



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Foreign Minister Shri Prhab Mukherjee (2nd L) joins hands with Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo (2nd R), Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win (1st L) and Singaporean Foreign Minister George Yeo during a group photo prior to the meeting Asean-India on the sideline of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) annual ministerial meeting in the central city of Cebu yesterday.

SE Asian countries close ranks on Myanmar

REUTERS, Cebu

Southeast Asian countries urged Myanmar yesterday to restore democracy but shrank from supporting a US-move to escalate pressure on their neighbour at the United Nations.

Myanmar has been a thorn in the side of the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) for years but the group has shied away from publicly slamming one of its own due to a long-held principle of non-interference in domestic affairs.

Foreign ministers at Asean's annual summit in the Philippines asked their counterpart from Myanmar to speed up the democratic process and release political prisoners but signalled that the United Nations did not need to reprimand the repressive

regime.

"We recognised there's a problem in Myanmar but we don't believe it's a threat to regional security," said one Malaysian official after ministers held talks on the central resort island of Cebu.

Myanmar's foreign minister, Nyan Win, asked Asean members on Wednesday night to help block a US draft resolution at the UN, which would put global pressure on its military junta.

Earlier this week, Indonesia, a current member of the UN council, said Myanmar should not invoke Asean solidarity but Thailand's foreign minister said on Wednesday Asean would stick to its traditional policy of "constructive engagement" with the junta.

Regional security took centre stage in later meetings between the Chinese and Southeast Asian

foreign ministers, when they agreed that six-party talks on containing North Korea's nuclear ambitions should resume as quickly as possible.

The ministers were meeting ahead of discussions among the leaders of China, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand and Asean chiefs on January 13-15.

Security was tight in Cebu, the Philippines' second city, after a trio of bombings on Wednesday night, hundreds of miles to the south of the venue, killed eight people.

Organisers insisted there was no threat to the summit but the Australian government repeated earlier warnings that militants could attack either Cebu or cities in the south, where Muslim and communist rebels are fighting government forces.

Indian SC asserts power as watchdog of parliament

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court reasserted its powers as a watchdog of the country's parliament yesterday, ruling it had the right to overturn laws which the legislature had tried to put beyond judicial review.

Progressive laws designed to protect sweeping land reforms and end feudalism following the foundation of modern India had been put out of the judiciary's reach in a small pocket of the constitution known as the ninth schedule.

That was done to protect the laws from appeal by disgruntled feudal lords, and other challenges.

But parliament has increasingly hidden controversial laws unrelated to land reform behind that protective cloak, including some that outrightly contradict earlier Supreme Court rulings.

Troops take Tiger base

Fresh fighting kills 20 rebels

AFP, Colombo

Elite police commandos captured a key Tamil Tiger base yesterday after killing four guerrillas in a confrontation in eastern Sri Lanka while 16 other Tigers were killed in separate clashes, the defence ministry said.

The police Special Task Force commandos took the base known as "Janaka" in the district of Ampara, the ministry said, adding that four members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed.

It said two STF commandos were wounded in the operation. The Tigers had maintained a uniform tailoring operation at the "Janaka" base, the ministry said.

The latest attack came a day after the military said it killed 14 Tiger rebels on Tuesday and Wednesday in the same region. Two more rival rebels were killed by the LTTE on Wednesday.

Earlier at least 16 Tamil Tiger rebels were killed in clashes with security forces and rival rebels in Sri Lanka's embattled eastern province, the defence ministry said Wednesday.

At least 10 members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed and another 25 wounded when troops retaliated against a rebel artillery attack in Batticaloa district Wednesday, the defence ministry said.

"In a search operation which followed, troops recovered three T-56 rifles, two Claymore mines, one

hand grenade, 95 rounds of T-56 ammunition, electric detonators and 100 meters of wire," the statement said.

There was no immediate rebel reaction to the military claim.

The bodies of four Tamil Tiger rebels were found by troops in the same district after a fight with a splinter group known as the Karuna faction, the ministry said.

It said two of the dead were members of the Karuna group, led by V Muralitharan, better known as Colonel Karuna. They were killed when the main LTTE guerrillas attacked them on Tuesday evening, it said.

The LTTE has accused the military of collaborating with the Karuna group to carry out attacks against the main rebel outfit, a

charge the security forces deny.

Colonel Karuna led an unprecedented split in the Tamil rebel leadership in March 2004 and has since been leading a campaign against the Tiger guerrillas, especially in the island's restive eastern province.

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 more than 3,800 people killed in the past year despite a truce in place since February 2002.

India may dump US nuclear deal: Envoy

REUTERS, New Delhi

India will walk away from a civilian nuclear deal with the United States if New Delhi's concerns are not allayed, its envoy said on Wednesday.

