

RUF leader Sankoh captured

UN hostages being freed in Sierra Leone

FREETOWN, May 17: Cheering crowds filled the streets of Freetown today as rebel leader Foday Sankoh was captured and his rebels began freeing the last of 500 UN peacekeepers taken hostage two weeks ago, reports AFP.

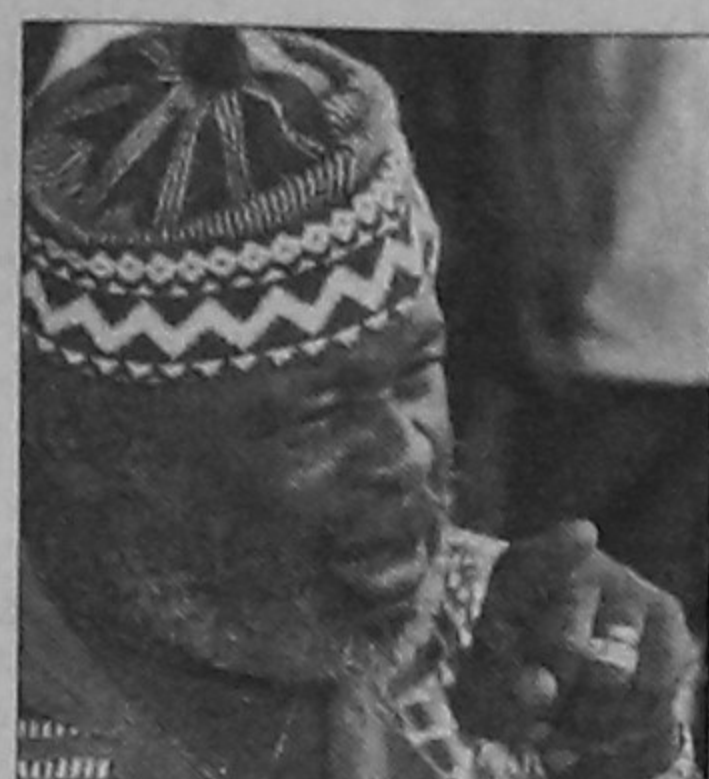
Sankoh was taken to army headquarters in the capital, where he is in British hands, a British army officer said.

The rebel leader, whose forces have broken a fragile 10-month peace accord, had been missing since May 8.

Shortly after Sankoh's capture, the United Nations announced that rebels had begun releasing some 350 hostages held in eastern and northern Sierra Leone.

Sankoh, who launched a brutal guerrilla war in 1991 and won vice-presidential powers as part of the Lome peace accord last July, was being held by British troops, said a British officer who refused to be identified.

As news broke of Sankoh's arrest, crowds massed outside



Foday Sankoh

the heavily guarded army building shouting anti-Sankoh slogans, while other Sierra Leoneans drove through the streets to voice their joy over the arrest of the man behind systematic mutilation of civilians in an eight-year campaign of terror.

"Sankoh is in the hands of the British army for the moment. We will hand him over

later to the Sierra Leone government," the officer said.

He gave no further details and did not explain why Sankoh was under British guard inside a Sierra Leone army compound.

Authorities accuse Sankoh, who escaped death row after striking the July power-sharing agreement, of masterminding another coup and illicitly selling diamonds.

The United Nations also holds Sankoh personally responsible for his rebels having taken 500 peacekeepers hostage earlier this month. After an initial batch of 140 were freed on Sunday, the remainder were being released on Wednesday, the UN force commander said.

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) leader went missing last week Monday following a massive anti-RUF demonstration outside his house that turned violent. Nineteen people were killed in the incident.

In Rome, the Misna missionary group said Sankoh had been hiding in a shelter under

his Freetown house.

But government soldiers here told AFP that he had been arrested early Wednesday in the seaside area of Lumley after being spotted by residents there.

His fate had been the prime subject of talk in Freetown, with rumours circulating in the press and on the streets that he had died of a heart attack, fled into the bush, left the country to sell his diamonds, or was being held secretly by the UN force UNAMSIL.

The United Nations was lambasted by human rights groups last year for granting the RUF amnesty after rebels raped, killed and mutilated tens of thousands of civilians.

But Sankoh, who wielded considerable power in rural Sierra Leone, still has a chance at redemption, the United States has said.

