

Tigers eye truce accord within a month

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels said Tuesday they were optimistic that a bilateral truce with the government could be arranged by Norwegian peace brokers within a month.

Norwegian facilitators held talks in London Monday with the Tiger rebels' chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, about formalising a ceasefire, which both sides have been observing unilaterally since Christmas eve.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they discussed matters relating to the proposed ceasefire with a Norwegian delegation headed by deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website quoted Balasingham as saying they were optimistic that a "mutually agreeable ceasefire" could be signed by both sides before February 24, when the present unilateral truce expires.

"Matters related to the ceasefire

are progressing well," Balasingham told TamilNet.

Balasingham said his meeting Monday covered the ceasefire terms and conditions, ground rules and the modalities of a permanent truce.

He said both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE had submitted proposals to Oslo on a permanent ceasefire to replace the unilateral and separate "cessation of hostilities" currently being observed.

14 hurt in US helicopter crash

AFP, Kabul

Fourteen US soldiers were injured when a CH-47 Chinook military helicopter made a "hard landing" in eastern Afghanistan overnight, US officials said.

The injured soldiers were safely recovered and received immediate medical care at a hospital in the region, the US Central Command said in a statement.

Four of the injuries were serious but not life threatening, while 10 were minor, according to the command.

US-Philippines anti-terror drive to start Thursday

AFP, Zamboanga

A joint US-Philippines anti-terrorist operation is to begin Thursday after the two countries resolved problems pertaining to the number of participating American military advisors, Filipino officials said.

The operation against the Muslim Abu Sayyaf guerrillas in the southern Philippines is part of Washington's plan to widen its war on terror into Southeast Asia.

Karzai vows to back US campaign all the way

AFP, Washington

Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai pledged in talks with US President George W. Bush to support the US military operation in Afghanistan to the end, as plans to widen the anti-terror campaign to Southeast Asia hit a snag Tuesday.

"This joint struggle against terrorism should go to the absolute end of it. We must finish them. We must bring them out of their caves and their hideouts. And we promise we'll do that," Karzai told Bush at the White House.

With the installation of a six-month interim Afghan administration following last month's collapse of the hardline Taliban regime, there has been increasing pressure in Afghanistan for an end to the US military campaign.

But Karzai -- the first Afghan leader to visit the United States since the former king Zahir Shah in 1963 -- told Bush his people understood the agony of the victims of September 11 terror attacks, and therefore knew that US action launched in October against the al-Qaida terror network must go on.

"We know that pain. We understand it. Our families know that pain," said Karzai, who wore a flowing green gown and a traditional grey hat to his joint appearance with Bush.

Bush meanwhile praised Karzai as "a determined leader" and said his government "reflects the hopes of all Afghans for a new and better future, a future free from terror, free from war and free from want".

He unveiled a further 50 million dollars in aid, on top of nearly 300 million pledged by the US at a donor's conference in Tokyo last week, to help rebuild the country ravaged by decades of conflict and international neglect.

But US officials reiterated Washington had no plans to join the international security force for Afghanistan, which Karzai wants to see extended beyond the capital of Kabul.

Bush however announced the US military would help to build and train an Afghan army and would support the soldiers of the international security force.

In a possible setback for Washington's plans to extend its campaign against terror to Southeast Asia, the Philippine army said Tuesday the next phase of joint military operations against Muslim rebels in the southern

Philippines had been indefinitely delayed.

The joint operation, which has sparked the largest deployment of US forces outside of Afghanistan and will eventually involve some 600 US troops, has triggered controversy in the Philippines, even

though it is officially dubbed a "training exercise".

Filipino military officials said a last-minute "sensitive" matter had delayed the formal ceremony to launch the second phase of the exercises aimed at crushing the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas.



US President George W. Bush (R) has a joint press conference with Interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai in the Rose Garden of the White House on Monday in Washington, DC. Karzai is on his first official visit to Washington.

Secrets of fathering boys!

REUTERS, Washington

Men who have higher levels of polluting chemicals known as PCBs in their bodies are slightly more likely to father boys, researchers said on Monday.

The researchers at Michigan State University said their study showed that human beings can be affected sexually by the chemicals, which cause sex-related defects in animals.

"We do not wish to say that having a baby boy is bad. It's just that there were more of them," Wilfried Karmaus, a epidemiologist

who led the study, said in a statement.

"A change in the proportion of boys to girls, however, indicates that environmental contaminants may play a role in human reproduction."

PCBs are endocrine disruptors chemicals that act like hormones. They and related chemicals known as dioxins are reported to have caused deformities of sexual organs in fish and alligators.

In humans both dioxins and PCBs can cause cancer, infertility and perhaps other sexual

changes. Vietnam veterans exposed to dioxin in Agent Orange, used to strip foliage in the jungle, claim it has caused a variety of ills including cancer and birth defects in their children.

Karmaus used information from studies of men and women who liked to fish in the Great Lakes, which are polluted with a range of chemicals.

"They were recruited by the Michigan Department of Community Health," Karmaus said in a telephone interview. Their blood levels of PCBs and other chemicals were measured.



South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung (L) give an appointment letter to Kim Sang-Nam(C), Senior Secretary to the President for Welfare and Labor during the appointment ceremony at the Blue House in Seoul on Tuesday. President Kim Dae-Jung on Tuesday carried out his third major Cabinet reshuffle in less than a year in a desperate new bid to resurrect the scandal-tainted image of his administration.

S Korean leader reshuffles Cabinet

AFP, Seoul

President Kim Dae-Jung on Tuesday carried out his third major cabinet reshuffle in less than a year in a desperate new bid to resurrect the scandal-tainted image of his administration.

The president's office said Kim replaced the ministers for unification, education, justice, trade, labour, health and welfare, science and technology, and planning and budget.

Six out of the nine top presidential advisors were also changed, with a seventh post created for the return of the president's longstanding confidante, Park Ji-Won.

The Nobel Peace Prize winning leader, who is in the fifth and final year of his single permissible term, has been forced to act over damaging corruption scandals now touching his family and close advisors.

Thousands still cut off in Britain after deadly gales

AFP, London

Engineers in Britain struggled Tuesday to restore power to thousands of homes after violent winds killed seven and brought chaos to northern areas of the country now threatened by rising flood waters.

"We are doing our best to restore power to the remaining homes where it is safe to do so," a spokesman for Scottish Hydro Electricity said.

As the clean-up began, the day after some of Britain's worst storms in a decade, the emergency services were bracing themselves after heavy rain and melting snow brought several flood warnings around the country.

Scotland was hardest hit where winds closed bridges, caused numerous road accidents and brought the rail network to a virtual standstill.

Gusts of up to 200 kilometres

(125 miles) an hour were clocked at the summit of Britain's highest mountain, Ben Nevis, in the Scottish Highlands on Monday.

At the worst point, 90,000 homes in Scotland were left without power.

Elsewhere, Northern Ireland was battered by similar gales of up to 100 miles an hour and the northeast of England was also badly hit.

Five people were killed Monday in road accidents -- two in western Scotland and three in northeastern England -- when strong winds flipped over their vehicles.

Another Scottish man was killed when a tree crushed him, and a woman, aged about 40, died in the city of York in the north of England, when construction materials being used for the renovation of a church fell onto her.

China against expansion of war on terrorism

AFP, Beijing

China Tuesday reiterated its opposition to expanding the war on terrorism to Iraq, but urged Baghdad to "strictly abide" by United Nations resolutions concerning international inspections of suspected weapons sites.

"The Chinese government's position against terrorism is very clear, we are against the willful expansion of the fight against terrorism," foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan told a news briefing.

His comments were in reference to Iraq, whose Deputy Premier, Tareq Aziz, was visiting China.

"We are concerned about the development of the situation in Iraq," Kong said, without directly commenting on reports the United States was preparing to step up its war on terrorism with new air strikes on Iraq.

"The Iraqis should strictly abide

by the UN resolutions, on the other hand its sovereignty and security should be safeguarded."

In talks Monday, Aziz briefed Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and Vice Premier Qian Qichen on the latest developments on Iraq, Kong said.

Aziz arrived to Beijing on Sunday after visiting Moscow, and was expected to depart from China on Wednesday morning, Kong said.

Russian press reports said Aziz would return straight to Moscow to continue consultations on a Russian proposal to resume UN weapons inspections in exchange for the lifting of UN sanctions on Iraq, in place since the 1991 Gulf War.

Meanwhile, China on Monday told visiting Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz his country should cooperate with the United Nations to end UN sanctions against Baghdad, state media said.

Thousands of children still missing after Lagos blasts

AFP, Lagos

Parents and relatives searched Tuesday for thousands of children still missing in Nigeria's main city after a stampede flight from a massive weapons store explosion left more than 600 people, mostly children, dead.

In a statement to national television and radio, President Olusegun Obasanjo late Monday declared the explosion and the mass drowning of more than 600 fleeing children and youths in a canal complex a "national disaster".

Flags should be flown at half-mast nationwide, he said, reiterating a promise made earlier of a full inquiry.

Anger is growing over the military's use of a badly maintained weapons store in a densely-populated area of a massive city to hold the heavy weapons which Sunday devastated Lagos.

Newspapers Tuesday voiced calls for the inquiry to be thorough

and independent.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian Red Cross said it believed thousands of children were still missing 36 hours after fleeing the explosion.

"Many thousands of people, most of them children, have been displaced. There are thousands still missing," Red Cross spokesman Patrick Bawa told AFP here.

The Red Cross had set up two camps to register displaced people and is providing food, water, clothing and comfort, he said.

Hundreds of thousands of people fled the densely populated Ikeja area of Lagos, the industrial and residential heart of mainland Lagos, late Sunday when a weapons store exploded after a fire.

The blast sent orange and red fireballs into the sky and rained missiles down all over the city.

In the mass panic, tens of thousands of Ikeja residents living close to the army barracks fled to the Isolo area and ran into a major canal complex, hundreds unable to escape.

Mahathir hints at early polls

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has hinted that Malaysia could face an early election next year and has not yet decided whether to retire, a report said Tuesday.

"I do not think we will call for an early election ... but there's also a possibility that we will hold it one year earlier, that is in 2003," the Chinese daily Sin Chew Jit Poh cited Mahathir as telling Taiwanese academics in an interview.

1 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

An Indian border guard was killed Tuesday during a fierce gunbattle between security forces and separatist militants holed up in a suburban residence of the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar, police said.

Border guards, backed by members of the police counter-insurgency wing, had surrounded the three-storey house in Srinagar's Ahmednagar suburb after a tip-off, and called on the suspected mili-

Palestinian minister barred from Arabs' Beirut meet

Israel to fortify Jerusalem

AFP, Beirut

Palestinian justice minister Freih Abu Midein has been barred by Israel from attending a meeting of Arab ministers in Beirut Tuesday, a member of the Palestinian delegation told AFP Tuesday.

General Mahmud Asfur said Abu Midein's deputy Ahmad Saeed al-Tamimi would represent the Palestinian Authority at the conference of Arab interior ministers.

Asfur said Abu Midein had submitted his request to attend to Israel last week, but it was refused.

Israel, which occupies the Palestinian territories, had already barred Abu Midein from attending a meeting of Arab justice ministers in Cairo in November.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who also holds the interior portfolio, has been blockaded by Israel in the West Bank city of

Ramallah for nearly two months, since a rash of suicide bombings at the start of December.

The Arab interior ministers' conference is due to focus on combating terrorism, drugs and the deteriorating situation in the Palestinian territories.

It is also scheduled to discuss ways to back the Palestinian police forces, many of whose offices have been smashed by Israeli bombardments in the 16-month Palestinian uprising or intifada, officials here said.

The Palestinian crisis is also expected to top the agenda at the Arab summit to be held in Beirut from March 25-26.

Meanwhile, Israel prepared Tuesday to fortify its self-proclaimed capital Jerusalem after a series of blistering Palestinian attacks, as US President George W. Bush slammed Yasser Arafat for

misleading him over a major arms smuggling debacle.

The proposals to cut off the disputed city's eastern, mostly Arab, half from the West Bank came as Palestinian shooting damaged six houses in the Jewish settlement of Gilo on the city's southwestern flank.

Israel's Public Security Minister Uzi Landau however denied press reports of a wall between the mainly Arab eastern part and the largely Jewish west, which many fear would undermine Israel's claim to Jerusalem as its eternal and undivided capital.

The city's eastern half, including the Old City and its Jewish and Islamic holy sites, was seized by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war and subsequently annexed.

The Palestinians see it as the capital of their future independent state.

Indo-Pak war of words goes on

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan have stepped up their campaigns for the diplomatic moral high ground as the concerned eyes of the international community remain focused on the dangerous military face-off on their common border.

With India making it clear that it could be months before it considers pulling back its troops from the border, the two nuclear rivals appear locked in a cycle of sporadic artillery exchanges and diplomatic point-scoring.

Pakistan, under pressure to intensify its crackdown on religious extremists, is keen to paint India's refusal to engage in a bilateral dialogue as arrogant intransigence with repeated offers of talks that it knows will be rejected.

On Saturday, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf sent a message to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee marking India's annual Republic Day, saying he wanted "good neighbourly relations" with India.

"I would like to reiterate our readiness to engage in a serious and sustained dialogue with India to commence together a journey of peace and progress," he said.

Vajpayee's response on Monday was as blunt as it was predictable.

"Our neighbour keeps inviting us for meetings and talks but I ask them, what do we do with the meeting if we have to meet to fight once again?" Vajpayee said. "It is better to remain separate."

Pakistan described Vajpayee's response as "unfortunate"

"We regret that once again India did not accept our sincere offer," foreign office spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan said.

While rejecting the offer of dialogue, the Indian prime minister also sought to up the ante in any discussion on Kashmir -- the territorial dispute that has been the main thorn in the side of Indo-Pakistan relations for more than 50 years.

Vajpayee said any future talks on Kashmir would have to involve the issue of handing over "Pakistan-occupied Kashmir" (PoK) to India.

"Pakistan has always said that (Kashmir) is the core issue between the two countries but we want to ask them whether this issue involves the PoK also, which is illegally under its occupation," Vajpayee said.

"Kashmir is an integral part of India and we have a legal and constitutional right over it."

The verbal jousting is aimed as much at the international community as the two countries' domestic audiences.

Since a December 13 attack on parliament in New Delhi, which India blames on Pakistan-based militant groups, tensions between the two countries have been extremely high and some 800,000 troops from both sides are deployed along their borders.

While there is pressure on Musharraf to curb militant infiltration across the disputed Kashmir border, countries such as the United States have praised measures taken by the Pakistani president thus far and urged India to consider a military de-escalation leading to dialogue on all issues, including Kashmir.



A cameraman (L) frame the wreckage of a train after a collision in Kamakhya station near the state capital of Guwahati on Tuesday. Two people were killed and a dozen injured in a head-on collision between an express and a goods train in this northeast India's Assam state.