

Lankan court blocks tsunami deal

Tension mounts as truce comes under mounting pressure

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court yesterday blocked a controversial deal with Tiger rebels to share billions of dollars in tsunami aid as a fragile truce came under intense pressure and more killings were reported in the island's restive east.

Chief Justice Sarath Silva said locating the headquarters of the proposed Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) in a rebel-held area was unacceptable as ordinary citizens would not have access to the region.

The proposed fund to which international donors were expected to contribute was also illegal, the judge held.

The chief justice ordered four crucial clauses in the P-TOMS

agreement suspended until the conclusion of a petition against the deal. The next hearing was fixed for September 12.

Both Colombo and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had seen the agreement as a confidence-building measure that could possibly lead to the resumption of peace talks on hold since April 2003.

However, diplomats close to the peace process said the court decision had heightened tensions, especially in the island's eastern province where three more killings were reported Friday.

Police said they found three men shot dead in the eastern town of Akkaraipattai on Thursday night and believed they were victims of internecine clashes among rival

Tiger factions.

The authorities had already sent hundreds of police reinforcements to the eastern region after troops shot dead a suspected Tamil rebel on Thursday evening, police and military officials said.

The Tigers were yet to respond to the court decision but on Friday they repeated a warning, first issued last month, that they would make their own security arrangements when travelling through government-held areas unless they were given stepped-up protection by the military.

"This, we fear, would push the ceasefire into a grave and complex situation," the Tigers said in the letter sent through Norwegian-led truce monitors.

The court ruling blocks the aid

deal that was arranged by Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway, which has been trying to bring the rebels and the Colombo government back to the negotiating table they left in April 2003.

The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, challenged President Chandrika Kumaratunga's move last month after quitting her coalition government in protest.

The court held that the president had the right to enter into a deal with the Tigers, but that four clauses in the agreement went against the constitution.

Friday's ruling came a day after the government named Constitutional Affairs Minister D.E.W. Gunasekera as its nominee to be one of the three members of the P-TOMS governing body.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists from India's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) scramble to flee from water cannon during a demonstration held to protest increases in electricity and water tariffs in domestic and agricultural sectors in New Delhi yesterday. Hundreds of protesters demanded that India's government withdraw the increased rate and urge subscribers not to pay their increased bills.

China ready to use nukes if US attacks it over Taiwan

REUTERS, Beijing

A senior Chinese general has warned that China was ready to use nuclear weapons against the United States if Washington attacked his country over Taiwan, the Financial Times newspaper reported yesterday.

Zhu Chenghu, a major general in the People's Liberation Army who said he was expressing his own views and did not anticipate a conflict with Washington, nevertheless said China would have no option but to go nuclear in the event of an attack.

"If the Americans draw their missiles and position-guided ammunition onto the target zone on China's territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons," he told an official briefing for foreign journalists.

A spokeswoman for China's Foreign Ministry noted that the general had said in the article he was not speaking on behalf of the government. A spokesman later said the ministry was looking into the matter.

Protesters storm govt office in Manila

AFP, Manila

About a hundred Philippine protesters forced their way into the agriculture department yesterday, officials said, smashing windows and chanting slogans against under-fire President Gloria Arroyo.

The protesters climbed over the ministry's low metal fence and swept past helpless security guards, putting up banners that condemned Arroyo and demanded more benefits for fishermen and farmers.

Six of the protesters injured themselves, agriculture department staff said.

The protest came as Arroyo's supporters hit back in a bitter struggle over her political fate after the US-trained economist was alleged to have rigged last year's election.

Around 30,000 people took to the streets on Wednesday to demand the resignation of Arroyo, who could face impeachment in Congress over an audiotape in which she allegedly tells an election official to fix the poll result.

But Arroyo's supporters released overnight a tape of their own, in which her arch-rival and predecessor Joseph Estrada allegedly plots her overthrow.

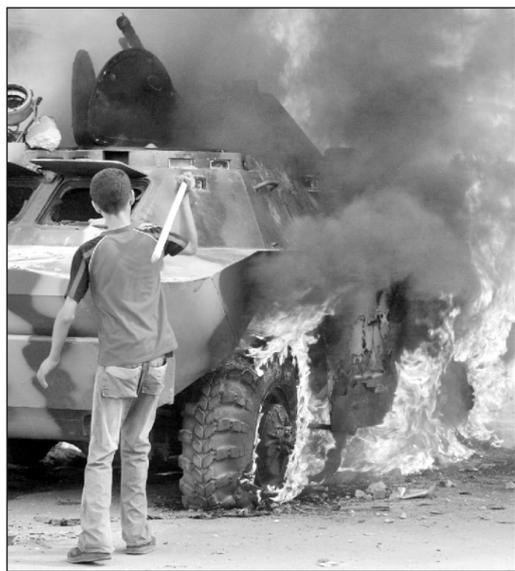


PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian boy hits a burning armoured vehicle of Palestinian Authority with a stick as security forces clashes with Islamic militants in a bid to stop mounting violence unravelling a seven-month informal truce with Israel yesterday in Gaza City. Two Palestinian civilian bystanders were killed and more than a dozen other wounded in the clashes.

