

CHILD SOLDIERS RECRUITMENT  
LTTE leaders may face travel ban

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tiger rebels have been reported to the UN Security Council for recruiting thousands of child soldiers and could face sanctions including a travel ban, a report said yesterday.

UB Secretary General Kofi Annan in his latest report on "Children and Armed Conflict," a copy of which was seen by AFP here, said Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers had recruited more than 4,700 children, some as young as 11, since 2001.

"The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) has often carried out recruitment by force, abducting children while on their way to school or during religious festivities, and beating families and teachers who resisted the seizure of the children," Annan said.

He said he was recommending that the UN Security Council take "targeted and concrete measures where insufficient or no progress has been made" by parties named in his report, including the Tigers.

"Such measures should include

the imposition of travel restrictions on leaders and their exclusion from any governance structures and amnesty provisions, the imposition of arms embargoes, a ban on military assistance, and restriction on the flow of financial resources to the parties concerned."

Annan's report said that during 2004 alone, more than 1,000 cases of new recruitment and re-recruitment were reported to UNICEF, a high percentage of them girls.

Out of the 4,700 cases of child recruitment by Tamil Tigers since April 2001, more than 2,900 children have returned or been released to their families, including about 1,230 children who were formally released, he said.

More than 1,660 children went home following fighting in eastern Sri Lanka in April 2004, and the fall of a breakaway faction of the LTTE. In addition, at least 550 children have deserted from the LTTE during this period.

The Security Council is expected to debate the report on February 23.



PHOTO: AFP

A human rights activist (C) tries to talk to journalists as he is arrested by riot police (R) during a protest staged by activists at Putalisadak, one of the main streets leading to the central government offices in Kathmandu yesterday. Ten human rights activists were arrested in central Kathmandu yesterday when they tried to stage an anti-monarchy protest in defiance of a ban on rallies.

Political leaders freed but rights activists arrested in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese authorities yesterday freed seven political leaders detained when the king seized power last week but arrested 10 human rights activists staging an anti-monarchy rally, state radio and witnesses said.

Among those freed were former prime ministers Krishna Prasad Bhattarai and Lokendra Bahadur Chand, the radio said.

The releases and fresh arrests come amid growing international condemnation of King Gyanendra's seizure of power and crackdown on dissent.

Political parties claim up to 1,000 people have been detained country-wide since the king on February 1 sacked the government, declared an emergency and assumed absolute power.

The army says only around 100 people are in detention.

The 10 activists were arrested

near the central government offices in the capital when they moved out from a crowd and began chanting slogans against the king.

The 10 were whisked away by police, who had been deployed in the area since early morning to enforce a ban on rallies.

The protestors from the Human Rights and Peace Society shouted slogans such as "Human rights have been violated", "Down with the royal proclamation" and "Long Live Democracy" before they were bundled into police vehicles.

Army sources, meanwhile, said five soldiers and at least one rebel were killed when Maoist rebels launched their first major offensive since the king's power grab.

The rebels attacked police posts and government buildings and bombed a jail, allowing 150 prisoners to escape.

The assault, which was repulsed by the security forces, took place Wednesday night in the far western

region of Kailali, the sources said.

"Several hundred Maoist rebels tried to attack various government offices including those of the district police, regional police and ward police, Nepal Rastra (Central Bank) and district administration office in Dhangadhi district," one source said.

"The security forces foiled the attack but five security men were killed and four other injured," he said.

An official in the military division said the Maoists had also bombed the district prison, allowing about 150 prisoners -- 60 of them Maoists - - to flee.

The new government has offered unconditional talks with the rebels to end an insurgency which began in 1996 and has killed 11,000 people. But the Maoists have yet to respond.

The king's takeover has been widely condemned by the international community.

Pakistan steps up security for Muharram

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's security forces have been put on high alert on the eve of a Shia Muslim holy month amid fears that recent sectarian violence could spark a bloody new cycle of revenge, officials said yesterday.

Shias, who make up some 20 percent of Pakistan's Sunni-dominated Muslim population, will on Friday begin Muharram, a month of mourning for a Seventh Century saint which peaks with graphic displays of self-flagellation.

Last year's festival was one of the most violent ever and authorities are on alert after a spate of bloodshed between the two Islamic sects in the northern towns of Gilgit and Skardu in January, which left 17 dead.

"Because of recent sectarian incidents in some parts of the country we have instructed the provinces to be extra-vigilant. Security forces have been put on high alert to ward off any threat," interior ministry spokesman Brigadier Javed Cheema told AFP.

Police commandos and plain-clothes agents have been deployed in all major cities including Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad and Rawalpindi to guard sensitive sites, another interior ministry official said.

Kashmiris vote defying rebels' boycott call

Top contender for mayor killed

AFP, Srinagar

Residents of Indian Kashmir defied rebel threats yesterday and voted in the latest round of civic polls, a day after militants killed a top contender for mayor of the region's biggest city.

"Voting was brisk," said an election office spokesman after polls closed in the fourth of seven rounds in Muslim-majority Indian Kashmir, where a revolt against New Delhi's rule has raged since 1989.

The election office had no immediate turnout figures. It has described turnout in the previous three rounds of the municipal elections -- the first to be held in over a quarter of a century -- as good.

Rebels who bombed election rallies and killed candidates and party workers during the campaign, as well as peaceful campaigners for separatism, oppose any elections and say they are no substitute for the right to self-determination.

Long queues lined up outside heavily guarded polling booths at Budgam in central Kashmir, which has a heavy militant presence, and Gandherbal in the northeast that has been targeted by rebels in the past.

Soldiers ringed polling booths to provide security.

