

Donors press Lankan parties to resume talks

UN calls for end to killings

AFP, Oslo/Colombo

Sri Lanka's international donors meeting in Oslo yesterday pressed both rebels and the Sri Lankan government to return to negotiations to shore up the country's faltering ceasefire.

"We call upon both sides to put a stop to the violence. On this basis we call upon the two parties to come to the negotiating table as soon as possible," Norwegian Minister for International Development and chief mediator Erik Solheim said at a press conference held after the meeting.

Solheim said the ceasefire, signed in February 2002, was still viable.

"It is true that there has been a number of violations to the ceasefire, all of them regrettable (...)

but still it is far short of full-scale war," Solheim said.

At least 100 people have been killed in the last two weeks in attacks blamed on the separatist Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and in retaliatory strikes carried out by the Sri Lankan army.

On Tuesday, a Tamil woman posing as an expectant mother gained entry to the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo's Army Hospital and blew herself up, severely wounding the army chief and killing 10 others.

The government retaliated by launching air strikes on suspected Tamil Tiger rebel positions, causing 15 casualties and displacing thousands of civilians in northeastern Sri Lanka.

"We are all deeply concerned with the recent escalation of violence. We

call upon both sides to put a stop to the violence," Solheim said.

"There is no military solution to this conflict," he stressed.

In Sri Lanka, an LTTE political chief said the situation on the island was approaching all-out war.

"The situation is like a war. People are being killed by bombs and artillery fire. You can't say there's peace in Sri Lanka anymore," S. Eilian said.

Talks to consolidate the truce between Colombo and the rebels took place in Geneva in February but were suspended last week when the LTTE said it planned to pull out of the next round of negotiations, slated for the end of April.

"We urge the parties to come to Geneva, that in itself will have a stabilising effect," Solheim said.

He said he hoped this would

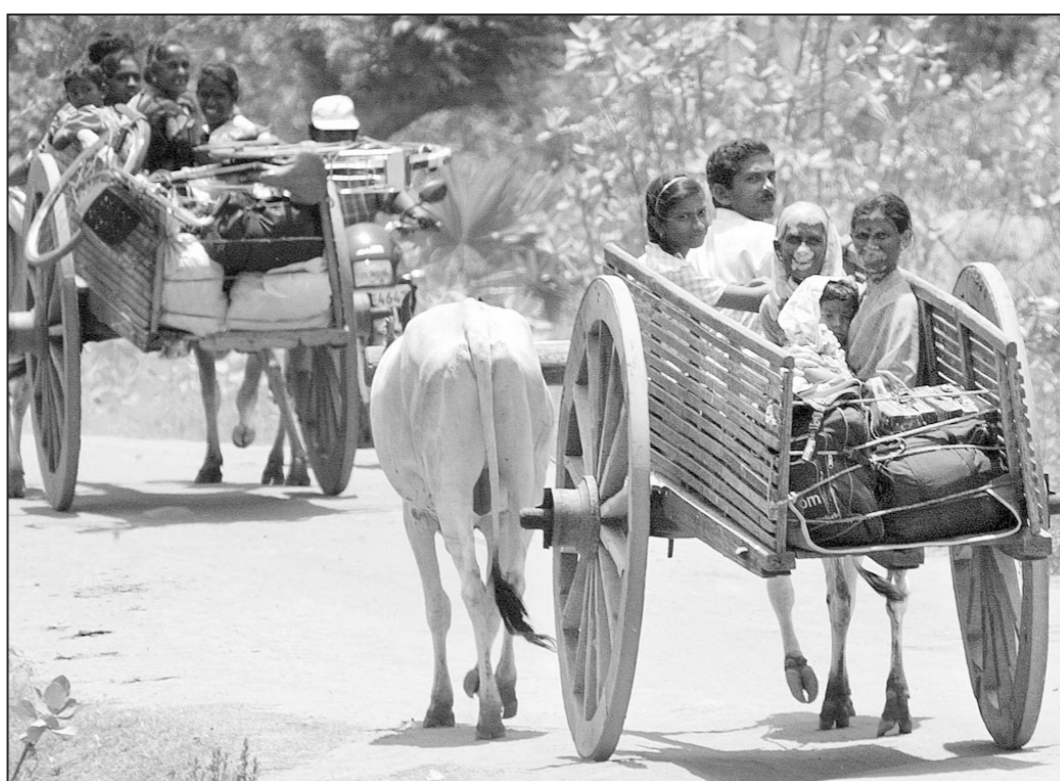
happen "in a short period of time."

