

India extends Kashmir ceasefire by a month

NEW DELHI, Jan 23 : India today decided to extend its unilateral ceasefire in the restive state of Kashmir by another month, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said, reports AFP.

The decision was taken at a meeting chaired by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Emerging from the three-hour meeting, Foreign Minister Singh said that the peace initiative "has been welcomed by the people of Jammu and Kashmir" and "should be given every chance."

"The present phase of peace ... is being extended, in that hope, by another month."

The present truce was to expire on India's Republic Day, on Friday.

According to government sources, there were different opinions within the cabinet in recent

days on the Kashmir ceasefire as several separatist Muslim groups were continuing their attacks during the truce.

"Today's decision was unanimous," Singh said.

He said that Pakistan should rein in militant outfits like the Pan-Islamic Lashkar-e-Taiba that claimed responsibility for several suicide operations in recent weeks.

"It is regrettable that Pakistan has not recognised the demand of time for peace and continues to promote, encourage and abet cross border terrorism. This must cease and the activities of organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad curbed and controlled by Pakistan."

India launched its ceasefire initiative on November 27 for the holy Muslim month of Ramadan

and it was extended at the end of December for another month.

Pakistan reciprocated by announcing that its troops would exert "maximum restraint" along the Line of Control dividing the Himalayan region of Kashmir. But so far no dialogue has started to find a permanent solution to the Kashmir dispute.

India blames Pakistan for fostering the separatist rebellion that has claimed more than 34,000 lives in the Indian zone of Kashmir since 1989.

Pakistan denies the charge but offers open moral and diplomatic support to the anti-Indian guerrillas based on its soil and in India's Kashmir.



Kashmiri women chant slogans against alleged atrocities by Indian forces inside India-held Kashmir, during a protest in the Pakistani capital city of Islamabad yesterday. Demonstrators staged a sit-in protest in front of Indian High Commission in Islamabad demanding the issuing of travel documents to the leaders of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference for Pakistan.

-- AFP photo

8 killed in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 23 : At least eight people, including three separatist militants, were killed and two others critically wounded in separate incidents in India's troubled northeastern state of Assam, officials said today, reports AFP.

A police spokesman said a gang of heavily-armed gunmen attacked a group of woodcutters late on Monday night in the village of Sankuchi in western Assam's Nalbari district, 140 km from the state capital Guwahati, killing five and wounding two.

"A group of 20 to 25 masked gunmen entered a house where the woodcutters were staying and fired indiscriminately with automatic weapons", a police official told AFP by telephone from Nalbari.

"The attack could have either been carried out by the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) or the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), both of them are active in the area", a top police official in Guwahati said.

Koirala reelected president of ruling party

POKHARA, Jan 23: Nepal's Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala was re-elected president of the ruling Nepali Congress party with 64 per cent of the votes, defeating a rebellion within the party, officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

Koirala secured 936 votes against 507 for his competitor, Sher Bahadur Deuba, in voting on Monday, officials said. Counting was completed early Tuesday but the official results were not announced.

"I concede my defeat and I have already congratulated Prime Minister Koirala," Deuba told reporters about 2 am on Tuesday.

The third candidate for party president, Ramhari Joshi, received only 10 votes during the party's General Convention that began in this resort town, 200 kilometres west of the capital, Kathmandu.

Kostunica faces tough talks with UN official

BELGRADE, Jan 23 : Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica faces one of the toughest tasks of his first 100 days in power Tuesday when he meets the chief prosecutor of the UN war crimes court for the former Yugoslavia, Carla de Ponte, who arrives here for a three-day visit, reports AFP. Del Ponte, a former Swiss judicial investigator, will have a hostile partner in the moderate nationalist president, who has often disparaged the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), branding it as a "political institution" and "biased" against the Serbs.

Moscow wants to work for ME peace : Putin

MOSCOW, Jan 23 : Russian President Vladimir Putin told his visiting Israeli counterpart Moshe Katsav on Tuesday that Moscow was willing to do all it could to help the Middle East peace process, reports AFP.

