

US asks Lankan parties to strengthen truce

Muslims block highways protesting tsunami aid deal

AFP, Colombo

The United States asked Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday to strengthen a fragile truce between them after they entered into a controversial deal to share aid pledged after the tsunami.

Colombo and the Tigers have agreed to a joint mechanism to distribute billions of dollars in foreign aid among survivors of the December 26 tsunami that killed 31,000 people in Sri Lanka and left a million homeless.

"If implemented properly, this mechanism will help to ensure efficient and equitable reconstruction assistance to those whose lives were devastated by the South Asia tsunami in the north and east of Sri Lanka," the US said in a statement.

It said Washington hoped the experience the two sides will gain by working together would help build confidence and lead to progress in the broader peace process, which has been stalled since April 2003.

"It is even more important now that the two parties take all possible steps to see that the ceasefire is observed and strengthened," the statement said.

The US designated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) a foreign terrorist group in October 1997 but has also urged the Sri Lankan government to enter into a negotiated settlement with the guerrillas.

More than 60,000 people were killed in the LTTE-led separatist conflict in three decades until fighting was halted with an Oslo-brokered truce that went into effect in February 2002.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga entered the aid-sharing deal Friday as a prelude to resuming negotiations with the Tigers.

However, the deal has led to a worsening split in her ruling coalition, which was reduced to a minority this month when a Marxist partner walked out in protest.

Sri Lanka's second largest

minority, the Muslims, have also objected to the aid-sharing agreement saying that they have been ignored and marginalised although more than 50 percent of those affected by the tsunami were Muslims.

Minority Muslims set fire to tyres and blocked key highways in eastern Sri Lanka Monday to protest at their exclusion from the government's controversial deal to share tsunami aid with Tamil Tiger rebels.

Traffic in Muslim-dominated towns in eastern coastal regions came to a standstill as crowds blocked roads and forced the closure of shops, a police official in the area said by telephone.

"They want their political leaders in government to resign," the official said.

The Muslim National Unity Alliance said Sunday it would quit the ruling coalition in two days unless the president drops the aid deal clinched with the Tigers last Friday to distribute billions of dollars

in foreign aid. The influential Muslim Council of Sri Lanka also joined growing opposition to the deal. It decided at a meeting Sunday to ask the international community to press the government to include it as equal partners with the rebels.

The Muslims say they were marginalised in the Norwegian-brokered deal, which been widely hailed as a possible prelude to restarting peace talks between the two sides.

They fear the tsunami deal between the government and the rebels would set a precedent for an eventual peace deal that would ignore their aspirations.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has already lost her majority in parliament following the withdrawal of support earlier this month by her Marxist ally, the JVP, or People's Liberation Front.

Deuba cleared of 1 graft charge

12 Nepalese soldiers killed, 50 abducted students freed

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's powerful anti-graft commission cleared former premier Sher Bahadur Deuba of one corruption charge Monday stemming from his term in office but he remained in detention on another graft accusation.

Deuba, sacked by King Gyanendra when he seized power, was arrested in late April on charges of corruption.

"You have been cleared of the charge of misappropriating government funds," commission chairman Bhakta Bahadur Koirala told the commission courtroom where Deuba was sitting along with six other members of his former cabinet who had been accused of the same offence.

The commission, set up by the king after he grabbed power February 1, had accused Deuba and the six others of distributing 3.86 million rupees (54,842 dollars) from the Prime Minister's Relief Fund to party activists and relatives during a religious festival last October.

"The whole thing was done to defame us. It was character assassination," Deuba told reporters afterwards before being taken back

to the detention centre where he was still being held on another charge of corruption.

The other corruption charge against the former premier involves a contract for a 13.1-million-dollar road project granted when Deuba was in power.

Earlier, communist rebels have freed 90 high school students who were seized from their classrooms last week, officials said yesterday.

The students, who were reported to be in good health, returned home Sunday to the village of Paudiamrai, about 200 miles west of Katmandu, said Durga Pokhrel, the chief administrative officer of Gulmi district.

Meanwhile, at least 12 security personnel were killed and six others injured in a clash with Maoist rebels attempting to capture arms from the military in southwestern Nepal, a senior army officer said yesterday.

The fighting, which took place on Saturday at Arghakhanchi, 335km southwest of the capital, lasted nearly three hours, Lieutenant Colonel Navjiv Rana said.

"Among the dead, six were soldiers and six policemen while six others were injured during the clashes with the rebels," he said.



Former Nepalese prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba talks to media after he was cleared, along with six ministers, on charges of misappropriation of government funds whilst in office in Kathmandu yesterday.



Indian author Arundhati Roy reads the final decision of the World Tribunal on Iraq (WTI) yesterday in Istanbul. The WTI, an anti-war grouping of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), intellectuals and writers, on Monday harshly condemned the United States, Britain and their allies for the occupation of Iraq.

World Tribunal slams US, Britain for Iraq invasion

AFP, Istanbul

The self-styled World Tribunal on Iraq (WTI), an anti-war grouping of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), intellectuals and writers, on yesterday harshly, if symbolically, condemned the United States, Britain and their allies for the occupation of Iraq.

