

Lanka seeks EU ban on Tigers to save truce

14 killed in fresh violence

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday asked the European Union to designate Tamil Tiger rebels as terrorists, saying such a move could nudge them into resuming talks on a collapsing ceasefire.

The request came as 14 more people were killed in fresh violence linked to the latest clashes with Tamil Tiger guerrillas in the island's embattled northern and eastern regions.

The government said it expected the 25-member EU to press ahead with a threatened move to list the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a "terrorist organisation" and cut off overseas funding.

"We expect the European Union to go ahead with the threatened sanctions if the LTTE continues to

behave in this appalling manner and engages in terrorism," the head of the government's peace secretariat Palitha Kohona said.

Kohona said they expected an EU-wide ban on the LTTE to encourage the guerrillas to participate in talks in Switzerland, a non-EU member, and discuss how to save a ceasefire in place since 2002.

He said the LTTE had been giving "flimsy excuses" for staying away from the talks originally slated for April 19 in Switzerland, and then rescheduled for April 24.

Last week the Tigers postponed the talks indefinitely citing the government's failure to curtail paramilitaries and transport difficulties for internal consultation, which they say are essential before the Swiss talks.

A request by the rebels for use of government helicopters to travel to the consultations was first declined, but later Colombo agreed to allow the use of chartered private helicopters.

The government denies supporting the paramilitaries, a charge made by the Tigers.

"There is a limit to entertaining excuses," Kohona told reporters. "The package of excuses may have now run out."

The EU slapped travel restrictions on the Tamil Tigers in October, two months after holding the guerrillas responsible for the August assassination of then Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar.

The EU at the time warned the Tigers that they may face a ban

across EU member states unless they gave up the use of "terrorism".

Britain has banned the Tigers since 2001. Two weeks ago, Canada added the Tigers to its list of terrorist organisations.

Media Minister Anura Yapa said the government expected international pressure on the Tamil Tigers to push the island's peace efforts to end three decades of ethnic bloodshed that has claimed over 60,000 lives since 1972.

Defence officials said five security personnel and three Tiger rebels were killed in fresh clashes during a 24-hour period over the weekend while six civilians were also gunned down by suspected Tiger rebels.



Thais vote in by-polls that may reignite crisis

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand held by-elections yesterday amid tight security, but the polls threatened to leave unresolved the constitutional crisis that forced Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to step aside.

The new balloting in 40 districts took place mainly in southern Thailand, a bastion of the opposition, which boycotted the general election on April 2.

Despite increased security across Thailand's southernmost provinces, where more than 1,200 people have been killed in two years of unrest, one security officer was killed and at least four injured in attacks by suspected militants.

Sunday's by-elections could determine when, or if, parliament will convene.

Thai law requires all 500 seats to be filled for parliament to meet, but the election commission projected that about 10 seats would remain empty even after the balloting.

A soldier (L) stands guard at a polling station for women during the by-elections day in Thailand's troubled southern Yala province yesterday. By-elections are being conducted in 40 constituencies nationwide, mainly in southern Thailand. Parliament cannot convene to name a new prime minister until all 500 seats are filled. But 40 seats were left empty after an opposition boycott and weeks of protests undermined the April 2 vote.

Blasts near green zone kill 7 Iraqis

7 US soldiers die in attacks

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Three explosions just outside the heavily guarded Green Zone killed seven Iraqi civilians and wounded eight yesterday while seven US soldiers were killed by roadside bombings, a US official said.

Iraqi police said earlier that three mortar rounds landed inside the zone, but the US official said the explosions occurred just outside.

They occurred near Iraq's Defence Ministry, which is just inside the zone, and were caused by mortars or rockets, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the attacks happened outside the Green Zone where the US Embassy is located. Meanwhile, seven US soldiers were killed in a roadside bombings northwest of Baghdad on Sunday and Saturday, the US military said.

A military statement said the three soldiers died when their vehicle was hit at 11:30 am (0730 GMT), but did not give further details.

Earlier four US soldiers were killed south of Baghdad in a roadside bombing Saturday, the US military said.



A Haitian carries a child in his arms as he joins hundreds of others in a march past the main US Immigration office building in Miami Saturday. Thousands of Haitians took to the streets to oppose what they call "discrimination against Haitian would-be immigrants by the US immigration service".

Fatah, Hamas gunmen clash in Gaza

AP, Gaza City

The militant group Hamas and rival Fatah agreed early yesterday to work to end tension that erupted in violent clashes and mass protests across the Palestinian areas after a Hamas leader accused Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas of treachery.

But the friction threatened to boil over again with neither side backing down from its key demands in vying for control of the Palestinian security forces.

