

Israel suspends talks, mulls future of peace

JERUSALEM, Jan 24 : Israel was weighing today the future of peace talks with the Palestinians that were abruptly called off following the killing by masked men of two Israelis in the West Bank, reports AFP.

Caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who condemned the double murder as a "horrendous" crime, would convene cabinet ministers for consultations later Wednesday the day after recalling top negotiators from the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba, officials said.

Middle East peacemaking was once again thrown into turmoil when Israel suspended the Taba talks that had been underway since Sunday to try to reach a peace deal and end more than half a century of bloody conflict.

Time is short, with Barak facing a February 6 election for prime minister he is expected to lose to hawkish opposition leader Ariel Sharon, who has vowed he would not be bound by

any deal if he becomes leader.

Barak recalled ministers in Taba and halted all contacts with the Palestinians following the discovery of the bodies of two slain Israeli restaurant owners near the West Bank town of Tulkarem.

"The question is will they suspend them for the night, or for 24 hours, or for good?" Palestinian minister for international cooperation Nabil Shaath said in an interview with Egyptian television.

"Suspending the negotiations raises lots of questions about the seriousness of the Israeli side," he added.

The two dead men, identified as Motti Dayan, 29, and Etgar Zeituni, 34, who ran a sushi bar on a trendy Tel Aviv street, had been dining in a Tulkarem restaurant when they were kidnapped at gunpoint by masked men and killed in a nearby village.

Their deaths brought to 383 the

number of people killed in a wave of bloodshed that has swept across the region for almost for months, most of them Palestinians.

A Hamas leader in Gaza City told AFP the killings were part of the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation, but stopped short of claiming responsibility.

"This is part of the on-going Intifada and a response to the Israeli aggressions against our people and a sign of our people's insistence to kick out the occupiers," he said.

An Israeli official said security forces were investigating the possibility that the militia wing of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction was responsible.

And Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh vowed that Israel would crack down on "terrorists."

"There is no miracle cure in this war, but in the end, swift action against terrorists responsible for repeated attacks represents the

most effective way of dealing with them," Sneh told army radio.

Arafat's Palestinian Authority condemned the killings and said it would open an investigation to track down those responsible.

Even before the Taba talks were suspended, both sides had cast doubt on the prospects for an early deal, with the Palestinians speaking of deep gulfs on key issues including Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, borders and Palestinian refugees.

"I don't think there is any possibility of reaching an agreement in three days or in the coming 10 days during the negotiations in Taba," Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told Voice of Palestine radio Tuesday.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (L) meets with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz in Riyadh on Tuesday. Arafat later met with Saudi King Fahd to discuss the Middle East peace process and bilateral relations. Israel decided to suspend the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks that were being held in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba until after the funerals of two Israelis killed in the West Bank town of Tulkarem. --AFP photo

Fiji army warns it may seek foreign help

SUVA, Jan 24 : Fiji's military is reported to have warned it is prepared to seek foreign help to maintain law and order if the Appeals Court next month upholds the Constitution abrogated in last year's coup, reports AFP.

The Fiji Times quoted army commander Frank Bainimarama as having told interim President Ratu Josefa Iloilo and cabinet the military would uphold the court ruling and support a government of national unity if it had to.

Col. Ratu George Kadavulevu was said to have read the army's warning on Monday in a briefing to a cabinet meeting also attended by Bainimarama and two members of the military's strategic unit.

The report quoted the army statement as saying "if Justice Gates' ruling was upheld next month, the military will uphold the rule of law and support the formation of a government of national unity."

The army was said to have warned that if it was unable to control the situation as a result of the response to the ruling, it would seek foreign assistance.

More oil leaks into water off Galapagos Islands

PUERTO BAQUERIZO MORENO, Ecuador, Jan 24 : More oil was flowing into waters off the Galapagos Islands Tuesday as authorities detected a second breach in the hull of a tanker that ran aground off the world famous nature reserve last week, reports AFP.

"We are facing a new pollution danger in the bay ... following the first oil spill," Environment Minister Rodolfo Rendon said.

The oil began flowing on Friday, after an Ecuadorian tanker ran aground a week ago off San Cristobal, the most eastern of the islands. The islands lie some 1,000 km from mainland Ecuador.

By Tuesday, 600 tonnes of spilled oil covering more than 1,200 square km of ocean was drifting northwards, away from the islands, officials said.

Then the new breach was discov-

ered in the hull of the badly damaged tanker, which authorities say still contains up to 160 tonnes of oil.

Twenty-eight tonnes were pumped from the Jessica Monday by the Ecuadorian Navy and a team of US Coast Guard experts, but stormy seas hampered the work.