The donors agreed to meet again in Tokyo at the end of May or in June to assess progress.

Meanwhile, the United Nations yesterday urged both the Sri Lanka government and rebel Tamil Tigers to quickly end the political killings that have led to an upsurge in violence.

"The dangerous escalation of the conflict in recent days is a direct consequence of killings being allowed to run unchecked," said Philip Alston, UN's special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.

He told the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to take urgent measures to end "political killings" and to protect human rights.



Displaced Tamil people return home at a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-controlled area in Sampur, near Trincomalee, northeastern Sri Lanka yesterday. Showing photographs of disfigured corpses lying in rubble, a Tamil Tiger political officer said government strikes this week had killed 15 people and displaced almost 18,000.

US seals military base deal with Bulgaria

REUTERS, Sofia

The United States signed an agreement yesterday to establish three military bases in Bulgaria as it shifts troops from old Cold War positions to smaller installations closer to the Middle East and Africa.

Under the deal, the US will deploy 2,500 soldiers on short rotations to Bulgaria as it draws down tens of thousands of troops from Cold War bases in Europe and Asia.

"The agreement indeed will enhance our cooperation, allowing the shared use of Bulgarian training facilities and strengthening our ability to operate militarily," said US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice after a signing ceremony on the sidelines of a meeting of Nato foreign ministers in Sofia.

Bulgaria, an ex-communist country of 7.7 million, has been eager to repay Washington for supporting its 2004 Nato membership. It has backed the US in Iraq despite widespread public opposition to the war.



Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (R) and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (L) arrive for the second day of the informal meeting of Nato foreign ministers in Sofia yesterday.

Russia hopes IAEA report will unite UN on Iran crisis

AFP, Sofia

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said yesterday he hoped a crunch IAEA report will help the international community agree a common position to defuse the Iran nuclear crisis.

He was speaking as the UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) prepared to release a report at the end of a 30-day deadline for Tehran to comply with UN demands to suspend uranium enrichment.

"We hope that will facilitate a common position to be adopted by the international community which will enable us together to prevent any threat of proliferation," he said after talks with his NATO counterparts in Sofia.

Such an agreement should also ensure "that the rights of all honest members of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) are observed and rights to the peaceful use of atomic energy are also

respected," he said.

The Russian minister also underlined the need for IAEA inspectors to be allowed continued access to Iranian nuclear sites, which the United States notably believes are being used as a cover to develop nuclear weapons.

"Russia continues to be concerned to enable the IAEA to continue its efforts in Iran. Only if professional inspectors can continue to work can we ensure that the NPT is complied with in respect of nuclear weapons," he said.

Lavrov said all sides should closely study the IAEA report - which will be presented to the IAEA board of governors and the UN Security Council - and closely consult on the next moves in the crisis.

"We are permanently in search of ways of achieving those ends. We are keen for increasing contacts between the EU-3, the Russian Federation, the Americans and the Chinese," he said.

Musharraf says he's not US 'poodle'

REUTERS, London

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has rejected accusations he is a Western "poodle", saying his fight against Islamic militants is for his country's benefit, not for the United States or Britain.

"I am nobody's poodle," he said in an interview with Britain's Guardian newspaper on Friday. "I have enough strength of my own to lead."

"When you talk about fighting terrorism or extremism, I am not doing that for the US or Britain, I am doing it for Pakistan."

Musharraf, an important ally in the US-led war on terrorism, has faced repeated opposition protests about his relationship with US President George W. Bush.

