

Lanka risks high intensity war, warn Tigers

REUTERS, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels accused Sri Lanka's army yesterday of assassinating one of their senior commanders, and said the military was pushing the island towards a "high intensity war".

Col. Ramanan, one of the top Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) commanders in the eastern district of Batticaloa, was killed by sniper fire late on Sunday in what the rebels said was among the most serious violations of a 2002 truce.

The military denies any involvement, instead pointing the finger at a group of former Tigers led by a renegade commander called Col. Karuna, who split with the mainstream rebels in 2004. The Tigers accuse the army of helping the renegade faction.

"The Sri Lankan Army are waging war against the LTTE," S. Puleedevan, head of the Tigers' Peace Secretariat, told Reuters in a telephone interview from the northern rebel stronghold of Kilinochchi. "He was killed by the Sri Lankan army using sniper guns." The Tigers and Nordic truce monitors both now say Sri Lanka is locked in a "low intensity war", although the government disagrees and says it is only retaliating in limited bursts.

"The Sri Lankan army, by killing (our) senior members, are discarding the ceasefire agreement," Puleedevan added. "It is actually pushing a low intensity war towards high intensity war."

Sunday's attack came a month after the Sri Lankan military chief narrowly escaped assassination after a suspected Tiger suicide

bomb attack on army headquarters in Colombo.

The ceasefire is still technically holding, but more than 270 troops and civilians have been killed since early April and the rebels and the military are fighting increasingly frequent skirmishes with mortars and rocket propelled grenades near their forward defence lines in the north and east.

The Tigers have pulled out of peace talks indefinitely, accusing the government of failing to honour a pledge to disarm armed groups -- particularly the Karuna faction -- who they regard as traitors and say are government-backed.

Puleedevan says it is highly unlikely talks, aimed at securing a permanent end to a two decade civil war that killed more than 64,000 people, will resume this year.

"The prospects are very bleak now," he said. "If this type of act continues, it's going to jeopardise the whole process."

The Tigers say an imminent European Union move to outlaw the group as a banned terrorist organisation, as the United States, Britain, Canada and India have already done, would only make things worse.

The ban, which diplomats say has been agreed by the 25-nation bloc in principle, is a diplomatic slap in the face for the Tigers, who have long sought to project themselves as viable leaders of a de facto state they want recognised as a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils.



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan army soldiers patrol in Jaffna yesterday amid war fears. Sri Lanka itself braced for a decision by the European Union to ban the Tamil Tigers in a move the rebels say could scuttle future peace negotiations and push the island back to war.

Montenegro votes for independence

AFP, Podgorica

The tiny Balkan state of Montenegro staked its claim for nationhood yesterday after voting in a historic, closely-fought referendum in favour of full independence.

A narrow majority voted Sunday to split from Serbia, referendum commission officials announced, consigning the last fragments of the former Yugoslavia to history.

The majority of 55.4 percent announced by the commission's head Frantisek Lipka, with 44.6 percent voting against, was only narrowly over the 55 percent threshold for the result to be valid.

Nevertheless, once confirmed and ratified, it would seal independence for this aspiring nation of just 650,000 people wedged between the mountains and the Adriatic Sea and bordered by Albania, Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia.

Germany, China agree Iran should not have nuclear bomb: Merkel

AFP, Beijing

Germany and China agree that Iran should not be allowed to build nuclear weapons, Chancellor Angela Merkel said yesterday after meeting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

"We talked about Iran and both agreed Iran should not have the capability to make nuclear weapons and shouldn't proliferate weapons of mass destruction," Merkel told a joint press conference with Wen.

Merkel met President Hu Jintao later on Monday.

"China and Germany agree that the conflict must be solved on a diplomatic level and Iran must return to the international community," she said after those talks.

German officials had said before Merkel's trip that Germany would like to see China more closely involved in the international efforts to solve the nuclear crisis in Iran.

China, which is a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council, opposes the use of force or sanctions against Iran.

It has sided with Russia to resist US-led efforts to introduce a UN Security Council resolution that would legally bind Tehran to stopping its uranium enrichment work.

