

## Lanka peace hopes dim

### Norway fails to clinch deal, mine blast kills 4

AFP, Colombo

Hopes of ending Sri Lanka's ethnic bloodshed have hit rock bottom after peacebroker Norway failed to arrange talks on saving a collapsing ceasefire, diplomats and officials said yesterday.

Oslo's efforts were complicated by a looming European Union ban on the Tamil Tiger rebels, who threatened to respond by scrapping the truce that has been marred in recent months by dozens of deadly attacks on soldiers, rebels and civilians.

At the weekend Norway failed to persuade the Tigers to return to Switzerland to hold another round of talks with the Sri Lankan government on saving the ceasefire in place since 2002. An offer Saturday of an alternative venue in Oslo has also not been taken up, said officials

on condition of anonymity.

Diplomats said Norway's invitation to the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to come to Oslo for a two-day face-to-face meeting appeared to be a last-ditch attempt to halt a return to war.

"But the signals so far are that neither party wants to make a commitment to go to Oslo for a meeting starting June 8," a diplomatic source close to the process told AFP. "The Tigers are waiting for an EU statement."

The European Union is expected to place the LTTE on its list of terrorist groups on Monday, a spokesman for the EU's Austrian presidency said Saturday.

The move against the Tigers, agreed in principle on May 18, is on the agenda of a meeting of the bloc's ministers in Brussels.

It means that the assets of the

LTTE will be frozen but more importantly it will cut off vital funds for the rebels from members of the Tamil diaspora in Europe.

At home, the Tigers have been warning that the Norwegian-led and internationally-backed peace effort may be drawing to a close.

The LTTE's political wing leader S. P. Thamiliselvan told a Norwegian peace envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer Saturday that Oslo must ensure justice for the Tamil side and try to block the EU ban.

"Liberation Tigers will be forced to reconsider the relevance of the ceasefire agreement (CFA) to the peace process, and LTTE's commitment and adherence to the CFA, if the EU carries out its threat of proscribing the LTTE," Thamiliselvan told reporters.

Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim, who held talks with

Sri Lankan leaders on Friday, warned that the island could be slipping back to full-scale war.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan authorities yesterday found the mutilated bodies of seven local tourists believed to have been killed by an explosion in a wildlife sanctuary near a conflict zone, police said.

Five of the bodies could be identified - two women and three men - while the remains of two others were mutilated beyond recognition after the blast at the Wilpattu national park, military spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said.

"There were three simultaneous explosions that left only the chassis of their four-wheel drive vehicle," Samarasinghe said adding that officials blamed the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the killing.

## Hindus, Muslims clash in Gujarat

REUTERS, Ahmedabad

At least 30 people were hurt in clashes between Hindus and Muslims in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat state, witnesses and police said.

Police official B.C. Modi said hundreds of people were involved in the fighting, and that most of the injuries were caused by stones or burning missiles.

The violence in Ahmedabad follows Hindu-Muslim riots in Vadodara city, also in Gujarat state, early this month, which killed six people and left scores wounded.

Gujarat, ruled by India's main opposition Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, saw widespread communal rioting in 2002 which left over 1,000 people, mainly minority Muslims, dead. Human rights groups said the toll was more than double that.



Pakistani youths enjoy the cool water as they bathe at a canal in Lahore yesterday. According to the Meteorological Department, the maximum temperature recorded yesterday was 44 degrees Celsius. The drop in temperature follows a searing heatwave in central Pakistan, which killed at least 84 people with temperatures as high as 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit).

## Iran files lawsuit against Saddam

AFP, Baghdad

Iran has filed a lawsuit against ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein for his regime's 1980s war against Tehran, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said in a joint statement with his Iraqi counterpart published Saturday.

"The two sides, noting the crimes committed by Saddam Hussein's regime in its aggression against the people of Iraq, Iran and Kuwait, confirmed the need to seek justice for that," the statement read.

"To this end the Iranian Republic has passed on to the Foreign Ministry of Iraq a complaint against Saddam and his agents for examination by the Iraqi High Tribunal", where Saddam already faces charges of crimes against humanity, the statement added.

The document did not list any specific charges Iran wished to bring against Saddam or any of his aides.



Palestinian Foreign Minister Farouk Kaddoumi gestures upon his arrival a day before the start of the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Putrajaya yesterday. The Iranian and Palestinian crises are expected to dominate talks among ministers from the 114-member NAM bloc of developing nations.

## Iran, Palestinian crises to dominate NAM talks

AFP, Putrajaya

The Iranian and Palestinian crises are expected to dominate talks among foreign ministers from the 114-member Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) bloc of developing nations here this week.

The two-day meeting, which starts today is being held ahead of the NAM Summit in Havana in September where Malaysia will hand over the three-year chairmanship to Cuba.

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Syed Hamid acknowledged that the issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions was likely to overshadow other items but insisted the discussions would be broad-ranging.

"I think everybody is interested whether this meeting is going to be inundated with the nuclear issue," he told a news conference.

