

Tigers agree to hold peace talks

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday told peace broker Norway that they will attend talks with the Sri Lankan government later this month despite a recent escalation in violence, a top guerrilla leader said.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they will name their delegation for the October 28-29 talks in Switzerland in a few days, the group's political wing leader, SP Thamilselvan, said.

"We will attend the talks," Thamilselvan told reporters in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi after talks with Norway's envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer, who arrived in Colombo Tuesday amid uncertainty over the proposed talks.

Thamilselvan said they will name a team of negotiators to attend the

talks in Switzerland where they held a round of negotiations in February, according to a transcript of the news conference obtained by AFP.

"We are going for talks in deference to the wishes of the international community," Thamilselvan said.

There was no immediate word from the Norwegians, but the breakthrough came amid stepped-up international pressure on Colombo and the Tigers to enter talks this month and save a collapsing ceasefire.

Japan's envoy Yasushi Akashi met with the Tigers on Wednesday after talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse on reviving peace efforts.

The US embassy said there could be more attacks in Sri Lanka following the latest escalation of violence marked by a Tamil Tiger

suicide attack on the southern port of Galle on Wednesday.

The US embassy in Colombo "wants to make Americans aware of the heightened possibility for terrorist attacks in Colombo in the near future," the US embassy said, as US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher met with officials in Sri Lanka.

Boucher arrived Thursday and held talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse, officials said, as the US sought to nudge the government and the Tigers to resume peace talks later this month.

Both sides have said they are willing to talk and have blamed each other for the recent upsurge in violence.

Both the Tigers and the Sri Lankan government had said they were keen to resume negotiations,

which stalled after a meeting in Switzerland in February.

Both sides have blamed each other for spiralling violence which has claimed the lives of more than 2,300 people since December, according to an official count.

The violence has come despite a ceasefire struck in 2002.

Police defused a Claymore mine in a key town just outside the capital Colombo Thursday, a day after Tamil rebels staged a suicide bombing at a southern port, the defence ministry said.

The mine was discovered in a pile of garbage, the ministry said in a statement.

The bomb, packed with ball bearings, was found at Kadawatha, a sizeable town about 15 kilometres from Colombo.



Sri Lankan naval soldiers and officers conduct investigation close to a destroyed ship at the Dakshina Naval base in Galle, some 180kms south of Colombo Wednesday. Tamil Tiger rebels disguised as fishermen staged a suicide attack against Sri Lanka's southern port of Galle Wednesday destroying three gunboats, officials said.

40 feared drowned as bus plunges into India lake

AFP, Bhopal

At least 40 people were feared to have drowned yesterday when their bus plunged into a lake in central India, police said.

Divers were searching for victims of the accident, which occurred in Rewa district, 530km east of Madhya Pradesh state capital Bhopal, police said.

The bus, which was carrying about 45 people, "fell into the lake while negotiating a bend. Four people have been rescued so far," a police official said.

Road accidents are frequent in India. They are often blamed on overcrowding, reckless driving and ageing vehicles.

4 rebels, soldier killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Four Islamic militants and an Indian soldier were killed during a fierce gunbattle near the de facto border dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan, an army spokesman said yesterday.

"The four (militants) were killed as they entered our territory from across the Line of Control late Wednesday," the spokesman said, referring to the ceasefire line that divides the disputed territory.

He said the four were killed in the northern Machil sector.

"A soldier hurt during the fighting died in hospital this morning," he added.

"By killing the four, the army has foiled a major infiltration attempt by militants," he said, adding it was the third such bid this month. In two previous attempts, seven militants and three Indian soldiers were killed.

Pakistan arrests serial killers of policemen

REUTERS, Karachi

Police in Pakistan's southern city of Karachi have arrested two serial killers who shot dead 15 security officers since June, an official said yesterday.

Police arrested Farhan and his accomplice Kamran on Wednesday.

"After interrogating Farhan it appears he was motivated by his mother's humiliation by some policemen when she was arrested for drug peddling," Jahangir Mirza, the chief of police in the southern province of Sindh told Reuters.

She has spent a total of four years in different jails. I think she was humiliated by the police during her arrests," he said.

