

Lanka steps up alert as Tigers honour suicide bombers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka stepped up already tight security yesterday as Tamil Tiger rebels prepared to celebrate "Black Tiger Day" honouring the 261 men and women who have staged suicide bombings, officials said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) arranged Hindu religious services across the territory under their control to mark Wednesday's 19th anniversary of their first suicide bombing.

"Security is already tight, but we take note of such anniversaries because there could be an escalation (of violence) at this time," a senior police officer said Tuesday, a day after eight people were killed and dozens wounded in three mine blasts in the north.

An upsurge of bloodletting since December between the majority

Sinhalese and minority Tamil population has killed more than 830 people and strained a shaky truce brokered by Norway in 2002.

"There's a bigger security deployment on the ground," the officer said.

The pro-rebel Nitharsana-m.com website said the Tigers will pay homage to the bombers from their suicide squad on Wednesday.

"Events to observe the Black Tigers' day at government and public institutions in the (rebel-held) Wann (area) have also been organised," the website said.

A man known as Captain Miller drove a truck packed with explosives into an army camp in the Jaffna peninsula 19 years ago, killing 40 soldiers and starting the cult of suicide bombings, which emerged a trademark of the Tigers.

Two days after the 2004 Black Tiger

anniversary, a woman suicide bomber blew herself up and killed four policemen who were about to search her at a Colombo police station.

For LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran, 51, the suicide bombers are the "protective armour" of his separatist movement which started in 1972 as a rag-tag band but is now regarded as a ruthlessly efficient killing machine.

The Tigers have been blamed for a number of high-profile victims, including former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

A former US deputy secretary of State, Richard Armitage, described the LTTE as an outfit "best known for pioneering the practice of turning its sons and daughters into human bombs."

EU ban on Tigers a huge mistake

Says Sinn Fein leader

AFP, Colombo

The chief negotiator for Northern Ireland's main Roman Catholic party, Sinn Fein, was quoted by Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka as saying a European Union ban on the guerrillas was a "huge mistake."

Martin McGuinness travelled to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi for talks with the political leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the LTTE said in a statement.

It said McGuinness, the first European politician to visit the region after the 25-member EU outlawed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation in May, discussed the "present state of" Sri Lanka's faltering peace bid.

"Regarding the EU ban he stated, it was a huge mistake for the EU leaders to demonize the LTTE and the political leaders of the Tamil people," the LTTE quoted him as saying.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists from Communist Party of India (CPI) shout anti-Israeli slogans during a demonstration near the Israeli embassy in New Delhi yesterday. Hundreds of CPI activists protested against the continued barbaric aggression of Israeli troops on the Palestinian people.

Maoist attacks leave 8 dead in east India

AFP, New Delhi

Maoist rebels have killed eight people including three policemen and a former rebel commander in two separate attacks in eastern India, officials said yesterday.

Hours after the attacks late Monday in the neighbouring states of Bihar and Jharkhand, the federal government renewed a call to the outlawed guerrillas to give up their arms and enter talks with the government.

Scores of rebels attacked a police station and killed two guards and an inspector in Bihar's Tankuppa county, not far from one of Buddhism's holiest pilgrimage sites, the Press Trust of India quoted police as saying.

Outnumbered police and the Maoists exchanged more than 2,000 rounds of gunfire in the fighting, in which a civilian also died. The rebels dynamited the police station after overrunning it.

Police said they were hunting for the rebels, who enjoy wide support among low-caste Hindus in impoverished Bihar.

Kabul riots in May killed 17

AFP, Kabul

A traffic accident involving the US military and subsequent rioting that tore through Afghanistan's capital a month ago killed 17 people and injured nearly 200, the government said Tuesday after an official investigation.

Interior Minister Zahir Ahmad Muqbel told reporters that nine people were killed in the initial traffic incident on May 29 in the Afghan capital.

"The rest of them were killed in the subsequent riots," he said without giving a breakdown, including how many of the dead were victims of gunfire from US troops when they were stoned by an angry crowd after the accident.

Until now there has been no clear death toll although police said the following day that initial investigations found 12 people had died.

The president's office has said five people were killed in the accident. Witnesses said four were killed when US troops opened fire.

The US-led coalition says some of the troops opened fire in self-defence, but it has not made clear if they fired only above the crowd. It is investigating.

British minister sees attack 'inevitable'

REUTERS, Nicosia

A new guerrilla attack on Britain is inevitable, a British junior minister responsible for counter-terrorism said on Monday.

Speaking days before the first anniversary of the July 7 attacks in London which killed 52 people and four suicide bombers, junior Foreign Office Minister Kim Howells said he did not believe al-Qaeda focused simply on anniversaries.

"I don't think they care a great deal about anniversaries. They care much more about success," he said in Cyprus.

But asked if he thought more attacks were inevitable, Howells said: "Yes, I do think it is inevitable, yes. We have already foiled since the London bombings a number of very, very serious would-be attacks."

