

'Ban on LTTE threatens peace'

REUTERS, Colombo

Tamil Tiger guerrillas said yesterday Sri Lanka's refusal to lift a ban on their organisation was a serious threat to peace prospects and asked the international community to press the government to relent.

The rebels insist they will not begin Norwegian-brokered talks to end the 18-year ethnic conflict unless the government lifts the ban imposed in 1998.

The government has rejected the demand as unreasonable and accused the guerrillas of delaying tactics.

"The government's decision has seriously jeopardised the prospects of peace talks and a negotiated political settlement," the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said in a statement, warning of "serious consequences that might arise."

Abduction in Philippines American hostage urges talks with Muslim rebels

AFP, Zamboanga

An American held hostage by Muslim guerrillas in the southern Philippines yesterday appealed to the government over local radio to negotiate his release.

Martin Burnham, 41, one of 20 captives seized from an upper-class Philippine resort on Sunday, told DZXL radio he and his wife, Gracia, were in the custody of the Abu Sayyaf guerrilla group.

"We are safe. Our needs are being met. We would like to appeal for a safe negotiation," he said in a telephone interview with the local radio station.

Another hostage, Filipino Raul Recio also said in the interview: "I hope they (the government) will not think of delaying and trying a rescue effort as they (the Abu Sayyaf) are good people."

A spokesman of the Abu Sayyaf, Abu Sabaya, who contacted the radio station, had said half of the hostages were being held in the southern island of Basilan while the others were in the Sulu islands, south of Basilan.

The Abu Sayyaf seized three Americans and 17 Filipinos from a resort off the western island of Palawan.

Last year, the Abu Sayyaf seized dozens of local and foreign hostages and hid them in Jolo island in Sulu, ransoming most of them off for millions of dollars.

One remaining Filipino hostage from that kidnapping spree is still in the hands of the captives.

Koizumi still very popular as PM

REUTERS, Tokyo

Support for Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is holding firm at record-high levels a month after he took office, although his party's popularity has slipped slightly, an opinion poll showed yesterday.

In the survey of just over 1,000 voters by the Mainichi Shimbun daily, 87 per cent said they supported Koizumi, up from 85 per cent a month earlier. The rating is an historical high for surveys conducted by the paper.

But support for his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) dipped to 29 per cent from 33 per cent in April, bad news ahead of a critical July election for the Upper House of parliament and contradicting a recent survey showing 44 per cent of voters supported the LDP, the highest level in nearly two years.

Wahid issues 'decree' to strengthen law & order

AP, Jakarta

Indonesia's President Abdurrahman Wahid issued a decree yesterday ordering the security forces to take tough action to maintain law and order just days before Parliament meets to demand his impeachment.

It was not immediately clear whether the decree called for martial law or the imposition of a state of civil emergency. Neither term appeared in the text of the document that was announced on national television.

"I have ordered the security minister to take actions and special steps to coordinate the functions of all the security forces to overcome the crisis and uphold order, security and law immediately," the statement said.

For days Wahid has threatened to take tough measures ahead of a meeting of Parliament, which is set to demand a higher assembly to impeach him for corruption and incompetence by August.

Wahid has warned that attempts to oust him could trigger massive rioting and bloodshed and ultimately the disintegration of Indonesia, a country of 210 million people.

Later, security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said the announcement did not constitute a state of emergency or martial law, which have both been threatened by Wahid and his aides recently.

Separately, defence minister Mohammad Mahfud said no arrests would be made under the new measures, details of which were immediately announced.

Wahid, who is nearly blind, had an aide read out a prepared statement on

his behalf.

However, in off-the-cuff introductory remarks, Wahid said he had issued the order because he feared groups for and against him would clash if the Parliament goes ahead with its campaign to remove him.

He accused his political opponents of using the news media to damage his reputation and said it had not reported the facts. He also denounced it for taking lightly repeated warnings by him that the nation could break apart if he is toppled.

Hours before the televised address was broadcast, pro-Wahid mobs took to the streets in East Java, his home province where he is revered as an Islamic leader.

