

Arab League mediation on Lebanon crisis fails

REUTERS, Beirut

Arab League chief Amr Moussa failed yesterday to broker a deal to resolve Lebanon's political crisis, a senior political source said.

"Moussa's efforts to broker a deal have failed," the source said. There was no immediate comment from the Arab League secretary-general, but he was expected to give a news conference at 1400 GMT.

Moussa, who arrived in Beirut on Tuesday, has been shuttling between rival Lebanese leaders in an effort to end the crisis which escalated after the Hezbollah-led opposition took to the streets to press its demand for veto power in the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

The opposition has declared Siniora's cabinet illegitimate and has been staging a round-the-clock protest in central Beirut since December 1.

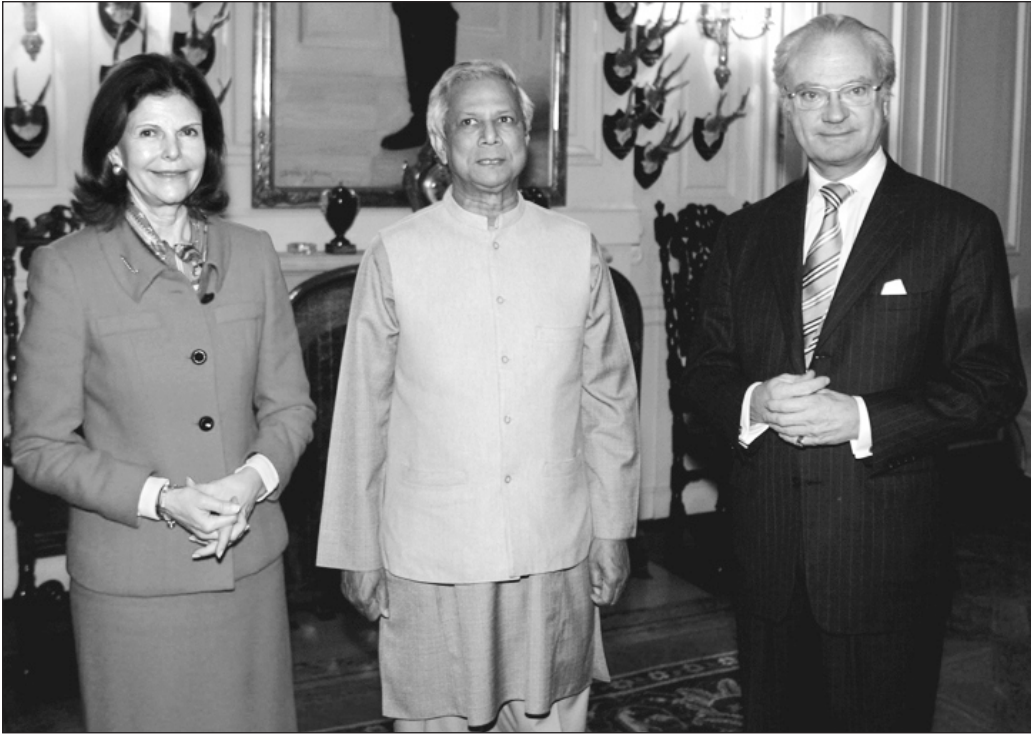


PHOTO: AFP

Nobel Peace laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh poses with Swedish King Carl XVI Gustaf (R) and Queen Silvia at the royal Palace in Stockholm, Sweden Wednesday. Microcredit pioneer and Nobel Prize laureate Dr Yunus, who received his prestigious award in Oslo at the weekend, released a CD and music video on December 12 to raise money for his native Bangladesh, Norwegian daily Dagbladet reported.

UK, Russia see progress on Iran sanction move

AFP, United Nations

Six major powers edged closer here Wednesday to agreeing UN sanctions against Iran over its refusal to halt sensitive nuclear fuel work, raising hopes that the Security Council could vote on a compromise package soon.

After a new round of informal talks on a sanctions draft resolution early Wednesday by envoys from the Security Council's five veto-wielding members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany, several participants emerged reasonably upbeat.

"We had a good meeting this morning. We made substantial progress," British Ambassador Emyr Jones Parry told reporters.

He expressed hope that a compromise text would be agreed on this week and that the full 15-

member council "will vote as soon as possible after that".

Western diplomats say they expect passage of the resolution by Christmas.

France's UN envoy Jean-Marc de La Sabliere also spoke of "progress" following amendments presented by Russia and the United States to a revised European draft drawn up by France, Britain and Germany.

"Important matters of principle have basically been agreed," Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin said.

While there were still differences on some issues, including a proposed travel ban on officials directly involved in Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, the six powers now "have a basic understanding that we should be focusing on uranium enrichment, chemical reprocessing, heavy

water projects and nuclear delivery systems," he added.

The European draft would mandate a ban on trade with Iran on goods related to its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes and impose financial and travel restrictions on persons and entities involved.