Govt has 'messed up' Says Indian Left

AFP, New Delhi

India's Communists, allies of the ruling Congress-led alliance, said the government had "messed up" economically and announced a week-long protest against high prices and privatisation plans.

The Communists on whom Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government relies for a majority in parliament appealed to other allies of the ruling coalition to pressure the government to change its economic policies.

"The government has messed up the whole issue," Communist leader A.B. Bardhan told reporters in New Delhi, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

Bardhan said the Communists would spearhead the nationwide protest starting July 13 and ending on July 19. It gave no immediate details of the protest.

Singh's government came to power following general elections in May 2004 promising economic reforms with "a human face."

Though India has registered impressive growth rates since the introduction of market reforms in 1991, about 40 percent of its billion-plus population still live on less than one dollar a day, according to World Bank figures.

India's economy grew by 8.4 percent in the year to March, beating previous estimates of 8.1 percent, but inflation has also picked up, hitting 5.44 percent in the week to June 17,

its highest level in 13 months mainly due to an increase in fuel prices, which the Communists had opposed.

Last month, the government also announced plans to sell 10 percent stakes in lignite mining and power generating firm Neyveli Lignite and India's second largest aluminium-maker, National Aluminium Co Ltd.

This move has angered the Communists who have been against sales of stakes in profitable state-run firms.

The government says the sale proceeds would be deposited in the National Investment Fund to be used for social sector projects and reviving ailing state-run firms.

The government has not said how much revenue the sales would generate, but media reports have said it would be about 555 million dollars in total.

Employees of both firms have protested the move and workers at Neyveli Lignite threatened to go on strike later Tuesday.

Political analysts had said a resounding Communist victory in key state polls in India in May could spell trouble for the Congress-led government's plans for economic reforms.

The Left has been extremely critical of the government's economic policies -- including the privatisation of airports, opening up of the insurance sector and allowing foreign direct investment in retail.

Five Afghan labourers of US base killed

AP, Kabul

Suspected Taliban militants shot and killed five Afghan labourers bringing construction supplies to a US military base in eastern Afghanistan, police said yesterday.

A sixth worker was wounded in the ambush Monday in Kunar Province, said Abdul Jalal Jalal, the provincial police chief. The driver of the truck carrying the workers escaped unharmed.

Jalal said he suspected Taliban militants were behind the attack and that the labourers were targeted because they worked at an American base.

In Kabul, a roadside bomb exploded near a bus bringing Interior Ministry officials to work Tuesday, wounding one of them, said ministry spokesman Yousuf Stanezai.

Resurgent Taliban attacks have raised concerns about Afghanistan's shaky stability.

The United States said Monday it was giving Afghanistan \$2 billion worth of military weapons and vehicles.

Two people were washed away

Rains trigger floods in India: 24 die

REUTERS, Kolkata

Heavy rains triggered floods and landslides in eastern India, killing 24 people overnight and disrupting life in the financial hub of Mumbai for a second day yesterday, officials and residents said.

The bad weather was caused by a depression over the east coast and a revival of the June-September annual monsoon rains which had hit a lean patch, leading to a dry spell across large swathes of the subcontinent.

At least 22 people were killed in the eastern states of Orissa and Jharkhand and several were missing in neighbouring West Bengal after torrential rains caused rivers to break their banks and triggered landslides, officials said.

Nine of the 22 died when their country boat capsized in the Kanhar river in Jharkhand, about 135km west of the state capital, Ranchi.

Two people were washed away

in floodwaters, 10 fishermen were missing and thousands displaced in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh as hundreds of villages were inundated.

"Four flood gates of a reservoir were also swept away in the swirling rain waters," said V.N. Vishnu, administrator of Srikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh.

Navy boats and helicopters had been pressed in to rescue marooned people from rooftops and also to drop food, medicine and water packets, authorities said.

"We have evacuated 15,000 people from waterlogged villages in the district to the safety of relief camps," Vishnu said.

In Mumbai, the country's commercial capital, schools and colleges were shut and emergency workers flushed muddy waters from submerged streets as the bustling city struggled to cope with a second day of monsoon rains.