"It's hard to describe just how difficult this operation is," the Coast Guard team's commander, Ed Stanton, said in a statement.

"Waves were breaking over parts of the ship as the crews worked and by the time we stopped the ship's starboard list had increased from 40 to 60 degrees," he said.

Weather conditions were better Tuesday, and about 50 seals llored on the San Cristobal beach where the pumping work was being coordinated.

Indian media hails truce extension in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Jan 24 : India's second extension of a unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir was hailed by the media today, but with a warning that the government must act quickly and carry its peace initiative forward, reports AFP.

The Times of India said Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee deserved to be congratulated for extending on Tuesday the truce in the face of growing attacks in the disputed territory.

"The Vajpayee government is to be congratulated for the bold decision despite the pressure that had built up within and without for the security forces to be allowed to resume their offensive."

"The Times added: "If there is one weakness with the Vajpayee government's current strategy, it is the inability to articulate a fresh set of measures that could build upon the

goodwill generated by the ceasefire."

The ceasefire was first implemented for a month on November 27 last year and extended by four weeks on December 20. It was set to lapse Friday but now will remain in force until February 26.

The newspaper, however, urged the government to back its peace efforts with a bulwark of human rights practices.

Unless progress is made on the human rights front, the government will not be able to swing public opinion in Kashmir decisively in favour of its peace initiative, the daily said.

The Asian Age newspaper, however, argued that New Delhi extended the truce in the face of tremendous international pressure to take the peace process forward.

Hunt for woman bomber in Delhi

11 killed in pre-Republic Day violence in Assam

NEW DELHI, Jan 24 : Indian police today stepped up a massive hunt for a Muslim female bomber who heads a list of people likely to stage suicide attacks during Friday's Republic Day parade in New Delhi, reports AFP.

Federal detectives also released a photograph of a male and identified him as Ejaz Rasool, saying he led a suicide squad which planned to target Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani.

The unnamed woman suicide bomber was described Wednesday as a member of the Jaish-e-Mohammad Muslim guerrilla group, which has rejected the second extension of India's unilateral ceasefire in disputed Kashmir.

"She is sophisticated and highly-motivated," an official from the Intelligence Bureau, India's domestic secret service, told AFP and

added the Pakistan-based woman, trained in combat and guerrilla attacks, had already "sneaked" into the Indian capital.

According to Delhi police, the female guerrilla has already conducted a reconnaissance of Rajpath, New Delhi's central vista where the Republic Day parade will be staged amid unprecedented security on Friday.

"Although she is a Pakistani national, she can easily pass off as an upper middle-class woman from the southern (Indian) region. She is deceptive and a smooth-talker," the Statesman quoted a police official as saying.

Sources said the photograph of the well-built woman have been handed out to the hundreds of police "spotters" deployed to track down militants ahead of Friday's military extravaganza and cultural

shows on Rajpath.

Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who arrived here Wednesday, will be the guest of honour during the parade on Friday when India marks its transition to a republic in 1950, three years after it gained freedom from British rule.

The military, which is staging Friday's show, also appeared worried over looming fears of attacks by suicide squads sent by Kashmiri separatist organisations to New Delhi.

"The major threats are either the suicide squads or improvised explosive devices, which are bombs, sometimes triggered off by radio-controlled devices," said Major-General Vinod Bhanot, commander of New Delhi's army garrison.

The police have decided to completely seal off vast expanses of New Delhi from 6:00 pm (18:30

BST) Thursday to civilian traffic as a precaution.

Local residents would have to produce proof of identity to reach their homes or place of work during the next 18 hours until Friday noon, a senior police official said.

Meanwhile, at least 11 people, including eight separatists, have been killed and three others critically wounded in violence in India's northeast, the authorities said Wednesday.

A police spokesman said tribal militants from the banned National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) late Tuesday attacked a group of women belonging to the rival Santhal tribe near Lumsum in western Assam.

20m take holy dip in Ganges

ALLAHABAD, India, Jan 24 : The banks of the Ganges in northern India witnessed an eruption of devotional rituals today, the holiest day of the world's largest religious festival, as an estimated 20 million Hindu pilgrims bathed in its waters, reports AFP.

Even for a pilgrimage that breathes superlatives, Wednesday's mass bathing was on a staggering scale.

Kumbh Mela police chief Alok Sharma said the event had passed off peacefully as of 12:00 am (12:30 BST) but the crush of humanity took a toll, leaving at least two elderly men from a monastic sect dead.

"Both were in their 80s and had been queuing up for hours for a dip in the Ganges when they died of cold," said Dayanand Baba of the Juna Naga (unclothed) sect.

