

Greenpeace up in arms against entry of new toxic ship to India

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Greenpeace activists are up in arms against the arrival of luxury passenger ship "SS Norway" at an Indian ship-breaking yard for scrapping, after Bangladesh had rejected the cruise liner's entry into its territory.

SS Norway, popularly known as "Blue Lady", is reported to have set sail from Malaysia on Friday last and is headed towards Alang shipyard in the western state of Gujarat.

Bangladesh had barred the entry of the 11-storey passenger ship into its waters in February this year before it was fully decontaminated. The ship had been sold to a Bangladeshi ship-breaker for 7.5 million dollars for scrapping in that country.

Greenpeace India official Ramapati Kumar said the cruise liner contains 900 tonnes of toxic asbestos in its frame, double the asbestos content in the decommissioned French warship Le Clemenceau, which was prevented entry into the Alang ship-breaking yard recently following the directive of the Indian Supreme Court.



Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala (R) shakes hand with United Nations (UN) Special Adviser to the Under Secretary General for Political Affairs, Tamrat Samuel (L) after talks in Kathmandu yesterday. Tarmat arrived in the city on May 7 for a week-long visit as a continued consultations the UN has maintained to encourage a peaceful resolution of the country's armed conflict and political instability.

LTTE seeks Japan's help to halt 'doom'

State of emergency extended

AFP, Kilinochchi

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels Tuesday sought foreign help to halt alleged military attacks against them and warned that the island could face "doom" if they decided to retaliate.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) appealed to Japanese envoy Yasushi Akashi to persuade the Sri Lankan government to halt the spiralling violence. The government has similarly called on the LTTE to halt violence that threatens a ceasefire in place since 2002.

The LTTE's political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan said in a statement that the international community could bring an end to "this warlike attack by the Sri Lanka armed forces and create a more conducive environment for peace talks."

Thamilselvan added that he had informed the Japanese envoy that the Tamil people by these attacks and repression of their normal life

will be forced to take a decision that will bring doom to Sri Lanka," the LTTE statement said.

The statement issued after closed-door talks with Akashi in rebel-held northern territory said the international community must understand the background to the ongoing fighting, which the LTTE blames on government support for a breakaway rebel faction.

Even as the meeting took place in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi, 330km north of here, security forces in Jaffna, further north found a large haul of bombs and ammunition.

Residents in Jaffna also staged a one-day strike to protest against the killing last week of seven Tamil men, police said.

The military claimed the seven were Tamil Tiger rebels shot dead by security forces, but the Tigers maintained they were civilians on their way to a birthday party.

Jaffna's banks and offices closed and public transport stopped running as part of the stoppage, police

said.

A curfew imposed Sunday in Jaffna was lifted Monday afternoon, the military said while the main entry and exit points to northern rebel-held territory, closed on Sunday, re-opened Tuesday.

Meanwhile, parliament Tuesday extended by a further month a state of emergency, which gives sweeping powers to security forces to detain suspects, officials said.

The tough laws were introduced after Tiger rebels were blamed for the August assassination of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar.

Akashi, who helped raise 4.5 billion dollars in aid to support the island's Norwegian-backed peace process in June 2003, held talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse on Monday, officials said.

The government said in a statement it was keen to resume negotiations with the LTTE and end the violence.

"It is imperative that it is through negotiations that the cycle of vio-

lence, which is spiralling dangerously out of control, could be brought to a halt," it said.

It urged the Tigers to return to ceasefire talks last held in Switzerland in February. The two parties agreed to meet again on April 19, but the Tigers declined.

Despite a truce signed in 2002, more than 200 people, mostly civilians, have died over the past month in tit-for-tat attacks by government and rebel forces.

Talks on a permanent settlement have stagnated since April 2003 after six rounds of face-to-face discussions.

In the most serious attack since the truce began, a female suicide bomber killed 10 and wounded 30 others including army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka at army headquarters in Colombo on April 25.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in the separatist conflict since 1972.

Lanka pushes India to help resume talks

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Sri Lanka on Monday sought India's assistance to revive the stalled peace process in the island nation after Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and an array of other Indian political leaders.

Samaraweera told the prime minister during a meeting Monday evening that Sri Lankan government was committed to maintaining the truce with Tamil Tiger rebels and hold talks with Norwegian facilitator, sources said.

He apprised Singh of the current situation in the island nation after a recent round of escalated violence following the attack on Sri Lankan army chief and retaliatory strikes by Lankan armed forces on rebel positions.

