

Germany freezes aid pledges to Lanka

Artillery duels ahead of showdown

AFP, Berlin/ Colombo

Germany said it will not offer the Sri Lankan government new aid until the peace process in the country advances and called on other nations to increase the pressure on Colombo.

Overseas Development Minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul told Berlin's daily Tagesspiegel that Germany had been frustrated that its aid to Sri Lanka was not being used effectively due to ongoing ethnic violence.

But she said that Berlin had no plans to cut off financial transfers entirely when asked if aid should be dependent on a lasting peace deal

between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tiger rebels.

"We will not do that (cut off aid) because the tsunami victims would suffer," she said, referring to the Asian disaster two years ago that killed an estimated 31,000 people in Sri Lanka alone while another million were left homeless.

"However we have stopped making new pledges to the government until the peace process gets back into gear. It would be good if other Western governments did the same."

Wieczorek-Zeul said that because much of the aid to Sri Lanka was not reaching the people for whom it was intended, her ministry had redirected 19 million euros

(25 million dollars) originally earmarked for Sri Lanka to Indonesia, the country hardest hit by the tsunami.

She said the funds, which will go towards construction of housing as well as education and training, will bring German aid for Indonesia through 2009 to 186 million euros.

Wieczorek-Zeul said that despite the civil war, Germany was continuing its aid projects in areas of Sri Lanka relief workers could still safely reach.

Reconstruction in Sri Lanka's northeast -- the part of the island worst affected by the tsunami -- has suffered with the escalation of fighting between government

troops and the Tamil Tigers since early this year.

Meanwhile, Tamil Tiger guerrillas fired artillery and mortar bombs at government troops in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday drawing retaliatory fire from security forces, the defence ministry said.

The exchanges with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) took place in the district of Batticaloa, the ministry said in a statement, adding that it suffered "no damages".

On Friday, the Tigers appealed to the International Red Cross to arrange a safe haven for thousands of civilians trapped by fighting in the district.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani man inspects the site of an explosion inside a welding shop in Karachi yesterday. Three people were killed and another injured when a gas cylinder exploded in the welding shop.

Colombian rebels kill 14 troops in ambush

REUTERS, Bogota

Colombian rebels ambushed an army patrol and killed 14 soldiers on Saturday in one of the worst attacks this year on troops fighting in President Alvaro Uribe's US-backed campaign to end a four-decade insurgency.

The soldiers were hunting for rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, the country's largest guerrilla group, after receiving information they were about to attack a small town in southern Meta department.

"The troops went to intercept the guerrillas, found a camp in the jungle and were attacked. In the combat two officers and 12 troops were killed and an undetermined number of rebels," Armed Forces Commander Gen. Freddy Padilla told reporters.

Uribe, who receives millions of dollars in U.S. military aid each year, has pushed the left-wing

FARC back into the jungles and mountains and reduced violence and kidnapping that once plagued cities, towns and major highways.

But with as many as 17,000 fighters still roaming rural Colombia, the FARC has shown it remains a potent force financed in part by the country's huge cocaine trade.

Last month, hundreds of guerrillas attacked a rural hamlet police station and killed at least 16 officers. The police post had only recently set up in an area that once was controlled by illegal paramilitaries who have demobilized in a peace deal.

A month later 17 soldiers were killed in a rebel attack on their patrol.

The latest assault came just days after Uribe's government renewed an offer to enter talks with the FARC over the release of hostages the guerrillas are holding, including three US military contract workers captured on an anti-drug mission.

Row erupts in Bhutan over transition to democracy

AFP, Guwahati

A row has erupted over the tiny Himalayan nation of Bhutan's planned transition from royal rule to constitutional monarchy, reports said yesterday.

The complaints centre around a provision in a draft constitution which stipulates that only university graduates can contest the Buddhist kingdom's first general elections, which are scheduled to take place in 2008.

"The education criteria would take away rights of the people. There would not be mass representation," the deputy speaker in Bhutan's national assembly, Zhamling Dorji, was quoted as saying by the national newspaper Kuensel.

The 34-point draft constitution has been sent to the Bhutanese people for their views ahead of the elections. Only 42 percent people

in Bhutan are literate and the country has 11,000 graduates among its 600,000 people.

"Should we allow our population to be represented by the two percent who are graduates?" Dorji said.

Several representatives of Bhutan's 20 districts have also opposed the guidelines.

"Modern education alone cannot judge a person," an unnamed representative from Zhemgang district was quoted as saying by Kuensel.

This month, Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicated the throne in favour of his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in a bid to give the young Oxford-educated royal more exposure to governance.