A 10,000-strong crowd gathered in the central Punjab region last month to hear opposition leader Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman call a visit by Bush an attempt at "enslaving the Pakistani nation

and rewarding General Musharraf for his patriotism to America".

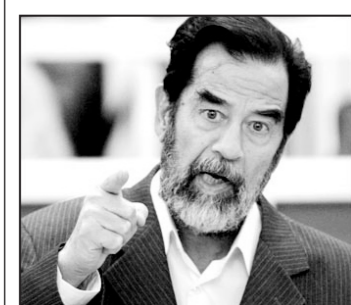
Newspapers have carried critical pieces on US foreign policy in Pakistan and one has a "Mush & Bush" column lampooning the two leaders' relationship.

Asked by the Guardian if he had the "teeth" to bite back at his Western allies, Musharraf said: "Yes sir, I personally do - a lot of teeth. Sometimes the teeth do not have to be shown. Pragmatism is required in international relations."

Pakistan has captured or killed hundreds of al-Qaeda members since Musharraf joined a US-led war on terrorism after the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

Anger has been building in Pakistan over repeated US attacks in the country, including an airstrike in January, which killed 18 civilians in the remote Bajaur region.

Musharraf told the Guardian: "The strike was an infringement of our sovereignty and I condemned it."



Saddam turns 69 behind bars

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's ousted leader Saddam Hussein, being tried on charges of crimes against humanity, spent his third birthday in a row behind bars as he turned 69 yesterday.

His birthday attracted little of the frenzy the date once engendered when it was celebrated as a national holiday during his 24 years of strong-armed rule from 1979 to 2003.

US officials were tight-lipped about what Saddam was up to on his birthday.

"We don't have much interest in providing any colour to Saddam's life," a US military spokesman told AFP.

Even in his hometown of Tikrit, Saddam's birthday passed unnoticed, although a few dozen posters bearing his portrait were seen in the majority Sunni city of Samarra, north of Baghdad.

Senior Maoist comes out in public in Nepal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

For the past 10 years, Nepal's Maoist rebels have been fighting to overthrow the monarchy from countryside bases. On Friday, in a sign of changing times, one of their leaders spoke at a rally in Kathmandu.

Lekha Nath Neupane, head of the Maoist students wing, began and ended his speech in the centre of the capital with a clenched fist salute to rapturous applause from thousands of people.

"Our hands are not only used for making a fist," he said in the Nepali language. "We are engaged in a revolution for peace but if necessary we can pick up guns and bombs again."

More than 13,000 people have died in the Maoist insurgency, but the guerrillas announced a three-month ceasefire on Thursday in hopes that the reconvened parliament will call elections to a special assembly, which will write a new

constitution.

King Gyanendra gave up his absolute powers earlier this week after almost 20 days of crippling protests by hundreds of thousands of his people. He has now invited seven mainstream political parties to form a government and ordered a revival of the parliament he dissolved four years ago.

Neupane, a trim youthful man with unruly hair and glasses, is on police wanted lists and could have been arrested. "I am taking a risk," he told Reuters after his speech to the crowd.

But many in the audience had come to hear him, even if they were not Maoist supporters. "I want to hear what the Maoists have to say," said Debraj Gautam, a student.

"We want peace in the country, that's why I am here."

But anti-monarchy sentiment was high, and many parroted the Maoists' demand for a republic.

"He is a criminal, he is not fit to be

king," another student, who did not give his name, said of Gyanendra. "There is no protection for him."

Neupane told Reuters the Maoists had two main demands - that parliament, which was holding its first session less than 1 km away, call elections to a constituent assembly, and that Nepal become a democratic republic.

If these demands were not met, they would take up guns again.

"The reason for the three-month ceasefire is that we want to get on the road to achieve peace, prosperity and independence for the Nepali people," Neupane said. "If the road doesn't reach its destination, we will have no alternative."

He said that about 100,000 Maoists had taken part in the street protests to force the king to back down. "Many of our supporters were wounded by police. The 20-day campaign was built on the strength of our 10-year war against the monarch, this is the universal truth."

