

International

58 rebels killed in ambushes

Lankan govt unveils plan to end civil war

COLOMBO, Oct 24: The Sri Lankan government on Friday formally unveiled a two-year plan to end the civil war, and the opposition said it needs many more months to study the details, reports AP.

The government wants to give more powers to the provinces, including a proposed new province merging two in the north and east that are home to most of the minority Tamils and the seat of the 14-year war that has left 50,000 people dead.

The rebels want an independent homeland for the Tamils, claiming they are discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese, who have a different language and culture. The guerrillas say they will not settle for anything else.

Despite several discussions over the years, the government and the opposition have not reached a consensus on the plan. No date has been fixed for voting on the power-sharing proposal.

Some Sinhalese groups oppose the creation of a unified Tamil province in the north and the east and want the rebels crushed by the military before concessions are given to the Tamils.

"We can't rush this. We need time to discuss it," said Ronnie de Mel, a lawmaker of the opposition United National Party. "We want to write a constitution which will stand the test of time."

The ruling People's Alliance has accused the opposition of dragging its feet. The alliance has a one-seat majority in the 225-member house, and needs the opposition's support for the required two-third vote for a new constitution. The power sharing plan, which is in the new constitution, must then be passed in a nationwide referendum.

"It is very important that we get this plan approved so that the cycle of violence ends," Lashman Peiris, the constitutional affairs minister, said as he placed a draft of the new constitution before Parliament.

The plan keeps for the central government power over major areas such as foreign relations and the military. The opposition wants to study provisions on finance, land transfer and the powers of police. Many Tamils don't support the rebel view that a homeland will end discrimination; most say they face in jobs and education. The Sinhalese control the government and military, key areas for advancement in an economy just emerging from socialist-style policies.

ambushes by government troops in the northern jungles where the military has been trying for five months to capture a major highway, the military said Friday.

Eight soldiers were wounded on the government side in the battle in the Vavuniya district near the town of Kanagayankulam, in which the troops poured mortar and machine gunfire on the rebels.

Six more rebels were killed a few hours later in the same area, when their jeep was attacked by soldiers, said Maj. Dewage. Two other rebels died in another ambush a few kilometres away at the same time.

The guerrillas did not immediately comment. Independent confirmation was impossible because the government does not allow reporters into the area 240 kms north of Colombo.

The soldiers have been trying to capture in 70 kms highway through rebel-held territory that could provide overland access to the government-controlled northern Jaffna peninsula. The peninsula is now accessible only by sea and air.

Another report adds: At least 58 guerrillas were killed in three

Mir to be abandoned, destroyed by end of '99

MOSCOW, Oct 24: The Russian Mir orbital station will fall back to Earth and disintegrate in the lower atmosphere towards the end of 1999, the director of the Russian Space Agency (RKA) Yuri Koptevy said Thursday, reports AFP.

He said Mir, which has been manned without a break since 1986, would be abandoned once the international Alpha Space Station becomes operational.

Mir which has been orbiting at an altitude of 400 km since 1986, will be allowed to descend to a lower orbit before being abandoned. Once it reenters the atmosphere, it will burn up before reaching the ground, Koptevy said.

He said the whole operation would be controlled to ensure there was no danger to people on the ground.

"We consider that exploitation of Mir will end around mid-1999, certainly before the end of that year," he said on NTV television.

"But putting an end to the exploitation of a complex weighing 140 tonnes is not that simple. It is not enough just to turn the engines off and let it fall just anywhere," he said.

The descent and fall back to earth of Mir will last nine to ten months. The station will continue to be manned permanently as long as it is above an altitude of 200 km, he said. After that it will be abandoned and allowed to descend to 120 km.

Debate on confidence-building steps Leaders from both Kashmirs invited to London confce

NEW DELHI, Oct 24: Prominent leaders from Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) have been invited to a conference in London to debate on confidence-building measures and Kashmir's role in promoting the dialogue between India and Pakistan, reports PTI.

The desirability of all Kashmir political institutions for coordination and the return and resettlement of displaced people are also expected to come up for discussions during the three-day meet scheduled to begin on November 28.

Prominent invitees to the meet include J and K Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah, former Sadr-i-Riyasat Dr Karan Singh and former union minister Mufti Mohammad Syed.

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chief Syed Ali Shah Geelani, JK Muslim Conference president Prof. Abdul Ghani and People's Conference chairman Abdul Ghani Lone.

The invitees from POK include POK Prime Minister Sultan Mahmood Chowdhury, Muslim Conference president Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan, JKLF chairman Amanullah Khan, Liberation League president Justice Abdul Majed Malik, Muslim League president Gen (ret'd) Mohd Hayat Khan and JUI president Abul Rashid Turabi.

6 killed in Kashmir violence AP adds from Jammu: An explosion in a bus in Kashmir's capital Friday killed three passengers and wounded 12 others, police said, reports AP.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the blast, which occurred as the bus was crossing a river bridge on the outskirts of Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu-Kashmir state.

Also Friday, army sources said a military patrol engaged in a fierce fire fight with suspected Kashmiri separatists along India's border with Pakistan that killed one army officer and two guerrillas.

The sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the battle broke out late Thursday near Surankote, about 210 kilometers northwest of Jammu, the state's winter capital.

BRIEFLY



US President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary open the White House Conference on Child Care Thursday, in the East Room of the White House. The president pledged to pitch a plan in his State of the Union Address to make child care in America more available and more affordable.

Tremor rocks S Chinese city: An earthquake, measuring 5.3 on the Richter Scale, has hit southern China's Yunnan province, the state Seismological Bureau said yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The epicentre of the tremor, which struck at 8.24 pm Thursday (1224 GMT), was 10 km northeast of the ancient city of Lijiang, which was badly damaged by a major 7.0 quake in February 1996. "This time, we have no reports of deaths or injury," said a spokesman for the Lijiang Seismology Bureau.

PNG lifts blockade on Bougainville: The military blockade on secessionist Bougainville island was lifted Friday after seven years as rebels and government troops continue to honour a ceasefire, AP reports from Port Moresby.

The blockade is believed to have killed many more Bougainvilleans by preventing the delivery of medicines and food than direct hostilities between the guerrillas and soldiers ever did. The commander of the Papua New Guinea Defense Force, Brig-Gen. Leo Nuta, announced the decision, saying the order included the lifting of all restrictions to travel anywhere in Bougainville.

Quake rattles C Italy: A new earthquake rattled central Italy on Thursday evening reviving panic in towns and villages devastated by a major quake a month ago, AFP reports from Rome.

The tremor which measured between four and five degrees on the 12-point Mercalli Scale, occurred at 1904 GMT along the boundary between Umbria and the Marche provinces. Another tremor shook the same area on Thursday morning followed by several minor aftershocks. There were no casualties, authorities said.

Paintings by Russian masters stolen: Thieves who broke into the apartment of an 81-year-old Russian woman stole 18 paintings from her late husband's unique collection, police said Friday, AP reports from St Petersburg.

The paintings, valued at tens of thousands of dollars, included works by Isaac Levitan, Konstantin Korovin, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Robert Falk and other Russian masters of the 19th and 20th centuries. St. Petersburg police reported, according to the Interfax news agency.

Sunken Russian Nub retrieved: The Russian Navy has retrieved a decommissioned nuclear submarine which sank in the Russian Far East in May, the Interfax news agency reported Thursday, AFP reports from Moscow.

The 1970s 675-class submarine, which sank at its berth at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky on May 29, has been towed to new moorings, said local flotilla commander Rear Admiral Alexander Nescheret. Despite the accident, background radiation levels emitted by the vessel remained normal, Interfax reported.

2 OAS officials kidnapped: Marxist rebels kidnapped two Organisation of American States (OAS) officials in Colombia on Thursday, raising the stakes in their campaign to sabotage local elections set for this weekend, Reuters reports from Bogota.

Foreign Minister Maria Emma Mejia made a dramatic radio plea calling on the Cuban-inspired National Liberation Army (ELN) rebels to take her hostage in return for releasing Raul Martinez of Chile, and Manfredo Marroquin of Guatemala. The pair are part of a team of 38 OAS election observers that arrived in the country last weekend. They were seized in a rural area near the town of San Carlos in northwest Antioquia province.

Lenin's statue to be auctioned: City authorities in the Estonian town of Tartu have decided to auction off the statue of Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, setting the starting price at US dollar 1,000, Tartu's mayor said Friday, AP reports from Moscow.

The statue had decorated a town square before the Baltic republic gained sovereignty in 1991. The auction is scheduled for Nov. 7, the day of the 80th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution in Soviet tradition.

Danish queen mother hospitalised: Queen Ingrid, the Danish Queen mother, aged 87, was admitted to hospital Thursday evening after falling and breaking her thighbone, the Court Chamberlain, Soeren Haslund Christensen said, AFP reports from Copenhagen.

The queen mother suffered the fall at Fredensborg Castle, the residence of her daughter Queen Margrethe and Prince Consort Henrik.

Remains of US soldier handed over: North Korea yesterday handed over the remains of a US soldier killed in the 1950-53 Korean War in a brief but solemn ceremony in the border town village of Panmunjom, witnesses said, AFP reports from Panmunjom.

Indian newsmans dies in road mishap: A veteran journalist of north-east India, K C Choudhury, 70, died in a road accident at Agartala Thursday, PTI reports from Agartala.

Choudhury worked for the National Herald and was also associated with many other national dailies for several years. He also worked in Manipur and Shillong. The accident took place Thursday morning when a speeding jeep hit him.

C'wealth won't expel Nigeria, may impose new sanctions LAOS, October 24: The Commonwealth of nations will not expel Nigeria but may impose new sanctions on it, the organisation's Secretary-General, Chief Emeke Anyaoku said in London on Thursday, reports Xinhua.

The exclusion of Nigeria is not on the table, it is not one of the recommendations of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Groups (CMAG), he was quoted by the News Agency of Nigeria as saying.

Anyaoku's comment came on the eve of the Commonwealth summit of heads of state in Edinburgh, Scotland today, which is to decide on Nigeria's membership of the 54-nation body.

