

Nepal army foils Maoist attempt to kill army chief

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's armed forces foiled a plan by Maoist rebels to blow up the country's army chief of staff last month by ramming his vehicle with an explosive-packed car, an army spokesman said Thursday.

"The Maoists had planned to hit the army chief's (General Pyar Jung Thapa) vehicle with powerful bombs fitted in a small four-wheel-drive jeep last month in Kathmandu," army spokesman Colonel Dipak Gurung told a news conference.

The Maoists intended to assassinate the general in a crowded place which could have caused widespread casualties but the army received a tipoff and was able to foil the plan, seize the car and arrest "some Maoists," he said.

Gurung did not say how many rebels were arrested or why the assassination attempt was not disclosed earlier.

Indian govt, Kashmiri militants begin talks

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government and a moderate faction of violence-torn Kashmir's main separatist alliance entered historic talks in New Delhi yesterday on ways to restore peace in Muslim-majority Kashmir.

The first-ever high-level talks began 3:05 pm (0935 GMT) between Deputy Indian Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani and a five-member team from Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, reporters at the venue said.

Hurriyat chairman Maulana Abbas Ansari, who is leading the moderates in the talks, warned against expectations of quick results earlier yesterday.

"Things do not happen with just a click of the fingers and so we have to work hard," 64-year-old Ansari told AFP.

Ansari, who was part of a front between 1960 and 1975 fighting for a plebiscite on the future of Kashmir, said he was going into the meeting with an open mind.

His comments came amid speculation the Indian government could declare a unilateral ceasefire against Muslim rebels, who have since 1989 been waging armed rebellion against Indian rule in Kashmir at a cost of at least 40,000 lives, and agree to release political prisoners.

Besides Ansari, others in the team are Omar Farooq and Abdul Gani Bhat, both former Hurriyat chiefs, low-profile leader Fazal Haque Qureshi, who is respected by separatists and rebels for his integrity, and Bilal Lone, the elder son of assassinated moderate separatist leader Abdul Gani Lone.

Thursday's talks mark the first official contact between the two

sides since August 2000 when senior commanders of the Hizbul Mujahedin met top home ministry officials after the armed guerrilla group announced a unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir.

The negotiations deadlocked when the Pakistan-based leadership of Hizbul withdrew the ceasefire within a fortnight and India refused to involve Pakistan in the talks over Kashmir.

Hours before the first-ever crucial meeting with Hurriyat, Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani yesterday met the Coordination Group headed by Centre's interlocutor on Kashmir NN Vohra.

Union Cabinet Secretary Kamal Pande, Union Home Secretary N Gopalaswami and others members of Coordination Group on Jammu and Kashmir briefed Advani on the various aspects relating to the talks.

Huriyat to focus on 'truce' during talks

PTI, New Delhi

The first-ever crucial talks between the Centre and the Hurriyat Conference begin on Thursday with the separatist amalgam adopting a two-pronged strategy, which includes a step-by-step approach for resolution of the vexed Kashmir issue.

While the Centre will be represented by Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani at the talks, the five-member Hurriyat delegation would be led by its chairman Maulana Abbas Ansari.

Union Home Secretary N Gopalaswami and Centre's interlocutor on Kashmir issue NN Vohra will assist the Deputy Prime Minister in the parleys with the separatist group.

The other Hurriyat members are Abdul Gani Bhat, Mirwaiz Umer Farooq, Bilal Lone and Fazal-ul-Haq Qureshi.

Ceasefire with terrorist groups and release of political prisoners in Jammu and Kashmir besides facilitating return of some expatriate Kashmiri leaders are some of the issues that are likely to figure in the talks.



Indian Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani (2nd from L) shakes hands with the head of Peoples Action Committee and chief priest of Kashmir's main mosque, Umar Farooq (L), as Kashmiri separatist Professor Abdul Gani Bhat (R) and Bilal Lone (2nd from R) looks on before a meeting at Advani's office in New Delhi yesterday. The Indian government and a five-member delegation from the region's main separatist alliance entered historic talks in New Delhi on ways to restore peace in Muslim-majority Kashmir.

Pakistan to increase its Delhi mission staff by April

ANI, Islamabad

At least 20 diplomatic staff will be sent by the Pakistan Government to boost the strength of its high commission in New Delhi by April.

Government sources told the Daily Times that the process for selection has been activated in line with New Delhi and Islamabad's decision to raise the number of staff at both high commissions from the existing 55 to 75.

The selection of the high commission staff is likely to be completed within a month and it would take another 45 days to process their visas.

The sources said four officers and 16 staff members would be

selected. On the reported agreement between the two sides to ease the restrictions on the movement of diplomats, the sources said that the diplomats could move now by fulfilling the requirements that existed before December 2001.

"Before December 2001, the mission personnel from both countries were required to give a seven-day notice before travelling and used to get written permission to travel," they said.

