

# Oslo mounts Lankan peace salvage move

## Bomb scare in Colombo, 4 cops killed in mine blast

AFP, Colombo

Four Sri Lankan policemen were killed in a mine blast yesterday as Colombo's financial centre banned cars fearing a bomb attack despite a fresh bid by peace broker Norway to salvage the peace process.

Norway's top peace envoy Erik Solheim, who was to arrive today for talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse, cautioned against high expectations from his latest mission, against the backdrop of a deteriorating security situation.

"The situation in Sri Lanka is complicated, and it is important not to have unrealistic expectations of the meetings," Solheim said in a statement sent ahead of his visit. His deputy Jon Hanssen-Bauer

arrived Wednesday and was due to travel to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi at the weekend to meet with the political wing leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Solheim said the visits were an important part of preparations for a meeting in Tokyo next week of Sri Lanka's key international financial backers, who are to review their support of a faltering peace process.

While Hanssen-Bauer met with Sri Lankan officials Thursday, four policemen were killed in a mine attack blamed on Tamil Tiger rebels in eastern Sri Lanka, the military said.

The victims were on a routine patrol at Kathankudy in Batticaloa district when a Claymore mine exploded.

Two soldiers and a policeman died in a similar blast in the northern district of Vavuniya on Wednesday.

The rebels, facing possible blacklisting by the 25-member European Union, said the island's Tamil minority was preparing for war and nobody could defeat them.

"I can see the people of Tamil Eelam (the separate state the rebels are fighting for) getting ready for the war.

"We know where we should stand -- on the power of our people's support, the guidance of our leader, on the sacrifices we have made for freedom in our own territory," a Tiger leader identified as Colonel Jeyam was quoted as saying by the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website.

Jeyam made the comment at a

memorial ceremony for another senior rebel commander who was gunned down on the weekend. Tigers blamed government forces for the killing of their Batticaloa district deputy commander identified as Colonel Ramanan.

Government military officials denied security forces were involved and said they suspected a breakaway rebel faction may have been responsible.

The rebels have said Ramanan's killing was intended to drag the Tigers into "major war", further raising tension on the island where a four-year-old ceasefire is being undermined by mounting violence.

## 3,000 Afghans flee heavy fighting

AFP, Kandahar

Up to 3,000 villagers caught in the crossfire of heavy battles between Taliban and security forces in southern Afghanistan have fled their homes, the International Organisation of Migration said Thursday.

Most have taken refuge in the main southern city of Kandahar, some arriving destitute and barefoot with their families and a few belongings on trucks, cars and tractors and telling of Taliban death threats on one side and security force shelling and gunfire on the other.

"They are scared, they are terrified," IOM Kandahar programme officer Nasim Karim told AFP.

"If they don't support the Taliban, they are threatened. If they do, then from the other side they are being bombed and shot at," he told AFP. "They have no choice."

## Pakistan okays \$1b deal for Swedish AWACS

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's cabinet approved on Wednesday plans for the purchase of a \$1 billion airborne early warning surveillance system from Swedish firms Saab and Ericsson to boost its air defences.

Pakistan, concerned over nuclear rival India's plan to purchase an airborne early warning system (AWACS), has long been seeking a similar system from Sweden.

"The Federal Cabinet accorded the go-ahead to the Ministry of Defence Production of the proposed purchase of AWACS aircraft from Sweden," said an official statement

## Pak immigrant convicted of NY subway plot

REUTERS, New York

A Pakistani immigrant was convicted on Wednesday of plotting to blow up a New York City subway station in a case that shed light on police investigation tactics since the Sept. 11 attacks.

Shahawar Matin Siraj, 23, faces a maximum life sentence after a Brooklyn federal court jury convicted him of conspiring to place and detonate an explosive on the city's mass transit system, among other charges.

During the five-week trial, Siraj claimed he was entrapped by an overzealous police informant twice his age. Egyptian Osama Eldawoody, 50, who met the younger man in an Islamic bookstore while spying on mosques for the New York police.



PHOTO: AFP  
Surveyor General of India, Major General M. Gopal Rao (R) smiles during talks with additional secretary in Pakistan's Defence Ministry Admiral Ahsan-ul-Haq Chaudhri during a meeting over disputed marshes in New Delhi yesterday.

## India, Pakistan open talks on marshes

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan launched a fresh round of talks yesterday over disputed marshes, a day after discussions on troop withdrawals from a glacier failed to produce a breakthrough, officials said.

"The Indian and Pakistani sides have started the talks. The talks end today (Friday)," a government spokesman said.

Officials were holding two days of meetings to try to demarcate Sir Creek -- a contested narrow strip of marshland that separates India's western Gujarat state from Pakistan's Sindh province.

The area is considered to be of little strategic value to either side but has been the scene of heavy fighting between the hostile neighbours.

The Surveyor General of India, Major General M. Gopal Rao is leading the Indian delegation. The Pakistani side is headed by Admiral Ahsan-ul-Haq Chaudhri, additional secretary in Pakistan's defence

ministry.