5 Hamas men killed in Israel air strikes

Palestinian police, rebels trade fire

AFP, AP, Gaza City

Five members of Islamist faction Hamas, two of them wanted leaders, were killed Friday in near simultaneous Israeli air strikes on Gaza City and the West Bank, Palestinian sources said.

Three Hamas militants were killed as they were travelling in a van that was completely destroyed in what witnesses said was an Israeli missile strike on an eastern district of Gaza City on Friday.

"We have three dead. They are all members of Hamas and five civilians wounded, including a child," medical sources told AFP in Gaza City after the raid. There was no immediate comment from the Israeli army.

An AFP correspondent saw a headless corpse and the gutted car following a massive explosion, just hours after Palestinian security forces clashed with militants from radical movement Hamas in the same area.

Witnesses said they saw a missile slam into a small van, devastating the vehicle and sending shrapnel soaring into the air.

40 confirmed dead in Nepali boat capsizes

AFP, Kathmandu

In the West Bank, Israeli helicopters fired three rockets near the town of Salfit, south of the main northern city of Nablus and not far from the sprawling Jewish settlement of Ariel, Palestinian security sources said.

Occupants Rabi Harb, 27 and Mohammed Ayash, 25, were killed and a third member of Hamas wounded after the rockets slammed into an industrial area, the security sources said.

As local leaders of the armed wing of Hamas, the Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades, they had been wanted by the Israeli army for two years, the sources added.

"They were important leaders in the Qassam Brigades in Salfit. They were shot by Israeli Apache helicopters," a security source told AFP.

Meanwhile, Palestinian police and Hamas militants exchanged fire in a crowded Gaza City neighbourhood yesterday, and at least two people were killed and nine wounded in some of the worst fighting among Palestinians in recent years.

Palestinian security forces were placed on high alert.

Another 27 bodies have been recovered after a ferry boat capsized in the flooded Banganga river in southwestern Nepal, bringing the death toll to 40, police said Friday.

Another 56 passengers are still missing, police said, adding that they had most likely been swept away in the raging torrent and there was little hope of finding them alive.

The accident occurred Thursday at Bardighat in Kapilbastu district, about 265km southwest of Kathmandu.

"Of the 106 people travelling on board the ill-fated boat, only 10 managed to swim to the river bank safely," a police official said.

"The rescue operation is continuing but there is little hope of finding anybody alive," a Home Ministry official said.

Most major rivers in western and eastern Nepal are overflowing their banks after being lashed by heavy monsoon rains, the official said.

US-led forces kill 24 rebels on Pak border

REUTERS, Miranshah

US-led forces killed 24 suspected militants on the Pakistan side of the Afghan border, Pakistan's military spokesman said yesterday.

The fighters, believed to belong to pro-Taliban and al-Qaeda forces, were killed crossing into Pakistan late on Thursday near Lowara Mandi, a border village in the North Waziristan tribal region, Major-General Shaukat Sultan said.

"Apparently these people were trying to escape into Pakistani territory when they were hit by coalition forces. Their bodies are, of course, with the Pakistani authorities," Sultan told Reuters.

"They are foreigners and suspected Taliban. They could be Afghans and people of central Asian origin," he added.

Paramilitary sources in North Waziristan said the militants had fired missiles at a base for US-led and Afghan forces some three km across the border.

"The coalition forces returned fire using rockets and heavy weapons," a paramilitary official told Reuters.

A witness said he saw US helicopters engaged in the attack, while

Geo television said the fighters were killed by a missile.

Sultan said the US side had informed their Pakistani counterparts before opening fire on the fleeing militants, but there would still be a check to see whether there had been any violation of Pakistani territory or airspace.

Pakistan has bridled in the past at US forces' sorties across the border in the area around Lowara Mandi.

A US military spokesman in Afghanistan said he had no information about the incident.

Tension has been building for months in North Waziristan since the Pakistan Army completed a series of offensives to dislodge al-Qaeda bases in neighboring South Waziristan.

