

Ulfa rebels warn migrants to leave

AFP, New Delhi

A separatist group in India's insurgency-hit northeast, blamed for killing scores of Hindi-speaking people, warned migrant workers yesterday to quit the region and threatened to step up violence.

The powerful rebel outfit, the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), also rejected Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's renewed offer of talks.

"We have appealed to the Hindi-speaking people that the conflict running in Assam (state) is with colonial India, so go away as soon as possible ...(and) stay away," Ulfa said in its newsletter, Freedom.

Authorities blamed the outlawed Ulfa for a four-day wave of attacks in oil- and tea-rich Assam state that ended Monday, in which 73 people were killed -- 61 of them Hindi-

speaking migrant workers.

The group denied responsibility for the massacre and blamed federal security forces, accusing New Delhi of seeking to "tarnish the image" of the rebels.

Ulfa, which was fighting for a separate Assamese homeland, would never seek its goal "by gambling with the lives of innocent people", the group said.

But Indian authorities insist the killings were the work of Ulfa.

This month's massacre was preceded by an Ulfa warning to Hindi-speakers to leave Assam, claiming the migrant workers were taking away jobs.

In the most recent violence in the far-flung state late Wednesday, at least 12 people were injured when blasts, blamed by police on Ulfa, rocked Assam.

Ulfa spurned Singh's fresh offer

of talks on Tuesday "to all disaffected groups, including Ulfa, who are willing to abjure violence".

"They (New Delhi) talk of dialogue on one hand and announce a full-fledged military operation on the other," the group said.

"There is no way left other than an intensified resistance struggle if India does not tackle the Assam-Indo political conflict politically and opts for displaying military might," it said.

Ulfa's threat to step up its armed campaign came in the wake of a major counter-insurgency drive by security forces launched in Assam and neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh.

Singh said that "terrorism will not be tolerated" and would be dealt with firmly.

"No one should mistake our openness for talks and dialogue as a sign of weakness," he said.

Pakistan denies Taliban leader hiding in Quetta

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan Thursday dismissed claims that its intelligence service was sheltering Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar in the city of Quetta as an "absurd" lie.

"It is an absurd and sheer lie," top military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

The allegation was made Wednesday by a Taliban spokesman captured in Afghanistan, where the fundamentalist movement has been waging a deadly insurgency after being driven from power by US-led forces in 2001.

The statement by Abdul Haq Haqiq, who was known to the media as Doctor Mohammad Hanif, was made in a video released Wednesday by Afghanistan's intelligence authority after his arrest near the Pakistani border.



Members of the UN monitoring team (R) observe as Maoist fighters register themselves during a weapons and personnel registration function at a camp in Chitwan, some 200km southwest of Kathmandu on Wednesday.

Nepali Maoists hand over more arms

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoists handed over more weapons to United Nations monitors yesterday, the second day of a process that is a key element of a peace deal in Nepal, former rebel leaders said.

The handover began Wednesday at two sites and is due to be carried out at 28 camps, UN officials said.

"The UN has registered 750 of the 6,500 Maoist soldiers and verified their weapons in the camp so far," said Maoist division commander Samthing Buddha.

He was speaking by telephone from a camp at Chitwan, 200km southwest of the capital, Kathmandu.

"By Thursday evening, we estimate that as many as 1,500 PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldiers will be registered," he said.

"Each of our PLA soldiers are distributed a form to fill out their details and are photographed by the UN officials for their records."



An office worker watches the British reality television show 'Celebrity Big Brother' on the Internet in London yesterday featuring Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty. British commentators rallied around Bollywood film star Shilpa Shetty Thursday after she claimed for the first time she was a victim of racism on a TV show at the centre of a diplomatic row.

More protests after Bollywood star blames racism in TV row

AFP, New Delhi

More complaints poured yesterday over alleged bullying of Bollywood film star Shilpa Shetty, after she blamed racism for her abuse on a TV show which has sparked diplomatic and street protests in India.

The number of formal protests received by British television regulators and broadcaster Channel Four rose to 30,000, after the Indian star spoke out for the first time about the attacks on her, officials said.

The British and Indian governments have voiced concern about treatment of the 31-year-old actress on Channel 4's "Celebrity Big Brother," which has been accused of exploiting the row to boost ratings.

Shetty has so far tried to play down concerns, but said for the first time late Wednesday she believed that comments, mainly from fellow contestant 23-year-old Jade Goody, were racially motivated.

"It is, I'm telling you... I don't deserve this. I definitely don't

deserve it," she said.

But Goody's spokeswoman rejected the allegation.

"I would urge anyone who says that Jade is a racist to produce the evidence to support the claim ... I am not denying the fact that it appears Jade dislikes Shilpa, but I don't believe her race is the reason," she said.

Channel 4 chairman Luke Johnson refused to comment during a testy interview with BBC radio Thursday morning, deferring to a statement Wednesday that denied any overt racism and blamed a "cultural and class clash".