"Any issue that affects peace, security of the global order, definitely will attract interest, but it is not

the only subject. In order for us to achieve economic development, of course the world has to be peaceful."

NAM, which represents two-thirds of the United Nations, counts Iraq, Iran and North Korea among its members - countries famously labelled by US President George W. Bush as the "axis of evil."

Iran's director-general of international political affairs Pirooz Hosseini said Saturday that he hoped NAM would support Iran's fight against US efforts to force it to stop its nuclear activities.

The United States is demanding sanctions from the UN Security Council over Iran's uranium enrichment activities over fears that Tehran is using a civilian atomic energy programme as a screen to develop nuclear weapons.

Critics say NAM lost its relevance after the end of the Cold War, but Syed Hamid insisted it had an increasingly important role to play.

## Nepal may ask UN to monitor Maoist truce

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's new multi-party government and Maoist rebels said yesterday they may request the United Nations to monitor a ceasefire in the Himalayan nation after holding further talks.

The government, formed after last month's violent pro-democracy protests that forced King Gyanendra to hand back power to political parties, matched a ceasefire this month declared earlier by the Maoist guerrillas.

On Friday, government and rebel negotiators held their first meeting since 2003, and agreed to a 25-point code of conduct vowing to push the peace process forward including a commitment to end provocations and stop using arms to intimidate people.

Pradip Gyanwali, a government

negotiator, said a formal ceasefire agreement and a human rights accord were expected to be signed with the rebels soon.

"Once we have those agreements in place, it will be easy for us to request the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Nepal to monitor the truce," Gyanwali told Reuters. "This is our understanding."

Maoist negotiator Dinanath Sharma said both sides had agreed in principle to engage a third party, possibly the United Nations, to monitor the truce.

"This may be discussed in our next meeting," Sharma said, adding they were expected to meet later this week.

Both sides have agreed to hold early elections for an assembly to

draft a new constitution and decide the future of the monarchy, a key rebel demand to end the insurgency.

The initial talks are also expected to prepare for a meeting between rebel chief Prachanda and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala.

Hopes for an end to Nepal's decade-long insurgency have been raised since the multi-party government took power last month after King Gyanendra ended nearly 15-months of absolute rule.

The insurgency, aimed at toppling the monarchy, has claimed more than 13,000 lives and wrecked impoverished Nepal's economy.

Previous peace talks in 2001 and 2003 failed.

## Peace first, reform later

Says Nepali minister

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's finance minister has ruled out any immediate radical market reforms as the price for political stability in the impoverished South Asian nation.

Ram Sharan Mahat said likely Maoist involvement in mainstream politics and a broad-ranging interim coalition government made market reforms hard as Nepal seeks to emerge from a decade of rebellion that has shattered the economy.

"Many radical reforms may not

be possible because of the spectrum of political forces in the government. And after some time the Maoists could be in government for a brief time," Mahat told AFP in an interview.

"Radical market-oriented reforms may have to wait for some time until the political situation stabilises," said Mahat, who took over Nepal's finances after mass protests forced King Gyanendra to give up absolute rule in April.

After battling for a one-party communist republic in a revolt that

has claimed over 12,500 lives, the Maoists have entered peace negotiations with the interim government after the two sides joined forces to sideline the monarch.

Still, one tough decision Mahat does expect to have to take is to raise oil prices closer to world levels even though a petrol product price increase last year sparked a general strike in the capital Kathmandu.

The move is necessary to stem losses at state-owned Nepal Oil Corp.

## Israel strikes Lebanon after rocket salvo

AFP, Beirut

Israeli warplanes yesterday bombed bases of a pro-Syrian Palestinian group in Lebanon, including positions near Beirut, after militants fired a rocket salvo deeper than ever before inside the Jewish state.

A Palestinian militant was killed and five others were wounded, according to medical sources, while the Israeli army said a soldier was lightly injured in the tit-for-tat attacks.

The air force raided two bases of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), while Israel angrily announced it would lodge a complaint with the United Nations.

Israeli fighter bombers swooped several times to fire 15 missiles at a base in Sultan Yaacub in eastern Lebanon, less than 10km from the

border with Syria, causing the casualties, police said.

They then targeted a base in Naameh, some 10km south of the Lebanese capital, that comprises a network of underground tunnels and has been the target of several past Israeli air strikes.

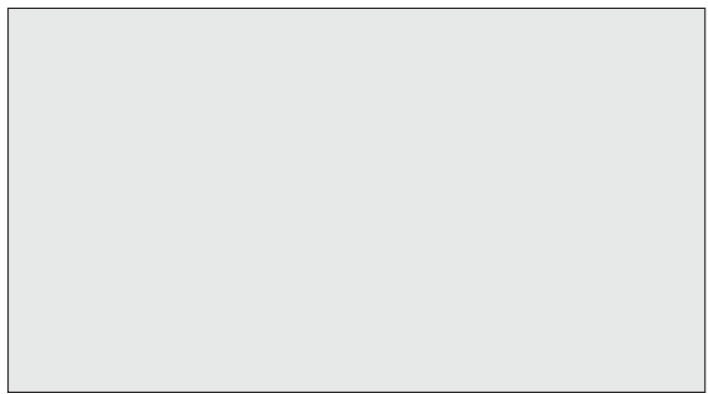
The bombing of the base, located near the busy highway linking Beirut to southern Lebanon, triggered traffic jams and panic among motorists, police said.

