

## Lanka prepares for war, hopes for peace

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's armed forces do not expect the island's shaky peace process to collapse into war but were ready for battle and could defeat Tamil Tiger rebels if the need arose, the country's defence chiefs said yesterday.

Fourteen soldiers were killed in two separate attacks in the minority Tamil dominated north earlier in the week in the biggest breaches of a 2002 ceasefire to date, and the military said the rebels were trying to provoke the army into reacting.

"We have fought some very high intensity battles," said army commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, an infantry veteran of the two decades of war that preceded the ceasefire. "Compared to that, this situation is nothing. We don't have any trigger-happy people who will fire everywhere."

The Tigers have denied responsibility for the attacks in the northern government-held Jaffna Peninsula, cut off from the rest of Sri Lanka by the de facto state the rebels control.

But few analysts or diplomats believe them and an organisation labelled a Tiger front group by some has claimed responsibility on the Internet.

Chief of Defence Staff Admiral Daya Sandagiri said troops were alert but that the government was keen to talk to the rebels and did not anticipate a return to the full-scale war that has already killed some 64,000.

"If we have to decide between the ceasefire agreement and conducting an offensive, we are certainly not thinking of an offensive at the moment," he told a news conference. "The armed forces are good and ready. That does not mean we are expecting a war."

The military had no evidence the Tigers were planning a return to war either, he said, but should it come the armed forces were confident they could defeat the rebels on the battlefield.

"We are prepared," he said. "We have the superior position. There is no doubt about it."

Analysts say that although both the Tigers and new President Mahinda Rajapakse's government say they want new peace talks, the gulf between them is vast and that as tension rises war becomes an increasing possibility.

Rajapakse -- whose Buddhist and Marxist allies oppose any concessions to the rebels -- largely owes his November election win to a Tiger boycott that kept away Tamil voters seen likely to support his more conciliatory opponent. Some fear it is a sign the rebels have lost interest in the peace process.

Army chief Fonseka said that any conflict, if it came, would likely be a conventional war in the north -- where Tigers and government positions already face each other across a desolate no-man's land of bombed palm trees and landmined lagoons.

But in the east, where the Tigers hold only pockets of ground and are clashing with a breakaway group of rogue rebels who many believe the government may be backing or at least ignoring, conflict would be more "unconventional", he said.

Diplomats say they still believe war can be averted. Some Western envoys say clamping down on Tiger fundraising among Tamil communities in Europe, Australia and North America might help bring them to the table, but others warn it might push the rebels over the edge to war.



Sri Lanka's top military commander, Admiral Daya Sandagiri, (C) speaks to reporters yesterday in Colombo to announce that government forces were ready to meet any "terrorist challenge" after an upsurge in violence that killed 31 people, including 16 troops, in the island, while police chief Chandra Fernando (L), army commander Sarath Fonseka (2L) and air force chief Donald Perera (R) look on. Sandagiri said the military was also keen to uphold a truce with Tamil Tiger rebels.

## Salem, Dutt come face to face in Tada court

PTI, Mumbai

CBI yesterday produced extradited gangster Abu Salem before a Tada court, which amended charges filed against him in 1993 Mumbai serial bomb blasts case.

CBI had filed chargesheets earlier showing Salem as absconding accused. Since Salem was extradited to India from Portugal, it was required to amend the charges to change his status from absconding accused to regular accused.

