

Over 1,000 killed in April sectarian violence in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

At least 1,091 people were killed in Baghdad alone last month in ongoing sectarian violence, President Jalal Talabani said in a statement Wednesday.

"We received a report from the morgue about the deaths in Baghdad that 1,091 people were killed between April 1 and 30," Talabani was quoted as saying in a statement issued by his office.

He said "we are shocked and angry at the daily reports of unidentified bodies being discovered and of people killed on the basis of their identity."

Iraq has been engulfed in a tit-for-tat sectarian violence since the bombing of a revered Shia shrine in the northern town of Samarra on February 22.

Thousands of bodies have been discovered across Iraq, mostly of Sunni Arabs, killed in Shia reprisals after the Samarra bombing.

The violence has raged amid the power vacuum as nearly five months after the December elections for the country's first permanent post-Saddam era parliament, Iraq is still without a government.

Choose war or peace

Japanese envoy to Lankan parties

AFP, Colombo

A top Japanese envoy yesterday warned that the international community cannot restore Sri Lanka's faltering ceasefire and urged the government and Tamil rebels to decide for themselves on war or peace.

Peace emissary Yasushi Akashi ended his four-day visit calling on both Colombo and the Tiger rebels to scale down the latest violence, which he described as the worst since his appointment in late 2002.

"It is very clear the ownership of the peace process belongs entirely to the government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)," he told reporters.

He said the island's key foreign backers -- Japan, the US, the European Union and Norway -- will meet in Tokyo later this month to review their engagement in the peace process in the light of "slow progress".

"We in the international community play a supportive role in this process. Unfortunately too much is expected of us. Sometimes we are unduly criticised for doing too much or too little."

Akashi said both sides must work towards reducing violence which has claimed more than 200 lives over the past month and threatened a ceasefire in place since 2002.

"There is a deep anxiety over the escalating violence," he said.

Government spokesman Keeheliya Rambukwella denied security forces were responsible for stepping up violence and blamed the Tigers.

"When the international community blames both sides, unfortunately they don't say what percentage of blame goes to the government," Rambukwella said. "If at all, our percentage is very small."

Chief peace negotiator Nimal Siripala de Silva told parliament President Mahinda Rajapakse condemned a spate of killings which

the Tigers have largely attributed to paramilitary units backed by security forces.

De Silva denied any government involvement in the killings and said security forces have been ordered to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Akashi met Rajapakse as well as the head of the LTTE's political wing S.P. Thamilselvan to discuss attempts to salvage the Norwegian-backed and internationally supported peace bid.

Akashi said India, which banned the LTTE after its suspected involvement in the 1991 assassination of former premier Rajiv Gandhi, will be invited to Tokyo to join the meeting.

"There will be soul-searching... where we are with the peace process. Where we should be going. Why there is not enough progress in the peace process."

Akashi condemned the April 25 suicide bombing targeting army chief Sarath Fonseka, who survived, and said the Tigers must

heed the concerns of the international community about such attacks.

He stressed the parties must decide to push on with the peace process or abandon it and the international community can only play a "subsidiary role."

"We cannot substitute for the parties in conflict," he said.

The LTTE told the Japanese envoy to press the government to halt alleged military attacks against them and said the island could face "doom" if they retaliated. The government similarly called on the LTTE to halt violence.

Talks on a permanent settlement have stagnated since April 2003 after six rounds of face-to-face discussions. More than 60,000 people have died in the separatist conflict since 1972.



Sri Lanka's main Muslim party leader Rauf Hakeem (L) talks with Japan's special peace envoy to Sri Lanka Yasushi Akashi (R) yesterday in Colombo at the end of a four-day visit to the embattled island. Akashi warned that the international community cannot restore Sri Lanka's faltering ceasefire and urged the government and Tamil rebels to decide for themselves on war or peace.

New Nepal govt eases media curbs

Some royal decrees scrapped

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's new multi-party cabinet scrapped several royal decrees on Tuesday, including easing media curbs that were imposed by King Gyanendra after he sacked the government and seized absolute power last year.

The king, who last month bowed to weeks of mass protests and handed power back to political parties, had curbed civil rights and media freedom after he grabbed power, accusing political parties of failing to quell a bloody Maoist revolt.

Journalists were given longer prison terms for criticising the king and a ten-fold increase in fines for defamation, steps that were condemned by international media watchdogs.