"He does still have a chance and the ability to prove himself by making sure the hostages get released and getting back into line with the accords," the State Department said.

15 killed in fresh sectarian clashes in Ambon

AMBON, Indonesia, May 17: At least 15 people were killed and more than 50 others injured in fresh sectarian clashes in Ambon in Indonesia's Maluku islands yesterday and today, reports and witnesses said here, reports AFP.

Thirteen civilians -- 12 Muslims and one Christian -- and two members of the security forces had been killed in the violence since late Tuesday, the state Antara news agency said.

Among the dead were a 19-year-old policeman and an army soldier, Antara said, adding that at least 59 others were injured.

Most of the victims were shot dead when security forces opened fire to disperse mobs of the two religious communities clashing in downtown Ambon city.

Antara said two people were killed and 11 others wounded in the first clashes late on Tuesday at the border separating the Mardhika and Batumerah areas. Thirteen other people were killed and 48 others were injured Wednesday in similar violence and shooting.

Pak ruler backs down on blasphemy law change

ISLAMABAD, May 17: Pakistan's military ruler, facing his first organised challenge in seven months, has withdrawn a key change to a controversial blasphemy law to appease restive religious parties, reports Reuters.

The official APP news agency quoted General Pervez Musharraf as saying late on Tuesday that an amendment to the blasphemy law would be withdrawn as demanded by Islamic groups who had threatened to hold protest rallies on Friday.

The religious parties had backed the powerful traders in calling a three-day strike from Friday in protest against a general sales tax (GST) and a survey to broaden the narrow tax base, a key demand of the International Monetary Fund.

Under the change, anyone with a blasphemy grievance had to register a complaint, called a First Information Report (FIR), with the area administrator or District Commissioner, instead of with the local police chief.

The change was aimed at making the process more official and harder to abuse, but religious groups said it was a

dilution of a key legal provision safeguarding Islam, and were furious.

"As it was the unanimous demand of the Ulama (religious scholars) and of the people, therefore, I have decided to do away with the procedural change in registration of a First Information Report under the blasphemy law," APP quoted Musharraf as saying.

Musharraf was talking to reporters on his return from a two-day official visit of Turkmenistan.

Human rights groups have long demanded the repeal of the blasphemy law, which they say is often twisted against religious minorities or in personal vendettas and land disputes.

It was not immediately known if they would now withdraw from the strike but APP quoted an official as saying that there was no further justification for it.

The protest is the first organised challenge Musharraf has faced since he came to power in a bloodless coup in October and suspended parliament and the constitution.

Gill to help Lanka crush Tamil uprising

NEW DELHI, May 17: An anti-terrorism expert who led the police crackdown on Sikh separatists in India will help neighbouring Sri Lanka crush the Tamil uprising, a newspaper reported today, says AP.

KPS Gill, who is widely credited with ending the Sikh rebellion in India in the early 1990s, will fly to Colombo this week to advise the government on an anti-terrorism strategy, the Indian Express newspaper reported.

"I have been invited in my personal capacity by the Sri Lankan government," the paper quoted Gill as saying.

Gill sought the Indian government's clearance before accepting the offer, the paper said.

India has refused to send its military into Sri Lanka to fight Tamil Tiger rebels, who are seeking a homeland. In recent weeks, they have advanced to the outskirts of Jaffna, their former stronghold that they are trying to recapture from the soldiers.



The BA Regional Turboprop at Liverpool Airport after it made an emergency landing Tuesday. All 44 passengers and four crew made a successful evacuation after the plane came to a halt on the runway at the airport and tilted on to one wing. — AFP photo

Rebels demand independence in exchange of hostages

JOLO, May 17: Muslim rebels holding 21 Western and Asian hostages have issued their first written conditions for their captives' release, including creation of an independent Islamic state — a demand the Philippine government has repeatedly refused, reports AP.

The demands are likely to complicate and prolong negotiations with the Abu Sayyaf rebels, which are scheduled to start either Thursday or Friday.

The highly political two-page manifesto described the kidnapping as a "minor thing compared to injustices suffered by the Philippines' Muslim minority."

The Abu Sayyaf, the smaller

and more extreme of two Muslim separatist groups fighting in the impoverished southern Philippines, also asked international organisations, including the United Nations, to create a commission to examine the plight of Muslims in the region.

Muslim people "have been a hostage of the Philippine government," said the manifesto, provided to journalists Tuesday.

