

International

Lankan PM vows to crush Tigers amid peace moves

COLOMBO, Nov 27: Sri Lanka Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa vowed to crush Tamil rebels and pooh-poohed British attempts to replicate the Northern Ireland experience in their former colony, reports said today, says AFP.

Wickremesinghe who assumed duties as acting defence minister last week said there will be no let up in the military campaign against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) despite the latest peace moves.

The state-run Daily News quoted the premier as saying at a meeting in his Kalutara home constituency Saturday that experiences of other countries cannot be "planted" in Sri Lanka.

"We will carry on the military option until the enemy is totally eliminated," he was quoted as saying in the Daily News.

"The government is certainly not for the cease-fire as previous experiences have shown that the enemy insists on cease-fire when only it is weak."

President Chandrika Kumaratunga who is currently touring Europe, sought Norway's help last year to bring Tamil Tigers to the negotiating table.

"Sri Lanka cannot compare its situation with that of (northern) Ireland as (LTTE leader Velupillai) Prabhakaran is the embodiment of brutality, killing even his own comrades," the prime minister said.

British junior foreign minister Peter Hain, who left Thursday after a brief visit had asked Sri Lanka

to use the Northern Ireland peace process as an example and move towards ending the separatist war.

Wickremesinghe's remarks were published widely as the government keenly awaited a policy speech later Monday by LTTE leader Prabhakaran who marked his 46th birthday on Sunday.

Prabhakaran's speech would commemorate some 16,000 of his cadres killed in the past 18 years.

This year's statement is keenly awaited by the government as well as the diplomatic community amid mounting international pressure on both sides to get down to peace talks.

Hain told reporters Thursday that Colombo was looking for Prabhakaran to signal a willingness to talk.

He said he was asking both the Tamil Tigers and Colombo to begin a dialogue in line with an initiative by Oslo.

"It is in everybody's interest to end the military conflict," Hain said.

"We have given a strong message to the LTTE that there is no alternative to peace talks. And that has been my advice to the government."

Sri Lanka's peace hopes were raised earlier this month when the Norwegian special envoy to the island, Erik Solheim, held a rare meeting with Prabhakaran and later announced the rebels were serious about talks.



Bollywood actress Manisha Koirala (C) takes part in a demonstration to protest against the trafficking of young girls near parliament yesterday. Some 2 million children are sold into labour or prostitution around the world, many of them in South Asia. -AFP photo

Riot police deployed as Delhi braces for strike

NEW DELHI, Nov 27: Riot police took to the streets of New Delhi today, as a strike by tens of thousands of angry factory workers sparked fears of fresh violence, reports AFP.

At least three people were killed, scores injured and dozens of vehicles set on fire during two days of protests last week, as workers demonstrated against the planned closure of thousands of polluting industrial units in the capital.

"There have been no arrests... no major incident of violence was reported as of noon today" said a Delhi police spokesman.

Monday's strike was called to protest against a 1996 Supreme Court order for the closure of 125,000 polluting units located in Delhi's residential areas.

Police and members of the anti-riot Rapid Action Force were deployed in large numbers near the parliament, where the protesters were expected to congregate after marching through the city.

In a bid to curb the protests, the Indian cabinet said Wednesday it would consider amending plans to save some of the units from closure, provided they adhere to strict anti-pollution norms.

However, the move did not appease the protesters.

"We plan to highlight the plight of the workers through whatever means at our disposal," said a factory owner belonging to the Small Scale Industries Action Front, one of the unions which led last week's violent protests.

New Delhi has been rated as one of the most polluted cities by the World Health Organisation.

Security was also tight around the Supreme Court, which the protesters had threatened to picket.

Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit, who belongs to the main opposition Congress Party, led a march to parliament, protesting against the intransigent attitude of the federal government over the factory closures.

'Dead' man killed after four years!

JEHANABAD, Nov 27: Death came upon him four long years after he was officially declared dead, reports PTI.