The country's transition to a constitutional monarchy began five years ago when the king handed over the powers of daily government to a council of ministers.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian army soldiers carry rocket launchers as they run towards the site of a firefight with rebels at Pattan, some 40km north of Srinagar yesterday. An Indian Army colonel, two soldiers and two rebels have died and four private houses have been razed during the encounter which began on Saturday.

4 militants killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Four Islamic militants have been killed and four other people, including three policemen, injured in two separate gunbattles with Indian troops in restive Kashmir, police said Sunday.

"Two militants were killed in the gunfight in Tilgam village in north Kashmir," a police spokesman said.

Another two rebels were killed in Sopore, 50km from Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, the spokesman added.

The 17-year-old insurgency against Indian rule has claimed more than 44,000 lives by official count and more than double that number according to the separatists' tally.

Five Taliban killed in Nato-led raid

AFP, Kabul

An air strike by Nato-led forces killed five insurgents in southern Afghanistan while two other rebels were blown up when their bomb exploded prematurely, the interior ministry said yesterday.

The five, two of which were Pakistani nationals, were killed on Saturday as planes from the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) bombed a rebel stronghold in the Garmsir district of southern Helmand province, it said.

Those killed included a mid-level Taliban commander, the Afghan intelligence department said.

Also on Saturday, two militants were killed when a bomb they were planting on a road used by Afghan and foreign troops

exploded prematurely near the provincial capital Lashkargah, the ministry added.

Garmsir in the far-east of the restive Helmand province was overtaken twice by Taliban militants earlier this year.

In another operation, security forces in the area also captured several militants who were carrying bombs, the ministry said, without giving details.

Taliban ousted by a US-led invasion five years ago are still active in eastern and southern Afghanistan.

They have carried out almost daily attacks this year making it the bloodiest since the toppling of their regime in late 2001.

Nearly 4,000 people, most of them militants, have been killed in violence this year.

3 shot dead after Shia scholar's funeral in Pakistan

AFP, Dera Ismail Khan

At least three people were killed and five others injured in a gun battle in a northwest Pakistani city Sunday after the funeral of a slain Shia Muslim scholar, police said.

The firing erupted when mourners were returning from the burial of Nazakat Ali Imrani, killed in suspected sectarian violence in Dera Ismail Khan city on Saturday, senior police officer Hamad Abid said.

Unknown shooters opened fire when the Shia crowd reached the city's Eidgah graveyard where the funeral of a Sunni Muslim resident was underway, he said.

Eight people with gunshot wounds were rushed to a local hospital where three of them died later, Abid said.

"Police chased and arrested two armed men who tried to flee after the firing," he told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Burqa-clad Afghan women, along with their children, wait for a bus while walking through the snow in Kabul yesterday. The Afghan capital experienced its second heavy snowfall of the winter.

US eyes 'opportunities' in Central Asia after death of Turkmen ruler

AFP, Ashgabat

The United States sees opportunities for expanded cooperation in Central Asia and wants a peaceful transition of power in Turkmenistan following the death of the country's president, a senior US official said here yesterday.

"There are many opportunities in this region for cooperation," US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher told reporters here after holding talks with officials in Ashgabat.

Those opportunities include closer work with nearby Afghanistan and other countries in the region as well as "cooperation with those of us who are further away," Boucher said.

He called on the new government in Turkmenistan to "take advantage of these opportunities for the benefit of the people of Turkmenistan" and reiterated calls from Washington and other world capitals for stability in the energy-rich country.

"We're certainly hoping for a peaceful and stable transition" of power in Ashgabat following the death Thursday from a heart attack of Saparmurat Niyazov, the country's iron-fisted ruler for more than two decades, who died leaving no successor and no clear system in place for choosing one.

The United States, Russia and China are among major world

powers that are anxious to consolidate strong relations with the authorities in Turkmenistan, which has the fifth largest known natural gas reserves and is a key link in energy supplies to Europe.

Western energy firms are eager to expand strategic energy routes between sources of supply in Central Asia and the Caspian region and markets in western -- routes that bypass Russia, a giant sitting between these two ends of the energy flow.

Asked about different possible pipeline routes from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Russia, Boucher said: "Those will be decisions that the government will have to make."

Boucher was then asked in particular about a proposal to build a pipeline that would bypass Russia, stretching from Turkmenistan across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and on to Western markets.

"This is a project of interest to us and of interest to people in the region... as with any project, if it has a commercial foundation and it can be done in the region, we'd like to see it done," Boucher said.

Speculation about US designs in Central Asia is running high in Moscow and other capitals closer to Central Asia, and Boucher said he met with journalists in Ashgabat "so you all have the real story as opposed to what's being written about".

