

UN threatens to halt aid work in Lanka

Colombo demands proof of massacre charges

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

The United Nations threatened overnight to suspend aid operations in Sri Lanka after UN monitors accused the security forces of executing aid workers.

Nordic truce monitors on Wednesday formally accused the security forces of being behind the execution-style murders of 17 local staff of aid agency Action Contre La Faim earlier this month in the northeast.

The government denies it, and angry officials accused the monitors of being biased toward the rebels in their ruling.

"We have no independent information ourselves in the UN,

but I say we cannot continue in this area unless people will be held accountable for the execution of 17 of our colleagues," the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland, told reporters in New York.

The victims, mostly Tamils, were found shot dead in their compound in the northeastern town of Muttur, around 200km northeast of the capital Colombo. It was the worst mass murder of aid staff since a 2003 bomb attack on the United Nations compound in Baghdad.

The Nordic Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees a 2002 truce that now only holds on paper, says Sri Lankan authorities have

obstructed their efforts to investigate, and says it is convinced no armed groups other than the security services could have been responsible.

"I will have some problems to trust a government investigation now because they are too involved in this case," outgoing chief monitor Maj. Gen. Ulf Henricsson said in an interview.

"A democratic and accountable government should support an international commission to look into this case."

"This is not just a Sri Lankan problem. This is a worldwide problem if you can kill aid workers without any punishment."

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan

government demanded proof yesterday of allegations by Nordic truce monitors that security forces were responsible for the massacre of 17 aid workers of a French charity.

"It is premature to blame the government without any supporting evidence," Sri Lankan government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said in Colombo.

The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) said Wednesday that Sri Lankan troops were involved in the execution-style slayings of the 17 local workers of Action Against Hunger during battles with Tiger Tamil rebels near the town of Muttur in the northeast earlier this month.



Pakistani army troops and rescue workers search for survivors in the rubble of a collapsed hotel in Murree 50km north of Islamabad yesterday. A woman has been rescued and three bodies recovered from a hotel which collapsed in Pakistan's popular hill resort of Murree early yesterday, trapping more than a dozen people.

30 Indians drown as boat sinks in Ganges river

AFP, New Delhi

More than 30 people drowned after a crowded ferry capsized Thursday on the Ganges River in eastern India, officials said.

The boat capsized 70km from Patna, the capital of the state of Bihar.

"More than 30 people have drowned," said Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar in Patna. "Divers are there trying to take out the dead bodies."

The vessel was carrying 50 people and two buffaloes even though it only had the capacity for 25 passengers, according to the Press Trust of India news agency.

"There will be a thorough investigation as to what kind of boat and how many passengers were travelling," Kumar told the television briefing.

Some 17 passengers were rescued after the morning accident, said district magistrate B. Rajendra, who was in charge of the rescue operation.

Disappearances up in Asia

Says rights group

REUTERS, Islamabad

Several hundred people in Pakistan have disappeared, apparently taken into detention in connection with the war on terrorism, human rights group Amnesty International said on Wednesday.

So called enforced disappearance has long been a problem in strife-torn countries such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, but new patterns have emerged in South Asia related to the war on terrorism, such as the Pakistani cases, it said.

"Whilst many of those have eventually been acknowledged as being held in Guantanamo Bay, others are believed still to be held in Pakistani detention although

their precise whereabouts remain unknown," the rights group said, referring to the US prison in Cuba.

Pakistan is a major ally in the US-led war on terrorism and has rounded up hundreds of suspected militants and many are believed to have been handed over to the United States.

"South Asia has a history of enforced disappearances, with tens of thousands of people going missing over past decades in countries such as Nepal and Sri Lanka," Amnesty International's deputy Asia director, Catherine Baber, said in a statement.

"It is very disappointing to see countries such as Pakistan join in the trend that one would hope

would be declining," she said.

In Nepal, where Maoist rebels have battled government forces for the past decade, a government committee is investigating more than 600 cases of enforced disappearance, the rights group said.

Sri Lanka, where ethnic Tamil rebels began a war for a separate state in 1983, has one of the highest levels of unresolved enforced disappearance in the world, it said, though it did not give an estimate of the number of cases.