Mobs called for Wahid's opponents to be killed and attacked homes and offices of members of rival political parties in several towns.

Ominously, one crowd, armed with sharpened sickles and sticks, burned two offices of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, which is headed by Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, Wahid's main rival in the nation's political crisis. Other houses were also set on fire.

There were no immediate reports of injuries, although police fired warning shots in nearby Sidoarjo when a pro-Wahid mob threw rocks at an opposition party member's home. One road leading to the second largest city, Surabaya, was blocked by burning tires.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of embattled Indonesian Abdurrahman Wahid burn tires at a main road in Sidoarjo, 30 kilometres south from East Java capital of Surabaya yesterday. The prospect of violence has been cited by Wahid and officials as a justification for Wahid's threat to declare a state of emergency if the People's Representative Council (DPR) calls for his impeachment.

Turkish hunger strike against jail reforms claims 23rd victim

AFP, Ankara

A hunger-strike over controversial prison reforms in Turkey has claimed a 23rd victim following the death of a former inmate in the southern city of Mersin, a leading human rights group told AFP yesterday.

Ugur Turkmen, who spent three years in jail for aiding an extreme left armed group, had joined the months-long protest in prison and continued to fast when he was released in January under an amnesty bill, a spokeswoman for the Human Rights Association (IHD) said.

He died late Sunday, she added.

Turkmen, aged 29, was convicted for helping the outlawed Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C), which Ankara accuses of masterminding the hunger strike, Anatolia news agency reported.

Of the 22 other protestors who have starved themselves to death since March, 18 were prisoners and four were relatives of inmates who joined the strike in solidarity.

Mainly mainly left-wing inmates to protest the introduction of new jails with tighter security launched the hunger strike in October.

The protestors say the new design will make the inmates more vulnerable to ill-treatment.

Some 400 prisoners are continuing the hunger strike, with 164 of them hospitalized, according to official figures.

The deaths have placed Turkey's already troubled human rights record in the international spotlight at a time when the country needs to implement far-reaching democratic reform to promote its candidacy for European Union membership.

'US to offer military aid to Russia for missile deal'

REUTERS, Washington

The United States is preparing to offer Moscow military aid, joint anti-missile exercises and arms purchases to earn Russia's cooperation in scrapping the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty, The New York Times reported yesterday quoting "senior administration strategists."

The Bush administration officials told the newspaper the proposals are likely to include an offer to buy Russian-made S-300 surface-to-air missiles that could be integrated into a defensive shield over Russia and Europe.

The plan is to be presented at a meeting of President George W Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a meeting in Slovenia, the Times reported.

Other proposals "include offers to hold joint exercises in future years to identify and shoot down attacking warheads, to provide money for Russia's decaying radar system and to share early-warning data," the newspaper said.

"We want to convince the Russians that it is in their best interest to move beyond the ABM treaty

and to develop a new relationship with us," Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, told the Times last week.

Most details of the administration's proposals have not been presented to Moscow, though hints were floated in meetings earlier this month, according to the newspaper.

"We hope to have cooperative proposals on missile defense, on nuclear reductions and on a broader relationship by the middle of the summer," one administration official told the Times.

One senior White House official told the newspaper, "if we are going to make this work, the Russians have to agree to the plan."

White House officials also told the Times that over time, they might also be willing to share some technology with Beijing.

The administration's ideas were first outlined to Russian officials earlier this month in Moscow by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Stephen Hadley, the deputy national security adviser, according to the newspaper.

600 Sunni Tehrik activists held Strike in Karachi, riot continues

AP, Karachi

A violent strike by a Sunni Muslim group shut most businesses in the restive port city of Karachi on Monday as rioters burned vehicles and threw stones at police to protest the killing of their leader.

Supporters belonging to Sunni Tehrik set fire to at least 10 vehicles in the early morning and overnight and blocked roads by burning tires in southern and central districts.

They demanded the arrest of the killers of their leader Saleem Qadri, who was shot and killed along with his five companions on May 18.