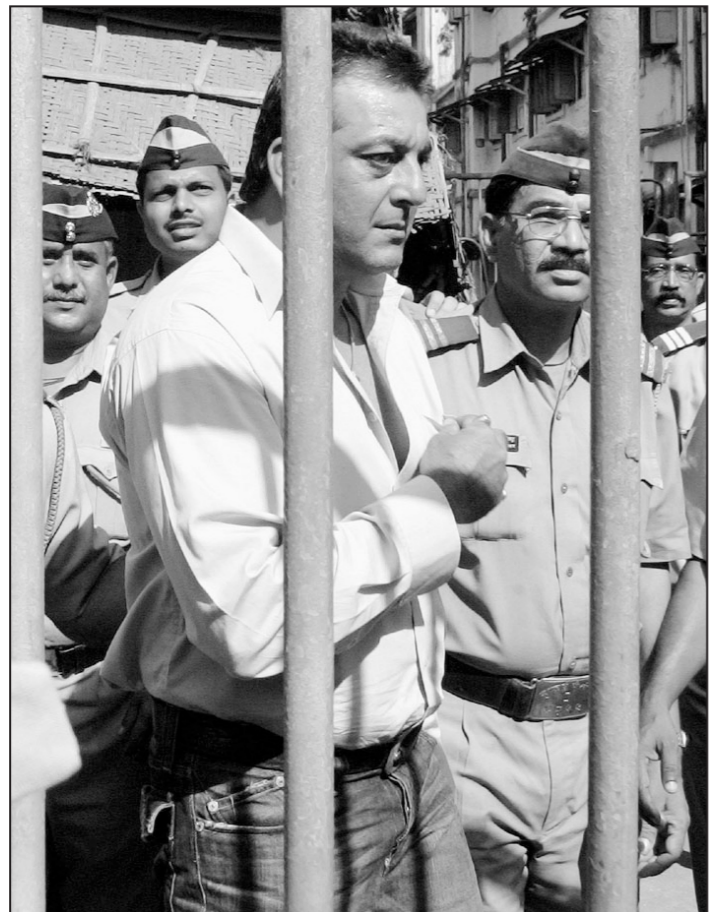
CBI informed the court it would file supplementary chargesheet against Salem within 30 days following which the charges would be read out to him.

CBI prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam also urged the court to conduct separate trial of Salem so that the trial of other accused should not suffer.

In keeping with the judicial directive, actor Sanjay Dutt and 84 other accused in blasts case also appeared before the court.

The court had summoned all the blast accused to appear for amending charges filed against Salem.

The court had ordered CBI to produce Salem for amending the charges showing him as an absconding accused in the chargesheet filed by CBI in 1993.



Indian film star Sanjay Dutt (C) leaves after attending a special court in Mumbai yesterday. For the first time Abu Salem, one of the most feared gangsters in the Indian underworld, and Sanjay Dutt were produced in the special court together along with 84 accused on bail.

## 3rd Indo-Pak bus link to have trial run

AFP, New Delhi

Nuclear rivals India and Pakistan will launch trial runs of a new bus service to connect their Punjab provinces from tomorrow, the Indian government announced.

The latest move to increase people-to-people ties as part of a slow moving peace process will link the Indian Sikh holy city of Amritsar with Lahore in Pakistan.

"The trial run of the Amritsar-Lahore bus service will take place on 11 December 2005 by the Indian operator and 13 December 2005 by the Pakistani operator," the foreign ministry said in a statement late Thursday.

"This trial run had earlier been scheduled for October 2005 but was postponed due to the (October 8 South Asian) earthquake," it said.

The quake claimed some 75,000 lives in Pakistan and Kashmir, the Himalayan region that is divided between the two neighbours and remains the main stumbling block in the peace process.

The Lahore-Amritsar bus, covering a 45km route, will link the two countries via their only international land crossing, at Wagah in the state of Punjab, a town that was split at partition in 1947.

The two countries launched their first bus link -- between the Indian capital New Delhi and Lahore -- in 1999.

## US plans Iraq, Afghan troop deployment cuts

Australia, Japan to extend Iraq mission

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

The US military has drawn up plans to cancel the deployment of two Army brigades to Iraq and one to Afghanistan next month in what could be the start of a reduction of US forces in those countries, defence officials said on Thursday.

But small groups from two brigades, which each include about 3,500 troops and hundreds of supporting soldiers, could be sent to help train Iraqi security forces, according to the officials, who asked not to be identified.

There are currently about 155,000 US troops in Iraq. President George W. Bush and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld are under mounting pressure from some members of Congress to begin reducing that force amid waning public support for the war.

Rumsfeld told reporters on Thursday that the United States planned to reduce its force in Iraq, recently bolstered to help protect

elections there on December 15, back down to the normal level of about 137,000 next year, but that going lower than that would be based on the security situation.

"I think that as we've said all along it's condition-based. And the reality is that the Iraqi security forces are improving in capability and experience every day, every week, every month," Rumsfeld said after meeting with members of Congress.