Early Sunday, militants in south Lebanon fired several Katyusha rockets towards an army base in northern Israel, wounding a soldier and causing damage, an Israeli army spokeswoman said.

The rocket salvo hit a base near the town of Safed, 20km south of the international border with Lebanon.



Members of the UN mission in East Timor wait to be evacuated from Dili yesterday. The international body began evacuating all non-essential staff after clashes between rival ethnic groups in the tiny country that prompted Australia to commit more than 1,000 troops to help restore order. New Zealand, Malaysia and Portugal are also sending forces.



## Pitt, Jolie have a baby girl

REUTERS, Walvis Bay

Hollywood stars Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt have had a baby daughter, People magazine said on Sunday.

A representative for the couple said Jolie, 30, had given birth to Shiloh Nouvel Jolie-Pitt on Saturday in Namibia, a sparsely populated desert country in southwest Africa. There were no further details available, People reported.

The couple, dubbed "Brangelina," have been closely followed by the tabloids and paparazzi in Namibia since arriving there weeks ago to have their baby.

Jolie reportedly took a shine to Namibia, better known for dunes and diamonds, while filming the movie "Beyond Borders."

The couple have been holed up in a sealed off beach resort in the tiny village of Langstrand and it was unclear if the child had been delivered there or at one of the private hospitals in the nearby towns of Walvis Bay and Swakopmund.

Locals in the Walvis Bay, shrouded in fog on Sunday morning, were thrilled by the celebrity birth.

"It's great ... She has put us on the map. It is a great thing," said resident Della van Noorten.

## Top Russian officials hold nuke talks in Iran

AFP, Tehran

Top Russian officials were Sunday holding high-level talks in Iran over the Islamic republic's disputed nuclear programme amid a fresh drive to find a diplomatic solution to the worsening crisis.

Russian National Security Council chief Igor Ivanov and Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak were meeting with top Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani, an AFP correspondent said.

They were also lined up for talks with Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, Gholamreza Aghazadeh.

No details from the talks were immediately available, but the mission follows up on a meeting of senior

officials from Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States - the five permanent UN Security Council members - as well as Germany that failed to break an impasse on how to deal with Iran although progress was reported.

A follow-up meeting at the foreign ministers' level is expected to take place in the coming week. US officials said it would probably take place in a European capital.

At their meeting in London last Wednesday, the major powers discussed a European proposal aimed at breaking Iran's determination to enrich uranium, a process, which can be extended from making reactor fuel to nuclear weapons.

## Corruption, failure fuel Afghan insurgency

AFP, Kandahar

A worrying upsurge of Taliban-linked violence in southern Afghanistan is being fuelled by government corruption and lack of development, analysts say.

An incident in which 34 civilians were killed nearly a week ago in a coalition strike in Kandahar province prompted a rare visit by President Hamid Karzai, who seldom dares set foot in the area, to reassure an increasingly frustrated population.

And on Saturday about 200 bearded and turbaned tribal elders, religious leaders and political

officials met to debate the problem.

Villagers must be more vigilant about turning away militants who are trying to establish a presence in their areas, some elders said.

Afghan officials said last week that Taliban militants were trying to retake some territory in the south, the birthplace of their ultra-Islamist movement, moving the insurgency on from mere guerrilla-style attacks.

"Let's stop the Taliban from using our homes and villages, brothers," said one tribal chief, Malik Nazar Gul, from Kandahars Dand district.

## East Timor violence raises civil war fear

AP, Dili

Youths with machetes, slingshots and spears rampaged across East Timor's capital Saturday, attacking people, burning houses and deepening a crisis that has sent thousands fleeing in terror despite the deployment of foreign troops.

Four people were killed, one of them burned to death while he was trying to defend his home and the others shot, witnesses and hospital officials said. At least 27 people have been killed since the upheaval erupted Tuesday.

Gangs roamed the streets of Dili for a second day Sunday, setting fire

to homes and businesses. Gunfire was also heard but there was no immediate word on casualties.

One group severely beat a man they accused of hiding guns. Foreign reporters intervened, and he was rushed bleeding to a hospital by aid workers.

With chaos spreading, the United Nations evacuated employees' families and nonessential staff to Darwin, Australia.

The UN envoy to East Timor, Sukehiro Hasegawa, said more peacekeepers were needed to halt the violence.

The UN has a tiny force of peacekeepers in East Timor and around

2,000 Australian troops were either on the ground or in transit. Australian sent the troops after East Timor's government said earlier this week it could not control the situation. New Zealand, Malaysia and Portugal also agreed to help.

"It has begun to quiet things down, it's a trickier operation than some people think," Australian Prime Minister John Howard told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. on Sunday. "Nobody should assume that it's just a simple walk-in-the-park military operation it's quite challenging."