In an attempt to prevent the strike, police arrested at least 150 people in overnight raids in Karachi, police chief Tariq Jamil told The Associated Press. Karachi is the capital of southern Sindh province and Pakistan's major port city.

Since Sunday, about 600 Sunni Tehrik activists have been arrested from all over Sindh, police said.

But Abbas Qadri, a leader of the Sunni Tehrik, said thousands were arrested.

Police suspect a rival Sunni Muslim group, Sipah-e-Sahaba, or Guardians of the Friends of the Prophets, of killing Qadri.

Sipah-e-Sahaba, which denies the charge, is one of Pakistan's most militant Sunni Muslim groups. The group has sharp differences with Saleem Qadri's Sunni Tehrik, which has been considered a non-violent group.

Police said they are investigating Qadri's murder and will soon arrest the killers.

"We have beefed up security and won't allow troublemakers to create law and order problem," said Jamil, the police chief.

Religious violence has escalated in Pakistan in recent years. Every year, hundreds of people are killed throughout the country as militant religious groups kill each others' supporters in hit-and-run attacks.

Demand for Koirala's resignation Shutdown paralyses Nepal for second day

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal was paralysed for a second straight day yesterday by a strike called by opposition communists demanding the resignation of the Himalayan kingdom's embattled prime minister.

The alliance of six communist groups has called for the nationwide strike to continue until tomorrow to press for the resignation of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala over alleged corruption in an aircraft leasing deal.

The social democratic government appealed to the strikers to call off the protest which shut down businesses, offices, schools and transport throughout the impoverished nation.

"We have urged the strike organisers to call off their programme since this type of forceful closures only cause hardships to the public, hit the economy and other sectors," Home (interior) Ministry spokesman Gopendra Bahadur Pandey said.

At least two people were killed on Sunday and dozens injured as

mobs of opposition supporters roamed the streets, clashing with police and attacking buses, taxis and government offices to enforce the strike, officials said.

The streets were quiet today, police said.

Business groups said the strike would hurt the economy and hit tourism one of the mountainous country's key livelihoods.

The strike was called despite a decision by an independent anticorruption panel on Friday clearing Koirala of any direct wrongdoing in the leasing deal by state-owned national carrier Royal Nepal Airlines.

But the commission warned Koirala against shielding corrupt officials as it charged 10 others with corruption, including former civil aviation minister Tarini Dutta Chataut and four top airline officials.

Koirala had said he would not quit unless charged by the panel over the deal.

Riot police take tough action as racial violence continues in UK town

REUTERS, Oldham

British police adopted a hardline "zero tolerance" policy when a second round of race rioting erupted early yesterday between white and Asian youths in the northwest English town of Oldham.

A police helicopter clattered overhead, its powerful spotlight piercing the night sky.

Ranks of police vehicles were lined up in a town centre car park with engines running. Some still bore the scars from the first night of rioting on Saturday.

The bodywork was dented from bricks and bottles and headlights were smashed.

Above he incessant crackle of radios, police dogs barked.

Ranks of officers, dressed head-to-toe in black riot gear, donned knee pads and leg guards and marched towards the flashpoints wielding batons and shields.

The orange glow of streetlights glinted off their dark blue helmets as they cordoned off areas of the manufacturing town by blocking

streets with shields locked.

Across Oldham, nervous residents kept doors firmly locked but curtains twitched at every loud noise.

Despite a rapid clean-up operation during daylight hours yesterday, bricks and other debris were still scattered across the pot-hold streets of the town's run-down areas.

Shops windows and doors were boarded up and doors bolted.

Oldham hit the headlines in Britain earlier this year when national newspapers printed pictures of the battered face of a 76-year-old white man who said he had been attacked by a gang of Asian youths. A 15-year-old Asian boy was later charged with racially-motivated assault.

The simmering racial tensions in Oldham have become so explosive that earlier this month Straw banned political marches in the town. On May 5, police arrested 16 people after the ultra-right wing National Front party went ahead with a march in defiance of the ban.