Hindu devotees surged ahead, brushing aside the suffocating overcrowding and an AFP correspondent at the site saw men and women with fractures and serious bruises being treated by mobile medical teams.

Allahabad city's chief administrator Sadakant said such incidents were bound to happen despite the months of "pain-staking" planning for organising the festival.

The bathing ritual was led in a dramatic fashion by the Nagas, the

most revered of sadhu (Hindu sage) sects, marching in colourful processions from about 5:15 am Wednesday (5:45 BST Tuesday).

The first to bathe at 5:45 am (6:15 BST) were 1,000 Nagas from the "Maha Nirvani" sect, who threw off their marigold garlands and charged naked and shouting into the waters at the sacred "Sangam" -- the confluence of the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati rivers.

The group included both the dreadlocked older Nagas and shaven-headed initiates, who were taking their first plunge after their initiation into the sect.

In sharp contrast to the pomp and drama surrounding the bathing of the Nagas was the picture of the millions of ordinary Hindus, who make up the vast majority at the 12-yearly Maha Kumbh fair, taking a dip in the Ganges.

Hundreds of boats were seen ferrying devotees to the "Sangam," which has a capacity to allow 20,000 pilgrims to bathe at a time.

Kumbh Mela administrator Jeeshv Nandan said at first estimates 15 million Hindu devotees had taken the soul-salvaging dip since Tuesday 7:00 pm (19:30 BST).



A Hindu holy man make his way back from the Sangam (background), as hundreds of thousands of devotees waited to bathe yesterday during the Kumbh Mela. Thousands of holy men and their disciples bathed at the Sangam, where the waters of the Yamuna and the Ganges meet, on the most sacred day of the world's largest religious gathering. Some 20 Million Hindu devotees were expected to bathe on the day. --AFP photo

Anti-Taliban forces capture several villages

KABUL, Jan 24 : Afghan opposition forces in a pre-dawn attack on the ruling Taliban troops Wednesday captured several villages around key district of Khwajaghar in north-eastern Takhar province, resistance officials said, reports AFP.

"We have advanced around five km towards the district centre," Mohammad Habel, a spokesman for the main opposition commander Ahmad Shah Masood said.

"Fighting is still going on inside Khwajaghar's centre with some Taliban soldiers putting up resistance there," Habel said in a satellite telephone call from the embattled area.

Thaksin unveils plans for Thai coalition govt

BANGKOK, Jan 24 : Thailand's premier-in-waiting Thaksin Shinawatra today unveiled plans for a two-party coalition government and said a third partner may be invited into the alliance later, reports AFP.

Thaksin said the New Aspiration party led by former prime minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh would serve as a junior partner in the coalition which is expected to be confirmed by a parliamentary vote next month.

"Today we want to make it clear to the public as well as investors ... that a government has certainly been formed after the January 6 elections," Thaksin told reporters.

Russian troops engage in HR abuses in Chechnya

WASHINGTON, Jan 24 : Russian security forces engage in torture, killings, looting, extortion and other abuses in war-ravaged Chechnya that are characteristic of "an anarchic society" rather than a modern state, a US human rights group said in a report, says AFP.

Timed to coincide with a Council of Europe session on whether Russia's voting rights at the assembly should continue to be suspended, the report by Physicians for Human Rights, a non-profit organisation, urged the council not to lift the sanctions.

"The Council of Europe should not relent on its commitment to human rights in Chechnya," said Leonard Rubenstein, investigation leader for the group, which made a name for itself probing war crimes in Bosnia.

"It must communicate to the Kremlin that its continuing abuses will not be tolerated by the Council," he added.

Over the course of last year, the group questioned nearly 1,200 Chechen civilians, finding dozens of instances of torture and other atrocities, according to the report.

"Russia's federal forces continue to engage in human rights violations against civilians, including arbitrary arrests, illegal detentions, beatings, torture, disappearances, killings, looting, extortion, attacks on civilians and violations of medical neutrality," the report said.

The surnames of people mentioned in the document were withheld for their own safety.

Many of those detained during security sweeps did not know where they were being held because they had been blindfolded during transport, according to the group.

Britain orders inquiry into serial killer doctor

LONDON, Jan 24 : The British government is to mount a "wide-ranging and comprehensive" inquiry into the actions of serial killer doctor Harold Shipman, it announced late Tuesday, reports AFP.

Health Minister John Hutton told parliament the government was determined to apply the lessons of the case to ensure patients in future had the "full and proper" protection they deserve.

