5 sailors killed in Lankan clash

AFP, *Colombo*

Five Sri Lankan sailors were killed and three wounded in an exchange of fire with Tamil Tiger boats in the island's northwest, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The navy lost one patrol craft during the 45-minute battle in the Kalpitiya lagoon, 170 kilometres (106 miles) north of Colombo, spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said.

The navy said it had also destroyed two Tiger boats with at least six guerrillas onboard.

"We destroyed two Tiger boats and they had at least three people on board each boat. We believe they were killed," navy spokesman PDK. Dassanayake said.

The Tigers also killed a soldier and wounded six other people, including three civilians, in two mortar attacks early Wednesday in the northeastern district of Trincomalee, defence ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said.

There have been sporadic attacks on military bases in the embattled northeast as a 2002 ceasefire between the government and LTTE appears on the verge of unravelling.

At least 825 people have been killed in an upsurge of violence since December.

Amid the deteriorating security, peace broker Norway is expected to meet with other monitors in Oslo Thursday to decide the future role of truce observers on the island.

The Nordic ceasefire monitoring mission, or SLMM, was thrown into crisis last week when the rebels demanded the removal of observers from European Union members Finland, Sweden and Denmark after the EU outlawed the Tigers.

Norway has maintained that it will continue its mediating efforts, saying withdrawal is not an option.

But this further blow to the peace process has added to anxiety throughout Sri Lanka as the country veers dangerously towards full-scale war.

Several schools in the capital were closed as parents kept their children at home or collected them from classes following a spate of anonymous calls warning of bombs, government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said.

"We have made arrangements to strengthen security in the face of the terrorist threat," he said.

Police said army bomb disposal squads were rushed to several schools, but the bomb threats turned out to be hoaxes.

"There is no reason to have this panic in schools," Rambukwella said.

"We ... need the support and cooperation of the public. The country is challenged by a ruthless terrorist organisation," he said.

Police spokesman Rienzie Perera said an investigation was underway to trace the hoaxers.

The bomb scare came hours ahead of the funeral for army Major General Parami Kulatunga who was assassinated by a suspected Tamil Tiger suicide bomber Monday.

Kulatunga, the army's third in command and the most senior officer to be killed in three decades of separatist conflict, was cremated at sunset amid tight security in Colombo.

The government has blamed his death on the LTTE, who are fighting for independence in the embattled northern and eastern regions. More than 60,000 people have been killed since 1972.

The army said it reintroduced tough security measures following Kulatunga's assassination and half a dozen checkpoints were established in the northeast to prevent the rebels from smuggling in explosives.

SC bar decides

FROM PAGE 16

with Barrister M Amir-Ul Islam in the chair.

The meeting reviewed the situation arising out of Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar's functioning as acting president of the country.

The SCBA also authorised its president Barrister M Amir-Ul Islam to take legal steps in this regard.

In a resolution, the meeting strongly condemned the government for what it said its (government's) conspiracy to tarnish the image of the country by violating the constitution.

"We will send a letter to President Iajuddin Ahmed tomorrow (Thursday) seeking his appointment at Bangabhaban to talk to him and know his physical condition. If we get the appointment, senior leaders of the SC Bar will meet him and the SCBA will covey the president's condition to the people," SCBA Secretary Advocate AM Aminuddin told the news agency yesterday.

Barrister Amir-Ul Islam said the government is hatching conspiracy to damage the constitution in an unconstitutional way.

Former SCBA presidents Advocate Abdul Baset Majumder and Advocate Ozair Farooq, Barrister Rafiqul Islam Miah, Advocate Abdul Matin Khasru, Barrister Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik, Dr Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury, former SCBA secretaries Advocate M Enayetur Rahim and Advocate Bashir Ahmed, SCBA Secretary Advocate AM Aminuddin and Assistant Secretary Advocate Motaher Hossain Saju, among others, addressed the meeting.

MPs urged

FROM PAGE 1

corruption has rendered all policies and measures futile. "How can we expect the country to progress amid such unbridled corruption?" he said, adding that the country has been branded as the most corrupt one for consecutive four years of the four-party alliance government.

