

## Prabhakaran in talks with Norwegian mediators

AFP, Colombo

The leader of Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas met Norwegian mediators yesterday to discuss arrangements for a second round of peace talks with Colombo, the rebels said.

Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran had a two-and-a-half hour meeting with a delegation led by Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen inside the rebel-held Kilinochchi town, a rebel spokesman said.

"The three topics that were discussed were the political situation in the northeast, the establishment of a joint task force and the second round of peace talks in Thailand," Tiger spokesman Daya Master said.

He said the Tigers would be sending the head of their political wing, SP Thamilselvan, for the second round of talks with the Sri Lankan government scheduled to open at the end of this month.

Prabhakaran was joined at Wednesday's talks by his chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, who led the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) delegation at the September 16 talks in Thailand.

Helgesen's team included Oslo's special peace envoy Erik Solheim and the Norwegian ambassador in Sri Lanka, Jon Westborg.

The Norwegians had been due to meet President Chandrika Kumaratunga later Wednesday, but official sources said the meeting was cancelled by her office.

Kumaratunga has been critical of the cohabitation government's handling of the peace bid.

## UN sees no quick justice for Afghan war crimes

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan is locked in a cycle of violence, with justice for the victims of war crimes over the past 23 years still only a distant possibility, a UN human rights expert said Wednesday.

Asma Jehangir, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights and arbitrary executions, said investigations into abuses allegedly committed by all sides could only begin after an overhaul of Afghanistan's deeply flawed justice system.

"The people of Afghanistan are collectively rebuilding a society and a country which has suffered from 23 years of conflict and a series of grave human rights violations," she said.

Although progress was slow, she hailed the efforts as "truly admirable", adding that Afghanistan was shortly expected to sign up to the statute of the International Criminal Court.

Jehangir, a former head of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission, called on the "friends of Afghanistan" to commit greater resources to help the country respond to victims' need for justice.

"The cycle of violence has not completely ended and impunity remains entrenched," she warned, citing recent reports of arbitrary killings.

Jehangir said an "atmosphere of fear" prevailed throughout Afghanistan and women remained among the most vulnerable.

