



PHOTO: AFP
Women lead their donkeys loaded with collected relief goods and their children on their way back to a refugee camp in the earthquake devastated area of Balakot yesterday. India and Pakistan may be considering opening their de facto border, but for years many Kashmiris have been regularly risking their lives to cross the heavily militarised Line of Control (LoC).

Pak quake relief situation worse than tsunami: UN

Annan seeks more aid for survivors

AFP, Geneva/ Muzaffarabad

The UN's top relief official warned yesterday that the shortfall in aid for victims of the earthquake in Pakistan made the situation worse than after the Indian Ocean tsunami last year.

"This is not enough. We have never had this kind of logistical nightmare ever. We thought the tsunami was the worst we could get. This is worse," Jan Egeland, the United Nations emergency relief coordinator told journalists.

Egeland said at least half a million people in Pakistani Kashmir were still out of reach in the mountainous region following the 7.6 magnitude earthquake some two weeks ago.

The international community needed to set up a "second Berlin airlift", he added, referring to a western air shuttle that overcame the blockade of the German city in the late 1940s.

An estimated three million people were without useable homes and in need of shelter, while about 67,000 people were seriously injured, according to the UN official. The UN says there have been 48,000 confirmed deaths.

"The earthquake in Kashmir afflicting three countries is becoming worse by the day as the extent of the emergency dawns upon us," Egeland said.

"The world is not responding as it

should," he added, warning of a "cut-off" facing aid deliveries in December as winter and "massive" snowfalls takes hold in the region.

"Tens of thousands of people's lives are at stake and they could die if we don't get to them in time," Egeland said.

The UN has received 86 million dollars in aid pledges in response to its appeal for 272 million dollars in aid from the international community.

Other bilateral offers of aid to Pakistan have been made by countries.

Currently 60 helicopters were operating in the region, with 20 more due to arrive, the UN said.

The tsunami on December 26, 2004 killed 217,000 people in India, Indonesia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

It triggered an outpouring of short- and long-term international aid worth billions of dollars, although the unprecedented relief operation was initially blighted by logistical bottlenecks.

Earlier UN chief Kofi Annan begged the world to do more to prevent a second wave of deaths from Pakistan's earthquake as troops yesterday set up new helipads to reach survivors cut off for nearly two weeks.

Annan made a strongly worded appeal for "immediate and exceptional escalation of the global relief

effort" as the merciless Himalayan winter sets in for three million people made homeless by the October 8 catastrophe.

"That means a second, massive wave of death will happen if we do not step up our efforts now," Annan said at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

He said he would go in person next week to a UN-sponsored donors' conference in Geneva on the disaster, which killed more than 47,700 people in Pakistan alone, and urged governments to attend at the highest level.

"I expect results," he said. "There are no excuses. If we are to show ourselves worthy of calling ourselves members of humankind, we must rise to this challenge."

The military said it was further stepping up its drive to get to the most remote areas using helicopters, mules and footsoldiers and would open 24 new helipads Thursday for quake aid flights in the Kashmiri mountains.

The helipads will be set up outside Muzaffarabad in the devastated Jhelum and Neelum valleys, which are only now seeing road links restored.

"This means we will be able to help people who we have not been able to reach so far," another army spokesman Colonel Rana Sajjad said late Wednesday.

10 die as roof of hospital collapses in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Ten people were killed and at least seven others injured when a hospital roof in western Nepal collapsed after heavy rains yesterday, police said.

The collapse occurred at the privately-run Manipal Teaching Hospital in the city of Pokhara, 225km west of Kathmandu, police said.

"A search is continuing to rescue those trapped under the concrete debris of the hospital roof," police said.

The exact number of those trapped inside the hospital was not immediately known, police said.

Rights groups ask Maldives to set free detainees

AFP, Colombo

International rights groups on Wednesday demanded the release of a key Maldivian dissident jailed this week for 10 years on a "terrorism" charge for participating in a pro-democracy rally.

Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) asked the government of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom to order the "immediate, unconditional release" of Jennifer Latheef, who was jailed Tuesday.

