

3 killed in Assam bomb blast

AFP, Guwahati

At least three people were killed and 20 injured in a powerful explosion at a crowded marketplace in India's northeastern state of Assam, officials said Saturday.

Suspected militants of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) triggered the blast Friday at a busy vegetable market in Dhekiajuli town, about 140km north of Assam's main city of Guwahati, police said.

"The market was crowded with evening shoppers when the powerful bomb went off," Assam police intelligence chief Khagen Sharma told AFP.

"At least 12 of the injured are stated to be critical," the police official said.

Two paramilitary troopers were among the injured.

Sharma said the bomb was concealed in a bag and kept on a bicycle in the centre of the market. No one has claimed responsibility.

The Ulfa has been fighting for an independent Assamese homeland since 1979.

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam during the past two decades.

Lankans asked to push peace or lose foreign aid

AFP, Geneva/Colombo

Sri Lanka's warring parties resumed talks in Geneva yesterday and received a stern warning that they will lose international financial aid unless large-scale killings stop immediately.

Peace broker Norway said the international community had virtually placed the Sri Lankans on notice to show progress in efforts to resolve the long-running separatist conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives since 1972.

"We have shown a lot of patience and we are prepared to show more, but the people in Sri Lanka and the international community will be impatient," Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim said at the start of the talks.

He said the island risked losing huge foreign aid and goodwill unless the government and Tamil Tiger rebels worked towards a final political solution based on a federal formula agreed in December 2002.

Speaking on behalf of Sri

Lanka's key international backers, including the US, European Union and Japan, Solheim said the number of people killed in Sri Lanka in the past eight months exceeded the toll in Lebanon.

Official figures show that about 3,000 people have been killed on the Indian Ocean island since the two parties had their last face-to-face meeting in Switzerland in February and agreed to scale down violence.

Solheim said both sides had failed to keep promises made then and the killings had escalated.

He blamed both the government and the Tigers for the bloodshed and said it was an "unwinnable war".

Diplomats expect the two-day meeting at Geneva's International Conference Centre will simply buy time for more talks in December and January.

However, Solheim said Saturday's gathering, arranged after intense international pressure on the Sri Lanka government and the Tamil Tigers, was a "step in the

right direction."

"These talks constitute a small ray of hope, at least a step in the right direction," he said.

The head of the Sri Lanka government delegation, Nimal Siripala de Silva, and the head of the political wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), SP Thamilselvan, shook hands at the invitation of Solheim, signalling the start of talks.

"There may not be a dramatic outcome of the talks, but what is expected is to be able to agree on dates for future talks," a diplomat close to the process told AFP. "We are looking at dates in December and January."

Peace broker Norway was unable to prepare a mutually agreed agenda for the two-day meeting.

The Tigers insist that humanitarian issues, including the reopening of a key highway to Sri Lanka's northern peninsula of Jaffna be taken up. However, the Sri Lanka government wants political issues thrashed out first.

Both are under international pressure to address human rights issues, with civilians increasingly caught up in fighting and even being targeted for attack.

Solheim noted that renewed fighting had also displaced over 200,000 people within the island.

"We would consider the outcome of the talks a success only if we can get the humanitarian issues sorted out over the weekend," Thamilselvan told AFP before the start of Saturday's meeting, highlighting road access to the northern Jaffna peninsula.

Thamilselvan said that failure of the Swiss talks could lead to "real, real war" in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's only woman negotiator, Fariel Ashraff, who also represents a minority Muslim party, said she expected both parties to show flexibility despite rigid positions taken publicly.

