

## SL peace talks to shift from Thailand to Europe

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's peace talks will shift from Thailand to a European capital next month, officials close to the Norwegian-brokered peace initiative said yesterday.

The second round of direct negotiations was due to be held at Nakhon Pathom, a riverside resort near the Thai capital Bangkok, from February 7 to 10.

But officials said a shift to Europe was made necessary by the medical condition of the Tamil Tiger rebels' London-based chief negotiator Noran Balasingham, 64, who is a diabetic patient with a kidney transplant.

The Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were both working to finalise the destination, officials said.

A round of talks was held last month in the Norwegian capital Oslo.

Official sources said it was not possible to stage the talks in Britain, despite Balasingham's presence there, as London had banned the LTTE as a foreign terrorist organisation in 2001.

The February talks will be the fifth between the Sri Lankan government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since the start of face-to-face talks in Thailand on September 16.

The latest development also raised a question mark over talks scheduled for March. The Japanese government had invited both the Colombo government and the LTTE to hold talks at a venue near Tokyo. Japan is also organising a major conference of international aid donors to help rebuild Sri Lanka even before the two sides enter into a final peace deal.

## Hispanics top US minorities

BBC ONLINE

Hispanics have become the largest minority in the United States, according to newly released government figures.

For the first time, there are now more Hispanics than Black Americans - 37 million Hispanics, compared to 36 million Blacks, says the United States Census Bureau.

Hispanics comprise nearly 13 per cent of the US population which has now hit 284.4 million people, according to the figures.

Observers say the trend is likely to continue because of higher birth rates and increased immigration from Latin American countries.

Census Bureau demographer Roberto Ramirez said it has long been expected that Hispanics would some day surpass blacks.

"And the trend shows it will clearly be increasing more in the future," Mr Ramirez said.

Demographers had already been surprised by the fast growth rate of the Hispanic community when the last official census was taken in 2000.

Asians are the next largest minority group after blacks and Hispanics, at about 12.1 million, or four per cent of the population, while the native American population rose one and a half per cent to 4.3 million.

Whites remained the largest single population group, numbering about 199.3 million in July 2001, nearly 70 per cent of all US residents.

The overall population rose 3.4 per cent from 281.4 million in April 2000, according to the bureau.

## BJP threatens to pull down UP govt

PTI, Etawah

Taking a serious view of party workers' complaints of "partisan and uncooperative attitude" of the officials in the Mayawati administration, BJP yesterday threatened to pull down the government if they were not shown enough respect.

"The BJP was not prepared to continue in the government at the cost of self-respect of its workers," BJP state President Vinay Katiyar told reporters in Etawah.

Katiyar said that after listening to the grievances of the party workers he would take up the matter with the BSP leadership and if needed will also speak to the BJP high command.

"The double standard of the officials would not be tolerated by the BJP," said Katiyar, who was flooded with complaints from BJP workers regarding partisan attitude of the administration.

Stating that BJP still stuck to its Hindutva agenda, he said the Ram temple issue, Uniform Civil Code and its opposition to article 370 (granting special status to Jammu and Kashmir) was very much on the party's manifesto.

"These would be made a poll plank in the forthcoming parliamentary elections," he added.

# Strong quake rocks Mexico: 20 killed

AFP, REUTERS, Mexico City

A strong earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale rattled central Mexico late Tuesday, leaving at least 20 people dead in the Pacific coastal states of Colima and Jalisco, officials said.

"Nineteen people were killed" in Colima, Fernando Moreno, governor of the small, mountainous state 760 kilometres (472 miles) west of Mexico City told Televisa television.

A local official from neighbouring Jalisco told AFP the earthquake killed one person in his state.

Emergency workers struggled to treat at least 100 people who were injured in Colima, a city of some 125,000 people where walls and homes collapsed.

Dazed residents slept in the open air or sat in chairs in the street on a balmy night, afraid to enter buildings.

The city is the capital of a small state of the same name which is devoted mostly to agriculture. The state is home to the active Volcano of Fire which last erupted in 1998.

