

Musharraf to return home on Jan 25 or 27

ANS, Islamabad

Former Pakistan president Pervez Musharraf, who has been in self-imposed exile, has said he is ready to face the courts and would be returning to Pakistan on Jan 25 or 27.

The former army chief on Thursday expressed the hope that he would be acquitted after two to three court hearings. He was talking to reporters in Dubai during an event Thursday, Geo News reported.

Musharraf also said that he would return to Pakistan Jan 25 or 27, accompanied by about 500 to 600 people from all over the world.

Musharraf is wanted by an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan over accusations that he failed to protect former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto from being assassinated in December 2007.



A veiled Palestinian girl uses a catapult to throw stones at Israeli soldiers during a weekly demonstration against the construction and expansion of Israeli settlements on village lands in the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh, near Ramallah yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Job surge lifts US economy

AFP, Washington

The US economy created 200,000 jobs in December, marking the sixth month in a row of gains, official figures showed yesterday.

In a keenly awaited reading of the ailing jobs market, the Labor Department yesterday reported the jobless rate fell to 8.5 percent and 200,000 jobs were added in December.

The jobless rate was the lowest since February 2009, when Congress passed a \$787 billion stimulus bill the month after President Barack Obama took office amid the worst US recession in decades.

The rate has lost 0.6 percentage point since August according to the Labor Department's year-end revisions.

"This report provides further justification for continued modest optimism about the US economy in 2012," Jason Schenker at Prestige Economics said.

Ahead of the November presidential election, the better jobs picture was expected to boost Obama's reelection bid.

The Democratic president has backed government stimulus efforts to generate more jobs, while opposition Republicans argue that more government spending holds the private sector back and adds to the huge federal deficit.

The Obama administration hailed the jobs numbers as "further evidence that the economy is continuing to heal from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression."

Iran agrees to resume nuke talks

REUTERS, Tehran

Turkey has delivered a Western offer to Tehran to renew negotiations over its nuclear programme, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said on Thursday, expressing hope talks stalled a year ago could soon be revived.

As new sanctions from the United States and the European Union added pressure on the Iranian economy, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi said Tehran was also interested in returning to the negotiating table.

Speaking at a joint news conference with Salehi, Davutoglu said Salehi had "responded in kind" to "an expression of willingness by the West to resume negotiations" that he had brought.

IRISING TENSIONS IN THE GULF

Iran, Israel plan new showdown

Sanction grip tightens on Tehran as Asia joins EU

REUTERS, Tehran

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The announcements came as new sanctions threaten Tehran's oil exports.

Real Admiral Ali Fadavi, naval commander of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, said exercises next month would focus directly on the Strait of Hormuz, which leads out of

the Gulf and provides the outlet for most Mid-East oil.

On the same day, the Israeli military said it was preparing for joint exercises with the US to rehearse missile defence and co-operation between the forces. The manoeuvres, which are codenamed Austere Challenge 12 and involve thousands of troops, have been planned for some time and were hailed by Israeli and US officials as their biggest ever joint drill.

Iran held a 10-day drill which ended on Monday in neighbouring seas.

Iran faced the prospect of cutbacks in its oil sales to China and Japan as new measures to block Tehran's crude exports over its nuclear programme appeared to be driving its economy to the wall.

Japan would consider cutbacks in

its Iranian oil purchases to secure a waiver from new US sanctions signed into law on New Year's Eve by President Barack Obama, a government source said.

The developments in Asia on Thursday followed news 24 hours earlier that EU leaders had agreed to halt European purchases of Iranian crude.

The bloc - particularly Italy, Spain and Greece - has collectively bought about 500,000 barrels per day of Iran's oil, making it Iran's second biggest customer after China.

EU leaders have yet to agree when the embargo will take effect, but are expected to announce it at a foreign ministers meeting at the end of this month.

China, the largest buyer, which imported about 550,000 bpd of Iran's oil last year, has cut its pur-

chases by more than half for this month and would now extend that cut to February, according to the Beijing-based trader.

Most oil traders still expect Iran to find buyers for its crude, but it will have to offer steeper discounts that will cut the hard currency revenue it needs to import food and other basic supplies for its 74 million people.

The new US measures, if implemented fully, would make it impossible for most countries' refineries to buy Iranian crude, marking a qualitative change in the West's approach to Tehran, which it accuses of seeking a nuclear weapon.

International sanctions that for years had little effect are for the first time having a real impact on day-to-day life in Iran, where the rial currency has tumbled and people have rushed to convert savings into dollars.

Turkey arrests ex-army chief on coup plot

BBC ONLINE



A former head of the Turkish armed forces has been remanded in custody to face charges over an alleged plot to overthrow the government.

Gen Ilker Basbug, who retired in 2010, is the highest-ranking officer to be caught up in a widening probe into the so-called Ergenekon network.

Prosecutors say in 2003 the hardline nationalist group tried to bring down PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government.

Gen Basbug rejects the allegations. Some 400 suspects are already on trial.

