

Tamil rebels using prisoners as human shield: Report

COLOMBO, July 8: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels are using 1,500 prisoners as human shields against planned government attacks on their bases in the north, the state-run Daily News reported Thursday, says AP.

The prisoners are a mix of civilians, members of rival rebel groups and renegades among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Tiger rebels.

According to the report, the LTTE have moved the prisoners from their camp jails in the northern jungles to areas near Mullaitivu, a major rebel base, where their leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, is believed to be living.

The defense ministry refuses to say how close they are to the base, but say the ultimate aim of their campaign is to drive the rebels out of the area or eliminate them.

There was no independent confirmation of the report, as the government bars reporters from visiting the war theater. The outlawed rebels do not maintain any overt presence in Colombo and can not be reached for comments.

The defense ministry declined to comment on the Daily News report.

China condemns US move to beef up defence of Taiwan

BEIJING, July 8: China's parliament condemned moves by US congressmen to beef up the defence of Beijing's diplomatic rival Taiwan, saying it could weaken ties with Washington further, official media said today, reports Reuters.

A spokesman for China's lawmaking National People's Congress (NPC) said a proposed US law advocating increased arms sales to Taiwan would "add frost on top of snow" to stormy Sino-US relations.

The Senate also passed an amendment to a defence appropriations bill last month requiring the Department of Defense to submit a report on the military balance in the Taiwan Strait.

The perverse moves of some US legislators constitute a grave provocation to Chinese sovereignty and gross interference in China's internal affairs," the NPC spokesman was quoted as saying.

The US government and Congress were obligated to "faithfully carry out their promise to support the 'one China' policy," he said.

"Practice proves that whenever these principles are observed, Sino-US relations grow smoothly," he said.

China views Taipei's government as the illegitimate ruler of a breakaway province and reserves the right to retake the island by force if Taiwan declares independence.

Ties between Washington and Beijing have turned frosty since NATO bombs hit China's embassy in Belgrade in May and killed three journalists.

Tens of thousands of demonstrators marched in front of US diplomatic missions in China to protest against what official media called a deliberate attack.

China has rejected a US explanation that the bombing was the result of faulty intelligence.

Iranian paper banned for publishing secret document

TEHRAN, July 8: Leading reformist newspaper Salam was closed by the Iranian authorities for publishing extracts from a top secret document, the official news agency IRNA reported Thursday, reports AP.

One of the paper's managers, Morad Oveysi, was also arrested on Wednesday, editor-in-chief Abbas Abdi said, denouncing the ban as "absolutely illegal."

The intelligence ministry had complained over an article in Tuesday's edition of Salam suggesting that tough new press laws being pushed through parliament were inspired by a now disgraced intelligence official, it said.

The Salam article said that Said Emami, whom the authorities blame for a wave of brutal murders of dissidents, had written to his superiors proposing the same sort of press curbs as approved by parliament Wednesday.

Emami committed suicide in a Tehran prison last month while awaiting a certain death sentence for last year's killings, the authorities said.

Heavy casualties as fighting intensifies in Kashmir Militants reject withdrawal, threaten US citizens

KARGIL, India, July 8: Fighting intensified in Kashmir on Thursday, with India reporting heavy casualties as militant Islamic guerrillas showed no sign of withdrawing from the conflict, reports AFP.

According to military officials, heavy fighting in the Batalik and Drass sectors of Kashmir claimed the lives of 38 Indian soldiers in the past 48 hours, and 92 infiltrators.

"As far as we are concerned there has not been the slightest change on the ground," a foreign ministry spokesman said, when questioned about a Pakistani commitment to withdraw the militants.

"We have a task at hand for which military operations are going on, and our current objective is to drive the intruders out," the spokesman said.

Pakistan, which denies New Delhi's claims that its armed forces are involved in the fighting, has promised to use its influence to effect a withdrawal from Indian Kashmir by what it calls Muslim "freedom fighters."

The commitment was made by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during talks at the weekend with US President Bill Clinton in Washington.

However, press reports in Pakistan on Thursday quoted Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz as saying there was "no time limit" for withdrawal. Aziz admitted that Islamabad was not sure if the Islamic militia would even respond to the call to pull out.

Kashmiri militants on Thursday slammed a Pakistan-US deal to withdraw Islamic fighters from Indian Kashmir and threatened US citizens and diplomats travelling in the region.

"We reject all agreements reached between India and Pakistan, or Pakistan and any other country," said Syed Ali Shah Geelani, chairman of the All-Party Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference, comprising some 30 secessionist groups opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir.

"Kashmiris are the main part of the dispute. Until they are taken into confidence, all agreements are null and void," Geelani said.