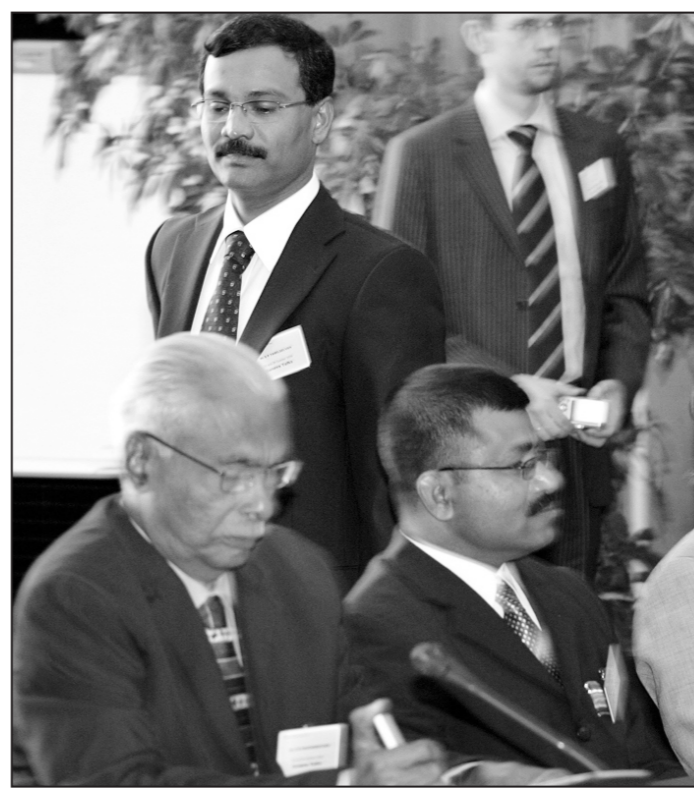


PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan political wing leader of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), SP Thamilselvan (Above L) passes behind member of the delegation at the opening of the Sri Lanka peace talks yesterday in Geneva. Sri Lanka's warring parties shook hands as they resumed face-to-face negotiations in the presence of Norwegian peace brokers after eight months break and 3,000 deaths in fighting on the Indian Ocean island.

'I'm not America's man in Iraq', says Maliki

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki told the US ambassador to his country "I consider myself a friend of the United States, but I'm not America's man in Iraq," a close aide told AFP yesterday.

Hassen Sunaid, a senior Maliki adviser who talked to him immediately after Friday's meeting with Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, said Maliki would talk by video link to US President George W Bush at 2.00pm (1100 GMT) yesterday.

Maliki fell out publicly with his main ally this week after US officials appeared to try to bump him into accepting a timetable of political reforms designed to placate Iraq's warring parties and end a sectarian war.

The furious Iraqi leader insisted that no outside power could determine the agenda of his government, despite the two countries' agreeing over the broad outlines of a plan to disarm illegal militias and kickstart a peace process.

The prime minister met Khalilzad on Friday and the pair later released a rare joint statement which tried to paper over the cracks in their alliance, but not before Maliki had spoken firmly to the US envoy.

Rains, floods kill 11 in Lanka

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Torrential rains and flooding have killed 11 people in southern and western Sri Lanka and forced around 18,000 families from their homes, a top disaster relief official said yesterday.

"We are providing dry rations to the affected people," said ND Hettiarachchi, director general of the National Disaster Management Centre.

The heavy rains since Thursday had also triggered landslides in some areas, blocking roads, newspapers reported.

Media showed people using makeshift rafts to escape flooded houses in some areas. In other parts, schoolchildren in uniform walked home in knee-deep water carrying their bicycles.

Sri Lanka's monsoon season runs from September to December.

Some 260,000 people so far have been affected by the floods, he said.

"We have allocated 10 million rupees (100,000 dollars) to provide initial relief measures," he told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP
Nobel Peace laureate and founder of the Grameen Bank Dr Muhammad Yunus (L) of Bangladesh and Ted Turner, Chairman of the United Nations Foundation, lay a floral wreath to the cenotaph for the Atomic bomb victims as part of their visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park yesterday. Yunus is on a six-day visit to Japan.

42 die as bus plunges into Nepal ravine

AFP, Kathmandu

Forty-two people were killed and 43 injured on Saturday when an overloaded passenger bus veered off a mountain road in Nepal and plunged into a ravine, police said.

The number of deaths was expected to rise from the accident at Luham in Salyan district, 450km northwest of the capital Kathmandu, as many of the injured were in critical condition, police said.

"Forty bodies were recovered from the accident site when the bus rolled down 250 meters (825 feet) off the road into a ravine Saturday morning. Two died while being rushed to a hospital," said district police officer Shankar Yadav.

The packed bus was carrying over 100 passengers at the time of the accident.

It was heading towards Tulsipur town in the neighbouring district of Dang from Salyan when it skidded off the twisting road.

Iran confirms stepping up uranium enrichment

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday confirmed it had successfully enriched uranium from a new cascade at a nuclear plant despite the threat of sanctions, halting the move as a step towards industrial-scale enrichment.

The cascade of 164 centrifuges to enrich uranium is the second to be installed at the Natanz nuclear plant in central Iran, joining an already established first cascade of the same number of centrifuges.

"The new cascade at Natanz has started work in the last two weeks," Iran's deputy atomic energy organisation head Mohammad Ghannad told the Iran newspaper.

"The products of the two cascades of 164 centrifuges have been obtained and have been successfully stocked," he added, saying the uranium had been enriched to levels between 3-5 percent.

The comments, which confirm statements by an unnamed official to the ISNA agency Friday, come

amid mounting efforts by European powers and the United States to take UN sanctions action against Iran over its failure to halt enrichment.

"The results from the research in the last two weeks will complete the path of research for Islamic Republic of Iran experts and will pave the way for the industrial phase of enrichment," Ghannad said.

