

Lankan peace talks enter a thorny round Thursday

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's peace talks are expected to be thorny and drawn out, but as both sides enter the second round in Thailand Thursday a beleaguered government is looking for quick results.

The latest round was originally thought of as a punctuation mark in a protracted process, but Thursday's talks have assumed an added political dimension that could make or break a shaky administration at home.

The first round of talks saw an unexpected concession from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels who announced they would abandon their campaign for a separate state.

That was a huge bonus for the government and boosted its image with the majority Sinhalese community, but not quite enough to hold together the minority Muslim party in the ruling coalition.

"Colombo needs some very positive signals from the next round of talks to overcome the problems of stability and ensure that the Muslims will not rock the boat," a Western diplomat here said.

The government is entering Thursday's talks after a humiliating setback in its battle at home with a hostile president who is opposed to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's handling of the peace process.

The Supreme Court virtually shot down an attempt by the government to clip President Chandrika Kumaratunga's wings.

There had been fears that political bickering between the president and the government could be a serious blow to Norway's attempts to broker an end to three decades of ethnic bloodshed.

"If the Tigers pulled out of the process citing the instability in Colombo, no one could have blamed them for it," a Western diplomat said.

"The fighting between the two main parties (of the president and the prime minister) has given a ready-made exit for the Tigers -- if they want to quit the talks."

The fears were addressed when the US deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs, Donald Camp, held talks with Sri Lankan leaders last week, diplomats said.

The US has strongly supported Norway's attempt to broker peace and stepped up bilateral ties with Colombo on the basis that President George W Bush "dares to dream of a future free of war" in Sri Lanka.

Government sources said Colombo would be looking for agreement on setting up a Joint Task Force with Tiger rebels to undertake reconstruction and rehabilitation in war-battered areas.

Any rapprochement between the Tigers and the Muslims is also crucial for the government to retain its support from the Muslim legislators and hold onto power.

Failure for a breakthrough in Thailand could seriously undermine the government, political sources said.

Clouds gather over Sihanouk's future

AFP, Phnom Penh

A healthy King Norodom Sihanouk was to celebrate his 80th birthday Thursday amid speculation and potential storm clouds over the future of Cambodia's revered monarch.

Such talk was once considered taboo but palace leaks have combined with comments from both the queen and the monarch's official biographer, Julio Jeldres, to relieve the local press of that constraint.

At stake is the future of the monarchy and a king who fears his cherished heritage and lines of succession could be abolished in favour of a republic after his death.

In what was interpreted as a bid to force the issue with the Cambodian government, Jeldres made it known while Sihanouk was in China for medical checks that the king could abdicate shortly after his birthday.

Diplomats said the threat was designed to force the government and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen into assuaging the king's fears over who would follow him.

Of those touted as a future monarch, both the king's son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, and his half-brother, Prince Norodom Sirivudh, have signalled a preference to remain in politics as opposed to ascending the throne.

Another prince, UNESCO ambassador Norodom Sihanouk, is considered a possible candidate. Both Ranariddh and Sirivudh have said they had no objections to Sihanouk becoming king.

But a more popular choice could prove to be Queen Norodom Monineath, a sprightly 66-year-old who has remained untainted by Cambodia's often-troubled political affiliations.

"She could hold office as regent, and this would suit Sihanouk," said one diplomat. "It cannot be underestimated how much he adores his wife, and Sihanouk wants to ensure she is looked after properly and with grace."

The succession is to be resolved by the Throne Council, which consists of three members from the national assembly, three from the senate, two senior Buddhist clergy and Hun Sen.

Diplomats said there was little chance of the king abdicating in the near future, despite recent threats to that effect. In particular they cited



King Norodom Sihanouk greeting well-wishers during independence day celebrations in Phnom Penh in November, 1999.

the upcoming ASEAN Summit, which promises to be Cambodia's biggest-ever political event.

The 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) convenes next Monday, drawing heads of state from Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam to Cambodia.

Leaders are also expected from China, Japan, South Africa and South Korea. Such a milestone event has not gone unnoticed by Sihanouk, who prides himself on the adoration of others.

Cambodian farmers prostrate themselves before the monarch during his trips into the countryside. Homes, restaurants, bars, public buildings and roads are adorned with photos of Sihanouk and Monineath.

Such adoration was expected to lavish the king with gifts and well-wishes from home and abroad, where he has worked the international political stage for 60 years.

All gifts, the King has declared, should be donated to Cambodian charities and he has apologised for a hectic schedule in the coming weeks that has toned down his

public appearances.