The Seismological Service at Mexico City's UNAM University said the quake struck at 8:09pm (0209GMT) and measured 7.6. The US Geological Survey put the

quake's magnitude at 7.8.

It was felt throughout the central region from the Pacific coast to Veracruz, on the Atlantic Coast. It lasted 10 seconds near the epicentre and about 50 seconds in Mexico City.

The epicentre was located at a depth of 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) beneath the ocean, off the coast of Colima.

Moreno said nine earthquake victims died in Colima, the state capital. The other ten fatalities were found in smaller communities, including Coquimatlan and Villa de Alvarez - earlier reports said two people had died there.

The head of Colima's Civilian Protection agency Melchor Usua told Notimex news agency that several people remained trapped under collapsed buildings and that the state, with a population of 560,000, had suffered heavy damage.

He said several people were injured inside a restaurant that collapsed around them.

A Jalisco Civil Protection agency spokesman said an 85-year-old woman had been killed by a collapsing garden wall in Ciudad Guzman.

In Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco 500 kilometres west of

Mexico City, local media said two buildings had collapsed and a clinic was damaged.

Federal Government Secretary Santiago Creel told Televisa the earthquake hit hardest in the state capital Colima, Coquimatlan and Villa de Alvarez.

Radio reports said a number of buildings had collapsed in Manzanillo, a port city in Colima. Most telephone links with the state were out of service.

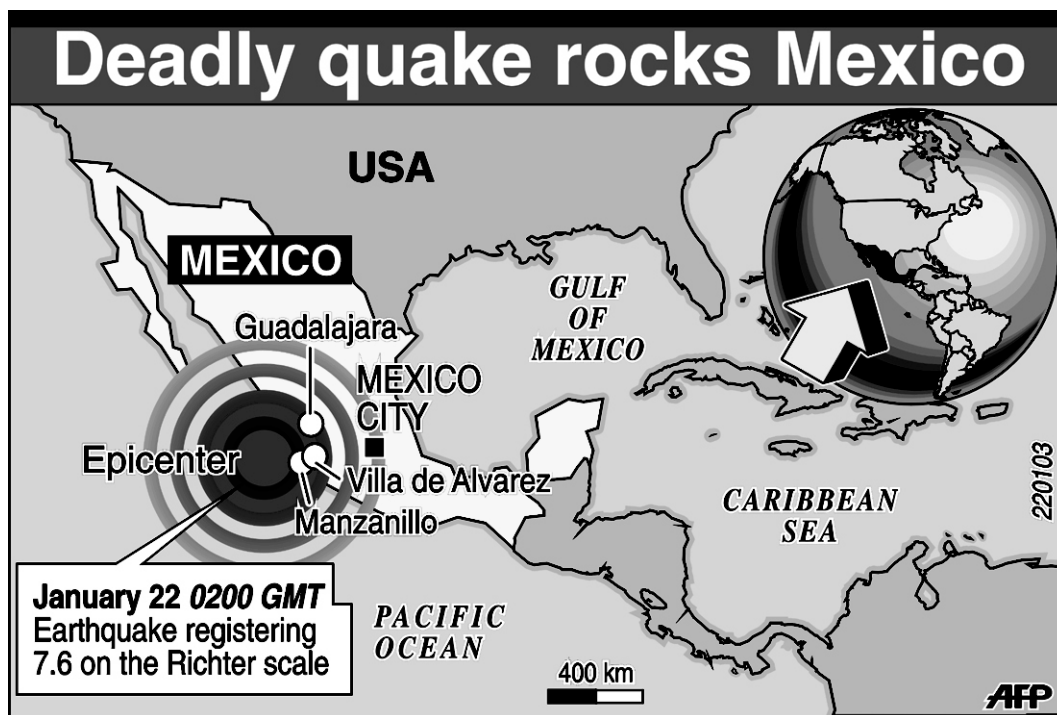
President Vicente Fox ordered National Defence Secretary Ricardo Clemente to get an investigation under way immediately to determine the extent of the damage, an official statement said.

Officials said the navy has sent patrol boats to inspect damage to port facilities in Manzanillo and Colima.

