

Lankan president invites Tigers to talks abroad

Norway to remain peacemaker but on its own terms

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government has formally invited the Tamil Tigers to resume peace talks, saying it was "amenable" to a key guerrilla demand to hold negotiations abroad.

Government spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva told reporters that Colombo no longer insists that any future negotiations be conducted within the island.

New Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has invited the rebel Tamil Tigers to crunch talks amid escalating violence, which has battered fears of a return to Civil war, the government said yesterday.

"The President and the United National Party (UNP) have agreed

to resume talks with the LTTE," de Silva told reporters, referring to the main opposition party and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

"The President has informed the UNP delegation that he has invited the LTTE for talks with the government," de Silva said after a cabinet meeting.

"He sent a letter to the LTTE through Sri Lanka's Peace Secretariat and the Norwegian facilitators," he added. "The government is waiting for a response from the LTTE. We expect a positive response."

But Rajapakse's outright rejection of the Tigers' demand for an ethnic homeland in the north and east has been followed by a series of attacks on the military by suspected rebels, and many ordinary

Sri Lankans fear a return to civil war.

The LTTE have threatened to resume their two-decade struggle next year unless Colombo comes up with a viable power-sharing blueprint, saying this is its last chance to avert a return to a war in which more than 64,000 people have been killed.

The government was willing to talk to the Tigers in an Asian country, rowing back on the previous government's refusal to hold talks outside Sri Lanka, de Silva said.

"First we have to break the ice," he said.

The rebels were not available for comment on Rajapakse's invitation because telephone lines to north were either down or blocked by the military.

But the Tigers said on Tuesday they had not decided whether to accept a Japanese offer to host talks in Tokyo.

Earlier government spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva told reporters that Norway had agreed to remain in the role of peace maker even though President Mahinda Rajapakse won the November 17 election on a promise to overhaul the Norwegian-backed peace process.

Norway's foreign minister told his Sri Lankan counterpart Thursday that Oslo would continue trying to broker peace in the island's long-running ethnic conflict, but only under strict conditions.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian policeman stands guard in the main square of the West Bank town of Ramallah as supporters of Hamas hold up flags of the Islamic movement during a rally following the announcement of the results of Palestinian local elections late Thursday.

Hamas extends victory in Palestinian local polls

REUTERS, Ramallah

Hamas extended local election gains from the fractured ruling Fatah party yesterday and Israel said that if the Islamic militants won Palestinian political dominance it would end any hope for peacemaking.

Hamas, committed to destroying Israel, appeared to profit from division in Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah movement and gained an important boost ahead of a January parliamentary election from the latest West Bank polls.

Provisional results released on Friday by the electoral commission showed Hamas won control of the council in the West Bank city of Jenin following voting on Thursday. Hamas earlier won control of municipalities in Nablus and al-Bireh.

Thousands of Hamas supporters celebrated in the Gaza Strip, chanting "God is greatest" and waving their green flag. Final official results are expected on Saturday. Hamas also made a strong showing in three earlier rounds of local voting.

Support for Hamas has grown at the expense of Fatah, long accused by Palestinians of corruption and incompetence while now struggling to heal a rift between an old guard and younger members.

Although Hamas has not been widely expected to win the January 25 poll outright, the disarray in Fatah could significantly strengthen Hamas's chances in the first parliamentary ballot in which it will participate.

That has stirred worries in Israel since Hamas opposes negotia-

tions and has spearheaded a Palestinian uprising, though it has largely followed a 10-month-old truce.

"If Hamas were ever to dominate Palestinian politics, that would mean the end of the peace process," said Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has ruled out talks with Abbas on Palestinian statehood unless he disarms factions like Hamas, a process that is meant to begin under a US-backed peace road map. Hamas refuses to disarm.

One Israeli was hurt in a shooting in the West Bank on Friday. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

China hospital fire kills 39

AP, Beijing

A fire swept through a hospital in northeastern China on Thursday, killing at least 39 people, the government said.

Thousands of neighbours watched helplessly as patients jumped from windows on the third and fourth floors of the hospital after rescuers tried but failed to reach them, the official Xinhua News Agency said Friday.

The fire broke out Thursday at the largest hospital in Liaoyuan, about 75 miles southwest of Changchun, the capital of Jilin province, witnesses said.

An initial investigation showed the fire started in a power distribution room, according to Xinhua.

The remains of 24 people were found at the scene and 15 others died after being transferred to other hospitals, Xinhua said.