"If you look at his popularity, then take into account all the heads of state that will be arriving immediately after his 80th birthday, this would not be an ideal time to abdicate," one Western diplomat said.

"Sihanouk is extremely politically savvy and he realises this is not the time for local politics; instead he is more likely to promote what is needed for Cambodia among the ASEAN members."

For a king who reigns but does not rule, Sihanouk has not shied away from making known his displeasure with a number of issues afflicting his country, including the use of Cambodia's shipping registry as a flag of convenience, and crimes such as human trafficking and drug running.

In his regular monthly bulletin, Sihanouk has further despaired that his country has been turned into a nation of beggars.

Another cause for concern is his royalist FUNCINPEC party, which has split amid internal brawling following a disastrous performance in last February's local elections.

North Korea has 4000 tonnes biochemical weapons: Seoul

AFP, Seoul

South Korea believes North Korea possesses some 4,000 tonnes of biochemical weapons and has built as many as three crude nuclear weapons, Seoul's intelligence agency chief told lawmakers.

In testimony to the parliament's Intelligence Committee on Monday, Shin Kun, director of the National Intelligence Service, said the North was capable of producing some 4,500 tonnes of weapons annually. Pyongyang began its biochemical weapons programme about four decades ago.

"The North is believed to have a stockpile of between 2,500-4,000 tonnes of biochemical weapons," an opposition Grand National Party (GNP) lawmaker, Lee Yoon-Sung, quoted Shin as saying.

"We are unable to judge how powerful those biochemical weapons are as we have yet to confirm the accuracy of their delivery systems and whether the North has made those weapons compact enough to deliver."

Echoing what US officials have said of the North's nuclear development programme, Shin said Pyongyang could already own as many as three crude nuclear weapons.

The weapons would have been

Fighting dirty Potential agents in a biological and chemical weapons arsenal

Disease	Main effect	Agent	Main effect
Anthrax (bacteria)	Respiratory infection, fever, internal and external lesions	Vesicant (sulphur mustard, lewisite)	Burns, blisters, damages eyes and airways
Smallpox (virus)	Fever, internal and external lesions	Choking (CG phosgene)	Coughing, nausea, lung failure
Botulism (bacteria)	Nausea, muscle paralysis, respiratory failure	Toxins (cyanide)	Nausea, muscle spasms, seizures, coma
Bubonic plague (bacteria)	Fever, respiratory failure	Nerve (sarin, tabun, soman, GF, VX)	Pain, nausea, breathing problems, seizures

Source: FAS Antidote/vaccine available 291002 AFP

built using some seven to 22 kilogrammes (15 to 49 pounds) of plutonium the North is believed to have extracted before it opened nuclear facilities to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections in 1992.

"We don't have any information on how much enriched uranium the North might have. South Korea and

the United States have been closely following this programme," he said.

A disclosure by Washington that Pyongyang admitted it was secretly developing nuclear weapons and considered the 1994 Agreed Framework "nullified" alarmed South Korea and Asian neighbours, and prompted the United States to demand an "immediate and verifi-

able" scrapping of the programme.

But Pyongyang, which denied that US envoy James Kelly had presented evidence of such a programme during an October 3-5 visit, said the envoy's trip showed the Bush administration wanted to stifle it by force and put brakes on rapprochement to the Korean peninsula.

Japan, N Korea resume talks

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Japan and North Korea yesterday resumed talks aimed at normalising their diplomatic ties amid growing global concerns over Pyongyang's covert nuclear weapons programme.

The two-day rapprochement bid in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur comes just days after the United States, Japan and South Korea issued a joint statement that demanded North Korea give up its quest for nuclear weapons.

Katsunari Suzuki, Japan's ambassador in charge of normalisation talks, heads the Japanese side while Jong Thae-Hwa, Pyongyang's roving ambassador, heads the North Korean side.

With Washington having ruled out any high-level talks with Pyongyang for now, the Kuala Lumpur meeting serves as an

important diplomatic channel for the international community to press North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programme.

Pyongyang has admitted violating a 1994 deal with the United States in which it agreed to freeze the programme in exchange for two light-water reactors and 500,000 tonnes of fuel oil a year until the reactors are completed.

Tokyo will demand that North Korea finally ends its weapons programme during the first talks between the two sides since Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il held a landmark summit in Pyongyang on September 17.

Suzuki has said the normalisation process will be broken off if North Korea refuses.

Japan will also press North Korea hard over the kidnapping of at least 13 Japanese citizens in the

1970s and 1980s to tutor spies.