The tribunal recommended "an exhaustive investigation of those responsible for crimes of aggression and crimes against humanity in Iraq."

After three days of deliberations, it singled out President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair along with government officials from other coalition partners as being primarily culpable for the war.

The tribunal, the purpose of which was to document the case against the war, did not consider the argument in favour of the US-led

intervention in Iraq, and had no judicial status.

The statement, read by Indian author Arundhati Roy, chair of the tribunal's "Jury of Conscience," called for an "immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the coalition forces in Iraq."

Roy, who won the Booker Prize in Britain in 1997 for her novel, "The God of Small Things", told a news conference that "our aim is to have the US and British forces out of Iraq," but conceded that this "will not happen tomorrow."

Roy also called on the US to immediately close down its prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and demanded a review of all treaties signed with post-invasion Iraq, which she said "should be considered null and void."

The WTI criticised the United Nations for having, it said, failed properly to manage the Iraqi crisis.

It also pointed a finger at a number of US firms active in Iraq, such as Halliburton, Carlyle, Boeing and Texaco.

It recommended "that people throughout the world launch actions against US and UK corporations that directly profit from this war."

The generally studious crowd of participants broke into a chant of "The people united will never be defeated" -- an avatar of left-wing Latin American liberation struggles -- as the tribunal's closing statement was being read.

It also erupted in applause after hearing testimony Saturday from Iraqi women's rights activist Hana Ibrahim.

Ibrahim spoke of the damage inflicted by the war and the occupation on the women of Iraq, with a proliferation of prostitution rings and the near-total exclusion of women from public life.

Arroyo apologises to nation but denies polls fraud

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo yesterday apologised to the nation after admitting she called a poll commissioner during last year's election, but denied rigging the vote.

The announcement increased pressure on Arroyo to step down amid opposition allegations that she conspired with the independent elections commissioner to manipulate votes in her favour.

The allegations sprang from tape recordings of a woman sounding like Arroyo talking to a man believed to be a member of the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), apparently about vote-rigging.

"I was anxious to protect my votes and during that time had conversations with many people, including a COMELEC official," Arroyo said in a televised nationwide broadcast, breaking weeks of silence on the issue.

"My intent was not to influence the outcome of the election and it did not," she said, adding that making the call was a "lapse in judgement."

"I'm sorry. I also regret taking so long to speak before you on this matter," the president said.

'US knows whereabouts of Zarqawi'

AFP, Washington

The US military is close to locating al-Qaeda's frontman in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, General John Abizaid, the commander of US forces in the region, said Sunday.

"I think we have a good idea" of where to find him, Abizaid told CNN.

"We know what we're doing in our efforts how to get him," he said.

"But I want to also stress that it's not about one man. It's about his network. His network exists inside Iraq. It's connected to al-Qaeda. It's got facilitation nodes in Syria," Abizaid told the US cable news channel.

"It brings foreign fighters in from Saudi Arabia and from North Africa. It is connected to what is happening in Afghanistan and what is happening in Pakistan. It is a global battle that we face," he said.

Iraqis may fight rebels for years: Rumsfeld

2 pilots die as US helicopter crashes

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Sunday that American forces would not defeat Iraq's rebels but would make way for Iraqis to put down an insurgency that could go on for a decade or more.

In the face of the unrelenting violence, Rumsfeld confirmed contacts with rebels in a bid to stem the carnage but warned that the insurgency could go on for years.

In fresh violence two US pilots were killed in a helicopter crash north of Baghdad yesterday, the military said.

The AH-64 Apache attack helicopter crashed at about 11:45 a.m. (0745 GMT) in Mishahda, 30km north of the capital, an Associated Press reporter at the scene said. The two pilots were

killed in the crash, which is still under investigation, said Lt. Col. Clifford Kent, a spokesman for the 3rd Infantry Division.

Late Sunday, gunmen opened fire on a barbershop, killing the barber, a police officer and a nine-year-old boy in the bustling Baghdad district of Al-Jadidah where Sunni Arabs, Iraqi Shias and Christians live together, the interior ministry source said.

The attackers then placed an explosive charge and blew the shop up before making their escape.

His remarks came on another day of bloodshed on which three suicide attacks around the northern city of Mosul killed more than 33 people, many of them police officers, highlighting the task faced by Iraq's US-trained forces against a Sunni Arab revolt, backed by foreign Islamists, against the new Shia-led

government.

"That insurgency can go on for any number of years," Rumsfeld said in a US television interview.

"Insurgencies tend to go on five, six, eight, 10, 12 years. Foreign forces are not going to repress that insurgency."

"We're going to create an environment that the Iraqi people and the Iraqi security forces can win against that insurgency."

Handing over to Iraqi forces and withdrawing the US army that invaded to topple Saddam Hussein two years ago is a key policy for President Bush as opinion polls show Americans turning against a project that many believed would rapidly produce a stable, pro-Washington government in Baghdad.

