

Lanka on red alert as Tigers suspend talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga Tuesday placed security forces on red alert after Tamil Tiger rebels suspended peace talks with her cohabitation government, a spokesman said.

Kumaratunga, who is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, held an emergency meeting of top military officers overnight and ordered the new measures, a spokesman for her office said.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) announced Monday that they were suspending talks with the government of Prime

Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe after accusing it of failure to deliver on "critical issues."

The LTTE made no direct reference to the next round of four-day peace talks due to open in Thailand on April 29, but diplomatic sources said those negotiations were now most likely to be put on hold.

However, there was mounting international pressure to get the talks back on track, a diplomatic source said adding that Norwegian peace brokers would be talking to both sides in a bid to salvage the process.

Kumaratunga who had been critical of her cohabitation government's handling of the Norwegian-

backed peace bid was quick to note that the Tiger action was reminiscent of four failed peace bids since 1985.

"The president is of the view that the reasons put forward by the LTTE for their withdrawal from the talks are feeble," Kumaratunga's office said in a statement.

"The past experiences of successive governments with the LTTE have been no different."

The statement said Kumaratunga was hopeful that "better sense would prevail" and that the LTTE would re-enter the negotiations brokered by Norway.

"In view of the emerging situation, the president summoned a meeting of

the three service commanders and the inspector general of police on Monday night to assess the security situation in the country.

"The president directed them to reintroduce immediately the security measures that were set up in 1995 to ensure the security and safety of the people," the statement said.

A round of talks Kumaratunga had with the LTTE ended in failure in April 1995 leading to fresh fighting.

At the time, Kumaratunga responded by slapping an economic embargo on rebel-held areas of the island's north-east and placed security forces on red alert before ordering a major offensive against the Tigers.



Kashmiri Muslim women mourn the death of relatives in Gulshanpora Batagund village, some 40-km south of Srinagar on Tuesday. Five villagers were killed and 12 injured in a powerful blast at a dairy farm in the Pulwama district of Indian Kashmir.

5 killed in Kashmir blasts

AFP, Srinagar

Five villagers were killed and 12 injured in a powerful blast at a dairy farm in the Pulwama district of Indian Kashmir early Tuesday, while three border guards were injured in a second explosion, officials said.

The blasts come just days after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee signalled India's desire for a fresh peace initiative with arch-rival Pakistan to try to resolve their decades-old bitter and bloody wrangling over Kashmir.

The first explosion occurred in Gulshanpora Batagund, near a small dairy farm where villagers along with their cattle had gone to sell and buy milk early Tuesday, police said.

"The explosive device was planted on the edge of the ground where the people and cattle were present," a police spokesman said, adding that some cattle, too, had been killed in the blast.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (L) speaks at a joint press conference as Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali (R) looks on in Islamabad on Tuesday. Karzai discussed terrorism and trade with Jamali on his first visit to Afghanistan's eastern neighbour in almost a year. Karzai played down border tensions and said he had been assured Pakistan was not supporting extremists alleged to be mounting attacks on Afghan and US forces from inside Pakistan.

Afghan leader meets Pak counterparts amid tensions

AFP, Islamabad

Afghan President Hamid Karzai arrived in Pakistan Tuesday for talks with his counterpart Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali on his first visit here in almost a year.

Karzai's trip, delayed since March, comes amid rising tensions over security along the neighbours' ill-defined border and Kabul's slowness in releasing former Pakistani fighters languishing in Afghan jails.

Karzai was accompanied by Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and Interior, Frontier Affairs, Reconstruction and Commerce Ministers.

He went straight into talks with Jamali after a welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace, officials said. The pair will hold a joint press conference before lunching together.

Chemical arms inspectors head for Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Inspectors from a global chemical weapons body will for the first time survey an industrial site in Pakistan as a "routine" inspection, officials said Tuesday.

The Hague-based Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is sending inspectors to the southern port city Karachi on April 29 to inspect Pakistan's largest fertilizer plant, Fauji Jordan Fertilizer, a senior official told AFP.

"They are more than welcome to inspect the Fauji Jordan Fertilizer site," he said, asking not to be named. "Pakistan does not have any chemical weapons."

The foreign ministry said the inspection "was the first of its kind in Pakistan," but called it "a routine matter."

The inspection will be conducted under the 1993 global Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) treaty, which commits its 151 signatory states including Pakistan to work towards the

elimination of weapons of mass destruction.

The OPCW said that apart from military sites, industrial sites which produced certain CWC-listed chemicals -- referred to as "scheduled chemicals" -- for a range of commercial, medical, agricultural and other uses were among those subject to "routine" inspections by its experts.

"As a matter of routine and probability, the longer the convention is in operation, the higher the probability is that facilities that have been declared as producing 'scheduled' chemicals will be inspected," spokesman Peter Kaisar told AFP by phone from The Hague.

The OPCW had inspected more than 1,400 sites in 52 countries, he added.

He was unable to confirm next week's visit as the organisation does not comment on planned inspections.

The foreign ministry said the visit was "not a chemical weapons inspection as Pakistan was not a chemical weapons state."

Under the CWC "a defined category of industrial units in all member states

are visited by officials of the OPCW," it said.