The Philippine government kidnapped the sovereignty of Muslims, it added.

Muslim sultanates existed in what is now the southern Philippines before Spain colonised the territory in the 1500s.

24 soldiers convicted for Aceh massacre

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, May 17: An Indonesian court today sentenced 24 soldiers and a civilian to up to 10 years' jail for the massacre of 58 civilians in the first major human rights trial in the restive province of Aceh, reports AFP.

"The defendants ... have legally and with certainty been found to be guilty of the crime of jointly murdering (people)," Judge Ruslan Dahlan said reading out the verdict with another judge.

Dahlan, heading a panel of civilian and military judges, said the defendants had used "weaponry which were not proportionate to the weapons carried by the victims."

The victims, some of whom had been armed with knives and machetes, all died from being shot in the head or chest and there appeared to have been no attempt to immobilize them, Dahlan said.

The "Connectivity Court," the first to involve civilian and military judges, was set up to specifically address cases of gross human rights violations by soldiers and officials in Aceh.

Ten members of the Kostrad army strategic reserve command, including a captain and a second lieutenant, were sentenced to eight years and six months each.



Yoshiro Mori

Japan is a divine nation

Japanese PM apologises for his comment

TOKYO, May 17: Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori apologised to parliament today for whipping up a pre-election storm by describing Japan as a divine nation with the emperor at its centre, reports AFP.

The opposition vowed to demand his government's resignation over the comment, reminiscent of Japan's wartime creed that the emperor was a living god.

Mori's statement, coming in the run-up to a general election expected June 25, stunned the public and press.

"It is a matter of course that I, as prime minister, strictly uphold and respect the sovereign power, which resides with the people, and freedom of religion," Mori told a full session of the upper house.

"I am sorry if I have caused a misunderstanding and I would like to offer my apologies," said the prime minister, who has a reputation for making verbal gaffes.

BRIEFLY

PWG kills 3 cops in Andhra:

Three policemen have been killed by left-wing extremists in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, police said yesterday, Reuters reports from Hyderabad.

A police spokesman said six members of the outlawed People's War Group (PWG) ambushed a group of policemen in Nizamabad town, 160-km (100 miles) north of the state capital, Hyderabad, on Tuesday night. He said an assistant sub-inspector, a constable and a home guard were shot dead in the attack.

Driver shot dead in Delhi road: In another case of road rage on the Indian capital's crowded highways, three drunken men argued with a car driver after an accident, then shot him dead and injured two passengers, newspapers reported Wednesday, AP says from New Delhi.

Tuesday's killing highlighted urban stress, the easy availability of firearms — legal and illegal — and the failure of police to curb drunken driving by operators of the city's 3.2 million vehicles.

17 militants among 21 killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, May 17: Indian troops gunned down 17 Muslim rebels in separate encounters in Kashmir, as two civilians and two soldiers were also killed in unabated violence in the disputed Himalayan state, police said today, reports AFP.

Police commandos early Wednesday killed two rebels in the military garrison of Yarpura, in Anantnag district, some 65 km south of the state winter capital Srinagar.

One civilian also died in the exchange of fire between the militants and the police, a police official told AFP.

A police spokesman said Indian combat troops shot dead six Islamic guerrillas late Tuesday who entered Kashmir from Pakistan at a Ragni border point, some 150 km north of Srinagar.

The six had crossed the Line of Control (LoC) which separates the Indian and Pakistani zones of Kashmir, police said.

Six militants were killed in

the firefight that lasted several hours. We recovered three AK-47 assault rifles, a machine gun and a pistol. We are keeping a vigil on the border to flush out militants who may be in hiding," said the spokesman.

In a separate encounter, Indian troops late Tuesday foiled another infiltration bid at a border point in Rajouri 190 km north of the state summer capital Jammu.

"Nine militants, four of them Pakistani, were killed in the encounter," said a defense spokesman here.

In the crossfire one Indian soldier was killed, while an army officer was seriously injured," he added.

Muslim rebels overnight Tuesday carried out a rocket attack on a security post near Banihal, some 200 km east of Jammu. One soldier and a civilian were killed in the attack.

Meanwhile, local authorities Wednesday fished out the mutilated body of an alleged police informer.