Rumsfeld said insurgent attacks were becoming deadlier.

AHMADINEJAD SAYS Iran to restart nuke act

AP, Tehran

The president-elect of Iran vowed to restart the nation's controversial nuclear program, saying it was meant only for peaceful energy purposes. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld labeled the new ultraconservative leader as "no friend of democracy."

Asked about relations with the United States during his first news conference since Friday's election, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Sunday said Iran "is taking the path of progress based on self-reliance. It doesn't need the United States significantly on this path."

In a sign of tensions likely ahead, Rumsfeld dismissed the vote as a "mock election."

Ahmadinejad entered the crowded chambers in Iran's municipal building with little fanfare, maintaining the unassuming style embraced by the roughly 17 million Iranians who voted him to power in a landslide victory.

3 Kenyans acquitted of hotel blast

REUTERS, Nairobi

A Kenyan magistrate acquitted three men yesterday of conspiracy in a 2002 suicide bombing claimed by al-Qaeda that killed 15 people at an Israeli-owned hotel.

"I have come to the conclusion that the prosecution has failed beyond reasonable doubt to prove its case," Chief Magistrate Aggrey Muchelule told the court.

"I find them not guilty and set them free."

The three defendants -- Salmin Mohammed Khamis, Mohammed Kubwa Seif and Said Saggah Ahmed -- bowed their heads in prayer as the verdict was read out in the packed courtroom.

Three Israelis and 12 Kenyans were killed after two suicide bombers broke through barriers outside the Paradise Hotel with a four-wheel drive vehicle full of explosives on Nov. 28, 2002.

Muchelule also acquitted the men of a further charge of plotting an almost simultaneous attack on an Israeli airliner.



Pakistani villagers salvage their belongings from their flood-affected homes in the village of Khazana, some 20 km from Peshawar yesterday. Following the flash flooding of the Kabul river in neighbouring Afghanistan, hundreds of families were shifted to safer places by Pakistani troops in a rescue operation.



Pakistani gang-rape victim Mukhtar Mai (R) is escorted by a policewoman and a friend as she leaves the Supreme Court in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan's Supreme Court started hearing an appeal against the acquittal of five men who allegedly gang-raped Mai on the orders of a village council, in a case that sparked international outrage.

US plans new sanctions to contain WMD spread

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration has drafted a plan to halt the spread of weapons of mass destruction by targeting assets of anyone doing business with North Korean, Iranian and Syrian firms suspected of working on weapons programs, The Washington Post reported on Monday.

The new tool would authorise "the blocking or 'freezing' of assets of WMD proliferators and their supporters, and thereby prohibiting US persons from engaging in transactions with them," the newspaper said, citing an internal government memo.

According to the newspaper, the measure was outlined in a "WMD Proliferation Financing Executive Order" that administration officials hope President Bush will sign before attending the Group of Eight summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, on Saturday.

Officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the order's success would rely heavily on US

intelligence.

A government list obtained by the newspaper identified three North Korean companies, four Iranian, and a Syrian government research facility as initial targets of the effort described in the draft executive order, The Washington Post said.

Three of the eight entities had been targeted previously by US sanctions, as had most Iranian agencies, the report said.

The measure would also target the US assets of individuals or companies, including foreign banks, that do business with those on the list, the newspaper said.

"If there is a bank in some European capital that is participating in working with one of the entities and that bank has some assets in the US, it is conceivable that some action could be taken to the bank's assets here," a senior official with knowledge of the order's details was quoted as saying.

HR GROUP REPORT REVEALS

US detained scores of Muslims after Sept 11

AFP, New York

The US government thrust scores of US-based Muslim men in jail without charge after the September 11, 2001 attacks, US rights groups said in a report published yesterday.

The men were held behind a veil of secrecy under a US law permitting the arrest and detention of "material witnesses" thought to have important information about a crime and considered likely to flee, the groups said.

"A handful" were later charged with crimes related to terrorism. About half were never brought to testify, and the US government apologised to 13 of the men for wrongfully detaining them, according to the 101-page report.

"Muslim men were arrested for

little more than attending the same mosque as a September 11 hijacker or owning a box-cutter," said Anjana Malhotra, a researcher at Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The US Justice Department has declined to reveal how many material witnesses it jailed in its counterterrorism investigations, but Human Rights Watch and the ACLU said they had confirmed 70 such detentions after a year of research.

Sixty-four were of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent, 17 were US citizens, and all but one was Muslim, a statement accompanying the report said.

"The Justice Department relied on false, flimsy or irrelevant evidence to secure arrest warrants for the men," almost all of whom had

cooperated with authorities prior to their detention, it said.

The men were typically taken at gunpoint, held in solitary confinement, harassed and in some cases physically abused, the groups said.

Court documents were sealed, court proceedings were held behind closed doors, and the men were largely denied legal protection guaranteed by US law, they charged.

One-third were held at least two months, some were held six months and one man spent more than a year behind bars.

"Many were not informed of the reason for their arrest, allowed immediate access to a lawyer, nor permitted to see the evidence used against them," the statement said.