On Wednesday militants gunned down outside a mosque a newly elected councillor in the summer capital Srinagar, which voted last

week. The dead man, Mohammed Maqbool Shah, was seen as a top choice for Srinagar mayor.

He was the second newly elected councillor in two days to be slain by rebels. Mohiudin Mir was kidnapped and shot dead in a field Tuesday.

The killings have terrified winners and candidates, who have been placing notices in local newspapers vowing they will have nothing to do with politics to avoid rebel attacks.

Local elections have not been held in Indian Kashmir for the past 27 years, partly because of the insurgency but also due to fears by the previous ruling National Conference of the creation of a rival power base.

US ends Lankan tsunami mission

AFP, Colombo

US marines have completed their tsunami relief operations in Sri Lanka while troops from seven other nations were also scaling down their work and preparing to withdraw from the island, a defence official said yesterday.

Only a handful of US marines remained on the island after the 1,600-strong force began withdrawing in the past two weeks, the official said, adding that they too would be leaving shortly.

Troops from Austria, Belgium, Canada, Greece, India, Italy and Pakistan had also drastically reduced their strength in the last few days and were on the verge of completing a withdrawal, the official added.

More than a dozen countries rushed troops to help with the immediate relief operations after the December 26 tsunamis killed nearly 31,000 people and left a million homeless in Sri Lanka.

Pakistan seeks US help to stop Afghan arms smuggling

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan has approached US coalition forces in Afghanistan to stop the alleged smuggling of arms into its unstable southwest, which has been hit by a low-level tribal rebellion, an official said.

Arms and drugs have flowed into the region from across the border and Soviet-era weapons had been used in attacks on key installations, Owais Ghani, the governor of Baluchistan province, told reporters late Wednesday.

"We have raised the issue with the American officials asking for their help to fight weapons and narcotics inflow into Pakistan," Ghani said.

"Soviet-made arms had been

used in the Sui attack, which indicates that arms were being smuggled into Baluchistan from Afghanistan."

Rocket attacks on Pakistan's biggest natural gasfield at Sui in Baluchistan left eight people dead and sparked the recent flare-up of violence.

Bombs and rockets targeting railway tracks, government installations and natural gas facilities have been exploding almost daily in Baluchistan, the biggest and the poorest of Pakistan's four provinces.

Tribesmen are demanding a greater share of the region's natural resources as well as increased political rights.

US faces dilemma over Nepali king's power grab

AFP, Washington

The United States is facing a dilemma in Nepal: Freeze military and other aid to punish the king for stifling democracy or watch Maoist guerrillas assume greater control of the Himalayan outpost.

Washington considers the communist rebels as terrorists and has been a key backer of the Nepali government's battle against the insurgents, providing badly needed weapons and training to the country's army.

When King Gyanendra sacked the government, declared an emergency and took absolute power last week, the United States strongly condemned the move and sought immediate restoration of democracy but stopped short of freezing aid to the impoverished nation sandwiched between India and China.

"All of this is under review, we are reviewing all options and consulting with our allies," a US State Department official told AFP.

The United States had allocated 45 million dollars in aid for Nepal in the year to September 2004, 10 percent of which was for security, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. For fiscal 2005,

44 million dollars has been set aside with only one third for security related activities.

As Washington ponders the prospect of freezing aid, the State Department said in a statement Wednesday that the US envoy in Kathmandu, James Moriarty, had been prevented by Nepalese security forces from meeting with several senior political leaders placed under house arrest.

Moriarty has "directly" told King Gyanendra to release opposition, student and human rights activists and leaders detained under his emergency rule and restore all civil liberties, the department said.

Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca is en route to Europe where consultations with allies will include Nepal, according to the department official. Washington has already held talks with India, Britain and China.

Aside from stifling democracy, the official said, the king's actions would dampen efforts to end the country's insurgency, which has claimed more than 11,000 lives since 1996 when rebels launched a struggle to set up a republic in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

Pakistanis protest shifting of US consulate

AFP, Karachi

Protesters in the violence-prone Pakistani city of Karachi called on the United States yesterday to change the proposed site of its new consulate, which is being moved after a series of attacks.

Around 100 demonstrators waved banners and placards saying the American mission was a potential terrorist target and would be too near local schools and houses in its new location.

"It may be more secure for them but we will become more insecure. Plus, the site they have proposed is meant to be a park," said one protestor who refused to give her name.

US officials have wanted to move the consulate from its city centre location since a June 14, 2002, suicide bombing there killed 12 Pakistanis. The new building would be in the exclusive seaside suburb of Clifton.

"We have been looking for a new site and have now proposed one where a new building can be constructed to meet modern security standards," US Consul-General Douglas Rohn told AFP.

The present building, built in 1957, was too old and did not meet US requirements, Rohn said. "This is a preferred site and the negotiations are being held with the government," he added.

Two Islamic militants were sentenced to death in November 2003 over the 2002 bombing, while two were sentenced to life imprisonment and one to 10 years' hard labour.

Police defused 650 kilograms of chemical explosives in a van parked outside the building in March last year.

In February 2003 two policemen guarding the consulate were shot dead by a Muslim extremist, who was later sentenced to death.

Karachi, Pakistan's largest city with 14 million people, remains a hotbed for extremists. Its crowded apartment blocks have been used as hideouts by several key al-Qaeda fugitives.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani people shout slogans during a demonstration denouncing a proposal of allotting a community park for US consulate building in Karachi yesterday. The US diplomats have chosen the park as potential site of the consulate to relocate their existing place, located at a busy road which is closed for traffic in order to fortify the building. A suicide bomber in 2002 devastated the outer wall of the consulate killing 14 people.