Thai court suspends third round of voting

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai court yesterday suspended a third round of voting in southern Thailand, in a ruling that appeared to cast doubt on the validity of snap polls earlier this month.

The ruling by the Supreme Administrative Court came just hours after a meeting of the chief justices of Thailand's three most powerful courts, who had gathered to consider scrapping the April 2 elections.

"The court halted the by-elections in 14 constituencies in nine provinces on April 29 because the election has been unconstitutionally organized," the court said in its verdict.

The ruling said that voting booths had been improperly arranged in a way that compromised the secrecy of the ballot.

Outgoing Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's party won 56 percent of the vote in the snap elections, which he called in hopes of ending two months of street protests against his rule.

But the opposition boycotted the

polls, undermining Thaksin's victory with a strong protest vote. He announced two days later that he would not become prime minister in the new government.

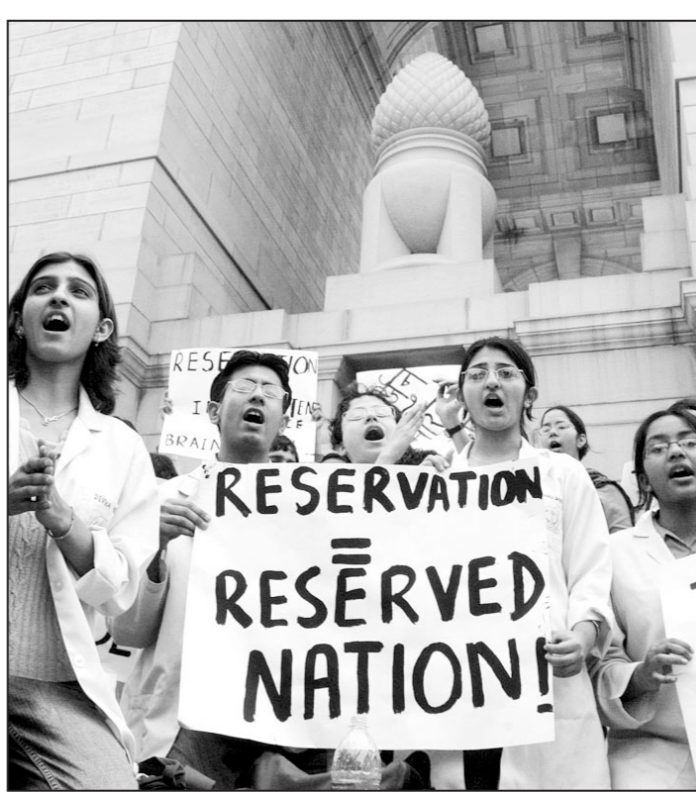
The political crisis continued, however, as the boycott left 40 of parliament's 500 seats empty, and a new round of voting last weekend failed to fill them.

A third round had been scheduled for Saturday to fill the remaining 14 seats, but the court put those polls on hold.

The decision came in response to complaints filed by individuals who said that other people would be able to see how they marked their ballots.

Voting booths had been arranged in the same way throughout the whole electoral process. The court's ruling therefore appeared to cast doubt on the validity of the original balloting as well.

The ruling did not address the question of whether parliament would be able to open. Thai law requires all 500 seats to be filled before parliament can convene, which is supposed to happen by May 2.



Indian medical students shout anti-government slogans during a protest against a government's recommendation to reserve up to 50 per cent seats in premier educational institutions - medical, engineering and management - and in government jobs for economic and social backward students in New Delhi yesterday.



Priyanka is Sonia's polls agent

PTI, Rae Bareilly

Congress President Sonia Gandhi has appointed her daughter Priyanka Vadra as her election agent for the May 8 Lok Sabha by election, a battle in which Congress bigwigs have kept away from campaigning.

The appointment of Priyanka, who was her election agent even in the 2004 general elections, conforms to the practice of the Gandhi family keeping the campaign generally restricted to local Congress leaders and the family.

