

France drops money-laundering probe against Laden brother

AFP, Paris

French judges have dismissed a money-laundering investigation targeting Osama bin Laden's half-brother, Yeslam Binladin, for lack of evidence after five years, a judicial source said Monday. Judge Renaud Van Ruymbeke opened an inquiry in December 2001 after the French authorities were alerted of suspect transactions involving companies linked to Binladin's Saudi Investment Company.

In particular, he was investigating a transfer of 300 million dollars (230 million euros) from Switzerland to Pakistan, which could have benefited the al-Qaeda chief who is blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

The investigation was prompted by findings of a private investigation funded by lawyers acting for relatives of people who died in the 2001 attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Hindu migrant workers sit in a railway compartment at Guwahati Railway Station in Guwahati yesterday after arriving from Tinsukia in eastern Assam. Hindu migrant workers mostly from Bihar are fleeing eastern Assam in the wake of a wave of attacks by Assamese insurgents.

Crackdown in Assam after wave of killings

Migrant workers flee

AFP, REUTERS, Guwahati

Troops fanned out into India's remote northeastern jungles yesterday to crackdown on separatist rebels blamed for a wave of ethnic killings that took 71 lives since the weekend.

The counter-insurgency operation in Assam came as authorities confirmed ethnic minority Hindi-speaking migrant workers from the eastern Indian state of Bihar -- the main target of the attacks -- were fleeing the state.

Thousands of poor migrant labourers fled Assam on Monday despite a government promise of protection after dozens were massacred at the weekend by a powerful rebel group, authorities said.

Separatist militants have killed

71 migrants in a spate of attacks across the state since Friday in the worst violence in the troubled region in years, forcing authorities to deploy hundreds of new soldiers and policemen to step up security.

Seven people, including two police officials, were injured late on Monday when two bombs on bicycles exploded at a vehicle checkpoint near Guwahati, police said.

Thousands of migrant labourers, mostly from Bihar, have panicked after the wave of attacks and are fleeing Assam, officials and witnesses said.

They were travelling by buses and trucks from the east of the state to Guwahati, and taking trains to Bihar from there.

Hundreds more, some of them carrying the bodies of victims,

continued to block roads for the second day in Doomdooma town, about 500 km east of Guwahati, demanding action against the insurgents.

The outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), a rebel group fighting for an independent homeland in the oil, tea and timber-rich state since 1979, has been blamed for the rampage of killings.

"We have reports of Hindi-speaking people leaving the state out of fear. But nobody is sure as to the number of people who have fled Assam in the wake of the recent violence," Assam government spokesman and health minister Himanta Biswa Sarma told AFP.

Army Chief General JJ Singh and Defence Minister AK Antony were due in the state Tuesday to

oversee the clampdown on the Ulfa rebels at jungle hideouts in Assam and a neighbouring state.

The two defence officials are scheduled to review security at an army base in the northern garrison town of Tezpur in Assam.

"The joint offensive by security forces of both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh will track down Ulfa rebels believed to be taking shelter here," Arunachal Pradesh police chief Amod Kanth told AFP by telephone from the state.

The initial operation was focused on the hostile and thickly-wooded terrain in Tirap, Changlang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh, bordering eastern Assam, intelligence sources said.

US rules out military solution to Lankan separatist conflict

4 civilians killed in hospital shelling

AFP, Colombo

The United States yesterday urged a speedy political solution to Sri Lanka's separatist conflict as the island slipped into more violence and warned that a military solution was not possible.

The US embassy here in a statement said it wanted the island's ruling party as well as the main opposition to come up with a power-sharing plan that could be the basis for resuming stalled peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels.

"The solution in our view lies in a negotiated settlement that meets the aspirations of all of Sri Lanka's communities -- (majority) Sinhalese (and minority) Tamil, and Muslims," the statement said.

"We reiterate that there can be no military solution to this conflict."

More than 60,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist conflict in the past 35 years and diplomatic attempts to end the conflict politically have ended in failure.

Government troops and Tamil Tiger guerrillas have been trading attacks across the island's embattled northern and eastern regions with over 3,800 people killed in the past year despite a truce in place since February 2002.

The latest attempt at peace talks ended in failure in October and Sri Lanka's key international backers, including the US, Japan and the European Union, have asked both sides to resume talks and end the latest cycle of deepening violence.

The US Tuesday urged President Mahinda Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the opposition United National Party "to accelerate their consideration of the power-sharing proposal so that a ceasefire can take hold and talks can begin."

"Twenty-five years of terrorism has not improved the lives of the Tamil people," the statement said in a reference to the Tigers' militant campaign for independence.

"Similarly, the ongoing violence in Vakarai has caused significant hardship for Sri Lankans living in that area," the US statement said.

The UN also this week demanded protection for civilians trapped by fierce exchanges in the rebel-held Vakarai area in the eastern Batticaloa district, and said it would offer aid if allowed.

"The situation in Vakarai in the east is grave and demands an urgent response," the UN statement said.

"According to government estimates, 15,000 people are

isolated without access to food or basic supplies, as stocks are decimated."

