

## Prabhakaran gets 200-yr jail term in absentia

AFP, Colombo

A court here Thursday sentenced the leader of the Tamil Tigers to 200 years jail in absentia over a 1996 truck bomb attack as peace talks between the government and the rebel group began in Thailand.

The Colombo High Court found Velupillai Prabhakaran, the supreme of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and four others guilty of masterminding a January 31, 1996 assault on the central bank.

The court gave Prabhakaran 200 years of jail for the attack, in which the Tigers rammed a truck loaded with explosives into the central bank in Colombo, killing 91 people and leaving hundreds more injured.

The judge found Prabhakaran guilty of 51 counts including murder and the destruction of state property. The court instructed the police's criminal investigators to arrest the guerrilla leader and confiscate his properties.



PHOTO: AFP  
Sri Lanka constitutional affairs minister and the government's chief peace negotiator, G. L. Peiris (R), shakes hands with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham (L), during the opening of a second round of peace talks at Rose Garden resort in Nakhon Pathom province, 32 km west of the Thai capital Bangkok. The crucial round of peace talks opened on Thursday amid tight security at a glass and teak banquet hall with the hopes of ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed which has claimed over 60,000 lives.

# Lankan peace talks get underway at Thai resort

## Muslims pushes for end to Tiger attacks on them

AFP, Nakhon Pathom

Sri Lanka's crucial second round of Norwegian-brokered peace talks got underway amid tight security Thursday in an opulent banquet hall at a riverside resort outside the Thai capital.

The Sri Lankan government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) opened their talks at the Rose Garden resort following a formal handshake for the cameras.

Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen invited government chief negotiator G. L. Peiris and Tiger delegation leader Anton Balasingham for a second handshake for photographers brought to the room.

Later, the two delegations posed for "informal" pictures inside the teak panelled banquet hall and then the official talks started behind closed doors.

Among the delegates were Tiger combatants Karuna, the LTTE's eastern province military commander, and political wing leader and war veteran S. P. Thamilselvan.

It is the first time both Karuna and Thamilselvan have travelled abroad and their participation is seen as crucial by adding a "political-military" input into the talks, the LTTE's Balasingham said Wednesday.

There is no change in the government delegation this time, but a general is advising the team.

The two sides, each comprising four members, are due to spend six hours a day together on Friday and Saturday, while on the concluding day Sunday they will hold three hours of talks before addressing a press conference.

Thursday's three-hour session is expected to decide on the agenda for the next three days of negotiations, official sources said.

Diplomats said the delegates will discuss a blueprint to win millions of dollars in foreign aid for rebuilding Sri Lanka's embattled northeast as well as problems relating to a ceasefire in place since February.

Meanwhile, minority Muslims who hold the balance of power in Sri Lanka will press at peace talks opening here Thursday for an end to Tamil Tiger attacks against them, a top Muslim negotiator said.

The second round of Norwegian-backed peace talks are being held at this Thai river-side resort against a backdrop of growing unrest within the Muslim community which is threatening to bring down the Sri Lankan government.

The Muslim negotiator, Rauf Hakeem, was the last of the four-member Sri Lankan delegation to arrive here Thursday after an 11th hour meeting with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to discuss his concerns.

Hakeem, a minister in the Sri Lankan government, is a negotiator at the Oslo-brokered peace talks with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but a separate Muslim delegation is yet to be allowed in.

## Talks after end of insurgency: India Pakistan is 'epicentre of terrorism': Advani

AFP, New Delhi

India Thursday accused Pakistan of using terrorism as a "pre-dialogue negotiating tactic" and ruled out talks with its arch-rival over Kashmir until all insurgency in the disputed Himalayan state is ended.

"We will be satisfied only when there is a complete stop to cross-border terrorism. Until then, there is no conducive atmosphere for talks," Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha said in an interview with the BBC's Asia Today programme.

He was responding to a suggestion by senior US State Department official Richard Haass in New Delhi earlier in the week that India "mull over" the possibility of opening talks despite the infiltration of Islamic militants into Indian-administered Kashmir from the Pakistani zone.