Iraq mistakenly freed terror kingpin Zarqawi

AP, Baghdad

Iraqi security forces caught terror leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi but released him because they didn't realize who he was, the deputy interior minister said Thursday, according to CNN.

The deputy interior minister, Hussein Kamal, said the Jordanian-born leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq was in custody sometime last year, but he wouldn't provide further details, CNN reported.

The report could not be confirmed, but a US official said in Washington that American intelligence believed it was plausible. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in compliance with office policy.

There have been several reports of missed opportunities to capture al-Zarqawi, including an April 28 raid by US forces acting on a tip from local informants that militants reportedly including the terror leader were hiding in a hospital in Ramadi.

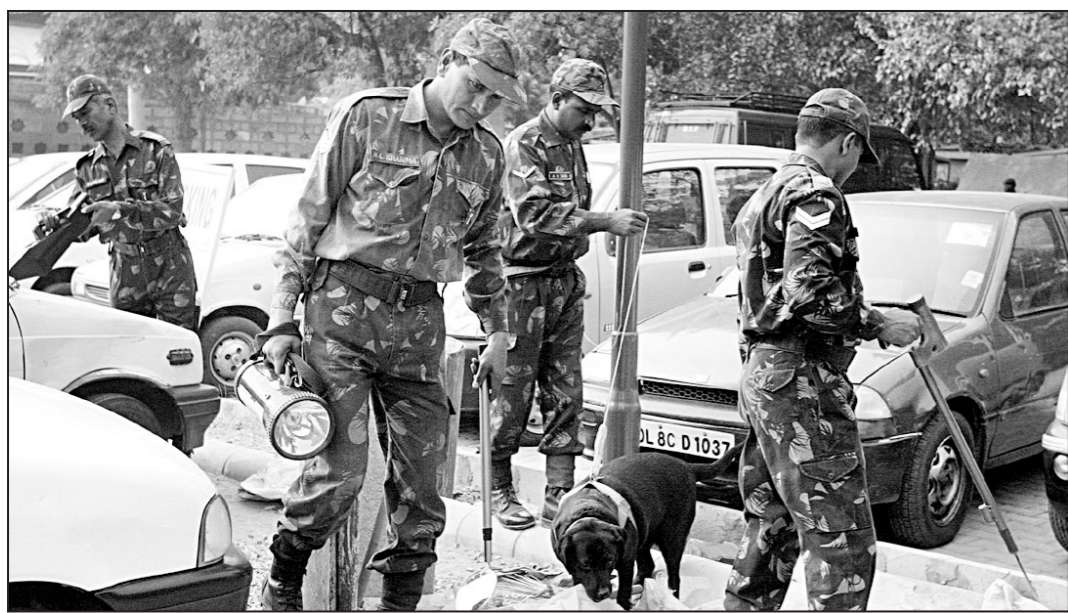


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Army Bomb Disposal Squad search for bombs outside Parliament House in New Delhi yesterday after a security alert. Indian parliament was evacuated as intelligence agencies warned of a possible bomb attack on the heavily guarded complex by militants.

Iraq counts votes after massive polls turnout

AFP, Baghdad

More than two-thirds of Iraqi voters turned out in the country's landmark election, according to first estimates Friday, spawning hope for the war-battered nation and boosting the prospect of drawing minority Sunnis into the political process.

Millions of votes were being counted after Thursday's election for the first full-term government since the ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003, which witnessed minimal violence in stark contrast to a vote in

January.

"The number of those who took part in the ballot should be between 10 and 11 million voters, according to our first estimates," said senior electoral official Farid Ayar.

A figure of 11 million voters would put turnout at around 70 percent.

However, final results however are not expected for at least two weeks and the country faces much political horse-trading before a new government is installed.

"Iraqis are ready to determine their future by democratic means

through the ballot box," said Kamiran Garadghi, spokesman for Iraq's first Kurdish president, Jalal Talabani.

Shia parties scored well in their strongholds in the south of the country, while Sunni regions reported strong turnout.

Global leaders hailed the vote, which many hope will end the insurgency raging since Saddam's downfall in April 2003 and pave the way for an exit of US-led foreign troops.

Blast rocks Russian nuke plant

AFP, AP, St. Petersburg

One person was killed in an explosion near the Leningrad nuclear power plant in northwest Russia, but the blast posed no danger to the reactors, an atomic energy agency spokesman said Friday.

"An explosion occurred on Thursday at a company located far from the reactors and did not affect the power station's operation. No increase in radioactivity was noted," Russian Atomic Energy Agency spokesman Nikolai Shingarev told AFP.