Meanwhile, at least four civilians were killed and 16 hurt by Sri Lankan army shelling inside rebel-held territory, the Tamil Tigers said Tuesday, as sporadic violence was reported in the island's troubled northeast.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said on its website that one more civilian was killed and five injured in Tuesday's shelling in the Vakarai area.

Earlier, the group said three people were killed and 11 hurt when a hospital in the same area was hit Monday.

The Sri Lankan military denied attacking civilians at the hospital, but said that troops have retaliated to guerrilla artillery attacks in the troubled region.

In another development in the island's northern Vavuniya district, two Tiger rebels -- a man and a woman -- were killed in a confrontation with troops on Tuesday, local officials said.

The incident came as the United Nations called on the combatants in the island's ethnic conflict to ensure civilian safety in battle zones.

US sub, Japanese ship collide

AP, Dubai

A US nuclear-powered submarine collided with a Japanese oil tanker in the Straits of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of the world's oil supplies travel, officials said.

No one was hurt in the accident that happened Monday night in the 34-mile wide straits, which are bordered by Iran and Oman and serve as the entrance to the Persian Gulf.

Damage to the fast-attack USS Newport News submarine and the supertanker was light and there was no resulting spill of oil or leakage of nuclear fuel, officials from the US Navy and the Japanese government said.

Both ships remained able to navigate, Navy officials said.

The bow of the submarine was travelling submerged when it hit the stern of the supertanker Mogamigawa as the vessels were passing through the Straits, causing minor damage to the Japanese vessel, the US Navy and Japan's Foreign Ministry said. The Japanese government said it was informed of the crash by the Navy and the US Embassy in Tokyo.

The tanker, operated by Japanese shipping company Kawasaki Kisen Kaisha Ltd., was able to continue to a nearby port in the United Arab Emirates, the statement said.

Pakistan to reconsider mining Afghan border

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's foreign minister said Tuesday the country would look at other options before going ahead with a plan to mine its border with Afghanistan, after talks with his Canadian counterpart. Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri said Pakistan would look at alternative ways to block militants crossing from Pakistan to fight in Afghanistan's worsening insurgency.

"Before we finalise we will definitely give due consideration as the objective of Pakistan and Canada is same, that is, to make sure that the

unwanted movement is controlled," said Kasuri at a joint press conference with Canadian Foreign Minister Peter MacKay.

"We will be very happy to receive suggestions from Canada."

Pakistan, which is not a signatory to the Ottawa Treaty against the use of landmines, came up with the proposal after a spate of allegations from Afghanistan about the infiltration of militants.

MacKay, who also met with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf after flying in from Afghanistan late Monday, opposes the proposal.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists hold protest in front of the Department of Foreign Affairs office in Manila yesterday to offer flowers for Zosimo Paredes, executive director of the VFA commission for criticising the government's action on the custody of US Marine Lance Cpl. Daniel Smith who was convicted of raping a Filipina in 2005.

Rare Asian vulture bred in captivity for 1st time

REUTERS, New Delhi

An endangered species of vulture has been bred in captivity for the first time, a conservationist group said, cheering those trying to rescue the South Asian bird from the brink of extinction.

The Oriental white-backed vulture chick hatched at a breeding centre last week in Pinjore, in Haryana, Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) said.

"The hatching of this vulture chick is a hugely important milestone," Chris Bowden, head of the RSPB's Vulture Conservation Programme, said in a statement late on Monday.

Numbers of South Asia's Oriental white-backed, long-billed and slender-billed vultures have plummeted by more than 97 percent in the last 15 years, the RSPB says.

Scientists say the decline is largely due to farmers dosing their cattle with diclofenac, a drug used to treat inflammation, poisoning the scavenging birds one step up the food chain.

India banned the production and sale of diclofenac in May last year, but implementation of the ban has been slow. The RSPB says it will be at least a decade before diclofenac is no longer a threat.

"(It) shows that the vulture breeding programme really can help save the vultures once diclofenac is removed from the environment," Bowden said.

India has also been successfully breeding in captivity the slender-billed vulture -- another of the three threatened species -- since 2005.

Milk destroys health benefits of tea

AFP, Paris

Bad news for Britons: adding milk to tea ruins the health benefits of the drink, according to a Germany study published on Tuesday.

Tea has complex compounds called polyphenols which are believed to help the arteries to relax or dilate, thus enabling a smoother flow of blood.

Scientists led at the Charite Hospital in Berlin tested black Darjeeling tea on 16 healthy women volunteers aged more than 50, placing an ultrasound probe on their forearm to measure arterial response.

When the women drank half a litre (0.9 of a pint) of tea, their arteries relaxed significantly more than when they drank hot water or tea with milk - tea in which skimmed milk, comprising 10 percent of the drink's volume, was added.

The results were confirmed in lab-dish tests on rat aorta.

The study, which appears online in the European Heart Journal, points the finger of blame at three casein proteins in the milk. These are thought to adhere to a kind of polyphenols known as catechins, preventing them from carrying out their health-making work.

