

No breakthrough in talks with LTTE over tsunami aid deal

AFP, Colombo

Peace broker Norway on Wednesday ended talks with Tamil Tiger rebels without reaching agreement on a tsunami aid-sharing deal involving the Sri Lankan government and the insurgents, the rebels said.

Norway's deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen held 90 minutes of talks with the Tamil Tiger political wing leader, S. P. Thamilselvan on a proposed "joint mechanism" for aid but there was no announcement on any deal.

"There is no big change," a rebel source said after the closed-door talks. "Mr. Helgesen carried a verbal message from the president (Chandrika Kumaratunga)."

The source said the president's request to include the second largest minority, the Muslims, in an aid-sharing deal could be considered after the joint mechanism was established.

Vietnamese PM's historic visit to White House

AFP, Washington

Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai came under muted US pressure on human rights as he became the first leader of his country to visit the White House since the bloody Vietnam War.

Ten years after Washington and Hanoi established diplomatic relations, Khai met with US President George W. Bush as hundreds of protesters outside the mansion loudly assailed his record on political and religious freedoms.

"The prime minister graciously invited me to Vietnam. I will be going in 2006," when Vietnam hosts the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum summit, the president said during a brief joint appearance in the Oval Office.

World vows support for violence-racked Iraq

AFP, Brussels

The world's top diplomats vowed Wednesday to boost support for Iraq's interim leaders in rebuilding the war-scarred country, but urged Iraqis to end their feuding to ensure a democratic and prosperous future.

UN chief Kofi Annan, speaking at an international conference on Iraq, also underlined that the global community must match its words with action to help Iraq, still racked by violence over two years after Saddam Hussein's ouster.

The people of Iraq "look to this conference for a clear sign that the international community will be their determined and dedicated companions on the tough road ahead," he said.

"By our words and more importantly by our deeds we must reassure them that we will not let them down," he said.

The one-day conference, co-sponsored by the United States and Europe, was expected to produce few concrete results but confirm trans-Atlantic cooperation on Iraq after the bitter rifts produced by the 2003 US-led invasion.

It is the first such conference attended by the transitional broad-based government elected in Iraq's landmark democratic elections in January, an event which helped defuse anger in Europe over the invasion.

US officials also did not try to hide their hope that it would provide a display of world backing for US policy in Iraq at a time when Americans at home are becoming increasingly skeptical of the operation.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, while vowing Washington's continued support, called on Baghdad to boost security and open its political system and economy.

"To maximize the financial bene-

fits of assistance, the new Iraqi government must continue to improve security, liberalize its economy and open political space for all members of Iraqi society who reject violence."

Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari vowed that Baghdad has every intention of taking on its responsibilities -- including military ones after US-led forces begin withdrawing from the country next year.

"We want the presence of multinational forces in Iraq to be provisional, and our own forces to take over the tasks which are down to them," he said.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said the Brussels conference marks a "very important day" for Iraq that is "replete with symbolism," adding the world has "now come together to actively support the building of a democratic, peaceful and prosperous Iraq."



PHOTO: AFP

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan shakes hands Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Al Jafaari as European Commissioner for External relations Benita Ferrero Waldner watches at an international conference on Iraq yesterday at the EU Headquarters in Brussels.

Pakistan, Afghan presidents talk over phone as tensions rise

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf telephoned his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai to defuse tensions over Islamabad's alleged failure to tackle Taliban attacks from its soil, officials said Wednesday.

Military ruler Musharraf made the move after he received a call from US President George W. Bush amid concern about the deteriorating relations between the two neighbours, both key allies of Washington in the war on terror.

"The President assured President Karzai of Pakistan's continued support and cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Pakistan condemned this menace in all its forms and manifestations," a Pakistani foreign ministry statement said.

Musharraf called Karzai hours after the Afghan presidential spokesman Jawed Ludin said that militants were getting training from camps in Pakistan to launch attacks in Afghanistan in the run-up to legislative polls in September.

No Progress at ME Summit

AP, Jerusalem

The first Palestinian-Israeli summit in four months failed to propel peace prospects forward or solidify a shaky truce, leaving main issues unresolved and both sides disappointed.

The meeting Tuesday started with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon scolding Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas for an upsurge in Palestinian violence. The chilly atmosphere never warmed.

The summit was supposed to kick off an effort to work together to ensure Israel's withdrawal from Gaza this summer proceeds smoothly and peacefully. But the frosty meeting itself raised doubts as to whether the leaders can work together on the pullout, much less on further peace moves.

Palestinian officials said the meeting left them frustrated at the lack of progress.

"This was a difficult meeting, and did not live up to our expectations," Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia told reporters. "In all the basic issues for which we were expecting positive responses, there were none."

Palestinians were hoping for concrete results, like release of more prisoners and easing of Israel's

West Bank security restrictions, like roadblocks, that have crippled life there through more than four years of conflict. Abbas needs such achievements to bolster his standing among his people.

Palestinian PM Qurei flees West Bank gunfire

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Disgruntled Palestinian gunmen have shot at a building in a West Bank refugee camp where Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei was speaking.

Mr Qurei was not harmed but had to flee the Balata camp in Nablus amid more gunfire. An explosive device also went off, but nobody was injured.

Militants at the Balata camp have expressed their frustration at the Palestinian Authority in the past.

But this does not appear to be an assassination attempt.

The incident appears to have been one more example of the law and order problems that plague the Palestinian territories, says the BBC's Alan Johnston.