On Thursday, a Pakistani general warned tribes in North Waziristan of an imminent offensive to flush out foreign militants, including al-Qaeda fighters.

At a meeting with tribal elders, Major-General Akram Sahi, commander of Pakistani troops in North Waziristan, gave the tribesmen 24 hours to hand over suspected militants.

Extremist clerics to be barred from UK

AFP, London

Islamic extremists barred by the United States and other countries will be barred from entering Britain under new anti-terrorist provisions, a newspaper reported yesterday.

Britain's interior minister Charles Clarke has instigated a review of his powers to exclude and deport people likely to incite terrorism, the Daily Telegraph said.

It added that radicals like Youssef al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born cleric who has visited Britain from his home in Qatar and who has backed suicide bombers in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, could be stopped from entering Britain.

The new powers are particularly aimed at Islamic clerics who have encouraged disaffected young British Muslims to become radicalised and potential suicide bombers, it said.

Anyone attempting to enter Britain who has been previously excluded from the United States or the European Union will have his or her case immediately referred to Home Secretary Clarke for a decision.

UN seeks to bolster West, Islam ties

Muslims issue TV ad to condemn bombings

REUTERS, AFP, United Nations

The United Nations, acting after deadly suicide bombings apparently driven by Muslim extremism hit London, launched an initiative on Thursday to build new bridges between the West and Islam.

The campaign's aim was to "bridge divides and overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarisation which potentially threaten world peace," UN chief spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Recent events had "heightened the sense of a widening gap and lack of mutual understanding between Islamic and Western societies -- an environment that has been exploited and exacerbated by extremists in all societies," he said.

Secretary General Kofi Annan

was pursuing the "Alliance of Civilisations" initiative, at the suggestion of Spain and Turkey, after 54 people were killed in suicide bombings in London by three British Muslims of Pakistani origin and a Jamaican-born Briton.

The campaign has no firm plans yet but is expected to present recommendations and a plan of action in late 2006.

Meanwhile, Muslims must not let extremists hijack their faith, a prominent American Islamic group warned Thursday in a television public service announcement issued in the wake of the London bombings.

Stung by criticisms that Islamic leaders have not done enough to condemn the blasts blamed by police on British Muslims, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) sent the

spot to television stations across the United States.

"We will not allow our faith to be hijacked by criminals," says one of the speakers on the advertisement, which features shots of Muslims speaking directly to the camera.

"Islam is not about hatred and violence; it is about peace and justice," says another of the featured speakers, a young woman.

CAIR leaders said the new TV spot was needed because persistent efforts by US Muslim leaders to condemn terror in the name of Islam had failed to penetrate public perceptions.

"We don't know why we are not breaking through that. Maybe the rising level of anti-Muslim rhetoric is drowning out our condemnation," said Ibrahim Hooper, CAIR's national communications director.



PHOTO: AFP

Three girls joins thousands of Londoners for a vigil in Trafalgar Square in London Thursday for the victims of the four suicide bombings in the British capital on the 7th July.

LONDON BLASTS Musharraf vows 'full' probe support

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has promised British Prime Minister Tony Blair that Pakistan will provide "fullest support and assistance" to the investigations into last week's bombings in London.

Musharraf and Blair spoke by telephone on Thursday evening, the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) reported.

"The President assured the British Prime Minister of Pakistan's fullest support and assistance in the investigation of July 7 terrorist acts in London," APP said.

Blair thanked Musharraf for Pakistan's "unequivocal support" and praised its role in the US-led war on terrorism, the report said.

Three of the four bombers behind the attacks that killed 52 London commuters were of Pakistani ethnic origin but living in northern England, while media

reports on Thursday identified the fourth as a Jamaican-born Briton.

On Thursday, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said it was awaiting details of when any of the suspected British-born suicide bombers had visited Pakistan.

The Islamic South Asian country has been at the forefront of an international war on terrorism since Musharraf committed it to support the United States following al-Qaeda's attacks on New York and Washington in 2001.

A year ago, the arrest in Lahore of a Pakistani computer expert named Mohammed Naeem Noor Khan helped British police bust a suspected al-Qaeda sleeper cell.

And in May, Pakistan delivered another breakthrough with the arrest of Abu Faraj al-Liby, dubbed by Washington as al-Qaeda's third-most important leader after Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Thai PM takes sweeping powers to fight unrest

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra took broad powers from the military yesterday, centralising control of security forces after Islamic insurgents staged a dramatic overnight attack.

