

Bush vows to press ahead with bold agenda

WASHINGTON, Jan 21 : President George W. Bush plans to move ahead quickly with a bold agenda, including tax cuts, national missile defence, and education reform, all of which depend on the health of the US economy, reports AFP.

In his 14-minute inaugural address Saturday, the 43rd US president laid out his ambitious program and pledged to unite a nation still divided over his razor-thin victory in the bitterly contested November 7 election.

"This is my solemn pledge: I will work to build a single nation of justice and opportunity," he declared in a solemn ceremony as thousands of protestors braved the chilly winter air and darkly overcast skies.

But "everything is dependent on keeping the economy rolling: if he can't do that, nothing else is going to matter a whole lot," said Allan Lichtman, a presidential historian at American University here.

"The economy, that's his first priority ... beyond crises of the moment," like the California energy crisis that has seen the state famed

for high-tech industry suffer through rolling power blackouts, said Lichtman.

In Saturday's speech, Bush said he would strive to reform the federal retirement program, health care for the elderly, fix ailing schools, develop the national missile defense (NMD) system, and cut taxes -- which got him his warmest applause.

"We will reduce taxes to recover the momentum of our economy and reward the effort and enterprise of working Americans," said Bush, whose camp has cast doubt on the underlying health of the prosperity he inherits from his predecessor Bill Clinton.

"We will build our defences beyond challenge, lest weakness invite challenge. We will confront weapons of mass destruction" he said, referring to campaign pledges to beef up the US military and pursue the controversial national missile defence program, which is strongly opposed by most US allies, China, and Russia.

Bush's cabinet meanwhile got off to a good start, as seven members --

including Secretary of State Colin Powell, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill -- won quick Senate approval, the final step before being sworn in. The senators also confirmed Education Secretary Rod Paige, Commerce Secretary Don Evans, Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman and Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham. Seven more must still be confirmed.

And Bush signed an executive order holding off hiring decisions until his Cabinet is complete, and another essentially blocking some of Bill Clinton's final decrees, which covered issues like environmental regulations and health care.

White House chief of staff Andrew Card, who issued the latter order, said the action was being taken "in order to ensure that the President's appointees have the opportunity to review any new or pending regulations."

Bush has also pledged to send his education package to the sharply divided US Congress on Tuesday, and says he will meet with leaders of both parties throughout the week.



(L-R) US President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush walk with former US President Bill Clinton and former First Lady Hillary Clinton after inaugural ceremonies on Saturday at the US Capitol Building in Washington DC. -- AFP photo

Estrada faces barrage of criminal charges

MANILA, Jan 21 : Ousted Philippine president Joseph Estrada faces a barrage of corruption charges including an offence punishable by death, but experts say weak courts and legal loopholes might allow him to stay free and even attempt a political comeback, reports AFP.

State prosecutors are now under pressure to file criminal charges against Estrada, who had been impeached by the House of Representatives and was on trial in the Senate when the suppression of vital evidence against him triggered a five-day bloodless uprising.

Aides of newly installed President Gloria Arroyo, the former vice president who took over Saturday after Estrada's government collapsed, said one of the cases to be pursued against the fallen leader would be "economic plunder."

Under a law that has never been applied, anyone found guilty of embezzling at least 50 million pesos, or about one million US dollars, can be sentenced to death.

But hardly anyone in the Philippines -- where compromise and non-violence are held dear by the political elite -- would expect the

death penalty to be applied even if the former actor was convicted of massive economic plunder.

Apart from a jail term, a criminal conviction for corruption can also include a permanent ban from holding public office.

Arroyo has rejected outright amnesty for her former boss, saying she would let the law take its course as far as the ex-president and his cronies were concerned. She vowed to name "good people" to the justice department and "let them do their work."

Estrada allegedly amassed more than 60 million dollars in secret bank accounts from illicit sources including kickbacks from underworld gambling bosses and diverted public funds.

He was also accused of intervening in official investigations into tax-evasion and share-price manipulation against businessmen friends.

