

# Indian armed forces fully mobilised: Naval chief

AFP, New Delhi

All three wings of the Indian armed forces remain fully mobilised and prepared for any conflict with rival Pakistan, naval chief Admiral Madhvendra Singh said Wednesday.

"In accordance with the directive received from the government, all three wings of the armed forces are fully mobilised. We are ready," Singh told reporters.

"The ships are armed. The ships are provisioned. The ships are fuelled," he added.

India and Pakistan have been locked in a tense military stand-off since the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militant groups.

Singh refused to confirm or deny



PHOTO: AFP  
Admiral Madhvendra Singh.

whether his warships were armed with nuclear weapons, but added that for most nuclear capable countries, the most potent nuclear strike force was "hidden, moving and underwater."

Questioned on naval acquisitions, Singh said India was still negotiating the purchase of the Russian-made aircraft carrier Gorchkov.

"Discussions are going on between the Russians and the government of India. If and when both parties are happy a deal might be struck."

In the event a deal cannot be worked out, "we will have to plan indigenous manufacturing, but that will take time," Singh said, adding he knew of no other suitable carrier on the international market.

The Indian navy currently has

only one aircraft carrier, Virat, following the decommissioning of its other carrier, Vikrant, five years ago.

Singh also said an anti-ship cruise missile being developed by India and Russia was "on schedule" and should be in service within two or three years.

The missile, which can be launched from a variety of platforms, including mobile launchers, ships, submarines and aircraft, uses propulsion technology from Russia and guidance know-how from India.

The missile was developed by BrahMos, a joint venture company formed between India's Defence Research and Development Organisation and Russia's State Unitary Enterprise NPO Mashinostroyeniya in 1998. It was test-fired in June.

# 7500 BC civilisation discovered off India's western coast

AFP, New Delhi

A "lost river" civilisation dating back to 7500 BC has been discovered off India's western coast, a senior cabinet minister said Wednesday.

"The findings buried 40 metres (yards) below the sea reveal some sort of human civilisation, a courtyard, staircase, a bathroom or a temple or something," said Murlu Manohar Joshi, minister for human resources and also ocean development.

"It looks like a Harrapan-type civilisation but dating way back to 7500 BC," he said.

The earliest discovered human civilisations in the subcontinent are the sites of the Harrapan and Indus Valley communities, which date back to 2500 BC.

The "marine archaeological findings" have been made by a joint exercise conducted by the Indian ocean development and archaeology institutes in the Gulf of Cambay region, off the coast of Gujarat state in the Arabian Sea.

Objects such as pieces of construction material, artefacts with rectangular holes, fused objects, pottery, beads, broken pieces of sculpture, a fossilised jaw bone and human teeth and a cut wooden log have all been retrieved out from the site. Carbon-dating and other methods have dated the finds to around 7500 BC.

Acoustic imagery has also revealed a river stretch of nine kilometres (5.6 miles) along which all the objects have been found. The imagery also shows built-up structures protruding from the seabed.

"We have formed a group to undertake further studies," Joshi said. "We have to find out what happened then ... where and how did this civilisation vanish ... what kind of seismological activity is taking place here."

The minister said the discovery could have implications worldwide.

"The idea is to tell the world that here is an area which needs further examination due to the discovery of objects which have been dated back to 7500 BC."

# US, Britain may impose ban on Zimbabwe

AFP, Harare

President Robert Mugabe's government has come under strong attack from Washington and the former colonial power Britain, with threats of sanctions against Zimbabwe over new draconian laws and "government-sponsored political intimidation".

The United States, the European Union and right groups have slammed Mugabe's law changes as a move to tighten his 22-year-old grip on power ahead of a presidential election in March.

Former colonial power Britain is considering targeted sanctions against the Zimbabwean government amid concerns about political violence and Mugabe's clampdown on the opposition, a British government minister told the BBC Tuesday.

# Kabul airport officially reopens

AFP, Kabul

Kabul's airport, heavily damaged during the US campaign in Afghanistan, was officially reopened Wednesday after being cleared of bombs and mines.