Brijnandan Singh Yadav, one of the four alleged People's War Group supporters killed in last night's massacre at Salarpur village in Bihar's Jehanabad district, was declared dead in police files in 1996.

According to police sources, Kamta Singh Yadav, the son of the deceased, and a relative Suryanath Singh Yadav had identified a body, recovered on April 28, 1996 near Baina village under Ghosi police station, as that of Brijnandan and a case of murder was registered against six persons belonging to Salarpur.

Brijnandan and Son Kamta, along with two others, were killed in last night's attack by the CPI-ML (liberation).

Fujimori still hopeful of political career in Peru

TOKYO, Nov 27: Former Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori insisted today that he still retained the moral capacity to govern and said it was up to the Peruvian people to decide his fate.

The people would be the "true judges" of whether his dismissal for "moral incapacity" disqualified him from a future political career, Fujimori told AFP in an interview.

Speaking at Tokyo's luxury New Otani Hotel where he stayed for six days last week, the ousted head of state he was not considering appealing against the decision by Peru's Congress to remove him.

"It was a completely political decision, and I hope that there was no hidden deal behind it. I know in my own mind, in my heart of hearts that I have the moral capacity," he said.

Asked if he believed the lawmakers' decision would finish his political career, Fujimori insisted, "It's the (Peruvian) people who will decide that. For me the people are the true judges of my political future."

The former president urged his supporters "not to lose hope in Peru's future," even though he acknowledged that "few will understand for now" his decision to quit the country and stay in Japan.

"I hope that the time will come when people will understand that this was a step I had to take, that they will remember how I handled problems," he added.

He was referring to his role in resolving the four-month long Japanese Embassy hostage crisis in 1997, and a century-old border dispute with Ecuador in 1998.

Kashmir truce offer sparks fears of increased violence

SRINAGAR, India, Nov 27: Indian security forces in Kashmir went on full alert today, on the eve of a unilateral government ceasefire that Muslim militant groups have rejected with threats of stepped up violence, reports AFP.

The ceasefire was expected to take effect from Tuesday -- the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Past experience has shown that ceasefires in Kashmir tend to herald a sustained phase of violence by hardline separatist groups opposed to any deals with New Delhi.

During the Ramadan ceasefire, the security forces have been ordered to refrain from "initiating" combat operations against militant groups.

But there has been no reduction in the security presence in the streets of the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar, where army bunkers will remain at key intersections.

"We have briefed our troops and have asked them to stay on high alert," said a senior Border Security Force officer.

In the past, militants have increased attacks on security positions and soft targets during Ramadan, he said.

The last ceasefire initiative in Muslim-majority Kashmir ended in August after just two weeks, during which hardline outfits opposed to the peace process massacred nearly 100 people -- mostly Hindu pilgrims and migrant workers.

Since Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's announcement of the ceasefire nine days ago, 10 Sikhs and Hindus have been gunned down in two separate incidents.

Minority groups are worried that the violence will worsen.

"We are being targeted through no possible fault of our own," said Sohan Lal, a Hindu labourer from Bihar state. "We are here doing meagre jobs for the Kashmiris. We are not working for any political party... they should understand this."

Harpal Singh, a Sikh carpenter from Punjab state, said he was considering leaving Kashmir for good after living here for 25 years.

"It's no good waking up and wondering if I even dare go to work," Singh said. "How many other places are there where a ceasefire means your life is in greater danger?"

Nearly all pro-Pakistan militant outfits have rejected Vajpayee's ceasefire offer and told their field commanders to intensify attacks on the security forces.

The Muslim insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir has claimed more than 34,000 lives since 1989.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training the rebel groups in Kashmir. Islamabad denies the charge but extends open moral and diplomatic support to what it views as the Kashmiris' legitimate struggle for self-determination.

Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah told the Star News television channel late Sunday that the Ramadan ceasefire could be extended.