The former speaker proposed for disclosing details of assets of the PM, the opposition leader, ministers and lawmakers for the sake of checking grafts. "If the lawmakers submit their accounts of assets, the government employees will be alert and corruption will gradually recede," he said.

The LGRD minister, however, did not comment on Hamid's proposal.

Although it was ruling BNP's election pledge to disclose the accounts of assets of the PM, ministers and lawmakers, the party has so far made no move in this regard.

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina launched blistering attacks on the ministers and ruling party lawmakers, accusing them of making thousands of crores of taka through corruption.

Participating in the discussion on the proposed budget, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia spent about an hour describing in details her government's various successes. But the PM neither responded to the opposition's allegation of corruption nor spoke a single word on the burning issue in her 75-minute long speech.

She also did not refer to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which is yet to start functioning, although her previous speeches in parliament boasted the government's success in forming it to check graft.

Mannan Bhuiyan proposed to re-fix the tenure of the parliament from five years to fours years.

On Hamid's inquiry about the dialogue on electoral reforms between the ruling and the opposition, Bhuiyan said he will be on the committee by dropping one of the two members rejected by the opposition.

The Awami League-led 14-party opposition combine had expressed its reservation over sitting in any dialogue with the ruling alliance with representation from Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote.

3 killed in 'crossfire'

FROM PAGE 16

regional leader of outlawed Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) in Kushtia.

Our Chittagong correspondent reported that a team of Rab-7 raided Hadi Fakirhat area of Mirersarai at around 2:30am on Tuesday and arrested Tarif, the leader of a notorious band of highway robbers and an accused in 15 criminal cases.

During interrogation at Chittagong Rab office at Patenga, Tarif confessed to his involvement in robberies on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway.

On his confessional statement, the members of the elite force conducted several search operations for firearms and the other members of gang in different areas of the district, taking Tarif with them.

They launched another search operation at West Joara under Korerhat Union of Mirersarai at 2:15am yesterday.

But when the Rab men along with Tarif reached near a passenger shed on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway in Mirersarai, Tarif's accomplices opened fire on the law enforcers, prompting them to retaliate.

Rab sources said Tarif received bullets during the shootout while his cohorts managed to flee.

Critically injured Tarif was rushed to the nearby health complex where the doctors declared him dead, said a Rab press release yesterday.

The Rab members also recovered two one-barrel guns and five cartridges from the spot.

The other criminal, Nurul Islam, was arrested by police at Barumchhara village under Anowara upazila at around 5:30pm on Tuesday.

Nurul Islam was an accused in 12 criminal cases filed with Anowara and Banshkhali police stations and a close associate of robber leader Martuza Ali, who was killed in "crossfire" last week.

Following his statement, police along with Nurul went to Sarenga village under the upazila at around 2:15am yesterday to arrest his accomplices.

Sensing the presence of the police, Nurul's cohorts opened fire on the law enforcers, forcing them to return fire.

During the gunfight, Nurul received bullets and died instantly, police said. Police recovered one LG with two cartridges from the spot.

According to our Kushtia correspondent, locals caught Marzul Islam alias Guddu Dakat, son of Nabisuddin of Hridirampur village in Mirpur upazila, at Barabaria village when he went there to collect toll on Monday night. The villagers beat up the outlaw and then handed him over to the police.

On his confessional statement, police along with Guddu went to the village at about 4:30am yesterday to arrest his accomplices.

When they reached Barabaria field, Guddu's cohorts opened fire on the law enforcers, forcing them to retaliate.

Police said Guddu was shot while trying to flee and died on the spot. They retrieved a gun and seven bullets from the scene.

Police said the outlaw was an accused in four murder cases filed with Mirpur Police Station.

Finance bill

FROM PAGE 16

that had been brought up in the House since the proposed budget had been placed to the lawmakers.

He said only 12 percent of the proposed budget will come from the donors, a fact that reflects the government's self-financing policy.

Eight percent of the donors' contribution will came from multilateral donors including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, he said.

He also said forums like Tuesday Group try to meddle in the country's politics just by being a part of providing the rest of the foreign aid, a conduct which is unacceptable. A country's internal politics should not be any business of forums like Tuesday Group, he said.