The Ergenekon trial is one of several involving accusations of anti-government plots by the military and secular establishment.

Some military officers already charged in the case have said they acted in a chain of command.

Turkey's military, the second largest in the Nato alliance after the US, has long seen itself as the guarantor of the country's secular constitution and staged three coups between 1960 and 1980.

But it has a history of tension with Erdogan's governing AK party, with the two sides engaged in a war of words for the past two-and-a-half years over the alleged plots.

NEWS IN brief

Mandela's party marks 100 years

AFP, Bloemfontein

South Africa's mighty African National Congress yesterday began celebrations for its centenary, still firmly at the helm of Nelson Mandela's all-race democracy despite losing some of its shine.

Africa's oldest liberation movement expects 46 heads of state for the bash marking its 100th anniversary Sunday, with 100,000 supporters set to flood into the normally placid central city of Bloemfontein.

"We are the oldest organisation in the continent," President Jacob Zuma told a cheering crowd after a walk-about Friday in Botshabelo around 40 kilometres from Bloemfontein.

5,000 relics from Titanic on sale

AFP, New York

Five thousand items recovered from the Atlantic grave of the Titanic, from a 17-ton piece of the hull to china used to serve first-class passengers, will go on auction in New York a century after the liner sank.

The unprecedented collection will be sold as a single lot by Guernsey's Auctioneers on April 11, exactly 100 years after Titanic's maiden voyage in the city where the doomed ship had been destined when it was holed by an iceberg off Newfoundland.

Chile blaze claims six firefighters

AFP, Santiago

At least six Chilean firefighters perished Thursday after tackling one of a series of raging wildfires blamed by President Sebastian Pinera on arsonists.

An unusually hot and dry early summer and high winds have seen forest fires ravage large areas of central and southern Chile, burning down scores of homes and destroying some 50,000 hectares of woodland and brush.

Cautin governor Miguel Mellado said earlier that 10 firefighters were trapped while fighting the blaze in a mountainside forest. Five died, two were evacuated by helicopter with injuries, and another three were missing, he said.

Tibetan self-immolates in China

AFP, Beijing

At least one Tibetan man set himself on fire near the restive Kirti monastery in southwest China yesterday, rights groups said, the 13th such act to hit Tibetan areas in less than a year.

The incident happened in Sichuan province's Aba county, the scene of sporadic bouts of unrest since a young monk named Phuntsog self-immolated last March, Free Tibet and the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) said.