Brosnan opts for delay in tying the knot

LOS ANGELES, May 17: James Bond star Pierce Brosnan has postponed his Irish wedding, which had been set for this coming weekend, until his teenage son fully recovers from an automobile accident last month, a spokesman for the actor said Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Publicist Dick Guttman said in a statement that Sean Brosnan, 16, was recently readmitted to a Los Angeles area hospital for treatment of complications from his injuries, which included a broken pelvis.

No details about the complications or the boy's medical condition were released.

Iranian House votes to seal border with Afghanistan

TEHRAN, May 17: Iran's parliament voted today to seal the country's 940 km border with Afghanistan in a bid to contain drug smuggling, reports AFP.

The conservative-dominated parliament agreed to give a special budget to the interior ministry to build electronically-equipped walls and fences to keep out smugglers and bandits.

Deputies said the measures were essential to save the border province of Khorassan from drugs and criminal activity.

On Sunday an MP from a border region made a violent attack on Interior Minister Abdolreza Musavi-Lari for the lack of security.

"Every day our children, our women and our men are shot dead, taken hostage or raped by Afghan bandits and drug traffickers," shouted Ebrahimyay Salami, who represents Khaf and Reshtekhar in the frontier area.

Myanmar military must respect democracy: US

WASHINGTON, May 17: The United States on Tuesday marked the 10th anniversary of aborted elections in Myanmar by endorsing the struggle for democracy in the South Asian state, dominated by military rulers for half a century, reports Reuters.

In an impassioned message of support for the country's democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, "Today we renew our appeal to the authorities in Rangoon to abide by the democratic wishes of their people."

Suu Kyi, the recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize, heads the

National League for Democracy, which won 392 of the 485 seats contested in the 1990 election.

"We renew our commitment to Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. As long as you struggle, we will do all we can to assist. And we know that you will not stop struggling until you prevail," Albright said.

She was speaking at an event held by the National Endowment for Democracy to mark the anniversary of the election, held on May 27, 1990, and to hear a videotaped message from Suu Kyi, who said, "We are not going to give up our struggle."

Lankan jets, tanks beat back waves of LTTE attacks

COLOMBO, May 17: Sri Lankan aircraft and tanks beat back waves of Tamil rebel assaults by killing at least 39 Tiger guerrillas who tried to breach army defences near the town of Jaffna, the government said today, reports AFP.

Troops backed by aircraft and artillery guns pounded formations of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at Columbuturai and Kaithady overnight, the government said in a statement.

"Troops manning defences observed over 30 terrorist dead bodies ahead of the defences," the statement said adding that another nine rebels were killed when troops smashed a rebel bunker near Navatukuli.

The government said three Tiger boats crossing the Jaffna lagoon were also attacked with heavy guns mounted on main battle tanks but gave no estimate of rebel casualties.

The government statement

also did not say if security forces suffered any casualties in the overnight battles.

However, the government said civilians in Jaffna were not leaving the area despite artillery and mortar attacks blamed on the Tamil Tigers.

There was no immediate reaction from the guerrillas to the latest military claims, but the rebels said in a statement from their London office Tuesday that they launched two frontal assaults along the coastal areas of Jaffna and Chavakachcheri.

"The Tiger combat units have smashed through the defence lines of the government troops causing heavy casualties to the enemy," the LTTE statement said on Tuesday.

The LTTE said fighting was also raging at Kaithady near Jaffna.

The latest fighting came as President Chandrika Kumaratunga on Wednesday vowed to restore peace based on Buddhist principles of non-violence and equality.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga today vowed to restore peace based on Buddhist principles as heavy fighting raged with Tamil rebels in the north.

Kumaratunga used a message on Wesak, Buddhism's most important celebrations marking the birth, enlightenment and the passing away of Buddha, to call for national unity and an end to the bitter civil war.

"We will soon take steps to provide comprehensive and lasting solutions drawing from the philosophy of Buddhism based on equality with honor and co-existence which every body can accept," Kumaratunga said.

She said a solution to the country's drawn out Tamil separatist conflict could be found by following the path of Buddha's teachings.

Lankan Tamils trapped between law & war

COLOMBO, May 17: Trapped between a brutal guerrilla group, tough anti-terrorism laws and a threat of communal violence, minority Tamils in Sri Lanka are battling apprehension.

