Norway's peace move hits snag as Tigers reject peace talks

Fresh fighting kills 54 in Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 17 : Sri Lanka's Tamil separatists ruled out entering Norwegian-backed peace talks until the government declares a ceasefire as officials today reported 54 people were killed in another day of clashes, reports AFP.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a statement from their London office urged the international community to pressure the Colombo government to adopt a ceasefire, adding that genuine peace talks could not be held "under conditions of war, violence and hostility."

However, the Tigers did not refer to fresh fighting in the northern Jaffna peninsula or the spate of attacks in the island's north-east over the past few weeks.

The defence ministry in a statement Sunday reported that 54 people were killed Saturday in the island's embattled northeast, after they launched a fresh offensive against the LTTE in Jaffna.

Government forces were Sunday consolidating areas wrestled from rebel control.

Twelve government troopers and 32 rebels were killed in Saturday's clashes in the peninsula while another nine rebels were killed in the north-east in three separate clashes, the ministry said.

A 15-year-old girl was also killed after being caught in crossfire.

Since 1972, the rebels have been waging a drawn-out campaign with the government for an independent homeland in the island's north-east. The conflict so far has claimed over 60,000 lives.

In their statement, the Tigers said while Norwegian-backed talks could not go ahead while fighting continued, they stressed they were not demanding security forces withdraw from the Jaffna peninsula, which the rebels held for nearly five years until they were driven out in December 1995.

"The Sri Lankan government has deliberately distorted our genuine plea for a peaceful environment for peace talks as a condition," the LTTE said in the statement.

"Sri Lanka has misinterpreted our call for the creation of conditions of normalcy as a situation that includes the withdrawal of armed forces from Jaffna. We did not demand the withdrawal of the armed forces."

Norway has been trying since last year to bring the Sri Lankan government and the Tiger rebels to the negotiating table. So far there has been no face-to-face meeting between the two sides.

While the LTTE insist peace talks have no chance of succeeding unless a ceasefire is agreed between the government and the rebels, the government has flatly refused to have a ceasefire before talks begin.

US President-elect George W. Bush (R) selects retired Gen. Colin Powell (L) to be his Secretary of State during announcement at Crawford Elementary School in Crawford, Texas on Saturday --AFP photo

Kashmiri separatist leaders meet at the All Party Hurriyat Conference at their headquarters in Rajbagh, Srinagar yesterday. Kashmiri separatist political leaders began the crucial meeting to unify their position on the Indian Army's ceasefire in the region and future peace talks. -AFP photo

Kashmiri leaders meet to discuss peace moves

India may extend Kashmir truce: Advani

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 17 : Kashmiri separatist political leaders began a crucial meeting today to unify their position on the Indian Army's ceasefire in the region and future peace talks, reports AFP.

All seven leaders of the All Party Hurriyat Conference -- an umbrella organisation comprising around two dozen separatist parties -- are in the state's summer capital Srinagar for the meeting.

"The discussions on the peace process and ceasefire will be with reference to where it will lead and whether there could be a resolution of the dispute (with India)," said Abdul Gani Bhat, a senior separatist leader.

Political observers said New Delhi will be keenly watching the outcome of the meeting as it could open the way for an extension of the ceasefire, scheduled to end on December 30.

A senior Hurriyat member, speaking on condition of anonymity, said divisions among the separatist groups meant the talks were likely to be long and stormy.

"It is an important meeting. We will have to discipline some of our members who have been unnecessarily creating confusion by giving divergent statements," he said.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee declared a unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir on November 27 to coincide with the holy Muslim month of Ramadan.

The moderate Hurriyat, which favours three-way talks invloving Pakistan, India and Kashmiri separatists, has found itself in a difficult position as pro-Islamic militant groups have rejected the ceasefire as a propaganda ploy.

Meanwhile, the Indian government could extend a unilateral ceasefire declared in the state of Kashmir beyond the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Home Minister L.K. Advani said Saturday.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) quoted Advani as saying Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was likely to make an announcement during the current parliament session, which is scheduled to end next Friday.

"We can consider extending the ceasefire and a decision in this regard will be taken before the end of the winter session of parliament," Home Minister L.K. Advani told the news agency.

Advani told reporters in the western Indian city of Silvassa there had been a "perceptible" reduction in separatist militant operations and infiltration across the border from Pakistan since the ceasefire began.

