

Norway moves to avert full-scale war in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Norway's top peace envoy held lengthy talks with Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse yesterday in a fresh bid to stop the island from drifting back to war, diplomats said.

Oslo's International Development Minister Erik Solheim arrived Friday morning and went directly to meet the president. Talks lasted longer than scheduled, diplomats said.

"They had a long meeting, but I cannot comment on the contents of their discussions," Norwegian embassy spokesman Erik Nurnberg said. "The minister is meeting with some religious leaders before he leaves for New Delhi today."

The president's office said the two sides had "extensive discussions on the current situation."

The talks lasting more than two hours ended against a backdrop of further violence. At least four people were killed Friday in two

separate incidents in the island's east, security officials said.

Three men from a breakaway rebel faction were shot dead by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the district of Trincomalee while a government official was shot dead in neighbouring Batticaloa, police said.

With a daily death toll reported from the island's north and east, international concern has mounted that Sri Lanka was returning to full-scale war, which had ended when both sides signed a ceasefire in 2002.

But Scandinavian monitors have said that truce is now in force only on paper after about 600 deaths since December. Most have been civilians.

Solheim's deputy, Jon Hanssen-Bauer, would remain on the island for direct weekend talks with leaders of the rebel movement, which is fighting for a minority Tamil homeland.

The chief Norwegian peace emissary to Sri Lanka was

expected to brief New Delhi on his efforts to bring the LTTE back to the negotiating table they left in April 2003.

Hours before Solheim landed, a Claymore mine killed a soldier and a civilian Thursday night in the northern peninsula of Jaffna, the military said.

Another Claymore attack in the island's east damaged a military vehicle Friday, but there were no casualties, the army said.

Ahead of his visit, Solheim tried to play down expectations of a breakthrough.

He held talks with Tiger rebels in January and brought both sides together for truce talks in Switzerland on February 22. But a second round has been put off indefinitely as the death toll mounts.

"The situation in Sri Lanka is complicated, and it is important not to have unrealistic expectations of the meetings," Solheim said Thursday in a statement.

Police banned vehicles entering

the main financial centre of Colombo on Thursday fearing a rebel car bomb attack, but lifted the restriction on Friday.

The 39-storey World Trade Centre (WTC) complex in the heart of Colombo blocked all vehicles, fearing a repeat of a 1997 truck bomb attack there that killed 20 people and wounded 100.

Solheim said the Norwegian effort was an important part of preparations for a meeting in Tokyo on Tuesday of Sri Lanka's key international financial backers, who are to review their support of a faltering peace process.

With violence escalating, the government said Friday it was setting up temporary shelters for civilians displaced by the unrest.

"The temporary open relief centres will commence operations within the next few days to accommodate the immediate needs of the displaced people," a statement said.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan soldiers patrol along the sea shore in Colombo yesterday amid stepped up security following fears of Tamil Tiger attacks. At least four people were killed in the island's restive east even as peace broker Norway mounted a fresh bid to try and save a faltering ceasefire.

US offers India help to fight Maoists

REUTERS, Raipur

The United States has offered to help an Indian state remove thousands of mines planted by Maoist rebels and train its police force to battle the insurgents, a senior official said on Friday.

Chhattisgarh in central India is the worst-affected among at least 13 Indian states battling armed Maoist rebels who say they are fighting for the rights of millions of impoverished peasants and landless labourers.

Thousands have died in Maoist violence in India in the past three decades with a spike in attacks in the past 17 months -- especially landmine blasts -- causing hundreds of deaths.

Two American diplomats made the offer to the state government during a visit on Thursday, Chhattisgarh's Additional Chief Secretary (Home) BKS Ray said.

"They offered assistance in demining and counter-insurgency training of police personnel and they also offered humanitarian relief to the camps for tribals," Ray said.



PHOTO: AFP

Hamas paramilitary members get off their pick-up truck after evacuating the streets of Gaza City yesterday. The Hamas government yesterday recalled a controversial paramilitary force from the streets of Gaza on the second day of cross-party talks to resolve deadly Palestinian feuding and political crisis.

