

Maoists, Andhra govt agree to retain truce

Naga leaders set for peace talks in Thailand

AFP, Hyderabad

The first round of peace talks between India's southern Andhra Pradesh state and Maoist rebels has ended with both sides agreeing to meet again and to continue their ceasefire, officials said yesterday.

"The talks were most cordial and fruitful," said state Home Minister Jana Reddy, who led the government delegation to the four-day talks.

Reddy said the state government had agreed to look into several demands by the rebels, including identifying surplus land to distribute among the poor and the release of political prisoners.

The Maoists, however, said the governments response was "unsatisfactory and vague".

"The government has asked us for more time. Our response will depend on whether they will keep their promises," Akkijaru Haragopal, leader of the Maoist delegation, told

reporters when talks ended late Monday.

While the government has suggested the next round of talks be held after two months, the rebels want another meeting on November 17.

The Maoist groups who took part in the talks were the People's War Group (PWG), which recently merged with the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI), and the Janashakti or Peoples Power.

The two groups have been waging a rebellion in largely rural Andhra Pradesh for more than three decades to create better living conditions for landless farmers and indigenous people.

They are also demanding the ousting from the state of multinational agencies such as the World Bank and multinational firms. This is to be discussed in the second round of negotiations.

The Maoist rebellion has killed

more than 10,000 people in Andhra Pradesh.

Meanwhile, Indian negotiators are expected to meet separatist guerrilla leaders from the northeastern state of Nagaland in Bangkok today for new talks to end India's longest-running insurgency, a rebel spokesman said in Guwahati.

"We will be discussing issues pertaining to the integration of all Naga-inhabited areas in the northeast, besides asking New Delhi to expedite the peace process and come to a solution soon," said Kraibho Chawang, spokesman for the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

Chawang, speaking to AFP from Nagaland's commercial hub Dimapur, said 10 top NSCN leaders from the state had left for Bangkok to join their two exiled leaders, Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu.



Most blacks likely to vote for Kerry

AFP, Washington

African Americans are expected to vote overwhelmingly for Democrat John Kerry in November, and a high turnout by blacks could decide the razor-thin presidential election.

Kerry, who had a shaky start with the black community, has spent a lot of time in African American churches recently to whip up additional support from one of the Democratic Party's mainstays.

Some 12 million blacks voted in the last election, with nine in 10 casting ballots for Democrat Al Gore.

But polls earlier suggested Kerry might be hard-pressed to match that figure against President George W. Bush.

A poll several weeks ago by CBS and Black Entertainment Television (BET) found eight in ten blacks supported Kerry. Some analysts said that number could climb higher on Election Day now that more African Americans are familiar with

the Democrat.

The Massachusetts senator has launched a major drive to mobilize African Americans, particularly in the southeastern state of Florida, which was pivotal in 2000 and is up for grabs this year.

Turnout among African American voters could be swelled by lingering resentment over the 2000 vote, when election officials turned away a number of black voters at the polls and canceled the ballot of many others.

A poll of black Americans earlier this year by CBS and BET found that 85 percent of respondents believed Bush did not legitimately win the presidency in 2000, compared with just 32 percent of whites.

And blacks are disenchanted with Bush, whose policies under seen as unfriendly to the African American community, such as tax policies that benefit the wealthy.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (L) shakes hands with US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca prior to their meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Rocca, who arrived in Pakistan October 16, for a four-day visit, met with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf and Foreign Minister Kasuri.



PHOTO: AFP
Yaneiris Cepeda (R), an Early Voting staff member, shows a voter how to work the touch screen of a demonstration voting booth at a local voting station Monday in Miami. The electronic voting machines are new in Florida, having replaced the punch-card system, four years after the state was ground zero in the US election debacle resolved in favour of Bush by the US Supreme Court.

Few glitches reported in early Florida voting

AP, West Palm Beach

Voters began casting ballots Monday in Florida, encountering long lines at the polls and a few ballot box glitches four years after the 2000 presidential election fiasco.

Florida is one of more than two dozen states that allow residents to vote at the polls before Election Day, and one of four that began the process Monday. Several other battleground states have already begun early voting, including Iowa, Nevada, and New Mexico.

The problems in Florida included a brief computer system crash in one county and voter complaints of incomplete paper ballots. But there were no early reports of problems with the ATM-like touch-screen voting machines introduced since the troubled 2000 election.

Florida's early voting was touted partly as a way to avoid long lines on Nov. 2, but it turned out to be so popular that Lucien Gennaro, a police aide in Coral Springs, waited for an hour and finally had to leave for work.

