

# Push for talks on as Tigers quit key panel

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka moved Thursday to speed up delivery on its promises to Tamil Tiger rebels, who pulled out of another key element of a Norwegian-backed peace process to protest delays.

The government was taking on board concerns expressed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels and hoped the negotiations could resume soon, the government's chief peace negotiator, G. L. Peiris, said.

The LTTE suspended the Norwegian-brokered peace talks on Monday protesting slow progress in getting the military to vacate public and private property it occupies in the northern peninsula of Jaffna.

The rebels were also concerned that there had been little work done on the ground despite several rounds of talks on rebuilding war-ravaged infrastructure.

"It is not helpful to engage in the imputation of blame," Peiris told reporters here. "We have to recognise that there is a limited problem and try to resolve it.... It is certainly not the end of the peace process."

Peiris, who is also the constitutional affairs minister, said troops were ready to quit two hotels and some 45 private homes they occupy in the Jaffna peninsula, and were contemplating relocating to former police stations in the region.

The minister said Norwegian peace brokers were in contact with the Tamil Tigers to convey the measures initiated

by the government to address their concerns.

However the Tigers said Thursday they were also pulling out of a key panel aimed at addressing immediate humanitarian needs in the island's embattled northern and eastern regions.

The LTTE said it would boycott the Sub-committee on Immediate Humanitarian Rehabilitation Needs (SIHRN), which diplomats said dealt a further blow to hopes of a quick breakthrough in getting the talks back on track.

The French government joined the United States in seeking a resumption of Sri Lankan peace talks. France said it "deplored" the Tiger decision to suspend talks.

But the LTTE said it was up to the government to restore confidence by implementing decisions agreed at previous meetings of the SIHRN, whose top advisory is Japanese peace envoy Yasushi Akashi, and ensure people benefited from the peace process.

Peiris said the government was ready to go ahead with 18 reconstruction projects identified by SIHRN as urgent. The cost of the projects was estimated at about 800 million rupees (8.3 million dollars).

"It is our leadership's wish to await action and implementation on urgent matters... prior to setting a date for the next meeting (of SIHRN)," LTTE's political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan told the government.

"As you are aware, urgent action is

required on resettlement and rehabilitation of internally displaced people and of refugees," he said in a letter to the SIHRN government representative, Bernard Goonetilleke.

Thursday's move by the Tigers surprised the establishment because, despite Monday's decision to suspend talks, the Tigers had sent a representative from London to attend a meeting of the humanitarian panel at the weekend.

The Tigers said they were expecting the government to "urgently seek" money pledged by foreign donors for Sri Lanka at a meeting in Oslo last November and spend it through the Northeast Reconstruction Fund.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in fighting in Sri Lanka over the past three decades but both sides have been observing a truce since February 23 last year.

Norwegian diplomats have said the Tigers were still committed to the truce despite the latest challenges to the peace process.

Meanwhile, France has asked Tamil Tiger rebels and the Sri Lankan government to overcome their differences and resume their Norwegian-backed peace talks, the French embassy here said Thursday.

The embassy quoted a foreign ministry spokesperson as saying that France deplored the announcement Monday by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that it had suspended peace negotiations with the Colombo government.

## Delhi braces for sweltering summer

AFP, New Delhi

Cometh the summer, cometh the water fights -- skirmishing over the scarce resource in New Delhi is as predictable in the Indian capital as the power cuts that are effected without fail on the most sweltering of days.

With temperatures pushing into the 40s Celsius (100s Fahrenheit) and six months of even more intense heat still to come, Delhi residents are already in foul mood, and newspapers are reporting the start of "tiffs" over water.

On Wednesday, for example, 15 people were injured in a free-for-all that developed in southern Malviya Nagar suburb when one resident hired a plumber to lay an extra pipe to his and his neighbours' homes from a tubewell residents had sunk in a bid to obviate water shortages.

According to a witness, other residents took umbrage at the move and "a fight ensued."

When fisticuffs proved not to be enough, "the fight took an ugly mood (and) people resorted to stone pelting," the witness told the Hindustan Times newspaper.

Anil Sharma, who lives in Netaji Nagar, also in south Delhi, said he had not been able to wash for four days due to a drastic cutback in water supplies to his government-supplied flat.

"We receive a trickle of water for maybe 10 or 15 minutes in the evening," Sharma said. "The water is very dirty -- a yellow colour. We have to boil it before we can drink it. There is not enough for washing, let alone flushing the toilets."