Lawyer Marichu Lambino, who assisted prosecutors at Estrada's senate trial, said public-interest groups would seek the immediate filing of criminal charges against the former president, as well as a foreign travel ban.

VHP offers reprieve to BJP on temple-mosque row

NEW DELHI, Jan 21 : The verdict of a Hindu religious summit to build a temple on the rubble of a razed Babri Mosque was seen Sunday as a clear reprieve to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist government, reports AFP.

The hardline Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Forum) at the summit on Saturday gave Vajpayee until March 12, 2002 to remove "all obstacles" in the way of the temple's construction, but did not actually say when the explosive project would start.

Instead, the summit in a resolution said the construction of the temple to the Hindu warrior lord Rama would begin on "any auspicious day" after March 12 on the site of the Babri Mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya.

The 16th-century mosque was razed by Hindu zealots on December 6, 1992. It sparked nationwide riots which left 2,000 people -- mostly Muslims -- dead.

Vajpayee, a moderate leader in his Hindu nationalist BJP party, faced an embarrassing political storm last month when he said the temple drive was an expression of "national" sentiment and an "unfinished" task.

The premier, however, on January 1 said his coalition government would strictly maintain a status quo on the mosque until the row was settled by court or through negotiations between Hindus and Muslims.

Political experts on Sunday said the VHP-led religious summit, held at the 42-day Maha Kumbh Mela Hindu pilgrimage in the northern city of Allahabad, appeared to have pulled its punches on the powder-keg temple-mosque issue.

"It is both a reprieve and a bit of a warning as the VHP has not announced any date for the temple's construction at the summit," said commentator Mahesh Rangarajan.

Announcing a date for the temple's construction would have brought enormous pressure on the National Democratic Alliance which is headed by the prime minister's BJP party, he said.

The analyst also said the summit saw divisions among holy Hindu men and with many sections opposing the VHP's temple campaign, the hardliners were forced to offer such a reprieve to Vajpayee.

"They (VHP) are backing off as for now but not forever. In months running to March 2002, tensions will mount. And so, it is a warning to

the government as well," Rangarajan added.

The Hindu newspaper described the resolution as a "climdown" and added that the VHP diluted its stand in the face of a warning from the BJP that such a move could "destabilise the Vajpayee government."

The experts added the date given to remove "all obstacles" was also aimed at drumming up support for the BJP ahead of polls to the 425-seat legislature of politically-strategic Uttar Pradesh state in the year 2002.

"The VHP is preparing for the Uttar Pradesh polls and is testing the people's pulse on the temple issue ahead of the elections," said political analyst Anand Ojha.

"If the VHP finds the BJP is losing electoral popularity in Uttar Pradesh, it will turn militant and try to re-sell lord Rama and the temple-building issue would then become

their unique selling point," Ojha told AFP.

Devendra Nath, leader of the National Congress Party, which is making ground in Uttar Pradesh, described the VHP's move as "controlled brinkmanship."

"It is a custom-built gameplan to carry the Hindu hardliners' agenda forward to secular power with popular base," the politician said.

The Hindustan Times added: "Only time will tell whether this queer political duet would meet the desired electoral denouement in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere."

Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, returns 85 MPs to parliament's 545-seat elected lower house and the BJP is determined to strengthen its base in the province to achieve a majority one day in the federal legislature.



Ashok Singhal (L), president of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP World Hindu Forum) addressing a Hindu religious summit at the Kumbh Mela Hindu pilgrimage on Saturday. Radical Hindus at the religious summit gave the government a one-year deadline to remove 'obstacles' for the construction of a temple on the razed Babri Mosque site in the northern Indian town of Ayodhya. -- AFP photo

Rebels blow up rail tracks ahead of Republic Day in Assam

Troops on red alert across India

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 21 : Tribal rebels triggered a powerful blast on a railway track minutes after a goods train had crossed in India's insurgency-hit northeastern state of Assam, officials said today, reports AFP.

They said militants from the United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity exploded the bomb late Saturday night in Karbi Anglong district, 320 km east of the state capital Guwahati.

