

Impact of global warming to worsen in future : UN

SHANGHAI, Jan 22 : The impact of global warming is more severe than first thought and the aftershocks of climate change will have a profound impact for centuries, revealed a major UN report released today, says AFP.

The report by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) paints a picture of weather changes that will raise global sea levels and temperatures, putting pressure on agricultural production and straining already scarce water resources.

"The scientific consensus presented in this comprehensive report about human-induced climate change should sound alarm bells in every national capital and in every local community," UN Environment Programme executive director Klaus Topfer told reporters after a conference in Shanghai.

Topfer called on governments and the private sector to "move boldly ahead with clean energy technologies" and to begin preparing for "rising sea levels, changing rain patterns, and other impacts of global warming."

The IPCC report is a three-

year compilation of the best scientific knowledge about the effects of rising global temperatures and concludes that much of the damage to the environment is already irreversible.

The atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, the most prevalent of the so-called 'greenhouse gases', has surged by 31 percent since 1750 -- a rise unparalleled in the last 20,000 years, the UN report concluded.

Current concentrations of the gas are at levels likely to have been unsurpassed for 20 million years, with 75 percent of carbon dioxide emissions caused by fossil fuel burning and the remainder by deforestation, the report added.

Since the 1950s, the earth's temperature has risen by an average of one degree Celsius each decade, with the 1990s likely to be the warmest decade and 1998 the warmest year on record since 1861.

New analysis of tree rings, corals, ice cores, and historical records for the northern hemisphere indicate that the 20th century is the warmest in the last 1,000 years.

Israel assures Syria it has no plans to attack

JERUSALEM, Jan 22 : Israel has assured Syria that it has no hostile intentions following reports that the Syrian armed forces are on top alert for fear of an attack by the Jewish state, the leading Haaretz newspaper reported today, says AFP.

"In an effort to assuage Syrian concerns, Israel sent a number of messages to Damascus through US intermediaries, in which the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak clearly tells the Syrian regime that Israel has no intention to attack Syria," the paper said in a front-page article.

It said Syrian President Bashar Assad, with the backing of senior military and intelligence officials, ordered "defensive redeployments" on the Israeli-Syria front fearing an attack ahead of the February 6 election for prime minister in Israel.

"As part of the redeployments, the Syrians are shifting air defence systems, including surface-to-air missiles, and reinforcing critical

positions," the paper said.

It said Damascus was concerned that Israel could use any cross-border attack by the Lebanese Shiite Muslim guerrilla movement Hezbollah as a pretext for a retaliatory strike against Syria.

Israeli defence ministry spokesman David Ziso refused to confirm or deny the report.

"We don't react to this type of report," he told AFP, but added: "Israel has no aggressive intentions towards Syria, although it reserves the right to defend itself if attacked."

Israel and Syria are still technically at war, and peace negotiations collapsed in January last year only weeks after their resumption because of discord over the fate of the Israel-occupied Golan Heights plateau.

Israel, which withdrew from southern Lebanon in May last year after 22 years of occupation, has repeatedly warned both Beirut and its political masters in Damascus against any cross-border attacks.



King Fahd of Saudi Arabia (R) meets with Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in Riyadh on Sunday. Jaswant scotched reports that Saudi Arabia was mediating between subcontinental rivals India and Pakistan, telling reporters that his talks in Riyadh had centered on strengthening cooperation between the kingdom and India, particularly in the economic field. --AFP photo

Palestinians, Israelis resume intensive talks in Egypt

Committees set up on key issues

TABA, Egypt, Jan 22 : The Palestinians and Israelis resumed intensive talks here today aimed at bridging their differences over US peace proposals ahead of elections for a new Israeli prime minister, reports AFP.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami led his delegation, and Palestinian parliament chief Ahmed Qorei, an architect of the 1993 Oslo accords, headed his team to a second round of talks at a hotel in the Red Sea resort at Taba.

The two sides ended an opening round of talks shortly after midnight (4:00 BST) Sunday but disclosed nothing about the substance of their meetings.

When asked what the atmosphere was like, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, a former chief of staff who is now Israel's tourism and transportation minister, smiled and told journalists: "Excellent."

The Taba negotiations are

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

That involves Israel giving the Palestinians 100 percent of the Gaza Strip and around 95 percent of the West Bank, as well as sovereignty over Arab areas of east Jerusalem, but denying them the right of return for an estimated 3.7 million refugees.

Israel rejects Palestinian demands for full sovereignty over the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in east Jerusalem, which sits atop Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism.

Meanwhile, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators meeting here agreed at their first meeting Sunday to set up committees on key issues at the heart of their conflict, both sides said Monday.

The negotiations, which come after almost four months of deadly Israeli-Palestinian violence, resumed on Monday

following an overnight opening round in Egypt's Taba beach resort that arranged for committees.

One committee will discuss borders, Jerusalem and security and the second will focus on the fate of Palestinian refugees, a statement from caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office said in Jerusalem.

But an Israeli delegation spokeswoman here said the larger committee might divide into two, and Palestinian sources said there would be three committees -- one on refugees, another on Jerusalem and borders and the third on security.