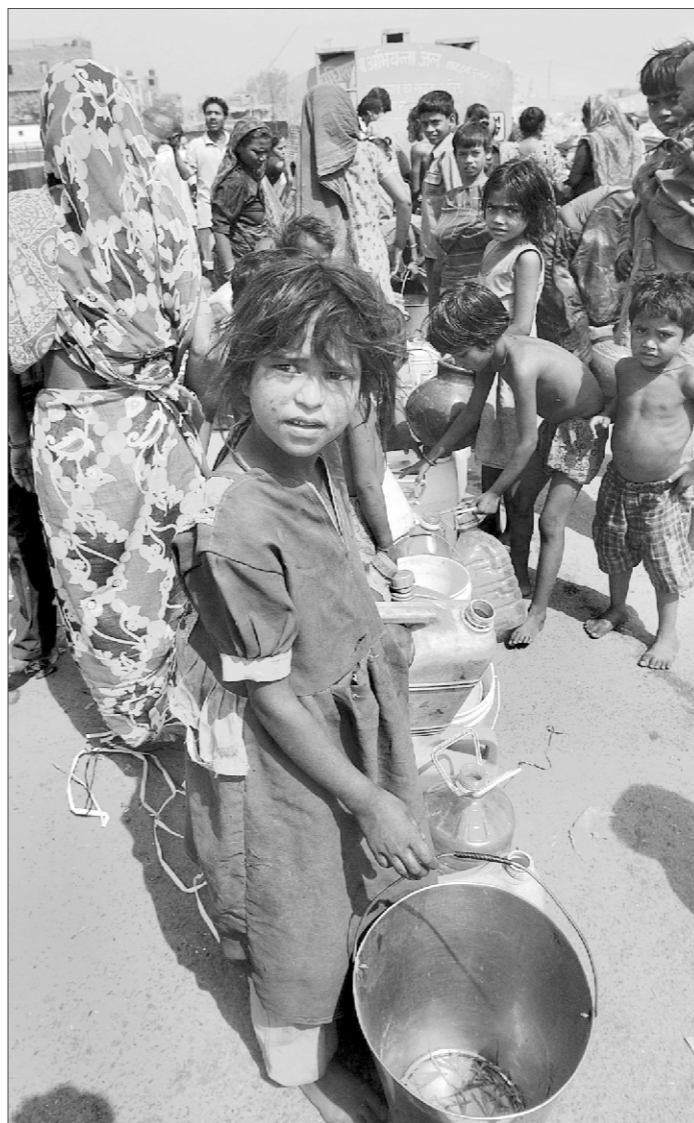


PHOTO: AFP

An Indian girl waits to fill her bucket with drinking water from tanker in New Delhi on Thursday. With temperatures pushing into the 40s Celsius (100s Fahrenheit) and six months of even more intense heat still to come, Delhi residents are already in foul mood, and newspapers are reporting the start of "tiffs" over water.

# French war stance will have negative impact: Powell

AFP, Amman

US Secretary of State Colin Powell told his French counterpart, Dominique de Villepin, Wednesday that France's opposition to the war in Iraq will have negative and palpable consequences, the State Department said.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the phone conversation between Powell and de Villepin, visiting Amman, Jordan, as part of a Middle East tour, was "reflective of the current relationship we have with France."

He described the relationship as uneasy, saying the nations remain allies with certain shared values, but ties have been badly damaged by recent "serious and difficult" disagreements.

"Understand that we did have these disagreements, understand that they were serious and difficult and that that has consequences for the future," Boucher said.

"There is obviously an effect on the relationship, on how we look at things, how we evaluate things and how we look at things we might want to do as we move forward."

At the White House, spokesman Ari Fleischer downplayed the idea that Washington was seeking to punish Paris but acknowledged France would feel

the consequences of its antiwar stance.

"Issue by issue, different issues will arise and will be judged on the merits," he said. "And we shall see when that happens."

Neither Fleischer nor Boucher would say what measures Washington would take. Senior State Department officials earlier said Powell was not in a position to tell de Villepin exactly what they would be.

But those officials said steps under consideration included sidelining France at NATO and excluding Paris or limiting its presence at US-sponsored and -hosted international forums.

One possibility would be to expand the so-called informal "quad" grouping of NATO's biggest and most influential members -- Britain, France, Germany and the United States -- to include Italy, Poland and Spain, they said.

The quad is widely believed to be a major force in shaping NATO policy but it activities are kept low-key so as not to offend other alliance members.

So the first public manifestation of the measures will likely be at NATO, where one official said Washington might bypass the alliance's traditional governing body, the North Atlantic Council, in favour of the Defence Planning Committee, from which France resigned in 1966.

