Anger rages

Indian leaders pledge swift action

PTI, *New Delhi*

As protests over the horrendous gang rape incident intensified, Indian Congress president Sonia Gandhi yesterday spoke to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asking for swift and immediate action in the case.

She also wanted the Prime Minister to ask the home minister to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to protect the victim, who is undergoing treatment in a city hospital.

Meanwhile, sustained protests over the gang rape of the 23-year-old paramedical student erupted in Raisina Hill, the seat of power, as thousands of youth clashed with police undeterred by the repeated use of water cannons, teargas shells and baton charge.

Demonstrators comprising girls and boys gathered right from the morning at India Gate and marched to Raisina Hill where Rashtrapati Bhavan and prime minister's Office are located.

The looked a battle ground as their repeated attempts to break the barricades and reach Rashtrapati Bhavan invited at least six rounds of spraying of water jets, teargassing and cane charging, injuring around 30 protesters.

Some policemen were also injured in the throwing of stones and other missiles at them. Police vehicles were also damaged in the violence.

Amid widespread outrage, Gandhi is learnt to have stressed for "action with immediate effect". Her telephonic conversation with the prime minister follows two strongly-worded letters from her to home minister Sushilkumar Shinde and Delhi chief minister Shiela Dikshit on December 18.

In the letters, Gandhi had sought "strictest possible measures" to ensure that there is no recurrence of such a barbaric crime.

Political parties condemned the police action and demanded that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh make a statement.

The prime minister called home minister Sushilkumar Shinde to his house and discussed a series of steps to ensure safety of women in the capital and to ensure that swift justice was meted out to the criminals involved in the bestial act on Sunday night.

Meanwhile, the 23-year-old gangrape victim has given a "fearless and bold" statement before a magistrate about the brutal assault on Sunday night and wants her tormentors to be swiftly brought to justice.

Delhi Police said the girl's statement corroborates with the version of her male friend who was also assaulted brutally by six men inside a moving bus on Sunday last.

DELHI GANG-RAPE PROTESTS

1. Indian demonstrators protest in front of the Government Secretariat and Presidential Palace calling for better safety for women following the rape of a student last week in New Delhi yesterday. 2. A girl holds up a sign calling for justice for the rape victim. 3. Police detain a demonstrator and 4. Angry demonstrators react as police fire tear gas and water cannon.

PHOTO: AFP

SETTLEMENT ISSUE

I don't care what the UN says: Netanyahu

HAARETZ ONLINE

Amid increasing international criticism of Israel's recent approval of construction plans in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a television interview Friday that he doesn't "care what the UN says."

Following the UN vote granting the Palestinians non-member status, Israel announced plans to advance a long-frozen project for the E-1 corridor, which links the city of Jerusalem with the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim. The Netanyahu government also announced plans to build 3,000 new residential units beyond the green line.

Criticism of these moves reached its peak this week, when on Wednesday fourteen members of the UN Security Council condemned Israel for its intention to move ahead with construction in E-1, as well as with building new settler homes. On Tuesday the US State Department accused Israel of engaging in a "pattern of provocative action" that runs counter to statements from Israeli leaders that they are committed to peace.

In Friday's Channel 2 interview, Netanyahu said construction is a matter of principle. "We live in a Jewish state, and Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. The Western Wall is not occupied territory. We will build in Jerusalem because this is our right. I don't care what the UN says."

Asked whether the recent announcements were a political maneuver ahead of the January elections, and whether they were made on the advice of the Likud party's political strategist, Arthur Finkelstein, Netanyahu countered that this is a matter of government policy.

Taliban kill Pak province minister

AFP, *Peshawar*

A suicide bomber killed a senior provincial minister and seven other people at a political meeting in northwest Pakistan yesterday, officials said, in an attack claimed by the Taliban.

The bomber struck when around 100 people including the provincial leadership of the Awami National Party (ANP) had gathered at a meeting in the city of Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The blast killed Bashir Bilour, the number two to the chief minister of the province, which is on the frontline of Pakistan's fight against homegrown militancy and is frequently hit by gun and bomb attacks..