Up to 10,000 enforced disappearances have been reported in the Indian-controlled part of the disputed Kashmir region, where Muslim rebels have been battling security forces since 1989, it said.

Pakistan troops find tribal chief's body

AP, Tartari

Pakistani soldiers searching a cave found the body of a fugitive tribal leader whose death in a military raid sparked large-scale unrest, but it was pinned under a boulder and will take days to retrieve, army officials said Thursday.

Nawab Akbar Bugti, 79, was killed when an explosion Saturday destroyed his mountain cave hideout in the Tartari area of Kohlu district in southwestern Baluchistan province. His son has said the violence that has gripped southern Pakistan since his death would continue until his father's body was returned.

Two senior army officials, who requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the search for the remains, said soldiers working at the cave on Wednesday spotted Bugti's head and shoulders protruding from underneath a giant boulder.

It would take at least three days to remove his body from underneath the boulder, said one of the officials, who works in army intelligence.

Bugti's death has sparked days

of rioting and protests led by his supporters in Baluchistan, a fiercely independent and restive region bordering Iran and Afghanistan. Bugti had led an often violent political campaign against the Pakistani government to win a greater share of wealth obtained from natural resources, like gas and oil, extracted in the region.

On Wednesday, hundreds of protesters blocked highways across Baluchistan, cutting Quetta off from major cities like Karachi in the south and Lahore to the east. Hundreds of people were prevented from going to work and scores of businesses and offices shut for the day.

Officials said Thursday that all the roads had reopened.

Bugti's son, Jamil, had warned that the unrest would continue until his father's body is returned to his family for burial. "We need my father's body. It is very important for us according to Islam and our culture," the son said Wednesday while greeting people expressing their condolences at his father's home in Quetta.

Indian diplomat named special envoy for US nuke talks

AFP, New Delhi

India's top diplomat Shyam Saran was named yesterday special envoy for negotiations with the United States on their controversial civilian nuclear energy deal.

He will be replaced as foreign secretary by India's High Commissioner to Pakistan, 57-year-old Shiv Shankar Menon, the prime minister's office said in a statement.

Saran's appointment showed the importance India is placing on successfully concluding its nuclear deal with the United States that New Delhi has said is crucial to meeting the energy needs of power-starved country.

Under the deal inked in March, the United States will aid the development of civil nuclear power in India in return for New Delhi placing its civil nuclear facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency inspections.

The United States has withheld its civilian nuclear know-how from India since 1974 when it conducted its first nuclear test.

India sees progress in battle against Maoist despite jump in toll

AFP, New Delhi

India is moving forward in its battle against Maoist rebels despite a sharp jump in casualties in the worst-hit state, a government official said Wednesday.

The statement by Home Secretary VK Duggal came after a one-day meeting with government officials and police chiefs from 13 revolt-hit states on how to stop Maoist violence from spilling into India's remaining 16 states.

Some 272 civilians were killed in the central state of Chhattisgarh, seen as India's worst hotbed of Maoist militancy, in the first seven months of 2006 compared to 130 in all of 2005.

Duggal attributed the rise in violence in Chhattisgarh to rebel anger at a state-sponsored anti-Maoist movement launched about a year ago called Salwa Judum (Marching for Peace).

Consequently, the rebels there were staging an increasing number of attacks, he said. But "generally

from all (state) chief secretaries there was a definite hopefulness that things are moving in the right direction."

The Press Trust of India said 486 people had died so far this year in Maoist-related violence across the country but gave no comparative figures.

The rebels control 10 of Chhattisgarh's 16 districts.

The guerrillas, who say they are fighting for the rights of neglected tribes and landless farmers, also hold sway in states such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last month ordered state governments to step up operations to tackle the Maoists, which experts say have links to leftwing guerrillas in neighbouring Nepal.

"We must recognise past responses are inadequate in dealing with these problems which are of a different intensity, magnitude, scale and scope," Singh said, branding the Maoists "probably the single biggest challenge" facing India.



Pakistani paramilitary soldiers stand alert on a road after three days of riot in Quetta yesterday following the killing of rebel tribal chief Nawab Akbar Bugti. The body of slain Baluch tribal leader has been sighted for the first time since he was buried in his cave hideout during a military operation six days ago in Kohlu in southwestern Baluchistan province.

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