"The sides will attempt to formulate an agreement on the problem of the Palestinian refugees, taking into account the Israeli position that there will be no right of return to the state of Israel," Barak's office said.

Property suit against Suu Kyi dismissed

YANGON, Jan 22 : A Myanmar court today dismissed a property suit against opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who faced eviction after her brother Aung San Oo lodged a claim for half-ownership of her Yangon home, reports AFP.

Judge U Sae Thein threw out US-based Aung San Oo's petition, citing technical problems with the way it was filed. His decision closed the door on an appeal, although the case may be filed again from scratch.

"Since the framing of the case was not in line with correct procedure, it is premature to file this suit," he told the court.

As a US citizen, Aung San Oo is not entitled to own property in Myanmar and if he won the case was expected to turn his half-share over to the government which has held his sister under house arrest since September 22.

A decision in his favour could have seen the Nobel peace laureate evicted from the lakeside villa once owned by their late mother Khin Kyi who died 12 years ago.

Up to 250 killed in Congo during clash last week

KAMPALA, Jan 22 : Between 150 and 250 people died in clashes late last week in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) town of Bunia, humanitarian sources there said today, considerably increasing a previous toll, reports AFP.

Earlier reports said 59 people had died Friday in clashes arising from an assault by Lendu tribespeople on Bunia airport, which is held by Ugandan troops whose helicopter had reportedly been used to attack nearby Lendu settlements in recent weeks.

The latest reports suggested many more people died later Friday evening when Lendu residents were attacked by

members of a rival ethnic group, the Hema.

Longstanding tension between the Lendu and the Hema has reportedly left thousands dead over the last couple of years and has this year prompted a wave of refugees to seek sanctuary in neighbouring Uganda.

Ugandan troops eventually restored calm in Bunia late Friday, and by Sunday many residents who had fled the town had begun to return.

Meanwhile, Rwanda denied Thursday receiving an official invitation from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to attend the funeral of slain president Laurent Kabila.

Youngest genius

SINGAPORE, Jan 22 : A Singapore girl is being hailed as the youngest person in the world to enter the exclusive Mensa society for people with exceptionally high IQs, reports AFP.

Celestine Cai, now aged six, was only three years and 10 months old when she joined her 10-year-old brother Camillus in the club, the Straits Times reported Monday.

The sole qualification rule to join Mensa is to have an IQ in the top two percent of the population.

Although her parents tried to downplay Celestine's feat when it became public knowledge, her intellectual capacity was hailed by the Mensa organisation.

Anti-Taliban factions recapture key dist

KABUL, Jan 22 : Afghanistans' anti-Taliban groups have recaptured a key central district after fierce overnight combat, opposition and Taliban sources said today, reports AFP.

Opposition spokesman Mohammad Habel said supporters of the Hezb-e-Wahdat faction took Yakawlang district of Bamiyan province in a heavy battle Sunday evening.

"It was captured in fighting from four o'clock till nine o'clock in the evening," Habel said, speaking from northeastern Takhar province.

Taliban spokesman Abdul Hai Mutmaen said he had not had any fresh reports from the area, although the militia's ambassador to neighbouring Pakistan conceded the district's loss.

"This is a temporary success and they will be repulsed. We have no concern about their activities to intensify the conflict in that area," Ambassador Abdul Salam Zaeef said.

He said UN sanctions which took effect Friday over the Taliban's alleged support for terrorism had "uplifted the sagging morale" of the opposition forces.

It is the second time Yakawlang, which straddles one of several routes from central to northern Afghanistan, has changed hands in the past four weeks.

Opposition supporters briefly seized the district last month, only to lose it in a Taliban counter-attack.

Hezb-e-Wahdat spokesman Ahmad Bahram said both sides had suffered casualties in Sunday's clashes and the Taliban had withdrawn.

The United Nations has cited "credible reports" that the Taliban's mostly Sunni soldiers massacred around 100 civilians for their alleged cooperation with supporters of the Shiite Hezb-e-Wahdat.

European FM's discuss 'Balkan syndrome'

BRUSSELS, Jan 22 : EU foreign ministers take their turn Monday discussing "Balkan syndrome," as they gather in Brussels for their first regular council meeting of 2001, reports AFP.

NATO's use of tank-busting ammunition tipped with depleted uranium in the Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts will be raised informally over lunch, EU officials said.

Several EU member states are investigating whether such ammo caused cancer among some of their soldiers returning from NATO-led Balkan peace-keeping missions.

Monday's meeting will be the first to be chaired Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh since Stockholm took over the rotating

EU presidency on January 1.

The 15 foreign ministers are also expected to discuss central Africa after last week's murder of Democratic Republic of Congo leader Laurent Kabila.

Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel will be leaving afterwards to attend Kabila's funeral on Tuesday, as part of a tour of seven African states announced Sunday.

