

Norway ends Lankan peace deadlock

Talks with Tigers to be held in Geneva in Feb

AFP, Kilinochchi

Norway yesterday broke a near three-year deadlock in Sri Lanka's peace talks by clinching a deal with warring parties to meet face-to-face in Geneva by mid-February.

The talks would focus on strengthening their ceasefire, which was on the brink of collapse after a surge in violence since December killed 152 people, envoy Erik Solheim told reporters in this rebel-held political capital.

Solheim had a rare meeting with Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran who in November put Colombo on notice to make a reasonable autonomy deal this year or face-igniting a separatist war.

Peace talks have been on hold since April 2003.

The Norwegian envoy, who is also Oslo's International Development Minister, travelled to

this political headquarters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) after separate talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse Tuesday.

The envoy said President Rajapakse was keen on a peace deal to end three decades of ethnic bloodshed that has left over 60,000 people dead.

"He is eager to see peace in Sri Lanka," Solheim said of his talks in Colombo with Rajapakse. Solheim was due to have another meeting with Rajapakse in the capital later Wednesday before leaving the island Thursday.

He said the first ice-breaking meeting between Rajapakse's government, which came to power in November, and the LTTE will be in Geneva.

"There may be a need for more meetings," Solheim said. "They would be held in Switzerland or

elsewhere in Europe."

He said the agenda for next month's meeting will be "to strengthen the ceasefire agreement."

"There is a need to create a climate that is conducive for peace," he said.

Solheim also stressed the need to reduce attacks on the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which suffered a bomb blast earlier this month. The SLMM is monitoring the truce that went into force in February 2002.

"It was very, very difficult, if not impossible, to keep the ceasefire" unless attacks are stopped, Solheim said. "Every possible measure must be taken to guarantee the security of the SLMM."

Asked if both sides had agreed to stop the latest wave of violence, Solheim replied: "The agreement between the two parties will have to be made at the meeting," Balasingham said.

LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham said they wanted talks with the new government as soon as possible but also sought an end to violence.

The London-based Balasingham, who flew in here on Monday to join the Solheim-Prabhakaran talks, said the LTTE will discuss with Colombo only about implementing the truce.

He ruled out amending or renegotiating the ceasefire as demanded by nationalists coalition partners in Rajapakse's government.

"On our part we have pledged that there will be no acts of violence. At the same time we want the government of Sri Lanka to ensure there shouldn't be any violence perpetrated against innocent civilians and the LTTE," Balasingham said.



Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim (R) walks with Puleedevan (L) of the Peace Secretariat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil (LTTE) after arriving in Kilinochchi by Sri Lankan Air Force helicopter yesterday. Norway broke a near three-year deadlock in Sri Lanka's peace talks by clinching a deal with warring parties to meet face-to-face in Geneva by mid-February.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan freezes accounts of suspected Taliban firms

REUTERS, Peshawar

Pakistani authorities have frozen bank accounts of two Afghan trading firms suspected of funneling funds to leaders of Afghanistan's Taliban guerrillas, security officials said yesterday.

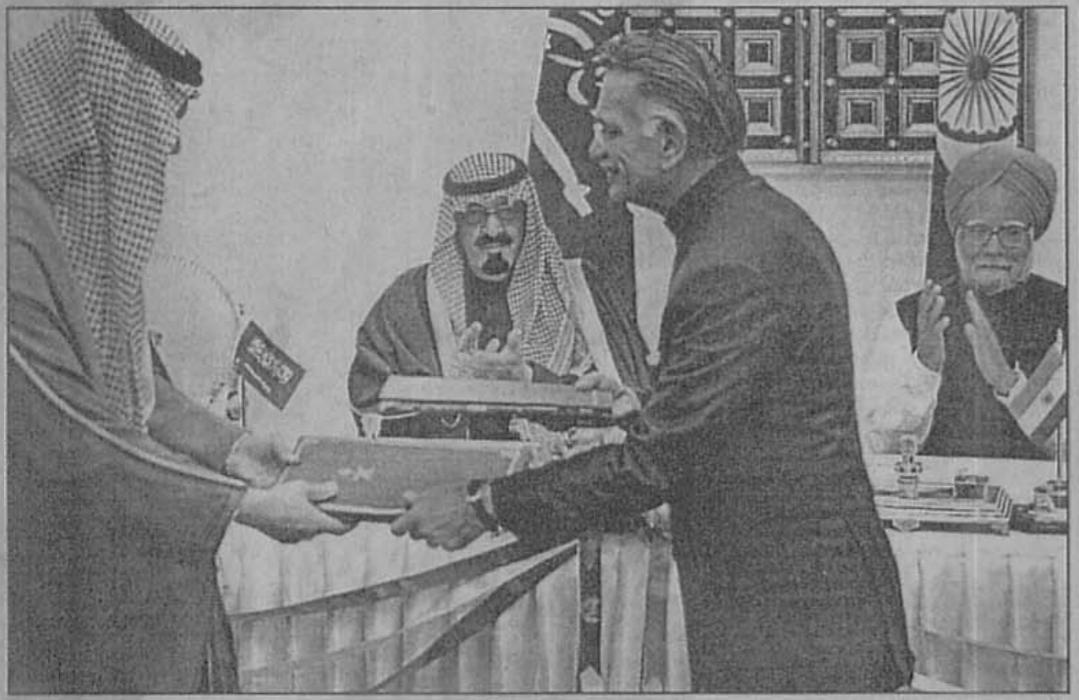
Agents of the country's Federal Investigation Agency raided offices of the firms on Tuesday in the north-western city of Peshawar after requests from Interpol and the Afghan government, the officials said.