China and Russia say such a resolution could heighten tensions and open the door to a military attack on Iran -- an option that the United States is refusing to take off the table.

Germany has been intensely involved in diplomatic efforts to persuade Iran to abandon sensitive nuclear activities, working closely with the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

Together with Britain and France, Germany is preparing a package of trade, technology and security benefits if Tehran stops enriching uranium, a process that creates fuel for power plants but can also form the core of nuclear bombs.

Iran insists its nuclear programme is peaceful.

WHO chief Lee dies suddenly

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced the sudden death yesterday of Director-General Lee Jong-Wook, stunning ministers and senior officials from 192 countries at the opening of the agency's flagship annual assembly.

Lee died in the intensive care unit of Geneva's University Hospital at 7:43 am (0543 GMT) after undergoing emergency surgery Saturday to relieve a blood clot on his brain, the UN agency said in a statement.

The 61-year-old South Korean had suffered a stroke earlier in the day while attending an official engagement, a WHO official said.

Spanish Health Minister Elena Salgado, who was chairing the WHO assembly in Geneva, made the announcement at the very beginning of the week-long meeting Monday.

"I regret to inform you that Dr. Lee Jong-Wook, director-general of the World Health Organisation, died this morning," Salgado said, adding: "For all of us, this is very sad news."

Nepal expands cabinet ahead of Maoist talks

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's new Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala expanded his cabinet yesterday ahead of talks with Maoist rebels to end a decade-old insurgency that has killed thousands of people.

At the same time, a senior Maoist leader said he had "big hopes" for the peace talks, a day after arriving in the capital Kathmandu.

Koirala was named the country's new prime minister last month after King Gyanendra gave in to weeks of pro-democracy protests and ended nearly 15 months of his absolute rule.

He brought in five new ministers and six junior members to his cabinet, raising its strength to 18 including himself, a palace statement said.

It said King Gyanendra had appointed the new ministers on the recommendation of Koirala.

The cabinet expansion paves the way for preliminary peace talks between the government and the

rebels.

No date has been set for the talks, which are expected to lay the groundwork for a meeting between Maoist chief Prachanda and Koirala.

"We have come with the message that we can establish a peaceful and progressive Nepal," senior rebel leader Krishna Bahadur Mahara told independent Nepal FM radio, a day after he arrived in the Nepali capital to head the Maoist team.

"We have come with big hopes this time," said Mahara, who is yet to emerge in public.

The government has chosen Home (Interior) Minister Krishna Prasad Sitala to participate in the talks.

Previous peace talks with the rebels collapsed in 2001 and 2003 over the future of monarchy.

Mahara said the government was not serious then.

"This time the situation is different," he said. "We hope that we don't have to take up arms again."

The 84-year-old Koirala was sworn in last month after at least 17 people were killed and thousands wounded during weeks of protests that forced King Gyanendra to hand power back to political parties.

The popular upsurge led to the setting up of a multi-party government and the country's parliament being reinstated.

The new parliament approved a plan to hold elections for a special assembly to decide the future of monarchy, a key rebel demand.

A veteran politician of the Nepali Congress party, Koirala has kept the key defence and royal palace ministries for himself in the expanded cabinet, which includes members of four of the seven parties that led the protests against the king.

The Maoists, fighting to turn Nepal into a communist state, agreed to talks after the multi-party cabinet matched a unilateral truce they had declared.

Kuwaiti parliament dissolved

Election called for June 29

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait was bracing yesterday for a tough election battle expected to center on the pace of democratic reform and the fight against corruption, after the Gulf state's ruler dissolved parliament and called for fresh polls next month.

Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah stepped in Sunday to defuse a political crisis between the government and opposition MPs over an election bill, amid accusations that the government was deliberately blocking political reform.

Opposition MPs, who blame the government for triggering the crisis, said their main issue in the June 29 parliamentary poll in the oil rich emirate will be election reform and fighting corruption.

"Our main issue in the election campaign will be to call on the next parliament to carry out comprehensive reforms to the electoral system as a prelude to political reform," MP Mussallam al-Barak said.