The visiting Lanka foreign minister pushed India to play a greater

role in putting pressure on LTTE to resume peace talks.

An Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman said the prime minister "expressed India's interest in the continued stability and prosperity in Sri Lanka. India hoped that the parties in Sri Lanka would resume talks at the earliest."

Samaraweera also met Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee and the issue of defence cooperation between the two countries is understood to have figured out prominently. He also had talks with Minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma, senior BJP leader Jaswant Singh and CPI (M) general secretary Prakash Karat.

Karat is understood to have conveyed to the Lankan minister that a peaceful solution to the problem could be found with adequate devolution of powers in a federal set-up within the framework of a united Sri Lanka.

Indian supercop takes charge of Chhattisgarh

5 Maoists killed

AFP, Raipur

Troops killed five Maoist guerrillas in India's central state of Chhattisgarh as a celebrated anti-insurgency expert took charge of a crackdown in the rebels' bastion, officials said yesterday.

State police chief O.P. Rathore said the rebels were killed in two separate overnight encounters by commandos and federal troops, now placed under the command of Kanwar Pal Singh Gill.

Two most-wanted guerrillas were also arrested following the firefights in the Maoist stronghold of Dantewada district, 500km from the state capital Raipur, he added.

Maoist rebels virtually run parallel administrations in 10 of the state's 16 impoverished districts and enjoy widespread support in their campaign for a better deal for landless farmers.

Nepal to name team for talks with rebels

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government will this week name a team to begin peace talks with Maoist rebels, a senior government official said yesterday.

"The Maoists have sent us a 22-point code of conduct for talks and most of the points are positive," the senior official, a member of the newly named cabinet, told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The government will "form a committee which will not be more than seven people by the end of this week," the official said.

The interim multi-party government was appointed late last month after weeks of mass protests crippled Nepal and forced King Gyanendra to hand back power to parliament.

Late last week the government began clearing out all the king's men, recalling ambassadors and accepting the resignation of dozens of royally appointed officials.

The reversals of royal rule continued Tuesday with at least six

ordinances brought into effect during Gyanendra's rule annulled, a cabinet member said.

"Ordinances including the one which was intended to curtail press freedom and another about non-government organizations have been scrapped," Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat told AFP after a cabinet meeting Tuesday night.

The multi-party government has matched a ceasefire declared by the rebel Maoists and agreed to a key rebel demand -- for an election to form a body to redraft the constitution and decide the future of the monarchy.

Once enemies, the rebels and seven mainstream political parties formed a loose alliance to restore democracy in late 2005 and have both claimed responsibility for the mass movement that forced Gyanendra's climbdown.

At least 12,500 people have been killed since the Maoists began their "people's war" in 1996 to install a communist republic.



A delegation of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) headed by PPP Vice Chairman Mukhdum Amin Fahim (2L) talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) during a meeting at Singh's residence in New Delhi yesterday. The PPP delegation is in India on a two-day goodwill visit to help improve Indo-Pak relations.

Australian town celebrates miners' rescue

AP, Beaconsfield

Bells pealed and sirens wailed as this tiny mining town erupted in jubilation yesterday after two miners were rescued from the kennel-sized cage where they had been trapped more than a half mile underground for two weeks.

But the joy quickly turned to grief as mourners gathered to bury a miner who died in the same rock collapse that trapped his co-workers.

"There's not many things in life that take us through so many emotions at the same time," said Graham Mulligan, spokesman for a Christian motorcycle club which escorted Larry Knight's coffin from the church to a nearby cemetery.

"This whole ordeal has taken us from horror to shock, grief, sadness, joy and happiness and then back to sadness again."

Brant Webb, 37, and Todd Russell, 34, punched the air as they walked out of the Beaconsfield Gold Mine before dawn Tuesday, freed by rescue crews drilling round-the-clock. Hundreds of well-wishers gathered at the mine gates erupted in cheers.



Australian miner Todd Russell (L) is comforted by his wife Caroline following the funeral of miner Larry Knight just hours after Russell and fellow miner Brant Webb, who were trapped deep underground for two weeks, were rescued yesterday. The rescue was hailed as "great escape" from the Beaconsfield Gold Mine in the Australian island state of Tasmania.

NUCLEAR ROW WITH WEST Iran praises China, Russia's 'realism'

AFP, Athens

Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani yesterday praised Russia and China for taking a "realistic" approach after talks between major powers failed to resolve differences over Tehran's nuclear programme.