The foreign ministry claimed the CWC had helped reveal a chemical weapons program in Pakistan's arch-rival India.

The team of inspectors arriving next week will include a Pakistani.

According to its website, OPCW inspection teams can include chemical production technologists, chemical production logistics specialists, industrial and analytical chemists, chemical weapons munitions specialists, pharmaceuticals and medical specialists.

Shares on the Karachi Stock Exchange fell 3.5 percent on fears sparked by news of the inspection, analysts said.

The benchmark KSE-100 index lost 105.17 points to close at 2862.32.

"The news of the proposed visit made investors jittery as they foresaw Iraq-like treatment with Pakistan," InvestCap Securities chief analyst Mohammad Sohail told AFP.

Pressure on Palestinians to form govt

AFP, Washington

The United States Monday heaped pressure on the Palestinians to end their bickering and quickly install a new government under prime minister-designate Mahmud Abbas or risk missing a critical chance for peace.

In unusually blunt language, Washington said confirmation of Abbas and his government before a Wednesday deadline was key to the reforms President George W. Bush has demanded in exchange for US support for a Palestinian state.

And though the State Department did not explicitly say it, spokesman Richard Boucher hinted strongly that the release of the so-called "roadmap" for Middle East peace -- which Bush has tied to Abbas's confirmation -- would be affected if the deadline was missed.

Bush reelection bid to start late

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush's bid for reelection will start late 2004 and will coincide with the third anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks, with organisers spending twice as much as during his first campaign, The New York Times said Tuesday.

Focused on national security and on combating terrorism, Bush's campaign will start with his official acceptance speech on September 2, 2004, Republicans close to the White House told the daily.

Starting August 30 -- one month after the opposition Democrats choose their contender -- the Republican convention for the November 2004 presidential elections will be held in New York City and Bush will shuttle between the convention center and Madison Square Garden, where a commemoration of September 11 will be held.

'US draws up plan to bomb DPRK N-plant'

Top Chinese, North Korean officials meet ahead of talks with US

AFP, Sydney

The Pentagon has produced detailed plans to bomb North Korea's nuclear plant at Yongbyon if the Stalinist state goes ahead with reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel rods, an Australian report said Tuesday.

Citing "well-informed sources close to US thinking", The Australian newspaper said the plan also included a US strike against North Korean heavy artillery in the hills above the

border with South Korea.

The artillery directly threatens Seoul as well as 17,000 US troops stationed south of the Demilitarised Zone.

The Pentagon hardliners said to be behind the plan reportedly believe the precision strikes envisaged in it would not lead to North Korea initiating a general war it would be certain to lose.

This is because Washington would inform Pyongyang that the bombing was not aimed at destroying the

regime of Kim Jong-il, but merely at destroying its nuclear weapons capacity.

Meanwhile, a top North Korean official has met in Beijing with China's defense chief ahead of nuclear talks involving the United States this week, state media said Tuesday.

Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok, head of the North Korean army's political bureau, met with Chinese Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan Monday, Xinhua news agency reported.

Lasting peace impossible unless Nepali Maoists lay down arms

AFP, Kathmandu

Lasting peace in Nepal is impossible if Maoist rebels do not disarm, an army spokesman said Tuesday.

"So long as the Maoists do not lay down arms there will be no durable peace in the country," Colonel Dipak Gurung told a press conference.

He said only 16 percent of the weapons looted by the rebels over the past seven years had been retrieved by the army.

The rebels entered into a ceasefire with the government in January but have said they will only disarm when a settlement is reached.

Gurung also denied that security had been stepped up because the planned first round of peace talks between the government and rebels were postponed Monday.

With the collapse of the talks, the government had immediately deployed troops of the Royal Nepalese Army at various entry points into the capital, who began checking passengers arriving in buses and taxis, according to witnesses.

US envoy to India quits

AFP, Washington

Outspoken US ambassador to India Robert Blackwill has resigned, less than a year after he was accused of treating staff like "furniture" as a controversy raged over his conduct in office.

Blackwill formally quit in a florid resignation statement, saying he was returning home to write and teach.

"This past January while in Washington, I informed President Bush, Secretary of State Powell, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Rice that I would be going back to the faculty at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government near the end of this summer to continue my academic career," he said.

Suharto's half-brother gets 4-yr for corruption

AFP, Jakarta

An Indonesian court on Tuesday jailed a half-brother of former president Suharto for four years for corruption involving some 11.4 million dollars in state funds.

Probosutejo, as head of a timber company, failed to repay interest-free loans from a state reforestation fund totalling 100.93 billion rupiah (11.4 million dollars), Judge Mohammad Soleh ruled.

Probosutejo, 72, who seemed dazed by the verdict, was allowed to remain free pending his appeal because the judge said he had been cooperative.



Railway workers disinfecting a soft-sitter cabin of a train, prior to passengers boarding at the Jinan Railway station in northeastern Shandong province on Monday. Official Chinese health ministry figures showed 94 dead and 2,001 infected by SARS as of April 21, and between April 19-21, China reported 194 new cases and 13 new fatalities with 36 patients discharged from hospital.