Geelani was reacting to last weekend's commitment given by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to US President Bill Clinton that he would try to persuade Islamic infiltrators fighting on the Indian side of

the Kashmir border to withdraw into Pakistan.

One of the militant groups involved in the current fighting said Thursday it had no intention of withdrawing.

"We don't recognise either Clinton or Nawaz Sharif. We decide on our own," the Harkat ul-Mujahideen said in a press release.

"We do not fight on the behalf of any country or ruler. We fight in the name of Allah."

The organisation also said it was imposing a "ban on American citizens as well as diplomats" coming to Kashmir.

"If they violate our orders, then strict action will be taken against them," the group said.

The Harkat ul-Mujahideen have been operating in Indian Kashmir since 1994 and have taken responsibility for numerous attacks on Indian security personnel.

The fighting in Kashmir began in early May when India launched a massive offensive to evict guerrillas who had crossed the so-called Line of Control with Pakistan and set up heavily-armed mountain bunkers on the Indian side.

India's official casualty list stands at 321 Indian dead, against 634 infiltrators. Independent observers say the figures are probably far higher.

In the absence of any withdrawal, the Indian army on Thursday was moving large numbers of troops to Batalik, where it captured two peaks late Wednesday in addition to two other guerrilla positions elsewhere.

The redeployment of reserves to Batalik has begun as our main objective is to complete the task within the month," a source from the 121st Infantry Division told AFP.

The troop movement began on July 5 following the recapture of the strategic Tiger Hills.

"The going in Batalik will not be as smooth as we saw in Drass because here we have at least two ridges that are like polished glass and the boys will have to climb at least 16,000 feet (4,848 metres) to fight the intruders," the source said.

The Ladakh Scouts, a commando unit, are spearheading the assault on Batalik. The reinforcements being brought in from other areas are mainly troops who have already staged high-altitude attacks on the infiltrators.



Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi (C), accompanied by his wife Zhizuko (R) and Indian Foreign Minister Komura Masahiko (2nd L), waves to journalists on his arrival at the Capital Airport in Beijing Thursday. Obuchi started an official visit aimed at shoring up ties between the two Asian powers at a time of strained Chinese-US relations. — AFP photo

US blocks move to lift sanctions on Libya

UNITED NATIONS, July 8: The United States on Wednesday blocked non-aligned attempts to seek the permanent lifting of UN sanctions against Libya by threatening to veto a draft resolution, western diplomats said, reports AFP.

The UN Security Council suspended the seven-year international air embargo and other punitive measures against Libya on April 5, following the handover of two suspects wanted for the Lockerbie bombing, and the suspension will remain in effect after Wednesday's council session.

The 15-member council, meeting behind closed doors, was due to examine two separate texts -- a US draft formal statement which wants "further progress" by Libya before the sanctions can be finally lifted, and a draft resolution from non-aligned states demanding the sanctions end.

However, US Ambassador Peter Burleigh warned colleagues that he wanted to make it very clear that "the US will veto any resolution on the lifting of sanctions," diplomats said.

Namibian Ambassador Martin Andjaba, who leads the non-aligned group in the council, responded by saying that the draft resolution would be "available soon" and did not formally submit the text.

Council experts were to meet later in the day in a bid to reach agreement on an amended version of the US text.

Speaking to reporters after the session, Burleigh stressed that Washington remained opposed to fully lifting the sanctions until Libya has complied with all UN requirements and that calls for an end to the measures were "premature."

"I made clear that as far as the US is concerned, Libya has not met all those requirements," said Burleigh, without mentioning the veto threat.

Libyan Ambassador Abuzed Omar Dorda wrote to the council on Tuesday to call for lifting the sanctions, arguing that

US embassy attacked in Kiev

KIEV, July 8: A petrol-bomb attack was carried out against the US embassy here overnight Wednesday but there were no casualties and damage was minor, an embassy spokesman said Thursday, reports AFP.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, which occurred shortly after midnight, the spokesman said.

Two molotov cocktails lobbed over the embassy's gates exploded on the territory of the embassy," the spokesman said.

Police said the attackers threw a glass bottle at the embassy that smashed near a first-floor window and did not cause any damage.

A small fire was almost immediately put out and there was no need to call in firefighters.

The newspaper Fakti, quoting witnesses, said three masked assailants carried out the attack.

UN chief arrives in Freetown

FREETOWN, July 8: UN chief Kofi Annan arrived for a short visit here Thursday, the day after a peace accord was signed by the government and the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) after nine years of war, reports AFP.

Annan arrived shortly after 11:00 a.m. (1100 GMT) at State House where he met Sierra Leone President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, who spent many years as a UN civil servant before his 1996 election victory.

Also present at the meeting was the Nigerian commander of the west African intervention force, ECOMOG, General Felix Mujakperu.