Tension, anxiety fear ... would best characterize the mood in the Tamil community at the moment," Pakiasothy Saravanamuttu, himself a Tamil and head of the Colombo based think-tank Centre for Policy Alternatives, told Reuters.

"The general attitude appears to be stay quiet and tread carefully," he said.

That certainly seemed to be the mood on the streets of Wellawatte, Colombo's predominantly Tamil district, dubbed "Little Jaffna" after the northern peninsula where separatist Tamil Tiger rebels are battling government troops.

Dozens of passers-by and shopkeepers declined to comment on the latest flare-up in the fighting in Jaffna.

Many professional and white-collar workers also declined interviews, and those who did speak chose their words carefully.

Tamils don't want war. We want peace," said A T Lingam, an aid worker.

Like most of Colombo's Tamils, Lingam is from one of the war-torn areas of the country's north and east where Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels are fighting for a separate Tamil homeland.

The Tamils' apprehensions stem partly from tough new public security laws which drastically curtail freedom of expression.

Under the laws, which were introduced earlier this month after the LTTE launched a fresh offensive to recapture Jaffna, nobody can criticise the president or hold protest marches. Trade union actions are banned and the government has the power to seize property and vehicles.

Strict censorship has also been imposed on the media.

Tamils in Colombo have always been anxious about police raids conducted under the 22-year-old Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The government says the

tough new laws are intended to protect Tamils living outside the north and east from any backlash that might occur if things go wrong for the mainly majority Sinhalese army on the battlefield. "They (the public security laws) are also intended to prevent attempts ... (to) fish in troubled waters and incite the people and inflame the country," President Chandrika Kumaratunga told the nation in a recent television address.

S Muthukumarawamy, a retired Jaffna public servant, agreed.

"The government is our only protector," he said, adding that he fears a repeat of 1983 ethnic riots whenever tension builds up in the country because of the fighting.

In July 1983 majority Sinhalese mobs went on the rampage in Colombo and other parts of the country after the rebels killed 13 Sinhalese soldiers in Jaffna.

Hundreds of Tamils were killed and thousands more displaced in the riots that plunged the country into its current full-scale ethnic war.



India's main opposition leader Sonia Gandhi (R) flags off a convoy of 100 trucks yesterday in New Delhi carrying food and medicine for the drought-hit areas in the north Indian state of Rajasthan. Rajasthan, along with its neighbouring state is reeling under one of the worst droughts of recent times which is estimated to have affected over 50 million people. — AFP photo

Government of Bangladesh
 Office of the Executive Engineer (RHD)
 Road Division, Barguna

Notice Inviting Quotation for (RHD) Ferry Lease

- Quotation notice : Quotation no 3/1999-2000 no
- Name of work : Lease of the Amtali Ferry Ghat at 69th km of Barisal-Patuakhali-Amtali-Barguna road under Barguna Road Division, during the year 1999-2000.
- Estimated cost : As per quoted rate.
- Earnest money : 10% (ten per cent) of quoted total amount.
- Eligibility of : A to D general category/ contractors
- Lease period : Up to 30-6-2001 from the date of work order.
- Name of officers : 1) Commissioner, Barisal Division, Barisal.
2) Executive Engineer (RHD), Road Division, Barisal/Bhola/Pirojpur/Jhalakati/Patuakhali/Planning Division, Dhaka. The undersigned & Sub-Divisional Engineer (RHD), Road Sub-Division, Barguna.
- The officers who will receive the quotations (in sealed cover) : 1) Addl Chief Engineer (RHD), Barisal Zone, Barisal.
2) Commissioner, Barisal Division, Barisal.
3) Superintending Engineer (RHD), Barisal Road Circle, Barisal.
4) Superintending Engineer (RHD), Procurement & Monitoring Circle, Sarak Bhaban, Ramna, Dhaka.
5) Executive Engineer (RHD), Barisal/Patuakhali & undersigned.
- Last date & time of selling quotation : Up to 24-5-2000 (during office hours).
- Last date & time of receiving quotation (in sealed cover) : 25-5-2000 up to 12:30 PM.
- Last date of opening quotation box : On 25-5-2000 at 12:45 PM.
- Date & time of : At 11:00 AM on 30-5-2000.
- Date & time of : Date will be fixed later on lottery (if necessary) (which will be circulated through notice board).

DFP-11726-15/5
 G-928

Md Abdul Bari
 Executive Engineer (RHD)
 Road Division, Barguna.