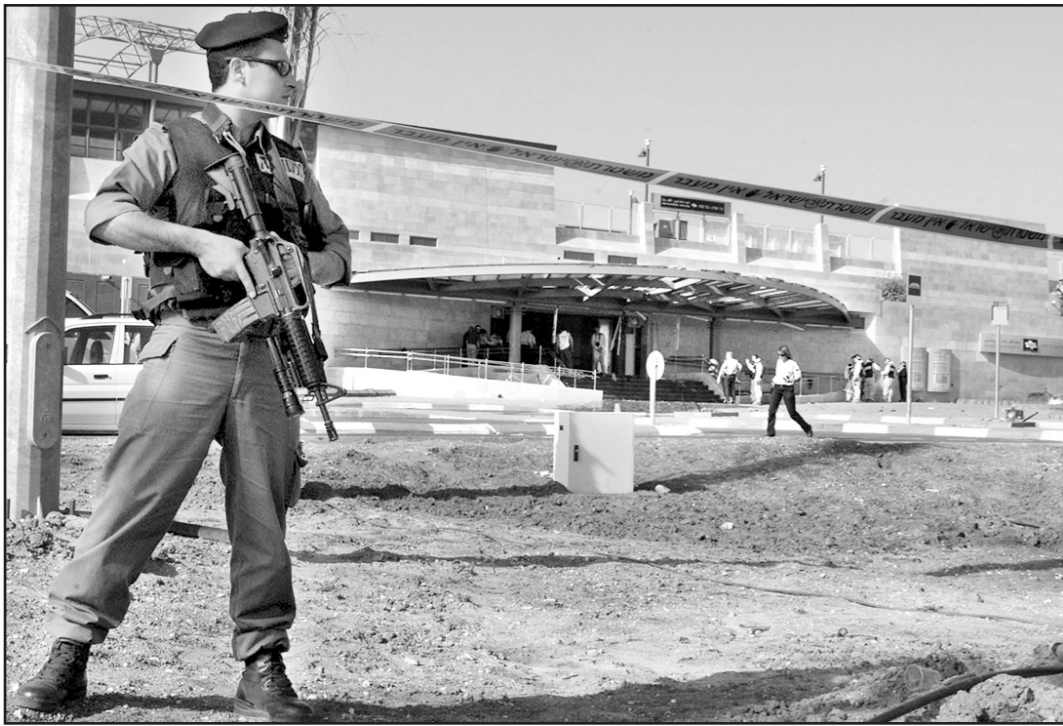


PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli border policeman stands guard in front of the Kfar Saba train station, northern Tel Aviv, where a Palestinian suicide bomber killed one Israeli and wounded 13 others when he blew himself up in front of a railway station during morning rush hour on Thursday.

## Israeli killed as suicide bomber hits rail station

AFP, Jerusalem

A Palestinian suicide bomber killed an Israeli when he blew himself apart at a railway station in northern Israel Thursday, only hours after the Palestinian leadership agreed on a new government that has pledged to crack down on powerful militant groups.

The bomber was sent by a splinter group of Fatah, the mainstream faction co-founded by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and his moderate prime minister-designate Mahmud Abbas.

He blew himself up when a security guard checking passengers at the entrance of a newly opened railway station in the town of Kfar Saba tried to prevent him from passing, Israeli radio said.

The guard's attention was caught by the thick black overcoat the bomber was wearing despite the high spring temperatures, the radio said.

# Cyclone-hit Assam looks for those who are still missing

AFP, Guwahati

People and cows were literally blown away in a cyclone that struck India's northeastern state of Assam this week, with rescuers finding some human bodies hanging from trees, police said Thursday.

The cyclone, packing windspeeds of up to 130 kilometres (81 miles) per hour, lashed at least five districts of Assam late Tuesday, killing at least 44 people and injuring about 2,000.

Troops and civil workers searching through debris of flattened houses found three more bodies Thursday, while one person injured in the tempest died, an official said.

The worst affected was Assam's Dhubri district, bordering Bangladesh, some 300 kilometres (185 miles) from the state capital Guwahati.

"We recovered bodies of at least three people stuck in trees after the cyclone blew them away," said N. Dutta, police officer in the district's Mancachar area, where about 2,000 houses were flattened in eight villages.

Another official said villagers told him cows had been tossed in the air by the winds.

Nazrul Islam, an executive magistrate in Mancachar, told AFP by telephone the death toll had risen to 44.

## 5 indicted for attempt to kill Musharraf

AFP, Karachi

A Pakistani anti-terrorism court on Thursday indicted five men accused of an alleged attempt to murder President Pervez Musharraf last year, court officials said.

The group include two Islamic militants who were sentenced to death for masterminding a deadly car bomb attack outside the US consulate which killed 12 Pakistanis.

Judge Aale Maqbool Rizvi charged the five accused with criminal conspiracy to murder and terrorism.