A street theatre group plays out a tableau in which "globalisation" (dressed in US flag) is holding India's Federal Government (L) and the Delhi state government (R) in chains during a protest near parliament yesterday. Security was tightened in New Delhi as a strike by tens of thousands of angry small factory workers sparked fears of fresh violence. Small factories polluting residential areas of the capital have been ordered to relocate, sparking riots last week. -AFP photo

Bus accident in Thailand: 20 killed, 16 hurt

BANGKOK, Nov 27: A bus veered off a highway in northern Thailand and tumbled down a roadside verge, killing 20 and injuring 16 people on board, police said, reports AP.

Police suspect that the driver, who died in the crash, had fallen asleep at the wheel. All the passengers were Thai.

An 8-year-old girl was among the dead, said Police Sgt. Prachub Kaewthida of Mae Prik district police station in Lampang province, 510 kilometres north of Bangkok.

The injured were taken to Mae Prik District Hospital. At least two people were in a serious condition, the police said.

The accident happened at around 3:00 am. The bus crashed through a highway rail fence and fell 7 metres (yards) down an embankment before landing belly-up, police said.

The bus was carrying families back to Bangkok after a holiday in northwestern Mae Hong Son province near the border with Myanmar, also known as Burma, the police said.



General Juan Carlos Tafur (C) salutes during a ceremony after being named new head of the Armed Forces Joint Command on Sunday in Lima, Peru. Tafur, who had been dismissed in October for disagreeing with officials in former president Alberto Fujimori's administration, was returned to active duty by President Valentin Aguapani. -AFP photo

Tension mounts after Israeli troops kill 5 Palestinians

Security chiefs of both sides meet

NABLUS, West Bank, Nov 27: Israeli commandos killed five Palestinians locals said they were known for attacking Jewish settlers and soldiers in an ambush late Sunday that Palestinians branded a cold-blooded murder, reports AFP.

An Israeli special unit gunned down the five Palestinians, two of them teenagers, near a Jewish settlement close to the northern West Bank town of Qalqilya.

The Israeli army said the dead had belonged to the militia wing of Yasser Arafat's faction, Fatah, which it blames for spearheading attacks against Jewish settlers over the past two months of deadly unrest that has claimed the lives of almost 290 people.

"A military unit in operation intercepted five armed terrorists after they had fired on a car along the road of the Alfei Menashe settlement," an army spokesman said.

But a Fatah official in the Qalqilya area, Ahmed Hazea, denied Monday that the victims were Fatah members and accused the Israeli army of killing them in "cold blood."

"We believe that Israel injured them first and left them without medical treatment until their last breaths," he told Voice of Palestine radio.

"Israel and its army will be punished... This crime and other Israeli crimes will not pass without punishment," he added.

Qalqilya residents who retrieved the five bodies early Monday said a group of seven Palestinians had been in an orchard near a road used by settlers. They said that the young Palestinians had likely been throwing stones, Molotov cocktails and possibly shooting primitive guns at passing cars owned by Jews.

Residents said they found a lone homemade gun

in the orchard and accused Israeli troops of preventing ambulances from reaching the area for several hours.

"Israeli occupation forces conducted an ugly crime when they shot in cold blood several Palestinian youths," Qalqilya governor Mustafa al-Malki told Voice of Palestine.

"The Israeli crime was conducted according to the old Israeli statement: kill first and then we will find you the excuse."

The banner headline of the Palestinian daily newspaper al-Hayat al-Jadida echoed the angry sentiment: "Occupation assassinates youths on eve of Ramadan."

Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, began at dawn on Monday and Fatah has called on Palestinians to intensify their uprising for the occasion.

Qalqilya residents said that two of the Palestinians who had been in the orchard escaped the Israeli commando fire and were being interviewed by Palestinian police.