Philippines criminalises state abductions

AFP, *Manila*

The Philippines has passed landmark legislation that criminalises state abductions, a presidential spokeswoman said yesterday, in a move hailed by human rights groups.

Under the new law "enforced disappearances" -- abductions carried out by security forces usually targeting anti-government activists and critics -- will be treated separately to kidnapping and offenders could face life in prison.

Human Rights Watch welcomed the new law, saying it was "the first of its kind in Asia and a major milestone in ending this horrific human rights violation".

Under the legislation the military can no longer cite the so-called "order of battle" -- a list of supposed communist insurgents that until now was used to justify holding a person.

The law also prohibits secret detention facilities and authorises the government to conduct "regular, unannounced... inspections of all places of detention and confinement".

Human rights group Karapatan says on its website it has documented 12 enforced disappearances since Aquino became president in July 2010, with more than 200 recorded during the rule of his predecessor Gloria Arroyo.

President Benigno Aquino approved the legislation late Friday, spokeswoman Abigail Valte said, amid a growing outcry over the abductions.

NEWS IN *brief*

Thatcher recovering from operation

BBC ONLINE

Former prime minister Margaret Thatcher is recovering in hospital after having a growth removed from her bladder.

She is understood to have undergone a minor operation to remove the growth.The former prime minister's spokeswoman said Baroness Thatcher is doing "absolutely fine".

The 87-year-old, who has suffered from ill health in recent years, was admitted to hospital on Thursday and is expected to be kept in hospital overnight.

South Sudan downs UN chopper

BBC ONLINE

The UN on Friday said a helicopter from its peacekeeping mission in South Sudan has been shot down by the army, killing all four crew, believed to be Russians.

A spokesman said the aircraft was shot down while on a reconnaissance mission in eastern Jonglei state.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon strongly condemned the attack on the "clearly marked" helicopter. However, South Sudan's minister of information told the BBC that the cause of the incident was

Pope pardons ex-butler

AFP, *Vatican City*

Pope Benedict XVI yesterday pardoned his former butler Paolo Gabriele, who was sentenced to 18 months in jail for leaking secret papal memos, but banished him from the Vatican.

However, the ex-butler "cannot resume his previous occupation or continue to live in Vatican City," a Vatican statement said.

Gabriele was found guilty in October of leaking sensitive memos to the press as part of a whistle-blowing campaign against what he said was "evil

Tunisia auctions of Ben Ali treasures

AFP, *Gammarth*

Tunisian Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali kicked off viewing yesterday for an auction of thousands of luxury items once owned by ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ali and his family.

Jebali inspected 40 luxury cars, thousands of clothing, jewellery items and art works on the eve of the public auction which is being held in the Tunis suburb of Gammarth in a bid to raise millions of euros for government coffers.

Hugh Grant in hacking settlement

SKY NEWS ONLINE

Phone-hacking victim Hugh Grant has accepted a "substantial sum" after settling his legal claim against the News Of The World, his solicitor said on Friday.

The actor will donate the money he receives from News Group Newspapers to the Hacked Off campaign for an accountable media, his solicitor Mark Thomson said.

Grant is a prominent member of Hacked Off, which is now campaigning for the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry into press practices

Blasts target Nigeria telecom firms

AFP, *Kano*

Two suspected suicide car bombers attacked the offices of two major telecoms companies in the volatile northern Nigerian city of Kano yesterday, police and the army said.

One of the attackers blew himself up when he rammed his car into the office gate of the Airtel mobile phone company, setting the building

Italy PM Mario Monti resigns

AGENCIES

Mario Monti late Friday resigned as Italian prime minister, officials said, keeping a promise to step down after the passing of his budget by parliament.

MPs earlier passed the 2013 budget drawn up by his government with 309 votes in favour and 55 against.