"We owe it to the families and friends of those murdered by Harold Shipman to implement whatever steps are necessary to prevent a repetition of these terrible crimes," he added.

Shipman, a family doctor, was convicted in January last year of

murdering 15 people, although an audit of his past practice revealed he may have been responsible for more than 300 deaths in total.

He is currently serving life in prison with no prospect of release.

Hutton said the inquiry would look at the extent of Shipman's activities, the role of organisations responsible for monitoring doctors, and recommendations what steps can be taken to protect patients.

"It is beyond belief a doctor should act in this way. Shipman was a cold, calculated, evil killer," Hutton added. "His crimes have shocked the country and caused enormous grief and suffering to hundreds of people.

Bush unveils edn reform bill

WASHINGTON, Jan 24 : US President George W. Bush unveiled his proposals Tuesday for education reform, describing them as "a major priority" of his new administration, reports AFP.

The Republican president, who made education reform a cornerstone of his presidential campaign, said he intended to "make sure every child in America gets educated."

"It is a major priority," Bush told journalists as he greeted Democratic and Republican members of Congress invited to the White House to discuss his proposals.

Questioned about the most controversial aspect of his push for education reform, school vouchers, Bush said he would not impose them on schools.

"None of us at the federal government should try to impose a school voucher plan on states and local jurisdictions," he said.

During the election campaign, Bush favoured the introduction of vouchers, amounting to some 1,500 dollars per child, that would allow parents to opt out of public schools they believe are failing their children.

The vouchers could be used to send the children to private schools or other public schools of their choice.

Democrats oppose vouchers, arguing the program would divert money from the public school system, and centrist Democrats announced their own education reform proposals Tuesday.

Final mission to Mir blasts off

MOSCOW, Jan 24 : Russia's Progress M1-5 cargo ship, due to steer the ageing Mir space station to destruction, successfully blasted off from the Baikonur cosmodrome early Wednesday, space officials told AFP.

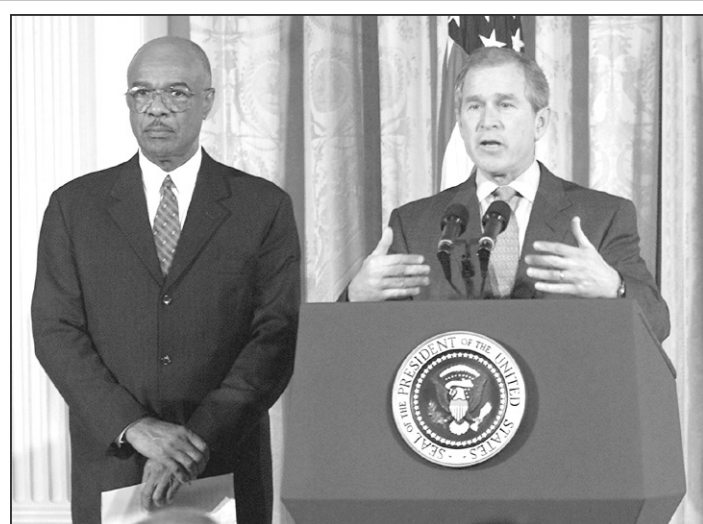
The Mir station is currently fully prepared for the unmanned docking, which is scheduled for Saturday, Russian mission control center's spokesman said by telephone. The successful launch at 7:29 Moscow time (10:29 BST) comes as a relief after Russian space chiefs had to delay the planned launch of Progress on Thursday due to last-minute problems with Mir's

orientation system.

The Progress craft will lower Mir's orbit to 80 km, making it enter the atmosphere's dense layers where most of the 15-year-old station will burn up.

The decision to bring down Mir follows several accidents in recent years, including a serious fire and a near-fatal collision with a cargo ship in 1997.

Russia has also found that its commitment to the new International Space Station (ISS) has stretched its budget to breaking point, making it unable to support both space projects.



US President George W. Bush (R) with Secretary of Education Rodney Paige (L) at his side announces his intention to deliver his education plan to the US Congress on Tuesday in the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC. --AFP photo

Stray dogs kill boy, woman in Russia

VLADIVOSTOK, Russia, Jan 24 : Stray dogs starving in the Arctic conditions in Russia's Far Eastern region have begun attacking people and have killed a young boy and an elderly woman in the past six days, local officials said today.

Maxim Krasin, aged 8, died last Friday from wounds inflicted by a pack of dogs who attacked him while he was out skating at Fikino, in the Primorye region, officials told AFP.

A second boy who was with him managed to escape. A 63-year-old homeless woman whose name was not indicated died in the same way Tuesday at Artvom, near Vladivostok, after an emergency operation failed to save her.