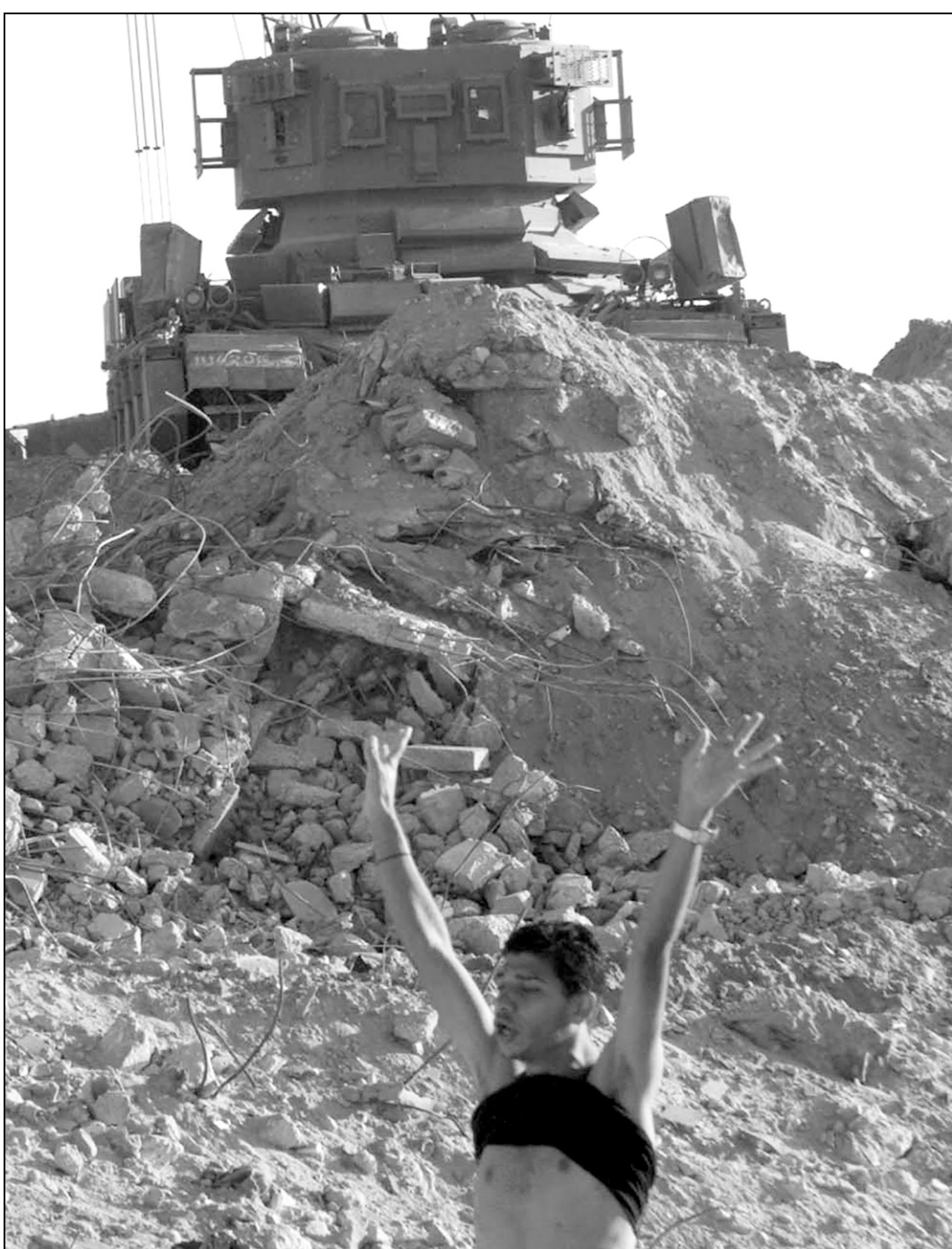


PHOTO: AFP

A young Palestinian man raises his arms in the air as an Israeli army bulldozer flattens a house in the Rafah refugee camp on Tuesday. The Israeli army destroyed five houses in the camp.

## US envoy in Israel with new peace roadmap for ME

REUTERS, Jerusalem

US envoy William Burns arrived in Israel yesterday armed with a peace "roadmap" aimed at ending two years of Middle East conflict as Washington courts Arab support for a possible war on Iraq.

A US embassy spokesman said Burns was expected to hold talks later yesterday with Israeli officials, including Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, and would meet Palestinian officials today.

Burns arrived in Israel in the wake of a Palestinian suicide bombing on Monday that killed 14 people, the deadliest attack in four months.

On a tour of the region before arriving in Israel, Burns called the bombing "reprehensible" and a blow to the goal of Palestinian independence. He called on both sides for restraint to help advance toward a Palestinian state and regional stability.

Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer said on Tuesday Israel was running out of military options to combat suicide

bombings and suggested it may be time to return to diplomacy.

Washington sees the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a source of discord as it seeks to persuade Arab states of the need for a possible military campaign against Iraq over its alleged development of weapons of mass destruction.

The militant Islamic Jihad group said two of its members carried out Monday's suicide attack in Israel as revenge for Israel's assassination of its founder in 1995 and recent raids which have killed Palestinian civilians and combatants.

Israel responded to previous attacks with tough army assaults. But this time, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, mindful of US desire to keep a lid on Middle East violence, refrained from swift retaliation.

Israeli forces mounted only limited operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on Tuesday.

A tank force thrust into a neighbourhood in the southern Gaza town of Rafah and destroyed the family home of a militant killed in a shootout with the army recently.

Palestinian hospital officials said that 20 people were injured when

the explosion rocked three nearby houses.

Speaking on Israeli television on Tuesday night, Ben-Eliezer said Israel's lack of military options to stop suicide bombings indicated it may be time to explore a return to peacemaking.

"In effect, our inventory of what more can be done is running out," Ben-Eliezer, Labour Party leader in the coalition government, said. "I think that... it would be worthwhile to begin some soul-searching and say that perhaps this is the time to begin to present our diplomatic agenda."

The statement exposed cracks in Sharon's coalition. He has said peacemaking cannot resume until anti-Israeli violence ends and Yasser Arafat is replaced as Palestinian leader.

Arafat, under pressure for democratic reforms, has decided the makeup of a new Palestinian cabinet and will present it to parliament early next week for approval, officials said.

## New US draft on Iraq fails to sway France, Russia

REUTERS, United Nations

Predicting negotiations for a UN resolution against Iraq would be "messy", the United States and Britain sought to convince France, Russia and China to approve tough disarmament proposals.

Facing opposition in the UN Security Council, Washington drew up a new draft, obtained by Reuters, and met twice on Tuesday with the four other permanent members of the 15-nation Security Council who hold veto power.

