

## '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 Elam (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 a 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 kilometers 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.



PHOTO: AFP

Photo dated July 24, 2000 shows Abu Sayyaf leader Abu Sabaya (L) at their camp in Patikul town on Jolo island. The Abu Sayyaf has again displayed its kidnapping prowess - this time claiming responsibility for the abduction of 20 people, including three Americans, from a western island resort.

## Israelis raid areas under Palestinian control

Arafat to meet EU leaders this week

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli tanks and bulldozers penetrated autonomous Palestinian territory to a depth of between 150 and 200 metres east of Gaza City yesterday, Palestinian security officials said.

The Israeli military's bulldozers flattened the land and destroyed trees, the officials said.

It was the first Israeli raid Monday into areas under full Palestinian civil and security control in violation of peace agreements between the two sides, the security officials said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon declared last Tuesday a unilateral ceasefire, banning Israeli raids into Palestinian autonomous areas and firing upon Palestinians except in dangerous situations.

But the Palestinians accused Israel Sunday of 96 violations since Sharon's announcement of the ceasefire.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will consult

the European Union on latest Middle East peace initiatives at separate meetings in the next few days, it was announced in Stockholm yesterday.

Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson, whose country currently chairs the 15-nation EU, will meet Arafat in Copenhagen this Wednesday and Sharon in Brussels the following Wednesday, a government spokeswoman said.

The Palestinian leader is to meet European Union and parliament officials Thursday in Brussels, a European Commission spokesman said Monday in the Belgian capital.

Arafat is scheduled to confer with Commission President Romano Prodi, External Affairs Commissioner Chris Patten, European Parliament President Nicole Fontaine and Javier Solana, EU high representative for foreign and security policy, the spokesman 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

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.

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## 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.

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.

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.

Of the 22 other protesters 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 protesters 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.

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