Kim admitted the abductions for the first time during the summit with Koizumi. The admission came with an apology but also with the revelation that eight of those kidnapped had died.

The surviving five, including two married couples and a woman married to a former US soldier, are now in Japan on visits initially scheduled to last two weeks.

But the Japanese government has decided to extend their stay with a view to having them live in Japan permanently and hopes to secure North Korea's promise to allow their seven children and the American husband to join them.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda said the still unclear circumstances around the kidnap cases will be at the top of the agenda in Kuala Lumpur.

"The abduction issue is the top

priority item and will be taken up early in the normalisation talks," he said.

North Korea, for its part, is expected to want to focus on Japan's colonial rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945 and economic assistance from Tokyo.

When Japan restored diplomatic ties with South Korea in 1965, Tokyo offered 500 million dollars in economic aid.

Japan's aid to North Korea could reach as much as 10 billion dollars, although Koizumi has said such aid would come only after normalisation of relations.

The two countries launched normalisation talks in January 1991 but they broke off in November 1992 due to Tokyo's abduction charges. Talks resumed in April 2000 but broke off again in October of the same year.

Musharraf arrives in Riyadh

AFP, Riyadh

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf arrived in Riyadh yesterday on a two-day visit during which he will discuss bilateral ties and regional issues with Saudi leaders.

The Pakistani leader, who is due to meet King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, was greeted at the Riyadh air base by the capital's governor Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz, a diplomatic source said.

The foreign ministry in Islamabad said Monday that Musharraf's talks with Saudi leaders would focus on the Middle East, India-Pakistan relations and bilateral ties.

Musharraf also plans to perform Omrah, the Muslim lesser pilgrimage, to the city of Mecca, Islam's holiest site.

The Pakistani leader's trip had originally been due to start on Monday. No reason was given for the delay.

Musharraf visited Saudi Arabia in June for talks with Crown Prince Abdullah, the kingdom's de facto ruler, when military tensions between arch-rivals Pakistan and India soared to dangerous levels.

Senior envoys from India also visited the kingdom in the past few months to appraise Saudi leaders of developments.

Five schools set ablaze in Thailand

AFP, Bangkok

Five schools were set ablaze in Thailand's predominantly Muslim south yesterday, in an attack Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra described as a "local problem".

Three schools in Thepa district and one each in Chana and Sabayoi district were set on fire around 2:00 am (local time Monday) in Songkhla province, which borders Malaysia.

Local police said there were no reports of casualties, but they were investigating the fires in the three adjacent districts as crimes.

"A suspicious car was seen near the scene before one of the school fires and police are looking for it," Songkhla's police Major General Santhan Chayanond said in a radio interview.

One school building was totally destroyed, while several buildings at the other schools suffered partial damage.

Thaksin, whose government has been downplaying the threat of international terrorism in the kingdom in the wake of this month's Bali bombings, was quick to rule out foreign involvement in the fires.

Militants kill 4 Kashmir cops

REUTERS, Srinagar

Islamic rebels killed three paramilitary policemen in an attack on a patrol in Indian Kashmir's main city yesterday, police said.

A paramilitary soldier was killed in a separate attack in the main city of Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir state's summer capital.

The banned Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohamed said it carried out both attacks. Jaish is one of two groups India blames for a raid on its parliament last December that triggered a military standoff between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

A May raid on an Indian army camp in Kashmir stoked already high tensions, bringing the two sides close to war in June.

The latest attacks came as a new coalition favouring talks with militants and other separatists prepares to take power in the state after an election, raising hopes of peace.

Taiwan plans to buy four Aegis destroyers

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan plans to buy four state-of-the-art Aegis-class destroyers from the United States in an arms deal sure to antagonize arch foe Beijing, a report said yesterday.

"Taiwan's defense ministry has quietly proposed to Washington for the procurement of four Arleigh Burke Aegis destroyers before Chinese President Jiang, Zemin visited the United States," the United Daily News said, citing military sources.

It said Washington is expected to announce the sale "early next year at the earliest."

Taiwan's defense ministry declined to comment on the report.

US President George W Bush deferred the sale of Aegis-class destroyers to Taiwan in April last year when he announced the most comprehensive arms sale to Taiwan since 1992 -- eight diesel submarines, 12 P-3C submarine-hunting aircraft and four Kidd class destroyers.

"Despite President Bush having set aside Taiwan's offer last year... the two sides reached consensus on the type of Aegis destroyers and weaponry to be sold to Taiwan," the News quoted an authoritative military source as saying.