

Tigers issue ultimatum to resume war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday issued a December 31 deadline for the new government to offer a "reasonable" political settlement to the country's ethnic conflict or risk a break-up of the island.

Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran -- in his much-awaited annual policy statement -- said new hardline President Mahinda Rajapakse should put forward a "reasonable political framework" before year's end.

"This is our urgent and final appeal," Prabhakaran said in a speech broadcast over the rebel Voice of Tigers radio.

"If the new government rejects our urgent appeal, we will, next year... intensify our struggle for self-determination, our struggle for

national liberation to establish self-government in our homeland."

Prabhakaran said his Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which have lost nearly 18,000 fighters in a separatist campaign since 1972, would intensify a campaign for independence unless Colombo agrees to their demand.

"Our people have lost patience, hope and reached the brink of utter frustration," Prabhakaran said in the speech, which concluded ceremonies honoring the Tiger "heroes" who died while battling government forces.

"They are not prepared to be tolerant any longer. The new government should come forward soon with a reasonable political framework that will satisfy the political aspirations of the Tamil people."

Prabhakaran made no direct offer

of peace talks in response to a call by Rajapakse who, in his first address to parliament on Friday, asked the guerrillas to enter talks under a brand new peace process.

"This new government is extending its hand of friendship towards us and is calling our organisation for peace talks," he said. "It claims that it is going to adopt a new approach towards the peace process."

"Having carefully examined his policy statement in depth, we have come to a conclusion that President Rajapakse has not grasped the fundamentals, the basic concepts underlying the Tamil national question," he added.

The rebel leader said Norwegian-backed peace efforts had failed to address the grievances of minority Tamils living in the South Asian island

nation's embattled northern and eastern regions, much of which are under Tiger control.

"The past four years of the peace process have miserably failed to address the most urgent humanitarian needs faced by hundreds of thousands of Tamil refugees displaced by war and by the recent tsunami, giving rise to hopelessness and disillusionment among our people," he said.

Prabhakaran said the distance between "him (the president) and us is vast" but said the rebels were willing to wait for Rajapakse's next move before talking decisive action "next year".

More than 60,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's drawn-out separatist conflict. Four previous peace attempts ended in failure and led to more bloodshed.

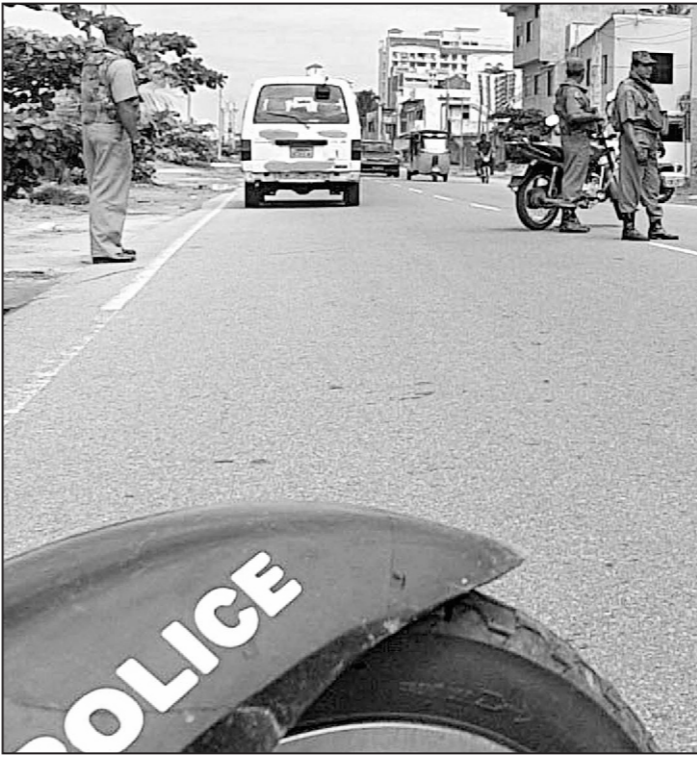


PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan policemen set up a roadside security check in Colombo yesterday. Sri Lanka stepped up security as Tamil Tiger rebels announced their annual policy statement at the end of ceremonies honouring 17,000 of their war dead.

Tremor should have been 'healing moment' for Kashmir: Benazir

AFP, London

The earthquake in Pakistan could have helped break the political stalemate with India over disputed Kashmir, former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto said yesterday.

Benazir criticised the response of President Pervez Musharraf's military regime to the October 8 disaster as too slow and claimed a civilian government would have been "more responsive" to people's needs.

"When the earthquake took place in ... a political faultline (Kashmir), the Indian government offered to help Pakistan but initially we refused the help," Benazir told BBC television.

"Now, when people are dying, you don't really look at who's offering the help. You take it. The first issue should be to help the people."

India and Pakistan agreed last

month to open five border crossing points along the UN-designated Line of Control dividing Kashmir between the two countries.