The five dead were Fathi Zaharan, 22, Mahmoud al-Adel, 28, Ziad Silmi, 17, Mahdi Qassem, 16, and Mohammad Odwan, 20, all residents of the Palestinian-run town.

Another Palestinian, Zakariya al-Khur, 17, also died Monday in Gaza City's Shifa hospital from a bullet wound to the head he received in clashes with Israeli soldiers last Tuesday, taking the total toll from two months of unrest to 289.

Meanwhile, the head of Israel's Shin Beth domestic security service Avraham Dichter met Palestinian preventive security chief for the Gaza Strip Mohammed Dahlan in Egypt on Sunday, public radio reported here.

Appeal delayed as Anwar in hospital

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 27: Malaysia's highest court today postponed Anwar Ibrahim's appeal against his conviction and six-year jail sentence for abuse of power because the ex-deputy premier was in hospital, reports AFP.

The federal court adjourned the hearing till December 11 after hearing that Anwar was transferred to hospital early Saturday with a slipped disc, one of his lawyers said.

Anwar, who first complained of back pain last month, was taken from Sungei Buloh prison to the government-run Kuala Lumpur General Hospital.

Rebel attacks spark panic among businessmen in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, Nov 27: Panic has gripped the Hindi-speaking business community in India's northeastern state of Assam, with separatist militants gunning down 50 people in a string of attacks over the past month, reports AFP.

In the latest incident, heavily armed gunmen on Sunday shot dead four businessmen from Bihar state.

"There is total chaos and panic with most of the non-Assamese people residing in Assam feeling insecure and haunted with a fear of being the next target themselves," J.P. Singh, a Bihari community leader in Assam, told AFP.

The main separatist targets have been the Marwari community from Rajasthan and the Biharis.

The two groups control the bulk of business in Assam, where they have lived for many years.

Police have blamed the killings on the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which is fighting for an independent homeland.

However, the ULFA has categorically denied any involvement.

"We have conclusive evidence to prove that the killings were perpetrated by the ULFA who out of desperation have been hitting at soft targets to show they are still a force to be reckoned with," Assam Police Chief Hare Krishna Deka told AFP.

BRIEFLY

China may execute 2 MPs: Two members of China's National People's Congress (NPC) have been sacked over corruption charges and could now face the death penalty, state media reported on Monday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The two legislators were found to have taken "huge sums" in bribes and could face trial soon, the China Daily website said, citing unnamed official sources. One of the two, Cong Fukui, was formerly the executive deputy governor of northern China's Hebei province and a member of the standing committee of the provincial communist party branch.

Apartment fire kills 10 in Russia: Ten people died in Russia's Far Eastern city of Yakutsk in a fire that devastated a two-story apartment building, the ITAR-TASS news agency reported Monday, AFP says from Moscow.

The victims' remains were found after firefighters struggled for five hours to bring the blaze under control, the local emergency service officials said.

The remains were not yet identified, and investigation of the incident was under way, the emergency service added.

5 to die in Vietnam: Five people, including a woman, received death sentences Monday for trafficking in drugs, the Hanoi people's court announced, AFP reports from Hanoi.

The five were convicted after a trial of 28 people, including 13 women, accused of being part of the most extensive drug network that was smashed in Vietnam in recent years. Six accused, three of them women, received life terms in jail, a court official said.

'US-N Korean summit indispensable to peace'

SINGAPORE, Nov 27: South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung today called for direct talks between the US and North Korean leaders, saying this was indispensable to peace on the troubled Korean Peninsula, reports AFP.

Kim, delivering the prestigious Singapore Lecture, also urged Japan to play a more active role to ease tensions with the Stalinist north.

He said North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il was expected to visit Seoul by spring next year in return for his own historic visit to Pyongyang on June 13.

Seoul also proposed a resumption of the four-party talks among the two Koreas, the United States and China, last held in August 1999.

Kim said that when he returned from the North "I stressed to President (Bill) Clinton that direct talks with Chairman Kim would be the only way to successfully carry out negotiations on various issues, including missiles."