Ethnic minorities, mainly from the Caribbean, the Indian sub-continent, Africa and China make up about five per cent of Britain's 57 million population. Latest official statistics show Bangladeshis number about 300,000.

Meanwhile the race riot triggered heated debate yesterday in the run-up to Britain's June 7 general election.

The rioting in Oldham unleashed sharp exchanges between rival politicians over race relations, crime immigrant numbers and asylum-seekers.

But all opinion polls suggest that with just over a week to go to the election Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party remains firmly on course for a landslide triumph.

Britain's third biggest party, the Liberal Democrats, accused the main opposition Conservatives of contributing to a climate of racial intolerance by calling for a crack-down on the number of asylum-seekers getting into the country.

"If politicians talk up things that encourage the view of racial differ-

Thursday.

In Stockholm, the Swedish foreign ministry said that Arafat and Sharon had requested meetings ahead of an EU summit in Gothenburg next month.

The discussions would cover the Middle East situation and latest peace initiatives including recommendations in the report of the commission chaired by former US senator George Mitchell.

"The Palestinian and Israeli parties wish to acquaint themselves better with the EU position on the Mitchell plan," a foreign ministry spokeswoman said.

The EU said last week it fully endorsed the Mitchell report and offered its help to bring about a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace.

It welcomed the report as "a realistic and balanced proposal to work from, in order to restore calm in the Middle East and relaunch the Peace Process."

No agenda details were furnished. The spokesman said there would be a press briefing late



PHOTO: AFP

A fire crew on the streets of Oldham in the early hours yesterday, as gangs of youths hurled petrol bombs at police officers and erected burning barricades during a second night of disturbances in the town.

again established that multi-cultural societies did not work.

"Two societies living side-by-side can lead to difficult moments," he told the Times newspaper.

Labour, which has accused the Conservatives of playing the so-called "race card" in the past over immigration and asylum, was reluctant to get involved.

Home (Interior) Secretary Jack Straw chose instead to urge all politicians to moderate their language.

Racism stalks British Asians as they show prosperity

REUTERS, Oldham

Abdul Ghafour removed his white prayer cap and scratched a lump beneath his greying hair.

"It was form a knife. A kid who just wanted money, but I had none. For some reason I didn't get my wages that day," he said.

Even though his assailant was a white man, the 48-year-old Kashmiri, who has lived in this northern English town for 33 years, said the colour of his skin had nothing to do with the attack.

That was in the 1970s.

A similar incident today would be unlikely to elicit such a response.

Like many of the 28,000 members of ethnic minorities mainly Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis in Oldham, Ghafour worked his way up through life the hard way.

Arriving from the Indian subcontinent three decades ago most of the immigrants lived with relatives in cramped, uncomfortable conditions, often sharing beds while an uncle or brother went off for the night shift in the textile mills of northwest England.

Sunday meant a day off, but a trip to a triple showing in the local cinema was all they could afford, Ghafour said. Every penny was saved to be sent to families back home.

The textile mills, often run like sweat shops, started to close in the 1970s, threatening many Asian with economic ruin.

It was also the catalyst for them to start their own

businesses often as taxi drivers, or running take-away restaurants and small corner shops.

Slowly but surely, prosperity started to arrive, and many Asians brought their families over.

The fruits of Ghafour's toils are clear a smart, well furnished house in an area of town which used to be the preserve of the management and owners of the mills he joined as a 16-year-old.

"I would never have dreamed of buying this house when I first arrived," he said.

But growing affluence and the swelling numbers of Asians brought with it resentment from some white people who feared the hard-working and well-educated immigrants would start taking their jobs.

The consequent popularity of the National Front in some areas of Oldham and racial tension, exacerbated by Britain's General Election on June 7, is souring Ghafour's success in life.

Faced with what community leaders say is "institutional racism" in the local media and police, Oldham's second generation of Asian born and brought up in England are fighting back.

"Why should we go? I am as English as the next man. Oldham is our town, our home," said Sameer, a 25-year-old with a Masters degree in microbiology.

He is soon to become a father and wants to be a science teacher. But he says the first lesson his children will learn is self defence.