Russia wants to help the Israelis and Palestinians "to solve the difficult problems that currently stand in the way" of Middle East Peace, Interfax quoted Putin as saying at the start of their Kremlin meeting.

Katsav was starting a three-day official visit during which he will also meet and the head of the Russian Orthodox church Patriarch Alexy II on Wednesday and visit a Moscow synagogue.

The trip coincides with a resumption of intensive peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians in a push to reach an agreement ahead of Israeli elections on February 6.

In an interview published Tuesday in the daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Katsav said his talks with Putin would be devoted mainly to bilateral relations and the strenuous peace process.

Pakistan in danger of becoming a failed state: Benazir

ISLAMABAD, Jan 23 : Former prime minister Benazir Bhutto said Pakistan is in danger of becoming a failed state unless the military returns to the barracks and markets replace missiles at the top of the national agenda, reports AFP.

She said she was planning to "build a post-Cold War identity for Pakistan" when she ends her self-imposed exile and returns to her homeland at an as yet undecided date.

"Given the challenges Pakistan faces, it's important for me to build a post-Cold War identity for Pakistan. It's a world of markets and the era of missiles has faded into the past," she said in an interview with AFP.

Hinting at stepped up efforts at detente with nuclear rival India, Benazir put "regional peace and stability" at the top of her agenda if she becomes prime minister for the third time.

Benazir said earlier this month in a newspaper interview that her suitcase was packed to end her exile and fill the political void left by her ousted rival, Nawaz Sharif, who was exiled to Saudi Arabia late last year.

Sharif, Benazir's political enemy throughout the 1990s, was deposed in a bloodless coup in October 1999 and military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has vowed to wipe out corruption and restore "genuine democracy" by October, 2002.

His coup was broadly welcomed by most Pakistanis who saw Sharif's government as hopelessly corrupt.

But he has been heavily criticised for pardoning Sharif from lengthy prison terms and is facing mounting criticism over the slow pace of economic revival and his failure to rein in extremist groups.

Benazir has lived in self-imposed exile in London and the United Arab Emirates since shortly before her conviction on corruption charges in April 1998, when Sharif was in power.

She and her jailed husband, Asif Ali Zardari, were sentenced to five years and fined millions of dollars in a case concerning kickbacks on government contracts. Her appeal is pending in the supreme court.

"The date for my return is yet to be announced. My party and I want my return linked to a movement for

the restoration of democracy," she said.

"Personally I am less keen to become prime minister again but my party (the Pakistan People's Party -- PPP) and allies believe the country needs my leadership."

"Therefore I am prepared to accept the challenge of contesting for a third time."

She said the PPP was drawing up a "mobilisation campaign" to kick-start the democracy movement ahead of her return.

"Pakistan is in danger of becoming a failed state unless old policies are given up, the army withdraws to the barracks and political parties are allowed to strengthen civil institutions," she said.

Benazir, who ruled from 1988 to 1990 and 1993 to 1996, accused military officers with "fanatic views" of plotting her and Sharif's downfalls.

East meets West at Kumbh Mela

ALLAHABAD, India, Jan 23 : Americans and Europeans, many of them ardent followers of sages and seers, are among the estimated 20 million pilgrims who have descended on the holy Hindu city of Allahabad in northern India for the Kumbh Mela, reports AFP.

As millions of pilgrims took a dip at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers on the 14th day of the six-week Hindu fair Monday, Mohan Kumar sat smoking a hand-rolled "bidi" (Indian cigarillo) and sipping weak, milky tea on the sandy embankment.

Born a Christian and once known as Daniel Alberto, Kumar is from Paraguay in South America.

"Don't ask me what I did for a living before this," snaps Kumar. "It just was not living. Although I made a lot of money I felt an acute emptiness eating me from the inside."

"Then I travelled to India two years ago and met this old man who changed my life."

Kumar's "little old man" is a 65-year-old Naga (unclotted) sadhu (holy man) called Sahabdin Baba who teaches yoga and lifts slabs of concrete weighing up to 40 to 50 kilograms to stay fit.

