

Norway suspends Lankan peace effort due to crisis

Talks with Tigers should continue: Chandrika

AFP, Colombo

Norway said yesterday it would suspend its efforts to end Sri Lanka's three decades of ethnic bloodshed until the president and prime minister resolved their power struggle.

Norwegian Deputy Prime Minister Vidar Helgesen, who stayed an extra day here for talks with the key players, said the mediators needed "clarity" on who was in charge of the peace process.

"Until such clarity is re-established, there is no space for further efforts by the Norwegian government to assist the parties," Helgesen told reporters after three days of mediation.

"This is one single impediment Norway can do nothing about," he said. "So we will go home and wait."

He said Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who revived the peace bid after his election on December 2001, was effectively out of the picture after being undercut by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, a critic of the premier's proposed concessions to Tamil Tiger rebels.

"There is not a stable peace in Sri Lanka today," Helgesen said. "I think, however, that the parties have committed to maintain the ceasefire."

"We need to make clear that the ceasefire will be much more difficult to sustain in a political vacuum," he said.

"If progress in the political negotiations is made impossible, the ceasefire will become increasingly fragile."

Kumaratunga invited Norway in 1999 to help broker peace but she since has accused Oslo of being too soft on the rebels, whose three-decade campaign to set up a homeland for the Tamil minority has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

Norway in February 2002 arranged a ceasefire between Wickremesinghe's government and the Tigers, which both the rebels and the president have assured remains in force.

Helgesen said he raised with Kumaratunga her remarks that Wickremesinghe's truce deal with the rebels was "invalid."

"We took it up with the president, but she said she will uphold it (the ceasefire)," Helgesen said.

Kumaratunga on November 4 suspended parliament for two weeks and took over three key ministries including defence, giving her control of all security forces and the police.

The Norwegian envoy said Wickremesinghe felt he was no longer in a position to negotiate with the Tigers, who told the mediators they wanted security guarantees because of the crisis.

"The prime minister can't take responsibility for the peace process

and is unable to give security guarantees," Helgesen said.

"He would not be able to take decisions and make compromises at the table. So effectively, he has said that he is out of the peace process," he said.

The latest Norwegian mission was arranged before the political crisis and was primarily aimed at arranging a face-to-face meeting between the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers to discuss a rebel blueprint for peace.

"Peace talks could have started tomorrow," Helgesen said, "provided there was clarity about who is holding political authority and responsibility on behalf of the government to ensure the continuation of the ceasefire agreement and the resumption of peace negotiations."

"Until last week there was such clarity," Helgesen said. "Today there is no such clarity."

Helgesen and Norwegian Special Advisor Erik Solheim met Thursday in the rebel-held northern town of Kilinochchi where the Tamil Tigers' supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran told them "there should be political stability in Colombo for the peace talks to continue."

The Tigers pulled out of direct negotiations in April after accusing the government of failing to deliver on promises made at six rounds of discussions since September last year.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga said Friday that peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels should go ahead despite peace broker Norway suspending its role due to her feud with the prime minister.

Kumaratunga as the acting defence minister ordered security forces to extend full cooperation to the Scandinavian force monitoring the ceasefire in place since February 2002, the president's spokesman said.

72-hour transport strike reduced to 24-hour in Sylhet

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

The transport workers and owners associations of Sylhet observed their 24-hour strike yesterday to realise a 20-point demand.

The associations, however, reduced their 72-hour strike to 24 hours at a meeting of the leaders of the associations and political leaders at the office of the superintendent of police (SP) in the early hours of yesterday.

The demands include withdrawal of Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) services in different routes of Sylhet.

The leading people of the Jaintapur, Gowainghat and Kanaighat upazila, who has been boycotting privately run buses and minibuses for 33 days for return of the regular BRTC services in Sylhet-Tamabil-Jafflong route, yesterday held another meeting at Jaintapur. They will meet again on November 18 to resolve the crisis, the SP of Sylhet said.

Khaleda in Medina

FROM PAGE 12 Khaleda, accompanied by her family members, will stay in Saudi Arabia as a royal guest of the Saudi King.

She will stay in Medina till November 18 for Ziarat at the Rouza Mubarak of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (SM) and say her prayers at Masjid-e-Nababi.

The prime minister will spend the holy night of Shab-e-Qadar in prayers in Masjid-e-Haram in Makkah.

