

LTTE to hold meeting today for resumption of peace talks

IANIS, Colombo

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will hold a crucial meeting on Monday to discuss the resumption of peace talks with the Sri Lankan government.

LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran and key theoretician Anton Balasingham will be present at the group's central committee meeting expected to take place in the Vanni region.

Six rounds of peace talks have been held between the separatist LTTE and the government to end 20 years of bloodshed that has claimed over 60,000 lives. A ceasefire between the two sides came into effect in February 2002.

But the seventh round of talks was cancelled last month by the LTTE which alleged non-implementation of the truce, exclusion of the rebels from a preparatory donor meeting in Washington and delays in resettling people internally displaced by the conflict.

'Musharraf, army & ISI back Pak peace move'

Jamali summons all-party meet

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri said Sunday a peace initiative by his government had the support of President Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani army and the country's military intelligence agency.

"As foreign minister of Pakistan, I am privy to many meetings. The present process has the complete backing of President Musharraf. He is very much on board," Kasuri told the Indian Hindi-language news channel Aaj Tak in an interview broadcast Sunday. He added that the army and the military Inter-Services-Intelligence (ISI) also supported the recent flurry of exchanges between the two rivals which began with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee

offering talks with Pakistan while on a visit to the disputed region of Kashmir in April.

Kashmir has caused two of the three wars between the nuclear neighbours since partition in 1947 and brought them to the brink of war last year.

Kasuri said India's fresh initiatives were "better late than never."

He added: "Pakistan is ready to start the dialogue process so as to hold meaningful discussions on all outstanding issues including that of Kashmir."

"We are pleased that measures, unilaterally taken by New Delhi previously affecting our relations, are being withdrawn," Kasuri added.

Diplomatic ties and air, rail and road links between the two coun-

tries were cut by India after an attack on its parliament in December 2001 which New Delhi blamed on militants supported by Pakistan.

On April 28, Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali telephoned Vajpayee to invite him to Pakistan for talks and also offered to travel to India himself.

The leaders also spoke about resuming people to people contact and improving trade and cultural ties.

On Friday Vajpayee announced the restoration of diplomatic ties and airlinks with Pakistan.

And on Saturday Jamali sent a formal invitation to Vajpayee to visit Islamabad. The Indian premier has not accepted or declined, but said "careful planning" was

needed before any meeting in Islamabad.

Meanwhile, Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali announced Sunday he has summoned ruling and opposition parties to devise a joint strategy for possible dialogue with arch-rival India.

"I have invited opposition and allied (government) parties to come on May 5 and devise a unified stand on talks with India," Jamali announced to a rally of some 4,000 people in the north-west city of Mansehra.

The announcement comes two days after Jamali sent a formal invitation to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to travel to Pakistan for talks, which would be the first between the hostile neighbours since July 2001.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (3rd L), Defence Minister George Fernandes (4th L) and Indian Air Force Chief S. Krishnaswamy (R) pose with the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) after the naming ceremony of the aircraft at the Bangalore International Airport on Sunday. The multi-role combat aircraft, dubbed "Tejas" (Brilliance), can carry seven weapon stations and has provisions for mid-air refuelling. It is expected to be inducted into the Indian Air Force by this decade.

PHOTO: AFP

Naga rebels warn against raid on their camps

AFP, Guwahati

A tribal separatist group in India's northeastern state of Nagaland warned Sunday that ongoing peace talks with New Delhi could be jeopardized if federal soldiers continued to raid its camps.

"The Indian government should not try to test the patience of the tribal Nagas by allowing federal troops to continue unprovoked assaults on our cadres," Phungthing Shimrang, convenor of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), told AFP by telephone from Nagaland's commercial hub Dimapur.

"Our cadres are well prepared to go into ambush once again... If compelled, we would go back to the jungles."

The NSCN faction, which is led by Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, and is fighting for an independent tribal homeland, is currently holding peace talks with the government after the two sides entered into a ceasefire in 1997.