"I lift trees, bullock carts and bricks to stay fit. Also, to remind myself that God has blessed us with a lot of strength. People tend to sleep through life never really seeing or using the immense physical or mental strength that they actually possess," said Sahabdin Baba who has 108 disciples, quite a few of them foreigners.

"Baba has amazing powers. You can see it in small ways. He will lift 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of concrete on January 24 before taking a bath in the Ganges," Kumar said, sharing a bidi with his guru.

Hindus believe that bathing in the Ganges river washes away their sins, speeding the way to the end of reincarnations in this world and the attainment of "nirvana" (salvation).

Some of the foreigners in Allahabad are backpackers who happened to find themselves in India at the right time. Others have made a special pilgrimage.

Many are dressed in jackets and tunics of the traditional Hindu colour saffron, and more than a few smoke copious quantities of marijuana.

Carol van Wijck, a 32-year-old software engineer from Amsterdam

who has visited India a dozen times, confessed to being dumbstruck at the pilgrimage.

"It's awesome to witness this sort of mass spiritual communion between so many people and the river," she said. "Here in this holy Indian city I finally feel I am part of something much bigger than me."

A 29-year-old sportsman who identified himself by his Indian name Ram Dev said he had jogged most of the way to Allahabad from his home in Britain.

"I have represented Britain in several rowing competitions. I was preparing for the Sydney Olympics when I learnt I had throat cancer. Then an Indian friend introduced me to the stoicism of Hinduism."

"I left my home in Britain on March 20, 2000 to reach the Kumbh Mela. Somewhere during my journey I broke my watch so I have no concept of time. I love it. I don't feel time is running out on me any more."

Japan spells its desire to have UNSC seat

TOKYO, Jan 23 : Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori complained today that Japan was shouldering nearly 20 per cent of the UN budgetary burden yet still did not have a permanent seat on the Security Council, reports AFP.

"I have the responsibility of explaining to the people about Japan's contribution including ODA (Official Development Assistance), although the (Security Council) reform is making slow progress," Mori was quoted by foreign ministry officials as telling UN Secretary General Kofi Annan here.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to convey to you this dissatisfaction among the people about Japan shouldering nearly 20 per cent (of the UN budget)."

A recent Cabinet Office opinion poll on international relations found a record 22.3 percent of Japanese wanted Japan's economic assistance to developing countries scaled back.

Mori also told the UN secretary general that reform of the institution was necessary, and that he had won backing for Japan's proposal to enlarge the Security Council.

Bal Thackeray sues Outlook magazine

BOMBAY, Jan 23 : Hardline Indian Hindu leader Bal Thackeray has slapped a defamation suit on a weekly magazine for hinting he was linked to a top film financier arrested for underworld links, his lawyer said today, reports AFP.

"We have filed a suit seeking one billion rupees (23 million dollars) against Outlook magazine," lawyer Satish Maneshinde said.

Maneshinde said the suit would be heard on Tuesday in the Bombay High Court.

The Outlook article mentions that Shah was possibly arrested because of his "proximity" to the Thackerays and also because he had financed a film produced by Thackeray's daughter-in-law Smita.

Outlook also alleged that Shah helped the Thackerays in "questionable" financial deals.

Most members of Bush's Cabinet are millionaires

WASHINGTON, Jan 23: In the quarter-century between his stints as defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld amassed a multimillion dollar portfolio and served on the boards of several top companies, his financial disclosure report showed, reports AP.

Like Vice President Dick Cheney, Rumsfeld amassed a fortune in the private sector after leaving the government. His last government position was as President Ford's secretary of defence from 1975 to 1977.

Rumsfeld is among several multimillionaires serving in President George W Bush's Cabinet, according to financial disclosure reports released on Monday by the Office of Government Ethics.

A look at Bush's nominees show that most are wealthy, all with a net worth in at least six figures. Many hold stock in companies affected by federal actions.

For instance, Commerce Secretary Donald Evans held stock options in Tom Brown Inc, the oil and gas exploration company he headed, valued at between five million dollars and 25 million dollars. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, former chief executive officer of Alcoa Inc, holds between

five million dollars and 25 million dollars of Alcoa stock options, plus another one million dollars to five million dollars in deferred compensation from his former employer.