Iran has repeatedly made clear its intention to enrich uranium on an industrial scale that would make it self-sufficient in making nuclear fuel for its atomic programme.

"We injected gas into the new cascade and now both 164 centrifuges are working together. Passing this phase is an extraordinary and valuable experience for Iran," Ghannad said.

He told the newspaper that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had been informed of the intended move one month ago and its inspectors visited the Natanz plant last week.

Enriched uranium lies at the centre of the dispute over Iran's nuclear programme, as it can be used both to make nuclear fuel and, in highly refined form, the core of a nuclear bomb.

Iran would need thousands more such centrifuges to enrich uranium on an industrial scale and its current uranium enrichment work is on a research level only.

To make a nuclear bomb, the uranium needs to be enriched to around 90 percent, far above the level needed for nuclear fuel.

Iran vehemently rejects US allegations that its nuclear programme is aimed at making nuclear weapons, saying the drive is solely aimed at providing energy for civilians.

The UN Security Council's five veto-wielding members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- as well as from Germany have been discussing a draft resolution on sanctions put forward by European countries.

Ahmadinejad sacks second minister

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad yesterday sacked the minister for cooperatives, his second change to the cabinet since coming to power last year, the ISNA agency reported.

Minister of Cooperatives Mohammad Nazemi Ardekani was a "very good and hardworking member of the government but we decided to use his qualifications in another position," Ahmadinejad said, without saying what the new job would be.

"These changes are done to serve the people better," he added, according to the ISNA agency. Ahmadinejad has put forward Mohammad Abbasi, an MP, as Ardekani's replacement.

Ahmadinejad in September sacked his welfare minister but also last week successfully fended off an attempt by MPs to impeach the Agriculture Minister Mohammad Reza Eskandari.

Parliament had expressed concerns over the qualifications and competence of several of Ahmadinejad's ministers when they were first presented in 2005.

Abbas may dissolve Hamas government

AP, Ramallah

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said he will replace the Hamas-led government with a panel of professionals if the militant group doesn't agree to govern with his party, suggesting a new, tough line in a bid to ease crippling sanctions.

The message was relayed to visiting EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana by Palestinian officials, who agreed Friday to discuss the confidential information with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

The moderate Palestinian president has raised the idea before but promised not to force it on a reluctant Hamas. His new position signalled a willingness to take a stronger stance against Hamas in an effort to ease Western sanctions designed to force the Islamic group to moderate its militantly anti-Israel ideology.

Solana, in the region trying to breathe new life into peace efforts, urged Palestinian leaders to move urgently to form a so-called national unity government and to ease the

deepening plight of the Palestinian people.

After meeting with Abbas on Friday, Solana told reporters that the Palestinian leader "is determined to move the process of the government" forward.

Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas spokesman in Gaza, said Hamas was unaware of Abbas' two-week deadline.

"I don't think it is wise of Abu Mazen to aggravate this crisis," Barhoum said, referring to Abbas by his commonly used name.

"Nevertheless, our position is firm: We are working on forming a national unity government," he said.

The EU, US and other donors cut off hundreds of millions of dollars of aid to the Palestinian Authority after the Hamas-led government took office in March. Despite growing hardship in the Palestinian areas, Hamas has rejected international calls to renounce violence and recognise Israel's right to exist.

Solana, in the region trying to breathe new life into peace efforts, urged Palestinian leaders to move urgently to form a so-called national unity government and to ease the

successful negotiations, Abbas said Thursday there was no point in further dialogue. Nevertheless, Hamas and Fatah officials are to meet in Damascus under Syria's sponsorship in coming days to try to cobble together an alliance.

Abbas, elected separately in 2005, has the authority to dismiss the government. But any new Cabinet would require the approval of the Hamas-controlled government, and if Abbas fails to win that approval, he could be forced to call new elections. Polls show Fatah and Hamas virtually tied, however, and new elections would be a risky move.

The Fatah-Hamas struggle has touched off deadly clashes between rival security forces, and Palestinian officials from both parties said they would increase police presence on the streets of Gaza following talk of heightened unrest on Saturday.

Cell phone takes security to new heights

AP, Tokyo

A new mobile phone in Japan takes security pretty seriously: It can recognise its owner, automatically locks when the person gets too far away from it and can be found via satellite navigation if it goes missing.

The P903i from NTT DoCoMo, Japan's top mobile carrier, comes with a small black card about the size of a movie-ticket stub. The card works as a security key by connecting wirelessly with the cell phone.

If an owner keeps the card in a bag or pocket, the phone recognises when the card moves too far away and locks automatically to prevent someone from making a call. The user can choose to have the phone lock when it is 26 feet, 66 feet or 130 feet away.