The explosion ripped apart five meters (16 feet) of tracks and left a huge crater, "a spokesman from the state-run railways said in Guwahati.

The powerful blast took place minutes after a cement-laden train passed the area.

"There could have been casualties if the bomb had hit the goods train as there were railway staff and guards travelling on it," he

said, adding the attack would leave rail traffic disrupted for the next 36 hours.

The militant organisation behind the attack has been demanding greater autonomy and the right to self-determination in Assam.

The police said the overnight attack was part of a plan by local separatist guerrillas to strike at government installations in the run-up to India's Republic Day on January 26.

At least 12 separatist guerrilla groups in the northeast have called for a strike on Republic Day to protest New Delhi's "colonial" and "repressive and barbaric" rule over the vast region rich in oil, tea and timber.

Militants have in the past carried out bomb attacks on or before Republic Day.

Security forces across India

have been placed on high alert ahead of Friday, when the country will mark its transition to a republic in 1950, three years after gaining independence from the British.

Republic Day celebrations are held in each of India's 27 states every year and in New Delhi the main event comprises a colourful parade, showcasing the country's military might and cultural diversity.

Some 50,000 army, police and paramilitary soldiers have been deployed in the seven northeastern Indian states with army helicopters carrying out aerial surveys over key installations.

Meanwhile, security forces have been placed on alert across India ahead of Republic Day on January 26, which is being held against a backdrop of mounting violence and daring raids by Kashmir's Islamic militants.

Afghan opposition claims Pakistan sending troops to help Taliban

Taliban deny UN's massacre charges

KABUL, Jan 21 : The Afghan opposition Sunday accused Pakistan of sending armed units to Afghanistan to back the ruling Taliban militia's impending offensive in the war-torn country's northeast, reports AFP.

"Intelligence reports indicate that since last week a number of new commando and artillery units of the Pakistan army have been deployed in northern Afghanistan in preparation for foreseeable attacks" on opposition forces, it said.

In a faxed statement it also claimed Pakistani generals were supervising the Taliban military operations against opposition leader Ahmad Shah Masood.

"General Qamaruz Zaman of Pakistan army has been assigned in charge of military operations in Afghanistan, replacing Pakistan's army general, Saeed Zafar," it said.

Zafar had worked in the same capacity in Afghanistan over the last year, the statement added.

Pakistani regulars are joining thousands of Taliban soldiers in the northeastern province of Takhar, close to Tajikistan, for an imminent attack against the opposition on the other side of Kokcha river, it said.

Forces of Masood, holding territo-

rial pockets in the northeast, remain the last obstacle to the Taliban's ambition of establishing full control of Afghanistan.

Senior Taliban spokesman Abdul Hai Mutmaen immediately dismissed the opposition allegations and accused Masood of receiving military aid including personnel from Russia and Tajikistan.

Islamabad has denied similar opposition claims in the past.

"We do not need Pakistani generals. Our army is stronger than the Pakistani army. We have people hardened in practical battle," Mutmaen told AFP speaking from the Taliban southern stronghold of Kandahar.

"We have Russian arms in our army which the Pakistanis don't. The opposition make such claims to boost their men's morale," Mutmaen said.

He said the Taliban did not need military supplies as the stockpiles left over by the former Red Army after its 1979-1989 invasion of Afghanistan were sufficient to run their war machine.

Meanwhile, the Taliban in Afghanistan rejected Sunday reports from UN officials that soldiers of the ruling militia massacred

some 100 civilians after recapturing a central Afghan town from the opposition.

Senior spokesman Abdul Hai Mutmaen said Taliban soldiers did not target the local population in Yakawlang in Bamiyan province after they retook the district last month.

"We did not need to confront the local population. They are our supporters," Mutmaen told AFP.

Speaking from the Taliban's Kandahar headquarters in southern Afghanistan he acknowledged that some people had been killed after the fighting but he blamed the retreating opposition for murdering them to defame the Taliban.