And Attorney General-designate John Ashcroft owns more than one million dollars in real estate.

"Ordinary folks can't afford to come to Washington and work in government, and so we get the well-heeled instead," said Charles Lewis, executive director of the watchdog Centre for Public Integrity. "There is a legitimate question about how sensitive and how acutely aware you can be when you're a millionaire in dealing with everyday issues like prescription drugs and Social Security payments."

A call to the White House seeking reaction was not immediately returned.

Rumsfeld's 94-page financial disclosure form shows that his holdings include between six million dollars and 30 million dollars in Gilead Sciences, a pharmaceutical company, plus one million dollars to five million dollars in vested stock options. He served as chairman of the board of Gilead from January 1997 until he joined the Bush administration.

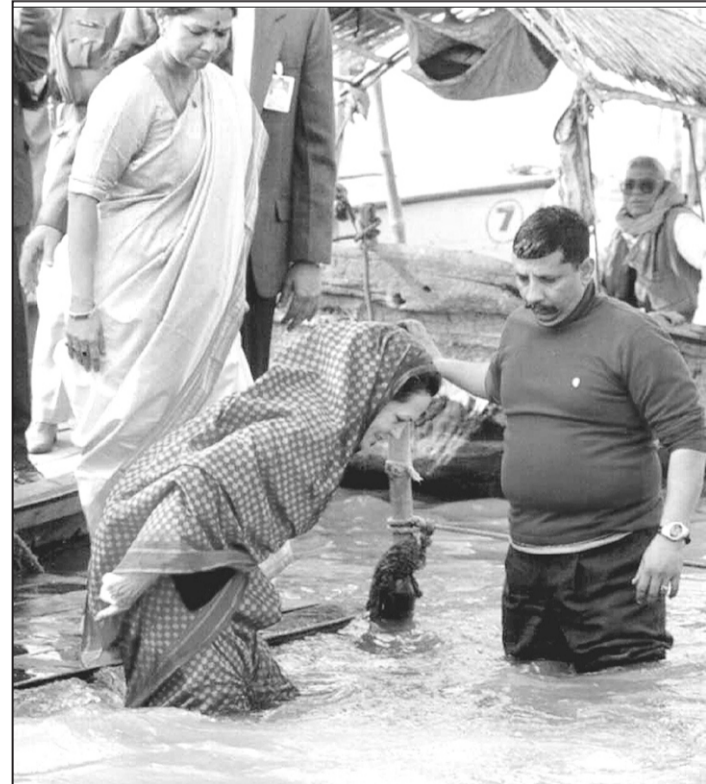
The ceasefire declared by the LTTE was set to expire on Thursday and the rebels had said an extension would depend on the government's willingness to reciprocate.

The military mounted an offensive that was ferociously repulsed by the LTTE last week in the Jaffna peninsula with the military losing 54 soldiers and the guerrillas losing 52, according to the government.

The terrorists could not use their heavy concentration of mortars and artillery as they were unaware of security forces positions until consolidation had progressed to a great extent," it said.

Security forces also took a 2.5 km stretch of the A-9 highway in the area and now control the strategically important high ground in the area, the ministry said.

The sudden military action came as a unilateral one-month truce declared by the LTTE was set to end.



India's main opposition leader and Congress (I) Party president Sonia Gandhi (C) takes a dip in the Ganges, considered sacred and purifying by Hindus, at the Maha Kumbh Mela in Allahabad on Monday. Sonia offered prayers and bathed in the river despite criticism of the timing of her visit to the world's largest Hindu pilgrimage.

--AFP photo

Lankan troops retake areas as fighting rages

COLOMBO, Jan 23 : Heavy fighting erupted in northern Sri Lanka today hours after government troops launched a lightning night advance into territory held by Tamil Tiger rebels, defence officials said, reports AFP.

Security forces shot dead at least 20 members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) putting up a delayed resistance to the military offensive, spokesman Sanath Karunaratne said.

He said troops lost two soldiers and six wounded in Monday's fighting.

The LTTE fired artillery and mortar shells towards the army's new positions at Muhamalai, the spokesman said.

