

Lankan parties halt slide into civil war

Deal welcomed, but dangers remain

REUTERS, Colombo

Talks between Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels in Switzerland have again held off a return to civil war, analysts and diplomats said yesterday, but much would depend on whether the parties kept their word.

Sri Lanka's stock market rallied on the news that the government and rebels had finished a two-day meeting in a chateau near Geneva with an agreement to meet again in April, but some warned the risk of war had not gone away.

"The spectre of war, at least until the 19th of April, seems to have gone away," said Janes' Defence Weekly analyst Iqbal Athas. "Until then, the ceasefire is bound to hold. But while smiling at each other, both sides will continue making prepara-

tions for war."

Truce monitors say more than 200 people died in December and January as suspected rebel attacks on the military pushed the country to the brink of a return to a two-decade civil war that has already killed more than 64,000 people.

The gulf between the two sides remains vast, with President Mahinda Rajapakse ruling out Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) demands for a separate homeland for minority Tamils and the rebels threatening war without concessions.

But tension fell after Norway, which brokered the 2002 truce, helped persuade the two sides to meet in Geneva for the first high level talks since 2003. On Thursday, the two sides reaffirmed their commitment to the battered ceasefire.

The LTTE delegation, which is heading on to Norway to meet overseas Tamils who help fund them, said they would take all necessary steps to stop attacks on security forces. They had long denied carrying out any attack, but few in Colombo believed them.

In turn, the government said it would ensure no armed group aside from the security forces would conduct armed operations. The Tigers accuse them of using Tamil paramilitaries to wage a "shadow war", but again the military has always denied it.

The Tigers' key concern is seen as renegade former rebel commander Colonel Karuna, who they say shelters in government territory and attacks the mainstream LTTE. Karuna says if his men give up their weapons they will be killed by the

Tigers and has refused to disarm.

The government has always denied any link to Karuna and said he solely operated within the borders of the de facto Tiger state. But truce monitors say security forces know where his bases are and have at least been turning a blind eye.

A diplomat said it was too soon to say if the government would act to rein in Karuna, but if Nordic truce monitors still reported they were taking no action the government delegation might be embarrassed when talks resume in Geneva on April 19.

"The government really has to be seen to do something," the western diplomat said on condition of anonymity. "But this is a positive outcome. It is the best we could have hoped for."



PHOTO: AFP
Nimal Siripala Da Silva (L) chief of the Sri Lankan government delegation shakes hands with Anton Balasingam (C), chief of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) delegation, as Parami Tamilselvan (R) looks on after meetings at the Bossey Castle near Geneva on Thursday.

Museveni holds solid lead in Uganda polls

AFP, Kampala

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni holds a solid lead over opposition challenger Kizza Besigye in the country's landmark elections, the first official results showed yesterday.

Provisional returns gave Museveni almost 60 percent of the vote compared to 37 percent for his main rival Besigye, with only a fraction of the vote counted in the east African nation's first multi-party polls since 1980, they said.

With results in from some eight percent of the nearly 20,000 polling station around the country, Museveni had won 313,432 votes, or 59.59 percent, of votes cast while Besigye had 195,948, or 37.25, the Electoral Commission said.

Although the results appear to show the president on track to extend his 20-year hold on power with a new five-year mandate, commission chairman Badru Kiggundu said the returns were still very partial and could change.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma (R) shakes hands with US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns (L) during a meeting at the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi yesterday. Burns arrived in India on February 22 for talks on the nuclear issue in a last-ditch effort to salvage an agreement between India and the US just days before US President George W. Bush's visit to India.

Bush hopes to seal Indian nuclear deal

REUTERS, New Delhi

US President George W. Bush has said he hopes to clinch an agreement with India on a landmark nuclear energy cooperation deal during his visit to New Delhi next week and get Congress to approve it on his return.

Bush's comments, made in an interview to an Indian newspaper and published on Friday, came amid talks between the two sides to bridge differences over New Delhi's plan to separate its civilian and military nuclear programmes to prevent proliferation.

"First things first is to go to India and hopefully reach an agreement on separation, and then bring that agreement back and start selling it to the Congress," Bush said in the interview to the Times of India.

"But we can't bring anything back until we've agreed to the agreement. And that's what's happening now. There's a spirit of goodwill and cooperation," he said.

The deal, first agreed to in

principle last July, aims to give India access to long-denied US nuclear equipment and fuel to meet its soaring energy needs.

But it has run into trouble with the US insisting that the plan to separate India's civilian and military nuclear programmes must be credible and transparent.

US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns and Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran began a second day of talks on Friday, aiming to arrive at a compromise on the separation.

"These negotiations are very challenging but there is goodwill by both governments. We need to do some more work today. We are hoping to make progress in that meeting," Burns told reporters ahead of the meeting.