Criticising the media for reporting price hikes of essentials, the minister said prices of essentials in Bangladesh are low compared to other neighbouring countries including India.

He said import duties on some essential items were reduced but duty reduction alone cannot bring the prices down.

About block allocations the minister said some of the fund will be allocated for some projects after scrutinising the viability of those projects.

Replying to a lawmaker's query, Rahman said some of the block allocations may be allocated for constructing a bridge over the River Padma if a project is initiated.

About black money he said the immediate previous government introduced the provision of legally laundering black money in 1999, and added, "But we increased the tax rate for the provision."

The proposed budget is scheduled to be passed by the parliament today.

Udichi unhappy

FROM PAGE 1

In the statement Udichi said that the government was the plaintiff of the case and it was expected that the government would ensure justice.

"We believe that the government has absolutely failed to find or to bring real culprits to justice...We cannot simply let them get away with the crime," it added.

I don't want

FROM PAGE 1

leader's allegation, which Hasina has been making since President Iajuddin Ahmed fell sick earlier this month.

In a witty reply, Khaleda also said "She [Hasina] wants me to become the president as she has lost confidence in her party and she knows that BNP would be re-elected in the next poll. That's why she wants to join qur party and become the prime minister by forcing me to the post of the president."

Hasina was not in the House when the premier was delivering the speech taking part in discussion on the proposed budget for the coming fiscal year.

Khaleda also said it is not wise to make debate on president. "As long as the president is ill, the Speaker would perform his duty," she added.

Earlier, Sheikh Hasina, also the Awami League (AL) chief, in her speech on the budget discussions expressed her suspicion that the prime minister is planning to become the president herself by "making President Iajuddin Ahmed sick."

"Turning the president ill is an old game that her husband also played," Hasina said, adding that President Iajuddin Ahmed might have been kept under house arrest.

Reiterating her opinion that the post of the acting president is not allowed in the constitution, the AL chief also said according to the constitution, there is provision for a post of vice-president, but no provision for the speaker to be an acting president.

UN for talks

FROM PAGE 1

out their election related activities openly without any hindrance.

The mission said for the sake of helping Bangladesh to continue its democratic tradition, the UN stands ready to provide appropriate assistance to Bangladesh in holding an election which is peaceful, free, and accepted by the people of the country.

According to a press release of the UN, the members of the mission met with officials of the Bangladesh Election Commission and its Secretariat, national and local government officials, political parties, civil society groups, media representatives and others.

The mission however observed that Bangladesh has a well-established practice of elections, through which the people have been able to express their opinions and change their governments with relative freedom.

Well established safeguards and protection of those is a unique trend of the electoral system of Bangladesh, the mission said. It also said the electoral administration of the country repeatedly proved in the past its ability to organise elections efficiently. All these factors can make important contributions in the formation of the foundation for a sound democratic process, it said.

The news release also expressed the mission's gratitude for the warm welcome it was accorded in Bangladesh.

All 23 accused

FROM PAGE 1

verdict, adding that no witness said they had seen the accused present at the Udichi programme during the blast.

The acquitted accused are BNP leader Noor-un-Nabi, Ahsan Kabir Hasan, his brother Mizanur Rahman, former commissioner Mohiuddin Alamgir, Sirajul Islam Siraj, Abul Khayer, Bere Babu, Mehedi Hasan Litu, Mokaddes Hossain Babu, Murad alias "Bhejal" Murad, Saidur Rahman, Nowsher Ali, Shariful Islam Mintu alias Minta, Rabiul Islam Maron, Saidul Islam, Mostafa alias Mastan, Sohrab, Nantu, Khokon, Tariqur Rahman, Ashok Kumar, Mohsin and Alamgir.

Five of them are in jail while one, Mizanur Rahman, has been absconding.

On confessional statements of five accused, the court said they had not made any confessional statement under section 164 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC).

They were rather forced to sign on blank sheets of paper in Dhaka. But according to rules, they were to make their confessions before a local magistrate court. The state failed to produce any magistrate to certify that the confessions were made in his court, the court said.

It suggested taking immediate legal action against IO Senior Additional Superintendent of Police (Criminal Investigation Department) Dulal Uddin Akand for falsely preparing the confessional statements.