"This is the start of a new era for Afghan aviation," the interim Afghan Minister for Air Transport and Tourism, Abdul Rahman said as the national airline Ariana announced plans to resume international flights next week.

The airport, which has had limited use for domestic flights since early December, was cleared for full service after weeks of mine clearance and repairs to the main runway.

Domestic flights in Afghanistan were suspended in September before the start of US air strikes, undertaken in the hunt for suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden and to help topple the Taliban regime which sheltered him.

# 4 porters die in avalanche in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Four Muslim porters working with Indian border guards in Indian-administered Kashmir have been killed in an avalanche, a police spokesman said Wednesday.

The porters were carrying food and arms for border guards in Uri district near the disputed border with Pakistan when they were caught in the avalanche overnight Tuesday.

"All the four were buried alive under the snow," the spokesman said, adding all efforts to save them had proved futile.

Indian army and border guard officials have indefinitely suspended the transportation of food and arms by foot to forward bunkers and posts, a top police officer said.

# 6 killed during strike in Aceh

AFP, Banda Aceh

Violence has left at least six people dead as explosions and volleys of gunfire Wednesday marked the start of a two-day strike called by rebels in Indonesia's Aceh province.

The separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebels have called a two-day strike from Wednesday to protest alleged brutality by police and troops and Jakarta's plan to revive a separate military command for the province.

In provincial capital Banda Aceh, and the districts of North Aceh, Pidie and South Aceh, shops were closed, schools were abandoned and no public transport was running, witnesses said.

A journalist in Lhokseumawe, the capital of North Aceh where Exxon-Mobil's key gas and oil operations are based, reported hearing 15 explosions since nightfall Tuesday, and volleys of gunfire before dawn.

# US-Russian uranium deal stalled

AFP, Washington

A landmark 1993 agreement to sell uranium from Russian nuclear warheads to fuel American power plants is in jeopardy because of a price dispute. The Los Angeles Times reported Wednesday.

The standoff already has stalled shipment of the uranium to the United States, and specialists are concerned that a collapse of the deal could increase the chance of terrorists or rogue nations obtaining the nuclear material, the report said.

Under the accord, the company USEC Inc. of Bethesda, Maryland, has been given the responsibility of purchasing from Russia 500 metric tonnes of the uranium.

But because USEC and the Russians remain at odds over pricing, no shipments have been authorised for 2002, according to The Times.

# Powell promises cash for Afghans

AFP, Kabul

US Secretary of State Colin Powell began a key Asian tour Wednesday with a promise of quick cash for near-bankrupt Afghanistan, as a lull in the military campaign turned attentions to rebuilding the war-shattered country.

Powell, who arrived in Pakistan on the first leg of a trip that will also take him to Kabul, New Delhi, Kathmandu and Tokyo, told reporters on his flight that the United States would free more than 220 million dollars in Afghan assets frozen in the United States.

"The country is broke," UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said here Tuesday after a meeting of 16 donor countries with officials of the world body and the fledgling interim administration of Hamid Karzai.

Afghan officials said they had only 10 million dollars left in the kitty, and

needed at least 10 times that amount to meet government payrolls -- the country's 250,000 civil servants have not been paid in six months.

The Afghan Central Bank assets, much of which are held in gold by the US Federal Reserve, were seized in 1999 after the toppled Taliban regime refused to hand over militants linked to the 1998 bomb attacks on US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya.

Powell said he would tell Karzai that operating money should be made available in "the next day or so."

"It's really just the beginning, though," he added. "They're really going to need a lot of help. There are a lot of bills there."

The bulk of the assets are gold worth around 195 million dollars, plus some 25 million dollars in frozen bank accounts and another 23 million of frozen overflight charges paid by foreign airlines for transiting Afghan airspace, he said.

In another move that should bring relief to the country, the UN Security Council voted Tuesday to lift a year-old ban on the Afghan airline Ariana. Ariana will resume international flights after the Kabul airport's main runway reopens next week, said its president, Rohullah Aman.