The quake rocked homes and offices in Mexico City, 310 miles to the east, where power was briefly cut and buildings cracked.

Still, the shaking earth brought back terrifying memories of a 1985 quake of 8.1 in Mexico City that killed more than 10,000 people.

"I was putting my kid to bed when everything started to move. We ran out with all our neighbors. I was just thinking of '85, the earthquake of



'85," said Beatriz Reyes, a resident of the central Mexico City neighborhood of La Roma, which was one of the hardest hit in 1985.

On Mexico City's central boulevard, Reforma, two twenty-story buildings, the Sevilla Palace Hotel and a government building, bumped together during the quake, said witnesses who briefly evacuated

both buildings. But the city dodged a bullet, with only a few dozen people treated for shock.

# Russian army sees US attack on Iraq in Feb

## Main goal to secure oilfields, says Interfax

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia's armed forces have obtained information that the United States and its allies have already decided to launch military action in Iraq from mid-February, news agency Interfax said yesterday.

The agency's specialist military news wire AVN, quoting an unnamed high-ranking source in the Russian general staff, said US-led operations would be launched once an attacking force of 150,000 had been assembled in the Gulf.

"According to the information we have, the operation is planned for the second half of February. The decision to launch it has been taken but not yet been made public," the source told the agency, which has generally authoritative contacts in the Russian military and political establishment.

The source added that the main

aim of the war would be to secure control of Iraqi oilfields.

It was not indicated by what means the Russian military had obtained such information - it was not clear if it had been acquired covertly by Russian intelligence services or by a direct tip-off from Washington, which would be keen to avoid any misunderstandings with Moscow if it does launch a war.

The United States says it is building up a force estimated to reach more than 150,000 by the end of next month. Britain is sending a further 30,000 troops. No other allies have come forward with significant military commitments so far and some, notably France, Germany and Russia are against rapid action.

"The military operation against Iraq will be conducted by a combination of means - strikes will be

from the air, land and sea. The war will be short, lasting about one month," the Russian source was quoted as saying.

The source added that the main aim of the operation was not so much to topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein but to secure US control over Iraqi oilfields.

"Hussein is the pretext. The real aim of the military action is control over Iraqi oil," he said.

Russia, together with France which is also a permanent member of the UN Security Council, are cautioning against US action in Iraq now while UN arms inspectors are continuing to search for evidence of weapons of mass destruction there.

Russia has a major commercial interest in Iraqi oil and has made clear its eagerness to exploit Iraq's huge reserves once UN sanctions on Saddam are lifted.



Anti-war activists burn a mock missile during a protest outside the US embassy in Manila yesterday. The Philippines has said a war on Iraq was inconceivable and asked the US government to seek a UN resolution for a military strike on Iraq.

# North Korea says it has no nuclear plans

## Top US arms control diplomat in Seoul

REUTERS, Seoul

With the spectre of Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions hanging over the Korean peninsula, the top US arms control diplomat met South Korean officials yesterday for talks on how to end a standoff with the isolated communist North.

US Undersecretary of State John Bolton held talks with Foreign Minister Choi Song-hong after stepping up pressure on Pyongyang by saying it was time to take the matter to the UN Security Council. The council could handle the Korea problem as well as the Iraq crisis, he said.

Bolton was tightlipped as he entered the meeting. He had met South Korean Defence Minister Lee Jun and other security officials Tuesday.

The crisis was sparked last October when the United States said the communist North had admitted to developing nuclear

arms. Pyongyang later ejected UN nuclear inspectors, removed the seals from a mothballed reactor and then pulled out of a global treaty to prevent the spread of atomic weapons.

Yet North Korea's delegates to ministerial talks in Seoul told their South Korean counterparts yesterday that Pyongyang had no intention of developing atomic arms, a South Korean official told reporters.

"North Korea stressed that it has no intention to develop nuclear weapons," South Korean Unification Ministry spokesman Rhee Bong-jo told reporters after the opening one-hour session of cabinet-level talks due to continue until tomorrow.