The discussions are part of a slow-moving peace process that the South Asian rivals launched in 2004.

On Wednesday, the two sides failed to find agreement over troop withdrawals from the world's highest battlefield in disputed Kashmir.

Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee said Pakistan turned down New Delhi's proposal to note down military positions held by it on the 6,300-metre (20,700-foot) Siachen glacier, before the two sides pulled out their troops.

New Delhi and Islamabad were also to discuss terrorism and drug-trafficking Tuesday in the Pakistani capital.

The neighbours have fought three wars since their 1947 independence from Britain, two of them over Kashmir, which both claim in full and hold in part.

## India, Japan pledge to boost military ties

AFP, Tokyo

India and Japan pledged to step up military cooperation, as Tokyo tries to move closer to the South Asian nation, which is seeking to modernise its armed forces.

Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee was at the start of a visit to Japan and China, which have seen growing friction with each other and are both seeking to improve ties with New Delhi.

Mukherjee and Japanese Defence Agency Director-General Fukushima Nukaga signed an agreement to "promote wide-range cooperation in the defence and security field" including in technical areas and training.

The two democracies share the goals of promoting "peace and stability in Asia and at the global level" and of countering terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, a joint statement said on Thursday.

## Myanmar may set free Suu Kyi: UN

AFP, United Nations

UN Under Secretary General Ibrahim Gambari hinted here Wednesday that Myanmar's military rulers may be preparing to release detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Briefing reporters on his visit to Myanmar and his surprise meeting with the 60-year-old democracy icon in Yangon last week, Gambari pointed to a statement by an unnamed police chief that could be interpreted as signalling a future release.

"The chief of police did make a statement that may be significant, to say that her release would not necessarily lead to political instability," he said.

Noting that the police official also claimed Aung San Suu Kyi was "losing support in the country," Gambari said this "could also be a way to prepare the ground" for her

release.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), has spent more than 10 of the past 17 years under house arrest in Yangon, and the military was expected to extend her house arrest later this week. She has also been barred from seeing foreigners for more than two years.

Gambari confirmed that he pressed Yangon to release not only Aung San Suu Kyi, whom he described as a "very determined lady," but also other NLD leaders.

"I can't say whether it will be done, but I certainly hope so," he added.

The under secretary general for political affairs said Aun Suu Kyi authorized him to report that she was well, but quoted her as saying she would like visits by her doctors "to be more predictable and regular" and wanted medical assistance for her detained companions.

## Hindus protest move to make Nepal secular state

AFP, Kathmandu

Religious activists crippled a Nepalese border town yesterday in protest against the government's decision to end the nation's status as the world's last Hindu kingdom, police said.

Police said protesters blocked roads with burning tyres and called a general strike in Birgunj with demonstrators travelling from the capital Kathmandu and neighbouring India to join in.

"All the shops, businesses and educational institutions closed their shutters and the highways were deserted in Birgunj," the town's police chief Bir Bahadur Rana told AFP.

"The activists have called for a general strike today and have

begun obstructing the traffic by burning tyres."

Demonstrators also blocked roads on Wednesday with burning tyres, closed shops and ransacked a newspaper van before torching its contents because it backed the new government's move to change Nepal into a secular state.

The police chief said protests had been growing for several days in the town, 275km south of Kathmandu, with property including a dental hospital vandalised.

A smaller protest was held in Kathmandu on Thursday with 100 people, including some 20 Hindu holy men, blocking a road near parliament. They chanted "The Hindu nation cannot be destroyed," waved banners and blew on conch shells.

## India's caste quota ire grows

REUTERS, New Delhi

Lying on the floor in a state hospital in New Delhi, 16-year-old Pushpendra has been waiting to get a bed since Monday.

His blood platelet count hovers at a dangerous 30,000-40,000, far below normal and the orphaned high school student's skin has a yellow hue.

He is suspected of having leukaemia but no one knows when, or if, he'll receive treatment in time.

Across India, thousands of junior doctors, interns and medical students have been on strike for weeks in many cities - from Kolkata in the east to Ahmedabad in the west - crippling state health services.

## al-Qaeda strategist handed over to US by Pakistan

REUTERS, Islamabad

A leading al-Qaeda member, who had a \$5 million bounty on his head and is wanted in Spain for possible links to the 2004 bombings, has been handed over to US agents, Pakistani intelligence officers said on Wednesday.

Ideologue and strategist Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, also known as Abu Musab al-Suri, a Syrian holding a Spanish passport, was handed over to US agents at least two months ago after being caught in Pakistan last year, they said.

"I can confirm that Abu Musab al-Suri is no more under detention in Pakistan," a senior Pakistani intelligence source told Reuters on condition of anonymity.



PHOTO: AFP  
Iranian First Vice President Parviz Dayoudi (L) receives a bouquet from a Pakistani young girl upon his arrival at Chaklala Airbase in Rawalpindi yesterday. Dayoudi arrived on a two-day visit to hold talks with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz.