

Lanka lifts censorship on media

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga yesterday ordered the immediate lifting of a military censorship imposed on local and foreign media, officials said.

President Kumaratunga ordered her media ministry to revoke the censorship which was imposed under tough emergency laws in May last year when Tamil Tiger guerrillas escalated their attacks against government forces.

The government previously had a censorship which was lightly applied, and from which Colombo-based foreign correspondents were exempt.

US offers to help Manila track down kidnappers

AFP, Manila

The United States came to the aid of the Philippines yesterday in a battle of nerves with Muslim guerrilla kidnappers who have threatened to kill their 20 American and Filipino hostages.

In a surprise meeting, US officials called on President Gloria Arroyo to discuss the kidnapping of the three Americans and 17 Filipinos from a luxury resort off the western island of Palawan on Sunday.

"We look forward to trying to work together on contacts at all levels including military-to-military," Congressman Robert Underwood, who led the American team, said after the meeting.

US charge d' affaires Michael Malinowski said details of the dialogue were confidential but stressed it had been a "very good" meeting.

Increased US government interest in the case came after an Abu Sayyaf spokesman threatened Tuesday to kill some of the 20 hostages when Arroyo ruled out ransom payments and sent the military after them.

Hours later, the US State Department called for the immediate release of all the captives and reiterated its policy of not paying ransoms.

"All of the hostages should be released immediately, safely and unconditionally," said State Department spokesman Phil Reeker in Washington.

Earlier, the daughter of Guillermo Sobrero, one of the three American hostages, called on President George W. Bush for help.

"I want President Bush to do something about this," Aimee Sobrero told ABC television.

Four largest parties call for impeachment of Wahid

One shot dead as violence erupts in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Violence erupted in Indonesia yesterday leaving one dead as MPs lined up to denounce the 19-month rule of President Abdurrahman Wahid and call for his impeachment.

One man was shot dead and five others were wounded in clashes with police in the East Java town of Pasuruan, a hospital official said.

It was the first reported death in three days of mass street protests aimed at staving off moves to oust Wahid. About 4,000 fervent supporters also smashed through the gates of parliament and swarmed into the grounds, prompting a teargas attack by police.

Police twice fired tear gas in a bid to beat back the protesters, many of whom have poured into the capital, Jakarta, from Wahid's political heartland of East Java, in a show of strength.

Inside the sprawling complex, the four largest parties holding 374 seats in the 500-seat lower house, undeterred by the anger boiling outside, called for a special session of the country's highest body, the national assembly, to hold Wahid to account for his rule.

"The people's lives are worsening, the market and donor institutions have lost confidence, the rupiah is losing its value, unemployment is increasing and prices going up," said Evita Asmalda of the Golkar party.

Golkar, along with the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) of Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, the United Development Party (PPP) and the Reform Faction, all supported moves to impeach Wahid.

Wahid, the country's first democratically-elected president, has twice been censured by the lower house for allegedly being involved in two financial scandals.

But the opposition against him has broadened, with critics accusing him of incompetence and failing to stem Indonesia's economic crisis and regional violence.

On Wednesday, Wahid again reiterated he would not resign, however many parliamentary factions were lined up against him, his spokesman said.

"No. The (impeachment) process is still a long way off," Adhie Massardi told AFP when asked if Wahid was considering resigning after it appeared almost certain the house would pass the motion.

A ring of steel was thrown up around the parliament, with 3,000 troops and police deployed around the complex backed by armoured cars and water cannon.

The protestors, baying for the blood of anti-Wahid lawmakers, managed to break in after negotiations with police broke down.

Further access into the sprawling compound and the parliament building was protected by a second crowd-control wall of fibre glass, filled with tonnes of water.

Wednesday's meeting was to decide whether to call for a special session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) at which Wahid would have to account for his term in office.

If his account is rejected by the MPR, it would spell the end of his rule, and pave the way for Megawati -- the popular daughter of founding father Sukarno who was narrowly beaten by Wahid in the 1999 presidential election -- to succeed him.

Only Wahid's National Awakening Party (PKB) has so far held out against impeachment.

The PKB's Ma'ruf Amien said that since the attorney general had cleared Wahid of any involvement in the two financial scandals, the DPR's two censure motions were legally unjustified.

Wahid has warned he may declare a state of emergency, which would allow him to disband parliament, to prevent clashes between his supporters and opponents if the lower house calls for a special MPR session.



Thousands of supporters of Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid march to parliament down a main street in Jakarta yesterday. Police armed with tear gas and riot shields looked on as protesters were allowed to march to parliament where MPs were calling for Wahid's impeachment.

Four Laden followers found guilty of US embassy bombings

AFP, New York

Four followers of Osama bin Laden were found guilty Tuesday of bombing two US embassies in East Africa in 1998, killing 224 people in part of a global plot hatched by the Islamic militant leader to murder Americans.

Two men were convicted of murder and could face the death penalty in the penalty phase of the trial starting Wednesday, while the two others were found guilty of conspiracy and face life imprisonment.

Prosecutors linked all four to al-Qaeda, Saudi multimillionaire bin Laden's militant group that the United States says has unleashed a campaign of terror against US targets. Bin Laden, on America's list of most-wanted fugitives, has been indicted for allegedly planning the bombings.

Investigators vowed to track down bin Laden and other suspects and put them on trial as well.

"The United States is committed to tracking down, apprehending and

bringing to justice every single participant in these crimes, however long it takes and wherever around the globe it is necessary to go to find the evidence and those responsible, to bring them to justice," said US Attorney Mary Jo White.

Twelve Americans were among those killed in the near-simultaneous bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam on August 7, 1998, that also left thousands injured. Eleven people were killed in the Tanzania bombing.

Jurors deliberated for more than 10 days before finding the defendants guilty of all 302 counts named in the indictment.

US and Kenyan relatives of the bombing victims, some shedding tears, others holding hands, listened in silence as the forewoman of the jury took more than one hour to read the verdicts.

"Today, it's bitter sweetness, even if we're very happy," said Sue Bartlett, who lost both her husband, a US diplomat in Nairobi, and her son, who was a student working as

intern at the embassy, in the blast.

The four bearded defendants sat upright and silent in their seats throughout the reading. None took the stand during the trial.

They were found guilty on charges of conspiracy to kill Americans, conspiracy to kill US government employees, using weapons of mass destruction, and destroying US government properties.

Saudi national Mohamed Rashid Daoud al-Owhali, 23, and Tanzanian Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, 27, face the death sentence for their role in the bombings. Lebanese American Wadih el Hage, 40, and Jordanian Mohamed Saddiq Odeh, 35, face life in prison.

Odeh lawyer Anthony Ricco said he would file an appeal, arguing that his client did not participate in the bombing.

Prosecutors linked all four men to al-Qaeda, the organization of alleged terrorist mastermind bin Laden, believed to be in hiding in Afghanistan under the protection of

the ruling Taliban militia.

Bin Laden is one of 14 people charged in the bombings still at large. There is a five million dollar reward for his capture.

Barry Mawn, the FBI assistant director, warned bin Laden and his associates that they would be brought to justice, saying the verdict demonstrated that "the rule of law is more powerful than any terrorist bomb, and that those responsible for such crimes will be identified, located, apprehended and convicted."

US investigators suspect that bin Laden was behind the October attack on a US destroyer in Yemen that killed 17 sailors as well as other terrorist attacks on US targets.

The US State Department welcomed the outcome. "We certainly hope the guilty verdicts will bring some measure of peace to the families of the victims," spokesman Phil Reeker said.



Edith Bartley (L) leads Clara Aliganda (R) away from the media and back inside the US Federal Courthouse in New York on Tuesday after the reading of guilty verdicts in the trial of the near-simultaneous 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed 224 people, 12 of them Americans. Bartley lost her father and brother in bombings while Aliganda lost her son.

Kashmir summit viewed as a new beginning, not an endgame

AFP, Islamabad

A landmark summit between the leaders of Pakistan and India over Kashmir should be seen as the start of a lengthy process rather than a make-or-break shot at peace, analysts said yesterday.

The stage has been set for a meeting in New Delhi sometime in June or July, the first summit between leaders of the nuclear rivals since early 1999.

Observers said it would be asking too much to expect Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to resolve any of the core differences over Kashmir in their first meeting.

Seasoned Kashmir watchers know that any movement on such fundamental issues -- which strike at the heart of Indian and Pakistani national identity -- will be as slow as the glaciers in the north of the divided Himalayan state.

"If the process is able to build a framework for structured dialogue that will be good. But I would see this meeting as a process, not an event," said Mushahid Hussain, a former Pakistani information minister and foreign policy analyst.

