

LTTE says past talks 'a waste of time'

Promises not to return to war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday vowed not to return to war, but said six rounds of peace negotiations with the government had been a "waste of time."

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said it was committed to a peaceful resolution of the island's drawn-out ethnic conflict which has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

The LTTE's political wing leader, S.P. Thamilselvan, told reporters in the northern rebel-held town of Kilinochchi there would be no return to armed conflict despite the rebels' boycott since April 21 of the Norwegian-brokered talks.

"The LTTE is highly committed to peace through a negotiated settlement," Thamilselvan was quoted as saying by local journalists contacted by satellite phone. "Not for one moment do we think a military solution is possible."

However, he added that six rounds of peace talks with the Colombo government had failed to build sufficient trust between the foes.

"We agree that it (the talks) has

been a waste of time. Six rounds of talks have not achieved a basis for mutual understanding," said Thamilselvan, who is a member of the LTTE's four-member negotiating team.

His remarks came a day after the LTTE asked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to establish an interim administration for the island's northern and eastern regions giving the rebels a majority stake.

The Tigers said they would re-enter talks and take part in a crucial donor conference Japan is hosting in June only if the government responded favourably to their latest demand.

"If the prime minister demonstrates that he could implement the decisions, it would be adequate for the LTTE to participate in talks," Thamilselvan said.

Meanwhile Sri Lankan authorities were giving the fresh demands "active consideration," officials here said yesterday.

However, they admitted that the prospects of immediately lifting the impasse were slim given the complexities involved.

"On the face of it, it appears a big problem for the government to

sell the idea of an interim administration to the rest of the country," an official source said. "But, getting Tigers involved in a political process is something positive."

The Tiger guerrillas already run a parallel administration in areas of the island's northeast under their control with their own police, courts, judiciary and tax collection.

However, the Tiger demand for an interim administration with them getting a lion's share would mean they will have greater authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, officials said.

Tamil politicians noted that President Chandrika Kumaratunga had initiated the setting up of a similar structure in November 1999 when she established the "Advisory Council for the Northern and Eastern Provinces."

However, Kumaratunga's move to have between 11 and 17 members drawn from political parties in order to exercise the powers of a provincial council, the highest level local government body in the country, was never implemented.

Storm kills 10, injures many in West Bengal

PTI, Kolkata

Ten people, including six women, were killed and over 100 injured by falling tress and lightning strikes when a thunderstorm raged across four districts of West Bengal Wednesday night.

Three, including a woman, were killed when the roof of a Kali temple collapsed at Char Majhdia Government Colony in Nadia district, police sources said.

The roof of a portion of the temple gave in after a banyan tree uprooted by the storm fell on it.

Another person died in Rabindrapur area of Nadia district, they said.

Two women, who took shelter under a tree in Burdwan district, were crushed to death when it toppled, the sources said.

Two other women died and as many were injured after being struck by lightning at two villages in the same district.

One person was killed after being struck by lightning in Bankura district, sources said.

In Falta in South 24 Parganas district a boat carrying eight persons capsized in the storm. Seven persons were rescued and one was missing. One of the rescued persons--a lady--died in hospital, the sources said.

The sources said the storm flattened more than 1000 kutcha houses.

UNICEF chief tells South Asia to invest more in education

AFP, Islamabad

The first regional meeting of South Asian education ministers was inaugurated here yesterday by the head of the United Nations' Children Fund (UNICEF) Carol Bellamy.

Ministers from Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are meeting under the Education for All (EFA) Forum to address rampant illiteracy and gender disparity in a region where 46 percent of the world's illiterates live, and where more than half of out-of-school children are girls.

Bellamy urged represented governments to increase education spending, telling delegates that South Asia -- home to one-fifth of the world's population -- can no longer afford to deny girls their basic education rights.

"Girls' education has been shown to be the single best investment that any society can make... Girls education lessens social burdens on governments and makes it possible to create larger, better prepared workforces," she said.

Education spending in Pakistan last year was as low as 2.2 percent of Gross Domestic Product.

Bellamy cited statistics showing that uneducated and illiterate women suffer higher rates of HIV/AIDS and earn less than educated women.