The accord -- signed after the 7.6-magnitude quake that killed more than 73,000 people in northern Pakistan and Pakistani Kashmir and left millions homeless -- also allowed aid convoys to access the region.

Benazir -- who governed Pakistan between 1988 and 1990 and again from 1993 to 1995 -- drew comparison with earthquakes in Turkey, when Greece was swift in offering help.

Stating that the Pakistan earthquake should have been a "healing moment" for Kashmir, she said of the developments on the border: "It was too little, too late."

"Not enough advantage was taken of the momentum for bringing people together that could have taken place."



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Kashmiri residents cross a bridge on the Line of Control, dividing Kashmir between Pakistan and Indian Nauseri-Tithwal Saturday. A second group of nine Kashmiri civilians from Indian-held Kashmir crossed on foot for the first time in 60 years to check on the safety of relatives on the other side after the October 8 quake which killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and 1,300 in Indian Kashmir.

Snow, rain disrupt Pak quake relief

REUTERS, Islamabad

Rain and snow fell over Pakistan's earthquake zone yesterday disrupting both air and road relief operations, aid officials said.

The Meteorological Department said up to eight inches (20 cm) of snow had fallen in some high-altitude areas and up to 32 mm (1.2 inches) of rain had fallen in some lower areas.

"Flights are off for today," said a spokesman for the UN World Food Programme (WFP) in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir.

An official of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said their air operations had also been called off because of the weather.

The Oct. 8 earthquake killed more than 73,000 people, most of

them in the Pakistani Himalayas, and seriously injured a similar number.

A race against time is on to ensure hundreds of thousands of homeless survivors are given adequate shelter and enough food to see them through a bitter winter.

Aid officials say disease could sweep through cold, poorly nourished survivors of Pakistan's worst natural disaster, causing a second wave of death.

The ICRC official said good weather up to now meant aid deliveries were slightly ahead of schedule, but prolonged bad weather would be a worry.

"We have been very lucky -- or the survivors have -- that we've been able to fly for a month without interruption," said Pauli Immonen, in charge of ICRC air operations.

Quake kills 10 in Iran

AFP, AP, Tehran

At least ten people were killed and scores more injured yesterday when a powerful earthquake measuring at least 5.9 on the Richter scale struck an island off Iran's southern coast, officials said.

The quake hit Qeshm island at 1:53 pm (1023 GMT) and was felt for more than 10 seconds, the official news agency IRNA said.

"Ten people have been killed. The number of injured has increased to around 100," the governor of Qeshm island, Heydar Alishbandi, told AFP by telephone as he toured the affected area.

"Five villages have suffered dam-

age of between 40 and 70 percent. Most of the houses are made of mud bricks so are now unsafe," he added.

The Gulf island, home to some 100,000 people, is situated off the coast from the large port city of Bandar Abbas.

Iranian state television put the intensity of the quake at 5.9 on the Richter scale, but the US Geological Survey put the magnitude of the quake slightly higher at 6.1.

The rocky and barren island was hit almost two years after the southeastern city of Bam -- situated 300 kilometres (190 miles) to the north -- was destroyed in a quake that killed tens of thousands of people.

Qeshm, located 1,150 kilometres

southeast of Tehran, has a busy commercial and fishing port and is also a popular weekend sunshine getaway for Iranian tourists.

However the governor said the island's main town, also called Qeshm, was undamaged. The affected villages were identified as Gabardin, Tonban, Karvan, Tourian and Khaldin -- all situated in the less densely populated west of the island.

"The rescue operation started 10 minutes after the incident. The injured are being taken away by helicopter," the head of the Iranian Red Crescent's rescue unit, Shahram Alamdari, told Iranian media.

"We are also ready to receive the injured in Tehran," he said.

China apologises to Russia for toxic spill

Water supply restored in Chinese city

AFP, AP, Beijing

China has apologised to Russia over a toxic belt of benzene flowing down river toward Siberia and has pledged to inform its neighbour of pollution levels, state press said yesterday.

Running water was restored in a major Chinese city yesterday, five days after a shutdown caused by a chemical spill, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

Water supplies resumed in Harbin at 6 p.m., Xinhua said in a short dispatch. It did not give any more details.

Resumption of service occurred five hours earlier than scheduled. But

it was not immediately clear whether it would continue or whether the entire city had its supply restored.

Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing informed Russian ambassador Sergei Razov about the pollution situation along the Songhua river in northeastern Heilongjiang province and expressed regret over any damage that may be done when the toxic slick enters Russia, Xinhua news agency said.

"On behalf of the Chinese government, I express regret over the possible harms to be done to the Russian people by the major environmental pollution accident," Li was quoted as telling Razov

on Saturday.

"China fully understands and attaches great importance to the concerns of the Russian side."

The environmental disaster began when some 100 tons of benzene was dumped into the river after a huge explosion at a chemical plant on November 13 in Jilin province, nearly 1,000 km up river from China's border with Russia.

The calamity has been widely seen as a reflection of China's dismal environmental situation, which has been largely ignored during 25 years of fast-paced economic growth.