She is expected to return home on November 23.

Her 19-member entourage includes her youngest son Arafat Rahman and his wife, two grandchildren, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin and his wife, and prime minister's Political Secretary M Mosaddek Ali and his wife.

Cessna

FROM PAGE 1 were unhurt but the left propeller of the plane was damaged, airport officials said.

The exigencies forced the ZIA authorities to suspend all incoming and outgoing flights at about 12:45pm. Fire fighters at the airport were kept alert but it was not required, airport officials said. The aircraft was taken off the runway at 3:30pm.

Earlier, in June last year a training plane crash-landed on a football ground at sector No. 4 in Uttara Model Town, leaving the pilot dead. Another plane crash killed its woman pilot and her trainer in 1998.

UNB adds: The one-hour suspension forced scheduled flights of Saudi Arabian Airlines, Indian Airlines and a domestic plane of Biman Bangladesh Airlines to be diverted and landed at Singapore, Kolkata and Chittagong respectively.



Senior Saudi government officials yesterday receive Prime Minister Khaleda Zia after she arrived at Prince Mohammad Bin Abdul Aziz International Airport in Medina en route to Makkah to perform Umrah.

PHOTO: PID

Flower trade in city

FROM PAGE 12

of the High Court mazar was the venue of the flower trade. Now it has spread to other specific areas of the city. A little distance away from the Shahbagh road corner towards the west lies the Katabon area where the flower shops outnumber the flower shops in any other area in the city. The neighbourhood around the Mahila Samity theatre venue is embellished by the presence of some flower shops. At present, no statistics are available as to the total number of flower shops that are operating all over the city, besides numerous roadside vendors.

Lately this wide appreciation of flowers forms a new staple of business in the hands of some nondescript youngsters. They can be seen just at the moments shoppers go to board their cars at the end of their shopping or when the rickshaws we travel in get stalled along with cars at road junctions in traffic jams or in the busy shopping areas. These youngsters offer a couple of roses or sticks of Rajanigandha or small garlands of flowers at a small price. This appears to be a sublimated form of begging resorted to by an increasing number of poor boys and girls. They present a poignant spectacle of a grim battle for subsistence at all weathers, fair or foul.

In Western countries, there is a system called interflora system under which one can send flowers not only from one neighbourhood to another but also from one city to another. Such a system is yet to be developed in our country.

For the Dhaka flower markets, supplies mainly come from Gazipur, Konabari and Savar in the previous greater Dhaka district and also from several villages in Jessore district. In some villages in Jessore district, cultivation of different kinds of flowers for commercial purposes has become a large-scale agricultural industry employing more than a thousand families. The villages engaged in such largescale flower cultivation exceed 20 in number and the people of those villages engaged in such cultivation are reported to earn a level of income which is said to be more than the income level obtained from cultivation of other crops. This is said to be a very encouraging development in improving the village economy.

According to our Export Promotion Bureau, there are bright prospects for earning substantial foreign exchange through export of flowers after meeting the internal needs. At present the turnover in the global flower market is reportedly valued at more than 160 billion dollars. Holland enjoys the foremost position in the global market for the commodity with a share of 67 per cent of the trade. Italy, Colombia, India, Kenya and Israel are also engaged in the foreign trade. For Bangladesh experts in this line feel there are immense possibilities in this field if cultivation of flowers of different varieties is boosted through special measures and on scientific lines in suitable areas of the country.

AL: Monga

FROM PAGE 12

affected areas. Also present at the conference was AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil, MP. He said his party would soon send medical teams to the northern region to provide medical services to the affected people.

The AL leaders asked the government to refrain from politicising its relief distribution activities and punish those involved in pilferage of relief materials.

They also urged people from all walks of life including social workers, industrialists and the business community to come to the aid of the monga-hit people.

Replying to a query, Abdul Jalil said the opposition leader and AL president might visit the northern region soon to see for herself the situation.

"If Awami League returns to power, we'll take initiatives to resolve unemployment problems of the northerners that will help them get over the monga crisis permanently," Jalil said in response to a question on a permanent solution to the problem.

AL leaders Obaidul Kader, Akhteruzzaman, Sultan M Mansur, Dr Abdur Razzak MP, AFM Bahauddin Nasim, Latif Siddiqui MP, Prof Nazma Rahman and Iqbalur Rahim were also present.