Neither Annan nor Kabbah made a public statement.

Annan is also due to hold talks with other members of the Freetown government as well as with representatives of the UN observer mission in Sierra Leone.

Congo ceasefire to be signed tomorrow

LUSAKA, July 8: African heads of state will converge on Lusaka on Saturday to sign a ceasefire deal to end the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambian President Frederick Chiluba announced today, reports Reuters.

"On Saturday this week African heads of state, plus the belligerents in the Congo war, will meet in Lusaka to sign a very comprehensive ceasefire agreement," he told a news conference, calling it a deal for Africa, by Africans.

Chiluba's announcement came a day after African defence and foreign ministers endorsed a draft ceasefire and withdraw foreign forces from the Congo.

The 11-month war has sucked in armies from at least six African states, dividing Africa's third largest country and threatening the stability of the entire region.

President Thabo Mbeki of regional heavyweight South Africa would be among the leaders attending Saturdays signing, a presidential spokesman in Johannesburg said.

Referring to a separate peace deal to end war in Sierra Leone, Chiluba said the outbreak of peace marked a new era for the world's poorest continent.

"It is a dawn of a new era for our continent. We have peace in Sierra Leone and now we have peace in the Congo. This is a paper I can proudly call an African document, designed and worked out by Africans for Africa," he told the news conference.

Arsonists torch 16 Serb houses in Kosovo

PRIZREN, July 8: Arsonists set fire to 16 houses in the old Serbian quarter of Prizren, the German Kosovo peacekeeping force (KFOR) commander said Thursday, adding six suspects had been arrested, reports AFP.

General Fritz von Korff, in charge of Germany's peacekeeping sector in southwestern Kosovo, lamented the "indifference" of Prizren's population after the latest attacks.

Some of them even refused to let us in to their homes to get water, von Korff said.

"We cannot stop new fires from happening without the cooperation of the public," he warned.

Water and electricity were cut off in the Serb neighbourhood about a half an hour before the fires occurred, in what von Korff called "an organised move."

Prizren has been plagued by tension and sporadic violence between Serbs and ethnic Albanians since NATO peacekeeping troops started to deploy in Kosovo on June 12.

The German military police registered 91 incidents in the German sector Wednesday, including theft, pillages and the fires.

1,200 safely evacuated from blazing ferry

GOTHENBURG, Sweden, July 8: A Norwegian ferry caught fire early Thursday off the Swedish coast, triggering a massive air and sea rescue operation, but all 1,167 passengers were safely evacuated and the blaze was brought under control, Swedish officials said, reports AFP.

Fire broke out aboard the ship Prinsesse Ragnhild shortly after 2:00 a.m. (0000 GMT), about 10 nautical miles off the Swedish port of Vinga near Gothenburg.

The flames are believed to have started in the engine room, IT news agency reported.

All the passengers were evacuated by helicopter, the agency said. About 10 firefighters were still on board the Prinsesse Ragnhild at 7:00 a.m., the maritime police here said.

The ship, belonging to the Norwegian company Color Line, was travelling from the German port of Kiel to Oslo, with a crew of 172, IT said. It was travelling in the Kattegat strait, a busy shipping lane between Denmark and Sweden, when the incident occurred.

About 20 ships and nine Swedish, Norwegian and Danish helicopters rushed to the aid of the stricken ferry, rescue services in Gothenburg said.

"Some passengers are suffering from shock from this fire while others have respiratory problems after inhaling smoke, but none are seriously hurt," said a spokesman for the rescue service.

The crew battled the fire with chemical powder and the blaze was under control by 7:30 a.m., Gothenburg maritime police said.

The Swedish ferry Stena-Danica from the Danish port of Fredrikshavn was 30 nautical miles from Gothenburg, its destination, when it picked up a distress call at 2:13 a.m. and went to assist the Prinsesse Ragnhild.

"It took on 520 passengers from the blazing ship," said Aasa Lindell Bystrom of the Swedish shipping line Stena Line.

She said "the atmosphere was very calm among the passengers taken onto the Stena-Danica."

The Swedish cargo ship Kihlstrand, carrying chemicals, took on 154 passengers for evacuation to Gothenburg, she said.

"The rescue services were on site very quickly," said Stephan Littorin of the Swedish emergency rescue services.

No progress on HR as EU mission leaves Myanmar

BANGKOK, July 8: A European Union mission has slipped out of military-run Myanmar leaving few clues as to the success of its effort to re-open a human rights dialogue with the junta, envoys said Thursday, reports AFP.

A cloak of secrecy has descended on the two days of sensitive talks which saw the four-man team meet opposition leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi and powerful junta First Secretary Khin Nyunt.

Representing Finland, Portugal, the EU secretary and the European Commission, the EU team was trying to pave the way for the resumption of a political and human rights dialogue between Europe and Myanmar.

