

Diplomats rush to save Lankan truce

Fresh war fears mount as violence spikes

AFP, Colombo

Diplomats from Sri Lanka's key backers held an emergency meeting with Tiger rebels yesterday amid fears the country could slip back into war after a day of violence that killed 18 people, officials said.

Representatives from the quartet known as "Co-Chairs" held talks with the head of the Tiger political wing, S.P. Thamilselvan, at Kilinochchi, 330km north of here, a rebel official said by telephone.

He had no immediate details of the discussions which came after the Colombo government urged the international community to pressure the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to de-escalate the violence in the troubled northeast.

Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake told diplomats from the Co-Chairs -- the United States, European Union, Japan and Norway -- that the international community must take "specific measures" to prevent the Tigers from unleashing violence.

At least 15 sailors were killed and an equal number wounded in an attack Friday by suspected Tamil Tigers on a naval road convoy while three more people were killed in violence linked to the conflict, officials said.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet.com web site said the navy had carried out reprisals against civilians in the area where Friday's ambush took place and had beaten 28 civilians. Fifteen of them had to be hospitalised,

Tamilnetsaid.

The head of the Scandinavian truce monitoring mission, Hargrup Haukland, in a statement said unidentified elements in the island's northeast did not want peace and were carrying out provocative attacks.

He described the attack on the navy road convoy as "vicious" and "cowardly".

The ambush was the worst attack against government forces since the truce arranged by peace broker Norway went into effect from February 23, 2002.

There was no immediate word from the guerrillas to charges that they staged the attack in the north-western coastal region of Mannar, but the official Tiger website said the

military demonstrated a "knee-jerk" reaction.

"The Sri Lankan army has been taking knee-jerk aggressive military actions in dealing with recent incidents in (the northern peninsula of) Jaffna and Mannar," the LTTE said in a statement.

"People of both areas are expressing fear that the Sri Lankan army continues to be a threatening presence."

Military officials here said security had been stepped up across the island following the spike in rebel attacks that left at least 60 people dead this month alone.

It was also the bloodiest month for the military which has lost 18 sailors, 19 soldiers and two constables during the same period.



PHOTO: AFP

Sea gypsies release a boat to the sea during the one-year tsunami ceremony at Moken Community in Phang Nga southern Thailand yesterday. About 5,400 people, including at least 2,436 foreigners from 37 countries, were killed when the tsunami hit Thailand on Dec 26 last year.

Tsunami survivors mark first anniversary

AP, Phuket

Survivors launched a boat laden with flowers, candles and incense in the first ceremony yesterday to mark one year since the Indian Ocean tsunami swept away at least 216,000 lives in one of the world's worst natural disasters in memory.

Peter Pruchniewitz, 68, who was swept from his hotel room and lost a friend to the waves, returned from Zurich, Switzerland to attend the ceremonies. Asked why, he said simply, "to remember."

The commemoration in Thailand was the first of hundreds to be held on the grim anniversary in the dozen countries hit by the earthquake-spawned waves last Dec. 26.

Amid the mourning, survivors and officials were taking stock of the massive relief operation and peace processes in Sri Lanka and Indonesia's Aceh province, the two

places hardest hit by the tsunami. In both cases, success has been mixed.

At Bang Niang beach in Thailand's Phang Nga province, mourners including Western tourists who were caught in the disaster placed offerings into a brightly coloured, bird-shaped boat that was floated into the Andaman Sea as members of the Moken, or sea gypsy, tribe chanted and pounded drums.

The Moken believe the ceremony helps ward off evil spirits.

A private memorial service for British citizens and two candlelight ceremonies were planned for later Saturday on the nearby island of Phuket.

In hardest-hit Indonesia, workers on Saturday scaled the minarets of the imposing 16th century mosque in the provincial capital of Banda Aceh, replacing missing tiles and slapping on a fresh coat of whitewash

in preparation for special services on Monday. Thousands of survivors have been rehoused in Aceh, but agencies say they are only about 20 percent of the total number needing new homes and the landscape is still one of devastation in many places.

But the tsunami did bring one positive side effect in Aceh -- it resulted in a cease-fire between the government and guerrillas that ended a decades-old separatist conflict.

No such progress was made in Sri Lanka, where disputes over aid delivery and an upsurge in violence blamed on separatist Tamil Tiger rebels have dashed hopes that the tsunami would end the country's long-running civil conflict.

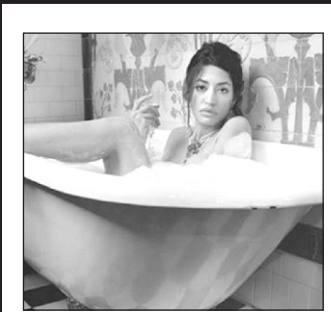


PHOTO: AP

GQ Magazine photo shows Wafah Dufour, the daughter of Osama bin Laden's half brother, posed for an article of GQ's January edition.

