

Oslo talks fail as Lanka violence kills 19 more

AFP, Oslo/Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels rejected talks yesterday with Sri Lanka at a meeting arranged by peace broker Norway, the government said as a surge of violence at home left at least 19 people dead.

Sri Lanka's government said in a statement issued here that the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who travelled to Oslo Monday for the two-day meeting scheduled to start Thursday refused to meet with them.

Peace broker Norway had called the meeting to discuss the safety of the 60-member Scandinavian mission monitoring a collapsing truce in the troubled South Asian island republic.

At least 680 people have been killed in violence since December despite the truce that was arranged and put in place by Norway in February 2002.

"The Sri Lankan delegation was

informed by the Norwegians that the LTTE had declined to meet the government of Sri Lanka delegation," the statement said.

"The Norwegian government representatives themselves expressed complete surprise at the stance taken by the LTTE despite all the background preparations made by the Norwegian facilitators."

The Norwegians also informed Colombo that the Tigers were opposed to nationals from Denmark, Finland and Sweden -- all European Union member states -- monitoring Sri Lanka's ceasefire following last week's EU ban on the rebels.

Officials said that the LTTE did not want to negotiate with a four-member Sri Lanka delegation led by the government's top official coordinating the peace process, Palitha Kohona, arguing they had no political authority.

Colombo rejected the Tiger

stance, saying the guerrillas had been fully aware of the composition of the Sri Lankan delegation, which had been named last week, when they travelled to Oslo.

Norway's top peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, had already played down expectations for Thursday's meeting.

"These talks are not aimed at finding a political solution to the armed conflict and do not substitute the Geneva talks aimed at strengthening the implementation of the ceasefire agreement of 2002," Solheim told AFP in Oslo.

"My expectations for this meeting are minimal," he added.

There was no immediate comment either from the Tigers or the Norwegians about the aborted take-off of Thursday's talks, but diplomats said the Norwegians were trying to get the two parties together for a one-day meeting Friday.

In Sri Lanka, violence escalated with at least 19 people reported

killed on Thursday.

Two separate mine blasts killed an army officer and two civilians, defence officials said.

The military blamed Tamil Tiger rebels for killing the officer while the Tigers blamed the military for the second blast in which two construction workers were killed.

Defence officials said Tiger rebels had also clashed with a breakaway faction in the north-eastern district of Trincomalee, leaving at least 15 guerrillas dead. Another man was shot dead in the same district at noon Thursday, police said.

Defence officials here said security had been stepped up in the embattled northern and eastern regions amid fears of an escalation of violence to coincide with the Oslo talks.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in the island's drawn out Tamil separatist conflict since 1972.



Indian Congress President Sonia Gandhi (R) greets Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala (L) prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, has promised his Nepalese counterpart an economic package to help the new government rebuild the troubled Himalayan country.

Indian court charges Geelani with sedition

REUTERS, Jammu

Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a hardline Kashmiri separatist leader, has been charged with sedition by an Indian court in the troubled Himalayan region and ordered into police custody five years after an arrest warrant was issued.

Police said 77-year-old Syed Ali Shah Geelani, head of a breakaway faction of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an alliance of separatist parties, was arrested on Wednesday on arriving in Poonch, a town 144 km northwest of Kashmir's winter capital, Jammu.

"Soon after he checked in Hotel Star in Poonch town, our police party immediately took him into custody," a senior police official, requesting not to be named, told Reuters.

A local magistrate ordered Geelani, who says he requires constant medical attention due to heart problems, into police custody until June 29.

Geelani's supporters staged protests in Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar on Thursday, and his party called for a strike on Friday.



An elderly Indian woman sits outside her house along a flooded street yesterday in Patna, Bihar, following 36 hours of continuous rainfall in the region. Bountiful early monsoon rains are raking in millions of dollars for Indian bookies taking bets on the amount of rain that will drench the country between June and September.

Abbas finalises decree for statehood referendum

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas was putting the finishing touches yesterday to a decree fixing the date of a statehood referendum, denounced by Hamas as a ploy to topple its government.

A formal announcement on the date should be made by the weekend at the latest, as hopes have all but disappeared for a compromise between the titular head of the Palestinian Authority and the Islamists who run its government.

Abbas said on Wednesday he would announce the date "in one or two days' time" although his spokesman said the declaration was more likely on Saturday.

The referendum, based on a document drawn up by senior Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, is designed to draw a line under rivalry between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah faction which was thrashed in January's parliament

tary election.

However Hamas, which has repeatedly stressed a desire for the factions to resolve their differences in negotiations rather than via a referendum, hardened its opposition by saying it would "not accept it at any price."

"Its aim is to impose concessions on us and a recognition of Israel. It's a plan to make the government fall," said Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri.

The document Abbas is threatening to put to the vote calls for a national unity government, an end to attacks in Israel and the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel on land conquered by the Jewish state in 1967.

If accepted, the blueprint would undercut Hamas's long-time platform of refusing to recognise Israel or disavow the use of violence even within Israeli borders, as well as bounce it into a coalition government with Fatah.

Abbas, in contrast, has long championed a negotiated settlement to the conflict with Israel and publicly criticised suicide bombings.

A Fatah spokesman said Hamas's opposition stemmed from its fear of losing, with polls showing around three-quarters of voters support the blueprint.

"We are surprised that the movement is afraid of facing the public and does not trust the Palestinian people," Jamal Nazzari told Palestinian radio.

Ahmed Bahar, Hamas's deputy speaker in parliament, reiterated the movement's belief that divisions should be resolved in talks and not at the ballot box.

"The referendum is unconstitutional and will only increase tension in the Palestinian arena," said Bahar.

"Dialogue must be the solution. The referendum would be part of the crisis."

Maoist rebels pile pressure on Nepal's new government

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's rebel leader Prachanda piled more pressure on the country's new government yesterday, claiming the political parties who came back into power in April were ignoring Maoist demands.

The Himalayan state's parliament was reinstated in April, ending 14 months of direct rule by King Gyanendra. Weeks of mass protests organised by the parties and the rebels in concert forced the royal climbdown.

"The parties are trying to ignore us when we are ready to stay at the talks table for agreement," Prachanda told Kantipur, a Nepali language daily.

The rebels and new government have observed a ceasefire for more than a month and have had a day of preliminary peace talks.

The new government has met a key rebel demand by promising an election to appoint a body to

redraft Nepal's constitution.

But the rebels have been calling for the dissolution of the new parliament, and the formation of a new interim government, containing Maoists.

"There will be bloodshed in the country if the seven parties attempt to move ahead alone by declaring the House of Representatives all-powerful," the rebel leader told the newspaper.

A longer interview with Prachanda is due to be televised on Kantipur television Thursday, marking the first time local media would have shown the elusive rebel leader.

Until the recent thaw with the new government Prachanda was branded a terrorist and barred from appearing in the local media.

An editorial in the Himalayan Times, an English language daily, called on the rebels to tone down their demands.

Europe colluded with CIA over prisoners Says watchdog

REUTERS, Paris

More than 20 mostly European countries colluded in a "global spider web" of secret CIA jails and flight transfers of terrorist suspects stretching from Asia to Guantanamo Bay, a rights watchdog said on Wednesday.

Council of Europe investigator Dick Marty said the US Central Intelligence Agency's well-oiled system did not involve torture but amounted to a form of "legal and judicial apartheid" that could exacerbate Muslim anger and spawn new terrorists.

The United States maintained a stance of neither denying nor confirming the allegations but challenged the credibility of the Council of Europe's report. Some European governments denied breaking laws, while others were silent or went on the attack.

European governments have faced embarrassing allegations

over cooperation with US policies unpopular with domestic opinion. It has fuelled perceptions some were ready to ignore national laws due to US pressure to back the war on terrorism.

Marty said in the report many of the Council's 46 member states had provided limited cooperation with his inquiry, but witnesses, plane enthusiasts, confidential sources and flight records had helped him partially lift a "veil of silence."

"It is now clear -- although we are still far from having established the whole truth -- that authorities in several European countries actively participated with the CIA in these unlawful activities," said Marty.

"Other countries ignored them knowingly, or did not want to know," he said, adding he had amassed a great deal of circumstantial evidence of secret CIA detention centres but had "no formal evidence."

World powers give Iran enrichment leeway

AP, Vienna

In a major concession, world powers are no longer demanding that Iran commit to a prolonged moratorium on uranium enrichment and are now asking only for a suspension during talks on its nuclear programme, diplomats and officials said Wednesday.

The proposal and a connected offer to allow continued uranium conversion are part of an effort to avoid a showdown over international concerns that the Iranians are trying to develop nuclear weapons.

Backing off the previous stance on enrichment signals a possible readiness by the United States and key allies to accept some limited form of enrichment by Iran, despite years of warnings from Washington that Tehran wanted such technology to make atomic warheads.

Iran insists its nuclear programme is intended only to

produce power, arguing it needs enrichment technology to produce fuel for atomic reactors that would generate electricity.

Since talks between European nations and Iran broke off last August, the public stance by the European negotiators and the United States has been that Iran must commit to a long-term halt in enrichment as a precondition for talks.

Still, a diplomat said that despite the concession, a long-term moratorium remained the preferred goal of the six nations that approved a package of incentives for the Tehran regime last week: the United States, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany.

Beyond that, the talks are meant to reach agreement on what kind of nuclear activities Iran can conduct under conditions that dispel fears it wants a military programme.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana, who presented

the offer to Iranian officials this week, said Wednesday that the issue of enrichment would have to be reassessed once talks were completed.

"In principle... they will have to stop now, we will have to negotiate with no process of enrichment in place," he told reporters in Germany. "After the finalisation of the negotiations we will see what happens."

Solana said the incentive offer came with "no specific timeframe," but that he expected an Iranian answer within "weeks."