"We feel this (ending infiltration and negotiations) could take place simultaneously," said Haass, direc-

tor of policy planning for the US diplomatic agency, who acknowledged, however, that the infiltrations were a "matter of considerable concern" for the United States.

Sinha questioned the trustworthiness of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's June commitment to the United States to rein in the militants, saying that infiltration had merely been reduced "from 100 percent to 70 percent."

"He made a promise he will not interfere in the elections in Jammu and Kashmir. He did his best to interfere," Sinha said, referring to a surge of militancy that accompanied September 16-October 8 legislative assembly vote in the restive state.

"Now if this is the value of the commitment (Musharraf) made to the United States, then I told Mr Haass, it is for them to decide what to do. But I don't think we are in need of any advice on what to do.

"We will do what is conducive to us. The national interest is to ensure that cross-border terrorism sponsored, financed and supported by Pakistan comes to an end."

Sinha, who met Haass in New Delhi on Monday, is currently in London.

Asked by the BBC if he believed Pakistan should be readmitted to the Commonwealth, Sinha demurred.

"I am not in position to tell you what should be the case because obviously it will be a collective decision of the ministerial action group... I hold a view but am not willing to share it with you."

The Commonwealth is next month to review Islamabad's three-year suspension from the 54-member body, using legislative elections held early October in Pakistan as a yardstick.

The Commonwealth observer

group declared the polls "for the most part transparent," but said there were doubts over whether there was a "truly level" playing field.

Sinha said India believed the poll to have been "seriously flawed."

"It's not India's view, it's the view of the observers that went there," he said.

Meanwhile, Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani said Thursday the international community had recognised the "epicentre of terrorism" and rising religious fundamentalism had shifted to Pakistan.

"Even the international community has slowly realised that the epicentre of international terrorism has shifted to Pakistan from Afghanistan," Advani told reporters on a two-day visit to the southern state of Andhra Pradesh.

## Air India flight to Hong Kong searched after terror hoax

AFP, New Delhi

An Air India flight bound for Hong Kong landed in New Delhi Thursday following a hoax call that there were "two terrorists" on board, airport officials said.

Around 180 passengers on board the Bombay-Delhi-Hong Kong flight were offloaded at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport but the two men were not on board.

Shanawaz Hussain, minister for civil aviation, said the incident had been a false alarm.

"There was information that there were terrorists on board but it has been declared a hoax. It's been confirmed," he said.

An airport official said a fax was received at Air India's Hong Kong office saying there were "two terrorists armed with explosives" on board the flight. The names of the two were also mentioned in the fax.

## Curfew reimposed in Lankan capital after fresh clashes

AFP, Colombo

A curfew was reimposed Thursday in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo following further tensions after communal clashes which left one person dead and 12 injured, police said.

The curfew in the northern and central parts of the city, which had been lifted Thursday morning, was put back in place indefinitely, they said.

Wednesday's violence between groups from the majority Sinhalese and minority Muslim communities was not linked to the second round of peace talks between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels, which began Thursday in Thailand.

At least five homes and four vehicles were destroyed in the clashes in which 13 people were

taken to hospital, where one person with a head injury died, medical officials said Wednesday.

Colombo police chief Bodhi Liyanage said that the situation was brought under control Wednesday night with the assistance of the army, navy and airforce reinforcements and the area was calm.

But residents said tensions mounted once again in the run-up to the funeral of the person who died, who was a Muslim, and several properties were attacked, leading the police to ask shop owners in the busy Panchikawatta business district to close down for the day.

The violence first erupted Wednesday morning when Muslims began work on a building that has been the subject of a court dispute with a Sinhalese Buddhist group.

## Nepal sacks 40 political appointees

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has sacked the heads of 40 state-run corporations who had been appointed by the elected government which King Gyanendra dismissed on October 4, officials said Thursday.

Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand's royal-appointed government has notified the corporation chiefs that they are being removed, said a source in the cabinet.