Karzai asks Taliban to lay down arms, join Afghan government

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, blaming violence in his country on foreign elements, yesterday issued a fresh call to Taliban militants to lay down their arms and join his government.

Karzai, speaking at a ceremony commemorating Afghanistan's victory against the Soviet-backed communist regime in 1992, said those engaged in insurgency against his government were "unknowingly" fighting their people on orders of foreign elements. He did not elaborate.

"On this great day of our nation's victory, I call on our those brothers... who are unknowingly causing the destruction of their country on the guidance of the enemy, to return to their homes," Karzai said.

Anti-Soviet warriors known as Mujahedin seized power in Kabul after the regime of communist leader

Najibullah collapsed in 1992. However, a bloody power struggle erupted between rival Mujahedin factions in which more than 50,000 people, mostly civilians, were killed. The fighting reduced much of the capital to ruins.

The civil war ended when the Taliban militia took over much of Afghanistan in 1996.

Karzai blamed the factional fighting on a "hidden foreign invasion."

"Afghanistan's sacrifices took the holy war to victory. But unfortunately the glory of the victory did not last long and the fighting erupted on foreign interference," he said.

"The country was secretly invaded and it became the nest of terrorism," he added.

The ceremony, attended by senior government officials, included a military parade.

Public reaction to the celebrations was mixed.

Eight killed in DR Congo air crash

AFP, Kinshasa

Eight people were killed when a plane operated by a small Congolese carrier crashed on landing in the town of Amisi, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), authorities said yesterday.

"There were no survivors. The plane slammed into the runway, the wings smashed and the entire aircraft caught fire," the governor of the Maniema region, Koloso Sumali, told AFP after Thursday's accident.

The plane was carrying four passengers, all Congolese nationals, and four crew - two of whom were Congolese and two South African - according to an official from the Peace Airlines Company (PAC), which operated the flight.

The dual-engine aircraft had left the town of Goma in the eastern province of Nord-Kivu at around 0730 GMT on Thursday, crashing less than an hour later in Amisi, some 400km to the west.

US, Pakistan launch strategic dialogue

But differ on Iran

REUTERS, Washington

The United States and Pakistan launched a new strategic dialogue on Thursday that sought to emphasise partnership on an array of issues but quickly demonstrated divisions over Iran, one of Washington's top foreign policy priorities.

While the US side stressed the need for punitive action against Iran for defying the UN Security Council with its nuclear activities, the Pakistani side declined to endorse sanctions and stressed Iran's importance as a neighbour.

They took place a day before Mohamed ElBaradei, chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency, is expected to tell the UN Security Council and the agency's board that Iran has not stopped purifying uranium or fully answered IAEA queries from a month ago.

Burns said Washington hoped for Pakistan's support in the Iran crisis. Although he did not specify what Islamabad should do, Burns said Iran had defied UN demands,

which required a "significant international response."

Asked if Pakistan backed sanctions on Iran, Khan said his country was not on the Security Council and so "will not be engaged in any discussion" on the issue.

Pakistan is concerned about Iran but opposes the use of force to keep it from developing nuclear weapons and does not support efforts to change Iran's government, Khan said.

"We want a friendly Iran. Iran is a very important neighbour of Pakistan," Khan said.

The issue is sensitive for Pakistan, which like its South Asian rival, India, developed nuclear weapons in defiance of international opinion.

Iran says its nuclear activity aims solely to generate electricity. The United States says it is a clandestine effort to make atomic bombs.



Wedding bells for Prince William?

REUTERS, London

Tabloid newspapers are speculating that Britain's Prince William, 23, is about to propose to his girlfriend Kate Middleton on holiday in the Caribbean.

The elder son of heir to the throne Britain's Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana is flying to the island of Mustique on Friday to join the 24-year-old Middleton, the Evening Standard reported on Friday.

The London newspaper, which broke the news of Camilla Parker Bowles' engagement to Britain's Prince Charles, said William sought advice on the best place to hide away from prying paparazzilenses.