He said nothing about uranium conversion, which is a step preceding enrichment. But diplomats told The Associated Press that Iran would be allowed to continue that activity. Previously, Washington and its allies wanted a freeze on conversion, too.

The diplomats spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorised to divulge the contents of the offer.



Palestinian Foreign Minister Mahmud al-Zahar (L) addresses Pakistani politicians while Qazi Hussain Ahmed (2L) chief of the six-party alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), Imran Khan the (R) leader of his party Tehreek Insaaf and leader of Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) Raja Zafarullah (2R) look on in Islamabad yesterday. Hamas leader Zahar arrived in Islamabad on a three-day visit as Pakistan pledged to donate three million dollars to the Palestinian Authority which is facing a financial crisis after a Western aid freeze to its Hamas-led government.



India President Abdul Kalam prepares to co-pilot a Russian-made Sukhoi 30 MKI aircraft in Pune yesterday. The 74-year-old president, a nuclear scientist known as India's "missile man" for his contribution to the country's defence programme, made a 30-minute flight over the city of Pune and became the oldest Indian to co-pilot a fighter jet.

Kalam's childhood dream comes true

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Fulfilling his childhood dream, Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam yesterday flew in a most advanced fighter aircraft Sukhoi-30 MKI of Indian Air Force, becoming the country's first head of state to perform the feat.

Clad in a navy blue G-suit and a cap, an intrepid 74-year-old Kalam, the father of India's missile programme, sat just behind the pilot in the cockpit, along with Wing Commander Ajay Rathore, of the aircraft which took off from an airbase near Pune city in the western state of Maharashtra and returned after a 30-minute sortie.

Kalam, who has his aeronautical engineering from Madras Institute of Technology and specialises in avionics, thus added another first to his credit after having become the first Indian President to undertake a journey in a submarine of Indian Navy last month and the first head of state to visit Siachen Glacier, the highest and coldest battlefield in the world before that.

Sitting at the back, Kalam operated a few controlling panels of Sukhoi-30, a Russia-built aircraft considered one of the most advanced fighter planes in the world.

"It was a beautiful experience," exulted a smiling Kalam to media persons at the air base after the flight. Ironically, he had wanted to join the Indian Air Force as a pilot way back in 1958 but was rejected.

US, allies hail death of al-Qaeda chief Zargawi

AFP, Paris

US President George W. Bush and his global allies Thursday hailed the killing of al-Qaeda's chief in Iraq, Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi, as a major strike against the "evil" terror network but warned it remained a grave threat.

From the White House to Downing Street, allies in the war that toppled Iraq's former president Saddam Hussein greeted the death of their nemesis with glee and caution.

"Now Zarqawi has met his end and this violent man will never murder again," Bush said at the White House Rose Garden.

"Zarqawi's death is a severe blow to al-Qaeda," he said, adding that it presented "an opportunity for Iraq's new government to turn the tide of this struggle."

But the US leader cautioned: "The difficult and necessary mission in Iraq continues. We can expect the terrorists and insurgents to carry on without him. We can

expect the sectarian violence to continue."

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Bush's closest ally in Iraq who also suffered a public backlash over the invasion, said the killing was a blow against al-Qaeda globally.

"We know they will continue to kill, we know there are many, many obstacles to overcome," Blair said. "But they also know that our determination to defeat them is total."

"This terrorism is a global movement. Their attack in Iraq has only ever been part of a wider attack that they have carried into conflicts and countries the world over," the British leader added.

"Indeed, there is barely a major nation in the world that has not felt the outreach of their evil."

"Defeat them in Iraq and we will defeat them everywhere."

Most poignantly, the family of Ken Bigley, a Briton kidnapped and purportedly beheaded personally by Zarqawi in a grisly video shown on the Internet, delighted in the death of the "monster."

Iraqi parliament picks new key ministers

19 people killed in fresh violence

AP, Baghdad

Iraq's parliament yesterday approved three new key ministers, including a Sunni Arab to head the defence ministry, as violence left at least 19 people dead and 40 wounded, according to police.

The three, including ministers for national security and interior, were sworn in after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki announced the death of al-Qaeda in Iraq chief Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

The new defence minister is Iraqi Army Gen. Abdul-Qader Mohammed Jassim al-Mifarji and Shia's Jawad al-Bolani for interior and Sherwan al-Waili for national security.

The posts are considered crucial for al-Maliki's government to implement a plan allowing Iraqi forces to take over security from the US-led coalition within 18 months,

opening the way for the eventual withdrawal of foreign troops. The appointments end a stalemate among Iraq's religious and ethnic groups over the crucial posts.

Al-Mifarji, who is not affiliated with any Sunni Arab party, told the 275-member body that he graduated from the Iraqi military academy in 1969 and was thrown out of the military and Saddam Hussein's now outlawed Baath Party in 1991 after he criticised the invasion of Kuwait which led to his conviction by a military court in 1994 and a seven-year prison sentence.

"All my properties were confiscated. In 2003, my only house was returned. Then I joined the new Iraqi army as the commander of operations room and then commander of military operations in western Iraq, and finally the commando units of the infantry."