

Colombo makes fresh offer to end impasse

Donors pledge up to \$ 2.3b aid to rebuild Lanka

AFP, Tokyo

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe offered an interim administrative structure to Tamil Tiger rebels Monday in a bid to end the impasse in the island's Norwegian-backed peace process.

Addressing a crucial international donors' conference here, Wickremesinghe said his government was prepared to set up an "innovative provisional administrative structure" for the South Asian nation's embattled areas.

Tamil Tiger rebels, boycotting the aid conference here, have insisted on a administrative mechanism that grants them greater political and financial authority in exchange for ending their suspension of peace negotiations.

"It is now important that we develop a roadmap with milestones to get there," Wickremesinghe said as the conference opened with promises of one up to 2.3 billion dollars in aid over four years from Japan, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the European Union, and the United States.

"In this context we would need to

set up an innovative provisional administrative structure."

"It will be responsible for the reconstruction and development of the north east and the administrative aspects of the transitional process."

There was no immediate reaction in Sri Lanka from the Tamil Tigers to the latest offer from Wickremesinghe to end the impasse in the peace process.

The Tiger rebels suspended their participation in peace talks in April after accusing the government of slow delivery on promises made to them at six rounds of talks.

The premier admitted before international donors here Monday that the implementation of reconstruction and rehabilitation work had been painfully slow.

"The actions of the LTTE in the past few weeks has demonstrated what we too were realising," Wickremesinghe said.

"It was clear that the structures we had put in place were too cumbersome and too distant from the people to be acceptable or to react quickly enough. The people needed a much faster response than the

government was able to deliver."

The Tigers said a sub-committee appointed by peace negotiators from both sides failed to carry out any significant projects in war-ravaged areas and they wanted an interim administrative body to speed up work.

A "needs assessment" for the embattled regions had been prepared with the help of the UN, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank and was endorsed by both the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers, the premier said.

He said delivery will also be implemented through a partnership of the government and the LTTE.

The premier said more political work needed to be done and insisted differences between his administration and the Tamil Tigers over a provisional administrative structure for war-ravaged areas was not far apart.

The new administrative structure, which must conform to existing Sri Lankan federal law, would provide for a significant role for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), allow transparency and

safeguard the interests of all communities on the island, Wickremesinghe said.

He also urged the international community to identify ways to help underpin the peace process, given the level of mistrust between the government and the Tigers.

Meanwhile, International donors on Monday pledged up to 2.3 billion dollars in aid over four years to help rebuild Sri Lanka in exchange for the steady progress towards peace in the war-ravaged nation.

Some 50 governments and multilateral agencies attending the crucial two-day conference are asking the Colombo government and rebels to immediately develop a peace plan "with clear milestones indicating the path towards a mutually acceptable final political solution," according to a draft declaration seen by AFP.

The Tokyo conference will link foreign aid to progress in the peace process, seeking an end to the three decades of ethnic fighting that has killed an estimated 65,000 people and displaced 800,000 others.



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (L) chats with US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage before the start of the opening session of the Tokyo Conference on Reconstruction and Development of Sri Lanka at a Tokyo hotel on Monday. Japan opened a crucial two-day donors conference for Sri Lanka here.

Musharraf castigates Talibanisation bid

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has lashed out at Islamic hardliners who last week imposed Sharia law in a province bordering Afghanistan, accusing them of attempting to Talibanise Pakistan and tarnish its image.

"Pakistan is earning a bad name abroad due to hardliners and orthodoxy in religion," General Musharraf told a gathering of lawyers Sunday, according to the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan (APP).

"The nation will have to decide whether they want 'Taliban' Islam or Islam in the real sense (as) preached by the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him)."

It was the pro-US president's strongest attack ever on radical religious parties and the fundamentalist laws they have imposed in North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Musharraf, a key US ally in its war on terrorism, has been trying to stamp out Islamic extremism for more than 18 months, banning militant groups, arresting their followers, and attempting to modernise Koranic schools known as madrassah.