The royalist government had also restricted independent radio stations from broadcasting news, giving a monopoly to state radio bulletins.

"We have scrapped some objectionable ordinances," Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

He did not give details but media reports said they included decrees restricting press freedom and imposing controls on non-governmental organisations.

The king handed power back to political parties after weeks of protests in which at least 17 people were killed and thousands wounded.

The new government has reversed some royal appointments and ordered ambassadors to 10 countries to return home.

Earlier on Tuesday, a United Nations official met Nepal's new Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and offered to help with the Himalayan kingdom's efforts to end the decade-old Maoist insurgency in which thousands have died.

Mobile phone saves 3 drifting in sea for 22 days

AFP, Sydney

Two men and a teenager have been rescued after 22 days adrift in a dinghy, eating raw squid and drinking rainwater to survive in the seas off northern Australia, officials said yesterday.

The trio -- a father, his son and a nephew -- were winched to safety by an Australian rescue helicopter late Tuesday after managing to send mobile phone text messages to relatives with their approximate location, police said.

It was the second extraordinary rescue in Australia on Tuesday following the safe release early in the day of miners Brant Webb and Todd Russell who were trapped almost a kilometre underground at a Tasmanian gold mine for two weeks.

West's nuke concern a 'big lie', says Iran

REUTERS, Jakarta

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad accused Western nations yesterday of hypocrisy and said their expressions of concern over nuclear programmes were a "big lie."

"I'll tell you, they are not concerned with nuclear programmes ... They are themselves engaged in nuclear activities and they are expanding day by day. They test new brands of weapons of mass destruction every day," he told a news conference during a visit to fellow Muslim nation Indonesia.

"Big powers pretend (they) are concerned, but it's a big lie," he said. Ahmadinejad said Iranian people resented "incorrect decisions" taken by the international community.

"The Iranian people are sufficiently capable to defend (their) own rights," he added.

Iran is under pressure to rein in a nuclear programme it says is for peaceful purposes but some countries fear it is really aimed at develop-

ing weapons.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, has offered to help mediate on the issue, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his spokesman said after Yudhoyono met Ahmadinejad.

"We can cooperate well in reducing the tension and move toward continuing talks and negotiations," Yudhoyono told reporters.

Spokesman Dino Patti Djalal said "Iran was very receptive" to Indonesia's offer to help mediate.

"We hope it will happen. We need to breathe new life into negotiations," he said.

Speaking of a letter sent to President Bush, which Washington shrugged off as an attempt to divert attention from the nuclear issue, Ahmadinejad said sending it was the right decision and that he had no comment on the US reaction.

Israel gives Hamas talks deadline

AP, Jerusalem

Israel will give the Palestinians until the end of the year to prove they are willing to negotiate a final peace deal, and will unilaterally set its final borders by 2008 if they don't, Israel's justice minister said yesterday.

The statement by Justice Minister Haim Ramon, a close associate of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's, was the first by an Israeli official to set a deadline for the Hamas-led Palestinian government to disarm and recognise the Jewish state.

The Palestinians' moderate president, Mahmoud Abbas, of the rival Fatah party, has tried to persuade Israel to bypass Hamas and resume peace negotiations with him, but Olmert has made it clear that he is not prepared to negotiate with Abbas if Hamas doesn't change

its violent ways.

Hamas thus far has refused to renounce violence and recognise Israel's right to exist, despite intense international pressure and the cutoff of hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid and Israeli transfer payments.

"Through the end of this year, 2006, there will be honest attempts to talk to the other side," Ramon told Israel's Army Radio.

"If it becomes clear by the end of the year that we really have no partner, and the international community is also convinced of this, then we will take our fate into our own hands and not leave our fate in the hands of our enemies," he added.

Olmert, who was a major force behind Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip last year, has said he intends to pull Israeli settlers out of heavily populated Palestinian areas

in the West Bank while fortifying major settlement blocs and holding on to the West Bank's Jordan River Valley.

His original timetable had called for a pullback by 2010, but a top aide said last month that Israel planned to conclude the withdrawals by the end of President Bush's second term in office at the end of 2008.

Asked how long the withdrawal would take, Ramon judged that it would be possible to complete the process in 18 to 24 months.

"I would like to believe that by the end of 2008 we will be deployed on a line that will symbolise the final borders of the state of Israel and promise our existence here as a Jewish democratic state," he said.

The borders, he said, "will first and foremost include the settlement blocs and the regions that are necessary for our security."