"We feel that certain countries have been acting in a more realistic manner" over the nuclear issue, Larjani, referring to the two UN powers, said following talks here with Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis.

"Other countries are trying to create headaches. I come from a region where a lot of problems have been created by the United States," he said.

"Our advice to the European Union is not to follow the policy of a country which creates problems for this region. The EU can play a constructive role."

Larjani, who is also Iran's national security chief, was speaking ahead of a meeting in New York of the foreign ministers of the UN Security Council permanent members, Germany and the European Union to try to find a common strat-

egy to force Iran to halt sensitive nuclear fuel work.

A US official said early Tuesday that the ministers had failed to reach an agreement on a possible UN resolution on the issue after a round of talks held late Monday.

Larjani, in a visit to Turkey on Monday, urged world powers to use the UN atomic watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and not the UN Security Council, to resolve the nuclear standoff.

Unlike the Security Council, the IAEA does not have enforcement powers and cannot impose sanctions on the Islamic republic.

With the IAEA holding on to Iran's nuclear dossier, Tehran would have more time to pursue talks for a diplomatic resolution of the dispute, but Western diplomats widely see Iran's request as stalling tactics.

Iran has repeatedly maintained that its nuclear programme is purely peaceful, but the West has remained sceptical, believing that it masks a drive for nuclear weapons.

Blaine fails to set underwater record

AP, New York

David Blaine emerged weak and wrinkly from a week spent submerged within an 8-foot snow globe-like tank but without a world record for holding his breath.

Rescue divers jumped into the tank Monday and hauled up the stunt artist as he struggled to break the record of 8 minutes, 58 seconds. Blaine held his breath for 7:08, but after spending some 177 hours underwater.

After being given oxygen, Blaine, 33, addressed the large crowd that had gathered around the tank on the plaza of Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts.

"I am humbled so much by the support of everyone from New York City and from all over the world," Blaine said. "This was a very difficult week, but you all made it fly by with your strong support and your energy."

Abbas appeals for end to foreign aid freeze

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas urged Middle East peace brokers yesterday to end a foreign aid freeze on the Hamas-led government, warning of deeper instability ahead in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Nine people were wounded in a second day of gun battles in the Gaza Strip between Hamas, which rejects Abbas's vision of a negotiated peace with Israel, and his Fatah faction.

The internal violence is fuelled by a power struggle between Abbas and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas over control of security forces following the January 25 election won by the Islamic militant group and has raised fears of civil war.

In a letter to the "Quartet" of peace brokers that planned to meet later in the day in New York, Abbas

appealed for funds to pay salaries, overdue since March, to 165,000 workers employed by the Palestinian Authority.

"A quarter of the Palestinians rely on the public sector salaries, and failure to pay these salaries could jeopardize the very foundation of the institutions of the Palestinian Authority and the future Palestinian state," Abbas wrote in the letter obtained by Reuters.

"Besides the potential humanitarian crisis resulting from the general deterioration of the economic situation, inability to pay salaries might have deep destabilizing political and security implications," Abbas said.

Local, regional and international banks, fearful of facing US anti-terrorism sanctions and lawsuits, have refused to deal with the Authority, creating a liquidity crisis.

Militancy must stop for troop withdrawal Says India

AFP, Jammu

India's defence minister yesterday rejected a call by Pakistan for troop cuts in Kashmir to push forward a slow-moving peace process, saying attacks by Muslim separatists must stop first.

"We will not reduce troop strength in Jammu and Kashmir," Pranab Mukherjee said in Jammu, the Himalayan state's winter capital. "A reduction of troops depends on the security scenario."

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has urged India to reduce troop numbers in the Kashmir towns of Srinagar, Baramulla and Sopore to speed up peace talks between the two nations that began in January 2004.

Each country holds part of Kashmir but claims it in full.

Mukherjee made the comments after visiting the mountainous districts

of Doda and Udhampur in the south where 35 Hindus, mostly shepherds, were massacred on May 1 by suspected Muslim militants.

Some 60,000 frontline troops are posted along Indian Kashmir's ceasefire border with Pakistani Kashmir while hundreds of thousands of paramilitary troops and police personnel are deployed in the Muslim-majority region.

Mukherjee warned he would send in more troops if attacks continued in Kashmir, where at least 44,000 people have died since an Islamic separatist revolt began in 1989.

"If the graph of militancy-related violence goes up (then) we may be forced to enhance the numerical presence of troops," he said, accusing Pakistan of renegeing on its pledge last year to halt militant activity on its soil.