Hamis militia off streets after Abbas's challenge

REUTERS, Gaza

The Hamas-led Palestinian government ordered its militia off Gaza's streets yesterday in the wake of clashes with President Mahmoud Abbas's rival Fatah movement that stirred fears of civil war.

The move comes a day after Abbas stunned Hamas with an ultimatum to back a proposal for Palestinian statehood that implicitly recognises Israel or face a referendum on the issue.

Abbas gave the government 10 days to back the proposal, effectively going over the heads of the Islamist militants and setting the stage for a showdown. Hamas seeks to destroy Israel and has rejected Abbas's calls for talks with the Jewish state.

Youssef al-Zahar, a leader of the 3,000-strong Hamas force in the impoverished Gaza Strip, told Reuters the interior minister had

ordered the pullback.

"We have received orders to withdraw from the streets and to concentrate in certain locations to be ready to rush to the scene when needed to confront chaos," Zahar said.

Government officials and a Hamas spokesman confirmed the order, saying it was partly to reduce tensions with Fatah.

No members of the force were visible in the streets of the impoverished Gaza Strip early on Friday, Reuters witnesses said.

Clashes between Hamas and Fatah have become more frequent since the unit was deployed last week. Government officials have said the new force would not be disbanded, despite calls from Abbas to do so, but integrated into regular police units.

Abbas and Hamas have been engaged in an increasingly bitter power struggle since the Islamists took office two months ago after

beating Fatah in January elections.

Raising the stakes, Abbas on Thursday gave Hamas 10 days to back a plan for a Palestinian state alongside Israel or face what would amount to a confidence vote.

Passage of the referendum might offer Hamas an opportunity to moderate its opposition to Israel and any peace negotiations without having to formally change its stance.

Addressing the first of two days of national dialogue aimed at easing tensions, Abbas said on Thursday that if an agreement was not reached, a referendum would be held in 40 days.

The proposal calls for a peace settlement if Israel withdraws from all of the West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem, occupied since the 1967 Middle East war.

The plan was drawn up in an Israeli jail by senior prisoners from factions including Hamas and Fatah.

UN slams Nepal army for disappearances

REUTERS, Kathmandu

The United Nations yesterday accused Nepal's army of torturing people detained in its war against Maoist rebels and "disappearing" many prisoners.

Releasing a study of prisoners at just one army barracks, the United Nations representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Nepal, Ian Martin, said the army flouted international rules and "those detained were disappeared".

"Our investigations have found that most of the hundreds of individuals who were arrested were subjected to severe and prolonged ill-treatment and torture," Martin told a news conference.

"There were acts of torture involving sexual humiliation of both male and female detainees. Detainees were repeatedly threatened with execution."

The UN has given the report on arrests, torture and disappearances at the Maharajgunj barracks to

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, appointed last month after King Gyanendra gave in to protests and handed power to a multi-party government.

The report said at least 49 people arrested in 2003 and held at the barracks in Kathmandu remained missing.

Nepal's poorly equipped and under-trained army and police have been battling a Maoist rebellion for a decade. More than 13,000 people have died and thousands have disappeared, with both sides accused by rights groups of widespread abuses. Both sides deny anything more than isolated cases of wrongdoing.

The country, one of the world's poorest, ranks among the top in the number of people who have gone missing in the conflict.

UN officials made more than 50 interviews with families, former detainees and other witnesses for the report.

Behave or you're history Nepali minister warns king

AFP, Kathmandu

Humbled King Gyanendra must "behave" or he has no future even as a ceremonial monarch, Finance Minister Dr Ram Sharan Mahat told AFP, revealing a royal spending spree before absolute rule was brought to an end.

Gyanendra's conduct had been "very good" in the month since he relinquished his 14-month grip on power and watched as parliament slashed his powers, wiped the word "royal" from the nation's institutions and ended Nepal's status as the world's last Hindu kingdom.

Mahat has vowed to cut back on spiralling palace expenses that rose to more than 10 million dollars in the nine months before Gyanendra stepped aside following weeks of mass rebellion against his total rule.

That sum, when the king had total control over palace finances unregulated by politicians, was six times the total for all of 2001-02, according to central bank figures.