But there was no sign the two sides were moving any closer on the US draft, last changed on Monday.

The proposals no longer have an explicit authorisation of military action but they declare Iraq in "material breach" and threaten "serious consequences", language Washington can interpret as sufficient to allow the use of force.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters on Tuesday, "It's probably going to be a messy process," because of the complicated and lengthy text.

US Ambassador John Negroponte said the five would meet again as soon as possible but acknowledged hard work ahead.

"Every country brings its own perspective and its own point of view to these issues, and these things have to be hashed out and discussed," he said, adding that he wanted to ensure "there's no veto in the offing".

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov was quoted as telling journalists in Moscow that "the American draft resolution... does not for the moment, meet the criteria, which the Russian side had previously outlined and stands by now".

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said during a visit to Luxembourg, "Some progress is still needed and so we have much work to do."

The United States has agreed to a two-stage process but not two resolutions as France once wanted, one to give UN weapons inspectors a mandate and a second to authorise force.

The US resolution requires the inspectors "to report

immediately to the Council any interference by Iraq with inspection activities, as well as any failure by Iraq to comply with its disarmament obligations".

The Security Council would then convene immediately to consider the situation. British Ambassador Sir Jeremy Greenstock has said this could lead to a second resolution but "the US is saying it will not be committed to wait for the result because the UN may not get it right".

The US draft demands Iraq accept the resolution within seven days of its adoption and within 30 days provide "an acceptable and currently accurate, full and complete declaration of all aspects of its programmes" to develop weapons of mass destruction.

Inspections are to resume within 45 days after the resolution is adopted and the inspectors will then have 60 days to report back on their findings. But they are to report sooner if Iraq fails to comply with its obligations.

Russia was said to voice the harshest criticism at the private sessions. France and others, diplomats said, had problems with the wording of Iraq's declaration of its weapons and related materials, believing it could open the way to war.

The US draft says, "False statements or omissions in the declarations submitted by Iraq pursuant to this resolution and failure by Iraq at any time to comply with, and co-operate fully in the implementation of, this resolution shall constitute further material breach of Iraq's obligations."

Washington believes that if US forces were to attack Iraq the best conditions would be in the first few months of next year and are anxious to wrap up the UN process, without which few nations would offer political support.

Iraq denies it has weapons of mass destruction and says it will allow free access to UN inspectors.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer told reporters, "It is coming down to the end. The United Nations does not have forever, and we'll continue to work it and see when we get an agreement, if we get an agreement, how to proceed."

## Koreas agree on peaceful resolution to nuke row

REUTERS, Seoul

North and South Korea agreed yesterday to seek a peaceful resolution to North Korea's nuclear arms programme, an issue that will be the focus of intensive US diplomacy with Asian and Pacific leaders this weekend.

Faced with US evidence, senior North Korean officials acknowledged early in October their country had been processing uranium to build weapons in violation of its international pledges and to the alarm of the United States and its allies.

A cabinet-level delegation from South Korea that had been in North Korea for talks since Saturday returned to Seoul on Wednesday after all-night haggling over the language in their joint statement on the nuclear question.

South and North Korea will make joint efforts to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula, and will actively pursue dialogue to resolve the nuclear issue and other problems," said the key paragraph of the statement.

South Korea had demanded explicit language committing the North to abandoning its covert nuclear arms scheme and upholding the 1994 "Agreed Framework" with the United States, which requires

inspections to verify that Pyongyang is nuclear free.

South Korean Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun said North Korea had reiterated its statement on Monday that it was ready to discuss all security issues "if the United States is prepared to abandon its hostile policy" toward the communist state.

Although North Korea is holding out for talks with the United States, Jeong put the best face on the agreement in comments to reporters upon his return to Seoul.

"It is significant the North has listened sincerely when we conveyed worries the North's nuclear program raised among Korean people and international communities," Jeong said.

"In other times, the North would have defiantly rejected such comments," he said.

North Korea stridently warned the United States on Tuesday it would take unspecified "tougher counter-action" if Washington did not accept talks on the nuclear issue.

"If the US persists in its moves to pressurise and stifle the DPRK (North Korea) by force, the latter will have no option but to take a tougher counter-action," the ruling party daily Rodong Sinmun said in a statement.

US administration officials took a dim view of North Korea's threat,

saying Pyongyang's reneging on the 1994 agreement had seriously undermined its credibility.

