

Lanka asks Norway to save peace move amid war fear

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka said yesterday it has asked Norway to keep trying to broker peace with Tamil Tiger rebels, amid a recent spate of violence which has killed 29 and raised fears that the country could slip back into war.

The new government of President Mahinda Rajapakse -- who had earlier promised to overhaul the peace bid and review the role of the Norwegians -- made a U-turn and asked Oslo to stay on.

The president told Norwegian ambassador Hans Brattskar to keep up the effort even though two key government allies had earlier insisted that Norway should be expelled from the faltering peace process.

"President Rajapakse invited the Royal Norwegian government to

continue its role as facilitator to the peace process in Sri Lanka," a government statement said.

Norway reacted cautiously and said it would continue its efforts under unspecified conditions.

"Our initial reaction is that it is positive that we have been asked to continue our work. This is a vote of confidence," said Erik Solheim, Norway's minister of international development who has been mediating for more than five years.

"But we want to make sure we agree with the government as well as with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) on the conditions before we accept to take on that role again," he told AFP in Oslo.

Rajapakse also met envoys of the "co-chairs" -- the United States, the European Union, Japan and Norway -- who are leading efforts to

raise money in support of peace.

"The president met with the four co-chairs and briefed them on his ongoing consultations and preparatory work for the continuation of the peace process," the statement said.

There was no immediate reaction from the LTTE, which had earlier warned against any unilateral action on the peace initiative.

The government separately appealed for foreign help to salvage the troubled ceasefire by mounting pressure on the Tigers who have been blamed for the latest violence.

The army, navy and air force chiefs held emergency talks with field commanders in the northern peninsula of Jaffna where 17 soldiers have died since Saturday, officials said.

Another 11 people have been killed in the island's east while a powerful

explosion Wednesday killed one and injured seven in the northern town of Vavuniya, police said.

"The service commanders are taking a closer look at the defences in the area and want to change some of the tactics," a top military official in the north said when contacted by telephone.

While senior commanders visited Jaffna, suspected Tiger rebels lobbed a grenade at a police vehicle on Tuesday night, officials said, adding that the passengers escaped unhurt.

The Norwegian-led truce monitoring mission sought to play down the violence and echoed the Colombo government's call for international pressure to help maintain the ceasefire in force since February 2002.



PHOTO: AFP

Leaders of the 57-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) pose during a photo opportunity at the Al-Safa palace in the holy Muslim city of Makkah yesterday. The leaders opened their two-day summit with a Saudi call for moderation and tolerance and a rejection of extremist violence.

BJP presses Sonia to quit government job

AFP, New Delhi

India's opposition turned its attack on ruling Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi yesterday after one of her closest ministers quit over charges that he and the party skimmed the UN oil-for-food scheme in Iraq.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) demanded Gandhi resign her post as head of the National Advisory Council, an important government-appointed body.

"Why have one standard for Natwar Singh and another for Sonia Gandhi?" demanded BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani in parliament.

Advani's demand came after the resignation late Tuesday of former foreign minister Natwar Singh from the cabinet.

NUCLEAR DEAL WITH INDIA

Congress threatens to throw out Bush plan

AFP, Washington

The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee warned Tuesday that Congress would throw out any "opaque" plan by the Bush administration to forge unprecedented civilian nuclear cooperation with India.

President George W. Bush agreed to give India, which is not a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), access to civil nuclear energy technology under a deal he signed with Prime

Minister Manmohan Singh in July.

But India has to first separate its civilian and military nuclear programmes and place its nuclear reactors under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections.

Under US law, the deal also has to be approved by the US Congress.

"While the Bush Administration has, I think, been very clear in discussions with the Indian government about its expectations, let me emphasize that any Indian plan will have to pass muster with the United States Congress," Republican

Senator Dick Lugar said.

"That should not be viewed as a threat, but rather as a political challenge that must be met," he told senior Indian policy makers and business leaders gathered in Washington for a US-India Strategic Dialogue.

Under the July deal, the United States also agreed to lobby allies in the Nuclear Suppliers Group for full civil nuclear energy cooperation and trade with India.