People who lose their security cards can punch in a password to unlock the phone. But they will have to buy a new card to set the lock again.

The extra security is handy because, like other recent Japanese phones, the P903i can be used as a credit card or a pre-paid cash card.



PHOTO: AFP
Rosalynn Carter (L) lights a lamp as former US president Jimmy Carter (R) looks on during the inauguration of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter partnership award for Campus-community Collaboration in New Delhi Friday. St. Agnes College, Managalore University won the first Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter partnership award in India.

Nepal govt, Maoists upbeat about upcoming talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and Maoist rebels said Friday they were hopeful of striking a deal to bring the insurgents into government and end a 10-year revolt in upcoming talks.

Discussions between Nepal's government and Maoists were postponed last weekend amid wrangling over how to move the political process forward.

But since then both sides have reported progress in informal discussions.

"We're hopeful the upcoming talks will finalize all pending issues as we're engaged in informal talks with the rebels to narrow down differences," Ramesh Lekhak, a member of the government negotiating team, told AFP on Friday.

His view was echoed by the Maoists.

"We're expecting the upcoming talks to be productive and historic. During our informal talks, we've found the seven-party ruling alliance more sincere in seeking to resolve the political deadlock," said rebel negotiator Dev Gurung.

UN considers peace mission in Chad

REUTERS, United Nations

The United Nations is considering a monitoring mission or peacekeeping force in Chad where the spillover from violence in Sudan's Darfur region has resulted in more than 200,000 refugees.

Jean-Marie Guehenno, the head of UN peacekeeping, told the UN Security Council on Friday he was sending a mission to Chad and the Central African Republic, which is also affected by the Darfur conflict, to investigate options.

A monitoring operation would include a standby rapid reaction force, supplied by one country or the United Nations, to check for trouble, especially at border points. It would observe the "security situation in the region and cross-border activities of armed groups" and alert local authorities. Guehenno said in his briefing notes, obtained by Reuters.



PHOTO: AFP
Housewives Aza (L) and Fatima Mohammed sit with their children beside household utensils in their N'Gortogole camp anticipating their ejection by the Nigerien authorities Friday. Niger has begun the expulsion of nearly 100,000 Normadic Mahamid Arabs, illegal immigrants, to neighbouring Chad following constant clashes between the community and the locals in the border region of Diffa.

Pressure grows on Berlin after new Afghan skull photos

AFP, Berlin

A German newspaper yesterday published more photographs showing soldiers posing with human skulls and bones in Afghanistan as pressure mounted on the government to find the culprits.

The defence ministry on Friday suspended two soldiers over a first set of photos published this week but Bild newspaper said the new pictures proved that German soldiers in Afghanistan regularly photographed skeletons and skulls, sometimes in obscene poses.

In one of the new photos, a soldier is pointing a gun at a human skeleton, in another a beret has been perched on top of a skull.

One of the pictures shows bones positioned on the ground around four skulls to form the words CSR TEAM. The newspaper said CSR was an abbreviation of the military term Campsite Reconnaissance.

Violence surges as Thai PM visits Muslim south

AFP, Yala

Militants in Thailand's restive southern provinces have killed five more people, police said yesterday, despite a visit by the new prime minister who has pushed new efforts for peace.

Military-installed premier Surayud Chulanont made a surprise trip to southern Thailand late Friday to visit victims of a bombing last week who are still in hospital.

But just an hour before he arrived, militants ambushed a Buddhist family returning to their home, killing the parents and their four-year-old daughter in Yala province, police said.

The day after his visit, a Muslim army ranger was killed in a drive-by shooting while he was off-duty in nearby Pattani province, police

said. A 74-year-old Buddhist man was also shot at point blank range while he was resting at his rubber plantation in Narathiwat province, police said.

The killings were the latest in a surge of violence in recent weeks, despite a raft of new measures aimed at ending the nearly three-year conflict that has left more than 1,500 dead.

Surayud's government last week announced that on Wednesday it would re-open a key regional mediation body, which was credited with easing previous conflicts in the region but which was dismantled by ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

"What will be expanded from the beginning is a great role for participation by the people," the defence

minister, General Boonrawad Somtas said in announcing its reopening.

He also said the military would end controversial emergency rule in the region by January. But since the entire country has been under martial law since the coup last month, that move would only have practical effects if martial law were lifted.

The military toppled Thaksin's government in a bloodless coup on September 19, bringing down a leader who was widely despised in the mainly Muslim provinces because of his hardline tactics.

The takeover brought a glimmer of hope for a breakthrough in the conflict, and the junta has quickly moved to undo many of Thaksin's policies that were blamed for exacerbating the conflict.