Other issues on Monday's agenda include the Middle East peace process, this month's earthquake in Central America, and the western Balkans after December's victory by democrats in Serbian parliamentary elections.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (L) shakes hands with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (R) in Beijing yesterday during Annan's three-day visit to the country. China assured Annan on Sunday of the country's continued support for the United Nations. --AFP photo

China praises UN for keeping world peace

BEIJING, Jan 22 : Chinese President Jiang Zemin praised the United Nations for maintaining world peace and promoting disarmament during a meeting with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan Monday, state media said, reports AFP.

Jiang said the UN "has done a lot of useful work in keeping world peace" and in helping to solve regional conflicts, the official Xinhua news agency said.

He said the organisation had also enhanced awareness among the international community of economic and social development and had pushed talks on disarmament over the past 55 years.

Jiang was speaking during a

meeting with Annan on the last day of the secretary general's three-day visit to China.

The UN chief left here Monday for Japan.

Jiang also assured Annan of China's continuing support and active participation in the international body, Xinhua said.

"China attaches importance to the role of the UN and supports the organisation to perform its functions in accordance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter," Jiang said.

He said it had been proven that strengthening the role of the UN was in the common interests of all countries.

Law closes in on Estrada

MANILA, Jan 22 : New Philippine President Gloria Arroyo Monday made key cabinet appointments and renewed a call for national unity on her first day at work as criminal proceedings began against her ousted predecessor Joseph Estrada, reports AFP.

Financial markets erupted in joy as investors welcomed Arroyo, the former vice president and economist installed Saturday by an army-backed bloodless revolt against ex-movie star Estrada, who was in seclusion at his suburban mansion.

"We must stand together. We must heal the nation," Arroyo said after a solemn flag-raising and military honours from presidential guards at Malacanang Palace.

Arroyo, who has rejected an outright amnesty for Estrada, assured the country's civil service there will be no mass purge among their ranks.

"I have no grandiose dreams to be a great president but I want to be a good president. Help me become a good president," she told palace staff and guards.

Anti-corruption investors

announced they were issuing subpoenas to Estrada, members of his family and alleged business cronies on the basis of complaints filed by civic groups. They were ordered to respond within 10 days and explain why they should not be criminally charged.

One of the charges being studied against Estrada is economic plunder, an offence punishable by death, but officials are not expected to press for the full penalty.

'Gladiator' best drama at Golden Globes

LOS ANGELES, Jan 22 : "Gladiator" the Roman epic starring Russell Crowe, triumphed Sunday by winning the Golden Globe for best dramatic motion picture, while "Almost Famous" became more so by winning best comedy, reports AFP.

"Gladiator," directed by Briton's Ridley Scott and featuring Crowe as a heroic general-turned-slave in ancient Rome, slayed "Traffic," "Erin Brockovich," "Wonder Boys," "Sunshine" and "Billy Elliot."

"Almost Famous," the story of life on the road with a 1970's rock band, beat out "Best In Show," animated "Chicken Run," the sensual "Chocolat" and "O Brother, Where Art Thou?."

But the night's big winner was Dreamworks Studios, which produced both winning films.

The Globes -- presented by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association -- are often harbingers of the winners of the Academy Awards, whose nominees will be announced February 13.

"Gladiator" also won for best original motion picture score at the 58th annual Golden Globe awards.

Crowe's General Maximus could not win all the laurels: the Australian he-man lost out in the acting category to moustachioed Tom Hanks in "Cast Away," the story of man marooned on an island after a plane crash at sea.

Julia Roberts took best dramatic actress for her portrayal of a tart-talking, well-endowed legal researcher-activist in "Erin Brockovich."



Producers Doug Wick (L) and David Franzoni (R), join director Ridley Scott (C) after their film "Gladiator" was awarded Best Motion Picture-Drama. -

"I can't believe I have won this. Oh, good golly," Roberts said in accepting her third Globe.

"Erin Brockovich, the real gal, is awesome, and should be a lesson that we are all powerful individuals who can make a difference in the world."

The real Erin -- who helped win a 333-million-dollar settlement against a giant power utility for some 600 people -- showed up to nervously introduce a clip from the film.

"Now that I am here in front of every big star in Hollywood, I would rather take on Pacific Gas and Electric again," Brockovich

said. Ang Lee won best director for critically acclaimed Chinese-language "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon."

"I cannot tell you how surprised I am," said the Taiwan-born director of "Sense and Sensibility," "The Ice Storm" and "Eat Drink Man Woman."

Ironically, while Lee was named best director, "Crouching Tiger" was not nominated for best drama.

The film was relegated to the foreign language category, where it bested "Amores Perros" (Mexico), "The Hundred Steps" (Italy), "Malena" (Italy) and "The Widow of St. Pierre" (France).

George Clooney won for best actor in a comedy for "O Brother."

"Traffic," directed by Steven Soderbergh, and "Gladiator" led the crowded field with five nominations a piece, including best drama and best director.

Benicio del Toro won best supporting actor for "Traffic," a sprawling tale of the world of international drug dealing.

"I'd like to congratulate all the nominees," de Toro said. "I love their work. (But if) they want a recount, they can talk to my lawyer."

Kate Hudson won for best actress in the same category for "Almost Famous."

In television, Martin Sheen, won for best actor in a drama for playing President Josiah Bartlet in "The West Wing."