There was no immediate reaction from the LTTE to the latest military campaign launched under the cover of darkness on Monday.

Following the Monday night drive, security forces recaptured an area of eight square km lost to the LTTE in November last year, the defence ministry said in a statement Monday night.

"The surprise achieved was such

Bush bars abortion funding

WASHINGTON, Jan 23 : President George W. Bush told his fledgling White House staff Monday that "the honour of a lifetime" demanded unimpeachable ethics, then made an anti-abortion decree that may hamper efforts to work with opposition Democrats, reports AFP.

Rescinding one of Democratic predecessor Bill Clinton's first acts in office, Bush reimposed a ban on federal funds for overseas groups that perform or advocate the procedure, or lobby governments to ease access to abortion.

"It is my conviction that taxpayer funds should not be used to pay for abortions or advocate or actively promote abortion, either here or abroad," the Republican leader said in his executive order.

The decree reversed Clinton's 1993 order lifting what its foes call the "global gag rule," also known as the Mexico City Policy because executive president Ronald Reagan originally

unveiled the ban at a 1984 conference there.

It was unclear what impact the move would have on Democrats, most of whom favour abortion rights, and with whom Bush has pledged to work as he pursues top priorities such as education reform and a nine-year, 1.3-trillion-dollar tax cut.

The highly symbolic move came as both sides in the battle over the right to end a pregnancy took to the streets nationwide on the 28th anniversary of the controversial Roe v. Wade US Supreme Court decision that legalised the procedure.

"We share a great goal: to work toward a day when every child is welcomed in life and protected in law. We know this will not come easily, or all at once," Bush told anti-abortion demonstrators in Washington in a statement.

In another gesture, the White House said the 43rd US president's

first international visit would be a February 16 day-trip to Mexico. His recent predecessors travelled first to Canada, the top US trading partner.

And in an unmistakable message that his administration will not be prone to the scandals that plagued Clinton's tenure, Bush urged aides to hold each other to uncompromising standards beyond "even a hint of ethical doubt."

"No one in the White House should be afraid to confront the people they work for, for ethical concerns, and no one should hesitate to confront me as well," he told his political troops in an address also meant to energise them.

"This is only our second day, but time moves fast around here, so let us begin the work we were hired to do and leave this a better place than we found it," he exhorted ebullient staffers.



US President George W. Bush (2nd R) replies to a question from the press during his first Cabinet meeting at the White House on Monday in Washington, DC. Bush said he would move quickly to ban US public funding for organisations that encourage abortions abroad, which would reverse an order signed by his immediate predecessor Bill Clinton. From left are: House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-TX), Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert (R-IL), Bush, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS).

-- AFP photo

British Parliament okays cloning of embryos

LONDON, Jan 23 : British scientists have been given the green light to clone human embryos for medical research, after controversial legislation cleared its final hurdle in Parliament late Monday, reports AFP.

In a landmark vote, an attempt to stall the move was defeated in the House of Lords, the upper house of parliament, by a larger than expected margin of 212 to 92.

As the measure had already been approved by a large majority in the lower House of Commons last month, it will come into force from January 31, junior health minister Lord Hunt said afterwards.

The vote came despite intense pressure from a coalition of Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim leaders in Britain, and other groups, who had cited religious and ethical concerns.

What is being allowed is cloning of an embryo for strictly medical reasons -- not cloning for reproductive reasons, which remains banned.

The idea is to clone an embryo on the basis of a patient's DNA, then cull it at the earliest stage of development, within 14 days of fertilisation.

At this point, the embryo is mainly a cluster of so-called stem cells that have the ability to grow into any part of the body.

These cells would be cultivated in a laboratory into purpose-built tissue, which, in turn, could be transplanted into the patient to replace the sick or damaged tissue.

The advantage of the technique is that the cloned tissue is considered by the immune system of the recipient to be "friendly" and is less likely to be rejected.

The tests may lead to breakthroughs in the fight against diseases such as Alzheimer's and cancer, but opponents say it is tampering with human life and that ethical worries are being sidelined in a race to be at the forefront of medical research.

