

'Diana's death was accident, not murder plot'

AFP, London

A long-awaited report into Princess Diana's death in a Paris car crash will confirm a French probe that it was an accident and refute theories of a plot by British intelligence, news leaks said yesterday.

The report by Lord John Stevens, the former Metropolitan Police commissioner, has concluded that Diana died in a traffic accident after her driver lost control of the car while drunk at the wheel, the leaks said.

Fleeing paparazzi photographers, Diana, 36, her boyfriend Dodi Fayed, 42, and their chauffeur Henri Paul, 41, were killed in a car crash in a Paris underpass in the early hours of August 31, 1997.

Bodyguard Trevor Rees-Jones survived.

A two-year investigation in France blamed Paul for losing control of the black Mercedes because he was driving too fast while high on drink and prescription drugs.

Civilians flee as scores killed in Lanka fighting

AFP, Colombo

Thousands of civilians were on the run yesterday in Sri Lanka's restive northeast as heavy artillery exchanges left scores dead, according to the Tamil Tigers and government forces.

Military officials and the rebels said sporadic mortar bomb attacks and artillery fire continued throughout Sunday along the Trincomalee and Batticaloa district borders.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the military launched a fresh offensive against them at Vakaraal and Sunday's artillery attacks killed at least 10 civilians.

"Ten civilians have been killed so far and fifteen more have been injured," the Tigers said in a statement referring to Sunday's attacks.

It said another 15 civilians were killed and more than 40 were injured on Saturday.

However, the defence ministry said it was the guerrillas who initiated

the offensive and said the military had, however, counter attacked and inflicted heavy losses on the guerrillas.

"Two soldiers were reported killed and 20 were injured," the ministry said in a statement referring to Sunday's fighting.

The guerrillas said they killed 30 government soldiers in Saturday's artillery duels along the district borders of Trincomalee and Batticaloa where civilians are on the run.

"In the battle that lasted for several hours, 30 Sri Lanka army soldiers, including two senior officers, were killed. Five bodies of soldiers have been captured by the LTTE," the Tigers said in a statement.

The defence ministry rejected Tiger claims and said only two soldiers were killed and 37 injured on Saturday, while claiming that over 40 Tigers were killed and another 40 wounded on the same day.

The ministry said the number of the displaced in the Trincomalee district rose Sunday to 2,232 and that they were found temporary accommodation in schools, temples and public building in the neighbourhood.

Military officials in Trincomalee, 260km northeast of here said that four soldiers were missing since Saturday.

Both sides blamed each other for the plight of civilians trapped in rebel-held areas as well as territory controlled by the military.

Hundreds of civilians were also unable to leave because of the sporadic artillery attacks on the main roads, a military official in the area said by telephone.

The renewed attacks came after peacebroker Norway failed on Friday to secure an agreement to end a blockade on the Jaffna peninsula, where nearly half a million people are trapped by fighting.

The LTTE said they told Oslo's envoy, Jon Hanssen-Bauer, to

persuade the government to provide unconditional access to the embattled north.

The government had asked Hanssen-Bauer to secure a deal with the Tigers to allow a convoy of some 400 trucks to travel through rebel-held territory, but the Tigers rejected a one-off convoy.

Instead, the LTTE political wing leader SP Thamilselvan told Hanssen-Bauer the government must open a disputed highway to Jaffna, as well as another highway to the island's east.

The Tamil Tigers have been campaigning for independence for the island's minority 2.5-million Tamil community in the majority Sinhalese nation of 19.5 million people.

More than 3,500 people have been killed in Sri Lanka in the past year. The bitter ethnic conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.



A Sri Lankan woman carries a child and makes her way to a temporary shelter in the north-eastern town of Kantale Saturday as they escape heavy artillery exchanges at a nearby village.

Delhi hosts 36,000 weddings in a day

REUTERS, New Delhi

With the planets perfectly aligned for a happy marriage, more than 36,000 weddings will take place in the Indian capital yesterday, threatening gridlock in the already congested city as guests race to parties.