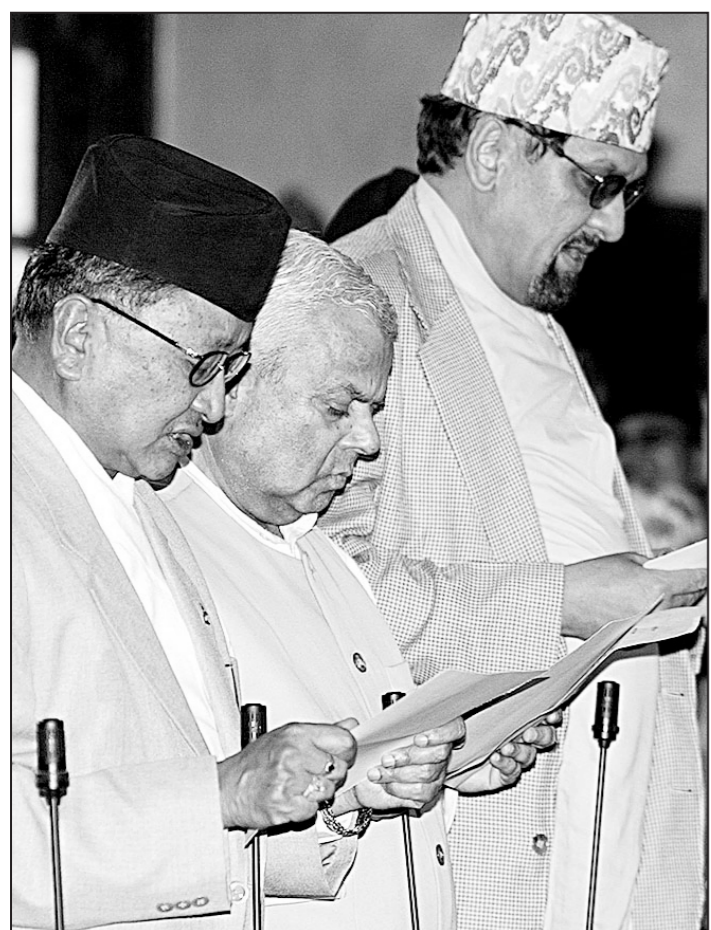


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese ministers (L-R) Gopal Man Shrestha, Mahanta Thakur and Ram Sharan Mahat read official documents in the Parliament in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's 84-year-old Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, who has been dogged by ill-health since taking the job, had been scheduled to address parliament about government policies for the coming year, but the announcement was put back for at least five days.

Nasa goes ahead with Discovery launch despite foam damage

AP, Cape Canaveral

Nasa managers hoped to make Discovery the most inspiring sight in the nation's skies yesterday as the space agency prepared for the first Fourth of July launch in history.

The launch attempt came after meetings Monday where Nasa managers pondered whether a 5-inch long crack in the external fuel tank's foam, which caused a 3-inch piece of foam to pop out on the launch pad, posed a threat to the shuttle during liftoff.

The patch of foam fell off an area that covers an expandable bracket holding a liquid oxygen feed line against the huge external tank. Nasa engineers believe ice built up in that area from condensation caused by rain Sunday.

US stars align in anti-Iraq war hunger strike

AFP, Washington

Star Hollywood actor-activists including Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon and anti-war campaigners led by Cindy Sheehan savoured a last meal outside the White House Monday before launching a hunger strike to demand the return of US troops from Iraq.

As Americans got set to fire up barbecues to celebrate the US Independence Day on July 4, the anti-war protesters planned to embark at midnight on a "Troops Home Fast".

"We've marched, held vigils, lobbied Congress, camped out at Bush's ranch, we've even gone to jail -- now it's time to do more," said Sheehan, who emerged as an anti-war icon after losing her 24-year-old son Casey in Iraq.

For their "last meal", several dozen protesters on Monday afternoon clustered around a rose-colored tablecloth on the pavement outside the White House fence.



PHOTO: AFP

Prime Minister of Spain Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero (2L) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2R) watch as Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma (R) and Spanish Minister of External Affairs and Cooperation Miguel Moratinos (L) exchange a mutual legal assistance treaty on criminal matters in New Delhi yesterday.

Asteroid has near-collision with Earth: Scientists

AFP, Washington

An asteroid hurtling through space came within a hair's breadth -- in astronomical terms, at least -- of crashing into the Earth early Monday, US scientists said.

Apollo Asteroid 2004 XP14 was discovered by the Lincoln Laboratory in Lexington, Massachusetts, part of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which claims the title of "the world's principal detector of asteroids" said Roger Sudbury, a spokesman for the lab.

"We were the discoverer," said Sudbury of the Apollo Asteroid 2004 XP14, which passed 268,873 miles (some 432,000 kilometres) from the Earth at 0425 GMT.

The distance between the two bodies was slightly greater than that between the Earth and the moon -- a close shave in the vastness of outer space.

Sudbury said the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Minor Planet Centre, which is affiliated with the Lincoln Lab, had classified the body as a "potentially hazardous asteroid," because of its prox-

imity to Earth which, had it been hit, would have caused a "significant impact."

"Most would just burn up upon entry into the atmosphere," Sudbury said.

"The question, of course, is where the Earth is as the asteroid goes by?"

Sudbury said The Minor Planet Centre has several criteria, including size and other factors, to indicate "whether an asteroid could actually penetrate the Earth's atmosphere and do significant damage."

He said scientists were able to reassure the public that there was never any great risk that Monday's asteroid would stray off course and crash into the Earth.

Sudbury told AFP that near-Earth asteroids were once believed to be a rarity, but recent scientific and technological advances have allowed researchers to track asteroids that previously escaped detection.

"In a few years we've detected more than have ever been discovered in history," he said.