It was critical the deal allowed India to reprocess spent US nuclear fuel and did not stop it conducting nuclear tests, Shyam Saran, India's special envoy to the negotiations, said.

"This process will have to continue and there are certain very important issues which would have to be addressed and these are difficult issues," Saran said in a speech to diplomats and strategic affairs experts.

"Can we walk away from this deal if it does not correspond to our national interest? Obviously we have to walk away from this and we will walk away from it."

President George W. Bush last month signed into law a bill approved by Congress allowing the deal to go through, a major step toward letting India buy US nuclear reactors and fuel for the first time in 30 years.

But Congress attached several conditions to the law, which have not gone down well with New Delhi, and the two countries have returned to negotiations.

Under the bill, the US president would be required to end the export of nuclear materials if India tests another nuclear device. It tested one in 1998.

It also does not guarantee uninterrupted fuel supplies for reactors and prevents India from reprocessing spent fuel.

Saran said these conditions were not acceptable to India and this had been conveyed to the US.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian fishermen wait for official documents during a function in Amritsar following their overnight release from Pakistani jails yesterday. Pakistani authorities handed over 115 Indian fishermen to Indian authority who had been languishing in jail here for the past two years.

Myanmar junta frees 5 prominent dissidents

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar's military junta released yesterday five high-profile dissidents it arrested in September at a time of intensifying international pressure on the ruling generals to take concrete steps toward democracy.

"We were all sent back home at about 1:30 this morning," Min Ko Naing, a leader of a pro-democracy student uprising in 1988, told Reuters. He said he and his colleagues were in good health.

He gave no reasons for their sudden and unexpected release by the former Burma's military rulers, who also freed 40 political detainees last week as part of a mass prisoner release to mark the 59th anniversary of independence from Britain.

Anti-junta pressure groups said it was designed to deflect attention from efforts by the United States to get the United Nations Security Council to press Myanmar this week into easing repression and beginning a promised transition to democracy.



PHOTO: AFP

Nato's commander in Afghanistan General David Richards (R) flanked by Pakistani Vice Chief of Army Staff General Ahsan Saleem Hyat (L) gestures as he addresses a press conference in Rawalpindi yesterday following their tripartite talks. General Richards said Pakistan's heavy troop deployment along the porous border had reduced militant activities in Afghanistan.

Pak-Afghan border crossing closed after protest

AFP, Chaman

A main border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan was closed yesterday after protests by thousands of Afghans against controls on cross-frontier movement, officials said.

Thousands of Afghan tribesmen gathered in Spin Boldak, close to the border in southern Afghanistan and opposite Pakistani town Chaman, and threw stones at the gates, forcing authorities to close the border, witnesses told AFP.

"The border has been closed because of the security situation," commander of Pakistani border troops, colonel Masood Anwar told AFP.

The protest came a day after Pakistan started a new biometric computerised system to screen and document all travellers crossing the border, replacing the previous permit system.

The authorities now issue border passes to people after recording their fingerprints, retinas

or facial patterns for identification.

"This is a step that we have taken to fight terrorism and stop any illegal movement across the border," National Database and Registration Authority (ANDRA) official retired Brigadier Akhtar Shah said.

Afghan border commander Abdul Raziq Panjsheri told reporters the new system would hurt people-to-people contact and amounted to discrimination against Afghans and should have been consulted on.

Chaman is the second busiest overland crossing point after Torkham in North West Frontier Province. Thousands of people criss-cross these points for business and private visits daily.

An Afghan tribal leader Dad Mohammad Khan told AFP by telephone from Spin Boldak that the protest was also linked to Pakistan's plan to fence and mine parts of the 2,500km porous border.

UN organises mission to help Nepali peace pact

REUTERS, United Nations

UN officials seek Security Council authorisation yesterday for a new mission in Nepal that includes 186 military monitors to help enforce a peace pact between the government and Maoist rebels.

The council last month approved an advance group of 35 monitors in response to formal requests from both sides that the United Nations intervene immediately to monitor disarmament of the

rebels and make sure the army stays in their barracks.

The Maoists and a seven-party government in November signed a peace accord declaring a formal end to a decade-old conflict in which more than 13,000 people died, up to 5,000 civilians disappeared, children were recruited in the war effort and sexual violence was common, UN reports say.

The Nepalese clamoured for United Nations intervention, according to Ian Martin, the special UN representative for Nepal.

"Seventy percent of the population wanted a UN role in the peace process and it gives us real leverage with both sides," he said.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has fielded an operation in Nepal since May 2005 and has some 60 employees on the ground. Unicef intends to beef up its operation to protect children damaged in the war. The United Nations also is sending election officials to help with a poll later this year for a constituent assembly.