"We seized documents during the raid which show the firms were transferring money to the Taliban," one of the officials told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"We have frozen 15 bank accounts of the firms in Peshawar and Islamabad," he added.

The official said no one from the firms had been arrested but a customs clearing agent who dealt with the companies had been detained.

Another security official said the firms, which deal in edible oil, sugar and other food items, are owned by an Afghan family from the southern province of Kandahar with which the Taliban's reclusive leader Mullah Mohammad Omar had close ties.



Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil (2nd R) and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Al-Faisal Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud (L) exchange an agreement on combating crime as King of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud (2nd L) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) look on during a signing ceremony in New Delhi yesterday.

India, Saudi Arabia join hands to combat terror

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

King Abdullah told Manmohan Singh.

During the delegation-level talks, the two sides discussed an entire array of bilateral relations, including energy security and regional issues like the India-Pakistan peace process.

The four agreements underlined the growing convergence of national interests between the two countries and placed the India-Saudi relations in a new strategic perspective.

The memorandum of cooperation on crime, which will further strengthen efforts in tackling transnational crime, terrorism and the smuggling of narcotics, was signed between Home Minister Shivraj Patil and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud.

Two other pacts aimed at boosting business ties between the two countries - Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement and Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement - were signed by Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Saudi Finance Minister Ibrahim bin Abdulaziz Al-Assaf.

A cooperation agreement in the field of youth and sports was also

signed.

Earlier in the day, King Abdullah set the tone for his four-day visit that began on Tuesday by describing India as a "second home" and hoped his visit, one by a Saudi monarch to India in 51 years, would take bilateral ties to a new high.

"I consider myself to be in a second home," Abdullah told reporters after taking the salute at a guard of honour at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the grand sandstone presidential palace.

He was warmly welcomed by President APJ Abdul Kalam and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

"This visit will renew historic ties between India and Saudi Arabia," he said before beginning his talks with Manmohan Singh, who on Tuesday evening broke protocol to receive the guest at the airport when he arrived from Beijing on a four-day visit.

"I would like to thank the president, the prime minister and the friendly people of India for their warmth and hospitality," said Abdullah, who was accompanied by a large delegation of royalty and senior officials.

The Saudi monarch assured

Manmohan Singh that his country has "declared a war on terror" and that they would continue their "struggle against terrorism."

"It might be a long-term struggle, but the battle will continue unless this scourge is eliminated,"

REPUBLIC DAY TODAY

India on alert ahead of celebrations

REUTERS, AFP, New Delhi

Anti-aircraft guns were mounted on high-rise buildings in the Indian capital yesterday and hundreds of soldiers and police patrolled its ceremonial heart as the country prepared to mark Republic Day.

Indians celebrate in style every Jan. 26, with lavish parades in all major cities showcasing the country's military might and cultural diversity, marking the founding of the republic in 1950.

The main event though is held in the heart of the capital, New Delhi, where the president takes the salute from military chiefs amid much pomp and ceremony.

Adding to the jitters this year are "certain intelligence inputs" about threats to the security of the ceremony's chief guest, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, police said.

"The main threat is from a car bomb or a suicide attack," said senior police officer B.K. Gupta.

"But we have made foolproof arrangements."

In recent years, celebrations around the country have been targeted by militants opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir, Maoists rebels fighting a class war in some poorer states, and separatist insurgents from the troubled northeast.

They have blown up railway lines, attacked key economic infrastructure and raised tensions across the country.

Security will be especially tight in New Delhi with one of the worst terror strikes the capital still fresh in the memory. In October 68 people were killed in three bombings, two at popular markets. The attacks were blamed on a Pakistan-based militant group.

Armed commandos guarded the city's VIP areas through the night and special announcements were made in markets asking people not to touch unidentified objects.

US, Pakistan agree to boost 'war on terror'

Bush to visit India, Pakistan in March

AFP, Reuters, Washington

Washington and Islamabad agreed Tuesday to coordinate more closely in their "war on terror" campaign following tensions over a US airstrike targeted at al-Qaeda militants in Pakistan but which left civilians dead.