The verdict also cited statement of Harkatul Jihad leader Mufti Hannan claiming his organisation's responsibility for the attack on the Udichi conference as well as attacks at eight other places.

PROCEEDINGS OF CASES

After the bomb blast, Sub-Inspector (SI) Abdul Aziz lodged two cases--one for murder and another for explosion--with Jessore Kotwali Police Station without naming anyone.

Senior ASP Dulal submitted a charge sheet on December 14, 1999, accusing 24 persons including incumbent Environment and Forest Minister Tariqul Islam and BNP leader Noor-un-Nabi.

The Court of Additional District and Sessions Judge, Jessore framed the charges against all 24 accused including Tariqul on July 19, 2000.

Tariqul filed a revision and an appeal petition with the High Court (HC), seeking acquittal but the HC rejected his plea on August 14, 2000.

The minister filed a leave to appeal petition against the HC rejection with the Appellate Division, which granted the leave and stayed proceedings of the case until disposal of the appeal.

The Appellate Division cleared Tariqul of charges on August 13, 2003 and the stay on the proceedings was withdrawn on October 26, 2004.

Recording statements of witnesses of the cases started on July 27 last year and ended last Tuesday. Thirty-one of 67 witnesses gave statements in the court.

Home sits on approval

FROM PAGE 16

to attend the next SSC examinations from jail following his prayer.

PRAYERS OF THE ACCUSED

On June 19, the accused sent similar separate letters of prayer to court through Rajshahi Central Jail authorities claiming that they were forced to confess through police torture.

"I myself do not know what I told in confession to be saved from police...all what I told in the judicial statement was taught by police," read a prayer.

On May 9, investigation officer (IO) of the case DB Sub-Inspector Ahsanul Kabir met Jahangir and Mohiuddin at the jail gate.

Lawyers and police officials, however, opined that the withdrawal prayers are to matter little as those confessions were made only before the magistrates with enough time to think beforehand.

They informed, Mohiuddin and the killers were denied bail from the High Court on April 25 and from Rajshahi judge court on June 21, despite the withdrawal prayers.

THE INVESTIGATION

Apart from the judicial confessions of Jahangir, Salam and Nazmul, five other witnesses provided statements before magistrates and 38 others gave statements before police that proved the involvement of Mohiuddin, Salehi and the three with the murder, local police briefed high-ups in a letter.

Mohiuddin masterminded the murder apprehending damage to his career by Taher who investigated out 'plagiarism' in his (Mohiuddin) 10 research papers out of total 11, the court was told.

Salehi had close ties with Mohiuddin and he also wanted to get his friend Nizam Uddin, also a student of Mohiuddin, a teacher's job at Geology and Mining department, the IO said regarding Salehi's involvement.

The IO, however, seeking a property attachment order from a court on March 8 told that police have proofs that Salehi was directly involved in the murder. "He (Salehi) went into hiding to avoid arrest," said the IO in the prayer, adding that charges will be pressed against him.

The IO also produced the call list of Taher's telephone before court and said, Taher was killed sometimes between 10pm and 12 midnight on February 1 and Jahangir made a call to a student mess from Taher's phone at 2:11am.

Meanwhile, DB police recovered a knife, Taher's missing travel bag, and mobile phone following confessional statements of the three. Taher's ATM cards were also recovered following Mohiuddin's confessions.

But a revolver used in the murder, Taher's wallet and a mobile SIM were still to be located as the arrestees stated that these were taken by the absconding Salehi.

Prof Taher, a senior pro-BNP teacher went missing on February 1 night and his body was found on the morning of February 3 inside a sewer behind his campus quarters.

BDR, BSF

FROM PAGE 16

The 256-acre land has been under Bangladesh's occupation since 1947, the BDR official said.

Abul Kalam, the wounded villager, was admitted to the Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital.

Big time games

FROM PAGE 1

We confused speed with hurry. We were very hurried. We were in a hurry too often and we made a lot of mistakes."

The winners of Saturday's match will go up against the winners of the tie between England and Portugal which takes place the same day in Gelsenkirchen.