Millions in S Asia still lack basic services

REUTERS, New Delhi

South Asian governments are failing to provide millions of people in the region with basic health and education services, clean water and sanitation, aid agency Oxfam International said yesterday.

Poor infrastructure, inefficient public delivery systems and the widespread subjugation of women across South Asia mean a litany of problems blighting the region remain unsolved, Oxfam said in a report.

Two out of three Indians cannot afford essential medicines even as the country gears up to become a medical tourism destination for

Westerners looking for cheaper surgery.

At least a third of children in Pakistan and Nepal do not go to school.

In Bangladesh, arsenic-contaminated shallow tube-wells are exposing an estimated 25 million people to the toxin, while 87 percent of Afghans have no access to clean drinking water.

Speaking at the report's launch in New Delhi, Oxfam's Balasubramanyam Muralidharan urged the government to abolish charging fees for access to healthcare.

The system should be funded entirely through taxes, he said.

Afzal hanging put off till decision on mercy plea

REUTERS, New Delhi

The hanging of Mohammed Afzal, a Kashmiri convicted for his role in the 2001 attack on the Parliament, has been put off until a decision on a mercy petition filed by his wife, an official said on Thursday.

Afzal, sentenced to death for his role in the attack which brought India and Pakistan to the brink of a fourth war, was due to be hanged at 6 am on Friday.

"Since his petition is pending before the president, the hanging will not take place tomorrow," Home ministry spokesman Onkarnal Kedia told Reuters.

N Korea test poses threat beyond Asia Says Manmohan

REUTERS, New Delhi

North Korea's nuclear test has upset the balance of power in Asia and poses a threat beyond the continent, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said on Wednesday.

Pyeongyang conducted an underground test last week, drawing condemnation from around the world and UN sanctions aimed at choking off its weapons programmes.

India, which tested atomic devices in 1974 and again in 1998, has made it clear it does not want another nuclear power in Asia.

"The spread of science has led to the emergence of weapons of mass destruction, most recently

seen in its manifestation in North Korea, thus changing the regional balance of power and threatening trans-regional consequences," Singh told a conference of military commanders in New Delhi.

India, keen to present itself as a responsible nuclear power with a democratic polity, is worried that North Korea's move might scupper a civilian nuclear deal with the United States that was signed last year.

The agreement has been stalled in the US Congress, which has to give its approval before President George W Bush can sign it into law.

Pakistan delays execution of Briton amid royal row

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has delayed the hanging of a British man by two months, officials said yesterday, meaning it will no longer coincide with a visit by Britain's Prince Charles.

Musharraf postponed the execution scheduled for November 1 following an urgent appeal by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and after Charles, the heir to the British throne, also got involved in the controversial case.

It is the fourth time the Pakistani leader has spared Mirza Tahir Hussain. The 36-year-old has spent nearly half his life in jail here for the murder of a taxi driver despite earlier having been cleared by a court.

Nepal king fails to answer probe on crackdown

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's isolated King Gyanendra has missed a deadline to answer questions by an inquiry panel on this year's crackdown on pro-democracy protests in which at least 22 people were killed, a committee member said yesterday.

A powerful panel, set up by Nepal's multi-party government, sent questions to the monarch last week, asking him what he knew about the bloody crackdown on anti-king activists in April and gave him until Wednesday to answer.

More than 5,000 people were wounded in the action.

"He has not responded," Harihar Birahi told Reuters.

"We have taken this as his refusal to answer. We are now free to submit a report on the basis of available evidence. There is no room left for him to complain now," he added.

It was not immediately clear what action the monarch would face next. The panel, headed by a retired judge of the Supreme Court, is due to submit its findings later this month.



Pakistani visitors who come to see their jailed loved ones wait in the premises of Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi yesterday where a British national Mirza Tahir Hussain, was due to be hanged. But Pakistan has delayed the hanging of Hussain by two months from its scheduled date of November 1, when Prince Charles was due to visit the country.



Pakistani Shia Muslim protesters burn a US flag to mark Al-Quds (Jerusalem) day during the holiest month of Ramadan in Karachi Wednesday. Protestors rallied in this port city against the United States and Israel and prayed for the liberation of Palestine.