Laden niece poses for GQ magazine

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Her uncle may be the world's most elusive fugitive, but Osama bin Laden's niece is about as conspicuous as she can be in a sexy photo shoot in the January edition of the men's fashion magazine GQ.

Wafah Dufour is an aspiring New York-based musician who told the magazine that her family ties to the al-Qaeda leader suspected of masterminding the September 11, 2001 attacks have prompted death threats and sent her into a bout of depression.

As part of an effort to distance herself from her massive Saudi family, Dufour appears in a sultry GQ photo spread, reclining on satin sheets wrapped in feathers in one picture and posing in a bubble bath wearing nothing but jewellery in a second.

"I was born in the States and I want people to know I'm American, and I want people here to understand that I'm like anyone in New York. For me, it's home," said Dufour, who took her mother's name after the suicide hijacking attacks that destroyed Manhattan's World Trade Centre.

UN asks Nepali rebels to explain polls threat

REUTERS, Kathmandu

A top United Nations human rights envoy has asked Nepal's Maoist rebels to explain their threat of "special action" to destroy February municipal polls.

The guerrillas threatened officials and candidates contesting the Feb. 8 elections to 58 municipal assemblies and called for a strike to wreck a vote the government says could lead to parliamentary elections in 2007.

The Maoists, fighting to topple the Hindu monarchy in the Himalayan kingdom, have not explained their threat but are known for beating, kidnapping or killing people who disobey them.

"If it includes threats to the life or physical integrity of individuals taking no active part in hostilities, or

the taking of hostages, such action would be a grave violation of international human rights standards," said Ian Martin, chief of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal.

"I must ask for a clear undertaking that no such action will be ordered or encouraged," he said in a statement late on Friday.

Municipal elections have been delayed since 2003 because of the Maoist revolt that has killed more than 12,500 people.

Nepal's seven main parties have also pledged to launch protests to thwart the polls, saying they were aimed at legitimising the regime of King Gyanendra, who seized absolute power on Feb. 1, fired the government, suspended civil liberties and jailed politicians.

'NSA spying broader than Bush admitted'

AP, New York

The National Security Agency has conducted much broader surveillance of e-mails and phone calls without court orders than the Bush administration has acknowledged, The New York Times reported on its Website.

The NSA, with help from American telecommunications companies, obtained access to streams of domestic and international communications, said the Times in the report late Friday, citing unidentified current and former government officials.

The story did not name the companies.

Since the Times disclosed the domestic spying programme last week, President Bush has stressed that his executive order allowing the eavesdropping was limited to people with known links to al-Qaeda.

Iraqi president seeks to defuse election row

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Iraq's top political leaders met yesterday to defuse a gathering crisis over contested general election results while the country's top Shia cleric called for setting up a national unity government.

President Jalal Talabani met with representatives from the two main political coalitions disputing the results of the December 15 elections, the Sunni National Concord Front and former prime minister Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National list, as well as his own Kurdish Alliance.

"There is a crisis... and it is necessary to recognize there are problems rather than hide them," Mahdi al-Hafez of the Allawi list told reporters after the meeting.

Reacting to growing protests

over the Dec. 15 ballot for a new parliament, Shia Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari urged Iraqis to have faith in the electoral process. He made the call after meeting with Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who announced the first of a possible series of US combat troop reductions next year.

According to preliminary election results, the religious Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which dominated the outgoing parliament, will also control the next parliament. Final results are not expected before January.

The alliance won overwhelming majorities in the country's southern provinces as well as the key province of Baghdad, while Allawi's secular Shia list performed poorly.

Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the

spiritual leader for many among the nation's Shia majority, appealed for calm and urged the setting up of a government of national unity, national security advisor Muwaffaq al-Rubaie said after meeting with him.

Sistani said Shia-based religious parties should "work with other components of the Iraqi people to set up a government of national unity representative of all the country's main (political) families," related Rubaie.

Two dozens parties, including the main Sunni Arab coalition, Thursday called for a re-run of the general elections because of alleged fraud.



PHOTO: AFP

Egyptian Ayman Nur, leader of the opposition Ghad party, reacts after his conviction at a court in Cairo yesterday. Hosni Mubarak's runner-up in Egypt's presidential election, fiery young lawyer Nur, was sentenced to five years in prison.

Dutch negotiator to mediate between India, Naga rebels

AFP, Guwahati

A Dutch negotiator has been appointed to help save an eight-year-old ceasefire between New Delhi and a separatist group in the northeastern state of Nagaland, a rebel leader said yesterday.

Oscar Fernandes, a federal minister, and leader of the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) formally nominated Michael C. van Walt van Praag from the Netherlands to mediate between the two sides last week in Bangkok.

"The talks in Bangkok were almost on the verge of collapse with the Indian government failing to respond positively to our demands," said senior NSCN-IM leader Kraibo Chawang.

"Praag's intervention helped in saving the peace process from breaking down," Chawang told AFP by telephone from Nagaland's commercial hub of Dimapur.