Police allege the accused had parked a Suzuki pick-up truck on a busy commercial road to blow up Musharraf's car when he was visiting this southern port city on April 26 to attend a rally.

The same vehicle was later used in the June attack outside the US consulate.

# India awaits Pak response

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Thursday said he was waiting for a response from nuclear rival Pakistan on his offers to resume talks on vexed bilateral issues such as Kashmir.

"Let us see how Pakistan responds," Vajpayee told parliament's upper house in reference to his earlier statements that India was willing to "extend a hand of friendship" to Pakistan.

"Stopping cross border infiltration and destruction of terrorist infrastructure can open the doors for talks," he reiterated.

He also said he "hoped a new beginning could take place between the two countries."

Vajpayee's comments came in a briefing to the house on his weekend visit to Kashmir, where he first made the

offer of talks.

Kashmir, which is divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both, has been the cause of two of the three wars between them since their independence from Britain in 1947.

President Pervez Musharraf has said Pakistan is willing for full dialogue with India on all issues, including Kashmir.

The latest remarks from the two South Asian foes contrast with their usual belligerent rhetoric and is seen by some analysts as a definite shift of mood in the region.

India blames Pakistan for derailing two previous peace overtures by Vajpayee, including a summit with Pakistan president Pervez Musharraf in 2001 in the Taj Mahal town of Agra.

Vajpayee, who was the first Indian premier to address a public rally in 16 years in Kashmir, also said his govern-

ment would offer support to the Kashmir government, which has promised a "healing touch" for the state.

Kashmiri separatists have called for three-way talks involving India, Pakistan and themselves in a bid to find a solution to the dispute.

But New Delhi wants militants to lay down their arms before it will begin talks.

Meanwhile, Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha Wednesday denied opposition charges that the government was acting under pressure from the United States in framing its foreign policy.

"India does not act under pressure from any country and we will not be cowed down," Sinha said during a debate in parliament, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

# Afghanistan hopes for peaceful resolution of India-Pakistan dispute

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan hopes for a peaceful resolution to all disputes between India and Pakistan, including over Kashmir, Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah said Thursday on his return from Islamabad.

"We hope that both sides will be able to solve all issues, including Kashmir," Abdullah told AFP after accompanying President Hamid Karzai on a two-day state visit to Afghanistan's eastern neighbour.

Afghanistan was not offering to act as a mediator, he said, stressing that India and Pakistan should solve bilateral disputes peacefully by themselves.

"As regards the disputes between both countries including the issue of Kashmir, we believe that this is for India and Pakistan to address all disputes through peaceful means."

His comments came amid renewed hopes for a thaw in high-stakes tensions

between the hostile nuclear neighbours following India's weekend offer of dialogue with Pakistan.

India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since independence from Britain in 1947. The Himalayan region is divided between them and claimed by both.

Karzai told reporters in Islamabad Tuesday that Afghanistan wanted "very close friendly relations" between the South Asian giants, who were on the brink of a fourth war last year.

At the same time he expressed support for United Nations Security Council resolutions dating back to 1948, which call for Kashmiris to be allowed to choose between rule by Pakistan or India.

"We support UN resolutions and in accordance with that we seek a resolution of the difficulties between India and Pakistan," Karzai said, drawing praise from Pakistani newspapers Wednesday.

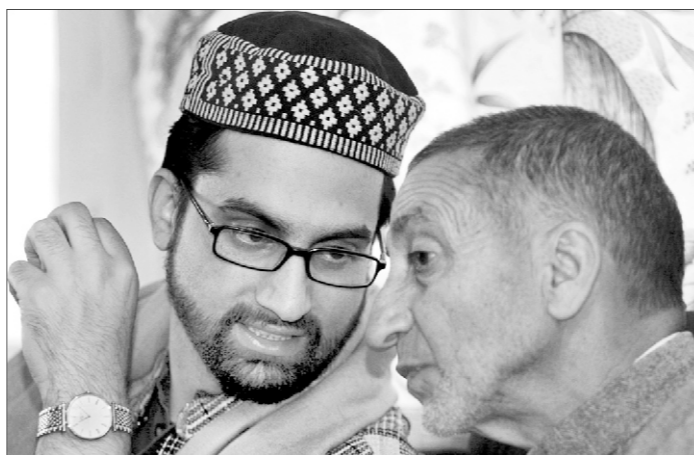


PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri senior separatist leader Moulvi Umar Farooq (L) talks to Hurriyat chairman Abdul Gani Bhat (R) in the Hurriyat headquarters before a meeting in Srinagar on Thursday. Kashmiri separatists opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir have dismissed the start of talks by New Delhi's new pointman on the restive region.