The strength of the mission staff at the respective high commissions was 110 before December 2001 but reduced to 47. Pakistan and India issued visas to eight additional officials on November 14, 2003, raising the number to 55.

Musharraf says

Indo-Pak flexibility on Kashmir a must

ANI, Ankara/Istanbul

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has once again reiterated that both Islamabad and New Delhi will have to adopt a very flexible stand for the resolution of the Kashmir dispute that has been a bone of contention for over five decades.

Suggesting that this was the only way to achieve relative peace and normalcy in South Asia, Musharraf told editors of leading Turkish newspapers in Istanbul that, "There is no question of a unilateral shift in Pakistan's position on Kashmir. It has to be mutual."

"We have a stand on Kashmir. I have always been saying that if we

want to go for a solution, we will ultimately have to show flexibility," he was quoted by the Daily Times and The News as saying.

He further went on to say that it was imperative for both countries to go beyond their respective stated positions. Both Pakistan and India "ought to be bold enough to move beyond their stated positions and show flexibility if any conclusion was to be reached. There has to be mutual flexibility," he added.

Recalling his landmark meeting with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on the sidelines of the 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad on January 5, the Pakistan President said it was "historic" as for the first time that both sides had accepted that the

Kashmir issue needed to be resolved.

He said that officials on both sides were still working out at what level the talks would be held. "We are in contact with each other to work on the level of the first dialogue that we ought to have, which will be in February."

Musharraf said the Kashmir issue needed to be settled in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

He hoped that process of normalisation of relations with India would move forward in "a positive way," but expressed concern over the fact that problems like Kashmir, Cyprus, Palestine and Iraq posing a great threat to world peace and stability.

Tigers start recruiting child soldiers amid war fears

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels have stepped up recruiting child soldiers and are holding more than 1,300 of them, Unicef said yesterday, amid fears the country could slide back into war.

The guerrillas recruited 709 underage fighters last year to bring the number held to 1,301 as of December 31, 2003, the United Nations children's agency said in a statement as it appealed for their immediate release.

The recruitment rise came even after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) launched a peace process with the government and despite rebel promises not to enlist children below 18.

Even after the launch of the first transit home to help demobilise child soldiers last October, the Tigers drafted more children. Between October and December 31, the number of child soldiers held by the Tigers jumped by 203.

At the same time, the LTTE released 202 child soldiers in 2003, Unicef said. It gave no figures for the number of child soldiers held in 2002.

Unicef said an "Action Plan" to help children in Sri Lanka's embattled northern and eastern regions could not succeed unless the Tiger rebels honoured their pledge not to recruit children.

"The LTTE must cease all recruitment of children," the agency said. "The LTTE must release all child soldiers."

The statement came as the LTTE warned of a return to war following President Chandrika Kumar-atunga's alliance Tuesday with a radical party which opposes granting autonomy to minority Tamils in exchange for ethnic peace.

The alliance is aimed at toppling the government of Premier Ranil Wickremesinghe who has been pursuing a Norwegian-backed peace bid with the LTTE to end the bloodshed which has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

The Tigers agreed to the Action Plan to provide a mechanism for the release and reintegration of child soldiers and for an end to underage recruitment last year following peace talks with the Colombo government.

Unicef representative Ted

Chaiban said the Action Plan, estimated to cost 14.2 million dollars over three years, had helped provide for the first time a formal mechanism for the release and reintegration of child soldiers.

Chaiban said he stressed during a meeting with S.P. Thamilselvan, the leader of the LTTE's political wing, last week that the implementation of the Action Plan depended on an end to child recruitment and the accelerated release of all children in the LTTE's ranks.

"If fully implemented over the period envisaged by the plan, the result would be a vast improvement in the lives of war-affected children," he said. "Substantial work has been done and important foundations have been laid."

He said an estimated 50,000 children in the embattled regions were out of school while 140,000 have been displaced from their homes. Landmines have killed 20 children and maimed 17 others during 2003 alone.

There was also a shortage of teachers in the former war zones with Unicef estimating the shortfall at 6,000.

Thailand denies covering up bird flu cases

REUTERS, Bangkok

Japan suspended yesterday imports from Thailand's huge and lucrative chicken industry as the Southeast Asian nation swore it is not covering up cases of the bird flu which has killed at least five people in Vietnam.

The suspension illustrated the potential cost of bird flu leaping to humans, which the World Health Organization fears could lead to an epidemic worse than Sars, even though experts say it safe to eat cooked poultry and eggs.

Japan took 60 percent of Thailand's 60 billion baht (\$1.5 billion) of chicken exports last year. The Thai government is aiming for 100 billion baht this year.

In a statement, Japan's Agriculture Ministry cited Thai reports that the H5N1 avian flu virus had jumped to humans for its decision.

"Until it becomes clear if there has been an outbreak, we have told the relevant parties that we are temporarily suspending imports from Thailand as a precautionary measure," it said.

