

Swiss peace talks failure pushes Lanka to abyss

AFP, Colombo

Talks between Sri Lanka's warring parties here over the weekend failed to buy time to save their troubled truce, diplomats and officials said amid fears of more bloodshed at home.

Peace broker Norway was unable to clinch an agreement Sunday on resolving urgent humanitarian needs, political issues as well as dates for more talks to keep the process alive.

Diplomats involved in the peace bid said there were fears that the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) could resort to their trade-mark spectacular strikes to demonstrate their ability to hit.

"I hope the parties will honour commitments to abide by the ceasefire," Norway's top peace broker Erik Solheim told AFP after announcing failure in the Geneva

talks.

Rebel negotiators cut short a planned visit to truce monitors Norway and Iceland, and were to return home immediately for discussions in Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe accused Tamil rebels of firing artillery at troops in the embattled northern peninsula of Jaffna through the weekend and into Monday.

The LTTE had earlier said they suspected the military were massing troops for an offensive on Jaffna, a claim rejected by the military spokesman.

The talks collapsed on a single issue -- the opening of a highway into Jaffna. The Tigers wanted the road opened immediately and the government asked for more time to consider it.

"We could have discussed the matter further," said government

negotiator Fariel Ashraff. "We had even suggested November 16 and 27 as possible dates to meet again."

However, the Tigers said they would return to the table only if Sri Lanka opens the strategic highway, which is also a key source of income for the guerrillas who "tax" goods and people moving on it.

About half a million people have been living under virtual siege conditions the government-held area since the middle of August.

The LTTE's chief negotiator, SP Thamiselvan, said he expected international pressure on Sri Lanka to ensure humanitarian assistance reaches the beleaguered population.

He said the closure was pushing the people "to a war environment and a humanitarian catastrophe", and amounted to creating a "Berlin wall."

"What we fear is that there could

be an escalation of violence," a diplomat who declined to be named said. "The international community will take stock of this dangerous situation."

The Sri Lankan government is banking on foreign goodwill to tame the Tigers and halt any repetition of suicide attacks -- the trade mark of the Tigers who are fighting for independence for minority Tamils.

Two weeks ago, the Tigers bombed a southern port, killing two people and wounding 26. Two days earlier they killed 116 people, mostly sailors, in a suicide truck bomb attack against a convoy of busses.

"The Tigers have promised they will not resort to violence," the government's top negotiator de Silva said adding, however, that the rebels had broken similar pledges in the past.



Sri Lankan political wing leader of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), SP Thamiselvan (L) stands while Norwegian Special Envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer (C) speaks to head of delegations of the Sri Lanka's government, Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva after a press conference closing Sri Lanka peace talks Sunday in Geneva.

Saddam lawyers clash with judge, leave court

AFP, Baghdad

Defence lawyers for ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein returned to court on Monday to present a list of conditions for ending their boycott of his genocide trial but left after they were rebuffed.

Saddam, seven co-defendants, chief defence counsel Khalil al-Dulaimi and another member of the defence team filed into the Iraqi High Tribunal for the hearing, but instead of listening to evidence made a string of complaints.

Dulaimi branded the case against Saddam as political and said it lacked the "conditions for a fair trial". He and his fellow defence counsel clashed with the judge then left, their boycott apparently still in place.

His 12-point list of demands included one that non-Iraqi Arabs be allowed to appear as defence lawyers and that the court investigate an alleged beating of defendant Hussein Rashid by court bailiffs.

Defence lawyers had been boycotting the case since September in protest at alleged political interference in proceedings, in particular the sacking of the first trial judge Abdullah al-Ameri.



Supporters of Indian opposition party Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) shout slogans as they burn an effigy of Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit during a protest against a demolition drive by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi in New Delhi yesterday. Hundreds of shopkeepers protested at the start of a three-day strike in the Indian capital against a decision to close shops in residential areas.

Suharto's son released from jail

REUTERS, Jakarta

Former Indonesian president Suharto's youngest son was conditionally released from jail on Monday, after serving a third of his original sentence for plotting the murder of a Supreme Court judge.

Hutomo "Tommy" Mandala Putra was sentenced to 15 years for paying a hitman to kill the judge and other offences, but that was reduced to 10 years on appeal and further sliced by a series of holiday "remissions."

In all he served five years before Monday's release, which drew fire from critics as showing undue leniency to a powerful figure.