"The opposition troops are used to these things. They have supporters and adversaries there. They kill their own old rivals," Mutmaen said.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, reportedly accused the Taliban forces of massacring non-combatants in Yakawlang.

Lanka mounts pressure on Britain to ban Tigers

COLOMBO, Jan 21 : Sri Lanka has escalated its diplomatic offensive to have Tamil Tiger separatists banned in line with new anti-terrorism laws in Britain even as Norway tries to broker peace, press reports said today, says AFP.

Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in interviews with the state-run Sunday Observer and the private Sunday Times here stressed that failure by Sri Lanka's former colonial master to ban the Tigers would be an unfriendly act.

"The failure of the British government to act against the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) would be an unfriendly act imposing considerable strain on our relations," the minister told the Sunday Observer.

The Sunday Times said the minister's remarks came as the British High Commission (embassy) here was beginning to ascertain the views of minority Tamil parties on banning the LTTE.

Press reports have said that moderate Tamil parties have asked Britain not to ban the LTTE, which is leading a drawn out campaign for an independent homeland in the island's northeast.

Kadirgamar said that banning the LTTE would not hinder Norway's attempts to bring the Tamil Tigers to the negotiating table, but on the

contrary hasten the peace process.

He made it clear that Colombo was hoping that the LTTE will be included in a list of organisations to be outlawed in line with new anti-terrorism legislation in Britain early next month.

"What we are telling Britain is simple: apply your law. The LTTE is eminently qualified to come within that law," Kadirgamar said. "If they fail to ban the LTTE, it will certainly affect our relations."

The LTTE on the other hand, has warned that proscribing them in Britain will affect Norway's peace bid in the island where more than 60,000 people have been killed in the past two decades.

Kadirgamar said the LTTE was using the Norwegian-backed peace process to ensure they were excluded from the list of banned organisations, but Sri Lanka believed that the two were separate issues.

The Colombo government asked Norway to help bring the LTTE to the negotiating table despite the group being banned at home.

Kabila's body arrives in Lubumbashi

KINSHASA, Jan 21 : Thousands of people massed Saturday to pay homage to slain Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) president Laurent Kabila as a cortege five km long accompanied his body through the streets of the southeastern city of Lubumbashi.

The front lines in the war which has divided the giant central African country in half and dragged in five other African nations were quiet, meanwhile, a rebel leader told AFP in the Rwandan capital Kigali.

Wahid to meet MPs for talks

JAKARTA, Jan 21 : Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid has agreed to meet a parliamentary commission probing financial scandals in which he is allegedly implicated, the commission's chairman said today, reports AFP.

Wahid has sent a letter accepting the commission's invitation to meet at a neutral site, the chairman was quoted by the state Antara news agency as saying.

Bachtiar Chamsyah, chairman of the People's Representative Council (DPR) commission investigating the scandals, said it had been decided the meeting would take place on Monday at 4:00 pm (15:00 BST) at the Jakarta Convention Centre, near the parliament complex.

Asia hopes for peace, prosperity under Bush

HONG KONG, Jan 21 : Asian leaders congratulated President George W. Bush on his inauguration today and expressed hope the new US administration would continue to promote peace and economic prosperity in the region, reports AFP.

The only slightly ominous silence came from China, which opted not to send any message and whose official press ignored the proceedings.

"I would like to meet with President Bush in person at the earliest possible date in order to achieve a common understanding of the basic direction of the future of the Japan-US relations," Japanese Prime Minister Yoshino Mori said shortly after Bush's inauguration as the 43rd president of the United States.

The United States is Tokyo's closest ally, with around 47,000 US troops based in Japan.

In Thailand, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai sent his congratulations, saying that 160 years of relations between the two countries would continue to prosper under the new US administration.

"I am also confident that under your able leadership, the United States will continue to play a major role in the maintenance of global peace, security and economic growth," Chuan said.

Pakistan's military ruler General

Pervez Musharraf was equally confident that the new president would continue to push for peace in South Asia.

India and Pakistan, newly-emerged nuclear powers, have been engaged in a decades-old conflict over the Himalayan region of Kashmir.

