

Manmohan starts peace talks with Ulfa

AFP, New Delhi/Guwahati

India's prime minister yesterday held talks with representatives of a north-east separatist group with the aim of ending three decades of insurgency that has claimed 15,000 lives, an official said.

Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi said Manmohan Singh chaired the inaugural session of the talks with an 11-member civil society group, which the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) has chosen to represent.

The government did not mention if there would be future talks or specifics of the discussion and released a short statement after they concluded.

"I am willing to listen to whatever concerns that you may raise. I am willing to discuss issues bothering the people of Assam," Singh's media

advisor Sanjaya Baru quoted him as telling the delegation.

The Ulfa, a rebel group fighting for an independent homeland since 1979, last month nominated the 11-member People's Consultative Group led by noted Assamese writer Indira Goswami.

"The presence of the prime minister in the talks is in itself an indication of the sincerity of the Indian government in solving the insurgency problem in Assam," Gogoi told AFP.

"The talks would primarily try and work out a mutually acceptable peace process leading to formal declaration of a bilateral ceasefire between the Ulfa and the central government," Goswami told AFP.

The Ulfa representatives include journalists, human rights activists, a former football player, an engineer, a lawyer and a doctor.

The team of Ulfa representatives

arrived in New Delhi from Assam's main city Guwahati for the talks Tuesday.

"We have come for the talks with a positive frame of mind to facilitate and prepare the ground so that a ceasefire could be worked out and then direct talks between the Ulfa leadership and New Delhi could begin," said Haider Hussain, editor of the leading Assamese daily newspaper Asomiya Pratidin.

New Delhi last week formally invited the group for talks following a letter from the Ulfa offering to begin a formal dialogue.

"I look forward to a fruitful and positive discussion with the group in a constructive spirit," M.K. Narayanan, India's national security adviser, said in the letter inviting the Ulfa representatives for talks in New Delhi.

The last round of direct talks between Ulfa rebels and the Indian

government was held in New Delhi in 1992.

They ended abruptly after the five Ulfa rebels -- who were released from prison for the dialogue with then prime minister Narasimha Rao -- went underground.

"The situation then was quite different from now with the people of Assam clamouring for peace, and our leadership too is equally keen to resolve the conflict through negotiations," jailed Ulfa leader Pranati Hazarika told AFP in a local court in Assam.

The Ulfa is one of the most organized militant groups in India's northeast, where more than 30 rebel groups operate with demands ranging from secession to greater autonomy.

At least 15,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam since 1979 when the Ulfa, the state's first rebel group was founded.



Pakistani survivors offer their noon prayers on the roof of a collapsed mosque in one of the worst earthquake-hit areas, in Balakot, in the North West Frontier Province yesterday. The United Nations raised its appeal for emergency relief for Pakistani earthquake victims to more than half a billion dollars amid warnings that time is running out for millions of injured or homeless people. The death toll from Pakistan's massive quake is now 54,000.

Haemorrhagic fever case in quake zone

AFP, Bagh

A patient with a suspected case of highly contagious haemorrhagic fever has been airlifted from a Pakistani town devastated by the October 8 earthquake, health officials said yesterday.

Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) said it had not confirmed that the patient from the ruined town of Bagh was definitely suffering from the disease, which can cause death by massive internal bleeding.

"It is not a confirmed case but a highly suspected case," Krist Teirlinck, the Paris-based charity's coordinator for emergency operations in Pakistani Kashmir, told AFP.

"The patient has been evacuated by the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organisation (WHO)," he added.

The WHO confirmed that it had flown out a suspected case of Crimean Congo Haemorrhagic Fever from the area by helicopter, adding that the man was due to arrive shortly in the capital Islamabad.

Lebanon deploys troops near Syria border

AP, Beirut

Nearly 400 Lebanese soldiers have been deployed near the Syrian border after Lebanon demanded a militant Palestinian group hand over members who killed a Lebanese contractor, a security official said yesterday.

The official said dozens of elite commandos supported by tanks are among the deployment, which started moving into place late Tuesday near the remote southeastern village of Helweh, a few miles from the Syrian border.

The pro-Syria Fatah Uprising group has a training base in Helweh and members of the group on Tuesday allegedly shot dead Mohammed Ismail, a civilian contractor working for the Lebanese army, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was unauthorized to speak to the media.

Lebanese authorities are calling on the group to hand over those who killed the contractor, the official said.