Blair to go by next year if defeated on reforms

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair will stand down next year if his ruling Labour party fails to back his public sector reforms, The Independent said yesterday, citing unnamed aides.

The newspaper reported that aides were not saying Blair was "threatening" to quit but instead wanted a "stable and orderly transition" to his widely-tipped successor, finance minister Gordon Brown.

"This is not a threat. It is just the reality," one "Blair ally" was quoted as saying. "There would be no bitterness. If people don't want him to continue, so be it. But they have to decide what kind of government they want."

Egypt opposition leader sentenced to 5 years jail

AP, Cairo

Egyptian opposition leader Ayman Nur was sentenced to five years in jail for forgery by the Cairo criminal court Saturday, an AFP correspondent reported.

The 41-year-old went on trial six months ago on charges of forging affidavits for the creation of his Ghad (Tomorrow) party last year.

Nur and his wife shouted "Down with (President) Hosni Mubarak" when judge Adel Abdel Salam Gomaa read the sentence.

Among Nur's six co-defendants, two were sentenced to five years in prison, three to three years and another was sentenced to 10 years in absentia.

Nur, who was Mubarak's main challenger in the September presidential election, has always denied the charges, arguing they were trumped up by the regime to undermine his political career.

Indonesia braces for potential terror attacks

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian security forces braced yesterday for potential Christmas Eve terror attacks by extremists believed to be intent on marring the holidays in the world's most populous Muslim nation. Police and military were on high alert amid fears that the killing last month of a top terror suspect would spark retaliatory attacks as minority Christians prepared to attend mass and celebrate Christmas.

"We are focusing on preventive measures. It is not impossible for them (extremists) to show up later tonight. Therefore, we must not be complacent," Jakarta police chief Major General Firman Gani told EIShinta radio.

National deputy police spokesman Anton Bahrul Alam said bomb squads nationwide were inspecting places where crowds typically converge.

"Together with the military, the Indonesian police are conducting inspections on suspicious materials in all potentially dangerous areas, such as shopping malls, offices, foreign missions and churches," he told AFP.

A police bomb squad scoured Jakarta's main cathedral, where East Timorese President Xanana Gusmao was expected to attend mass later in the evening, according to a government official.

Jakarta police deployed about 50 men in six anti-bomb units to search for explosives in major churches across Jakarta and its West Java suburb of Bekasi, said Dwi Suseno, the deputy chief of the city's bomb squad unit.

"We are only conducting searches at major churches but we will do the same operation at smaller churches if they ask us to scour the premises," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

A policeman stands guard in front of the Cathedral ahead of Christmas Eve in Jakarta yesterday. Indonesian security forces braced for potential Christmas Eve terror attacks by extremists believed to be intent on marring the holidays in the world's most populous Muslim nation.

Bhutan's people excited by move for democracy

REUTERS, Kolkata

Bhutanese are sad but excited about their King's decision to hand over power to his son and hold the tiny Himalayan kingdom's first democratic election in 2008, local newspapers say.

"It might be momentous news for others but it is a cause for profound sadness for us in Bhutan," state-run daily Kuensel quoted an unnamed resident of the capital, Thimphu, saying.

This month, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck said he would hand power to his son, Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and hold elections in 2008, shocking the Buddhist kingdom's estimated 700,000 people.

In March, Bhutan unveiled a draft of its first constitution aimed at setting up a two-party democracy after a century of absolute monarchy put in place with British support in 1907.

While elderly Bhutanese compared the royal announcement with the sun setting on the dragon kingdom, the talk of democracy excited many young citizens.

"We shouldn't be surprised but be proud and look forward with confidence and optimism," Nima Tshering, a resident of Thimphu wrote in a letter to Kuensel.

The newspaper said Bhutan had received the King's decision in stunned silence, and "the nation could not fathom the concept of His Majesty stepping down."

The newspaper said as the King made his announcement to a crowd of farmers, herders, teachers, students and civil servants they fell

into a bewildered silence.

"The year 2008 is too early. Many of us feel that His Majesty should reign for another 20 years," Kuensel quoted a shepherd saying.

Bhutan's march to democracy contrasts dramatically with the neighbouring Hindu kingdom of Nepal, where King Gyanendra took total power and sacked the government in February.

Most Nepalis and their seven leading political parties are demanding a return to democracy.

About seven years ago, Wangchuck, who became king in 1972 at the age of 16 after his father's death, took a major step on the road to reform when he devolved power to a council of ministers.

In 2001, he initiated the drafting of a new constitution to replace a more than 50-year-old royal decree under which Bhutan has been ruled.

The draft speaks of two houses of parliament -- a 75-member National Assembly and a 25-member National Council. The King would remain head of the state, but parliament would have the power to impeach him on a two-thirds vote.

For years, the world's only entirely non-smoking country was considered the last Shangri-La, a land of 700,000 untouched by the winds of modernisation.

But the landlocked kingdom's window on the world is opening, with television arriving in 1999, the Internet a year later.