"A woman in India with a high school education will earn 1.5 times more on average than an uneducated woman... and a woman with technical training will earn up to three times as much," she told the forum.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents carry food and drinking water through flooded streets near the southern Sri Lankan town of Matara. Some 256 people were killed and 200,000 families were displaced in flash floods and mudslides that left a trail of destruction. Aid workers helping flood victims in southern Sri Lanka are increasingly concerned about the relief effort since the government is having trouble finding ways to get drinking water, food and medicine to the cut-off areas.

Anti-dowry heroines of India

AFP, New Delhi

A young software engineering student who earlier this month sent her groom to prison for demanding a huge dowry promoted a nationwide campaign against greedy suitors.

Nisha Sharma, 21, attained celebrity status when she scrapped her wedding at the last minute and called the police after her school-teacher suitor, Munish Dalal, allegedly demanded 1.2 million rupees (25,000 US dollars) in dowry.

Despite being banned by law in the 1980s as a non-bailable offense, it remains common for the family of the groom in India's male-dominated society to demand a dowry of cash or goods.

Munish was arrested under the Dowry Prevention Act and Sharma has vowed to pursue a judicial battle to punish the man who wanted to marry her only if she coughed up the cash as well as an expensive trousseau.

"First, I was afraid for my life and then I became very, very angry and I then decided to call off my marriage," said Sharma, whose father, D.D., was allegedly roughed up for not handing over the cash dowry.

"I have the total support of my family, my parents and my friends

because what I have done is to begin a fight against injustice.

"I call on all women today that even if a single penny is demanded by their in-laws, they should say no. They should not marry into that family and only in this way the scourge may end," she told AFP.

Official figures show that the number of women killed by their in-laws for not fetching an attrac-

packed with MPs, rights activists and Bollywood stars bearing promises of help since she called off the wedding on May 13.

After Sharma's case made headlines, two other women in New Delhi walked out on planned weddings after last-moment dowry demands.

Earlier this week, 20-year-old Farzana Zaki called the police when her husband and father-in-law refused to take her home for want of dowry.

Newlywed Anupama Singh refused to go with her husband when he asked for 800,000 rupees (16,600 US dollars) in dowry from her stunned parents, police said.

"But please, I am not a celebrity. I am just an ordinary girl," said Sharma, a day after she was honoured, along with police officers killed by Islamic militants, by the privately-run All India Anti-Terrorist Front.

"There are many kinds of terrorism and we honour all those who have had the courage to fight it in every way they can," Front chief M. S. Bitta said, describing Sharma's step as a "decisive action" against dowry.

Sharma, who since May 13 has attracted several marriage proposals including from Afghanistan, appeared unfazed by all the attention and said she would concentrate on her studies.

Pakistan begins crackdown on Hizbul

PTI, Islamabad

Acting on its decision to impose restrictions on the militant group Hizbul Mujahideen, Pakistan on Wednesday night registered cases against leaders of the group for carrying weapons.

Cases have been registered against Hizbul leaders by Rawalpindi police for displaying weapons in public, Pakistan private TV channel Geo reported on Wednesday night.

Hizbul sources here said that cases have been registered against two of the body guards of Hizbul leader Sayed Salahuddin, who were photographed with their weapons two days ago at a function organised to commemorate "martyrs".

Speaking at the function, Salahuddin vowed to carry on with the jihad to "liberate" Kashmir.

Both Salahuddin and Hizbul spokesman Salem Hashmi could not be reached over the phone.

The decision to register cases followed conflicting statements by Pakistan's Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat on Tuesday that Pakistan government imposed restrictions against Hizbul both in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to prevent it from carrying any illegal activities.

He clarified that by illegal activities, he meant that the group would not be allowed to carry weapons, organise rallies and open offices in Pakistan. He said the group was not banned because it was an indigenous group from Jammu and Kashmir.

The registration of cases was seen as an unprecedented move against Hizbul following assertions by Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee hoping that Pakistan would stick to its stand to crack-down on the outfit.



PHOTO: AFP

Brigadier General Tono Suratman, a former military commander in East Timor is surrounded by journalist shortly after a human rights trial on East Timor at Central Jakarta court yesterday acquitted him of crimes against humanity in the territory in 1999.