That game is being presented as the third round of a showdown between totally different managerial types, England's cool-as-a-cucumber Swede Sven-Goran Eriksson and Portugal's boiling Brazilian Luiz Felipe Scolari.

Scolari has already won the first two rounds coaching Brazil to success over Eriksson's England in the 2002 World Cup quarter-finals and repeating the dose in the last eight of Euro 2004.

England have looked pedestrian so far, but have Wayne Rooney ominously getting back to top form, while Portugal are still licking their wounds from the brutal second-round game against the Netherlands in Nuremberg.

Key midfielders Deco and Costinha are both out due to suspension, while there are fitness doubts over winger Cristiano Ronaldo.

Deco though said he was confident the Portuguese had the experience and strength in depth to overcome that.

"We have a lot of wonderful players," he said.

"The (five) substitutes who took the field (in the 2-1 group win) against Mexico all played very well.

"The players who will take our place will do a proper job."

In the other half of the draw, Germany take on Argentina in a matchup steeped in World Cup history that will bring the host country to a standstill on Friday.

Coached by the ever-popular Jurgen Klinsmann, the Germans are building up a mighty momentum that they hope will bring them back to Berlin on July 9 to contest the final.

But they take on a recognised world power for the first time in Argentina and the portents are not good.

The Germans have yet to record a win against the South Amerian powerhouses since reunification in 1990 and they have not beaten a top-ranking world side since October 2000.

Both sides have promised fireworks in the opening 15 minutes with Germany looking to get off to the same start as they have done in their four previous games.

The winner in Berlin will take on who emerges from the late game on Friday which sees stubborn Italy take on last eight suprise packages Ukraine.

The Italians have once again limped into the latter stages of a major competition but that is when they are at their most dangerous.

Ukraine are just happy to have got this far after suffering an opening 4-0 thrashing at the hands of Spain.

Reforms

FROM PAGE 1

Hasina, the Awami League (AL) president, was taking part in a discussion on the proposed budget for fiscal 2006-07.

She told the House that the electoral reforms proposed by the 14-party opposition combine will have to be carried out for the next election to be held.

She alleged that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is "conspiring to usurp the presidential power, as she is afraid of getting rejected by the public in the next general election."

"She (Khaleda) does not have confidence even in her party's secretary general and that's why she had left him out of the government delegation for the proposed dialogue with the opposition," Hasina observed.

During the hour-long speech, the AL chief touched issues ranging from price spiral of essentials to rise of Islamic militancy to unabated corruption.

Khaleda Zia entered the House half an hour into Hasina's speech.

Accusing the prime minister, her family and the ruling alliance leaders, Hasina said, "In the last four and a half years, they have done nothing for the people of the country. They have rather been busy making money through corruption and irregularities."

Rejecting the proposed budget, the former prime minister said she wonders if the country's economy is so strong then why must the people go through such 'unremitting miseries'.

Referring to the government claim that the purchasing capacity of the people has increased under the alliance rule, she said, "Yes, I agree [with you] that the purchasing capacity has increased... but that's not of commoners. It's you who have amassed a huge wealth."

She then asked the government to disclose the source of income for the prime minister's family and the ruling alliance men who own a number of private television channels.

She said keeping Tk 11,000 crore, which is 12 per cent of the total budget, as block allocation is a flagrant violation of the constitution and financial discipline.

Turning to recent unrest in the garment sector, Hasina alleged, "Four people were arrested after the violence and all of them turned out to be activists of BNP's labour front."

Outlaws kill

FROM PAGE 16

killing Akhter on the spot and injuring Shahjahan. Locals took Shahjahan to Kushtia General Hospital in a critical condition.

Later, the same gang stormed into the house of Hazrat Ali, also a member of Sadarpur Union Parishad, at Kakiladah village and shot him point blank. Hazrat Ali died on the spot.

Police said the Janajuddho faction of PBCP claimed responsibility for the killing over telephone.

Delhi wants

FROM PAGE 16

top post in the global body, Veena Sikri informed the foreign minister.

On an enquiry, the envoy explained to the minister about India's recent ban on the export of rice, lentil and sugar.

"It is not only applicable to Bangladesh but also to all," she said, adding that the measure has been taken in order to maintain good supply line in the country as they have some shortage of these items domestically.