CHRISTMAS IN ASIA

Shopping, barbecues and security worries

AFP, Hong Kong

The day before Christmas was marked across Asia with last-minute shopping, security sweeps, transport congestion and final preparations for the holidays.

In Australia, shops stayed open late to cater for crowds of present buyers, with perfumes, toys and digital cameras among the most popular items.

Unseasonal wet weather put a dampener on backpackers' plans for a Christmas party on Sydney's Bondi Beach.

The traditional event, which normally sees celebrating tourists pack the iconic beach, has been scaled back after local authorities imposed alcohol restrictions and a hefty entrance fee last year.

Instead, England's Barmy Army of cricket fans were planning a Christmas Day barbecue on the banks of Melbourne's Yarra River ahead of the Boxing Day Test, with thousands expected to turn out despite England poor on-field form.

The mild weather proved a bonus for 800 firefighters who have been battling blazes in Victoria state for the past three weeks, allowing authorities to stand them down to enjoy Christmas Eve at home.

The mood in Indonesia was darker, with anti-terrorist police sweeping through churches ahead of Christmas services, checking for explosives amid warnings from the US and Australia of possible militant attacks.

Indonesia has deployed some 18,000 police and troops to guard churches, mosques and public venues over the festive season. Police said there was no specific threat despite the warnings.

Hotels were full and shoppers jostled in the predominantly Roman Catholic Philippines, where police and security forces were also on heightened alert over possible attacks.

There was gridlock on roads leading out of the capital Manila as families returned home to provinces and towns in time for traditional Christmas Eve mass before a midnight dinner called Noche Buena.

In Tokyo, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, now under growing pressure from the media, made a Christmas truce with the press, as journalists working at the prime minister's office presented him chocolate.

"Merry Christmas!" the journalists said in chorus, handing him the surprise present after he finished explaining a budget bill for the next fiscal year.

UNSC calls for an end to attacks on journalists

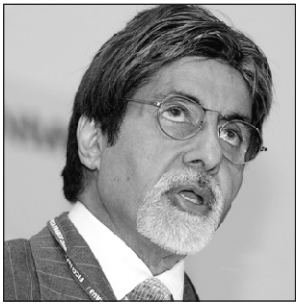
AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council has condemned attacks on journalists working in war zones and called on all parties to put an end to such violence.

Resolution 1738, unanimously adopted by the council Saturday, said that media professionals working in areas of armed conflict "shall be considered civilians" and must be respected and protected as such.

It also stressed that "the deliberate targeting of civilians and other protected persons, and the commission of systematic, flagrant and widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in situations of armed conflict may constitute a threat to international peace and security."

The document urges all parties involved in armed conflicts to respect the professional independence and rights of journalists and other media personnel.



Bachchan is Indian of the Year

REUTERS, New Delhi

Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan, whose star and sex appeal remains undiminished by age, has been voted Indian of the Year, The Times of India reported on Sunday.

An opinion poll in the newspaper said 15 percent of Indians voted for the 64-year-old actor as the most popular citizen, far ahead of the five percent who backed star batsman Sachin Tendulkar and ruling Congress party president Sonia Gandhi.

Bachchan got maximum votes from housewives -- 19 percent -- and those in the 35-45 age category in the survey of 1,005 people in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Bangalore.

3 of Egypt family test positive for bird flu

REUTERS, Cairo

Three members of the same family in Egypt have tested positive for H5N1 bird flu, a World Health Organisation official said yesterday.

The WHO earlier said a brother, 26, and sister, 15, had the virus and then said a third relative, a woman aged 30, had contracted it.

All three are from the same extended family of 33 living in a single house in a village near the town of Zifta in Gharbiya province, about 80km north of Cairo, Hassan el-Bushra, regional adviser for communicable diseases surveillance at the WHO, said.

Bushra said the family raised ducks, and the brother and sister had slaughtered the flock after a number of ducks had become sick and died.

The three have been moved to a hospital in Cairo and have been treated with the drug Tamiflu, with the rest of the family being kept under close medical surveillance, Bushra said.

Lanka to rescue crew of Jordanian ship from north

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military will mount an operation to rescue the crew of a Jordanian ship which drifted into waters near a Tamil Tiger stronghold, truce monitors said yesterday, the latest flashpoint in renewed fighting in the island.

The ship carrying a cargo of rice drifted off the Mullaitivu coast in the island's war-torn northeast early on Saturday after mechanical failure.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam earlier said the 25 crew of the Farah III were safe and that they were trying to arrange for their return through the International Red Cross.

But the Sri Lankan military accused the Tamil Tigers of forcibly boarding the vessel while it was drifting in the seas, with its cargo of 14,000 tonnes of rice bound for South Africa from India.