At an emergency meeting called after Thursday's raid on Yala town in the Muslim-majority south, the Thai cabinet authorised Thaksin to invoke a range of measures including curfews, wiretaps and the power to close down publications.

"We have to be decisive now," Thaksin said before the emergency cabinet session. "Otherwise the unrest could spill over to other provinces."

Most of the measures approved Friday were already in effect in large swathes of the Muslim provinces along the border with Malaysia, which have been under martial law since the insurgency broke out in January 2004.

But the executive decree moves decision-making away from southern military commanders to the prime minister's office in Bangkok.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani women mourn as they search for their missing relatives at a mass grave, where the unidentified bodies of the train crash victims are being buried, in Ghotki, some 430km north-east of Karachi yesterday. Authorities have buried dozens of unidentified bodies of Pakistan's worst train crash in 15 years, which killed some 150 people.

FORMER CIA CHIEF SAYS US should pull out of Iraq now

AFP, Washington

The United States should cut its losses, pull out of Iraq promptly and never again use its military might to build a nation according to its own values, former CIA chief John Deutch wrote on Friday in The New York Times.

US military presence in Iraq is harming US interests in the Arab world, detracts attention from other "important security challenges ... North Korea, Iran and international terrorism," and weakens the US military, said Deutch, who before heading the Central Intelligence Agency (1995-1996) was deputy defence secretary (1994-1995).

"Those who argue that we should 'stay the course' because an early withdrawal ... would hurt America's global credibility must consider the possibility that we will fail in our objectives in Iraq and suffer an even worse loss of credibility down the road," he added.

"I do not believe that we are making progress on any of our key objectives in Iraq," he said, adding that even when the Iraq government appears to be functioning, "the

underlying destabilising effect of the insurgency is undiminished."

Deutch's call comes amid plummeting US public support for the war, an insurgency which sees a daily death toll hitting Iraqi civilians and security personnel alike, and some 1,750 US soldiers dead since March 2003.

But another recent survey showed that a majority of Americans backed US President George W. Bush's vow to maintain US troops in Iraq until the country can govern and control itself.

Rather than spend years, money and lives in Iraq to achieve "minimum conditions for withdrawal" -- security and a representative self-government -- Deutch argued that a quick withdrawal now would avoid a lot of grief to come.

"Our best strategy now is a prompt withdrawal plan consisting of clearly defined political, military and economic elements," including urging Iraq and its neighbours to recognise that it would be in everyone's interest to allow Iraq to "evolve peacefully and without external intervention."

Bush admn overdid WMD claims: Feith

AP, Washington

The top policy adviser to Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld says the Bush administration erred by building its public case for war against Saddam Hussein mainly on the claim that he possessed banned weapons.

The comment by Douglas J. Feith, in an interview with The Associated Press, is a rare admission of error about Iraq by a senior administration official. Feith, who is leaving after four years as the under-secretary of defence for policy, said he remains convinced that President Bush was correct in deciding that war against Iraq was necessary.

"I don't think there is any question that we as an administration, instead of giving proper emphasis to all major elements of the rationale for war, overemphasised the WMD aspect," he said, using the abbreviation for weapons of mass destruction.

The administration claimed the now-deposed Iraqi president possessed mass-killing chemical and biological weapons at the time of the March 2003 invasion and cited them most prominently as justification for attacking.

Nuclear energy tops Manmohan's US trip agenda

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's prime minister visits the United States next week hoping to seal a growing friendship with Washington with a landmark deal over sharing nuclear technology and backing for a UN Security Council seat.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's three-day state visit starting July 18 is being seen by New Delhi as a touchstone of President Bush's intention to take the relationship between the world's two largest democracies to new heights.

Singh will hold talks on issues ranging from defence to trade, aviation to agriculture. But the success of his visit may be measured by whether the Bush administration agrees to help boost India's civilian nuclear energy program and back its candidature for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

"What this visit would be doing is reaffirming at the highest level the transformation that is taking place in India-US relations," Indian Foreign

Secretary Shyam Saran said. "What we are really looking at is a genuine partnership between India and the US."

Relations between India and the United States have come a long way from the days of the Cold War when the two countries were on opposite sides.

India's economic reform program, its huge market, a booming information technology industry, its military might and potential as a counterweight to China have all combined to bring New Delhi closer to Washington.

Today, the two capitals are talking about India buying US F-16 fighter jets and nuclear reactors -- a far cry from the days when Washington imposed sanctions on New Delhi after it conducted nuclear tests in 1998.

India, which has refused to sign most global non-proliferation regimes saying they are discriminatory, has been looking to develop its civilian nuclear industry with Russian and US help.