Regarding the imposition of countervailing duty on Bangladesh's four items--hilsa fish, saris, medicine and porcelain--Sikri said it has also been done universally on all imports for revenue purpose.

The foreign minister exchanged views on issues of UN reforms and also the candidature scenario for the post of UN secretary general.

Edn institutions

FROM PAGE 16

non-government schools and colleges but teachers and employees of these institutions receive only 15 per cent professional advantage," Prof Majharul Hannan, president of Bangladesh Council of principals, said in his keynote paper.

He said they will arrange view exchange meetings with the guardians and other teachers and employees organisations on July 4.

The Oikya Jote leaders urged the government to meet their six-point demand for the elimination of discrimination in wage and allowance in the education sector.

Besides salary increase, their demands include house rent, festival allowance, increment, health allowance and other facilities.

Oikya Jote Secretary General Muhammad Jahangir Khan said they placed the six-point demand for removing all kinds of discrimination in the education sector and improving the quality of education.

Among others, Bangladesh Teachers Association President Prof Rafika Afroj, Secretary General Alhaj Nazrul Islam, Bangladesh College Teachers Association President Prof Ishak Hossain, Jatiya Teachers Association Federation Treasurer Harun-ur-Rahid were present.

Non-government primary madrasa teachers under the banner of Bangladesh Swatantra Ebtedayee Madrasa continued their hunger strike until death for three consecutive days at Muktangon demanding their incorporation into the national pay scale.

PM asks EC

FROM PAGE 1

proposed budget for the next fiscal year.

Against the backdrop of the Election Commission's controversial activities including preparation of allegedly fake voter list, different quarters are now expressing doubts about the timely preparation of an acceptable voter list before the next elections.

Refuting the opposition's allegations of preparing for engineering the next elections, Khaleda Zia suggested the main opposition Awami League (AL) to keep confidence on people.

Khaleda Zia, who is also chairperson of the ruling BNP, blasted the media for 'writing fictions in the name of freedom of the press'.

"People do not believe them [media] as what they are writing is not true. People are living in peace and getting benefits of various initiatives taken by the alliance government," Khaleda Zia said.

Khaleda Zia launched blistering attack on AL accusing it of engaging in conspiracy and different subversive activities in the name of anti-government agitation.

Referring to the initiative for holding dialogue between the ruling and the opposition parties, the prime minister urged the opposition not to create any obstacle in holding discussion by putting conditions.

"We will listen to you.....Come and sit in dialogue shunning all the subversive activities in the name of the anti-government agitation. Door for discussion is always open. We together will fix the way for holding a fair election," the BNP chairperson said.

"But the main opposition party does not want to hold discussion as they do not want peaceful resolution. They want to destroy the peaceful atmosphere for a fair election as they know that they cannot win in the polls if it is held free and fair," Khaleda Zia said.

In her 75-minute speech, Khaleda described her government's success and urged people to vote for her alliance to win in the polls for continuation of the development activities.

"They [opposition] have taken anti-people role in the name of political opposition. We have advanced preparing the development road map, but they have tried to create obstacle to the road map. No patriotic political party can do this," she said.

"We could achieve more success in the last four years. But certain quarters who cannot do any welfare and development activities for the country only debate about the history and want to take the country backward," the premier alleged pointing to the main opposition party.

"We will not be in power during the election period. But the caretaker government will have to take measures so that terrorists and godfathers cannot emerge to deteriorate the law and order situation. Along with the people, we will also be vigilant against return of the godfathers and we will not allow anybody to snatch people's voting rights," she said.

Terming the proposed budget as pro-people and aiming at developing the country, the prime minister thanked the finance minister for proposing such a budget.

Nepal's parliament

FROM PAGE 16

returned Tuesday from a nine-day trip to Bangkok for prostate laser treatment. Koirala has been plagued by bad health and missed the opening session of parliament in April due to bronchitis.

The ornately carved seat where the king formerly sat during parliamentary proceedings had been removed and replaced with a national flag as the speaker administered the oath of office to 19 of 21 ministers and around 200 parliamentarians.