The announcement sent shares in Thailand's main chicken exporters down sharply to their lowest

since May, with CP Foods dropping 6.5 percent and GFPT down 9.2 percent.

"Definitely, it will hit our exports. Japan is an important market," said an official at one large chicken exporting firm.

"It is quite a shock. I wonder why Japan has decided to impose a ban without waiting for confirmation from Thailand first about a bird flu case."

But Thai Commerce Minister Wattana Muangsook shrugged off the suspension.

"I do not think there will be any long-term impact. We will quickly solve the problem," he told Reuters.

Thai Health Minister Sudarat Keyuraphan said Wednesday three people were being tested for the disease and the results should be known and made public by the end of the week.

Thursday, she bristled at reports that at least one person had died of the disease and the government was covering up a dreaded leap into humans in Thailand.

"We have nothing to hide," she told a radio station, insisting the government was being open on the issue.



People burn incense and pray at the Baiyunguan (White Cloud) taoist temple in Beijing yesterday on the first day of the Lunar New Year. Chinese in the capital ushered in the Year of the Monkey, year 4071 in the Chinese lunar calendar, visiting temple fairs across the city in a traditional celebration of the Spring Festival that goes back centuries.

Will they or won't they join politics?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

This question has cropped at a time when the siblings of Nehru-Gandhi family, Priyanka and Rahul undertook a three-day tour of their mother and top opposition leader Sonia Gandhi's parliamentary constituency in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh.

This was the first time Priyanka and her brother Rahul are together toured Amethi and adjacent Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha constituencies. So far, it was Priyanka, Congress chief Sonia's official manager of the constituency, who had undertaken the job.

The media hype on the Priyanka-Rahul visit apart, Congress circles in Uttar Pradesh are abuzz with speculation if the sister and the brother would take the plunge into politics with early Lok Sabha elections a certainty.

Since the siblings hit the dusty plains of Amethi in what is seen as a virtual launch of the Congress campaign in politically key Uttar Pradesh, Priyanka and Rahul have

kept up the guessing game on their entry into hurly and burly of politics.

We are considering it. But the decision may take time, may be three months, three years or even ten years. "When the inner urge comes in full to join the politics, I'll do it," Priyanka said in response to persistent queries from journalists covering her visit to Amethi.

Rahul, on his part, said, "I am not averse to politics but that does not mean that I am joining politics tomorrow".

When the same question was posed to Congress spokesman in New Delhi yesterday, he told reporters, "I don't think this question arises for persons who are born in the party persons who have lived in the party and whose parents and grand parents have been in the party, they are in the party from their birth".

Pressed further, the spokesman Abhishek Singhvi said, "It is entirely up to Priyanka and Rahul to take the decision. When they decide to join the party, you will

come to know."

But Congressmen in Uttar Pradesh are confident that the charisma of Priyanka and Rahul would be good enough to revive the moribund party in a state which has the highest number of parliamentary seats 80.

Even though Priyanka and Rahul maintain their mum on joining politics, they have made remarks during their tour attacking the ruling BJP-led NDA alliance and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee government's claim of a 'feel-good' factor in the economy.

The political circles are also thick with speculation if Priyanka would contest from Rae Bareilly, the parliamentary constituency once represented by her grandmother and former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Questions are also being asked if Sonia would choose to contest from any constituency in southern Indian state of Karnataka ruled by Congress leaving Rahul to join electoral fray in Amethi, represented in the past by Rajiv Gandhi.

Afghans check death reports despite US denial

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghanistan's government is investigating reports of civilian deaths in a US air strike, despite the US military saying only armed men were killed in the Sunday attack.

A government team had been sent to the central province of Uruzgan to investigate and could provide an initial report later Thursday, Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali told a news briefing.

Provincial officials say 11 civilians -- including women and children -- were killed in a US air strike on the village of Sawghataq in the province's Charcheno district.

The US military has said five armed men were killed in the strike after leaving a compound where mid-level leaders of the former Taliban regime had gathered.

It described the report of civilian deaths as Taliban "disinformation." Jalali said "terrorists" were killed but details of the attack were not clear.

Iran to help Sri Lanka's oil exploration

AFP, Colombo

Iran is to open a 20 million-dollar credit line for Sri Lanka's power and energy sector and help the island prospect for oil, Colombo said Thursday after talks with a visiting Iranian delegation.

Details of the financial package were to be worked out by authorities on both sides, Sri Lanka's Energy Ministry said.

Tehran has also agreed to grant longer credit for imports of oil from Iran, the ministry said, adding the move would help ease pressure on domestic fuel prices.

Iran's Vice Minister for International Affairs Mohammad Khazaei held talks with Sri Lanka's Energy Minister Karu Jayasuriya here Wednesday and discussed plans to explore oil and gas along the island's northwestern sea board.

"Iranian delegates agreed to get Iranian companies involved in the process once the bidding round is announced and to provide technical assistance for exploration and exploitation of oil and gas," a ministry official said.