Indians primarily rely on Vedic astrology — which dates back to ancient Hindu texts — to fix the dates and times for weddings or when buying a car or home.

Auspicious days are calculated by pandits, or priests, after elaborate mathematical calculations.

"Until December 8 the position of the sun was not appropriate for marriage," said Dr Prem Kumar Sharma, a noted astrologer. "Today is a Sunday, which symbolizes the goodness of the Sun personified, and Jupiter and Venus are also aligned perfectly."

Police in New Delhi said they would pull out all the stops to keep the city moving.

"We are expecting a huge number of people to go for the weddings today but we are sure that we will tackle the situation," said Qamar Ahmed, joint commissioner of police in the sprawling city of 14 million people.



Protesters display anti-coup banners during a rally in Bangkok yesterday. The protesters were demanding the lifting of martial law imposed after a September coup that ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

BJP brands US nuclear bill 'humiliating'

REUTERS, New Delhi

A bill that will allow the United States to sell nuclear technology to India compromises India's independence, its main opposition party said yesterday, adding that the "humiliating" law should be rejected.

Legislation sailed through Congress early on Saturday, ending the isolation imposed after New Delhi developed nuclear weapons in contravention of international standards.

The deal, first agreed in July 2005, has caught the imagination of many in India and is seen as a major move toward becoming a regional power. But it has also attracted criticism after it was modified in the US legislature.

In a sign of the battle the government faces, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which ruled the country between 1998 and 2004, said early fears the United States was only interested in capping India's nuclear

weapons program "stood confirmed."

A BJP statement said the bill did not deliver full civil nuclear cooperation, imposed "rigorous" assessment obligations, failed to guarantee uninterrupted fuel supplies for civilian reactors and prevented India from reprocessing spent fuel.

It also banned future nuclear tests and rendered the weapons programme "subject to intrusive US scrutiny."

Strategic analysts and members of the Indian nuclear establishment have cited similar concerns.

They argued against inspections and said the deal would constrain India's military nuclear programme by separating it from the civilian side.

An earlier draft stated that cooperation would depend on India's support for international efforts to restrain Iran's nuclear programme, ranking New Delhi.

Showdown looms over new Palestinian polls

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas steamed ahead Sunday with plans to call early parliamentary and presidential elections in a move the ruling Hamas movement branded a coup against democracy.

The decision set the stage for a showdown with the Islamists who have been in power for less than a year.

Abbas's media advisor, Nabil Amr, is due Sunday to outline steps the president planned to take after saying early elections were the only way out of a spiralling political crisis.

Abbas told the executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Saturday that he had no alternative but to call an early vote after months-long unity government talks with the Islamist Hamas collapsed.

"There is no choice for me except turning to early elections," a senior Palestinian official quoted Abbas as telling the meeting.

Abbas is due to announce his decision formally in a speech Thursday, when he will make the case for taking this step while still keeping the door open to Hamas for talks, the official said.

"In my speech I will inform the people of my decision, but I will also tell them that the door of dialogue is not closed," Abbas was quoted as saying.

Hamas, which won a stunning upset in a parliamentary vote in January, called the decision an attempt to overthrow the democratically elected Palestinian government and vowed to fight the move.

Palestinian prime minister and Hamas leader Ismail Haniya, in Tehran during his first official trip abroad, blasted Abbas's plan,

saying it would accentuate "the crisis and tensions."

"I think that the invitation to carry out the elections in this way is disrespectful to the Palestinian people," Haniya told Iranian television after Abbas's announcement.

"I believe that this will increase the tension and have a negative impact," he added.

In Gaza, the chief of Hamas lawmakers in parliament told AFP the move "is a clear coup against democracy. The goal of this decision is to kick Hamas out of the Palestinian political scene."

Khalil al-Hiyia said Hamas was studying its options.