Arsenic

FROM PAGE 12 well water has been heavily promoted and developed in Bangladesh as a safe and environmentally acceptable alternative to microbiologically unsafe untreated surface water.

In the mid-1990s, the crisis emerged into broad public awareness. The origin of the arsenic pollution is geological in this case; arsenic is released to ground water under naturally occurring aquifer conditions.

The EAWAG and the University of Lausanne are so far working together with the Hanoi Institute in Vietnam. But the researchers would like to do more. "We are now facing a lack of finances in order to do field tests with Biosensor on a large scale," said Meer. At least, \$150,000 would be needed.

According to the government, only 71 per cent of the population has access to safe drinking water, since the arsenic problem crept up. But some scientists put the figure at less than 40 per cent.

Already, more than one million people are suffering from health problems in Bangladesh because of the exposure to arsenic water. "Our test could make sure at a low cost that no-one is exposed to this life-threatening danger," Meer notes.

US will stay

FROM PAGE 1 Donald Rumsfeld told US forces in the Pacific yesterday there was no plan for an early withdrawal from Iraq, but Iraqis would get more power more quickly than initially thought.

"There is no decision to pull out early, indeed quite the contrary," Rumsfeld said when asked by troops stationed on the Pacific island outpost of Guam about reports of a premature withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

"We will stay there as long as necessary to see that that country is put on a path" to democracy, he said.

Rumsfeld said the initial plan had been for a transfer of sovereignty after a new Iraqi constitution had been ratified and elections held.

But the process was likely to take about two years and the Iraqi Governing Council and US administrator Paul Bremer would try to find a way of transferring some responsibility before that.

"It does not mean that we would physically leave the country any sooner," Rumsfeld said.

"What it means is that the Iraqis would begin to take on a greater portion of responsibility for governing themselves sooner than the original thought was with respect to first a constitution, then national elections because of the time involved."

B Chowdhury

FROM PAGE 1

20 last year, said after his resignation he had said he would stand by the people during a critical situation and offer his contribution as a senior citizen for the country's welfare.

He said government efforts to combat crime and corruption -- the two top election agenda clearly spelled out by him and the present prime minister during conferences with diplomats, donors and journalists -- have failed after the two-year rule of the BNP-led coalition government.

"Today, newspaper reports suggest that the number one agenda (combating crime) has certainly not yet been fulfilled. There were some efforts, but they failed. The reason for the failure must be searched out," he said.

About corruption, he said, "... We've seen corruption in the past and still see it. The efforts to curb corruption have not been successful. And people are not hopeful of any good programmes of the government to curb corruption in the near future."

Chowdhury also said the price hike of essentials coupled with the famine-like situation in the north have badly affected the poor and limited income groups, adding that people did not expect such a situation.

Asked if he would ask the government to resign for its failure, he said, "It's a highly political question ... if I had failed to deliver, I would have resigned as a politically sensitive person."

Referring to the prime minister, he further said, "I will not ask her (to resign) because I don't know how much politically sensitive she is. Those who are in power should have assessed people's reaction and found they longer enjoy people's confidence as before."

He outright rejected the suggestion that he enjoys support from external forces, saying, "First of all, I am not in politics. Secondly, I don't believe in external power and thirdly, I believe that after Almighty Allah, ultimate power lies with the people."

Replying to another question if he apprehends intervention by any extra-constitutional forces, he quipped: "What do you mean by extra-constitutional? Do you call the fall of Ershad in 1990 extra-constitutional? It was made constitutional as people are all powerful."

Asked if he foresees mass upsurge, he said, "I did not say that."

During a nearly 45-minute interview, the former president also spelled out his ideas about the future structure of government and his future course of action.

He said he had a discussion with Gono Forum leader Dr Kamal Hossain and also had talks with former president Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed during a function to commemorate the late Barrister Ishaq Ahmed.

Although Chowdhury wouldn't name all the personalities he talked to, he acknowledged that a number of BNP leaders did contact him and inquired about the affairs of the state.

On speculations about emergence of a 'third force' headed by him, which would include people from both the BNP and Awami League, he said, "It's too early to tell."

"But if the country faces a critical situation, and if I feel that people want me, only then I will go. I will not betray the people. I'll be with them," he added.