Asked if the two sides could resolve the tangle before Bush arrives next week, Burns said: "President Bush and Prime Minister Singh have really given a clear signal, they both want to have this agreement done."

Amnesty urges Bush to raise HR concerns in India

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush has been asked to raise a long list of human rights concerns in India during his visit to the world's most populous democracy next week.

Amnesty International sent a letter to the US leader on Wednesday urging him to include rights concerns on his agenda of discussions with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, an official from the rights group said.

"Even though India is the world's largest democracy, there remain disturbing human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions, deaths in police and military custody, rape, torture and arbitrary arrests," said T. Kumar, Amnesty's Asia-Pacific advocacy director in Washington.

Amnesty urged Bush to seek, among others, the abolition of a law preventing prosecution of military personnel who allegedly committed abuses in the disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir and northeast Indian states.

Strike over killings hits Kashmir

8 killed in gunbattle

AFP, Srinagar

A strike called by Kashmiri separatists to protest the fatal shooting of four civilians, allegedly by the army, crippled life in Indian Kashmir yesterday, police and residents said, as another eight people died in two gunbattles in the restive region.

Most shops, banks and offices in the summer capital Srinagar were closed by the strike, which was called by both moderate and hard-line factions of the region's separatist alliance.

Traffic was also thin on the streets, witnesses said.

The strike was being observed in other Kashmir towns, including Handwara in northern Kupwara district, near to the village of Dudipora where the four civilians died on Wednesday, witnesses said.

The army said the four, aged between nine and 20, had died in

crossfire between militants and soldiers.

But angry residents told reporters that the victims were playing cricket when they were shot without provocation after one of the four tried to flee on seeing the approaching soldiers.

The state government and the army have separately ordered probes into the incident, a gesture that cooled tempers and led to the burial of the four late Thursday.

The protesters had previously refused to a burial and had left their bodies in the centre of a key road as a mark of protest.

Meanwhile, three Islamic militants, a soldier and a woman died in a gunbattle when troops attacked a rebel hideout late Thursday, the army said.

The deaths occurred near Bandipora town, 60km north of Srinagar.

Indian troops shot dead another three militants in the district of Doda on Friday, a police spokesman said.

Rice's ME tour fails to isolate Hamas

AFP, Abu Dhabi

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice yesterday wrapped up a Middle East tour with a call for nuclear non-proliferation in the Gulf region, but failed to mobilise Arab states to isolate a Hamas-led Palestinian government.

Rice and foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) "stressed their fears and serious concerns with regards to the dangers of this (nuclear) proliferation in the region," said a joint statement issued following their meeting in Abu Dhabi.

Both parties reaffirmed "the necessity of keeping the Gulf area free from weapons of mass destruction," but fell short of criticising neighbouring Iran, which the West has accused of seeking to develop nuclear arms, a charge rejected by non-Arab Tehran.

The GCC comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi

Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

During her visit to the UAE, Rice discussed the controversial takeover of operations at six major US ports by the Dubai-based DP World, underscoring that "the UAE was a good friend and strong ally in fighting terror," said a US State Department official travelling with Rice.

In London on Friday, DP World said it had agreed to delay taking control of the US ports as part of its purchase of ports and ferry operator P and O, in the wake of US opposition to the deal on security grounds.

But it insisted that its buyout of P and O for about 5.7 billion euros (6.8 billion dollars) should not be delayed beyond the agreed closing date of March 2.

Rice's tour, which also took her to Cairo, Riyadh, and -- unexpectedly -- to Beirut, ran into an Arab refusal to isolate the Islamist movement Hamas, following its victory in last month's Palestinian

elections.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal warned that Riyadh would continue to back the Palestinian Authority financially, even after the radical movement won elections.

"We do not want to link international aid to the Palestinian people with considerations other than their terrible humanitarian needs," Saud told a press conference held jointly with Rice.

Rice repeated Washington's position that the US was conscious of the Palestinians' needs. Washington has asked the Palestinian Authority to return 50 million dollars in aid for infrastructure projects, fearing that it would fall into the hands of Hamas, regarded as a terrorist group by the US and European Union.

Before arriving in Saudi Arabia, Rice held talks in Cairo with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, which also focused on the aftermath of Hamas's victory.

Criticism not working with Myanmar: UN

AFP, Bangkok

The "cacophony" of criticism against Myanmar is not forcing the military-ruled state to reform, an outgoing UN rights envoy said Friday, urging the international community to be more diplomatic.

Paolo Sergio Pinheiro, who is stepping down after six years as the UN's rights envoy to Myanmar, said "there was a lack of coordination among and inside the international community" in its approach to Myanmar.

"There is a cacophony, and people are accusing others of not being sufficiently tough," he said at a press conference in Bangkok.

