

# Lanka eyes deal with Tigers over transport

## 8 more killed in fresh violence

**REUTERS, AFP, Colombo**

Sri Lanka's government said yesterday it was moving closer to an agreement over the transport of Tamil Tiger commanders, a rebel pre-condition for peace talks, as two people were killed in fresh violence in the north.

International truce monitors say around 200 people have died since early April in the bloodiest month since a 2002 truce halted two decades of civil war. Talks due to be held last month in Switzerland have been postponed indefinitely by the rebels.

The two sides have been rowing over the issue of transport of eastern rebel leaders to a pre-talks meeting. The government refused to provide military helicopters for them, while the

Tigers pulled out of a sea transport offered by the government, at the last minute.

Now, the plan is to use a seaplane. "We've agreed on a landing site for the seaplane," Palitha Kohona, head of the government peace secretariat, told Reuters, adding that the government was prepared to go to talks next week if need be.

"The government is bending over backwards. But I think if you look at it sanely, they will have to come back to talks sooner or later."

But diplomats say that even if the transport issue is resolved, they will only believe the Norwegian-brokered talks in Geneva will happen when the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) physically sit down at the

table.

Police said suspected rebels killed two Home Guard troopers and wounded two on Thursday with an improvised bomb near the northern town of Vavuniya. The Tigers deny attacks on the military, but few believe them.

The rebels, who want an ethnic Tamil homeland in the north and east, are also angry over what they say is army support for a renegade group of former rebels. The government denies the allegation.

In the northeastern port town of Trincomalee, soldiers told a Reuters photographer they had destroyed a claymore fragmentation mine.

A suicide bomb attack on army headquarters in the capital and retalia-

tory government air strikes on Tiger positions last week had raised fears of a return to full-scale conflict.

Meanwhile, two policemen and six others were killed Thursday in separate clashes in northern Sri Lanka where a fragmentation mine also exploded but caused no casualties, officials said.

Six men travelling in two three-wheeler taxis were shot dead by security forces when they tried to attack a military sentry point at Nellyadi in the Jaffna peninsula, military officials said.

Some 200 people have been killed in the past month, the bloodiest period since a 2002 truce took effect between Tamil Tiger rebels and the government.

## 3 Pakistani cops killed in attack near Afghan border

**AFP, Khar**

Armed men stormed a Pakistani security post in a remote tribal region near the Afghan border and killed three policemen, officials said yesterday.

The attack happened shortly before midnight on Wednesday at Kotki Charmang post in the Bajaur tribal district, a local security official in the region's main town Khar told AFP.

"Three levies (tribal police) died in the attack and we are investigating who the attackers were," the official said, requesting anonymity.

Bajaur, which borders Afghanistan's insurgency-plagued eastern province of Kunar, was the scene of a controversial US air strike aimed at al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri in January.

Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's lieutenant, was due at a house in the village on the day of the air strike but did not show up.



**President of India's ruling Congress Party and Chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government Sonia Gandhi drives through a village as part of her election campaign for a by-polls scheduled to take place in Uttar Pradesh's Rae Bareilly constituency on May 8.**

## Cyclone Mala death toll in Myanmar rises to 21

**AFP, Yangon**

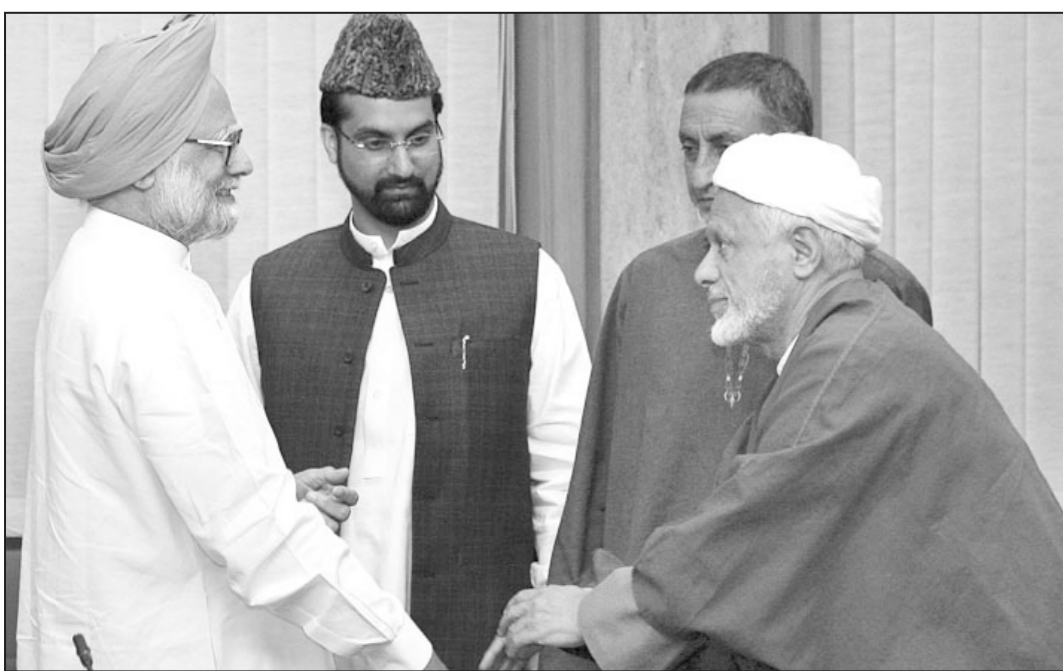
Twenty-one people were killed and another 14 are still missing after Cyclone Mala struck Myanmar's west coast last weekend, state media said yesterday.

