

US-India nuke deal faces next crucial vote

Officials in Delhi keep their fingers crossed

AFP, New Delhi

Indian officials were upbeat yesterday after a controversial civilian nuclear energy deal with the United States sailed through a Congress committee...

A senior Indian official welcomed the 37-5 vote Tuesday by the Foreign Relations Committee in the House of Representatives...

Pakistan hangs 4 who gang-raped Christian girl

AFP, Multan

Four Pakistani Muslims convicted of gang-raping a 14-year-old Christian girl were hanged Thursday after losing a six-year legal battle against the death sentence...

The men, Omar Hayat, Mubarak Ali, Muhammad Ashraf and Shehzad Ahmed, were executed at the central jail in Faisalabad...

They were convicted of raping the teenage girl in December 1999, but had appeals against their death sentences rejected by higher courts.

Officials said there was no religious motivation behind the attack.

Christians make up less than three percent of Pakistan's mainly Muslim population and often work in low-paying menial jobs.

Gang-rapes is punishable by death under special laws introduced by Pakistan in 1993.



Vietnam's newly elected Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung (C) waves as he leaves the national assembly that ended its summer session yesterday...

Top court strikes down S Korean media bills

They are aimed at muzzling press freedom, most judges observe

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's constitutional court struck down new media bills yesterday, saying parts of the legislation were geared to muzzling press freedom.

The court took specific aim at one clause which would limit the circulation of South Korea's top three newspapers.

"The clause is in violation of business equality and freedom of the press," the 7-2 majority ruling of the nine justices said.

Two new laws, championed by South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's ruling Uri Party, were scheduled to come into effect on July 28 but now will have to be revised and resubmitted to parliament for approval.

Citing anti-trust concerns, the Newspaper Law set out to limit the combined circulation of the top three newspapers to 60 percent of the market...

Press freedom advocates have said the measure was an attempt to silence newspapers unfriendly to Roh, a former human rights lawyer who took office in 2003.

He has had an uneasy relationship with conservative dailies, accusing them of distorting his policies or publishing inaccurate stories.

The three top newspapers, the conservative Chosun Ilbo, Dong-A Ilbo and pro-business JoongAng Ilbo, currently hold more than 70 percent of the market.

The justices ruled that it was up to Korean people to choose which newspaper to read, not the law.

"There is no great danger of illegal trading (by the three newspapers) as their status in the market is up to the choice of subscribers," said the ruling.

But the court upheld parts of the new legislation, including a requirement that newspapers release information on their circulation and advertising income.

Roh has said the new laws would increase competition in the print media, while the Chosun and the Dong-A dailies which brought the suit said the government wanted to assert control over the newsroom.

The ruling was a new blow for Roh following his party's crushing defeat in local elections in May, which were seen as a referendum on the president's performance ahead of presidential polls next year.

The Uri Party remains the major party in the National Assembly with 142 of the 299 seats. But public support for Uri and Roh has been sagging.

Police kill six Maoists in Chhattisgarh

AFP, Raipur

Indian police shot dead six Maoist guerrillas and arrested three others in a raid on a rebel hideout in central India, police said Thursday.

The six died in a fierce shootout late Wednesday with police in a forested area north of Raipur, capital of the tiny state of Chhattisgarh, police said.

A woman Maoist rebel was among the three arrested in the raid in Dantewada district, one of the areas worst hit in the state by insurgent activities, inspector general T.J. Lonkumersaid.

More than 175 people -- including security personnel, Maoists and civilians -- have been killed in a wave of violence since January in Chhattisgarh.

An estimated 50,000 villagers, caught in the conflict between the rebels and security forces, have fled their homes and taken refuge in 27 government relief camps.

The Maoists -- who have taken control of 10 of Chhattisgarh's 16 impoverished districts -- say they are fighting for the rights of poor and landless farmers.

Briton jailed for double murder in Singapore

AFP, Singapore

A British businessman was sentenced to 24 years in prison Thursday for killing his Singaporean chauffeur and the driver's Chinese girlfriend.

Michael McCrea, 48, who was sent to Singapore from Australia after losing an extradition battle, was sentenced to the maximum 10 years each for two counts of culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

He received an additional four years for causing evidence to disappear in relation to a murder, his lawyer Kelvin Lim told AFP.

McCrea was "very shocked" by the length of the sentence, Lim said.

He and his client had expected a maximum 16 years in prison, back-dated to June 2002 when McCrea and his girlfriend Audrey Ong were arrested by Australian police, Lim said.

The couple had fled to Australia after the killings in January that year.

McCrea admitted on Monday to strangling his driver Koh Nai Guan, 46, and using a plastic bag to suffocate Lan Ya Ming, 29. Court was told that McCrea had a fight with the driver who had used the word "slut" to describe McCrea's Singaporean girlfriend, local radio reported.

SRI LANKAN VIOLENCE

Truce monitors hold crisis talks

AFP, Oslo

Five Nordic nations went into crisis talks here Thursday to try to salvage Sri Lanka's faltering ceasefire, as the slaying of a top army general underscored the threat of full-scale war.

Peace broker Norway's talks with the four other members of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) opened in Oslo amid uncertainty over the role of foreign truce observers on the South Asian island, organisers said.

The meeting was called after the Tamil Tigers demanded that monitors from European Union nations Finland, Sweden and Denmark quit the mission, saying they could no longer be neutral following an EU ban on the Tigers.

The SLMM has suspended its monitoring of sea movements after a Tiger rebel attack last month saw the sinking of a Sri Lankan navy gunboat. SLMM said its monitors aboard another Sri Lankan navy craft had a narrow escape.

Five Sri Lankan sailors were killed in a battle off the island's north-western coast Wednesday, the same day major general Parami Kulatunga who was killed by a suspected Tiger suicide bomber was cremated.

More than 820 people have been killed in the latest upsurge in fighting in Sri Lanka's embattled northern and eastern regions confining an Oslo-brokered 2002 ceasefire to paper and raising doubts over Norway's role.

The London-based human rights watchdog Amnesty International Thursday urged Sri Lanka to better protect civilians amid an upsurge in violence citing UN figures of tens of thousands displaced since April.

"The state's failure to provide adequate security and to ensure that attacks against civilians are prosecuted has resulted in widespread fear and panic," said Purna Sen, Amnesty's Asia-Pacific director.

"Almost every major attack in recent months has had a devastating ripple effect as people flee from their homes and villages in search of sanctuary."

A total of 39,883 people have been displaced in Sri Lanka's embattled north and east since April, according to United Nations figures.

With the worsening security situation, Norway has been struggling to get the parties back to the table.

"There is no question of Norway pulling out," Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim said last week. "Our patience is almost unlimited but those who are impatient are the civilians."

"The LTTE's demand that SLMM monitors from EU countries be replaced is deeply regrettable and will weaken the SLMM in a critical period," Solheim said.

The Tiger demand would force 37 out of the 57 monitors now in Sri Lanka to quit, leaving only those from Norway and Iceland and effectively hamstringing the SLMM.

Odd Naustdal, Solheim's information officer, said the meeting was kept low-key for now, with no news conference or press releases scheduled, "although this could change".

"The meeting is an internal working meeting to discuss the SLMM," he told AFP.

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