The Commonwealth suspended Nigeria's membership in November 1995 after its government executed author Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other minority activists on charges of

murder. The Commonwealth then directed the CMAG to investigate and monitor Nigeria's human rights record so that it can decide at its next summit two years later whether Nigeria should be expelled for good.

As the deadline draws near and consultations between CMAG and Nigeria seem to have yielded positive results, there is a fear among some Nigerians that their country might be expelled after all.

Anyaoku explained that the decision not to expel Nigeria was taken in the light of the local government elections on multi-party basis last March, which has been generally regarded as free and fair.

He, however, said the Edinburgh summit may impose new sanctions on Nigeria.

It is understood that both Britain and Canada have been pressing for further sanctions,



French President Jacques Chirac, right, greets Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat upon his arrival at the Elysee Palace in Paris Thursday.

Bhandari may lose job as governor

Cong (I) justifies call for sacking UP govt

NEW DELHI, Oct 24: India's Congress (I) Party here today justified its call for the sacking of a key Hindu nationalist state assembly, arguing their religious agenda was a threat to Indian politics, reports AFP.

The party, which sparked a national crisis this week by demanding the dismissal of the Uttar Pradesh government, accused the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) of putting religious ideology ahead of political policies.

Congress spokesman Ved Prakash said: "The stand of the BJP is communal and that is well known. They mix religion with politics which cannot be permitted in India."

"People must be told, India is a secular nation. Each religion in India will have to be respected and that is our stand."

Truce between Israel, Hamas possible: Yassin

LONDON, Oct 24: A "temporary truce" between Israel and the radical Palestinian Movement Hamas is possible, Hamas' spiritual leader said in interviews published here today, but the establishment of a Muslim state of Palestine with Jews — a tolerated minority remains the ultimate goal, reports AFP.

Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, in remarks published in the Times and Independent newspapers, said his immediate goals were the same as those of Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Authority: Sovereignty over the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem.

"For a period of time in the history of the region, yes, I could accept this position," he said in Times.

In the Independent he said he could offer Israel a "temporary truce" if it accepted all

country. They claimed the BJP had used bribes to win a confidence vote and said a mass brawl between politicians in the assembly chamber indicated law and order was breaking down in the northern state.

The demand threatened to mushroom into a national crisis. Gujral's United Front coalition, made up of more than a dozen small leftwing and centre parties, is kept in power by the Congress.

Gujral's Cabinet was badly split over the issue, some saying dismissal of the assembly was not merited but others fearing the Congress could topple the United Front if it did not comply.

The United Front, however, ended two days of talks by backing the regional assembly. The Congress has since pledged to continue its support for the Gujral coalition.

Prakash added the current BJP Chief Minister Kalyan Singh had also been in power in 1992 when Hindu fanatics destroyed the Babri Mosque at the

Canada announces immigration targets for '98

OTTAWA, Oct 24: Canada, one of the favourite destinations of immigrants announced on Thursday immigration targets for 1998 that are little changed from 1997, reports Reuters.

Citizenship and Immigration Minister Lucienne Robillard said Canada would aim to admit 200,000 to 225,000 immigrants and refugees next year.

That is 5,000 more than the range for 1997, but the midpoint is in fact less than the 215,000 that the government now projects will show up in Canada this year.

Even more were admitted in 1996, an above-target 225,000.

Our immigration plan is based on the humanitarian values of welcoming and caring that characterises us," Robillard told a news conference.

Off the Record Biggest apple of all time

DETLENG, England: With apologies to New York, the biggest apple of all time has been unveiled at a farm show in England weighing three pounds 11 ounces (1.9 kg) and measuring 53 cm in diameter, report AFP.

Farmer Alan Smith showed off the Howgata wonder fruit at Mardenshow at Detling in southeast England.

"The apple is the one bright spot in what has been a pretty grim season," he said.

The previous world champion apple was grown in Oregon in the United States in 1994 and weighed three pounds four ounces.

Most popular Internet site LONDON: Sex is by far the main motivation of Internet users, according to a survey published in the latest number of the British magazine Web, reports AFP.

Catholic priest gave last rites to Diana

LONDON, Oct 24: A Catholic priest today spoke of how he gave Diana, Princess of Wales, the last rites after her car crash in Paris, reports AFP.

Father Yves Clochard-Bossuet, 46, told The Mirror newspaper he was at Diana's bedside in a Paris hospital at 4 am.

"She was already dead. I prayed for her soul. I was alone with her for four hours. I could not believe I was in front of her."

As resident priest at the Pite Salpatriere Hospital in Paris where Diana's body was taken, he had been summoned in the early hours on Sunday, Aug 31, after the crash.

Father Bossuet, said he struggled to believe that he had been called to give the sacraments, which can be given to the dying of any Christian denomination — to Diana.



Roberta Aitchison, left, with meter maids Alicia and Annette who are at the centre of a court battle with a rival meter maid proprietor. The meter maids pose with their boss in Surfers Paradise, Queensland, Australia, Wednesday. Verbal abuse and threats have been made between the two rival proprietors and the court battle continues to decide which meter maid outfit will win out.