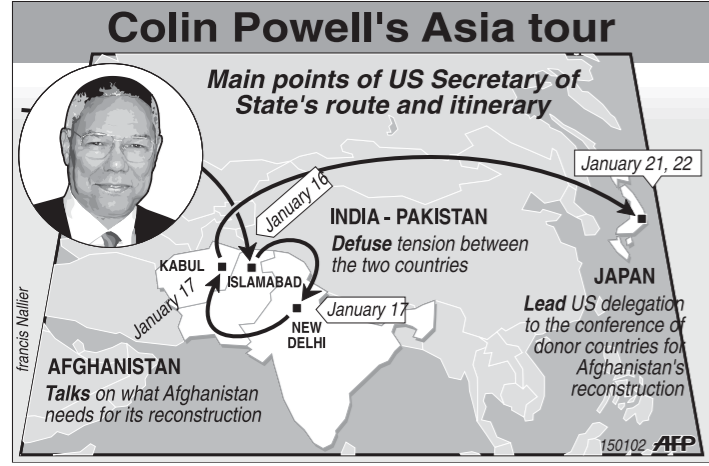
"We are very pleased with the end of sanctions, and we want to operate again," he told AFP. "Our planes, hangars, technical and maintenance services were destroyed by the bombardments and more than 20 years of war, but we can count on two planes -- an Antonov 24 and a Boeing 727 -- to take to the air again."

The first flights will be to India, Iran, Dubai and Uzbekistan, he said. The Kabul airport, heavily damaged during the US bombing campaign, was cleared for limited use in early December, allowing Ariana to operate the small An-24 on a twice-weekly domestic run between Kabul and the Herat.

The UN resolution also ended financial restrictions imposed on the carrier in October 1999 as part of sanctions to force the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden, who is blamed for the East African embassy bombings and the September 11 terror attacks against the United States.



PHOTO: AFP  
United States Secretary of State Colin Powell greets Wendy Chamberlin, US ambassador to Pakistan, as Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdull Sattar (r) looks on at Chacklala Military Airbase in Rawalpindi on Wednesday. Powell arrived in Islamabad on a brief visit to hold talks with Pakistani high official in an effort to decrease the tension between the South Asian rivals.



# 'American Taliban' accused of conspiracy to kill US nationals

AFP, Washington

American John Walker Lindh, captured fighting with al-Qaida forces in Afghanistan, faces federal charges of conspiracy to kill US nationals that could send him to prison for the rest of his life, Attorney General John Ashcroft said.

In a complaint filed Tuesday in US District Court in Alexandria, Virginia, "the United States is charging Walker with ... conspiracy to kill nationals of the United States overseas, namely US nationals engaged in the conflict in Afghanistan," Ashcroft said.

The 20-year-old, also known as Suleyman al-Faris or Abdul Hamid, is also charged with "providing material support and resources to designated foreign terrorist organisations, including al-Qaida; and engaging in prohibited transactions

with the Taliban," Ashcroft said.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said the president was "pleased that the process put in place by the National Security Council to review this unique case and the collaborative efforts between the departments of Defence and Justice worked well."

"The president is confident that justice will be done."

Walker's family and a lawyer they hired to represent him issued a statement criticising the US government for denying access to him.

Lawyer George Harris said he would seek a fair trial for his client, and asked US officials to "cease their public speculation about this case and respect the presumption of innocence and the fair procedures that our constitution guarantees to all American citizens."

# Maoists attack Nepali jail, free 32 prisoners

AFP, Kathmandu

A group of armed Maoists attacked a jail in Nepal releasing 32 prisoners out of 50, state-run radio said Wednesday.

"A group of Maoist terrorists attacked the central jail of Surkhet district, 432 kilometres (270 miles) far south-west of Kathmandu, and helped to free 32 inmates by digging a tunnel at the backside compound of the jail," Home Minister Devendra Raj Kandel told AFP.

"The group of Maoists attacked the jail with guns and kept the security personnel guarding the jail occupied by exchanging fire with them while others helped to get the 32 inmates escape," Kandel said. He said none of the escaped

prisoners had so far been re-arrested.