Premier Girija Prasad Koirala has met several times with Gyanendra since becoming head of

an interim government but officials have given few details of their palace talks.

However Nepali Congress colleague Mahat said Gyanendra should still be seen as a "unifying symbol" and the party would back him in a ceremonial role -- but the issue had not been broached by the premier.

"They still have not talked about his future," Mahat said. "The prime minister obviously advised him to adjust himself to the new situation. He couldn't have said no. He had no choice."

Mahat said the monarch must accept a ceremonial role.

"He has to or he has no future," he said in an interview Thursday. "We will have to see how he behaves."

The king's role is a likely source of dispute between politicians and Maoists -- who want to scrap the monarchy -- as they prepare for talks to end a 10-year rebellion.

The insurgency has left more than 12,500 dead in the impoverished nation where average annual income per head is just 240 dollars.

"The past government was indulging in extravagance and huge unproductive expenditures," said Mahat.

He highlighted the growth in spending on the security forces and "wild jaunts to Africa" by the king. Gyanendra travelled to several African countries late last year amid continuing political crisis at home.

Rising costs included a 550,000 dollar bill for Crown Prince Paras's trip to Austria, a senior economist at Nepal's central bank said, during which officials presented a pair of rhinos to the Vienna zoo.

Other costs included an 8,000 dollar hotel cancellation bill for an aborted trip to the United Nations, further foreign trips for the king and spending on a rival journalists' association as the monarch clamped down on the media.

Expenditure on the security forces rose by 50 percent in two years from 2002-03 as Gyanendra tried unsuccessfully to quell the Maoist insurgency and bolster his control of the country.

Bush admn rules out new conditions on N-deal

PTI, Washington

Dismissing suggestions that the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord was in serious trouble, the Bush administration has said that though it was ready to show some flexibility to accommodate the views of Congress members, it was not prepared to impose conditions or introduce legislations at this point that can "break" the deal.

"We have a very active discussion with members of Congress. There is always a variety of views and sometimes you can get lost in that. I think there are a lot of supporters who have stood up in favour of this. There are people who have praised or criticised different aspects of the agreement and we have to deal with that," Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher said in an interview.

"There are a number of people who have raised the issue--actually it is Congressional prerogative--for Congress to vote on the bilateral agreement, something that the Congressman (Tom) Lantos has raised and that is not a India issue. It

is an issue for us and the Congress. But it is one that we have got to talk to them about," Boucher said.

"I think we are flexible in some terms, in terms of accommodating some of the desires of Congress and have us work with them. We certainly accept the views of Congress on different issues but we are also going to make clear that we cannot do things--legislations or conditions-- at this point that will break the deal," Boucher said emphatically.

On the London meeting between Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns and Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, he said it was "another good step forward" with India coming back with a response to the draft of the bilateral nuclear agreement.

Boucher said that though he does not have a full report of the meeting, based on early remarks it appears to have gone quite well. "They have had the time to have a very thorough discussion, a very detailed discussion on how to move forward with the relationship, on how we move forward with the Congress, nuclear suppliers, bilateral agreements".

Probe films underwater volcanic eruption

AP, Tokyo

An unmanned probe got within feet of a violent underwater eruption in the Pacific Ocean, returning with the clearest footage ever captured of seismic activity under the sea, a team of Japanese and US researchers said.

The footage, released Thursday by the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology, shows gray ash and rock spewing from the underwater NW Rota-1 volcano as it erupted in October.

Lava streams down the volcano, which is 1,800 feet under water in the Mariana Arc volcanic chain, some 60 miles north of the US Pacific territory of Guam.

The Japanese-American research team also collected sediment samples, team leader Yoshihiko Tamura said. The Hyper Dolphin probe went as close as 7-10 feet from the eruption.

"We believe it's the first time anybody has captured quality footage of an underwater eruption



PHOTO: AP

Photo released by the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology on Thursday, show an underwater volcanic eruption in the Pacific Ocean, saying it was the closest and clearest images ever captured of seismic activity under the sea.

from such a close distance," Tamura said.

Analysis of the footage and sediment could help explain how repeated eruptions of underwater volcanoes eventually give rise to

islands and even continents, Tamura said.