Gunmen rescue Saddam judge plot suspect

3 policemen killed

AFP, Kirkuk

Gunmen ambushed a hospital yesterday to free a detainee held over a plot to murder a judge investigating Saddam Hussein, as deadly violence continued in Iraq ahead of a crucial general election.

Shootings, bombings and foreign hostage takings have provided a bloody backdrop to the dramatic trial of the deposed Iraqi dictator, which has captivated the world with its harrowing tales of torture and murder.

Three policemen were killed when around 20 gunmen stormed into the main hospital in the northern oil centre of Kirkuk to free one of 12 detainees arrested last Saturday over a plot to assassinate chief investigating judge Raed Juhi.

"They freed the detainees after opening fire on the policemen guarding his room. Three of them were killed and six wounded," said Captain Salam Abdel Qader, in charge of security at the hospital.

The prisoner belonged to an Islamist cell linked to al-Qaeda that

had planned to murder Juhi but was smashed by police in Kirkuk.

Persistent insecurity and attacks against security forces are exacerbating concerns not only about stability ahead of the December 15 election but also the prospects for the country after a permanent parliament is elected.

Forty police officers and recruits were killed in a twin suicide bombing at the Baghdad police academy on Tuesday, in the worst such attack on security forces in weeks.

NAGA REBELS SAY

Truce in danger

AFP, Guwahati

A powerful separatist rebel group in India's northeast threatened yesterday to end a ceasefire if no progress is made in fresh peace talks planned next week with the Indian government.

The negotiations on the Naga tribals' demands for a homeland in the remote northeast will be held in Bangkok December 15 and 16, a rebel leader said.

"There can be no solution without merging all Naga-inhabited areas in the northeast and if our rights are denied we shall have no option but to pull out of the ceasefire," senior guerrilla leader Kraibo Chawang told AFP.

The two sides agreed to a ceasefire in 1997 as part of a drive

aimed at ending one of South Asia's longest-running insurgencies that has cost at least 25,000 lives.

Last December hopes were high that an end to the dispute could be in sight. But the mood has soured since then and the Naga rebels have been complaining bitterly about what they say is a lack of progress in talks with New Delhi.

"The talks are delicately poised," Chawang said by telephone from Dimapur, the commercial hub of Nagaland state.

"The Indian government's response to our demands will be very crucial in deciding whether or not the peace process continues."

The talks will be held between the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland led by Isak Chishi Swu

and T. Muivah and Indian negotiators, led by the minister for programme implementation, Oscar Fernandes, Chawang said.

There was no immediate official comment from the government on the threat to end the truce. But a home ministry official speaking on condition of anonymity said the government was aware of the "belligerent mood" among the Nagas.

"A single wrong move at this stage could well jeopardize the eight-year-old peace process," the official said. "We've worked out certain back-up plans and ideas that will be shared with the Naga leadership during the talks."

US shifts to ban cruelty to detainees abroad

CIA prison row clouds talks with EU

REUTERS, AFP, Kiev

The United States said yesterday it had changed its policy on interrogations of detainees, putting a worldwide ban on US personnel subjecting prisoners to cruelty, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said.

"As a matter of US policy, the United States' obligations under the CAT (Convention against Torture), which prohibits cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment -- those obligations extend to US personnel wherever they are, whether they are in the United States or outside of the United States," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said.

US officials said her comments,

made during a trip to Ukraine, marked a policy shift toward the international convention on torture. It follows strong pressure from Europe and the US Congress.

Previously, the Bush administration had interpreted the convention as only applying to US territory.

Human rights groups have said the United States has exploited that loophole to mistreat prisoners in places such as Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay.

The move is also an important concession in US domestic politics where Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona and a former prisoner of war who was mistreated in Vietnam, has pressed the administration to close the

loophole.

Until Wednesday, the administration, led by Vice-President Dick Cheney, had resisted legislation proposed by McCain that was widely backed in Congress.

Rice was in Brussels yesterday for talks with EU and Nato counterparts which was clouded by continuing controversy over alleged CIA prison flights to Europe.