"Over the past half century, Pakistan-US relations have contributed positively to regional and international peace and stability. We look forward to working together with you to consolidate this long standing relationships," Musharraf said.

He expressed the confidence that under Bush's leadership the US would continue to play a vital role in promoting international peace and harmony.

Warm congratulations were also forthcoming from Nepal, where King Birendra pledged support for the Bush administration.

"Nepal has always valued her friendship with the US and her support in our development endeavours," the king said.

However there was no congratulatory message from China, where Bush's plan to press ahead with a more aggressive defence agenda has raised some hackles.

The official press made no mention of the inauguration ceremony nor did it carry any pictures.

Gunmen kill 11 of a family in Algeria

PARIS, Jan 21 : Gunmen killed 11 members of the same family in an.

Overnight attack in Algeria, where Islamic militants have waged a bloody nine-year insurgency, area residents said, reports AP.

The Friday attack in Medea, 90 kilometers south of the capital, left three others seriously wounded, residents told The Associated Press on condition their names not be used.

The armed group broke into the victims' home, shooting to death 10 of the victims, the residents said. The 11th victims, a four-year-old child, was stabbed to death. Only one member of the family, a teenager, was able to escape unharmed, they said.

Interrogation of Hinduja brothers continues

NEW DELHI, Jan 21 : Indian police today continued questioning three billionaire brothers of Britain's Hinduja business empire in connection with a 1986 bribery scandal involving the Swedish arms firm Bofors, officials said, reports AFP.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) said brothers Srichand, Gopichand and Prakash Hinduja were called in for a second day Sunday in line with a court order to interrogate the three London-based Indian tycoons during "office hours."



Ecuadoran military personnel work aboard the Ecuadoran flagged tanker ship 'Jessica', which sits capsized some 800 meters off San Cristobal Island, in the Galapagos Archipelago on Saturday. The 'Jessica' has spilled some 240,000 gallons of oil and Ecuadoran authorities are battling the spill, hoping to avoid an environmental disaster in the archipelago's pristine waters. -- AFP photo

Israel downbeat ahead of marathon peace talks

JERUSALEM, Jan 21 : Israel was downbeat about the chances of success at marathon peace talks with the Palestinians due to open in Egypt today, seen as the last chance of striking a deal before Israel's election for prime minister little more than two weeks away, reports AFP.

"We must not bury our heads in the sand. The chances of overcoming the differences in the short time we have left are not very high," Israel's caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak said in an interview on army radio.

"But it is our task to verify what we can agree on and on what we cannot reach an accord," he said.

Barak's "peace cabinet" gave the green light Saturday to the peace talks in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba which are expected to last about 10 days following a proposal by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat last week.

A peace accord with the Palestinians is seen as Barak's only chance of winning a February 6 special election for prime minister against hardline Likud opposition leader Ariel Sharon.

Sharon currently enjoys a commanding lead in opinion polls over Barak, whose government has been brought to its knees by the near four-month wave of violence that has claimed the lives of around 380 people.

Negotiations are due to get underway at 9 p.m. (1:00 BST) and are

expected to try to draft an accord based on a plan put forward last month by then US president Bill Clinton.

Clinton's initiative involved Israel handing 100 per cent of the Gaza Strip and around 95 per cent of the West Bank and also giving sovereignty over Arab areas of east Jerusalem to the Palestinians, but denying them the right of return for an estimated 3.7 million refugees.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami said the Taba talks were aimed at setting the framework for an accord rather than a comprehensive agreement.

"It looks impossible to reach a final accord, but it is possible to set the outline of a comprehensive accord," he said.

Palestinian legislative council speaker Ahmed Qorei, one of the main architects of the 1993 Oslo peace accords, said the Palestinians wanted above all to reach a full accord based on international resolutions.

"There is a serious desire to resume peace talks and to explore the possibility of achieving an agreement," Qorei told Voice of Palestine radio.

But he added: "There are big key differences and a very wide gap. Therefore, there is a need for big efforts and decisions from the Israeli side."