

Lanka irked over Norway remarks on peace bid

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka has expressed concern over Norway's remarks that it would only resume the role of peace broker in a three-decade ethnic conflict if both sides agree to a set of conditions, a press report said yesterday.

Colombo expressed "concern" over the remarks made last week by Norwegian International Development Minister Erik Solheim, the Sri Lankan Sunday Times said, adding that it would raise the issue with Norway's ambassador.

"The ministry has also been told to express the government's displeasure over why Mr. Solheim had gone public in the international media over this matter when it should have been raised with the government," the newspaper said.

A foreign ministry spokeswoman said she could not comment on the report which came a day after Tamil Tiger rebels asked Norway to arrange an urgent meeting with the government to save a troubled truce in place since 2002.

Pakistan, India plan to resume ferry service

S Asian rivals test new bus link

AFP, REUTERS, Karachi/Lahore

Pakistan and India have finalised a draft agreement, which would pave the way to restart a ferry service between them that was broken off 30 years ago, officials said yesterday.

The South Asian nuclear rivals have also conducted a successful trial run of a bus service linking Amritsar to Lahore yesterday.

The two countries agreed on a draft Saturday to revise a shipping protocol between them after three days of talks here, Anwer Shah, director general of Pakistani ports and shipping ministry told AFP.

The revised protocol would allow Pakistan and India to lift third country's cargo from each other's ports,

he said.

The protocol would be signed after completion of necessary formalities by the two governments, but he gave no specific date.

"With our agreement to delete contentious parts of the old document (1975 protocol) we have agreed to provide freedom of navigation to lift third country's cargo from each other ports," Shah said.

"Thus, we have successfully removed the final obstacle in the way of the Karachi-Mumbai ferry service," he said.

The service was broken off in 1975 with Pakistan saying bilateral trade was too thin and passenger numbers too low to make it viable.

"We have done at least 90 per cent of work and now it is up to the

cabinets of the two countries to formally endorse it," Shah said.

"We pointed out difficulties to the Indian counterparts vis-a-vis Pakistani seafarers for joining their vessels from Indian ports that has been acknowledged by the Indian delegation," said Shah.

"It (the protocol) would benefit thousands of Pakistani seafarers," he said.

The latest move to increase people-to-people ties and trade is part of a slow-moving peace process started in January 2004 between the South Asian rivals.

The two countries have also increased bus links and flights and opened their heavily militarised border in Kashmir after devastating October 8 earthquake that killed

more than 74,000 people.

Meanwhile, India and Pakistan yesterday conducted a successful trial run of a bus service linking Amritsar to Lahore as part of their cautious peace process.

The Indian bus, painted with the flags of both countries, left the Sikh holy town of Amritsar in Indian Punjab for Lahore in Pakistani Punjab 60 km to the west.

As the golden-coloured bus with Indian officials on board crossed the border point at Wagah, a Pakistani band greeted the vehicle, a witness said.

"I am so happy that I cannot explain it to you," bus driver Amreek Singh told NDTV 24/7 news television.

The bus later arrived in Lahore.