In a separate incident, Maoists killed a regional president of the ruling Nepali Congress party in the south-western Dang district, the minister said.

The attackers escaped and no one has been arrested for the killing. The rebels have been fighting for a communist republic since 1996 and the insurgency has so far claimed the lives of more than 2,300 people.

In November the government declared emergency rule to combat the Maoists, who had broken a four-month truce with attacks on police and army posts.

# Shootout at Lahore airport: 5 hurt

AFP, Lahore

Five people including four security officials were wounded early Wednesday in a shooting at Lahore Airport described as a "terrorist act", officials said.

Two of the victims were critically injured when the unidentified gunmen opened fire after being stopped for security checks at the main gate of the airport around 2.15 am (2115 GMT Tuesday), officials said. The attackers then fled.

"We stopped them for security checks at the outer gate but they started firing," chief of the Airport Security Force (ASF) Chandry Muneer told AFP. "It was a totally terrorist act. They targeted security officials who were on duty," he said.

Muneer said there were two people in the car, with the occupant of the passenger seat shooting at the victims.

The firing was "indiscriminate," he said, adding that three ASF officers, one police official and a rickshaw driver received bullet wounds.

The security officials returned fire and the assailants fled, he said. Hospital officials said two ASF officers were in a critical condition. "They are still in coma," medical officer Seema Khan said.

The three other victims were described as stable.

# Misuari sympathisers step up attacks on military

AFP, Jolo

Police officers and gunmen loyal to jailed Muslim leader Nur Misuari killed three soldiers and a civilian in his southern Philippines island base Wednesday, pushing the death toll in two days of unrest to 36, officials said.

President Gloria Arroyo denounced the violence which erupted on Tuesday, saying "it was instigated by troublemakers." She did not elaborate.

Jolo island's downtown was a virtual ghost town with shops and

schools shuttered, roads barricaded by tyres and rocks and lampposts and walls plastered with posters of Misuari.

The military and police commands ordered all units in Jolo back to barracks to head off further bloodshed.

Misuari, 60, fled Jolo after a bloody armed rebellion by his followers in November that left more than 100 people dead.

But Malaysia detained him for illegal entry and deported him last week to stand trial for rebellion.



PHOTO: AFP  
Pakistani police watch the burning government building of interior minister and other offices as fire fighters battle to put down fire in Islamabad on Tuesday. The top 10 floors of a 16-storey government ministry building in the Pakistani capital have been gutted by fire, which continued to blaze out of control more than four hours after it erupted. The Shaheed-I-Millat building housed offices of 15 government departments, including the record-keeping offices of the interior ministry.

# Microscopic form of life found

AFP, Paris

American researchers say they have found a community of hydrogen-munching bugs deep underground, a discovery which strengthens the belief that microscopic life, perhaps of a kind unfamiliar to us, may be thriving beneath the surface of Mars.

The microbes were found in geothermal water 200 metres (650 feet) underground at Lidy Hot Springs in Idaho, they report in Thursday's issue of Nature, the British science weekly.

On Earth, most forms of microscopic life get their energy from sunlight. But there is also a handful of anaerobic (non-oxygen breathing) microbes that, remarkably, can live in utterly dark, hot, acidic or alkaline conditions, such as on rift vents on the sea floor.

They survive by combining electrons from hydrogen with carbon dioxide, a reaction that creates methane, which is their energy source, and also water.

These so-called methanogens have been closely studied by microbiologists, and some bacterial members of the family have an interesting commercial potential, such as digesters of sewage that yield methane as a byproduct.

What intrigues space scientists is whether methanogens or things like them could exist under the surface of Mars and the Jupiter moon Europa, where water is suspected to lurk but where there is no known oxygen and no sunlight.

Seeking to find an environment on Earth that could replicate hostile, lightless conditions, the US team, led by Francis Chapelle of the US Geological Survey in South Carolina took samples from Lidy Hot Springs, where a private landowner has drilled a hole to draw deep groundwater that is heated to 58.5 C (137.3 F) by a geothermal source.