But Fatah Uprising, one of several Damascus-based radical Palestinian factions with bases in Lebanon, has so far declined to turn any of its members over, claiming the group did not kill the contractor, the official added.



An Indian commuter rides his motorcycle in the flooded Hosur road in Bangalore yesterday. The fragile infrastructure of the southern Indian city of Bangalore is exposed yet again under heavy rains that left 10 people dead and several injured as the city recorded an all time monthly high of 524 mm of rainfall.

Saddam lawyers to boycott court

AFP, Baghdad

Lawyers representing Saddam Hussein announced yesterday that they will boycott the special tribunal trying the ousted Iraqi president until they are given better security.

"In view of the dangerous security conditions in Iraq and their impact on Iraqi members of the defence team, along with the never-ending threats against them and their families ... a decision has been taken to fully boycott the Iraqi Special Tribunal," said a statement issued by a Jordan-based team and lead Iraqi counsel Khalil al-Dulaimi.

The decision followed the killing of Saadun Janabi, an attorney representing one of Saddam's co-defendants, a day after the opening of the trial.

The statement, issued on behalf of "2,000 Iraqi lawyers belonging to Isnad's Arabic for support) international central committee", a Saddam defence group, also accused the judges on the tribunal of "violating" the rights of the defence lawyers.

"Given these circumstances, it is impossible to have a fair and open trial," it said.

Defence lawyers said their boycott

would last until their demands were met. They also appealed for a time freeze on proceedings in the meantime.

The trial, which opened on October 19 in Baghdad, was adjourned after just one day until November 28.

On Tuesday, a group of former foreign leaders backing the defence team called for a UN probe into Janabi's murder, while defence lawyers also appealed for UN protection.

In their statement, the lawyers put forward 10 conditions for ending their boycott, including an independent international investigation into Janabi's killing, UN protection for meetings of the defence committee and the hiring of 15 bodyguards per lawyer to ensure their protection.

They also asked to be allowed to carry weapons and to be given passes to get them through Iraqi and US security checkpoints. The lawyers also said they wanted assurances that security forces would not raid their offices or homes or tap their telephones, that money and documents confiscated from them be returned and that no lawyer be arrested without the bar association being informed of it.

UN DOUBLES ITS AID APPEAL

Pakistan facing new wave of deaths

AP, Muzaffarabad

Quake-ravaged Pakistan is facing a second catastrophe and a new wave of deaths if the world does not come forward to help survivors of the Oct. 8 earthquake before winter sets in, aid officials said yesterday.

The warning came as the United Nations appealed for nearly double what it previously sought from donor nations gathering Wednesday in Geneva to raise money for victims of the temblor, which is believed to have killed nearly 80,000 people most in the high Himalayan mountains of northern Pakistan.

Jan Egeland, the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said before the meeting that millions of lives were at risk, an apparent reference to the 3.3 million people left homeless by the 7.6-magnitude quake.

"Catastrophe looms large," said Rashid Khalikov, the UN humanitarian coordinator in this destroyed city.

"The danger is there that the loss of life would be very high if the required help does not reach them" before winter.

Pakistan's government raised the official death toll to 54,197 on Wednesday, with 78,000 injured. Central government figures have consistently lagged behind those by local officials, which put the death toll in Pakistan at about 78,000. A further 1,350 people died in Indian-held Kashmir.

Temperatures are already dipping below freezing in some areas of the mountainous north, and the weather is expected to worsen in coming weeks, cutting off remote valleys where some 800,000 people are believed to lack any shelter whatsoever.

Khalikov told The Associated Press the cold is already taking its toll on survivors, with winter still weeks off.

"What we have already in our hands is dramatic increases in respiratory diseases. There are a lot more cases of pneumonia, bronchitis and

other kinds of diseases that happen when people are exposed to the cold," he said.

Aid workers have just five weeks to get six months' worth of food supplies into the most remote areas of Pakistan before they are cut off, according to the UN World Food Programme.

"We are racing against time. We need to win the race before snow falls," said Simon Missiri, head of the Asia and Pacific operation of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

"We need more resources to save 2 million to 3 million lives and we need much more resources in the next few days," Egeland said hours before the donor meeting. The UN is now asking for \$549.6 million, up from the \$312 million it initially called for.

Despite the fresh warnings, the United Nations has said it has received less than 30 percent of the \$312 million it initially requested. Pakistan has said rebuilding the area will cost \$5 billion.