The MPs and ministers read the oath out loud together and tapped the desks in front of them to signify approval when finished.

Ram Chandra Poudel, an MP and general secretary of the Nepali Congress party, said he felt "happy and proud," after the ceremony.

"The process of institutionalizing a new democratic Nepal has begun now. We have moved away from any kind of intervention from the monarchy," he told AFP.

The assembled politicians pledged to "be totally honest in performing the duty as approved by parliament that has been restored as per the people's aspirations" in the ceremony in the house of representatives.

The swearing-in was held according to "the proclamation by the house May 18 and the house regulation passed June 10," Subash Nemwang, house of representatives speaker, told AFP.

Before the new coalition government took over and ended King Gyanendra's public political role and control of the army, the monarch swore in the premier and other lawmakers. But now oaths will be taken in parliament.

In future, "others, including army (officials), police and civil servants, will be called to take the oath of office in the days to come" in parliament and not before the king, Nemwang said.

Nepal's bar association hailed the move to sideline the king.

It is "a new and very good start," said Sambhu Thapa, the head of the bar association and a member of the committee tasked with drafting Nepal's interim constitution.

The government and Maoists rebels struck a ceasefire more than two months ago and have agreed to frame the interim constitution that will allow the guerrillas to join a new interim government to be formed.

Parliament was suspended for two-and-a-half weeks in mid-June for MPs to return to their constituencies and for politicians to focus on peace efforts.

The government and rebels have held one round of peace talks and the rebel leadership is in Kathmandu consulting with political leaders.

Seven main political parties entered a loose alliance with the rebels late last year after King Gyanendra seized control in early 2005.

Since the rebels began their "people's war" to establish a communist republic in Nepal in 1996, at least 12,500 people have been killed.

Israelis bomb

FROM PAGE 16

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said the operation would continue "over the coming days".

Launching the offensive three days after Shalit was captured in Israel by gunmen in a cross-border raid, Israeli aircraft struck at three bridges in what the army said was an attempt to stop militants moving the captive.

A helicopter attack on Gaza's only power plant sent flames shooting into the sky and cut off electricity to much of the coastal territory. Engineers said repairs could take six months.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called the bombardment of civilian infrastructure "collective punishment and a crime against humanity".

Olmert said Israel had "no intention of recapturing" the Gaza Strip.

"We have a central goal and that is to bring Gilad home," he said in a speech in Jerusalem.

Mushir al-Masri, a legislator from the governing Hamas movement, said Olmert's "adventurism" was "putting the missing soldier at risk".

Overflying Gaza, Israeli warplanes caused sonic booms that rattled Palestinian nerves and carried out what a military spokeswoman said were several missile strikes in open areas.

Security sources said an explosion that killed two Palestinians at a home in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday was accidental and not related to the Israeli offensive.

MISSING SETTLER

In another challenge to Israel, a militant group threatened to kill a Jewish settler it said it seized in the West Bank if the Gaza raid continued. Israeli authorities said the settler has been missing since Sunday.

Abu Abir, a spokesman for the Popular Resistance Committees, showed a photocopy of the missing settler's ID card at a Gaza news conference. Abu Abir and other militants left in a hurry at the sound of Israeli aircraft breaking the sound barrier.

In a statement in Brussels, the European Union's external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, called on those holding the soldier to free him.

She also urged Israel to "act with prudence" to allow diplomatic efforts to secure his release to succeed.

The hostage crisis was a major test for Olmert, a career politician with little security experience.

He was elected in March on a platform of carrying out a similar withdrawal from parts of the occupied West Bank, another territory Palestinians would like as part of a state.

With tension growing on Tuesday, Hamas reached a political deal with Abbas, a moderate, but rejected any suggestion the plan meant it recognized Israel.

Israel dismissed the manifesto, penned by Palestinians in its jails, as "double-speak" aimed at lifting a US-led aid embargo on the Palestinian Authority.

Two Israeli soldiers and two attackers were killed in Sunday's raid by gunmen from three factions, including Hamas's armed wing, who tunneled under Israel's Gaza border fence.

The groups said the assault was in response to the killing of 14 Palestinian civilians in Israeli air strikes in Gaza against militants behind cross-border rocket attacks.