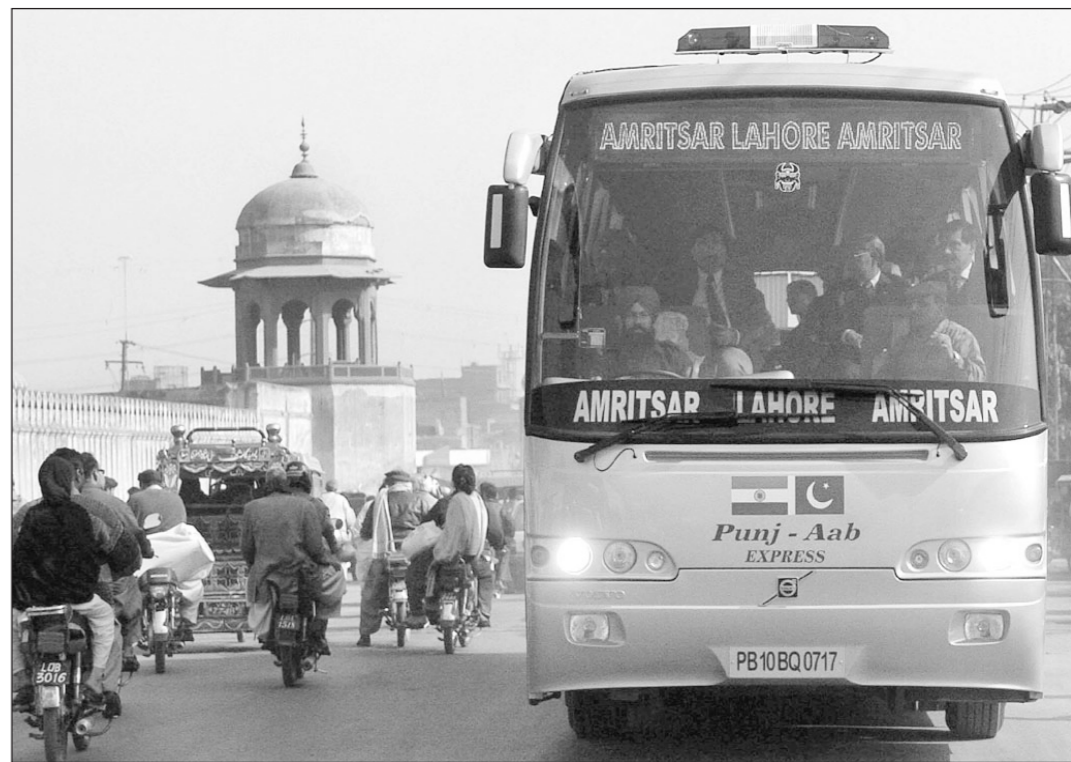


PHOTO: AFP

A bus carrying Indian and Pakistani officials arrives in Lahore from Amritsar after crossing the India-Pakistan border at Wagah as part of a trial run for a new bus service.

Massive explosions rock UK fuel depot

REUTERS, Hemel Hempstead

Explosions tore through a fuel depot north of London before dawn yesterday, creating a huge tower of smoke and flame and seriously injuring four people in what police said appeared to be an accident.

"All indications at this stage are that this was an accident. However clearly we will keep an open mind," Hertfordshire Chief Constable Frank Whiteley told a news conference after Britons, still on edge from July attacks in London, awoke to images of ram-paging fire and destruction.

Eye witnesses described a series of massive explosions at the Buncefield oil depot, just after 0600 GMT, spewing flames and a column of black smoke, smashing house windows and causing widespread damage.

More than four hours after the blast, a huge column of black smoke continued to billow several hundred feet into the air.

"It's probably the largest that I have seen ... in terms of actual fire size," the county's chief fire officer, Roy Wilsher, told a news conference.

Wilsher said the fire was under control but could burn for days and there could be more small explosions.

Nearby Luton airport and London's Heathrow said the huge pall of smoke could disrupt some services.

The Buncefield depot supplies petrol and fuel oils for a large part of southeast England. Oil is brought to the depot, near the town of Hemel Hempstead, in an underground pipeline from tankers unloading on Britain's east coast.

Whiteley said there were around 36 casualties, about four of whom suffered serious injuries.

"At the moment it looks as if we got off a lot more lightly than you would expect with an explosion of this size," he said.

The depot is jointly run by oil companies Total and Texaco.

Britain has been on edge for attacks since four suicide bombers blew themselves up and killed 52 commuters in July in London, but the police appeared to rule out any foul play in Sunday's blast.



PHOTO: AFP

A view of the remains of farm buildings at Highgrange and Punchbowl Lane as smoke and flames billow from Buncefield oil distribution depot near Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire, northwest of London yesterday.

SECURITY FOR THURSDAY'S POLLS Iraq announces border closure

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's government announced yesterday stringent security measures for the upcoming parliamentary elections, including the closure of all borders and airports, an extension of curfew hours and a ban on travel across provincial boundaries.

The Interior Ministry said the measures would take effect Tuesday two days ahead of the vote and last until early Saturday.

Under the restrictions, the curfew will be moved from midnight until 10 p.m. and last until 6 a.m.

All airports and borders will be closed from midnight Monday until 7 a.m. Saturday.

Iraqis vote Thursday in a watershed election for a parliament to steer the war-torn country towards full sovereignty nearly three years after the 2003 US-led invasion.

The ballot, the third election this year, marks a new beginning for Iraq

following the chaos of a lightning drive to oust Saddam Hussein, two transitional governments and the adoption of a constitution in October.

When the dust settles on the inevitable political horse trading, Iraqis will be left with a four-year parliament capable of carving out a new direction for the country, which is teetering on the tightrope of inter-communal tensions.