Trio seek tough UN resolution on Syria

AP, United Nations

The United States, France and Britain challenged the rest of the UN Security Council to adopt a tough resolution threatening sanctions against Syria if it doesn't cooperate fully with a UN investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

The pressure on Syria is likely to intensify Wednesday when a report by the UN special envoy on Syria-Lebanon, Terje Roed-Larsen, on disarming Lebanese militias is released. There are allegations Syria is continuing to smuggle arms to Palestinian militia groups in Lebanese refugee camps, in violation of a council resolution of September 2004 demanding that all militias be disbanded.

But Russia and China, which have veto power, and Algeria, the only Arab member of the council, have been hesitant to use the threat of sanctions

to back up a call for more Syrian cooperation.

A draft resolution circulated late Tuesday by the United States, France and Britain strongly backs a report by the UN investigating commission that implicated top Syrian and Lebanese security officials in Hariri's assassination and accused Syria of not cooperating fully with the probe.

The report brought swift denials from the Syrian government, which called it biased, politicised and an American plot to take over the region.

Syria's UN Ambassador Fayssal Mekdad told the council that every paragraph in the report deserved to be refuted. He insisted Syria "has cooperated faithfully and sincerely" and will continue to do so.

If adopted, the draft resolution would require Syria to detain anyone the UN investigators consider a suspect and allow the individual to be questioned outside the country or

without Syrian officials present. It would also immediately freeze the assets and impose a travel ban on anyone identified as a suspect by the commission.

The language appeared to be an effort to pressure Syria into giving the investigators access to top security officials possibly including the brother-in-law and brother of President Bashar Assad who may be implicated in Hariri's slaying.

Syria would also be required to renounce terrorism and "commit itself definitively to cease all support for all forms of terrorist action and all assistance to terrorist groups and to demonstrate this undertaking through concrete actions."

If Syria does not fully cooperate with the investigation, the draft says the council intends to consider "further measures," including sanctions, "to ensure compliance by Syria."

'Israel should be wiped off the map'

AFP, Tehran

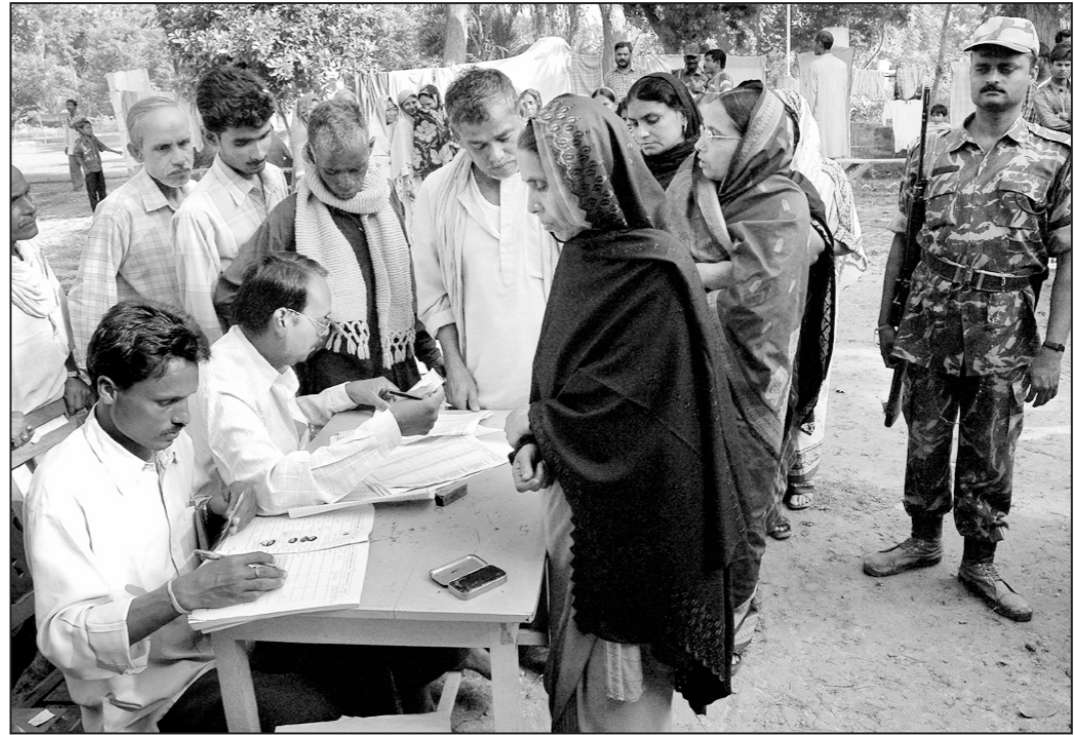
Iran's hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Wednesday openly called for Israel to be "wiped off the map".