Democrats to undergo shake-up, Clinton to maintain grip

WASHINGTON, Dec 17 : Less than a week after Al Gore conceded the election, top US Democrats decided the party needed a leadership shake-up to add "new blood" and prepare itself for future battles, a party spokesman said Saturday, reports AFP.

The changes are likely to ensure that outgoing President Bill Clinton -- and his wife Hillary -- will wield strong influence within his party for years to come as the man who will lead the Democrats is known as Clinton's long-time associate and confidant.

"It's true that Terry McAuliffe has been slated to become the new national chairman of the party," Democratic National Committee (DNC) spokesman Luis Rosero told AFP.

"Joe Andrew has decided not to run for office again and will likely go back to practising law," he added.

Andrew, who hails from Indiana and has been in charge of the DNC since March 1999, is credited with having dramatically improved the party's financial situation.

But the party leadership has been repeatedly criticised over the populist message adopted by the Democrats during this year's election campaign, saying it did not resonate with moderate and independent voters, which resulted in Gore's failure to win a clear majority on November 7.

According to Rosero, the number two man in the party hierarchy, DNC general chairman Edward Rendell, was also on his way out.

Rendell caused an uproar in Democratic ranks last Tuesday, when he publicly urged Gore to concede after the US Supreme Court ruled against him in his dispute over Florida votes with Republican George W. Bush.

But Rosario said Rendell's impending departure had nothing to do with his roundly condemned remarks, "in which he expressed his personal opinion."

'Israel, Palestinians to hold separate talks with US

Troops kill 2 more Palestinians

GAZA CITY, Dec 17 : Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said on Sunday that separate Israeli and Palestinian delegations would hold talks with US officials in Washington in the coming days, reports AFP.

"Two delegations will go to Washington in the next few days to examine with the US administration the ways of supporting and safeguarding the peace process and confirming what has already been concluded," Arafat told reporters here.

Palestinian information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo said earlier that the Palestinian delegation would leave for Washington on Tuesday.

"We will go to Washington Tuesday to consult with the American administration to explore if there is any possibility of resuming negotiations," Abed Rabbo said.

Earlier top Israeli and Palestinian officials pursued talks overnight amid renewed efforts to bring the two sides back to the negotiating table after more than 11 weeks of deadly violence.

"In our current contacts, we are working on two issues: the joint effort to reduce the violence and resume cooperation, and we are also looking into ways to progress on the peace process," said Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami, who led the Israeli delegation at the three-hour meeting.

The Palestinians were represented by top negotiator Saeb Erakat, information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo and Gaza Strip preventative security chief Mohammed Dahlan.

Clinton spoke by telephone with Arafat for 45 minutes on Saturday "on the ways to save the peace process and restart negotiations before President Clinton's term ends," Arafat adviser Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

But the White House said that while the outgoing president was trying to help restart talks, there was nothing on the table.

"We are taking an inventory of Camp David and looking at how we can build on it and if we can proceed to negotiations," Ben-Ami said, referring to the failed July peace summit hosted by Clinton.

Meanwhile, two Palestinians were killed by Israeli soldiers on Sunday near the Rafah terminal at the crossing point between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, although the circumstances were not immediately clear, hospital officials said.

Iyad Mohammed Daoud, 27, and Ahmed Abdel Jalil Kassas, 33, were shot dead and a third man, whose identity was not immediately available, was seriously wounded, they added.

42 Afghans killed in clashes with Iranian security forces

TEHRAN, Dec 17 : Iranian security forces have killed at least 42 Afghans in the past three days and freed more than two-dozen hostages, the state IRNA news agency said Saturday, reports AFP.

The news agency said 35 Afghans were killed in shootouts Friday morning in the Chenaran region of Khorassan province not far from the Afghanistan border. The Iranian military freed 27 villagers who were being held hostage.

Meanwhile seven other Afghans were killed in the provincial city of Khaf over the past three days and several others were wounded, IRNA said, adding that a few rifles and a small quantity of morphine were found.

The conflict intensified three weeks ago when the military announced that it had deployed a battalion of troops near the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan to stop the flow of narcotics into the country. Since then, more than 100 people, mostly Afghans, have been killed in eastern Iran.

Iran, a Shiite Muslim state, regularly blames the Sunni Taliban militia which controls most of Afghanistan for the rise in drug trafficking in the region.

In May, the Iranian parliament voted to seal off the frontier with Afghanistan and approved funding for electronic surveillance along the border.