"A lot of people who were waiting just left. I'll try again tomorrow," he said. "It was a little frustrating after what happened in 2000."

Texas, Colorado and Arkansas also began early voting Monday.

Critics say the extended voting period increases opportunities for fraud. And some groups urged voters to ask for paper absentee ballots because of concerns about the touch-screen machines and the possibility of recounts. Voters can choose either method through Nov. 1.

State Rep. Shelley Vana said the absentee ballot she requested at a Palm Beach County site was missing one of its two pages, including proposed state constitutional amendments. She said election workers were indifferent when she pointed out the oversight.

"This is not a good start. If there are incomplete ballots out there, I can't imagine I would be the only one getting it," she said.

Palm Beach County elections supervisor Theresa LePore did not immediately return calls seeking comment.

Mahathir predicts 'liar' Bush's victory

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad, in remarks published Tuesday, predicted US President George W. Bush would win the November 2 election because Americans were "very ignorant" people and would "accept a liar".

Mahathir, who retired last October after 22 years in power, told The Star in an interview that the US electorate "appears to be willing to accept a person who told a blatant lie and to elect a liar as their president."

"The American people are, by and large, very ignorant and know nothing about the rest of the world. They think that America is the world," he said.

"They will accept a liar. They will accept (British Prime Minister Tony) Blair and I am sure they will accept Bush. They have already accepted (Australian Prime Minister John) Howard who told a blatant lie."

Bodo rebels offered safe passage for Delhi talks

AFP, Guwahati

The government of India's troubled northeastern state of Assam yesterday offered free passage to leaders of a tribal separatist group so they can travel to New Delhi for possible peace talks.

"Leaders of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) who are abroad or within the state could avail the safe passage offer to enable them to come and hold talks with the central government," Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi told journalists in the main city of Guwahati.

"There are many top NDFB leaders in jail now. If they want some of the jailed leaders to be part of the negotiating team, we are ready to

release them on parole."

New Delhi has yet to make a formal response to the NDFB's unilateral ceasefire offer which came into effect on October 16 although the state government has welcomed the truce offer.

"We have scaled back military operations against the NDFB and are expecting a formal announcement from the central home ministry shortly on the truce offer," the chief minister said.

"We shall be working out modalities for the ceasefire and possible talks between the NDFB and the central government after consultation with Home Minister Shivraj Patil during my visit to New Delhi Thursday."

US, Iraq oppose Saudi plan for all-Muslim force

Baghdad extends arms-for-cash plan

REUTERS, AP, United Nations

The Iraqi government and US military commanders both rejected a Saudi plan for an all-Muslim force to protect UN election staff in Iraq, the White House said Monday.

"The Iraqi interim government had some real concerns about having troops from a neighboring country inside Iraq. The multinational commanders also had some concerns about forces operating outside the chain of command structure," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan, commenting on a media report.

New York daily Newsday reported on Monday that President Bush rebuffed the Saudi initiative because the force would not have been under US command.

Such a move would raise questions about the Bush administration's repeated assertions that it was eager to have other countries send troops to Iraq to ease the burden on

American forces, it said.

Saudi Arabia announced it hoped to organize such a force in July during a visit by Secretary of State Colin Powell.

But several Muslim countries, including Indonesia, Egypt and Pakistan were cool to the idea, citing the increasing violence in Iraq as well as concerns about possibly having to serve under US command.

The United Nations was also uncertain whether it wanted its staff protected by a force of one religious group rather than its usual multinational approach, UN sources said.

But Newsday said Crown Prince Abdullah personally lobbied Bush to agree to deploy a unit of several hundred troops from Muslim nations to help prepare for January elections.

Washington, the newspaper said, turned down the proposal because the plan would have meant troops being under UN control

rather than the control of US commanders who lead the multinational force now intended to ensure security in Iraq.

AP adds: Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi announced plans Monday to extend a cash-for-weapons programme for Shia fighters in Baghdad's Sadr City to cities nationwide in an attempt to disarm the country.

In Fallujah, the focal point of the Sunni rebellion, hopes that peace talks could resume there quickly were dashed when the city's chief negotiator, Sheik Khaled al-Jumeli, ruled out restarting talks soon despite his release Monday from US custody.

US and Iraqi forces have vowed to retake the city by force if negotiations are not successful, and the US military announced late Monday that it had destroyed several safehouses and weapons storage sites linked to terrorist mastermind Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

India, Lanka finalise defence accord

AFP, Colombo

India and Sri Lanka finalised a draft defence agreement yesterday that would boost military cooperation between them, an official said.

The draft was completed after talks on stepping up training for Sri Lankan troops, the sharing of intelligence, and equipping Sri Lankan security forces with Indian hardware, the defence ministry official said.

