

6 soldiers killed in Kashmir car bomb attack

AFP, Srinagar

Six Indian soldiers were killed and 18 injured when a powerful car bomb exploded yesterday as a bus carrying troops drove past a popular tourist attraction in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir, police said.

The explosion ripped the bus apart and shook the famed Mughal gardens on the shores of lake Dal in the summer capital Srinagar around 4.00 pm (1030 GMT), a police spokesman said.

A civilian photographer who earned his living taking pictures of tourists in the gardens was also injured, as were the bus driver and conductor, both civilians.

The spokesman said explosives were placed in a car and detonated as a military convoy passed by. The bus carrying the soldiers bore the full brunt of the blast.

The soldiers were heading back to their units after having completed their annual holidays, army spokesman Vijay Batra told AFP. They had been travelling from Jammu, the southern winter capital.

The region's dominant rebel group Hizbul Mujahideen, which wants Kashmir merged into Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the explosion in a telephone call to local news agency Kashmir News Service.

Lanka signs tsunami aid deal with Tigers

Marxists disrupt parliamentary debate

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government and Tiger rebels yesterday entered a landmark tsunami aid-sharing deal, raising hopes of salvaging a Norwegian-led peace process while hardline Marxists stepped up nationwide protests.

The government said the deal raised the prospect of reviving direct peace talks which remain on hold since April 2003, but the main Marxist party, the JVP, described it as a stepping stone for the break-up of the island.

Under the deal, the Colombo government and the Tigers will jointly handle billions of dollars in foreign aid for survivors of the December 26 tsunami, which killed at least 31,000 people and displaced one million in the country.

"The secretary to the ministry of rehabilitation, M. S. Jayasinghe,

signed on behalf of the government..." government minister Maithripala Sirisena said here.

The document, after being signed by Jayasinghe, was taken by Norwegian diplomats to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi where it was inked by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) deputy head of planning and development secretary, Shanmugalingam Ranjan.

Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama said the deal could help break the 26-month deadlock in peace talks.

"Though this is not directly linked to the peace process, this will create a good environment in which we are going to work with each other and that could help the peace process," he said.

Details of the proposed Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure were unveiled in parliament Friday after months of secret

talks with the help of Norway.

Government officials said the two sides had discussed 13 drafts before signing the 14th on Friday, underscoring the intense negotiations that went on before a deal could be clinched.

Several groups have attacked the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga for agreeing to the deal, which critics see as granting the separatists too much legitimacy.

The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, disrupted parliamentary debate on the controversial issue when the document was released ahead of debate in the assembly, and the sitting ended in chaos.

The JVP argues that the deal will set the stage for the LTTE to strengthen their claim for an independent homeland by granting them recognition as a separate entity.

The government responded to

the uproar in parliament by postponing assembly sittings until July 5. However, the delay has no bearing on concluding the deal as it does not require approval by parliament, a government minister said.

The JVP quit the ruling coalition last week protesting the deal to jointly handle tsunami aid and vowed to launch nationwide protests from Friday.

The joint mechanism will be in three tiers with a three-member panel – comprising one representative each from the government, the Tigers and the minority Muslim community – at the top.

A mid-level structure will be dominated by the rebels, who will have five seats while the government will have two and Muslims three.

The mechanism will have an international lender as the custodian of foreign aid.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Marxist demonstrators stand outside the Sri Lankan parliament where Marxist legislators blocked a debate on a controversial aid sharing deal between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday in Colombo.

'Irregularities in Iran presidential run-off'

AFP, Tehran

Iran's interior ministry said it had received reports of irregularities in yesterday's presidential election run-off and warned it may suspend voting in certain polling stations.

However the Guardians Council, an unelected hardline-controlled political watchdog, dismissed the complaints and effectively vetoed any move to halt the high-stakes election.

"We have received a number of reports concerning interference in certain polling stations from people who shouldn't be there," the reformist-controlled interior ministry's spokesman Jahanbakhsh Khanjani told reporters.

Iranians were voting in a tight presidential run-off between moderate cleric Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Rafsanjani and two beaten reformist candidates have already alleged Ahmadinejad is being backed illegally by well-financed



Protesters make the thumbs down sign as they display mock compact discs during a protest march in Manila yesterday. The protesters were seeking the ouster of President Gloria Arroyo for alleged cheating in the last election and her family's alleged involvement in illegal gambling.