Blair hits back at EU critics

'I am a passionate pro-European'

AFP, Berlin

British Prime Minister Tony Blair defended himself Wednesday against broadsides from EU leaders in the wake of the failed Brussels summit, calling himself a "passionate" European committed to reform.

Faced with much of the blame from across the continent for the collapse of talks on the long-term EU budget, Blair said in a guest column in Germany's top selling newspaper Bild that he would continue to fight for a financial overhaul.

"I am a passionate pro-European. And it is those who believe in Europe most who must be the most ardent advocates of reforming it for the better," he said. He renewed his criticism of the

25-nation bloc's Common Agricultural Policy, which largely benefits France, and said the money would be far better spent on technology, education and support for innovation.

"We need a budget which concentrates on the future. A budget for jobs, not special interests. We need to invest in innovation and skills, not pay out two euros a day for every cow," he said.

"There is no reason for large transfers of money from countries like Germany and Britain to other rich countries to continue, as was proposed last week."

Blair also hit back at accusations that he was clinging to Britain's cherished budget rebate at the expense of the 10 new member states.

"We need, of course, to support the poorer member states. Like Germany, Britain was a leading champion of enlargement. We certainly won't duck our obligations to the new member states," he said.

"Indeed, I have said that Britain is ready to pay more. But only if the money is concentrated in the right countries -- the poor ones, not the rich -- and concentrated on the right policies too."

"Of course, the EU is much more than a free-trade area," he said.

"People want jobs, but they also want security and protection for the environment. They want European values upheld. They want Europe strong in the world."

Filipino hostage freed in Iraq

AFP, Manila

A Filipino hostage held by militants in Iraq since last November has been freed, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo said Wednesday.

Arroyo said Roberto Tarongoy was now in the safe keeping of Filipino diplomats in Baghdad and would be flying home at an unspecified date. She did not provide further details.

"At long last, Robert Tarongoy will be coming home soon," Arroyo said in a statement on government radio.

Tarongoy, an accountant who worked for a Saudi firm based in Baghdad, was seized from his workplace along with an American colleague. The fate of the American remains unknown.

Daughter reunited with father six months after tsunami

AFP, Banda Aceh

A 16-year-old girl was Wednesday reunited with her father in Indonesia's tsunami-ravaged Aceh province six months after the disaster separated them and killed their loved ones.

A tearful Sri Handayani, who was staying in another town with a relative when the tsunami hit, hugged her father, Muhammad Ali, as they met at the social affairs office in the provincial capital Banda Aceh.

"Aren't mama and sister with us anymore?" Handayani asked Ali,

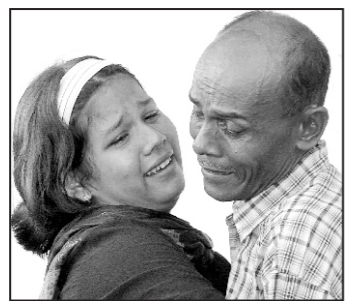


PHOTO: AFP

Acehnese Muhammad Ali hugs his daughter Sri Handayani during a reunification in Banda Aceh yesterday.

46. Ali told the daughter that her mother and one of her three sisters did not survive the disaster.

"I'm happy to be reunited with father again," she told reporters.

Ali said he was at home with his wife and three of their five children when the tsunami engulfed his village. His wife's body and that of one of the children were never found.

UNICEF says 1,082 children in Indonesia are listed as "separated" from their families -- a euphemism which, in most cases, now means orphaned. Of these, all but 70 are living with relatives or other families in their communities.

HURRIYAT'S VISIT TO PAKISTAN

Pakistan denies breach of understanding

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistan has denied Indian allegations that it breached an "understanding" with India by permitting Hurriyat leaders to travel beyond Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, reports Online news agency.

Pakistan has not violated any agreement by allowing the Hurriyat leaders from Jammu and Kashmir to visit Islamabad, Foreign Office spokesperson Jaiil Abbas Jilani told BBC.

He was reacting to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's assertion on Tuesday that Islamabad did a wrong by allowing the Hurriyat leaders to journey to Islamabad, where they met Pakistani leaders including President Pervez Musharraf.

Indian officials say passengers

taking the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus should not travel beyond the Indian or Pakistani halves of Kashmir.

Manmohan Singh made the statement in responding to a letter from Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who raised the issue following the return of the Hurriyat delegation to Jammu and Kashmir.

Manmohan Singh said in a letter to Vajpayee that "Pakistan violated an understanding on these procedures that had been reached between India and Pakistan".

The Pakistani spokesman described the trip by the Hurriyat leaders as a breakthrough and said it had helped strengthen the peace process between India and Pakistan.

French journalist Anne-Sophie Le Mauff making a call while wearing her traditional Iraqi black Abaya (robe) and head scarf she uses before going out to report at a local Baghdad hotel yesterday. Le Mauff said that the Iraqi interior ministry officials told her that she should leave the country and they were acting upon the request of French authorities. Media rights group Reporters without Borders slammed what it called an unacceptable action against Le Mauff, "who has worked in Iraq for more than a year, in particular for the French dailies L'Humanite and Sud-Ouest, Radio Monte-Carlo, Radio Vatican and Radio Canada. The French government denied that they asked the Iraqi authorities to expel Le Mauff. On June 12, French journalist Florence Aubenas was freed after spending five months as a hostage.

PHOTO: AFP