"I also recommended to Japanese Prime Minister (Yoshiro

Mori to formulate an active North Korea policy," said Kim, who won this year's Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end 50 years of lingering hostilities following the Korean War.

A meeting between the US and North Korean leaders "will be indispensable to peace on the Korean peninsula and all of East Asia," he said.

Kim Jong-Il "calls all the shots, he makes all the decisions in the North."

Kim Dae-Jung said it was up to Clinton to decide on whether to make a visit to North Korea or wait for the next US president to do so.

Speculation that Clinton would stopover in Pyongyang early this month after the APEC summit in Brunei was ruled out because of differences over North Korea's ballistic missiles program.

"From my perspective, of course we want all the pending issues between the two sides, including the North Korean missile issue, to be resolved as soon as possible," Kim said.

"But whether the visit should be made by President Clinton or not, that has to be made based upon various considerations including the domestic political consideration of the United States."

Kim stressed that the easing of South and North Korea ties without parallel improvements in Pyongyang's ties with the United States and Japan would be inadequate to take the peace process forward.

"In this respect, I hope that East Asian nations will continue to support the efforts of North Korea to improve relations with the United States and Japan."

North Korea's move to drop insistence for the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea has cleared the way for resuming the four-party talks with the US and China, Kim said.

Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji backed a resumption of the talks during a meeting with Kim on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in Singapore, he added.

Floods, landslides kill 162 in SE Asia

HONG KONG, Nov 27: Floods and landslides triggered by the worst rains in more than a decade have killed at least 162 people in northern regions of Malaysia and Indonesia and in southern Thailand, officials said today, reports AFP.

Meteorologists said the rain was abating, but added there could be more on the way as the region enters its monsoon season.

In Indonesia, at least 91 people have been killed since Monday last week, in one of the worst monsoon rains to hit the northern part of the archipelago in more than two decades.

Meanwhile, the worst floods in Thailand's south in over a decade have left at least 51 dead, caused havoc in the city of Hat Yai and destroyed swathes of farmland.

In northern Malaysia more than 20 people have been killed and more than 8,000 people have left their homes amid inundated roads and railways. Half a million people are suffering from water shortages, while 3,000 victims are housed in relief centres, officials said.

Japan hopes for continued talks on global warming

French minister reproves US for failure of climate talks

TOKYO, Nov 27: The Japanese government said today it would continue to participate actively in international efforts to limit greenhouse gases and deal with global warming, despite the failure of UN climate talks in the Hague at the weekend, reports AFP.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda said Japan would continue to push the issue domestically while monitoring progress of international negotiations over the issue.

"The fact that we weren't able to see an agreement (at the Hague) is very regrettable especially after our country had held active negotiations with other nations," Fukuda said.

"We will continue to participate in discussions to deal with global warming, and will strive to maintain the strong will of the international community that issued the Kyoto Protocol on global warming," he said.

The Kyoto Protocol, signed in 1997, sets a deadline of 2012 for cutting overall emissions of greenhouse gases by just over five percent compared with 1990 levels.

These gases, chiefly the byproduct of industrialisation, are blamed for causing a gradual warming of the Earth's atmosphere, with the risk of disrupting the planet's weather system.

The landmark 1997 treaty has bestowed a legacy of complex political, technical and legal issues to be resolved.

The 12-day negotiating marathon in The Hague concluded Saturday after all-night haggling among environment ministers from the 180 Kyoto signatories failed to bridge a wide EU-US gulf on key issues.

Further talks are expected to resume in six months.

Meanwhile, French Environment Minister Dominique Voynet said today the United States was among those mainly responsible for the failure of the conference in The Hague on global warming.

"The conference was 'undeniably a failure... Those mainly responsible -- I do not say guilty -- are evidently the big carbon-emitting states. Hence the United States," Voynet said in an interview published in the daily Liberation.