

Sri Lanka detains 900 in rebel search

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops and police detained 900 people in a major house-to-house search in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo Saturday as part of a major hunt for Tamil Tiger rebels, a top police officer told AFP.

Large parts of the capital were sealed off for seven hours during the sudden swoop carried out by 2,000 heavily armed soldiers and 2,400 policemen, Colombo's Deputy Inspector-General Pujith Jayasundara said.

"We are holding the men and women detainees at eight centres in the city and they are being released as their identities are established," Jayasundara said. "The screening of people started at dawn. We detained a total of 903 people."

The pre-dawn operation concentrated in Colombo's Wellawatte area where minority Tamils are concentrated, said residents who were not allowed to leave their homes while the search was underway.



Indonesian police evacuate a body of a blast victim in Palu, Central Sulawesi yesterday. Six people were killed and 45 injured when a bomb exploded at a market stall selling pork in the Indonesian town of Palu in religiously-divided Central Sulawesi province, police said.

PHOTO: AFP

3 British hostages freed in Gaza

REUTERS, Gaza

A 25-year-old British human rights worker and her parents were freed in the Gaza Strip on Friday by the Palestinian gunmen who kidnapped them two days earlier.

A previously unknown group calling itself Brigades of the Mujahideen-Jerusalem said it seized Kate Burton, her father Hugh and mother Helen to demand British and European pressure on Israel and freed them as a gesture of goodwill.

The Burtons passed through Gaza City briefly before being whisked away toward Israel in diplomatic cars with darkened windows.

"They are well and in good spirits. They are currently with officials from our Consulate General in Jerusalem," said a statement from the British Foreign

Office.

"She was not hurt, her parents were okay and she plans to visit Gaza next week," said Adnan Hajjar, a colleague of Burton's. "Kate said she was sorry that she could not make it to the hotel to greet everybody."

In a video released to media, a masked gunman read out a message standing next to Kate Burton, who appeared with her hands behind her back.

"We have decided to pardon the three Britons as a gesture of goodwill in return for a seriousness in answering our demands," the gunman said.

Burton and her visiting parents were seized in the chaotic southern town of Rafah on the Egyptian border on Wednesday. Kidnappers, armed with automatic rifles, pulled over their car and bundled them into another vehicle that sped away.

The political demands and

Islamist tone of the captors were a marked departure from previous kidnappings in the Gaza Strip, whose perpetrators tended to be seeking jobs or the release of prisoners and set free their hostages within hours.

The fact the kidnappers made no contact for two days had raised concerns for the Britons' safety.

"We thank everyone who has worked so tirelessly toward this moment, especially Kate's colleagues and friends in Gaza, who kept all our hopes up throughout this ordeal," said a statement from the Burton family released through the Foreign Office.

The kidnappers said that they wanted British and EU pressure on Israel to end the "no-go zone" it imposed in northern Gaza this week to stop rocket fire, to free prisoners, pull back troops in the occupied West Bank and end assassinations of militant leaders.

Gunmen occupy Gaza ministry to demand jobs

REUTERS, Gaza

About 50 masked gunmen occupied a Palestinian government office in the Gaza Strip for several hours on Saturday to demand jobs, witnesses and a spokesman for the gunmen said.

The group, members of a political wing of the mainstream Fatah movement, occupied an Interior Ministry office in Deir el-Balah refugee camp, forced everyone to leave and stood guard outside.

The gunmen left the building about three hours later after Palestinian officials agreed to discuss their demands, a spokesman for the gunmen said.

"We have suspended our protest after contacts with Fatah leaders and the interior minister," said Abu Mahmoud, adding that a meeting would be held on Monday to discuss their demands.

2006 year of big decisions: Blair

BBC NEWS ONLINE

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has said decisions will be made in 2006 which could shape the UK's fortunes for generations to come.

In his New Year message, the prime minister vowed to press ahead with controversial reforms in health, education, energy and welfare.

He emphasised the so-called respect agenda, pledging fresh action to tackle anti-social behaviour. And Blair also pledged to continue the fight against terrorism in the UK and abroad.

Tory leader David Cameron and Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy have also made New Year messages.

The prime minister is facing a battle to secure his political legacy in 2006, with backbenchers threatening to revolt over plans to grant independence to state schools.

Some Labour MPs are also uneasy about plans to encourage

people off incapacity benefit and into work, and to increase the role of the private sector in the provision of local health services.

Blair, who is taking a winter break with his family in Egypt, listed UK strengths, including high employment and falling hospital waiting lists, and said: "Everyone in our country who has worked hard to achieve this can feel proud of the progress we've made this year."

"Our achievements are being acknowledged across the globe, a fact recognised by the international community when we won the 2012 Olympics for London."

"But 2006 is a year in which critical decisions have to be got right if we are to sustain prosperity and fast-improving public services for the long term."

"On schools, local health services, pensions, welfare, the respect agenda and energy, we face big choices which will decide how prepared we are for the challenges of the future."

Advani steps down

Rajnath takes over as new BJP chief

PTI, Mumbai

The main opposition leader of India LK Advani on Saturday stepped down as the President of his party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He will be succeeded by senior leader and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Rajnath Singh. Rajnath will take over as the new party chief on January 2.

This was Advani's third stint as BJP President. He took the charge last year. However, he will remain the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, the party said.

The veteran leader said he had sent his resignation to senior Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu, which has been accepted.

"I had announced at the Chennai meeting of the BJP National Executive that I will step down as President. I have done so," Advani said addressing a press conference.

