



Members of a Sri Lankan peace support group hold candles at a vigil in Colombo on Thursday in memory of those who died in the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots. Those who attended the vigil wished for peace in the country and prayed for an end to the conflict that has haunted the island for twenty years, as Sri Lanka marks its bloodiest two decades with hopes of peace.

New Hurriyat chief calls for truce

REUTERS, Srinagar

The new chief of Kashmir's main separatist alliance on Thursday urged Indian troops and militants to declare a ceasefire to set the stage for Indo-Pak dialogue over the Jammu and Kashmir issue.

The two neighbours have recently taken several steps to ease tensions over the region.

"To gain the confidence of the Kashmiris, India should declare a ceasefire and release all prisoners from jails. I also appeal to boys with guns to declare a ceasefire," Moulvi Abbas Ansari, 67, said in an interview.

The All Parties Hurriyat Conference, which bands nearly two dozen groups, early this month appointed Ansari, a moderate Islamic cleric, as its chairman.

"Ceasefire is a must if you want to create a conducive atmosphere for talks," Ansari said. "I also appeal to India and Pakistan to declare a ceasefire on the LoC (Line of Control), because on both sides of the border Kashmiris die," Ansari said.

N Korea drops demands, agrees to six-way talks

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has dropped its demand for one-one-one negotiations with the United States and has directly notified key regional players that it is ready to meet them in six-way nuclear crisis talks, South Korean officials said yesterday.

South Korea, Japan, the United States, Russia and China received notifications at the same time from the Stalinist state, whose latest move triggered optimism throughout the region that a breakthrough in the nine-month nuclear stand-off was at hand.

No timetable for negotiations has been revealed, but a senior US official said that talks could take place as early as this month.

US President George W. Bush, who had apparently received information on North Korea's intentions in a telephone conversa-

tion Wednesday with Chinese leader Hu Jintao, spoke of "serious progress" in the standoff.

Japanese leaders welcomed signs that North Korea was finally showing flexibility while South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman Kim Sun-Heung said that months of tough diplomacy may finally be paying off.

"We have been exerting our efforts to resolve this matter with close cooperation with related countries and we think our efforts are bearing fruit," he said.

South Korean officials said the Stalinist state had abandoned, at least for now, its long-standing demand for one-on-one talks with Washington and was ready to engage directly in six-party talks without a resumption of exploratory three-party talks held in Beijing in April.

The North Koreans had also

apparently dropped all reference to a non-aggression pact, one of the country's key demands since the nuclear crisis erupted in October last year.

"North Korea expressed its intention to accept six-party talks directly without going through three-way talks or bilateral talks," Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Soo-Hyuk told a news briefing here.

No date for talks has been fixed, he said, but the venue was certain to be Beijing.

First public word of the agreement came from the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow which issued a statement on North Korea's decision late Thursday.

Experts and analysts said they expected talks to go ahead soon but cautioned against undue optimism.

"When they sit down for talks, that is when the going gets tough,"

said Yu Suk-Ryul, North Korean expert at the government-affiliated Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security here.

"North Korea has got to explain when and how it is going to dismantle its nuclear weapons programmes and then Washington and the rest of the participants are going to have to meet North Korea's demands for security and economic help. This will be long and difficult."

Washington held inconclusive three-way talks with China and North Korea in Beijing in April, and has been campaigning to get allies South Korea and Japan as well as Russia involved in any new consultations.

North Korea had previously insisted on a non-aggression pact and one-on-one talks with the United States prior to any multilateral talks.

Nepal breathes easy as Maoists to keep talking

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese across the spectrum expressed relief Friday after Maoist rebels said they remained committed to the faltering peace process, as government opponents hoped the narrowly avoided crisis could trigger political change.

The Maoists had set a Thursday deadline for Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa's government to meet key demands, including the release of prominent prisoners, restrictions on the movement of troops and more involvement in the peace process by King Gyanendra.

While the government only clearly met one condition -- releasing four jailed members of the Maoist Central Committee -- guerrilla supreme Pushpa Kamal Dahal on Thursday said the rebels would "resume peace dialogues in accordance with the desire of the major political parties and the expectations of the people."

Fighting stops in Liberia, talks go on Taylor's exit

AFP, Monrovia

West African envoys were to press Liberia's President Charles Taylor to step down and go into exile in Nigeria after a peacekeeping force is deployed yesterday as fighting stopped for the first time in two weeks.