Vladimir Vorobiyev, the regional representative of Russia's emergency situations ministry, said the blast went off in a nearby metal smelting facility, but not actually within the limits of the power station, which is located in the town of Sosnovy Bor near Saint Petersburg.

11 sentenced to life in prison for Gujarat riots

AFP, Ahmedabad

An Indian court in the western state of Gujarat has sentenced 11 Hindus to life in prison for killing Muslims during bloody religious riots in 2002 in a verdict hailed by human rights lawyers.

Lawyer Siraj Malik, who has been active in seeking prosecution of the rioters, said that the judgement delivered Wednesday "would instil confidence amongst the Muslims" living in the riot-scarred state.

The accused were found guilty of hacking and burning to death 11 Muslims in Ajanwa village in Panchmahal district, before dumping their bodies inside two wells in March 2002.

The victims included women and children.

Maldivian govt promises democratic reforms

AP, Colombo

The Maldivian government on Friday promised to accelerate democratic reforms in the Indian Ocean archipelago, where President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has governed his 300,000 people with tight controls since 1978.

Gayoom, the longest running head of state in South Asia, promised political reforms last year following international pressure sparked by allegations of torture of political prisoners, and a series of anti-government riots in 2003.

Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmed Shaheed told reporters in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo that despite some progress, more work needed to be done.

North Korea agrees to implement N-accord

AFP, Jeju

North Korea has pledged to implement an agreement reached in September on ending its nuclear weapons drive but made no promise to return to six-nation disarmament talks.

The Stalinist country said it would cooperate actively to end the nuclear standoff peacefully, according to a joint statement at the end of three days of high-level talks between the two Koreas.

"Sharing the view that the (September) agreement must be implemented as soon as possible for the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, South and North Korea agreed to cooperate actively for the peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue," it said.

UN slams Indian refusal to share quake data

AFP, Hyderabad

India said Friday it would not share information on earthquakes below the magnitude of six on the Richter scale due to security concerns, drawing criticism from the United Nations.

Indian seismologists at an UN tsunami conference said sharing seismic data had security implications as seabed terrain could be mapped, possibly helping others learn about the nation's submarines and warships.

And Indian seismologists said providing information on earthquakes below a magnitude of six was

unnecessary in seeking to prevent a tsunami.

"Only an earthquake with a magnitude of more than seven has the potential to generate a tsunami," said G.D. Gupta, head of the seismology division in the Ministry of Science and Technology.

"That's why we're willing to provide data on quakes above the magnitude of six."

He was speaking on the sidelines of the UN conference which aims to set up a tsunami early warning system for Indian Ocean countries by next year. Sharing seismology data was considered a crucial part of developing the system.

Politician among 9 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Nine people including a pro-India politician have been killed in fresh violence in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir, police said yesterday.

Rebels attacked the politician, Shaukat Bandey, late Thursday in the town of Baramulla, 55km north of the summer capital Srinagar.

Bandey, a key member of the youth wing of the regional Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) which belongs to the ruling coalition, was injured when rebels fired on his motorcade, police said.

Bandey died in hospital late Friday, police said.

After being reported earlier in satisfactory condition, he developed complications and his condition worsened suddenly, police said.

A civilian who was caught in the firing also died while a teenage girl was injured, police said.

The attack on Bandey was the latest in a string of rebel strikes against pro-India political figures in the mainly Muslim region. In October militants gunned down the state's education minister who was also a senior PDP leader.