"This was obviously done to seek the cooperation of the corporations and to check corruption in these important offices," the source told AFP.

The cabinet also made a number of its own appointments to the finance ministry, the National Planning Commission and other key departments.

On Wednesday, two leading ministers in the former government were taken into police custody on allegations of corruption.

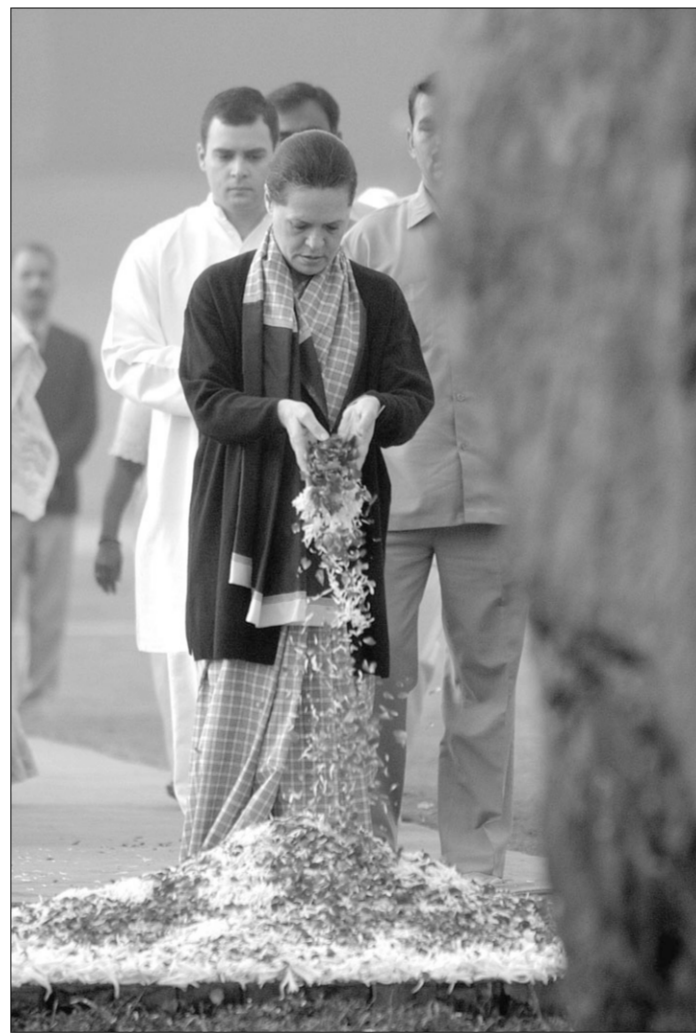


PHOTO: AFP  
Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi pays floral tributes to former prime minister and her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi on her 18th death anniversary as her son Rahul Gandhi (in white shirt) looks on in New Delhi on Thursday. Her own bodyguards assassinated Indira Gandhi in 1984.

## Benazir warns party men against division

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's self-exiled ex-premier Benazir Bhutto directed her party to stay united Thursday, amid widespread reports of government efforts to strike a deal with party members that would see Bhutto sidelined.

"You were elected on the tickets of the PPP and you will remain as members of the PPP, as one force," Bhutto said in a telephone address from the United States to Pakistan People's Party (PPP) parliamentarians and executives.

The PPP meeting fell three weeks exactly after elections supposed to restore civilian rule following a three year military regime, but which resulted in a hung parliament with parties still deadlocked in efforts to form a governing coalition.

The PPP is locked in internal

debate over whether to soften its rejection of key constitutional changes and join the pro-government PML-Q in a coalition, or to sit in opposition and continue to fight the changes, secretary general Raza Rabbani told AFP.

President Pervez Musharraf's government is said to be keen to bring PPP into a ruling coalition on the condition that Bhutto, who was barred from October 10 polls, remain in exile, which she has imposed on herself since 1998.

"We are one party. The party comes first and loyalty to the party is the priority," Bhutto told the PPP meeting.

"Whether we are in government or opposition, we will conduct ourselves with dignity and as a collective force."