Advani said there had been consultations within the party after his decision to step down in which Rajnath Singh's name was finalised as the new president.

"I present to you Rajnath Singh, the new BJP President and extend my best wishes to him," Advani said.

Advani garlanded Rajnath and offered him sweets. He expressed confidence that under his leadership, the party will touch new heights.

Describing Singh as a dedicated worker, Advani said he had displayed his administrative abilities as a Minister in Uttar Pradesh, as Chief Minister of the state and as a Minister in the Vajpayee Government. "He is a popular leader and under his leadership, the party will grow by leaps and bounds," he said.

Advani said the party faced difficulties and these were not due to the shortcomings of the party or the ideology but due to the "behaviour and conduct of some of our own colleagues."

While the IQ of some leaders were very high, their EQ (Emotional Quotient) was very low and the difficulties arose because of them, he added.

He said equally important was MQ (Moral Quotient) and SQ (Spiritual Quotient).

Maintaining he was satisfied with the outcome of the conference, he said "I do not judge the outcome solely by headlines but by its intrinsic strength".

Advani said Rajnath Singh would formally take over as BJP President on Monday, January 2 at the party's Ashoka Road Headquarters at 9:30 am.

Besides Advani, senior party leaders would be present on the occasion.

In response to questions, Advani said Rajnath Singh's tenure would be till February 2007 but since he has not completed the full tenure, the party's national council can re-elect him as party Chief for another three years.

Charging the UPA government with taking the threat of terrorism lightly, Advani said the attack on the Indian Institute of Science was not a small matter.

The gravity of the incident should not be judged by the number of casualties, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Outgoing President of India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Lal Krishna Advani (R) offers a sweet to his successor Rajnath Singh at a press conference in Mumbai yesterday. Leader of the opposition in the Indian parliament Lal Krishna Advani, who spearheaded the ascent of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics, quit as chief of the opposition - the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

Bomb kills five outside Iraq Sunni party office

REUTERS, Baquba

Five people were killed when their car was hit by a roadside bomb outside the local offices of one of Iraq's main Sunni Arab political parties on Saturday, police said.

Another two were wounded in the blast close to the Iraqi Islamic Party headquarters in Khalis, a violent town roughly 60 km north of Baghdad.

Police said the attack appeared to target members of the party, which is the mainstay of a Sunni coalition that took part in this month's parliamentary election.

Insurgent groups such as al Qaeda in Iraq have called the election a farce and threatened attacks against Sunni politicians who took part.

The mixed Sunni and Shi'ite area in the west of Diyala province has seen heightened levels of violence in recent months, much of it claimed by al Qaeda and similar groups.

Fireworks and fanfare to usher in 2006

AFP, Sydney

Revellers around the world prepared to ring in 2006 on Saturday with fireworks and fanfare, saying goodbye to a year scarred by violence and natural disasters.

Security was tight ahead of New Year's festivities in major cities worldwide, with events in Auckland and Sydney due to kick off a night of celebrations from Asia to the Americas.

Tens of thousands were expected to crowd the harborfront area near Sydney's landmark Opera House to get the best view of the spectacular fireworks display at midnight (1300 GMT).

Some 1,700 police were patrolling streets and beaches in Australia's largest city to prevent any outbreaks of violence, following suburban race riots earlier this month that pitted whites against Arab-Australians.

Street parties and glittery displays were planned across Asia and the Pacific, with Hong Kong boasting a massive light and sound show

including fireworks to be set off from 20 buildings around its famed Victoria Harbor.

In the Chinese capital Beijing, bells and drums were to be sounded 108 times at midnight (1600 GMT) to mark an auspicious start to the year, signifying the elimination of worldly troubles in accordance with Buddhist tradition.

Authorities in Indonesia -- already on high alert for possible attacks by Islamic extremists during the New Year period -- fanned out in restive Central Sulawesi province after a bombing in a crowded market Saturday left seven dead.

The festive mood across much of the region contrasted with last year, when prayer vigils and fundraising events replaced jubilant blow-out bashes in the wake of the devastating December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

As Asia struggled to rebuild in 2005 after the giant waves killed more than 220,000 people, natural disaster sent it reeling again this October, when a massive earth-

quake killed at least 74,000 people in Pakistan and India.

The continent was also to usher in 2006 in the shadow of the bird flu crisis, with outbreaks and deaths across Asian countries in 2005.

In the Philippines, hospitals braced for a spate of casualties as revellers traditionally set off firecrackers and fire guns into the air at midnight. Two people died and more than 130 were injured by firecracker incidents in the run-up.

Not everyone was preparing to greet the New Year with mass parties -- in Pakistan fundamentalist groups oppose street revelry as contrary to Islamic norms and zealots have been known to attack those who defy their edict.

In Europe, six months after Britain fell victim to apparent Islamist suicide bombers, with 52 people killed plus the attackers, Prime Minister Tony Blair said the country should not waver in the fight against terrorism.



PHOTO: AFP

This picture shows Nicolas Schiffman, Argentinean crew member of the Greenpeace ship MY Esperanza holding his New Years wish' banner, in front of the Yushin Maru catcher ship from the whaling fleet from Japan, taken in the Southern Ocean yesterday. The Yushin Maru is closely following the Greenpeace ship, which in turn is following the whale fleet factory ship Nisshin Maru, with Greenpeace attempting to bring the whale hunt to an early end and make it the last time the sanctuary is breached by the whalers.