"He is out. He will serve the remaining time outside the prison," Gusti Tamarjaya, the justice ministry official handling penitentiaries in Jakarta, told reporters.

While no longer in jail, Tommy is theoretically still a prisoner, having to meet conditions of probation.

Guards switched Tommy from a van to a car after he was blocked by a crowd of reporters and photographers scrambling for comment and footage when he emerged from an East Jakarta jail.

Nepali Maoists ready to allow arms monitoring

New stance brings optimism ahead of peace talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels said yesterday they would place their weapons under United Nations supervision if the army does the same to revive peace talks and pave the way for elections next year.

"Chairman Prachanda in his informal meeting with Prime Minister (Girija Prasad) Koirala Sunday proposed that our party was ready to lock up all our weapons in a single place under UN monitoring, provided the Nepal Army does the same," Ananta, the deputy commander of the rebel army, told AFP.

Ananta, who uses one name, said the proposal by rebel leader Prachanda would leave the rebels unarmed ahead of planned national elections next year.

The multi-party government that came to power in April after mass protests forced King Gyanendra to end direct rule agreed to let the rebels join an interim government to end a decade-old insurgency.

Issues such as arms management and the role of the monarchy had prevented the peace process from moving ahead, but the rebels' proposal has provided a boost, officials from both sides said.

On Sunday, the rebels extended a six-month ceasefire, saying they were "confident of a peaceful solution with the government".

A government peace negotiator said it was reviewing the proposal on arms.

"The government is considering the Maoist proposal," Labour Minister Ramesh Lekhak, the government peace negotiator, said Monday.

"The proposal means that the rebels would separate their weapons and soldiers. Earlier this was unacceptable to the Maoists. A meeting point should be found soon," Lekhak said.

Previously, the rebels had said that they would keep their arms and soldiers together in United Nation's supervised camps, but the multi-party government had said that the

rebels must disarm before entering government.

Arms management is essential for elections to take place as planned before May 2007 for a body that will rewrite the constitution, an analyst said.

"The new proposal could be a solution to end the current deadlock," said Krishna Khanal, a political scientist from Nepal's Tribhuvan University.

"The government and the Maoists need to ensure that people will get opportunity to exercise their rights to vote in an environment without intimidation," Khanal told AFP.

Gunaraj Luitel, a senior news editor with the Kantipur media group, said the rebel proposal was a significant step forward in the peace process.

"I have seen flexibility on their (the rebels') stance on weapons," said Luitel, who interviewed Prachanda on Sunday.

Three killed as cyclonic storm nears Andhra Pradesh

REUTERS, Hyderabad

Three people were killed and thousands evacuated as a cyclonic storm nears Andhra Pradesh, officials said yesterday.

Cyclonic storm Oгни is closing in on the mainland between Ongole and Machilipatnam, 350 km south-east of the state capital, Hyderabad, the Indian Meteorological Department said.

"Heavy rains are lashing the coastal district towns with wind speeds of over 50 kilometres per hour under the impact of the cyclone," said a duty officer at the Visakhapatnam cyclone warning centre in the state.

All flights from and to Visakhapatnam were cancelled.

State disaster management officials said that more than 20,000 people from low-lying areas in the coastal districts of Prakasam, Guntur and Krishna have already been shifted to more than 75 relief camps, which had been set up in advance.

Ahmadinejad warns of 'firm response' to any sanctions

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad yesterday warned Iran would react firmly to any UN sanctions imposed on Tehran over its contested nuclear programme.

"We are not looking for tension but any action that aims to limit us will receive an appropriate and firm response from the Iranian people," Ahmadinejad said during a gathering in Pishva in Tehran province.

Iranian officials have already vowed the Islamic republic would hit back against any eventual sanctions but have said the nature of the retaliation would only be revealed if and when the penalties are imposed.

Oil markets are rattled by the possibility of Iran blocking the Strait of Hormuz -- a key conduit for transporting oil -- but leaders from Opec's number two producer have vowed not to use oil as a weapon in the standoff.

Despite an ongoing bid by Western powers at the UN Security Council to impose sanctions against Tehran over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment, Tehran has stepped up its research into the sensitive activity.

It has enriched uranium on a research level from a second cascade of 164 centrifuges at its nuclear plant in Natanz as well as from an already installed cascade of a similar size.

"No one has the right to renounce the absolute rights of the Iranian people," Ahmadinejad added.

"The Iranian people, with the help of God, have resisted and despite sanctions have succeeded in reaching the nuclear summits," referring to existing US sanctions that have been in place for two-and-a-half decades.

Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki meanwhile said Iran still wanted to expand its uranium enrichment research operations despite the looming threat of sanctions action.

"I hope that the chain of research activities can be completed in the most rapid way possible," he said, according to the ISNA agency.

Iran wants to have six cascades of centrifuges at the test plant in Natanz and is also seeking to install a total of 3,000 centrifuges at an industrial-scale enrichment facility at the same atomic plant.

US biggest polluter

Carbon pollution by industrialised states still rising: UN report

AFP, Bonn

Greenhouse-gas emissions by the industrialised world are still rising, with the United States firmly entrenched as the biggest polluter, a UN report said yesterday.

In an annual update on global-warming pollution, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) said that, compared with the benchmark year of 1990, the 41 industrialised countries it monitors trimmed their emissions by 3.3 percent by the end of 2004.

But this was mainly due to the slump in the former Soviet bloc economies in the 1990s, which forced the closure or overhaul of thousands of power stations and factories that spewed out carbon dioxide.

Because of that historic change, countries in eastern and central Europe had a decrease in emissions from 1990-2004 of 36.8

percent. But from 2000-2004, they in fact increased their pollution by 4.1 percent as their economies emerged from the post-Soviet crash.

In contrast, the other industrialised countries saw an increase in pollution of 11 percent from 1990-2004. From 2000-2004, the increase was two percent.

"Industrialised countries will need to intensify their efforts to implement strong policies which reduce greenhouse-gas emissions," the UNFCCC's executive secretary, Yvo de Boer, warned.

The report applies to so-called Annex 1 countries of the UNFCCC, the offshoot of the famous 1992 Rio Summit on the planet's environmental future and parent of the Kyoto Protocol for curbing greenhouse gases. Annex 2 parties are developing countries and the poorer ex-Soviet republics.



Brazil's reelected President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (C) of the Workers' Party (PT), first lady Marisa Leticia (C, R) and supporters make the "L" for Lula as they celebrate their victory in the presidential elections on Sunday night in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Charles thanks Musharraf for terror help

AFP, Islamabad

Britain's Prince Charles thanked President Pervez Musharraf for Pakistan's help in fighting terrorism at the start of a five-day royal tour of the Islamic republic yesterday, officials said. Charles held a private meeting with Musharraf at his official residence in Islamabad after flying in to Pakistan late Sunday on a high-profile and equally high-security visit.

"They (Prince Charles and Musharraf) discussed a number of subjects including counter-terrorism," a British government official said on condition of anonymity after the meeting.

"The Prince thanked Pakistan for its support for tackling terrorism and for supporting British troops fighting terrorism in the region," the official added.

Pakistan helped Britain thwart an alleged plot to blow up airliners flying from London to the United States in August, arresting several suspects including a Briton.



Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) walks with Britain's Prince Charles as they arrive to inspect the traditional folk stalls at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad yesterday. Charles and his wife Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, (R) met military ruler President Pervez Musharraf after arriving in Pakistan on Sunday for a 5-day high-profile tour.

Israel preparing extensive Gaza operation: PM

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert warned yesterday that the army was preparing an extensive operation in the Gaza Strip, with the government to make a decision on the offensive within days, an MP said.

"The army is preparing for an even more extensive operation in the Gaza Strip," the prime minister was quoted by the source as telling parliament's defence and foreign affairs committee.

"The government intends to reach a decision on the exact pattern of the operation in the coming days," Olmert was reported to have said.

At least 260 Palestinians, many of them civilians, have been killed since current operations began late last June.

A government spokeswoman later tried to downplay Olmert's comments, insisting that Israel would continue along its current tack and that no significant tactical shift was afoot.

"Israel is determined to fight terror,

not differently but continuously," spokeswoman Miri Eisen, who was inside the committee meeting while Olmert spoke, told AFP. "We won't change our mode of operation in the Gaza Strip and we will not go back to Gaza. We intend to continue our operation there and carry out pinpoint operations."

The prime minister reiterated insistence from top Israeli officials that the government had no intention of keeping troops in the Palestinian territory permanently after last year's historic withdrawal.

"We will operate in the Gaza Strip but we do not intend to stay there permanently," the committee member quoted Olmert as saying.

Officials have repeatedly warned that Israel will intensify its four-month-old offensive, launched in late June after Gaza-based militants seized an Israeli soldier and killed two others in a cross-border raid.