"The establishment of the Zionist regime was a move by the world oppressor against the Islamic world," the president told a conference in Tehran entitled 'The World without Zionism'.

"The skirmishes in the occupied land are part of a war of destiny. The outcome of hundreds of years of war will be defined in Palestinian land," he said.

"As the Imam said, Israel must be wiped off the map," said Ahmadinejad, referring to Iran's revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

His comments were the first time in years that such a high-ranking Iranian official has called for Israel's eradication, even though such slogans are still regularly used at regime rallies.



A paramilitary trooper keeps guard as voters line up to cast their ballot during the second phase of state assembly elections in the Raghapur district in the lawless Indian state of Bihar yesterday. Federal and state officials posted about 90,000 police and paramilitary troops in the eastern state with orders to shoot troublemakers after threats by Maoist rebels to disrupt polling.



A gam (pod) of pilot whales lies beached in Marion Bay on the island state of Tasmania yesterday in a second mass stranding within 24 hours. Wildlife rangers said another 80 of the marine mammals beached themselves just hours after nearly 60 of the animals died in the same spot.

4 killed in bomb attack on Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

At least four people were killed and dozens more wounded yesterday in a Palestinian bomb attack in a marketplace in northern Israel, the first inside the Jewish state since July.

Responsibility for the attack in the town of Hadera was claimed by the Islamic Jihad movement which said it was in retaliation for the recent killing of its military commander for the West Bank.

Israeli private television said at least four people were killed when the blast ripped through an area around the town's marketplace.

A spokesman for the Magen David Adom ambulance service, Yeruham Mandola, said that at least 30 people had been wounded in the blast.

Local police commander David Sisso said that the attack had been carried out in the town's main market, adding that it was the work of a

suicide bomber.

The attack came just two days after militants from Islamic Jihad vowed to avenge the death of their military leader in the West Bank after he had been shot dead by Israeli soldiers.

All the main Palestinian militant groups were meant to be observing a truce until the end of the year but Jihad had said that the "cooldown can go to hell" after Louai Saadi, overall commander of its Al-Quds Brigades military wing in the West Bank, was shot dead on Sunday night.

A member of the movement, speaking in a phone call to AFP, said Jihad had carried out the attack in Hadera as an "initial response" to Saadi's death.

Jihad has already broken the truce on at least one occasion, including an attack near a shopping mall in the Israeli coastal city of Netanya in July which was said to have been masterminded by Saadi.

Only US seeks to justify abuse: HR Watch

AFP, Washington

The US Congress should reject a Senate bill if it includes a White House-proposed amendment that would allow the CIA to abuse prisoners during interrogations, a human rights group said Tuesday.

Human Rights Watch said that under President George W. Bush, the United States has become "the only government in the world to claim a legal justification for mistreating prisoners during interrogation."

"The administration is setting a dangerous example for the world when it claims that spy agencies are above the law," said Tom Malinowski, Washington director of Human Rights Watch.

"Congress should reject this proposal outright. Otherwise, the United States will have no standing to demand humane treatment if an

American falls into the hands of foreign intelligence services," he said in a statement.

The US Senate recently approved 90-9 a bill sponsored by Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham banning military and Central Intelligence Agency use of any "cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment."

However, the Bush administration has approached members of Congress to place a waiver in the bill that would allow the CIA to use cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment on foreign detainees in US custody outside the United States, Human Rights Watch said.

Last week, Vice President Dick Cheney and CIA director Porter Goss met with McCain to propose the presidential waiver for the proposed legislation, the New York-based rights group said.

The proposed waiver says the

measure "shall not apply with respect to clandestine counterterrorism operations conducted abroad, with respect to terrorists who are not citizens of the United States, that are carried out by an element of the United States government other than the Department of Defence," according to a copy of the proposal on the group's website.

"While many other governments practice torture and other forms of mistreatment and have records of abuse far worse than the United States, no other government currently claims that such abuse is legally permissible," Human Rights Watch said.

"This exception contains code language that could give the CIA a green light to treat prisoners inhumanely," said Malinowski. "If allowed to stand, it will render president Bush's past pledges about humane treatment meaningless."