He said it was imperative for Pakistan, an Islamic republic established 56 years ago for South Asia's Muslims, to cultivate a more "enlightened and progressive" image.

"It is the demand of the hour to present Pakistan as an enlightened and progressive nation because we are being branded as 'fundamentalists', terrorists and

an intolerant society, a stigma which we should prove wrong through our character and deed," he said.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) alliance of far right religious parties in NWFP have banned men from training or watching female athletes, banned male doctors from treating female patients, and launched an anti-obscenity drive to eliminate music, dance, singing and pornography.

Mobs taking the anti-obscenity drive into their own hands have vandalised billboards depicting women and Western products, trashed shops selling music and video CDs, and torn cassette players out of public buses.

Last week the MMA-ruled provincial parliament voted unanimously to make Sharia the supreme law in NWFP's provincial courts and set up three committees to recommend ways to Islamise the education system, economy and judiciary.

The MMA government has also made it compulsory for all civil servants to pray five times a day, and wants to set up a Taliban-style department to enforce virtue and eliminate vice.

The legislature is also considering a proposed law to make it compulsory for all women to be covered from head to toe in public.

Musharraf said there should be no laws on how people dress.

"Everyone is free to wear whatever he likes, there is no restriction on anybody's dress," he said.

Bomb blast kills 3 in Afghanistan

REUTERS, Kabul

At least three Afghans were killed when a bomb exploded in the vehicle they were travelling in, the latest in a series of blasts that have rocked the south of the country in recent months, state media reported on Monday.

The explosion ripped through a vehicle in the Panjwaye district of Kandahar province, the Arman-e-Millie daily newspaper reported without saying when the blast occurred.

The government mouthpiece described the situation in Panjwaye area as "insecure."

Kandahar province has been rocked by a series of attacks and explosions since the start of the year which the government has blamed on remnants of the ousted Taliban regime and the al Qaeda network it sheltered, many of them operating from Pakistan.

In the deadliest so far, 18 people died when an explosion ripped through a bus on the outskirts of Kandahar city, the province's capital and the Taliban's former stronghold.

Last week officials said up to 40 Taliban fighters were killed during a raid in the Spin Boldak district near the border with Pakistan, the largest defeat inflicted on the hardline Islamic regime since it fell from power in late 2001.

Kabul TV reported late Sunday that two more Taliban guerrillas, including senior commander Hafiz Abdul Rahim, had died in subsequent clashes in the area.

'India considering troops for Iraq'

PTI, Washington

India is considering US request for sending troops to Iraq as part of an international peacekeeping force,

Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani told US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld during a meeting on Sunday.

Until now, the Indian government has been reluctant to accept the US request under pressure from the Opposition, the military and some of its own allies.

At a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security two weeks ago, the government decided not to send troops immediately, but keep its options open and discuss the subject with the United Nations and authorities in Iraq.

Rumsfeld called on Advani soon after his arrival here on Sunday. During the unscheduled 40-minute meeting, the two sides discussed bilateral issues and expressed satisfaction at the pace of progress of the growing defence cooperation between the two countries, the Indian Embassy said in a statement.

Rumsfeld raised the question of India's contribution of troops for the stabilisation of Iraq and "the Deputy Prime Minister said this matter is under the consideration of the Government of India and that a decision will be taken after taking all aspects into account" the statement said.

Before taking any decision, India has sought clarification on certain issues, including the need for such a forced, its roadmap and the command under it would work.

The Embassy termed Rumsfeld's meeting with Advani at his hotel yesterday as a "very special gesture", as the former was

going to travel out of Washington DC and said Deputy Prime Minister greatly appreciated this gesture.

AFP adds: US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani have met in Washington to discuss the possible deployment of Indian troops to war-torn Iraq, media reports said Monday.

The issue was discussed during a visit by Rumsfeld to Advani at his Washington hotel room on Sunday, the reports said.