Indonesia hunts Aceh rebels

Curfews may be imposed, more troops sent

REUTERS, Banda Aceh

Indonesian troops hunted rebels in jungle and villages across Aceh yesterday as their officers considered imposing night curfews on flashpoints in the province.

The military said it had killed four separatists overnight, taking the total since Monday to 12. It added that a district rebel commander had surrendered on Wednesday, the second senior separatist to do so in a week.

The military, which launched its biggest offensive in decades on Monday following the collapse of peace talks in Tokyo, said it was considering clamping curfews on Pidie and Bireun districts, both separatist strongholds.

"Violence has risen in both those places. It would make it easier for our operations...to impose a curfew," said Firdaus Komarno, military spokesman in the oil and gas-rich province on the northern tip of Sumatra island.

A spokesman for the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), which began fighting for independence in 1976, insisted no separatists had been killed and accused the military of murdering nearly 50 civilians. The military denied killing non-combatants.

In Jakarta, Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda went on the defensive in the face of international concern, telling foreign envoys Indonesia's territorial integrity was at stake.

"It is they who speak the language of force and terror," he said, blaming the rebels for the unraveling of a landmark five-month-old peace pact. Mediators say the government sank the weekend Tokyo talks.

More than 10,000 people have been killed in the 27-year war but casualty claims are traditionally hotly disputed.

AFP adds: Indonesia's military said yesterday it has killed 22 rebels in a four-day offensive against

Aceh separatists and is sending hundreds more troops to support the attack.

Troops shot dead three guerrillas in a clash in Aceh Besar district near Banda Aceh early Thursday, bringing the total to 22, said military spokesman Yani Basuki.

The government also mounted a diplomatic drive, summoning 115 ambassadors and leaders of international organisations to a meeting in Jakarta to explain its decision to go to war.

Residents in one village in the district where 10 people died on Wednesday said the victims were farmers. They said a boy aged 12 was among the dead.

GAM military spokesman Sofyan Dawood, in a statement to AFP in Jakarta, said troops had killed 28 civilians Wednesday. The military was not immediately available for comment on that figure.

Pakistan may not send Riaz Khan to India

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan is unlikely to nominate its present ambassador to China, Riaz Mohammad Khan, as High Commissioner to India even though he has been named by Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali as a probable nominee.

Riaz Khan is unlikely to be appointed Pakistan's High Commissioner to India as Islamabad believed that his recall from Beijing could send wrong signals to the Chinese government as he was posted there only less than a year ago, a local daily reported on Thursday.

"Despite his competence Islamabad would not pull out Riaz Khan from China which is the highest priority country for Pakistan as it would send a wrong message to Beijing that Islamabad was attaching more importance to another country," Dawn quoted an unnamed highly placed official as saying.

'Lashkar' terrorist shot dead in Delhi

PTI, New Delhi

Foiling an attempt of Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) to set up a base in the national capital, police shot dead a militant belonging to the outfit in South-West Delhi early Thursday morning.

The militant, identified as Arif Mohammad Khan, was killed in an encounter with the sleuths of Delhi Police's Special Cell at Nazafgarh where he had built his own house, Joint Commissioner (Special Cell) Neeraj Kumar said.

He said that Arif was his assumed name and his real identity was Abdul Aziz, a resident of Bhawalpur district of Punjab in Pakistan.

Kumar said that the militant had sneaked into the country two-and-a-half years ago and was changing places quite often till he purchased a plot in Nazafgarh and built a small house.

He had been staying at several places in Uttar Pradesh before moving into the national capital.

The militant had also married a local girl with his assumed Indian identity and also managed to procure a driving license and a ration card for himself.

Police recovered one AK 47, four magazines, 92 rounds and six hand grenades from the site of the encounter, Kumar said.

The militant was tasked to set up a local base in the national capital for his outfit members to carry out subversive activities, he added.



PHOTO: AFP

A resident of the densely-populated southwest Nazafgarh area shows a spent shell at the site where a Special Cell of Delhi Police officials killed a terrorist in early morning encounter in New Delhi on Thursday.