"Nobody should expect a 54-year old dispute to be resolved overnight. That is unrealistic. But the fact that one army head and one leader of a Hindu nationalist party are meeting to negotiate is something special."

Alexander Evans, a research associate and author about Kashmir based at the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College London, said there was a lot of no-man's land and precious little common ground between the Indian and Pakistani positions on Kashmir.

"India and Pakistan remain far apart -- particularly on Kashmir. A resolution of a series of other disputes, ranging from Siachen (a disputed glacier) to trade, could easily be concluded by officials," he said.

"But Kashmir remains the challenge. India sees a solution as far off, and

far away from what Pakistan seeks. Pakistan hopes for a favourable resolution, but few, even in Pakistan, expect that to be swift or on Pakistan's terms.

He warned that both leaders were hamstrung by domestic forces which opposed any compromise on Kashmir, a fertile but largely undeveloped state which is divided between Pakistan and India but claimed by both.

"There are a lot of critics who don't want to see talks succeed," Evans said.

"On the Pakistani side, militants and hardliners fear it could pave the way for concessions from Islamabad. This, they reckon, would be an 'Indian trick'."

"On the Indian side, insufficient clarity as to what the long-term Kashmir policy can or will be makes serious progress difficult to foresee."

Vajpayee's offer of talks with Musharraf, made last week and formally accepted by the general on Tuesday, was a dramatic turnaround in Indian policy towards official contact with the Pakistani leadership.

New Delhi accuses Islamabad of fostering Islamic militancy in the Indian part of the Muslim-majority state, and had insisted that "cross-border terrorism" should cease before talks could resume.

But analysts said the surprise offer of dialogue should not be seen as a sign that India was ready for any other compromises.

"I do not yet see any indication of flexibility on the part of the Indians to show that they really want to settle the core dispute of Kashmir," said Khalid Mahmood, a professor of political science at the Islamabad-based Institute of Regional Studies.

"Just a couple of weeks ago the Indians were insisting that they would hold talks only with the Kashmiri leaders and not with Pakistan."

"Now they want to hold talks with Pakistan minus the Kashmiri leaders. It does not necessarily mean that there is any flexibility on the part of the Indians."

Arafat seeks 'urgent' deployment of international observers

AFP, Copenhagen

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat appealed here yesterday for the "urgent" dispatch of international observers to Israel and the Palestinian territories to help end the violence there and revive the Middle East peace process.

"We are in need quickly of observers from the European Union, from the United Nations, from the co-sponsors and from everywhere to stop the violence and to protect the peace process," Arafat told reporters after a meeting with Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson.

He said "it is urgent" that observers be sent to the region and added: "I ask for help from the EU, from our

friends."

The United States in March vetoed a United Nations resolution on sending UN observers to the region after Israel said it regarded the move as unfair and an infringement on its sovereignty.

Persson, whose country holds the EU presidency until June 30, declined to comment on Arafat's appeal for observers but reiterated the need for both Israel and the Palestinians to take immediate steps to end violence between them.

"We are of course prepared from the European Union to play a constructive role in the region," Persson said. "But the first thing necessary to achieve is to stop the violence, stop all the violence."

"If it is done, it will be a great momentum for a political solution".

Persson said Tuesday in Helsinki that the EU sought to play a "major political role" in the Middle East peace process in the future and suggested the bloc was working on ways to enhance its profile in the region.

The Swedish leader was due to hold talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Brussels next week and he said his meetings with the two sides would help inform anticipated discussions on the Middle East crisis at an EU summit in Sweden June 15 and 16.

Arafat was scheduled to meet with Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen later Wednesday.

New poll gives Labour huge lead over rivals

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's lead over the opposition Conservatives has shot up by six points over the past week to 19, according to an opinion poll published yesterday.

With the June 7 general election fast approaching, the ICM poll for the Guardian newspaper put Blair's Labour Party on 47 per cent, the Conservatives on 28 per cent and the Liberal Democrats on 17 per cent.

The results, if replicated on election day, would translate into a landslide victory for Labour, giving Blair a majority of 267 in the 659-member House of Commons.

Such a result would mean the Conservatives losing 35 members of parliament, leaving them with just 128.

The survey suggested that Europe and the euro would not be important issues for voters despite campaigning by Conservative leader William Hague to push them to the top of the agenda.

When asked to place "joining the euro" in a list of 11 key election issues, voters put it last.