A vanguard of up to 1,500 Nigerian soldiers is to begin arriving in Liberia by Monday ahead of a 2,000-strong regional force tasked with enforcing a ceasefire between government forces and rebels seeking to overthrow Taylor, leaders of the West African ECOWAS grouping decided Thursday at a summit meeting in Accra.

Taylor, an indicted war crimes suspect, was told to hand over power in the three days that follow the deployment of the full peacekeeping force and depart for Nigeria, which has offered to take him in, said the 15-nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

In Monrovia, the guns fell silent for

the first time in the capital after two weeks of daily mortar attacks, according to Taylor's military commander there.

"There is no fighting this morning for the first time in two weeks," General Benjamin Yeaten, deputy chief of staff, told AFP from the frontline. "The fighting stopped just minutes after midnight."

ECOWAS executive secretary Mohamed Ibn Chambas and the foreign ministers of Ghana and Togo were to travel to Monrovia on Friday to discuss with Taylor the arrangements for the handover of power to his successor. The regional bloc did not specify who that successor would be.

Taylor's spokesman Vanii Paasewe said the beleaguered leader, who after almost five years of war only controls about a fifth of Liberia, will "not necessarily" abide by the ultimatum, suggesting that much wrangling lay ahead for the envoys to finalise a deal.

Judicial inquiry into Kelly's death begins

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair will be called to appear before a judicial inquiry into the death of British weapons expert David Kelly, the veteran judge conducting the probe said Friday.

Setting out the scope of his inquiry as it opened in London, Lord Brian Hutton said Blair would be summoned "at some stage".

So too, he said, would Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon, Blair's close aide and powerful media strategist Alastair Campbell, and BBC board of governors chairman Gavyn Davies.

"I should emphasise this is an inquiry to be conducted by me," said Hutton, a former chief justice in Northern Ireland, who launched the inquiry with a moment's silence for Kelly.

"This is not a trial conducted between interested parties who

have conflicting cases to advance. I do not sit to decide between conflicting cases. I sit to investigate the circumstances surrounding Dr Kelly's death."

Kelly, whose body was found July 18 in woods near his home with a slit wrist, had been identified by the government as the source of a BBC report claiming that Blair's government had "sexed up" a September 2002 dossier on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction.

Vigorous denials from Downing Street of the report escalated into a heated row between the government and the public broadcaster.

With Kelly's funeral to be held next Wednesday, Hutton -- who has already met the scientist's widow -- said his inquiry would resume on August 11 at the Royal Courts of Justice in central London.



India's Defence Minister George Fernandes (R) waves as Indian Air Force pilot Wing Commander N. Harish looks on as they stand in the cockpit after flying an airforce MiG-21 fighter jet at Ambala yesterday. 73-year-old Fernandes sat in the co-pilot's seat for the 25 minutes flight from the Northern Indian town in a bid to rid the ageing Russian planes of their reputation as "flying coffins".

Lanka, Pakistan open talks on trafficking

AFP, Colombo

Pakistan's interior minister Syed Faisal Saleh Hayat has discussed the issue of human smuggling with Sri Lankan officials, a minister said yesterday, as Colombo announced the arrest of 21 Indians and Pakistanis allegedly preparing to leave illegally for Italy.

Hayat's Sri Lankan counterpart John Amararatunga said the two ministers had discussed possible solutions to the problem.

The latest arrests bring to 682 the number of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals arrested in July for using Sri Lanka as a transit point for illegal immigration.

US lawmakers want Pakistan to end Kashmir terrorism

IANIS, Washington

Sixteen US lawmakers have urged President George W Bush to insist that President Pervez Musharraf end cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir before giving any more economic aid to Pakistan.

"It is not enough to move terrorist camps from Pakistani-occupied Kashmir to the Punjab; the camps, and the groups, must be dismantled, the terrorist financial networks must be eliminated and the terrorists must be arrested and prose-

cutted, not merely put under house arrest or other informal detention," they said in a joint letter to the President, copies of which were made available to media in Washington on Thursday night.

The Congressmen said, "It is also time, however, to dismantle the terrorist networks that threaten Pakistan's internal stability and engage in terrorism across the Line of Control in Kashmir."

