

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 protesters 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 fanned for high-tech indus-

try 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 failing 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.

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.

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

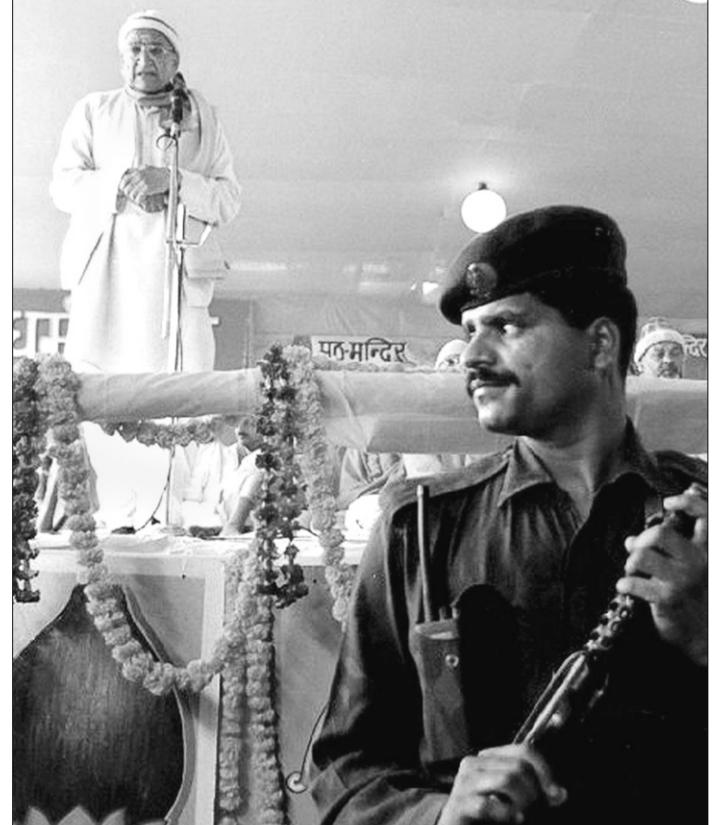
a warning to the government as well," Rangarajan added.

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 pull the lord Rama and the temple-re-building issue



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

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 message 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 Yoshiro 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.

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

Pakistan's military ruler

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International



(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 bloodbath, reports AFP.

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

New Philippine leader signals radical change in management style

MANILA, Jan 21 : New Philippine President Gloria Arroyo, who boasts a doctorate in economics and administrative experience, will have a markedly different, hands-on management style to her predecessor Joseph Estrada, reports AFP.

Arroyo, a college dropout with easygoing work habits and a scandalous private life, was ousted Saturday by a bloodless coup. She will be held dear by the political elite -- would expect the death penalty to be

showing up for work after noon-time and rarely reading important government documents.

The petite, buttoned-down Arroyo, 53, a mother of three and daughter of a former president, could not be more different from Estrada.

Arroyo, an overweight, 63-year-old, former action movie star and self-confessed drinker and gambler, maintained a string of mistresses and reputedly hosted late-night drinking sessions with a small group of cronies at the palace.

He acknowledges having fathered at least 10 children by four different women.

"I'm not the type that has hangers-on," Arroyo said in an interview aired Sunday. "I always try to be on time. I always try to be businesslike," she said.

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.

"What we are telling Britain is simple: apply your law. 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, and 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.

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," Israeli 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.

"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 differences and a very wide gap. Therefore, there is a need for big efforts and decisions from the Israeli side."



Ecuadorian military personnel work aboard the Ecuadorian 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 Ecuador authorities are battling the spill, hoping to avoid an environmental disaster in the archipelago's pristine waters.

--AFP photo