"The draft agreement is now ready for approval by both countries," the official said.

It was not immediately clear when the Defence Cooperation Agreement would be formally inked but President Chandrika Kumaratunga is due to visit New Delhi next month for her first meeting with the new Indian leadership.

India banned military sales to the island during the height of fighting between Sri Lankan government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels, but lifted the embargo after a truce went into effect in February 2002.

In May the new Indian government pledged to maintain support

for Colombo's efforts to end its long-running ethnic conflict and to continue talks on a defence pact.

The pact was initially suggested in October by then prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, defeated at April parliamentary elections.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels sent one of their top military commanders overseas for urgent medical treatment yesterday, the government announced.

The head of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) naval operations, Thillaiyampalan Sivaneshan, was flown out of the country accompanied by a doctor, the government's Peace Secretariat said.

Official sources said he was flown to Singapore.

The secretariat said in a statement that Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway had told the government the commander, better known as Soosai, needed overseas treatment because of a "rapidly worsening condition caused by an old injury sustained in conflict."

Bird flu kills 23 tigers at Thai zoo

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai tiger zoo housing hundreds of the big cats was shut down yesterday as bird flu tests confirmed 23 tigers had died of the virus and another 30 had fallen ill.

The director of Thailand's bird flu taskforce, Charal Trinvuthipong, said a second round of bird flu tests had left no doubt that the tigers had been infected by the deadly virus.

"A second test conducted at the National Animal Health Institute today found bird flu in the samples," Charal told AFP.

REUTERS POLL Bush, Kerry tied in White House race

REUTERS, Washington

Democratic Sen. John Kerry pulled into a statistical dead heat with President Bush in a seesawing battle for the White House, according to a Reuters/Zogby poll released Monday.

The latest three-day tracking poll showed Kerry and Bush deadlocked at 45 percent apiece barely two weeks before the Nov. 2 election. The president had a 46-44 percent lead over the Massachusetts senator the previous day, and a four-point lead the day before that.

About 7 percent of likely voters say they are still undecided between the two White House rivals.

"This is, as I have said before, the same kind of roller coaster

ride we saw in 2000 with the lead changing back and forth and neither candidate able to open up any kind of lead," pollster John Zogby said.

Kerry campaigned Sunday in Ohio and Florida while Bush took a day off in Washington. Ohio and Florida top a list of about 10 tightly fought swing states where the race for the 270 electoral votes needed to claim the White House will be decided.

With both candidates battling for every last vote, Bush holds a four-point edge in the suburbs and the two candidates are tied in small cities, the poll found. Kerry comfortably leads Bush among urban voters and Bush holds a strong lead among rural voters.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqis queue with sacks of weapons outside the main stadium in Baghdad's poor neighborhood of Sadr City yesterday to exchange them for cash. A weapons-for-cash scheme to disarm the militia of radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr in Sadr City has been extended, an Iraqi official involved in the operation said yesterday. The handover is seen as a first step to restoring security and stability to Sadr City, an area controlled by militants loyal to the firebrand cleric Moqtada Sadr that has been the scene of on-off violence for the past six months.

2m Asian maids in Gulf without legal cover

AFP, Kuwait City

Some two million Asian maids working in Gulf Arab states without proper legal cover face various forms of maltreatment, including sexual abuse and non-payment of salary, according to an official study.

The study, reviewed by Gulf social affairs and labour ministers who met in Kuwait last week, also outlined the negative effects of the huge number of foreign domestic helpers on Gulf societies.

It was prepared by a joint Gulf body on the basis of official data supplied by member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which groups Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The ministers approved a proposal to hold a forum to discuss specific measures to deal with problems facing domestic helpers, in addition to drafting legislation that would serve as a yardstick for member states.

The study, a copy of which was obtained by AFP, stated that domestic

helpers are not governed by the labour laws in any of the six states. Only Kuwait has a special law for them but it has so far failed to curb abuses.

Bahrain extends the labour law to partially cover maids, while there is no solid form of legal protection, outside existing general legislation, in any of the remaining GCC members.

The study placed physical abuse and beating, in addition to sexual harassment and rape, at the top of a list of abuses to which domestic helpers are subjected.

Other problems include non-payment or delay in payment of salary and forcing them to do hard work and work long hours and at the weekend.

By the end of 2003, there were 812,000 domestic helpers in Saudi Arabia, 400,000 in Kuwait, 30,000 in Bahrain and 66,000 in Oman. The UAE had 450,000 domestics at the end of 2002, the last available figure, while Qatar did not reveal the number of maids it has.