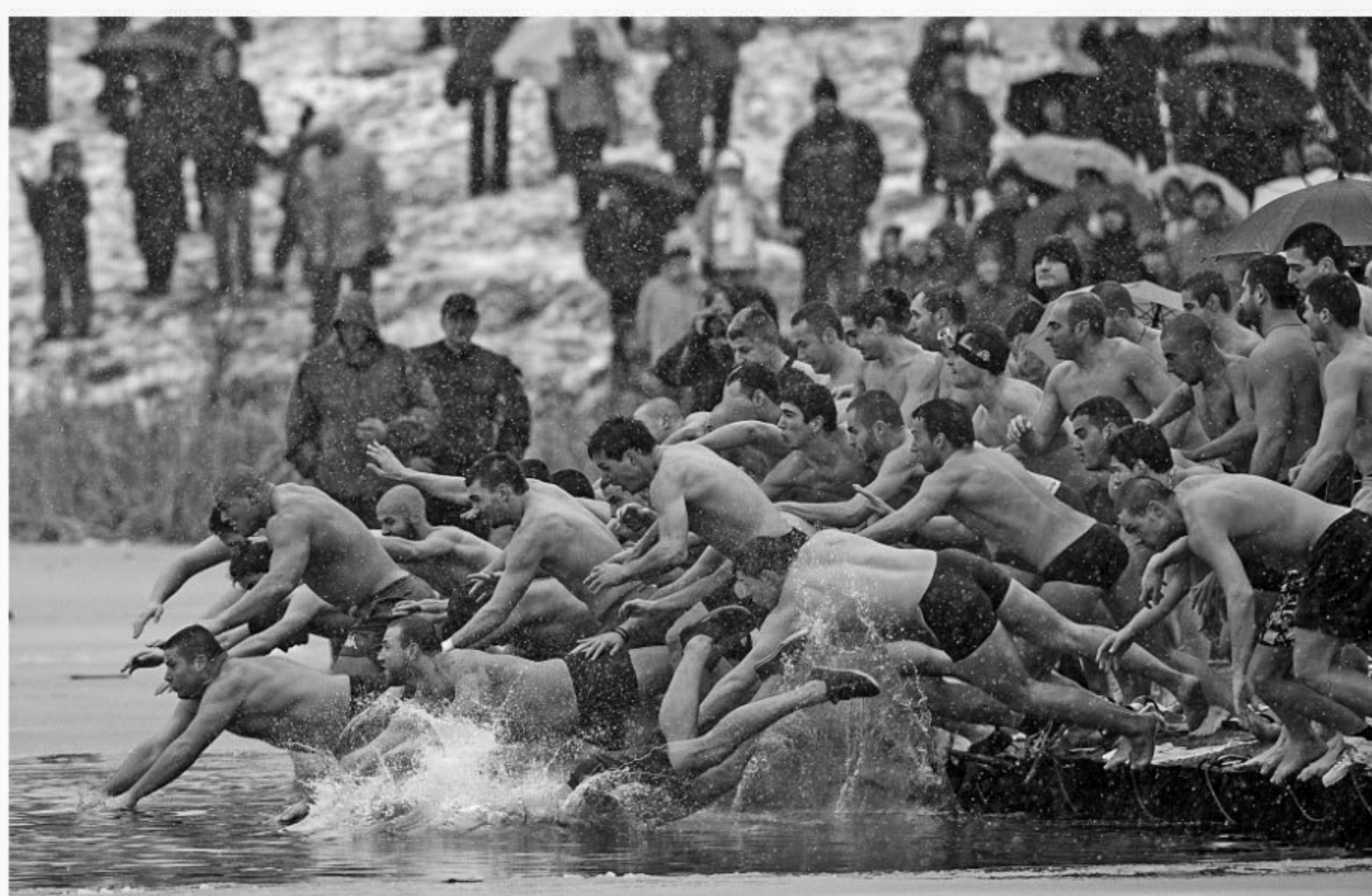


PHOTO: AFP

Bulgarians dive into icy water as they compete to catch a cross in the middle of a lake in Sofia as part of Epiphany Day celebrations yesterday. It is believed that the man who is the first to grab the cross, thrown into the water by an Eastern Orthodox priest, will be healthy throughout the year.

China agree to review Ai Weiwei tax case

BBC ONLINE



Authorities in China have agreed to Ai Weiwei's request to review a \$2.4m fine imposed by the tax bureau for "back taxes".

The outspoken artist was charged with tax evasion linked to his Fake Cultural Development Ltd company in November.

He paid a \$1.3m bond required by law for an appeal and his lawyers

filed a 9,000-word request last week.

He said officials told him over the phone on Wednesday that the review would be completed in two months.

He was able to pay the bond after some 30,000 supporters sent money to him.

Mr Ai says that the allegations against him are a bid by the authorities to silence his criticism of the government.

The world-renowned artist was arrested in April 2011 and detained for 81 days, his whereabouts unknown.

He was given a gag order when released in June, but continued to tweet and speak to international media. He was then charged with tax evasion.

The artist was named by ArtReview magazine last year as the most powerful artist in the world.

"We hope that the tax bureau will earnestly review the case," Mr Ai's lawyer, Pu Zhiqiang, told AFP.

"If we are not satisfied with the results, we can bring the case to court," he added.

Memory loss can begin from age 45

GUARDIAN ONLINE

As all those of middle age who have ever fumbled for a name to fit a face will believe, the brain begins to lose sharpness of memory and powers of reasoning and understanding not from 60 as previously thought, but from as early as 45, scientists say.

Their evidence comes from a large study of more than 7,000 civil servants aged between 45 and 70. The 5,000 men and 2,000 women agreed to undergo verbal and written tests on three occasions over a 10-year period.

Over the decade, there was a 3.6% decline in the mental reasoning of men and of women aged 45 to 49. The process appeared to have speeded up in the older age groups. Men aged 65 to 70 have a decline of 9.6% while women fared a little better, at 7.4%.

REPUBLICAN'S RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

Tough Carolina fight looms

REUTERS, Manchester

Even as the Republican presidential candidates fight it out in New Hampshire, a bigger showdown is looming in South Carolina, a conservative state with a history of nasty politics and picking winners.

The state's primary on January 21 - 11 days after New Hampshire - could be the last stand for conservatives hoping to stop more moderate frontrunner Mitt Romney, who is likely to roll into South Carolina off consecutive wins in Iowa and New Hampshire, where he has a big lead in polls.

A Romney win in South Carolina could essentially wrap up the nomination early, but a victory by a conservative like Rick Santorum would give the Republican Party's right-wing a long-sought savior to rally around in a race that moves on to Florida and other states.

"South Carolina is where the anybody-but-Romney forces hope to finally find their standard-bearer," said Republican strategist Tucker Eskew, who is from South Carolina.



Mitt Romney



Rick Santorum

"It's the killing ground and birthing ground for presidential hopes."

Texas Governor Rick Perry, who briefly considered dropping out of the race after a poor fifth-place showing in Iowa, is also in the race.

South Carolina, which has backed the Republican White House winner every year since the primary's inception in 1980, has a history of ugly and decisive primary battles.

The brutal 2000 fight between George W Bush and McCain, which featured a rash of anonymous anti-McCain smears, was vital in Bush's march to the White House. In 2008, McCain beat back a challenge from rival Mike Huckabee that helped him clinch the nomination.

As the moderate former governor of Massachusetts, Romney faces a tough challenge in South Carolina even if he does ride a wave of momentum after New Hampshire. He was a distant fourth in the state in 2008 with 15 percent.