The Israeli army blows up a tunnel at the border between Egypt and the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah on Saturday. The Israeli army destroyed a two-storied house and seriously wounded a Palestinian youth during the armed clashes, which erupted during an Israeli operation.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel lobbies US against ME peace 'road map'

AFP, Washington

An Israeli government envoy begins a visit to the United States Sunday in hopes of persuading the US government to drop its support for a Palestinian state and the "road map" to Middle East peace.

Tourism Minister Benny Elon will fly to New York first and travel to Washington on Monday "to discuss the impending road map and the danger a Palestinian state west of the Jordan River poses to the State of Israel," according to an Israeli government statement released late Saturday.

While no talks with members of the executive branch are scheduled, Elon is expected to meet with leaders of the US Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as prominent evangelical Christian leaders close to the administration of President George W. Bush.

According to Israeli spokesman Ronn Torossian, these religious

leaders include Christian Coalition President Roberta Combs, former presidential candidate Gary Bauer and Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network, who once said that "God gave the land to the descendants of Israel. It was not given to Palestine."

The visit follows last week's unveiling of the "road map," a plan put together by the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations that calls for incremental steps toward resolving the Middle East conflict and creating a Palestinian state in 2005.

The plan calls for an immediate halt to Palestinian violence, the Israeli military's gradual withdrawal from Palestinian territories and an end to Jewish settlement activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

But in a statement made public in the United States on Saturday, Elon made clear he saw the road map as a non-starter and wanted to

convey to Americans that "our stay in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) is not temporary."

"A Palestinian state in the heartland of the land of Israel will be a disaster to both the Jewish state as well as the Palestinians," continued Elon, a political ally of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who heads the right-wing Mokedet Party faction in the Israeli Knesset.

"I wish to explain by means of facts and maps that the 'peace' that the road map envisages cannot be achieved," he said.

Although he was officially presented with the "road map" last Wednesday, Sharon has so far refrained from extensive public comments on it.

Asked if Elon's trip had the blessing of the Israeli leader, Torossian replied: "He is a cabinet member of the Israeli government, and this is an official trip of the Israeli government."

Turkish quake rescue effort ends

AFP, Celteksuyu, Turkey

Rescue work to look for survivors of the quake which demolished a boarding school in eastern Turkey has officially ended after the last two bodies of pupils were pulled out from under the debris, the provincial governor announced Sunday.

The final toll in Thursday's quake stood at 167 dead and around 520 injured, the governor of Bingol province Avni Cos told Anadolu news agency.

At the school in Celteksuyu, where 198 pupils were asleep in their dormitories when the quake struck, 84 children and one teacher perished and 114 survived, he said.

RSF accuses US of war crimes against journalists

AFP, Paris

US attacks on a Baghdad hotel housing foreign journalists and on the office of an Arab television station were war crimes, the head of the international journalists' watchdog group Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) charged Saturday.

"Seeing an American tank firing at the Palestine Hotel and Americans hitting Al-Jazeera television, we're no longer talking professional risks. These are war crimes," said RSF Secretary General Robert Menard.

Two journalists were killed by a tank round fired into an upper floor of Baghdad's Palestine Hotel where foreign correspondents were based, and an Al-Jazeera correspondent was killed in a separate missile attack on the Arabic news network's offices in downtown Baghdad.

4 al-Qaeda suspects detained in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities have rounded up four more al-Qaeda suspects in two different raids on what the Interior Ministry said on Sunday were hideouts of members of Osama bin Laden's terror network.

Two were arrested in southwestern Baluchistan province and two were apprehended in the southern port city of Karachi, the ministry's spokesman Iftikhar Ahmed said.

"The arrests were made recently," he said without specifying a date or further details.

Local media said the arrests followed a lead provided by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The News daily, quoting security sources, said two Arabs of Egyptian origin, identified as Abdul Khalik Mohammad and Abi Abdullah, were taken into custody in a raid in Karachi's suburban district of Surjani over the weekend.

Ice starts melting on Indo-Pak front

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali in the last fortnight have said and done things which have sent positive signals for peace and stability in South Asia.

First, it was Vajpayee who extended the hand of friendship. Then came Jamali's turn to ring up the Indian Premier and convey his appreciation of his gesture. They were quickly followed by India's announcement of the decision to restore fully diplomatic ties with Pakistan and lift the ban on use of Pakistani planes to use Indian airspace. Pakistani reciprocated within hours.