"We discussed the war on terror and the need for closer communications and coordination to take this effort forward," Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told reporters after talks with US President George W. Bush at the White House.

Aziz did not explain what steps the two allies would take to bring about greater information sharing and coordination in their fight against terrorism.

Bush and Aziz said they discussed trade, nuclear energy, defence cooperation and the response to the Oct. 8 earthquake in Pakistan that killed about 74,000 people and left about 3 million homeless.

"A sense of caring and sharing always builds a better relationship between countries and that's what we are seeing between Pakistan and the United States," said Aziz.

During a brief joint public appearance at the White House, neither leader mentioned the suspected CIA airstrike that targeted al-Qaeda members in a remote part of Pakistan but killed 18 civilians and angered many Pakistanis.

Washington has declined to acknowledge that it carried out the attack, while Islamabad says the CIA was behind it.

Landmine explosion kills 6 in Pakistan

AP, Quetta

A minibus struck a land mine in southwestern Pakistan yesterday, killing six passengers and wounding five, a government official said.

The dead, all civilians, included two women and two children, said the region's top government official, Abdul Samad Lasi. The wounded were taken to a local hospital where they were all in critical condition, he said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack in Dera Bugti, about 210 miles east of Quetta. But Lasi said the land mine was likely planted on the road by tribal militants to target security forces guarding gas pipelines and other government installations in the area.

The tribesmen are blamed for carrying out the attacks to press for more compensation for resources extracted in the sparsely populated region. They also oppose government plans to build new military garrisons. The government said it increased the number of troops in the area to protect gas fields.



A Palestinian woman holds her baby as she casts her vote in the West Bank village of Dura near the town of Hebron yesterday. Palestinians voted in their first general election for a decade, with the Islamist movement Hamas posing an unprecedented challenge to the ruling Fatah party's long grip on power.

Palestinians vote in elections

Hamas may emerge victorious

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinians voted yesterday in their first parliamentary elections in a decade, a ballot that could bring the militant Islamic movement Hamas into the government for the first time.

Thousands of police with automatic rifles guarded polling stations across the West Bank and Gaza after weeks of armed chaos in Palestinian areas had threatened to delay the election.

Calm prevailed as Palestinians cast ballots, but security officials were taking no chances. "We have been instructed to use force against anyone who tries to disrupt the election process," policeman Ibrahim Mahmoud said in Ramallah.

Israeli officials caution that a

win for Hamas, behind suicide bombings and officially committed to destroying Israel, could herald an end to peacemaking. The United States, which brands Hamas a terrorist organisation, is also concerned.

Polls show Hamas, standing on an anti-corruption platform in its first run for parliament, just a few percentage points behind President Mahmoud Abbas's long-dominant Fatah party.

Both groups have said they would consider forming a coalition government if Hamas made a strong enough showing.

In Gaza, Hamas supporters wearing the group's trademark green hats and bandannas deployed outside polling stations.

"We are coming to make a change

for the better. We want to change the government," said Hamas supporter Baher-Rayes, 23.

Some 1.4 million people in the Gaza Strip, the occupied West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem were eligible to vote for the 132-member Palestinian Legislative Council. Election officials said they expected a high turnout.

Voters were choosing from among 11 party lists across the Palestinian areas and more than 400 candidates running locally in the first parliamentary elections since 1996.

About 900 foreign observers, led by former US President Jimmy Carter, were monitoring the process.

The main militant groups had pledged to prevent trouble.

Thaksin rejects peace talks offer for south

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra yesterday refused an offer for peace talks over the restive south, as a Muslim man became the latest fatality in the Muslim-majority provinces.

"I don't know (about the offer) and my government has no policy" for such talks, Thaksin told reporters in Bangkok when asked if his government would accept a call for negotiations with a rebel group.

Thaksin was responding to an offer made in a media interview in Sweden on Monday by a man claiming to be the foreign policy chief for the separatist group Patani United Liberation Organisation or PULO.

"I have never heard of this group," Thaksin said, adding Bangkok would continue countering the unrest by increasing crackdowns and arrests of militants.

Supreme Commander General Reangroj Mahasaranont reiterated

Thailand would not negotiate with any separatist groups. "The Thai government has a policy not to hold talks with such groups," Reangroj was quoted by a domestic television channel as saying Wednesday.

Their stance came as a Muslim government employee was shot and killed in front of his home in Thailand's restive southernmost provinces by suspected Islamic militants, police said.

Baham Kalem, 35, was shot several times with an assault rifle and died instantly in Pattani province Tuesday evening, police said, adding he was part of a job creation scheme run by the regional border security body.

"We have already issued an arrest warrant for one suspect concerning this case" but made no arrests, Colonel Thawal Nakhonthrawong, superintendent of Nong Chik district police, told AFP.