Veteran opposition MP Ahmad al-

Saadun said that "the government had been hijacked by a small group of corrupt elements who have blocked reforms... The real battle of the Kuwaiti people is confronting the symbols of corruption."

Although the row appeared to have been sparked by the dispute over the number of constituencies in Kuwait -- there are currently 25, but the government offered 10, while the opposition demanded five -- the root cause of the crisis is the pace of reform.

"We have repeatedly said that reducing electoral districts was only a step on the road to reforms and combating corruption," Saadun, a three-time former speaker, told reporters after the dissolution was announced.

Like other opposition MPs, Saadun became highly skeptical of the government's intentions when after submitting its bill, it backed a motion by pro-government MPs to refer it to the constitutional court -- which amounts to delaying the reform indefinitely.

Hurriyat rejects PM's Kashmir roundtable

REUTERS, AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's main separatist alliance yesterday rejected an invitation by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to attend a "roundtable" peace conference in the disputed Himalayan region.

The two-day meeting to be chaired by Singh from Wednesday is the second such effort this year to widen the dialogue process in Kashmir, where tens of thousands of people have been killed in an Islamic revolt against Indian rule since 1989.

The All Parties Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference, an alliance of two dozen political separatist groups, said it would not be a part of the "crowd".

"The Hurriyat considers that the crowd comprising political hypocrites and Ikhwanis (former militants), with no agenda, can hardly produce a result in terms of the permanent settlement of the Kashmir problem," Hurriyat chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq told a news conference.

"Thus it was decided unanimously not to attend."

The Hurriyat decision came a day after eight people, including two

Islamist militants, were killed and 20 wounded when a gunfight broke out at a political rally in the heart of Srinagar.

On Saturday, militants issued a threat to disrupt the conference and asked political separatists to stay away from the meeting.

Prime Minister Singh has said he would go ahead with the talks despite the spectre of violence.

Indian Kashmir's summer capital was under tight security yesterday following deadly attacks by rebels and ahead of peace talks by the prime minister that will not include a key separatist group.

Both local and federal police set up check points across the city and were frisking people and searching cars for explosives.

Two Islamic groups, al Mansurain and Lashkar-e-Toiba, claimed responsibility for Sunday's attack in a telephone call to the local Current News Service.

Muslim rebels opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir have tried to disrupt high-profile events in the past by staging attacks, including car bombings.

Armed clashes erupt near Palestinian parliament

AFP, AP, Gaza City

Four people were wounded in exchanges of gunfire between members of the Palestinian security forces and Hamas followers near the Gaza City branch of the Palestinian parliament, security sources said.

Heavy exchanges of fire ricocheted in the street outside the Legislative Council building, pitting police and preventative security officers against a new paramilitary force deployed by the Hamas-led government, the sources said.

Hamas supporters used rocket-propelled grenades against the security forces, which are dominated by the former ruling Fatah movement loyal to Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas, said a security source on the spot.

A Fatah militant was shot dead in clashes with Hamas gunmen in the southern Gaza town of Abassan earlier Monday in spiralling tension that has illicitly pledged by Abbas and Hamas to avoid a descent into civil war.

Earlier Palestinian police thwarted an attack Sunday on a security commander the second ally of President Mahmoud Abbas

targeted in two days as the rivalry between his moderate Fatah Party and the Hamas militant group threatened to explode.

Abbas called on both sides to do everything possible to avoid violence and said he would open talks with Hamas later this week to end the dangerous power struggle.

"Civil war is the red line that nobody dares cross, no matter which side they are on," Abbas told reporters at the World Economic Forum in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheik.

Abbas met Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni there the first high-level talks between Israelis and Palestinians since Hamas beat Fatah in January parliamentary elections.

Since the Hamas Cabinet took power in March, tensions have risen as Abbas and the militant group vie for power. Abbas was elected separately last year.

In an effort to consolidate his control over the Fatah-dominated security forces, Abbas installed close ally Rashid Abu Shbak as the commander of the three branches that fall under the Hamas-controlled Interior Ministry.



PHOTO: AFP
British Prime Minister Tony Blair (L) shakes hands with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki (R) yesterday in Baghdad. Blair pledged on a surprise visit to Baghdad to work with the new government.