She is the daughter of top Maldivian dissident Mohamed Latheef, spokesman of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) who is based in Sri Lanka.

Amnesty said it considered Latheef a prisoner of conscience.

Both groups said they believed the sentencing of Latheef was politically motivated and that she had not received a fair trial.

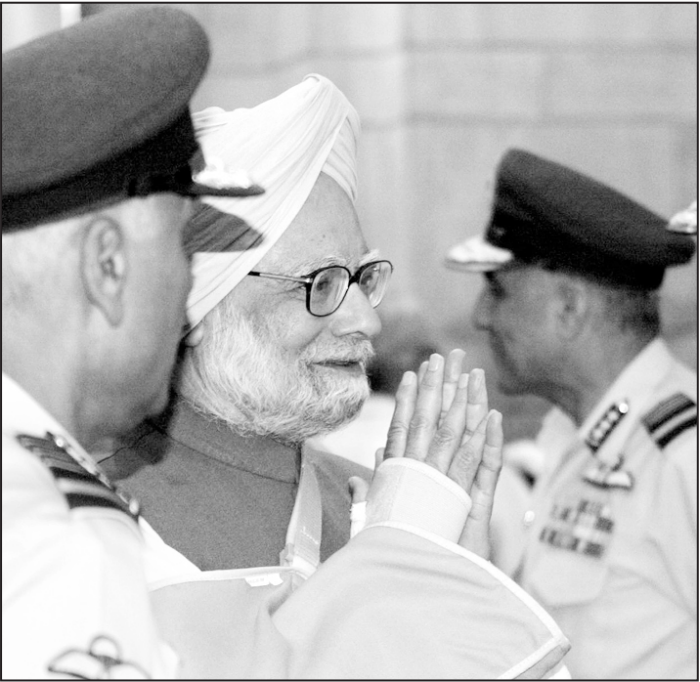


PHOTO: AFP
Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh greets senior officers from the Ministry of Defence during the Combined Commanders Conference in New Delhi yesterday. Manmohan Singh met with the chiefs of India's million-plus army, navy and air force before formally inaugurating the week-long commanders meeting, which will focus on the operational situation in Jammu and Kashmir and the North-East, and also along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China.

'Asian tsunami survivors plagued by HR abuses'

AFP, San Francisco

Survivors of last year's tsunami in Asia are suffering human rights abuses including sex assaults and arbitrary arrests, as corrupt or incompetent officials mismanage relief, a US report said Wednesday.

"The tsunami exposed groups already suffering from discrimination and other human rights abuses to greater harm," the study by the University of California, Berkeley Human Rights Centre and the East-West Centre in Hawaii.

"Vulnerable groups, such as women, children and migrant work-

ers, have suffered violations of human rights, including sexual violence and arbitrary arrest, during the relief phase and remain at risk as reconstruction begins.

"In addition, children living in conflict zones have been forced into armed groups. In some areas, government officials have refused to allow people access to aid in order to secure military goals," it added.

Human rights researchers visited five countries stricken by the December 26, 2004 killer wave -- India, Indonesia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand -- in March and

'US soldiers burned Taliban fighters'

REUTERS, AFP, Sydney

Australian television on Wednesday broadcast footage of what it said was US soldiers burning the corpses of two dead Taliban fighters with their bodies laid out facing Mecca and using the images in a propaganda campaign in southern Afghanistan.

The television report said US soldiers burned the bodies for hygienic reasons but then a US psychological operations unit broadcast a propaganda message on loudspeakers to Taliban fighters, taunting them to retrieve their dead and fight.

The US-led coalition force in Afghanistan said yesterday it was investigating media claims that US soldiers burned the bodies of two suspected Taliban militants and used the evidence to threaten locals.

A US military statement released said Army criminal investigators had launched a probe "into alleged misconduct by US service members, including the burning of dead enemy combatant bodies under inappropriate circumstances."

LANKAN GOVT SAYS

Tigers turn down truce talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday said Tamil Tiger rebels did not agree to a bid by peace broker Norway to restart talks on a ceasefire imperilled after the August assassination of the country's foreign minister.