"It's not a boxing championship." In November, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice chided Asean members for not being tough enough on Myanmar for human rights, calling the impoverished Southeast Asian nation an "outpost of tyranny".

"You call the leadership of Myanmar certain names, this doesn't help," Pinheiro said.

"I think that some countries have forgotten that diplomacy exists."



PHOTO: AFP
Anti riot policemen (L) block protesters during their protest in Manila yesterday calling for the ouster of president Gloria Arroyo. Arroyo declared a state of emergency and ordered the arrest of several military officers and civilians behind what she described as a coup attempt against her.

US urges Manila to protect rule of law

AFP, Manila

The United States yesterday urged Philippines President Gloria Arroyo to uphold the rule of law and protect civil liberties after she imposed a state of emergency to quell an alleged coup attempt.

Washington also urged more than 100,000 Americans living in the former US colony to "take prudent steps to ensure their personal safety during this uncertain time," US embassy spokesman Matthew Lussenhop said in a statement read on national television.

Arroyo on Friday declared a "state of national emergency", invoking powers to use the military to quell a rebellion and to take over public utilities if necessary, after the government detained several people including a general who it said withdrew his support for Arroyo, the commander-in-chief.

"We call on the Government of the Philippines and the Filipino people to respect fully the rule of law, protect civil liberties and human rights, and reject violence," the US statement added.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani fishermen stand on their boats during a demonstration in the Arabian Sea near Karachi yesterday to condemn the publication of cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM) in European newspapers. Pakistani police detained 70 workers from an alliance of Islamic parties ahead of nationwide protests against the publication of cartoons.

UN worried about US stand on HR council

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN General Assembly president wants a vote next week on a resolution for a new Human Rights Council but the United States has called for reopening negotiations that some fear might sink the proposal.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, as well as major rights groups, said the compromise draft resolution, unveiled on Thursday by assembly President Jan Eliasson, fell short of their proposals for a smaller, stronger body to name and shame abusers and help nations devise rights laws.

But they said it was an improvement over the discredited Geneva-based Human Rights Commission -- where human rights violators such as Libya, Sudan and Zimbabwe had seats and prevented action against other abusers.

"It's not everything we asked for, but I think it is a credible basis to push ahead," said Annan, who

proposed the new council in March. "The member states have had enough time to discuss it ... and now is the time for a decision."

However, US Ambassador John Bolton said one option was opening negotiations among governments rather than Eliasson's system of intermediaries or facilitators to sound out nations. He said Washington would review the issue.

"The facilitator process is a process where everybody talks and then the oracle thinks about it and then comes up with the text as opposed to international negotiations where you put a text on the table and mark it up," Bolton told reporters.

"That has not really occurred and that is something we'll now have to consider launching to see if we can correct the deficiencies in this draft," he said.

"The strongest argument in favour of this draft is that it's not as bad as it could be," Bolton added.

Russia, China officials in Iran for talks

REUTERS, Tehran

Russia and China stepped up their efforts yesterday to persuade Iran to accept a compromise proposal over its nuclear program that may avert the threat of UN sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Sergei Kiriyenko, head of the Russian atomic energy agency Rosatom, and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Lu Guozeng arrived in Tehran for three days of talks over Iran's nuclear impasse.

Time is running out for Iran to avoid formal referral to the UN Security Council at a board meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna on March 6.

Iran has offered UN inspectors information about a shadowy uranium-processing project that Western intelligence has linked to warhead design, a senior diplomat in Vienna said on Thursday.

The diplomat, close to the IAEA

but asking not to be named, said IAEA inspectors would be in Tehran this weekend to check the information on the "Green Salt Project."

Russian officials have played down expectations of a breakthrough at the Tehran talks and analysts say Iran is in no mood to compromise.

High oil prices and US problems in Iraq meant that for Iran "this is probably not the time to concede," the International Crisis Group think-tank said in a new report.

It said it expected Iran "to press ahead, strengthening its position for the day genuine negotiations or confrontation with the US might begin."

Senior cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani told worshippers at Friday Prayers in Tehran that Iran was telling the West: "Nuclear energy is so entwined with our honour and dignity that we will never let your ominous plans be implemented."

Worshippers responded with

chants of "God is Greatest" and "Nuclear energy is our indisputable right."

Russia and China, both of whom have burgeoning energy and trade ties with Tehran and veto rights on the Security Council, do not favour the use of sanctions against Iran, which denies any intention of making nuclear arms.

But with Iran seemingly unmoved by the threat of Security Council referral or the possibility of military action, Moscow and Beijing have joined Western calls for it to halt immediately atomic fuel research and enrichment which it resumed last month.

Kiriyenko said he would press ahead with the joint enrichment facility talks and also visit the Gulf port city of Bushehr, where a Russian-built atomic reactor, Iran's first, is due to come onstream later this year, state television reported.