"We've plussed-up (added) considerably from 137,000 ... up to about 160,000 to be helpful during the election period," he said. "And we certainly expect to go back down to 137,000. If conditions permit we can go below that. But time will tell."

Defence officials have said that they are considering dropping the US force to about 100,000 by next summer, but stressed that no final decisions have been made.

Bush and Rumsfeld have refused to set any timetable for withdrawal from Iraq, where more than 2,100 Americans troops have died since the March 2003 US-led invasion that toppled President

Saddam Hussein.

Defence officials said the two Army brigades in question -- one from the 1st Armored Division headquartered in Germany and the other from the 1st Infantry Division based at Fort Riley, Kansas -- have been scheduled to replace US troops that will soon be rotated out of Iraq.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister John Howard indicated yesterday that Australia will extend the deployment of its troops to Iraq to continue guarding Japanese military engineers operating in the south of the country.

Japan announced on Thursday that it would keep its 600 troops in Iraq until late next year, around a year longer than planned.

Japan's Cabinet on Thursday approved the extension of the country's troop deployment in Iraq for one year, paving the way for the government to prolong Tokyo's largest military mission since World War II.

## 'Libi was coerced into linking Iraq with al-Qaeda'

AFP, Washington

A top al-Qaeda suspect whose testimony was used in part to justify the US-led war on Iraq said his statements linking Iraq to al-Qaeda were false and made under coercion in Egypt, The New York Times said Friday quoting current and former US officials.

While it was known that Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi recanted his statements in March 2004, this is the first time US officials admitted he had lied about the Iraq-Qaeda links to obtain better treatment from his captors, the daily said.

It is also the first public evidence that bad intelligence on Iraq may have been in part the result of the US policy of rendition, by which suspects are sent abroad for interrogation to skirt strict US rules against prisoner abuse, the daily added.

Libyan by birth, Libi was captured in Pakistan in late 2001 becoming the highest ranking al-Qaeda leader in US custody. He was held initially in Afghanistan but transferred to Egypt in January 2002, said the US officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

## US COMMANDER SAYS

## Laden is believed to be alive

AFP, Washington

The top US commander in Afghanistan said Thursday al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is still believed to be alive and US forces will not rest until he is captured or killed.

Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry said there was no reason to believe Bin Laden was killed in the earthquake that ravaged Pakistan October 8.

"Our working assumption is that he is alive today," Eikenberry told reporters here. "I will not speculate on his location."

US military leaders past have tended to downplay Bin Laden's significance despite his leading role in the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

## Strong cyclone heads for south India

AFP, New Delhi

A severe cyclonic storm was barreling down a narrow strait separating India and Sri Lanka and was expected to make landfall today, the Indian navy said yesterday.

The navy tracking the cyclone named Fanus said at 5:00 pm (1130 GMT) it was swirling 300 kilometres (186 miles) off the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and was likely to hit the districts of Kullur and Nagapattanam on Saturday.

"Fanus was declared a severe cyclonic storm and it is maintaining its intensity and moving in a west-northwesterly direction and is now landlocked between Sri Lanka and peninsular India," a naval meteorologist told AFP.

The cyclone swept harmlessly past the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Andamans earlier Friday.

## Protesters in China village shot by cops

AP, Beijing

Authorities have surrounded and sealed off a village in southern China where police fatally shot protesters in a dispute over land use this week, villagers said yesterday.

Thousands of people took part in Tuesday's demonstration in Dongzhou, a village in Guangdong province, international rights groups said. They were angry over plans to construct a wind power plant on local land.

Police fired into the crowd, killing at least two people, the reports said. Villagers have put the number as high as 10.

## Israel shuts Jerusalem crossing after stabbing

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel has temporarily closed the main crossing point between Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank after a Palestinian stabbed an Israeli soldier to death at a checkpoint there, the army said yesterday.

The shutdown came against a backdrop of spiralling violence this week, including Israeli missile strikes that have killed three militants in Gaza following a Palestinian suicide bombing that killed five Israelis.

## Poland was main CIA detention base in Europe: HRW

REUTERS, Warsaw

Poland was the heart of the CIA's secret detention network in Europe, with bases there until recently holding a quarter of the 100 detainees estimated held in such camps worldwide, a human rights group said.