Moves towards democracy, marked by well-organised ballots and determined turnout, is a cornerstone of US policy in the Middle East with Washington increasingly focused on an ultimate exit strategy from Iraq.

But the success of the election and future prospects of stability hinge on turnout among the fallen Sunni elite, who boycotted the January 30 election for a transitional parliament, Iraq's first free vote in half a century.

Indian cops push back Bhutanese from Nepal

REUTERS, Kolkata

Indian police have stopped hundreds of exiled Nepali Bhutanese from entering India yesterday as they tried to return to Bhutan, officials said.

Over 100,000 ethnic Nepali Bhutanese live in camps in eastern Nepal on the border with India after Bhutan's king stripped them of citizenship or forced them to leave because they had campaigned for democracy in the Himalayan kingdom.

"They (the refugees) have been trying to cross into India in small groups on their way to Bhutan, but we have been pushing them back," police official S.L. Sarkar told Reuters from Siliguri, 650km north of Kolkata.

The refugees have to travel through West Bengal to reach Buddhist Bhutan from eastern Nepal.

Indian official in Nepal to push for democracy talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran arrived in Nepal yesterday at the start of a three-day visit aimed at nudging the royal government and disenfranchised political parties towards talks, officials said.

Saran is expected to meet with the leaders of the main political parties as well as King Gyanendra, who sacked a four-party coalition government in February and seized power.

"I came here to hold talks with my old friends in Nepal," Saran said on his arrival in Kathmandu.

Saran, a former Indian ambassador to Nepal, is expected to reiterate statements last month by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at a South Asian summit calling for the

restoration of democracy in Nepal.

Gyanendra, who said he sacked the government for its failure to stem a Maoist rebellion, has pledged to hold local elections in early 2006 and parliamentary elections in 2007.

But an alliance of seven leading political parties has rejected the gesture because they were not consulted and the polls would not address questions on the role of the monarchy.

Local newspaper reports said Saran was also likely to raise the issue of Nepal's import of arms from India's rival China last month.

India, the United States and Britain suspended arms shipments after the royal takeover.

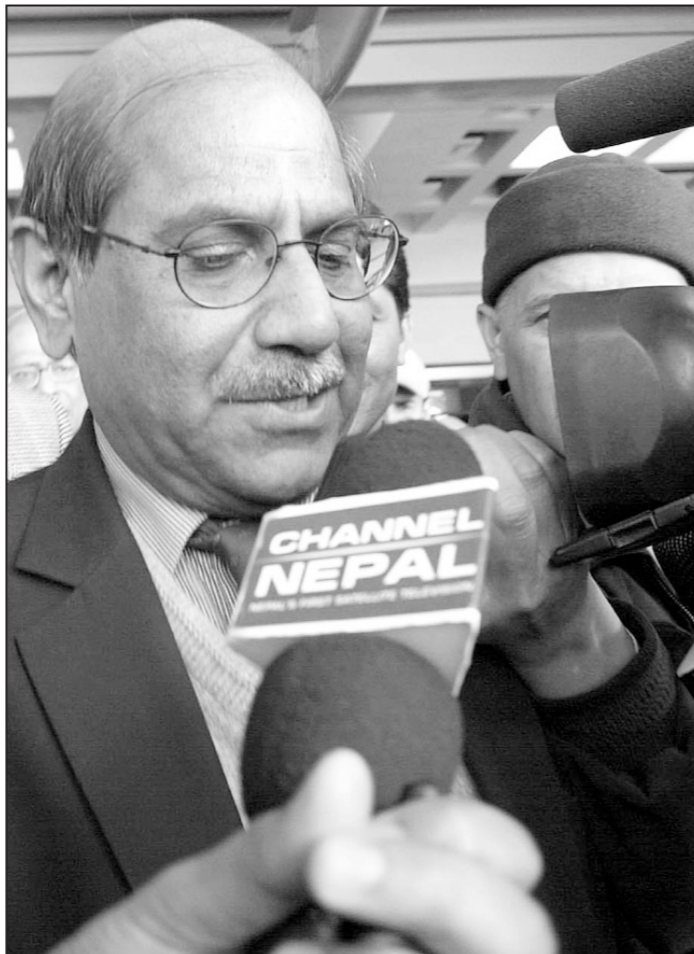


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran talks to media representatives upon his arrival at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu yesterday. Saran is scheduled to hold talks with King Gyanendra to push for the return of democracy in the Himalayan nation during his three-day visit to Nepal.