The denial was not the first, but it defied predictions that North Korea would resist discussing with Seoul an issue it had insisted was exclusively a problem for Pyongyang to work out with the United States.

South Korea told the North's

delegates that resolution of the nuclear crisis was a prerequisite to improving their ties.

"The South side delivered our position that if the nuclear problem is not resolved, resolving North-South problems will also face difficulties," Rhee said.

"We demanded that North Korea replace the seals at its nuclear reactor and reverse its withdrawal from the NPT (nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty) to regain the confidence of the international community," he said.

The talks at a Seoul luxury hotel are the first between ministers of North and South since the NPT announcement.

The impasse has sparked a series of diplomatic initiatives and US officials have cited some progress, an indication that Washington has shifted from its hard line of "no negotiations" now that the standoff has become a distraction to its preparations for possible war

against Iraq.

North Korea's official media hurled more abuse at the United States and at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was monitoring the reactor and which Pyongyang has called a US puppet.

"If the US is truly interested in (dialogue), it should completely drop its anachronistic hostile policy toward the DPRK (North Korea) and immediately respond to the latter's proposal for concluding a non-aggression treaty," the Minju Joson said in a commentary carried by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

"Now is the time for the US to think twice and behave itself," the newspaper said.

The ruling party daily Rodong Sinmun, in its own diatribe, accused the IAEA of "dancing to the tune of the US."

North Korea has insisted the only solution to the impasse is to hold

direct talks with the United States, which a year ago grouped the North with Iraq and Iran in an "axis of evil," and for Washington to sign a non-aggression treaty.

Washington said it can only talk if the North abandons its suspected atomic arms program.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, adding his voice to mounting international concern, urged North Korea Tuesday to reconsider its NPT withdrawal and return to dialogue.

The clearest sign of possible movement came from Russian special envoy Alexander Losyukov who emerged from six hours of talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang saying he was optimistic of a solution although more talks were needed.

Deputy Foreign Minister Losyukov was the first foreign envoy to meet the reclusive Kim since the crisis erupted.

He presented Kim with proposals

calling for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula in exchange for guarantees of the North's security and a resumption of aid to the impoverished state.

Losyukov left Beijing for Moscow early Wednesday, apparently setting aside earlier plans to fly to Washington for talks after his meetings in Pyongyang.

In addition to the unusually conciliatory North Korean statement that it has no plans to develop nuclear weapons, signs of a solution to the standoff came also from Bolton.

Bolton was asked this week if President Bush was considering sending a letter to Kim containing security guarantees.

"If putting it on a piece of paper is important I'm sure diplomacy can find a way to do that, but what that precise mechanism would be has not been decided yet," Bolton said.

He presented Kim with proposals

## Polls show dip in support for Iraq war

REUTERS, Washington

A majority of Americans still back military action to topple Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein but support for attacking Iraq has slipped to its lowest level since summer, according to a new poll out on Tuesday.

The ABC News/Washington Post poll also showed that President Bush's approval rating for handling the Iraq situation was down eight points in the last month, to 50 per cent.

The poll of 1,133 adults showed that 57 per cent of Americans support US military action to remove Saddam from power, compared to 62 per cent a month ago and as high as 78 per cent in the months after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Americans also were split almost evenly, 50 per cent to 47 per cent, on whether the United States should work more for a diplomatic solution or more on preparing for use of force to disarm Saddam.

But at the same time, 61 per cent of those polled gave diplomacy little or no chance of succeeding.

Among other findings, 71 per cent of Americans said if UN inspectors cannot find hard evidence of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, the United States should present its own evidence before attacking. Fifty-four per cent said the United States should set a deadline for the UN inspectors to complete their mission in Iraq.

The telephone poll was conducted January 16-20 and has a three percentage point margin of error.

## Hezbollah hits Israeli army positions

AFP, Jerusalem

Tensions rose yesterday in Israel a week before elections after Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrillas hit Israeli army positions and a massive car bomb was found in the north.

After a period of relative calm in Israel, the Shiite militia Hezbollah fired mortars and rockets on Israeli army posts in the disputed Shebaa Farms region along the northern border, provoking a retaliatory air raid by Israeli warplanes.