"In terms of there being an effective mechanism for garnering greater rewards from us, shredding their previous deal with us is not going to be an effective means of convincing us to enter into a new agreement," one official said in Washington.

Lee Jung-hoon, a professor of international relations at Yonsei University in Seoul, said Pyongyang's nuclear gambit "will only harden (the US) position on North Korea."

"(Bush) will cut off all links with North Korea and will encourage allies, particularly Japan and South Korea, to moderate or cut off its dealings with North Korea until North Korea comes out much more genuinely in wanting to deal with this."

US officials said Bush and his top aides had made no decisions on whether to impose sanctions or other penalties on North Korea in an attempt to force Pyongyang to reverse course.

In talks with Asian and Pacific leaders this weekend the US president would seek strong statements demanding North Korea give up its nuclear weapons programme, the officials said.

Bush will host Chinese President

## Suspicion over regional terror link in Bali blast grows

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police were still waiting yesterday to question hospitalised Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, the alleged spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, as suspicions grew that the regional terror network was involved in the Bali bombing.

Security was stepped up around the country after foreign and Indonesian officials warned that new attacks may be imminent. Staff at offices, nightclubs and other buildings in the capital are searching bags and inspecting vehicles.

A guard on seven vital energy or mining projects was also strengthened.

Bashir remained under police guard in hospital in the Central Java city of Solo -- five days after he collapsed and six days after police summoned him as a suspect in a bombing spree and an alleged plot to assassinate Megawati Sukarnoputri before she became president.

Witnesses said Bashir's own bodyguards, one of whom sports an Osama bin Laden T-shirt, were being allowed inside the hospital and even inside his room.

There was no word on when police would attempt to question or move Bashir, who denies terror links and commands support in the Solo area.

About 5,000 Muslims including a former government intelligence chief rallied in support of Bashir, 64, at the main mosque in Solo late Tuesday.

"After the bomb exploded in Bali recently, the focus of attention has moved to Solo, where a figure lying in bed in hospital has been slandered," former intelligence chief, retired lieutenant general ZA Maulani, reportedly told the rally.

## Washington sniper threatens children, demands \$10m

AFP, Rockville, Maryland

After a bus driver was shot and killed, possibly becoming the Washington area sniper's 10th murder victim, police tried to contact the killer who now is threatening to target children and reportedly demanding a 10 million dollar ransom.

"Your children are not safe anywhere at any time," said a message from the murderer read Tuesday by Montgomery County police chief Charles Moose. It was found late Saturday near the last confirmed sniper shooting in Ashland, southern Virginia.

It was the most dramatic moment in an anxiety-packed day that began when a bus driver was gunned down as he was preparing his vehicle for service in nearby Montgomery County, Maryland.

The 35-year-old father of two was declared dead later that morning.

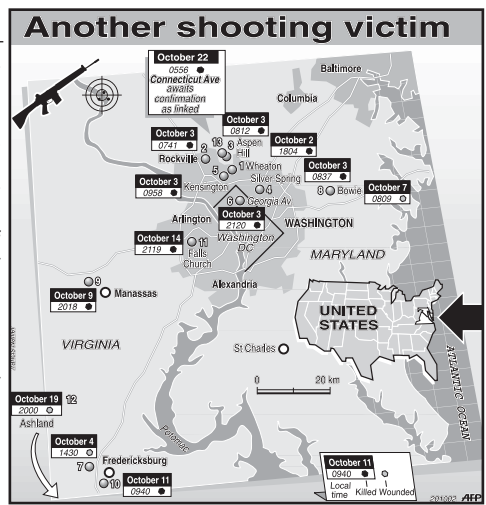
If confirmed by ballistic analysis, Conrad Johnson would be the 10th fatal victim of the Washington area sniper and the 13th person shot since the murder spree began October 2 not far from where Johnson fell.

Moose on Tuesday once again talked directly to the sniper or people close to him via the media, saying "We have researched the options you stated and we have determined it is not possible electronically to comply in the manner that you requested."

"However, we will remain open and ready to talk to you about the options you have mentioned."

"It is important to do this without anyone else getting hurt," Moose added.

"We have indicated that this is about more than violence," he said. "We are waiting to hear from you."



The cryptic message came in answer to a letter the sniper apparently left near the scene of his latest confirmed shooting outside a restaurant in Ashland, southern Virginia, where a 37-year-old man was wounded.