Rice, on the last leg of a four-country European tour, was set to join fellow ministers from both bodies at an informal dinner Wednesday evening, before a formal Nato ministerial meeting on Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranians mourn as they identify the bodies of loved ones at Tehran's forensic department yesterday following Tuesday's plane crash. The International Federation of Journalists called yesterday for a probe into the crash of an Iranian military C-130 airplane, which the association described as the "worst-ever" accident involving journalists.

Likud chairman defects to Sharon party

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli cabinet minister Tzahi Hanegbi, the acting chairman of the right-wing Likud party, has joined the ranks of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's new Kadima party, army radio said yesterday.

Hanegbi, a minister without portfolio, was to call a press conference later in the day to announce his surprise defection.

He is the sixth member of the cabinet to split from Likud and join Sharon in Kadima since the prime minister formed his new party last month.

The move came amid reports that police are to recommend Haegbi's prosecution on charges of cronyism during his time as environment minister.

While the other five Likud ministers to have joined Sharon were seen as close allies of the premier, Hanegbi was regarded as an opponent of his controversial decision to pull troops and settlers out of the Gaza Strip.

As the interim head of the Likud

central committee, the party's main governing body, Hanegbi was to have played a key role in organising the elections to replace Sharon.

Party primaries are due to take place on December 19 and it was not immediately clear if Hanegbi's decision would affect the timetable.

Hanegbi's defection will be another major blow to Likud, which won 38 out of the 120 seats in the Knesset at the last election but is now projected to win only a dozen, according to an opinion poll published in the Haaretz newspaper on Wednesday.

The survey found Kadima was on course to emerge as the largest party with 39 seats, comfortably ahead of the centre-left Labour with 22.

A general election is due to be held on March 29.

Before the announcement, there were widespread reports that police were about to submit a file on Hanegbi to the state prosecutor, which contained enough evidence to justify pursuing a case through the courts.

ZAWAHRI VIDEO SAYS

Laden still leading war against West

REUTERS, Dubai

al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahri has urged Mujahideen to attack oil sites in Muslim states and said Osama bin Laden's battle against the West was only just beginning.

"I bring a message of joy to all Muslims and mujahideen that al-Qaeda, thanks to God, is spreading and expanding and strengthening. Zawahri said in a video posted on a Web site frequently used by militants.

"Its prince Sheikh Osama bin Laden, may God protect him, is still leading its jihad (holy war)," Zawahri said.

The first apparent confirmation in a year from a top al-Qaeda official that bin Laden was still alive was followed later in the lengthy interview by a call to target oil installations.



"I call on Mujahideen to concentrate their attacks on Muslims' stolen oil, most of the revenues of which go to the enemies of Islam while most of what they leave is seized by the thieves who rule our countries," he said.

New Tory leader to test mettle in showdown with Blair

David Cameron faces his first test yesterday as Britain's new opposition leader at the weekly prime minister's questions in parliament -- a battle of wits with Tony Blair over burning political issues.

Fresh from his decisive victory Tuesday as Conservative Party leader, the telegenic, eloquent and youthful Cameron will fire the opening shots in a revitalized campaign aimed at returning his party to power.

And newspaper pundits say Cameron -- the fifth Conservative leader to face Blair -- has raised hopes he will produce the first credible opposition to Blair's Labour Party since it swept into Downing Street in 1997.

India to buy 16 more Russian MiG jets

AFP, Moscow

India is to buy 16 MiG-29K fighter jets from Russia under a deal agreed during this week's visit by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Moscow, the Izvestia newspaper said yesterday.

The jets are to be modified for use on aircraft carriers, the newspaper said, noting that India recently bought a Russian aircraft carrier, the Admiral Gorshkov.

The newspaper gave no details on the financial cost of the deal, or the timescale for delivery. However the RIA-Novosti quoted a senior MiG official, Mikhail Globenko, as saying the deal included the setting up of a centre in India for servicing the jets.

The fighter jets will be an updated version of MiG fighter jets Russia previously supplied to India, the news agency said.