The attack by Hezbollah mortar bombs and Katyusha rockets was the first such strike since August last year.

An 82-year-old Lebanese man wounded by the Israeli return fire died of his injuries yesterday.

The Israeli army reported no casualties in the attack, but a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said, "This bombardment is a serious development. It is a clear attempt to provoke an escalation in the region ahead of the Israeli general elections or of a possible war with Iraq."

The barrage came just two days after Sharon himself warned Palestinian militants, Syria and Hezbollah not to act against Israel in case of a war on Iraq.

That message appeared to have fallen on deaf ears when Israeli police later discovered a car laden with 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of explosives and four gas cylinders at a checkpoint near the northern Israeli town of Umm El-Fahm.

The four passengers of the vehicle were apparently Palestinians on their way to carry out a suicide attack, but they managed to escape toward the West Bank, police said.

Israel says that despite the drop in the number of attacks, Palestinian hardliners are still trying to launch new deadly strikes, and attribute their lack of success to anti-terror sweeps in the West Bank, reoccupied since last June.

## Vajpayee takes a dig at Musharraf

PTI, New Delhi

Apparently taking a dig at Pakistan's military leadership, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday said even rulers in khaki felt the need to seek some kind of democratic legitimacy.

"Coups, bloody power struggles and military take-overs have come to be seen as anathema to the ethos of our times. Even rulers in khaki have felt the need to seek some kind of democratic legitimacy," he told the inaugural function of the three-day International Parliamentary Conference here to mark the Golden Jubilee of Indian Parliament.

Observing that just as the international community has cherished India's successes along the path of democratic development since independence, Vajpayee said, "We too have greatly valued the victorious march of democracy around the globe".

Recalling that the closing decades of the last century had seen collapse of totalitarian systems, he said the dogmas that sustained dictatorships of various stripes, and advertised their superiority over democracy in development and human welfare, had collapsed.

# Pakistan slates new Indian sub, bomber deal with Russia

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday lashed out at India's new deal with Russia to purchase nuclear-capable submarines and bombers, accusing it of recklessly amassing weaponry and intimidating its neighbours.

"Fired by its ambition to attain great power status, India has chosen the reckless path of militarisation," foreign ministry spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan said in a statement.

"It is amassing weapons and military hardware beyond its legitimate defence requirements to intimidate its neighbours."

rines, which are nuclear propelled and can deliver nuclear warheads.

The package, which will include an old 44,500-tonne Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov, is reported to be worth three billion dollars.

Neighbouring foes Pakistan and India, the world's newest nuclear powers, both have air and ground delivery capability of their respective nuclear arsenals. The New Delhi-Moscow deal would put India ahead of Pakistan in sea delivery capability.

"The acquisitions would complete India's cherished nuclear triad," Pakistan's Khan said.

"It would also aggravate the existing imbalance in conventional forces and strategic weap-

ons delivery systems in the region."

New Delhi and Moscow have also agreed to jointly develop fifth generation fighter aircraft and produce a new long-range nuclear-capable cruise missile known as BrahMos, which can be fired from ships.

The procurement deal coincides with a concerted effort by Pakistan to woo Russia, India's largest military hardware supplier, after decades of cool relations stretching back to Islamabad's siding with Washington during the Cold War.

President Pervez Musharraf will make his maiden visit to Moscow in early February. Foreign Secretary Riaz Kohhar is currently in Russia, security officials from both countries held

defence talks in Moscow recently, and Pakistan last week declared "a new stage" in relations with Russia.

Pakistan would not enter an arms race with India, Khan said in an echo of off-repeated comments by South Asian officials.

However Pakistan "would take every possible measure to safeguard its independence and sovereignty."

Defence analysts say Pakistan has stronger missile delivery capability than India, while India is understood to possess up to three times more nuclear warheads than Pakistan.



French President Jacques Chirac shakes hands with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder at the Elysee Palace in Paris yesterday, during the festivities marking the 40th anniversary of the Franco-German treaty.