His resignation opened the way for a tight contest in the upcoming general election dominated by a raging debate over austerity in the recession-hit country.

President Giorgio Napolitano was set to begin talks with political leaders in the key eurozone state yesterday before dissolving parliament and formally calling a general election.

Monti, appointed to head up a technocrat government last year as Italy battled the debt crisis, has been called on by his supporters to run in the February election or endorse parties which pledge to continue his reforms.

Monti's arch-rival, the flamboyant Silvio Berlusconi, has blamed Germany for Italy's woes and called for an end to austerity, while Monti has urged more budget discipline.

The unelected Monti has kept his cards close to his chest, appearing reluctant to dive into the rough-and-tumble of Italian electoral politics, but is expected to announce today whether he will enter into the fray.

EU tightens noose on Iran

REUTERS, *Brussels*

Rigorous new sanctions against Iran's banking, shipping and industrial sectors took effect yesterday, as part of the European Union's effort to force Tehran to scale back its nuclear programme.

The toughest EU measures yet, they include bans on financial transactions, sales to Iran of shipping equipment and steel, and imports of Iranian natural gas, adding to earlier bans, including on the OPEC producer's oil.

They reflect heightened concern over Iran's nuclear goals and Israeli threats to attack Iranian atomic installations if diplomacy and other measures fail to deliver a solution.

Cold snap kills 200 across East Europe

AFP, *Moscow*

A vicious cold snap across Russia and eastern Europe has claimed nearly 200 lives, officials figures showed yesterday, as forecasters warned it would last until Christmas Eve.

In Russia, the cold has killed two people in the past 24 hours, the Ria-Novosti agency reported, citing medical sources, bringing the total number of deaths over the past week to 56.

The freeze had also left 371 people in hospital.

Thermometers have been stuck below minus 20 degrees Celsius (minus 4 Fahrenheit) in Moscow -- and below minus 50 degrees (minus 58 F) in some parts of Siberia -- for a week.

Other European countries hit hard by the extreme temperatures were counting the toll as temperatures gradually started to return to normal.

Authorities in Ukraine, which has been battling heavy snowfall for weeks, said 83 people had died of cold, with 57 of the victims found on the street.

The homeless are traditionally the hardest-hit by the region's bitter winters.

In eastern Europe, police in Poland said Friday that 49 people had died of exposure this month, with most of the victims homeless, as temperatures plunged to minus 10 degrees Celsius.

At least six people have died of exposure in Lithuania in the past weeks, police and emergency services said there.

Japan's PM elect pledges to mend ties with China

AFP, *Tokyo*

Japan's incoming premier yesterday pledged to seek a thaw in ties with China after a report said he will send a special envoy on a fence-mending mission to Beijing.

Ties between Japan and China have become increasingly strained over a disputed island chain -- the Tokyo-controlled Senkakus, which Beijing calls the Diaoyus -- with neither side willing to budge after months of bitter wrangling.

"I want to make efforts to return to the starting point of developing the mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests," Shinzo Abe told reporters.

"The Japan-China relationship is one of extremely important bilateral ties," he said.

The comments came after the business daily Nikkei reported Abe will send Masahiko Komura, the vice president of his Liberal Democratic Party, to deliver a letter to Chinese authorities next month.

They also came a day after China sent ships into territorial waters around the disputed islands, in the first incursion since Japan elected a new government.

"I will shoulder grave responsibility (for Japan's future)," Abe, who will officially be appointed as prime minister on Wednesday, told supporters in his constituency in western Japan earlier Saturday.

"My mission is to bring a breakthrough in the serious situations we face in economy, diplomacy, and education."

Abe said Friday he will dispatch former finance minister Fukushiro Nukaga to deliver a letter to South Korea's president-elect Park Geun-Hye, who also triumphed in national elections just days ago.

Tokyo is embroiled in a separate row with Seoul over a different set of islets, with tensions flaring up earlier this year after outgoing South Korean president Lee Myung-Bak paid a sudden visit to the disputed territory.