Iran, which has called for greater aid from Europe to fight the drugs trade, is a major transshipment point for narcotics coming from over the border en route to lucrative markets in Europe, the Gulf and central Asia.

2 Japanese trains collide: 1 killed

TOKYO, Dec 17 : Two passenger trains collided in western Japan today in a suspected brake failure, killing a conductor and injuring at least 26 people, officials said, reports AFP.

"Two one-carriage trains collided on the Keifuku Railway, and 27 people were taken to hospital," said Kazuya Shimizu, a spokesman at Fukui Prefecture Police, some 320 km northwest of Tokyo.

Tadao Sasaki, a 57-year-old conductor, died in the accident.

Violent protest against Haider's Vatican visit

ROME, Dec 17 : Police said today they detained seven people for questioning over their role in violent protests against visiting Austrian far-right leader Joerg Haider overnight, in which at least 31 people were injured, reports AFP.

Seven civilians and 24 members of security forces were hurt after clashes broke out late Saturday afternoon when police cordoned off the area near the Vatican where Haider was staying at a hotel and attending a Christmas ceremony in Saint Peter's Square.

Tigers kill circus artist

CALCUTTA, India, Dec 17 : A 20-year-old circus performer was mauled to death by three tigers during a performance in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, police said Saturday, reports AFP.

Rita Chetri was attacked late Friday during her act in which nine tigers were required to jump over her and then pass through a ring of fire, according to Howra district police officer, A.B Sen.

Police dig deeper into Bollywood's links with organised crime

BOMBAY, Dec 17: Indian police today said film star Salman Khan had been questioned and other celebrities will be examined as part of an investigation into Bollywood's links with organised crime.

"We called Salman on Saturday and questioned him as he wanted to leave abroad for medical treatment. We are going to call in other stars and other people as well," joint police commissioner, D Shivanandan told AFP.

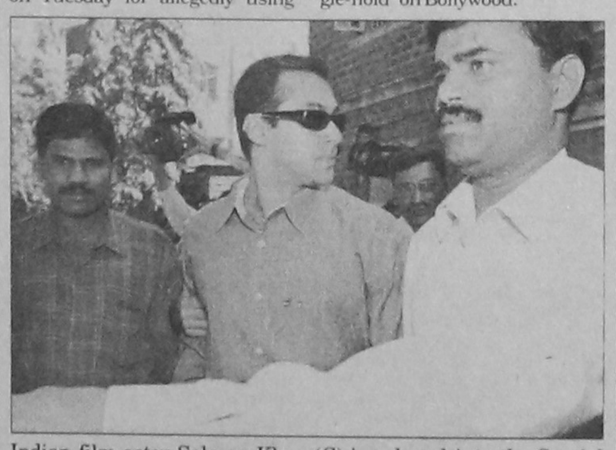
Salman Khan, Preity Zinta and Rani Mukherjee were the stars in a film called "Chori Chori Chupke Chupke" whose producer Nazeem Rizvi was arrested by the police on Tuesday for allegedly using mafia money.

"We have strong evidence about the connections of the film producer Nazeem Rizvi and (crimelord) Chhota Shakeel," Shivanandan said.

The film, which literally translates as "Hush Hush" was due to be released this month.

On Friday, the police also interrogated prominent film financier Bharat Shah, one of the film's backers. The police said he may have been acting as a conduit for "dirty" crime money.

According to police, the underworld, in the form of people such as Bombay mafia boss Dawood Ibrahim, had a "very deep strangle-hold" on Bollywood.



Indian film actor Salman Khan (C) is ushered into the Special Crime Branch office for questioning on Saturday in Bombay. Khan was interrogated for four hours in connection with the underworld financing of the film "Chori Chori Chupke Chupke". --AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Chinese mayor gets life term: A vice mayor of a city in eastern China's Jiangsu province has been sentenced to life in prison for accepting bribes totalling more than 220,000 dollars, the Beijing Morning Post said Sunday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The paper said Pan Baocai was sentenced by a court in Yuannantong city. The court recovered 100,000 yuan (12,000 dollars) from Pan, which he allegedly took while serving as vice mayor. Pan was also accused of accepting expensive watches and refrigerators as gifts from those trying to curry his favour.

Taliban arrest BBC staffer: Afghanistan's Taliban have arrested a local BBC employee here on charges that he was working with the organisation without the authorities' permission, a senior official said Sunday, AFP reports from Kabul.

Abdul Saboor Salehzai was picked up from his Kabul office on Saturday, foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Osman Sheryar said.