The two sides traded gunfire and hurled stones and firebombs Saturday, escalating a fierce power struggle between the militant and moderate factions. Abbas said Saturday he would not allow the accusations to plunge the Palestinians into civil war.

In a meeting that began late Saturday, Hamas and Fatah officials agreed to calm the hostilities.

"The two movements have agreed to call on our Palestinian masses to stop all displays that might lead to tension," Fatah official Maher Mekdad said, reading a joint

statement after the meeting. "They agreed to work together to strengthen the national unity."

Outside the meeting, thousands of Fatah supporters shouted anti-Hamas slogans. No agreement was reached in the meeting on the control of the security forces, participants said.

The unrest followed the president's recent moves to take control of all six security forces and Hamas's response that it would form its own shadow army, made up of militants and headed by a top fugitive Israel has been hunting for years.

Abbas' prompt veto of that plan provoked a scathing comment late Friday from ruling Hamas party's political chief, Khaled Mashaal.

"We can understand that Israel and America are persecuting us, and seeking ways to besiege and starve us, but what about the sons of our people who are plotting against us, who are following a studied plan to make us fail," Mashaal said from his base in Syria, without mentioning Abbas by name.

Diplomats pessimistic over Iranian crisis

Prospects for negotiated settlement slim

AFP, Tehran

For the first time since the crisis over Iran's nuclear programme kicked off some three years ago, Western diplomats are saying the prospects for a negotiated settlement look extremely slim.

They believe the Islamic republic's hardline rulers have decided to work all-out to acquire a nuclear deterrent -- be that a bomb or the capacity to make one -- which will in turn accelerate Western efforts to impose punitive action such as UN sanctions in the short term.

Many diplomats also say that, barring a sudden and surprise change of heart by Tehran's radical right-wingers, a conflict between Iran and the United States cannot be ruled out in the medium term.

"The Iranians believe they are in a very, very strong position. They're counting on the Russians and

Chinese to block the Security Council from imposing any meaningful sanctions," a senior Tehran-based Western diplomat said.

"But the regime also seems convinced the Americans cannot attack," he added.

Iranian officials regularly speak of the US as being in a "quagmire" in Iraq and allergic to any further spike in oil prices, already at 75 dollars a barrel partly thanks to the Iran crisis.

"This, I think, is a very grave miscalculation," said the diplomat, speaking on condition that he not be named.

The UN Security Council has given Tehran until April 28 to freeze uranium enrichment -- which makes reactor fuel but can be extended to make weapons -- as a "confidence-building" measure.

Iran's has refused to do so, asserting its nuclear drive is a legal bid to generate atomic energy.

It has also announced that its scientists have successfully mastered enrichment and -- in a display of total defiance -- has vowed to reach an industrial-scale enrichment capacity within 12 months.

"The Iranians have tried to present a fait accompli. In reality they're not quite there yet, but it is a turning point. From now on the faster their work advances, the quicker the crisis will escalate," said a European diplomat close to the issue.

Furthermore, Iran's hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been firing on all cylinders -- upping his fierce anti-Israeli rhetoric and showing off Tehran's close ties with Palestinian and Iraqi militant groups.

Iran's armed forces have also played up military exercises in the Gulf and the oil-supply choke point at the Strait of Hormuz.

Six dead in Libyan military plane crash in Cameroon

AFP, Yaounde

A Libyan military cargo plane crashed Sunday in the Cameroonian town of Kousseri near the border with Chad, killing all six crew, the town's deputy mayor told AFP.

The plane, which had come from Libya, apparently missed its landing at the nearby airport of the Chadian capital N'Djamena and came down shortly after 5:00 am (0400 GMT) in a district of Kousseri, Kamssouloun Abba Kebir said.

The plane burst into flames on impact but nobody on the ground was hurt, he said.

The charred bodies of the six crew members were found in the wreckage of the plane by Cameroonian rescuers who went to the scene.

Two killed in Yemen market bombing

AFP, Sanaa

Two people were killed and 16 more wounded in a bomb blast in a crowded market in the Yemeni capital Sanaa yesterday, police said.

"A man set off a bomb when the market where traders sell Qat was packed with people," one witness said, referring to the mild narcotic leaf popular in Yemen.

Security forces sealed off the area and launched a hunt for the man who fled after throwing the bomb into the marketplace in the working class southeastern district of Shumaila, witnesses and police said.

More troops head to troubled Solomons

AFP, Honiara

Australia and New Zealand sent more troops to the Solomons yesterday to bolster security amid fears the opening of parliament could trigger further riots in the impoverished South Pacific island nation.

Solomon Islands police commissioner Shane Castles said security forces would be prepared for any incidents across the capital Honiara when parliament sits on Monday.