Jones Parry said nuclear experts of the council would go over the text Thursday morning while envoys of the six major powers would take it up again later that day.

In the meantime, the amendments and the comments made during Wednesday's session would be forwarded to the envoys' respective capitals, he added.

Churkin for his part described the text as "very positive", "even tough there are certain restrictions on activities which we are concerned about."

India 'unshakable' against nukes

PM tells Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asked Japan yesterday for its moral authority to let his country into the club of civilian nuclear powers, boasting of "unshakable" commitment against proliferation.

Singh and US President George W. Bush last year reached a controversial deal to give India access to civilian nuclear technology even though it has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty on atomic weapons.

The pact needs the approval of the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, of which Japan is a pivotal member.

"Like Japan, India sees nuclear power as a viable and clean energy source to meet its growing energy requirements," Singh said in an

address to the Japanese parliament.

"We seek Japan's support in helping put in place innovative and forward-looking approaches of the international community to make this possible," he said.

In an aside from his prepared text, Singh added: "At the same time, I would like to confirm that India's commitment to work for universal nuclear disarmament remains unshakable."

Japan's support for the India-US pact is seen as significant as it is the only nation to have been attacked with nuclear weapons and is also a major civilian atomic power.

Japan has been seeking warmer relations with India but has yet to offer a position on the nuclear pact. Singh meets Friday with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Lanka vows to drive out Tigers from east coast

Civilians flee fighting, troops kill 6 rebels

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's security forces are determined to drive the Tamil Tigers from a stretch of the east coast the rebels control under a 2002 truce, the military said yesterday, to the worry of international ceasefire monitors.

In fresh violence security forces shot dead at least six Tamil Tiger rebels during a confrontation in Sri Lanka's restive eastern province, officials said yesterday.

The troops and a group of fighters from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) clashed near Poonani on Wednesday night and security forces recovered the bodies of six Tigers, a military official in the area said.

The clash came as Sri Lanka's army

chief vowed to drive out Tiger guerrillas from the island's east as dozens of civilians fled their shelters Wednesday amid a lull in long-range attacks.

The commander of the army, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, said the military had captured two guerrilla defence lines inside their Vakarai stronghold, according to the state-run Dinamina newspaper.

Troops and rebels have been locked in fierce artillery duels in the northeastern districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa in recent weeks, and around 35,000 civilians are stuck in camps behind rebel lines in and around the Tiger-held town of Vakarai.

The United Nations has urged both sides to halt fighting that has killed more than 3,000 civilians, troops and

rebel fighters this year, but the military and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have ignored the call.

"We want to get the LTTE out of this area and free the civilians," military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told Reuters, referring to a 14 mile stretch of coast in the eastern districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa.

"The LTTE are firing artillery and mortars toward civilian settlements and camps in Trincomalee south and keeping 35,000 people as human shields," he added. "So we have to respond to that threat as a countermeasure. We will control most of the coastline in the east."

Analysts suspect the government wants to drive the Tigers out of the east completely and then concentrate on rebuilding damaged, long-

neglected infrastructure in the area while confining the Tigers to their northern stronghold.

Samarasinghe said more than 1,000 civilians had fled Tiger territory near Vakarai overnight and said troops had killed five rebels and freed a soldier as the Tigers had tried to move him south to areas of land they control inland.

The Tigers say dozens of civilians have been killed by army artillery fire in and around Vakarai since Saturday, while the army blames the rebels for putting them in harm's way.

The Tigers were not immediately available for comment on the plan of the military, which has already driven them back from terrain they had held south of the strategic harbour of Trincomalee since the 1990s.