Officials had sought to set up a meeting between the two on Monday or Tuesday but their busy schedules made that impossible.

Among the main points of discussion was a US request for India to send a division-strength contingent to replace its own occupation troops, part of an international stabilisation force in Iraq.

The Indian government has not officially expressed itself on the issue but the military and the political opposition -- as well as some allies of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) -- vehemently oppose the deployment because Indian troops will fall under British or US command.

New Delhi has consistently argued that all proceedings and operations in Iraq be under the auspices of the United Nations and not a US-led coalition.

The two also discussed the ongoing international fight against terrorism and defence cooperation, newspaper reports here Monday said.

VHP launches drive for Ram temple

PTI, Lucknow

In its second campaign within a year for the construction of Ram temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) on Monday began a ritual at Kar Sevapuram to enlist the support of 5 crore people for the move.

At least 200 saffron bags filled with Ram raksha sutra (sanctified thread), a map of the proposed temple and soil from the disputed site, are being consecrated at a yaga being held at Kar Sevapuram in Ayodhya, Purushottam Narain Singh, in-charge of VHP in Uttar Pradesh said.

These bags will be distributed among Hindus across the country, asking them to take a pledge not to rest until the Ram Temple was built at the disputed site, he added.

The organising secretaries touring the country will tie the Ram raksha sutra on the forearms of Hindus, Singh said.

Senior VHP leaders including international president Ashok Singh, general secretary Ashok Togadia, and Giriraj Kishore and Onkar Bhavani are taking part in the yaga, he said.

Singh said the yaga was being performed as per Vedic rites by priests from Varanasi and Allahabad.

These consecrated threads would be distributed among 200 VHP organising secretaries tomorrow on the occasion of Bhimsaini Ekadashi.

Asthma patients line up for fish cure

AP, Hyderabad

Hundreds of thousands of asthma patients gathered in Hyderabad to swallow live sardines smeared with secret herbs, convinced the ritual will cure them. The treatment, which is free, began on Sunday night outside the home of the Goud family, and is expected to continue for 24 hours.

Every June, on a date chosen by astrologers, patients from all over India get the free treatment outside the home of the Goud family, which claims it received the formula from a Hindu saint 162 years ago.

Narendar Kumar Gupta, 40, from Bihar said he was coming for the third time. "My condition has improved considerably during the past two years," he said.

Baldev Singh has travelled from Rajasthan to Hyderabad for a fifth straight year. "I am told that one should take this medicine for at least seven years to root out the problem of asthma completely," he said. Doctors have asked the Goud family to disclose the formula for medical and scientific scrutiny.

"If they refuse to do so, the government should withdraw its support for the event," said MV Ranga Reddy of the Indian Medical Association, an umbrella organisation of doctors.

But the Gouds refuse to reveal the herbal formula for fear it will be used for profit. They say the saint warned that the remedy would lose



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian woman places a small fish into the mouth of a boy in an attempt to cure him of asthma in Hyderabad on Sunday. Hundreds of thousands of people from all over the country, on the eve of the Mrigasira Karthi, signifying the advent of the monsoon season, converged on the city of Hyderabad to swallow a small murrel fish (whole) which has previously been administered a special herbal paste on the understanding it will cure asthma.

its potency if it were commercialised.

"We will continue the distribution of the medicine until the last man gets it," said Bathini Harinath Goud, one of five brothers who makes the yellow paste smeared inside the mouth of an inch-long sardine.

Nearly 200 family members and

volunteers are administering the sardines to the patients.

"Everybody can't make people gulp a tiny live fish, which is an integral part of the medicine. This requires special expertise," said Goud, whose family has been administering the treatment for nearly 50 years.

After swallowing the live fish, the patients begin a strict 45-day diet of 25 different foods, including lamb, rice, white sugar, dried mango, spinach and clarified butter. They must abstain from deep-fried food and repeat the treatment at least once within two years.