"The human embryo has a special status and we owe a measure of

respect to the embryo," Hunt told peers during the debate.

But he added: "We also owe a measure of respect to the millions of people living with these devastating illnesses and the millions who have yet to show signs of them."

Opponents in the House of Lords had tabled an amendment to the legislation demanding research be delayed until the ethical, moral and scientific issues had been studied by a specially created committee.

Lord Alton questioned the rightness of treating the human embryo as "just another accessory to be created, bartered, frozen or destroyed."

His amendment, if approved, would have stalled the measure for months -- possibly fatally and most probably until after the next election, which most observers expect in early May.

Twins' case moves to courtroom

LONDON, Jan 23 : The tangled case of twin baby sisters adopted over the Internet moves to the courtroom today, as British social workers try to put them under the guardianship of the courts, reports AFP.

Local authority officials are to ask the High Court in Birmingham, central England, to declare the six-month-olds wards of court.

Last week, police and social workers used an emergency protection order to take the children from adoptive parents, Alan and Judith Kilshaw, as the row over their saga erupted.

The babies were advertised over the Internet and placed with a California couple who paid 4,000 pounds (6,000 dollars) for them.

Two months later, they were handed to the Kilshaws, who had paid twice as much.

The girls' natural mother Tranda Wecker agreed to the deal, although there is no doubt over the legality of the adoption after she reportedly admitted lying about her residency.

Congo prepares to bury Kabila amid tight security

KINSHASA, Jan 23 : The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) boosted security as a tense Kinshasa prepared to bury the country's assassinated president Laurent Kabila in the capital today, reports AFP.

Angola, one of Kabila's allies in the huge conflict that swamped his country during his rule, said Monday it was sending in extra troops amid fears that the ceremony could spark further unrest here.

Hun Sen flays UN for hypocrisy, failure

PHNOM PENH, Jan 23 : Prime Minister Hun Sen on Monday flayed the United Nations for its failure to bring peace to Cambodia, saying the world body's demand for a Khmer Rouge trial was hypocritical, reports AFP.

In his keynote speech to the second Asian Association of Parliaments for Peace attended by lawmakers from 31 nations, Hun Sen said Cambodia was committed to a trial with UN help, but questioned the motives of the international community.

"I only wish to recall that the recent calls for prosecution and punishment of the former Khmer Rouge leaders for their past crimes come strangely from those who had actively pardoned, fed and supported them and installed them in the seat of peace negotiations in 1991," he said.

"The crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge were not different from now. But what is different from before is that during the last 10 years Cambodia has struggled to move toward and achieve peace on its own."

Seventeen nations and all Cambodia's warring factions, including

the Khmer Rouge, signed the Paris peace accords in 1991, which called for disarmament and a UN transitional authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and national elections.

The Khmer Rouge later reneged on the agreement and did not take part in the elections in 1993.

"What was intended in the Paris peace accords of 1991, but could not be ensured by UNTAC, is now a reality because Cambodians have come together among themselves, not at the behest and prodding of external forces," Hun Sen told delegates. The Khmer Rouge under dictator Pol Pot are blamed for the deaths of as many as 1.7 million Cambodians during their 1975-1979 "Killing Fields" regime. They were driven from power by an invading Vietnamese army in 1979, but fought a guerrilla war right up until 1998, when the movement fizzled with the death of Pol Pot and mass defection of rebel fighters who were integrated into government forces as a matter of national policy.

Many members of the current government -- including Hun Sen himself -- are former rebels or have associations with the Khmer Rouge movement.

Muslims ask Arroyo to implement peace accord

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, Jan 23 : A senior Muslim leader today urged newly-installed President Gloria Arroyo to implement fully a peace accord forged by a previous government with an Islamic separatist rebel group, reports AFP.

"I hope this new administration will now do anything in its power to comply with the peace agreement" with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), said Nur Misuari,

governor of a Muslim autonomous region in the southern region of Mindanao.

Misuari's MNLF signed a peace treaty which ended a 24-year separatist rebellion in 1996. He was later elected to his current post.

Huge amounts of money were also allocated to develop the autonomous region.