The letter, according to law enforcement sources quoted Wednesday by The Washington Post daily, was three pages long, handwritten, wrapped in plastic and tacked to a tree.

In angry tones, the sniper complained that police dispatchers had ignored half a dozen of his calls, branding them as "incompetent," and adding that "five people had to die" because of the bungling.

The letter gave a deadline of Monday for 10 million dollars to be deposited in a bank account, according to several sources who have seen photocopies of the letter.

It also reprimanded police saying it would be better for them to try to stop the killings rather than making an arrest.

The letter, said the sources, also included the same phrase the murderer had jotted down on a Tarot card left at the scene of an October 7 shooting: "I am God."

While Moose refused to provide any details as to when the communications with the murderer began or the reasons for his message to him, his words would appear to fit in with the description of the letter provided by the Post -- the reference to complying "electronically" to the sniper's request could be construed as an money transfer by computer.

Moose told the sniper that if a toll-free telephone number given him to contact police did not work, a post office box could be set up supposedly to channel the communications.

## Manila plans to arm civilian watchmen

AFP, Manila

President Gloria Arroyo's government is drawing up a plan to arm some of the 18,000 civilian volunteers to help police fight common crimes in the Philippine capital, officials said yesterday.

The plan would make use of the "barangay tanods" (neighbourhood watchmen), civilians now armed only with sticks and hired by district officials to patrol local streets and help direct traffic, senior government officials said.

"We have 18,000 policemen deployed in metropolitan Manila, and our police claim that in New York with the same number of residents, (about) 11 million, they have 45,000 policemen," Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) chief Bayani Fernando said.

He told reporters that he had secured authorisation from Arroyo to draw up a plan to train the watchmen, and to provide them with handguns provided they had been properly trained.

"When (people) need help, the first person to respond is usually the 'tanod', who are deployed all over the city," he said, putting their number at about 18,000.

## China induct fresh faces in political leadership

AFP, Beijing

China has named younger, dynamic leaders to the top government jobs of Beijing and Shanghai, marking out the new incumbents as rising stars in the country's political system, analysts said yesterday.

Liu Qi, currently the mayor of Beijing, was named head of Beijing's Communist Party, state media said late Tuesday, while Shanghai mayor Chen Liangyu was given the equivalent top post in Shanghai.

In China's one-party system of government, Communist Party positions outrank top government posts such as mayoralities, which both men will also keep.

The men they replaced, Beijing party secretary Jia Qinglin and Shanghai boss Huang Ju, are expected to be named to central government posts as part of a leadership reshuffle beginning next month.

President Jiang Zemin is forecast to begin handing over his official posts to Vice-president Hu Jintao at the 16th Communist Party Congress, beginning on November 8.

China-watchers said that the

Congress could also see Liu and Chen named in the party's powerful 21-member Politburo, its highest ruling body which is normally reserved for top central leaders along with a smattering of provincial and municipal bosses.

"Most likely this means that the chances are good that Liu and Chen will be elected to the Politburo at the 16th Party Congress," said Joseph Cheng, professor of political science at the City University of Hong Kong.

Liu, 59, a former engineer in the metallurgical industry, is best known for his efforts in leading Beijing's successful bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, and heads the organizing committee for the event.

Liu was named Beijing vice mayor in 1998 and became mayor in 1999 in a general house cleaning of the city government following a corruption scandal surrounding former Beijing party boss and Politburo member Chen Xitong.

"Liu Qi is known as a technocrat, without any particular closeness to either Jiang Zemin, or Hu Jintao," Cheng said.

The Beijing party secretary position has often been seen as crucial to China's leadership for the

purely geographic reason that whoever occupies it runs the capital of China. However this is not always the case, Cheng said.

"The Beijing party secretary doesn't always have to be close to the top leader," Cheng said. "In this case, Hu Jintao will have to make his own arrangements" for keeping influence over the city, he said.

Chen Liangyu's appointment to the Shanghai post is also a big promotion for the 56-year old engineer, who graduated from a military engineering school and once ran a Shanghai machinery factory in the early 1980s.

A long line of top Shanghai officials have gone onto the highest party and government posts, including President Jiang, Premier Zhu Rongji and Vice Premier Wu Bangguo, all former Shanghai party bosses.

Chen, a native of Ningbo city south of Shanghai, graduated from the Logistic Engineering Institute of the People's Liberation Army in 1968 and worked his way up through enterprise and government ranks in Shanghai for much of the 1980s and 1990s.