Pak cops 'sewed prisoner's lips shut'

AFP, Multan

Pakistani authorities ordered a probe yesterday into claims that police sewed up a suspect's lips to stop him screaming obscenities, officials said.

Policemen allegedly used a needle and jute yarn to silence the man when he fought with a fellow prisoner, tore an officer's shirt and shouted while being taken to court Thursday in dusty Vehari, near the central city of Multan.

"I have ordered an inquiry into the sewing of the lips of an undertrial prisoner, Muhammad Hussain, to keep his mouth shut," Multan deputy inspector general of police Malik Muhammad Iqbal told AFP.

Another local official speaking on condition of anonymity said police tied the suspect to a pillar and beat him but resorted to the gruesome newfangled when he kept hurling abuse at them.

Hussain, facing trial over a fight between rival groups, badly damaged his lips when he then tried to speak again, he said.

But a deadline would "play into the hands of the terrorists," Jaafari said on the eve of a meeting with President Bush at the White House yesterday.

Some US lawmakers, including a few from Bush's own Republican Party, have called for a deadline to

Iraqi PM opposes setting troop withdrawal date

Saddam must be tried soon

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

Iraq would like to see US forces withdraw as soon as feasible, but setting a date for their departure would be a mistake, Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari said in an interview published yesterday.

"We would like to see the withdrawal of American forces as quickly as possible, because the presence of any foreign troops on our land means there is a weakness that we cannot by ourselves control the security situation," Jaafari said in an interview with The Washington Post.

But a deadline would "play into the hands of the terrorists," Jaafari said on the eve of a meeting with President Bush at the White House yesterday.

Some US lawmakers, including a few from Bush's own Republican Party, have called for a deadline to

begin withdrawing American troops from Iraq.

But the White House and the Pentagon have rejected the idea, saying insurgents would simply wait for a withdrawal and then renew their fight.

In the interview, Jaafari called instead for accelerating the training of Iraqi troops, including a possible role for nations that are not a part of the US-led military coalition.

Meanwhile, Jaafari said it was time to put the deposed Saddam Hussein on trial, as insurgents pressed on with their terror campaign yesterday and pressure grew for US-led troops to withdraw.

Jaafari was in Washington to meet with President George W. Bush and help him try to ease increasing US concern about the Iraq war.

Speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations think-tank Thursday, Jaafari said: "There has indeed been some time wasting and I have spoken to the main judge responsible for trying Saddam Hussein."

India says no to Pak minister boarding Kashmir bus

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday said it had rejected a request by Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid for permission to travel to Indian-administered Kashmir on the new trans-Kashmir bus service next week.

The government of India has processed the application and has declined permission, taking into account all aspects," Foreign Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told a media briefing here.

The minister has been at the centre of a controversy since a leading separatist earlier this month praised his help during the early days of the Islamic militancy which exploded in the divided state in 1989.

Rashid, a Kashmiri, had said he wanted to cross on the next run of the bus service on June 30 to visit relatives in Indian Kashmir.

Senior separatist leader Yasin

Iraq-style regime change not appropriate for Syria: Rice

REUTERS, Dubai

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signalled in remarks published yesterday that Iraq-style regime change was not appropriate for Syria, but said Damascus must change its policies.

"What we want is to send the Syrians a clear message from everybody that their behavior must change. This means that they should not be in a position to cause instability in Lebanon," the London-based Ashraq al-Awsat newspaper quoted her as saying in an interview given to three Arabic-language newspapers.

Asked whether the US administration would go as far as toppling President Bashar al-Assad's government, she said: "Every situation is different from the other. Syria is not Iraq and Iraq is not Syria. Iraq was a special case

where there was a problem of weapons of mass destruction, backing terrorism and UN (Security Council) resolutions. We were also in a state of war with Iraq.

"The Syrian regime is capable of changing itself, its policies and its behaviour with its neighbours. This is the path we hope they will take," she said.

Washington stepped up its campaign to isolate Damascus on the international stage following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in February.

Lebanese opposition leaders accused Damascus, which then had a strong military presence in Lebanon, of being behind the killing -- a charge it denied.

Syria bowed to pressure to withdraw its troops in April after anti-Syrian protests swept Lebanon.

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