Reports of the CIA operating secret jails in Poland and Romania as part of its war on terror have raised controversy on both sides of the Atlantic and dogged US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's European trip this week.

"Poland was the main base for CIA interrogations in Europe, while Romania played more of a role in the transfer of detained prisoners," Marc Garlasco, a leading analyst at Human Rights Watch, was quoted by Polish daily Gazeta Wyborcza on Friday as saying. Garlasco said the CIA had set up two detention centers in Poland, which were closed shortly after the Washington Post published an article about secret prisons last month.

He said the allegations were based on information from CIA sources and other documents obtained by Human Rights Watch. "We have leads, circumstantial evidence to check but it's too early to reveal them," Garlasco said.

Polish authorities have repeatedly denied the existence of secret jails of any form on Polish territory, with Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz saying this week he would fully cooperate in human rights probes into the allegations.

Poland is one of Washington's leading allies in Europe, where it irked EU heavyweights Germany and France by backing the US war with Iraq and sending troops there.

European countries responded to public pressure by seeking answers from Washington before Rice's trip, but quickly retreated in the face of her defence that the United States respected their sovereignty and acted within the law in its war on terrorism.

## SECRET CIA PRISON ROW Rice woos Europe's politicians, not people

REUTERS, Brussels

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice won a reprieve from European governments over the US treatment of detainees this week but public pressure is unlikely to ease over allegations of secret CIA jails.

On a trip that ended on Friday, Rice aimed to defuse anger that has raged across the continent since a newspaper report early last month said the United States held suspects in clandestine jails in eastern Europe.

Allies, who had responded to public pressure by seeking answers from Washington before Rice's trip, quickly retreated in the face of her defence that the United States respected their sovereignty and acted within the law in its war on terrorism.

Governments had little appetite to reopen a transatlantic rift after

clashes over the Iraq war and avoided digging too deeply into accusations that could expose their own tactics against militants.

But Rice's refusal to answer the allegation of secret prisons has left a lightning rod for anger among European publics already critical of the United States over detainee abuse scandals in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

That means Europeans will continue to demand their leaders extract answers from Washington, Charles Kupchan of the Washington-based thinktank the Council on Foreign Relations said.

"Rice and her counterparts were successful at creating the image of a unified front," he said. "But I doubt this issue is going to be defused by the atmospherics in the realm of high politics."

## Asean FMs put pressure on Myanmar over reform

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Southeast Asian foreign ministers turned up the pressure on Myanmar Friday, expressing frustration over the military junta's unmet promises on rights and democracy that have embarrassed regional leaders.

At a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), host Malaysia said Myanmar had been given a clear message that it had to start backing up its words with actions.

"They talk about democracy. We want to see some movement that will show they are really leading towards that," said Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar.

"I don't think any single country in Asean does not feel impatient or does not feel uncomfortable, because it does create problems and difficulties for us," he said. "This

has created some embarrassment."

Myanmar opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest, and her National League of Democracy (NLD) party has boycotted talks on what the regime calls a "road map" to democracy.

The international community, including the United Nations, European Union and United States, has dismissed the on-again off-again talks, which the junta insists are intended to set up a constitution, as a sham.

Syed Hamid said the criticism had hurt the credibility of the 10-nation Asean bloc, which decided to bypass the country in rotating alphabetical order and hold its next summit in the Philippines instead.

He said Asean could try to send a committee to visit the poor and secretive country, which has

blocked UN envoys from visiting in recent years, to see what progress it was making in improving its human-rights situation.

"One of the things that we have discussed is to ensure that we will work together to ensure that Myanmar comes out with some tangible results," Syed Hamid said.

"I think they understood that message. We hope they will take the necessary step without us wanting to interfere in their internal affairs," he said.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Hasan Wirayuda said Asean's foreign ministers, meeting here ahead of a two-day regional summit starting on Monday, had been critical during Friday's discussions.



The UPA Chairperson and president of All India Congress committee, Sonia Gandhi (R) talks with earthquake survivors at Sultan Daki, some 120km north west of Srinagar yesterday. Sonia flew to the forward areas of Poonch, 250km northwest of Jammu, to spend three hours with the tremor affected people on her 59th birthday.