"Further research could shed light on the very fundamentals of how land masses are formed," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi guards push journalists back as Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshya Zebari (C) enters with his Iranian counterpart Manouchehr Mottaki into the Iraqi foreign ministry in Baghdad yesterday. Mottaki confirmed his country's decision not to hold direct talks with the United States over the situation in Iraq.

Iran rejects Iraq talks with US for now

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iran has decided not to take up an offer from Washington of direct talks over the future of Iraq for the time being, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said on a visit to Baghdad yesterday.

Iran's initial acceptance of talks had been exploited for propaganda by the United States, and Tehran had therefore decided to suspend its decision to take part, he told a news conference.

"Unfortunately, the American side tried to use this decision as propaganda and they raised some other issues. They tried to create a negative atmosphere and that's why the decision which was taken for the time being is suspended," Mottaki said.

He was speaking after meeting his Iraqi counterpart during a visit to Baghdad that turned attention on Tehran's role in its US-occupied neighbour hours after President George W. Bush admitted mistakes in his Iraq policy.

He was also due to meet Iraq's

new prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, less than a week after the Shia Islamist formed his national unity government and pledged to curb the kind of violence that saw a bomb kill nine people in Baghdad on Friday.

Washington has said it is open to talks about stabilising the country with Iran, with which the United States has no diplomatic relations.

US officials, who were not immediately available for comment on Friday, say they want Iraq to have good relations with Iran but reject any attempt to create a Shia Islamic state in Iraq.

In April, Washington said talks with Iran were on hold as Iraq's government was being formed. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also said last month there was no need for such talks for the time being.

Mottaki's trip was the second such visit from Iran since its US enemy overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003 and oversaw the election of an Iraqi Shia Muslim leadership close to the Islamic Republic.

10 Taliban killed in Afghan fighting

AFP, Kandahar

Taliban insurgents attacked a police vehicle in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, killing a policeman and setting off an hour-long battle in which 10 militants were killed, police said.

The militants attacked the vehicle in Ghazni province and killed the policeman, provincial police chief Abdul Rahman Sarjang said.

"This attack sparked a police operation. After a one-hour exchange of fire, and the arrival of reinforcements, at least 10 Taliban were killed," he said.

The attack was in Giro district where Taliban militants had taken refuge and were besieged by police, Sarjang said.

Afghanistan has in the past 10 days seen some of the worst fighting since the fall of the Taliban as the militia steps up its four-and-a-half-year insurgency, backed by other Islamic outfits including al-Qaeda.

Kashmiri militant vows to fight until secession

REUTERS, Srinagar

The Pakistan-based chief of an alliance of Kashmiri militant groups fighting New Delhi's rule in Kashmir said the guerrillas would continue their struggle until the region secedes from India, a report said yesterday.

"No other solution is acceptable to us," United Jihad Council chairman Syed Salahuddin said in a statement published in the region's leading English language newspaper, Greater Kashmir.

Salahuddin's statement comes a day after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh chaired a two-day peace conference in Srinagar.

"Militants will continue their struggle until they get freedom from India," he said.

"Independence is our right and we will get it."

On Thursday, premier Singh promised to set up five committees, including one that would look at "the special status" of Kashmir, a reference to the question of giving more autonomy to the restive Himalayan region within the Indian constitution.

Singh also had made a veiled

appeal to Kashmiri militants in Pakistani Kashmir to come back, saying their cases would be reviewed favourably but stopping short of offering an amnesty.

He also vowed "zero tolerance" for custodial killings by Indian forces.

The Indian Express newspaper said Singh's comments showed "New Delhi's intention to reach out" to Kashmiris.

India says Kashmiri rebels cross into Pakistani Kashmir where they are trained and armed to carry out attacks in the Indian-ruled part of the Himalayan region where more than 45,000 people have been killed since the revolt broke out in 1989.

Militants had vowed last week to disrupt the latest peace talks in Kashmir by launching attacks in Srinagar.

On Thursday, four Indian tourists, including a child and a woman, were killed when a grenade was thrown at their bus, bringing to 15 the total number of people killed in the city since the militant warning.