The decisions to send back their top diplomats to Islamabad and New Delhi and reopen respective air spaces constitute the first tangible steps the two countries have

taken in the last one and half years since the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001.

It was part of New Delhi's coercive diplomacy to recall its high commissioner from Islamabad and snap road, rail and air links with Pakistan soon after the attack on Parliament. It was, therefore, expected that the initiative to partially roll them back would come from India.

However, India, according to highly-placed government sources here, is viewing the process of engaging Pakistan again with a large measure of circumspection.

At the heart of India's cautious approach to the new peace initiative is the bitter experience of its two key initiatives in the past. Vajpayee's historic bus journey to Lahore in February 1999 which was followed by Pakistani intrusion in Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and the failure of talks

between the Indian Prime Minister and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in Agra in July 2001.

Given the deep mistrust between the two countries, it is too early to expect a clear roadmap for resumption of dialogue. But officials here do talk of two aspects in the backdrop of the telephonic talk between Vajpayee and Jamali on April 25.

One is the two countries going back to the state of bilateral ties that had existed prior to the attack on Indian Parliament and second exploring the possibility of setting in motion the dialogue process.

While rolling back of some of the punitive measures India had taken immediately after the attack on Parliament like resumption of air link and restoration of full diplomatic relations were very much on the cards after Vajpayee-Jamali telephonic talk, India is very cautious on the dialogue front.

Baby-swap inquiry opens in India

BBC ONLINE, Hyderabad

Police in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad have launched investigations after a woman complained that hospital staff replaced her new-born boy with a baby girl.

Police said Latha Reddy gave birth to a boy in the Nayapal Government Maternity Hospital in Hyderabad on 16 April.

Hospital staff showed the baby to the mother before taking him to the intensive care unit.

But five days later when the child was returned to her, the woman said she discovered that it was now a baby girl.

The mother refused to accept the child and her husband filed a complaint with the police.

A DNA test was carried out on the mother and the baby girl and it established that Ms Reddy was not the mother of the child.

Police said they have launched criminal investigations against the hospital staff following the DNA report.

Myanmar frees 21 prisoners

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government has released 21 prisoners, including prominent academic Salai Tun Than and 12 members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), it said in a statement Sunday.

The announcement comes ahead of this week's one-year anniversary of the junta's release of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi from 19 months of house arrest.

"The government of Myanmar commuted the sentences and released 18 prisoners today and three last week, totalling 21, taking consideration of health and humanitarian concerns," the junta said.

"The releases are the latest in a series of efforts by the government to move Myanmar closer to multi-party democracy and national reconciliation," it said, in a likely bid to appease growing frustration over its lack of reform.

Aung San Suu Kyi began secret talks with the junta aimed at reconciliation in October 2000, but a political dialogue has yet to begin. International patience with the regime is wearing thin, while late last month Aung San Suu Kyi herself complained publicly for the first time over the stalled talks.



Sandra Shawqi, a three-year-old toddler, eats a biscuit as she sits in the lap of a relative at the al-Sahel hospital in Cairo on Sunday. Shawqi survived for 10 hours trapped beneath her mother's body in an apartment block that collapsed killing six other people, including three children. Rescue workers found Sandra alive at dawn, locked in the embrace of her mother, who died shielding her child when the building collapsed without warning in the north of Cairo late Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Girl survives 10-hour ordeal under rubble

AFP, Cairo

A 10-year-old girl survived a 10-hour ordeal under the rubble of a Cairo apartment building which killed at least seven people when it collapsed, while others were still missing Sunday.

Rescue workers found Sandra Said Shawqi alive at dawn beneath the ruins of the six-storey block, but also brought out four bodies, an AFP correspondent witnessed.

Some half-a-dozen more were believed to be still trapped, but it was not known if they were alive or dead.

Seven people were injured, two of them seriously, when the building collapsed without warning in Cairo's poor Shubra district late Saturday, police said.

The two upper storeys ended up on the wreckage of the lower ones and the injured were among 10 people who lived in two apartments on the top floor and were rescued from the debris.