Diplomats said it would also propose talks between the military authorities and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, which won 1990 elections only to be denied power by the junta.

"They wish first to report to the EU working committee and they don't want to jump the gun, so to speak," Finnish ambassador to Thailand Tauno Kaaria told AFP.

"They have left already and I don't think they had a briefing for diplomats."

A British diplomat in Yangon said the past two days had been "exhausting" but could not comment on the details of the talks.

"The atmosphere was cordial and there was an exchange of information on both sides," she said.

But she said any more details of the success or failure of the mission could take "a long time" to come back from the working committee in Brussels.

A media blackout of the meetings has been imposed in Myanmar, with no coverage in the official newspapers and no comment from junta officials.

Political dialogue between the junta and the EU has been on ice since the EU imposed sanctions in 1996, a move condemned in Yangon as neo-colonial interference.

The human rights situation has also tested the EU's ties with the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN), which Myanmar joined two years ago.

The US State Department on Wednesday backed the EU's team, saying it expected the talks to focus on human rights.

"We support the discussions by the special European mission, which has arrived in Burma (Myanmar) for talks intended to encourage Burma to improve its dismal human rights performance," spokesman James Foley said.

Washington "has long urged Burmese authorities to begin a real, substantive dialogue with the National League for Democracy, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and leaders of Burma's ethnic minority groups leading to a peaceful democratic transition."

Aung San Suu Kyi recently told AFP the junta was not interested in any type of dialogue with the NLD, although she remained open to the possibility of "talks about talks."

Although both have imposed sanctions against the junta, Washington and Brussels have clashed previously over how to deal with Yangon, which is accused of serious human rights abuses including rape and torture.

Prisoners set fire to jail in Indonesia

JAKARTA, July 8: Thirty-four prisoners escaped from a jail in Indonesia's troubled Aceh province after the inmates set fire to the prison, but 12 were later recaptured, police said today, reports AFP.

Head of the Banda Aceh district police Lieutenant Colonel Dedi Suryadi said the inmates broke out late Wednesday around 7:00 pm (1200 GMT) after starting the fire near the front of the gate of the Keudah prison.

"We are still trying to confirm what had happened, but among the prisoners were two Free Aceh Movement members who had encouraged the others to revolt," Suryadi told AFP by phone from Banda Aceh city.

More than 100 prisoners overpowered the guards when the fire brigade came to put out the fire which had spread rapidly to other parts of the jail.

"The first of the six men recaptured were taken to the city's district prison. The other six were taken to the city's provincial prison," Suryadi said, adding the fire had damaged over 90 per cent of Keudah prison.

Police later evacuated the remaining 139 inmates to the Lhoknga prison in Aceh Besar district some 16 kilometers (10 miles) away from Banda Aceh.

Suryadi said Keudah had experienced a prison breakout last year.

"That was before I became head of the district police," he said.

Two of the escapees were caught heading West out of town in a taxi.

"Police immediately knew they were among the missing convicts because they were soaking wet from the fire hoses," Dedi said.

He said the two separatist inmates were believed to have made away with five of the prison guards' rifles.

"It's possible that they took the guards' rifles. Five were noted missing," he added.

Insufficient guards in Aceh prisons have been blamed for at least four jail-breaks there this year.

Achey was put under operational military status in the late 1980s after a resurgence of activity by the separatist Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh) movement which has been fighting for an independent Islamic state since the 1970s.

Algeria to free 2,300 militants

PARIS, July 8: Algeria will release 2,300 non-violent Islamic militants as part of a newly-announced presidential pardon, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika told French radio Thursday, reports AFP.

The figure excludes "perpetrators of blood crimes," those who have planted bombs in public places or schools and which targeted civilians or innocent victims," Bouteflika said.

Violent terrorists "will be tried normally with all the guarantees granted to them under the law, in the most complete and total transparency," the Algerian president added.

It was the first concrete count of how many would benefit from the amnesty, part of Bouteflika's high-stakes campaign for national reconciliation, under which an initial 30 were freed Monday.

The amnesty will not be immediate however, as parliament has 45 days to approve a referendum on it, Bouteflika said.

The new president, elected in April in a vote boycotted by six rivals charging fraud, has pledged to restore peace to the north African country, where civil unrest and security operations have claimed an estimated 100,000 lives since 1992.

US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton (R) is escorted by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan Wednesday on his farm near Oneonta, New York. Hillary Clinton announced her plans to run for Moynihan's seat as a Senator from the state of New York.



US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton (R) is escorted by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan Wednesday on his farm near Oneonta, New York. Hillary Clinton announced her plans to run for Moynihan's seat as a Senator from the state of New York. — AFP photo