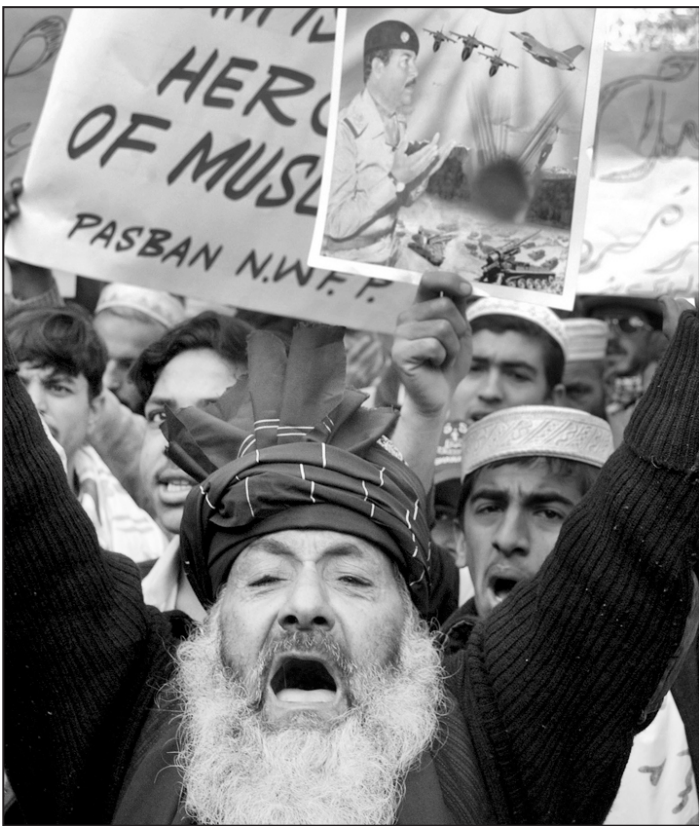


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Muslims hold placards and shout slogans against the execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussain during a protest rally in Peshawar yesterday. A grisly new video showing the body of Saddam Hussein shortly after his hanging was posted on the Internet.

Palestinian factions lock in war of words

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian rival Fatah and Hamas factions engaged in a war of words yesterday as tensions continued to simmer in the volatile Gaza Strip, where internecine violence has killed more than 30 people in less than a month.

A spokesman for president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party slammed what he called "a bloody current within Hamas" that was sabotaging efforts to form a government of national unity.

"For Hamas, national unity and pluralism are nothing but slogans," Abdel Hakim Amer told a news conference. "Those who express their disagreement with Hamas are labelled as putschists, agents and conspirators."

He also dismissed a warning issued by Hamas to Fatah strongman in Gaza Mohammed Dahlan on Monday, a day after the MP's vitriolic tirade against the ruling Islamists during a huge rally in Gaza City.

"The fact that Hamas is attacking him is for Fatah and the majority of our people is proof that he is

right," Amersaid.

Referring to Dahlan during a press conference late Monday, Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum said: "We will not allow these putschists to drive our people toward the brink of civil war. We remain vigilant in the face of these putschists and their plots."

Gaza has been embroiled in factional fighting since December 16, when Abbas called for early elections in order to resolve a months-long standoff with Hamas over forming a coalition government.

Overnight five Hamas members, including three who belonged to its controversial "executive force," were kidnapped in the northern town of Jabaliya. They were released a few hours later unharmed, security sources said.

On Tuesday morning, three members of the Hamas "executive force" -- interior ministry troops that Abbas has declared illegal a few days ago -- were wounded when a shell was fired at their vehicle by armed men. Hamas accused Fatah of the attack.

Myanmar urged to free political inmates

AP, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged Myanmar's military government on Monday to release all political prisoners including pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

He also urged the government to make "further concrete progress" on all issues raised by his predecessor Kofi Annan including human rights, democratic reforms and national reconciliation.

Ban noted the government's

decision on Jan. 3 to grant amnesty to 2,831 prisoners and welcomed reports that this included up to 40 political prisoners.

"The secretary-general urges the Myanmar authorities to go beyond this first step by releasing all other political prisoners in the country, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," UN spokeswoman Michele Montas said.

The United Nations and human rights groups estimate the junta is holding more than 1,100 political prisoners.

Guantanamo ruins lives and a nation's reputation

AFP, Washington

Since the first prisoners in the US "war on terror" arrived at the Guantanamo naval base five years ago, the Cuba-based camp has ruined hundreds of lives and tarnished the reputation of the United States.

The fifth anniversary of the first arrivals at the camp on January 11, 2002 "is a sad day for us here in America," said Wells Dixon, a lawyer at the Centre for

Constitutional Rights, which is coordinating the legal defence of detainees.

"After five years, Guantanamo is a complete failure, an absolute failure," he said.

Several human rights groups have planned rallies this week, including a protest in Cuba on the opposite side of the fence that marks the limits of the US enclave.

The US government had estab-

lished the secure facility to interrogate prisoners far from prying eyes.

But the army has since found that most detainees could offer little useful intelligence and many were not blood-thirsty killers, as they were described when they were ushered into their cells.

Of more than 700 Guantanamo detainees from some 40 countries, about 380 have been repatriated, in most cases released without charges.