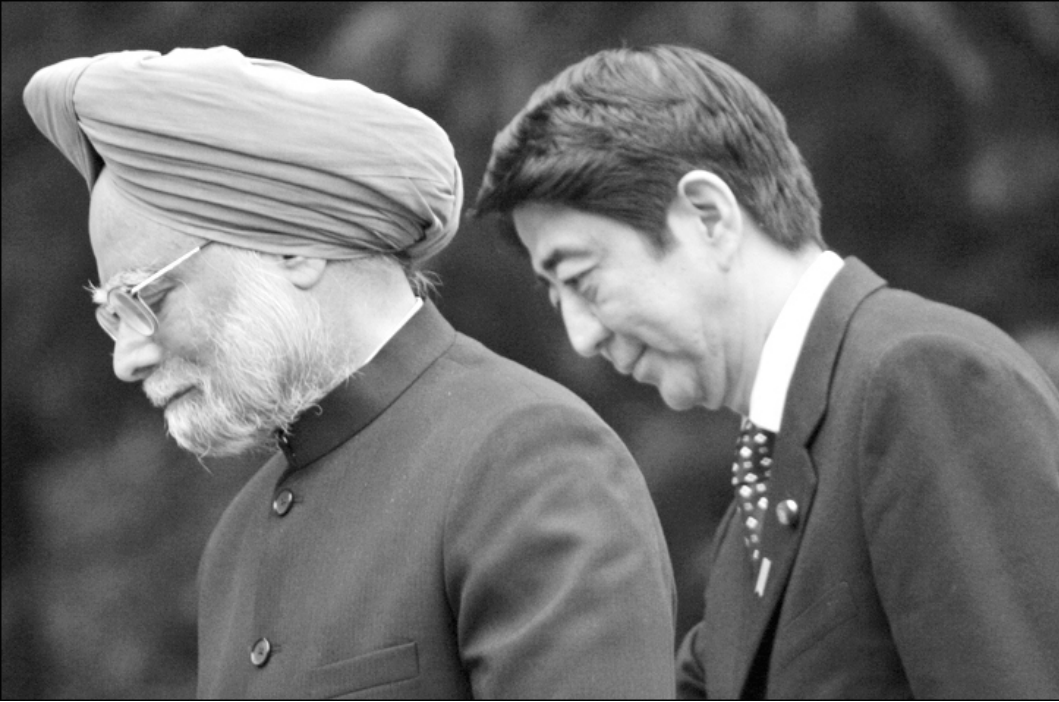


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe walk during the welcoming ceremony at the premier's official residence in Tokyo yesterday. Singh arrived in Japan on Wednesday on a four-day official visit.

India, Bhutan demarcate border after 45 years

AFP, Guwahati

India and Bhutan have formally demarcated their border by signing the final maps 45 years after the process of settling the boundary started, officials said Wednesday.

The two countries will erect pillars and use markers to define the 700-kilometre (435-mile) frontier, which is currently unfenced

and separated by concrete pillars in only some places.

"This is indeed a landmark agreement as the two countries mutually agreed to demarcate the border without any differences in opinion," a Bhutanese foreign ministry official told AFP by telephone from the capital Thimphu.

India's ambassador to Bhutan, Sudhir Vyas, and the Himalayan

kingdom's secretary for international boundaries, Dasho Pema Wangchuk, signed the agreement at a meeting in Thimphu on Tuesday.

"This line is not a border, it is a marker of friendship between our two countries," Vyas was quoted as saying by Bhutan's national newspaper Kuensel.

Israel court won't ban targeted killings

AP, Jerusalem

The Israeli Supreme Court decided yesterday not to issue a blanket ban against the targeted killing of Palestinian militants, ruling that some of the killings were legal under international law.

The ruling gave legal legitimacy to a practice Israeli forces have routinely used against militants during the past six years of violence. The Israeli human rights organization B'tselem estimates that 339 Palestinians have been killed in the targeted operations over the past six years. Of those,

210 were the targets and the rest were bystanders.

The three-judge panel unanimously ruled that "it cannot be determined in advance that every targeted killing is prohibited according to customary international law," while also noting that the tactic was not necessarily legal in every case.

Two human rights groups, the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel and the Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment petitioned the court to ban the policy in 2002, but the court repeatedly delayed issuing a decision on the case.

Rahul not in hurry to take leadership torch

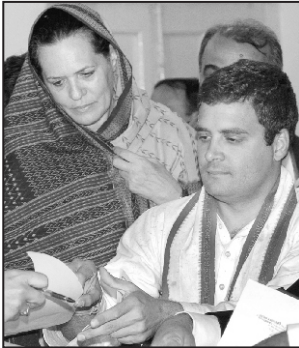
AFP, New Delhi

India's political crown prince Rahul Gandhi is showing little inclination to fill the boots of his illustrious forebears, to the increasing alarm of Congress party stalwarts, analysts say.

Two-and-a-half years after being elected as a Congress MP, the photogenic heir to the famed Gandhi-Nehru dynasty, which has given India three prime ministers, seems to have cold feet about taking up the leadership torch.

"There seems to be a real diffidence -- somewhere he appears to be scared, lacking confidence," said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

For months there have been media reports that his mother, Congress president Sonia Gandhi, would name Rahul to a



Rahul with his mother Sonia

major post such as party general secretary as a prelude to him perhaps becoming a candidate for prime minister.

But the party now says the soft-spoken, clean-cut Rahul, 36, is still making up his mind about whether to heed his dynastic calling.

‘Pakistan govt wants to enslave Afghanistan’

AFP, Kandahar

Afghanistan's president accused the Pakistani government Wednesday of trying to turn his countrymen into "slaves", in his strongest words yet blaming Islamabad for a wave of violence.

Hamid Karzai added that he was the only person able to prevent Afghans angered by an insurgency which has claimed nearly 4,000 lives this year from "coming after" Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

Pakistan hit back by saying the roots of the problem were in

Afghanistan and that Islamabad was doing all it could to counter militancy, but stopped short of an outright rebuttal.

"Pakistan still hasn't given up the hope of making us slaves. But they cannot," Karzai said in a speech at a boys' high school in the southern city of Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban.

"This tyranny against our people is not by the nation of Pakistan, it is by the government of Pakistan," he added to cheers from a crowd of around 500 students, teachers and local dignitaries.