Pakistan can no longer afford its dalliance with groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba,

they said.

Signatories to the joint letter were Frank Pallone, Jim McDermott, Gary Ackerman, Joseph Crowley, Tom Lantos, Harold Ford, Melvin Watt, Robert Wexler, Barbara Lee, Adams Schiff, Howard Berman, Edward Markey, Ellen Tauscher, Robert Matsui and Shelley Berkley (all Democrats) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Republican).

Bush had announced a five-year, \$3 billion assistance package for Pakistan during Musharraf's visit to the US in June.

58 killed in Nepali landslides

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 58 people have been killed in Nepal and over 30 were missing after massive landslides engulfed homes following heavy rains throughout the country this week, state-run radio said Friday.

A total of 22 people were killed in Manakamana village in the Gorkha district, 85 km west of Kathmandu, when seven houses were buried in a landslide Wednesday night, it said.

Reports said 11 died in Chitwan district, nine in Nawalparasi, seven in Makwanpur, six in Tanahun, and one each in Rupandehi, Bara and Siraha districts.

Vajpayee, Advani vow to build temple in Ayodhya

PTI, Ayodhya

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani yesterday vowed that a grand Ram temple would be built at the Ram Janmasthan (birth place) and expressed hope that "obstacles" in its path would be removed.

Addressing hundreds of mourners, who had gathered to attend the funeral of late president of Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas Mahant Paramhans Ramchandra Das, Vajpayee said, "We would fulfil his

(Mahant's) last wish. We are confident that all obstacles would be removed and the path paved for it."

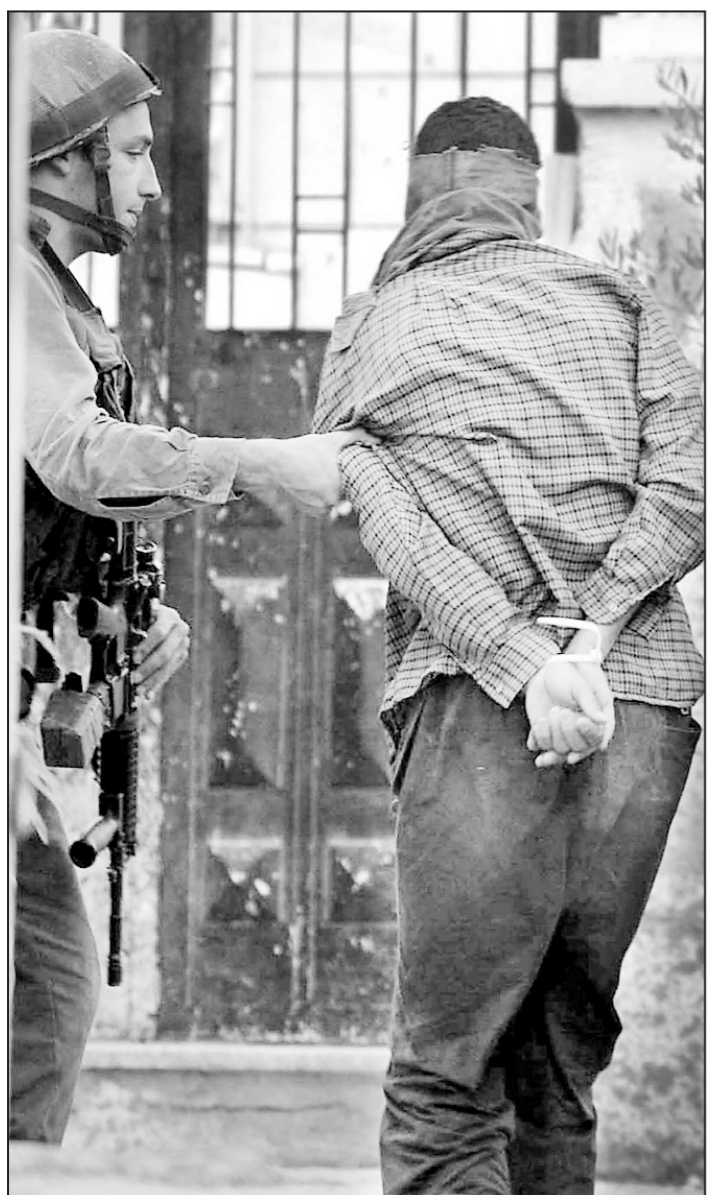
"Good sense would prevail even on those who are opposing it and, together we will fulfil his dream. We feel confident in front of his funeral pyre," Vajpayee said.