The death toll increased from three after 18 people drowned in flash floods from heavy rain that hit villages as the storm passed through Irawaddy region and Rakhine state, media said.

The New Light of Myanmar newspaper quoted local government officials as saying eight women were among the 14 missing.

"There have been strong winds and torrential rains along coastal regions and the southern part of Rakhine state, causing rivers to flood," the newspaper said.

"The sudden flow of water left 18 people drowned and 14 missing."



**Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) shakes hands with member of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella group of Indian Kashmiri separatist parties, Maulana Abbas Ansari (R) as leader of the Hurriyat Conference Mirwaiz Umar Farooq (2L) and member Professor Abdul Ghani Bhat (2R) look on, prior to a meeting in New Delhi Wednesday.**

# Peace talks rekindle hope for Kashmiris

**REUTERS, Srinagar**

People in revolt-torn Kashmir expressed a mixture of hope and caution yesterday, a day after separatist politicians and New Delhi agreed to work together to try and end a bloody insurgency in the disputed region.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, Kashmir's main political separatist alliance, agreed on Wednesday to establish a system to discuss solutions to the dispute over the Himalayan region.

It was the first time the Hurriyat and New Delhi had agreed to seek sustained negotiations to try and quell a revolt that has killed tens of thousands of people since it began in 1989.

"It is a positive development," said Noor Ahmad Baba, head of Kashmir

University's political science department.

"But much would depend on how far the Hurriyat is able to retain the confidence of Kashmiris, that they are not for any kind of a sell-out, and how they are able to carry other separatist groups along in this process," he said.

Much would also depend on how far Pakistan is willing to back Hurriyat in the quest to settle a dispute that has plagued relations between New Delhi and Islamabad for nearly 60 years and triggered two of their three wars, analysts said.

A lasting settlement will also need the support of Islamist militant groups who are opposed to any compromise with the Indian government.

India and Pakistan both claim Kashmir in full and rule it in parts. A

parallel peace process between the nuclear-armed neighbours has improved their relations but made slow progress over tackling Kashmir.

Some ordinary Kashmiris echoed the caution of analysts.

"Unfortunately, previous talks failed to produce a breakthrough. But I am now hopeful and pray that all parties concerned will work sincerely and find a solution so that peace returns," said 28-year-old Syed Sajjad in Srinagar.

"I believe the slow and steady win the race."

Wednesday's talks were the second between the two sides since Singh became prime minister in 2004.

# Gujarat must act to halt sectarian riots

**AFP, Vadodara**

India's Gujarat state must take action to stop Hindu-Muslim riots from worsening, a rights group warned yesterday as troops patrolled a city where six people have already died.

Vadodara (formerly Baroda) has been under curfew since Monday when violence erupted after authorities demolished a Muslim shrine saying it was built on government land.

"The Gujarat government must be vigilant against extremist violence against helpless civilians," said Brad Adams, Asia director for the New York-based Human Rights Watch.

"Instead of allowing this violence to deepen religious hatred, the

authorities should launch an immediate, thorough and transparent investigation to ensure that those responsible are prosecuted and punished," he said Thursday.

The group said it was worried that there could be a repeat Gujarat's 2002 riots which left more than 2,000 people dead, most of them Muslims.

After man was burnt alive in his car on Tuesday, The Indian government deployed 1,500 troops, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

Gujarat's chief minister Narendra Modi also promised Wednesday to act swiftly against rioters as arson and looting continued.

"I warn rioters, whatever community they belong to... the law will do its duty," he said.