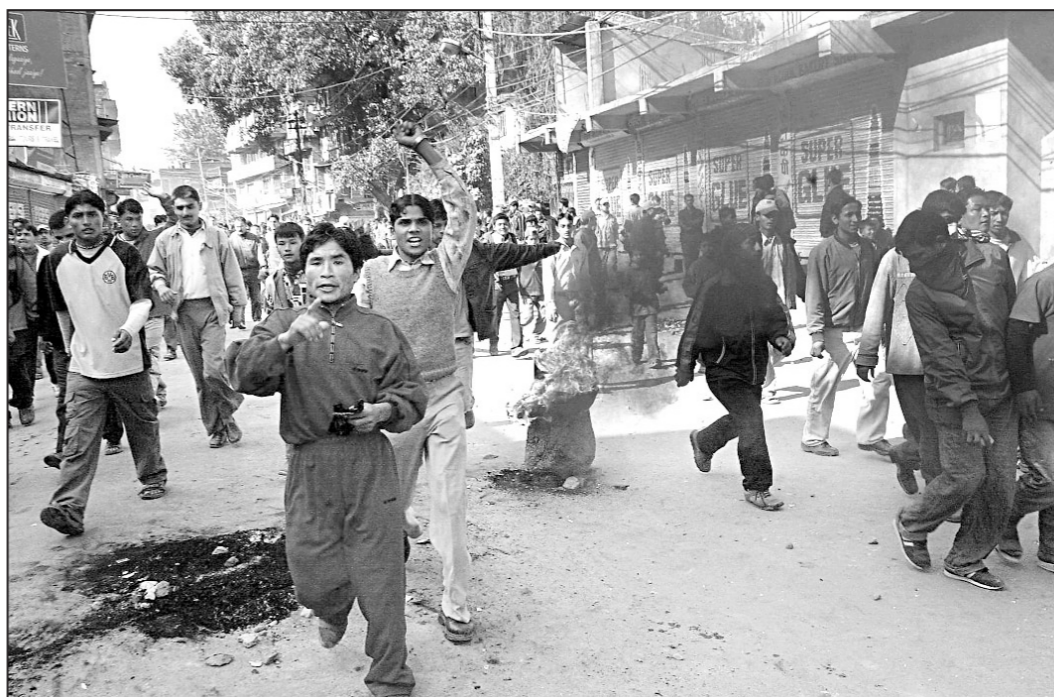


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese students and demonstrators shout slogans as they run past a burning tyre in Kathmandu yesterday during a day-long general strike called by seven opposition political parties to protest at the massacre of eleven civilians by a soldier late on December 14.

Students, police clash in Nepal during strike

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepali police fired tear gas to break up protests by rock-throwing students during a general strike in Kathmandu yesterday to protest the killing of 12 civilians by a soldier near the capital, witnesses said.

Shops and schools were shut and public transport off the roads in the city, which mainly heeded the strike call by political parties as anger remained high following the incident around midnight on Wednesday when the soldier fired on a crowd of villagers who had gathered at a temple to mark the full moon.

The soldier, who had an argument with the villagers, also died in the shootout in the tourist town of Nagarkot, near Kathmandu, but the circumstances of his death were not clear.

Witnesses said students, trying to enforce the strike by blocking roads, threw rocks at hundreds of riot policemen who retaliated by firing tear gas. There were no reports of serious injuries.

US scheming on Iran, Syria, says Mahathir

AP, AFP, Kuala Lumpur/ Tehran

Malaysia's former prime minister accused the US Thursday of scheming to invade Iran and Syria, and said the Iranian president's recent statements against Israel are providing Washington the excuse.

On Monday, Iran's hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called the Nazi Holocaust a "myth" used as a pretext for carving out a Jewish state in the heart of the Muslim world. Ahmadinejad earlier provoked an outcry in October when he called for Israel to be "wiped off the map."

Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's former longtime leader, himself raised an international outcry when shortly before leaving office last year he said in an Oct. 16 speech that

"Jews rule the world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them."

Opening a three-day global peace forum in Kuala Lumpur, Mahathir charged that the US Congress has "prepared legal authority for aggression against other countries" through laws allowing it to meddle into other nations' affairs using democracy as a pretext.

The Iran Freedom and Support Act of 2005 carries a subtle threat of war and "sounds like blackmail," he said. He noted that when introduced in the House, the official title was "to hold the current regime in Iran accountable for its threatening behaviour and to support a transition to democracy in Iran."

"Democracy, human rights, possession of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) are convenient excuses for war and killing," said

Mahathir, who has described the US as a "mass murderer" for its invasion of Iraq.

He said Ahmadinejad's call to wipe out Israel from the map of the world has provided "additional grounds for aggression" for Washington.

Ahmadinejad's comments came amid US-backed negotiations between Iran and Europe seeking a compromise on Tehran's nuclear programme. Washington says Iran secretly aims to build nuclear warheads but Iran insists its nuclear intentions are peaceful, aiming only to produce electricity, and has refused to give up key parts of the programme.

Toxic slick enters Russia from China

AFP, Vladivostok

A toxic slick that threatened the water supply of several large Chinese cities along the Songhua river has reached Russian territory, Russia's emergency services minister said.

"The water polluted with benzene today reached the Russian border and has flowed into the Amur river," which forms the border between the two countries, the minister, Sergei Shoigu, said in the city of Khabarovsk, near the Chinese border.

However, initial tests by Russian experts showed the slick, which contains benzene and nitrobenzene, is not as highly concentrated as had been feared and is continuing to dilute, officials from the emergency situations ministry said.