He said he would host an iftar party for members of the civil society, former judges, intellectuals and journalists at Sheraton Hotel on November 22.

To another question, he denied any link between his present stance and cancellation of BTV programmes of his son Mahi B Chowdhury, a BNP lawmaker.

About a press statement by BNP's front organisations rebutting his remarks and hinting at his "mysterious role" when president Ziaur Rahman was killed, he said the statement was made at a junior level "at the dictate of others".

"I don't want to speak ill of those who were politically reared by me," he said, and hoped that those who encouraged

the statement would speak the truth in future and would not resort to any "falsehood" to mislead the people.

Recalling the assassination of president Ziaur Rahman in Chittagong, Chowdhury said he was in a different room with another minister. "I did not know about the incident beforehand," he said.

He however said it was interesting to note that some other ministers including Shah Aziz, who were supposed to go to Chittagong with president Zia, did not turn up for one reason or other.

Chowdhury said he had made statements about the matter several times, appeared before investigations and a martial law court. "I appeared before three investigations and also gave evidence to a chief justice ... my position is absolutely clear."

He said president Ziaur Rahman made him party secretary general and deputy prime minister. He was also deputy leader in parliament both while in government and opposition. He also served as education minister. Under the present government, he was made foreign minister and elected president by the 300-member parliament.

About the allegation of conspiracy brought against him by BNP's front organisations while he was president, Chowdhury posed a counter question as to why he should get involved in a conspiracy after being elected to the highest office.

Spelling out his formula of future government, Chowdhury said there should be two vice-presidents and three deputy prime ministers to assist the president and the prime minister for effective governance.

During President Zia's time, he said there was one vice-president and three deputy prime ministers (DPMs). Later the post of DPM was cancelled but that of vice-president continued till Ershad's rule.

He said one vice-president would be in charge of law and parliamentary affairs and the other in charge of administration. The first DPM, he said, would also be the deputy leader in parliament to look after parliamentary and legal affairs, the second in charge of administration and the third in charge of development.

The cabinet, he said, would comprise of 30-40 efficient ministers. The prime minister would appoint 80 per cent of the ministers while the ruling parliamentary party would nominate 20 per cent.

He said out of the 300 parliamentary seats, 200 MPs would be elected by direct vote while remaining 100 seats would be allocated pro rata on the percentage of votes polled by political parties, allowing induction of eminent personalities, professionals and dedicated political leaders into parliament. "This would help make parliament more effective, vibrant and enlightened."

Chowdhury also favoured floor crossing by MPs after three years, maintaining certain procedures.

"This is just my opinion. They are not just to be imposed. Politicians and experts may accept my proposals or reject. I will not live long, but just leave my ideas to future generation to think about," he said.

"Because the way elections are being held, there is no chance for good people to contest the elections and be elected to parliament," he added.

Outlaws kill 2 in Rajbari

UNB, Rajbari

Two people were killed allegedly by the activists of outlawed Sarbaraha Party at Ganjanandapur and Khamardanga villages in Pangsha Upazila on Thursday night.

The victims were identified as Shukur Ali, 60, a former member of Harinbaria Union Parishad and Abu Mia, 35, a listed criminal.

Police said the outlaws swooped on Shukur Ali while he was returning home from Kalkhali bazaar at about 8pm. They shot and slaughtered him. The same group attacked Abu Mia at village Khamardanga at midnight and strangled him.

Police recovered the bodies and sent those to hospital morgue for autopsy.

AL turns down

FROM PAGE 12 session when its lawmakers walked out to protest the switching off of the microphone of Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina by the chair.

The AL preconditions include unreserved apologies from Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar and State Minister for Housing and Public Works Alamgir Kabir on three separate issues.

He demanded apologies from Khaleda for pegging a non-MP BNP newcomer as a de facto legislator for a Faridpur constituency, from Sircar for his comment that parliament functioned smoothly without the opposition and from Kabir for derogatory remarks against Hasina.

Speaking at a roundtable organised by Bangladesh Parliament Journalists Association on November 6 in Dhaka, Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed wondered why the opposition made such demands in the first place that "we cannot meet".



PHOTO: STAR

Activists of National Garment Workers' Federation brings out a procession in Dhaka yesterday, demanding trial of the killers of a garment worker in Narayanganj and pay of workers' arrears and bonuses ahead of the Eid-ul-Fitr.