"If the president calls new elections there will be a response from Hamas," Hiyia added. "How can Hamas agree to hold elections twice in less than one year?"

Syria preparing for war

Says Israeli official

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel believes Syria is preparing for war by stepping up missile production and deploying anti-tank rockets along the border, a senior intelligence official was quoted as saying yesterday.

An Israeli official quoted the head of the military intelligence research division, General Yossi Beidetz, as telling the weekly cabinet meeting that Syrian President Bashar al-

Assad was "preparing his forces for a military conflict" with Israel.

"Syria has accelerated the production of long-range missiles and has deployed anti-tank rockets on its border with Israel," which runs along the occupied Golan Heights, Beidetz said.

A military source told AFP he believed Syria wants to incorporate lessons learned from the July-August war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia, which

put up stiff resistance to the Jewish state.

"Syria has learnt a lot from Hezbollah which managed to inflict a lot of damage to Israeli forces, especially its tanks and armoured vehicles, by using guerrilla warfare," he said.

The warning came days after a report by a high-level US panel recommended Israel relaunch peace talks with Syria, which have been frozen since 2000.

Talabani blasts US report on Iraq

26 killed in attacks as Rumsfeld pays defiant farewell visit to US troops

AFP, Baghdad

President Jalal Talabani, a long-time US ally, made a stinging attack on the controversial Iraq Study Group report yesterday, calling it "dangerous" and insulting to Iraqi sovereignty.

The report's recommendations were also implicitly criticised by outgoing defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who paid a defiant farewell visit to US troops and urged them to stay the course, the Pentagon reported Sunday.

Four days after the release of the report, which was hailed by many US lawmakers and commentators as pointing to a way out of the Iraq crisis, Talabani invited journalists to his Baghdad villa to denounce it.

"If you read this report one would think that it is written for a young, small colony that they are imposing

conditions on, neglecting the fact that we are a sovereign country, and respected," he said.

Meanwhile, at least 26 people were killed on Sunday in Iraq, including nine Shias in sectarian attacks on two Baghdad families, a security official said.

Another 17 corpses, three of them headless, were recovered by police in northern Baghdad's Al-Hurriyah neighborhood, the official added.

In the attack on the families, gunmen broke into a home in the south-western Jihad neighborhood and killed five Shia brothers, one of them a policeman, after separating them from their sisters, the official said.

The women were unharmed.

In another similar attack, gunmen entered a house of another Shia family in the same area and killed a man and his three sons.



Outgoing Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld visits troops assigned to Al-Asad Air Base in Iraq's restive Al-Anbar province during a surprise trip to Iraq yesterday.

Democrats vow change as Cong ends session

AP, Washington

The 109th session of Congress, frustrated by partisanship and criticised for its meagre record of accomplishment, ended with flurry of bill-passing and promises of change when Democrats take over the House and Senate in January.

Before the predawn finish Saturday, departing House Speaker

Dennis Hastert acknowledged that after eight years, the longest stretch for a Republican in the job, he will welcome a return to the rank and file. "On Jan. 4, I will be privileged to rejoin you on these benches where my heart is," he said.

The Illinois Republican will be succeeded on that day by Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-California. She becomes the first female speaker and the first Democrat in the post since Newt Gingrich of Georgia led the Republicans to power in 1995.

Pelosi is promising that the new Democratic era will get off to a

quick start with votes to raise the federal minimum wage for the first time in a decade, enact lobbying and ethics reform and lower Medicare prescription drug costs.

As often is the case in the waning hours, the congressional session ended with a mad rush to deal with untended business.

In the long final day, ending around 4:40 a.m. EST in the Senate, the two chambers passed a massive tax and trade bill, prevented the government from shutting down and approved dozens of other bills. They included an important fisheries management measure; a bill allowing civilian nuclear technology transfers to India; and bills to fund programmes to combat AIDS, pandemic diseases and premature births.

Lawmakers ready to return home also were reminded of the corruption and scandal problems that helped sweep Democrats to power in the November elections.