Thousands of people gathered at the ghat shouted slogans like "Baba tera swapan adhura, use karenga hum pura (Baba your unfulfilled dreams will be fulfilled by us) and 'Jai Sri Ram'" as Shastri lit the sandalwood pyre on a specially erected

dias.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani, RSS Chief KS Sudershan, BJP National President Venkaiah Naidu, Union Ministers Rajnath Singh and Murlis Manohar Joshi, BJP presidents of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh Vinay Katiyar and Uma Bharati were among those present at the cremation ground.

Earlier, in his address, Advani declared that the Mahant's dream for the temple would be definitely fulfilled.



An Israeli soldier arrests a Palestinian man during a military operation in the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. Palestinian prisoners to be freed by Israel will have to sign a pledge not to offend again before they can walk out of jail, Israeli public radio reported.

Tension rises as no ME breakthrough in sight

AFP, Jerusalem

Tension was growing Friday between Israel and the Palestinians over the implementation of the peace roadmap, after back-to-back talks in Washington failed to yield a breakthrough on the main sticking points.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon warned his government would not tolerate the slightest Palestinian violation, citing European tolerance of Germany's Nazi regime in the 1930s as the root of World War Two.

The Palestinians meanwhile said it was Sharon's government that was failing to carry out the first steps required in the peace plan drawn up by the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States.

"The experience of the past shows that the worst mistake, after reaching an agreement, is ignoring violations in implementation, even if they appear small," Sharon was quoted as saying by the Israeli press.

"We are at the beginning of the implementation of the first stage of the roadmap, which is based on a ceasefire and specific steps toward a total cessation of violence, terrorism and incitement," Sharon said.

"There is no progression from one phase to the next before the full implementation of the previous one," he said, implying that the Palestinian Authority yet had to deliver on its pledge to disarm militants.

The roadmap, which paves the way for the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005, calls on Palestinians to crack down on radical militants but also urges Israel to freeze Jewish settlement activity and dismantle settlement

outposts.

But according to rights groups, more such outposts have been built than evacuated since the roadmap was launched, while on Thursday Israel announced that it was seeking to build more homes in a Gaza Strip settlement.

On Thursday night, the Palestinians called for urgent action from the sponsors of the political process to decide on their response to "the escalation of Israeli actions."

Nabil Abu Rudeina, a top aide of Yasser Arafat, spoke after a meeting of the combined Palestinian leadership, including both the Palestinian leader and his moderate premier Mahmud Abbas, who had previously been at odds over policy towards the peace process.

The appeal to the international community, reminiscent of the statements issued almost daily by Arafat's office before the roadmap was published, reflected Palestinian frustration at the failure of Abbas' talks last week in Washington to yield any significant Israeli concessions.

The Palestinians had hoped to obtain increased US pressure on Israel after US President George W. Bush criticised the separation barrier Sharon's government is erecting in the West Bank.

But the Israeli premier returned Thursday from his own trip to the White House after cordial talks with Bush and promised to continue the construction of the controversial fence.

And the US State Department said the freeze on settlement activity mandated by the roadmap, including what the Israelis call "natural growth", was still under discussion.

'Accounts funding Sept 11 attacks traced in Pakistan'

AP, Washington

Investigators have traced the funding for the September 11 attacks to al-Qaeda accounts in Pakistan, a top FBI counter-terrorism official said in Washington on Thursday.

Deputy assistant director of the FBI's counter-terrorism division, John S Pistole made this revelation in his testimony to the Senate governmental affairs committee.

Pistole said that they have "traced the origin of the funding of 9/11 to financial accounts in Pakistan, where high-ranking and well-known al-Qaeda operatives played a major role in moving the money forward, eventually into the hands of the hijackers located in the US".

16 cops injured in Ankara explosion

AFP, Ankara

Sixteen Turkish police officers were injured Friday, two of them seriously, when a device left outside a justice ministry building blew up as they were inspecting it, officials said, blaming the attack on underground groups.

The bag containing the explosives was left in the garden of a training center for young judges and prosecutors in the capital Ankara, and blew up just as the officers were investigating it.