Norwegian envoy Trond Furuhovde told the government that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they were not ready to hold talks on the ceasefire, government spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva told reporters.

"We are informed that the LTTE remains unchanged and they are not ready for talks on the ceasefire agreement or the violations of human rights," de Silva told reporters.

He said Furuhovde and United Nations rights envoy Ian Martin were unable to get an agreement on a venue to hold direct talks between Colombo and the LTTE on saving the troubled ceasefire or an agreement on monitoring human rights violations.

"The LTTE is not prepared to change their position and it is our perception and understanding that both of them were very disappointed with the attitude of the LTTE," said de Silva who is also the minister of health.

The LTTE wants direct talks with Colombo either in their political headquarters of Kilinochchi in the island's northeast, or abroad, a demand rejected by the government.

Norway proposed holding talks at Sri Lanka's only international airport, but that was rejected by the LTTE.

Separately, de Silva denied that the crash of an unmanned military spy drone over rebel-held territory Wednesday was a violation of the Oslo-brokered truce that went into effect from February 2002.

"Due to a technical problem the plane crashed," he said adding that the air force could fly over rebel territory and that it was not on an offensive mission.

Scandinavian truce monitors are

yet to announce their position on the incident.

Furuhovde, who had earlier headed the truce monitoring committee, told reporters here last week that he appraised himself of the positions taken by the two parties.

"I cannot say if the talks can be held in the near future," Furuhovde said, adding that both sides may await the outcome of the November 17 presidential election before fresh negotiations.

Direct peace talks were put on hold in April 2003 and diplomatic efforts since then to get the two sides talking have failed.

The assassination of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on August 12 added a new urgency to resume talks between the two sides over allegations that the LTTE was responsible for the killing. The rebels denied involvement.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in the drawn-out conflict

between 1972 and 2002 when the truce went into effect.

However, despite the ceasefire, hundreds of people have been killed and most of the deaths have been blamed on the Tigers and a rival faction.

Meanwhile, security was stepped up for Sri Lanka's two main presidential candidates on fears that they may be the targets of Tamil rebel assassins, the government said yesterday.

The security was increased after Ports Minister Mangala Samaraweera said he feared that Tamil Tiger rebels may launch attacks against Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and former premier Ranil Wickremesingh before the November 17 poll.

"Security for the two candidates was... strengthened and they were provided additional security personnel, vehicles and other logistics as directed by the president," a government statement said.

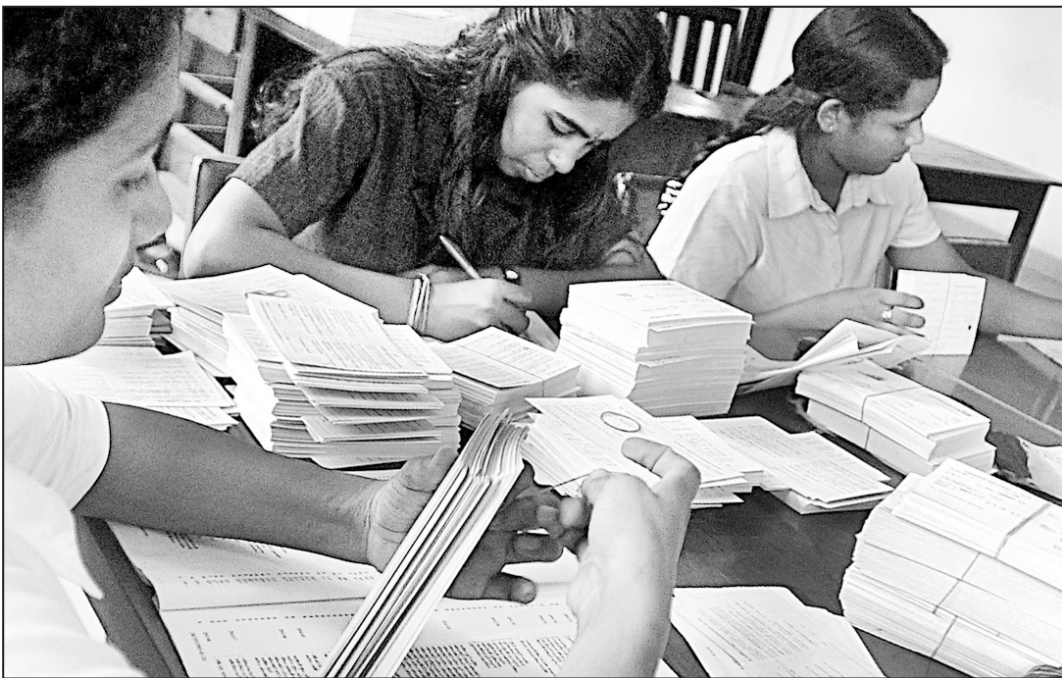


PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan election officials inspect polling cards before distributing them to voting stations in Colombo yesterday. Some 13.3 million men and women over the age of 18 years are eligible to vote in the elections in Sri Lanka, which has been torn apart by a more than three-decade-old ethnic conflict. Presidential elections are due to take place on November 17.

Nepal sets deadline to register for local polls

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Election Commission yesterday set a 30-day deadline for political parties to register for local polls early next year, state-run radio said, despite threats of a boycott.

"The political parties have 30 days to register for the polls at the commission's office effective from Thursday," state-run radio said, quoting Election Commissioner Keshab Raj Rajbhandari.

An alliance of seven of Nepal's major political parties this week said they would boycott the local elections in February 2006 because participation would legitimise a power grab by King Gyanendra.

The king wants to hold the elections a year after he sacked a coalition

government to curb criticism in the face of domestic protests and international pressure to restore democracy, an alliance party leader said.

"The election announcement was a cunning move of the king to confuse the international community to legitimise the unconstitutional government," Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist general secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal said. "We will not let it succeed."

The king said he seized power to stem a Maoist rebellion which has claimed more than 12,000 lives since 1996.

The local polls would be the first such elections held in nearly eight years. They cover 58 municipalities across the country and are scheduled

to be followed by parliamentary elections in 2007.

The last parliamentary elections were held in 1999, although the parliament was dissolved three years later.

On Wednesday, the seven-party alliance held a meeting on the eastern outskirts of Kathmandu and agreed to actively boycott the polls as well as move to hold talks with the rebels to get them to turn a three-month unilateral ceasefire announced in early September into lasting peace.

"We haven't formed any committee but the top leaders have been given the onus to hold talks with the rebels," said Ram Chandra Poudel, general secretary of the largest party, the Nepali Congress.

India waits for Pak proposals to open Kashmir border

AFP, New Delhi

India said yesterday it was still waiting for Pakistani proposals on how to allow Kashmiris to cross the de facto border that divides the Himalayan region, in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake.

Since welcoming Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's suggestion of opening up the Line of Control (LoC) Tuesday, New Delhi has made no moves to allow Indian Kashmiris to cross over to aid stricken relatives.

The foreign ministry has asked Islamabad for concrete details of the plan and Indian officials say they are still waiting for a response.

"We are still waiting for operationalisation details," a foreign ministry official said.

Indian media reported that the government would not act until Pakistan, where some 3.3 million have been left homeless in the disaster, set out just how the historic crossings

would actually happen.

Neither the Indian high commissioner in Islamabad nor his counterpart in New Delhi have been in touch with the foreign ministries in their host nations, the Hindustan Times said.

India's director-general of military operations, Lieutenant General Madan Gopal, made it clear New Delhi was in no hurry.

"Let the details be analysed by the Ministry of External Affairs. We will also have to look at the security concerns... there will be no let up in our vigil," he told reporters on Wednesday.

"There is no question of the entire LoC being opened up for relief operations. Certain routes can be opened up for relief operations" Gopal said.

India did respond quickly to calls from all sides for Indian Kashmiris to be allowed to telephone their relatives in Pakistan-held territory to see how they were faring after the October 8 quake.