Whatever the chairman's view, Channel 4 has seen ratings rocket since the row erupted while the BBC reported that shares in Dutch-based production Endemol that makes "Celebrity Big Brother" had risen as a result.

As complaints to the British broadcast regulator mounted the debate widened into a discussion about the extent of racism in British society.

Lanka truce monitors resume work

AFP, Colombo

Ten of Sri Lanka's nearly three dozen truce monitors will be back at their posts next week in the embattled north and east after an absence of more than two weeks, a spokesman said.

But the remaining 24 will wait to discuss their role in monitoring the deadly ethnic conflict with the rebels and the government, an official of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Commission (SLMM) said.

The truce monitors suspended their activities earlier this month while they reviewed in Colombo their operations following a sharp escalation in hostilities between warring factions, SLMM spokesman Thorfinur Omarsson said.

"Four of our monitors are already in place in two areas," Omarsson said.

He gave no immediate reason for the partial return of the truce monitors.

The group is staffed by nationals from Iceland and Norway.

The SLMM says its mandate has

changed following an upsurge in mine attacks, airstrikes and mortar-ing of enemy positions that have become daily events along with reports of abductions, recruitment of child soldiers and killings.

The government protested earlier against the mission's move to suspend operations and meet in Colombo without making alternative monitoring arrangements.

The mission was set up in 2002 to investigate breaches of the now tattered ceasefire between government forces and rebels who are fighting for a homeland for the island's Tamil minority in the north-east.

More than 60,000 people have died in the 35-year-old conflict.

Despite the Norwegian-brokered truce, over 3,800 people were killed last year as fighting escalated.

Meanwhile, a soldier and a civilian were killed in fresh violence in Sri Lanka's north as troops and Tamil Tiger rebels traded mortar fire in the restive east, the defence ministry said Thursday.

Series of blasts kill 19 in Baghdad

AP, Baghdad

A series of explosions and shootings rocked Baghdad yesterday, killing at least 19 people and wounding dozens, police said.

Three car bombs detonated within minutes of each other near a vegetable market in the predominantly Sunni neighborhood of Dora in southern Baghdad. At least 10 people died and 30 were wounded, a police officer said.

Another bomb exploded in central Baghdad at rush hour, killing four people and wounding 11, two other police officers said.

One said the death toll was expected to rise.

At least two huge explosions rang out across the area about an hour apart.

A parked car later struck a busy thoroughfare in a religiously mixed area in central Baghdad, killing four people and wounding 10, police

said. The blast burned many cars and shattered the windows of nearby stores.

Gunmen also opened fire on an Iraqi police patrol near al-Shaab stadium in eastern Baghdad, killing one policeman and wounding another, police said.

On Wednesday, a suicide car bomber killed 17 Shias at a teeming Sadr City market, while gunmen in a predominantly Sunni neighbourhood of Baghdad shot up a convoy of democracy workers in an ambush that took the lives of an American woman and three bodyguards.

The attack on the marketplace came one day after car bombings killed scores of university students just two miles away, indicating that al-Qaeda-linked fighters are bent on a surge of bloodshed as US and Iraqi forces gear up for a fresh neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood security sweep through the capital.

'Abbas to meet Hamas supremo in Damascus'

AFP, Ramallah

A Palestinian lawmaker said yesterday that president Mahmud Abbas would meet with Hamas political supremo Khaled Meshal this weekend in Damascus, but the encounter could not be confirmed.

Independent MP Ziad Abu Amr, who is mediating between Abbas's Fatah faction and its rival ruling Hamas party, said the encounter would take place on Saturday, during the president's weekend visit to the Syrian capital.

"A meeting was arranged. During our mediation, we have made progress on numerous questions, but two points remain unresolved," Abu Amr told AFP, without elaborating.

Neither Abbas's office nor Hamas officials could immediately confirm the planned encounter.

A close Abbas aide speaking on condition of anonymity said that for the moment no meeting between the Palestinian president and the Hamas exiled political chief was scheduled.

Pressure mounts on Olmert to resign

AP, Jerusalem

Defence Minister Amir Peretz defied calls to resign and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert ignored similar demands after the Israeli army chief of staff stepped down over the military's failure to stop Hezbollah rocket attacks from Lebanon last summer.

Public and political pressure on the two embattled leaders was noticeably building Wednesday, reinforcing the feeling that Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz was just the first to go.

A poll broadcast Wednesday evening on Channel 10 TV showed that 69 percent wanted Olmert to resign, and 85 percent hoped Peretz would quit. The Smith Research poll by telephone questioned 425 Israelis and quoted a margin of error of 4.8 percent.

"Halutz's resignation is a positive and unavoidable move," said

Ophir Pines-Paz, a member of Peretz's Labor Party. "But the political leadership also has to take responsibility."

In Lebanon, Hezbollah legislator Hussein Haj Hassan called Halutz's resignation "the result of the defeat of the Israeli enemy in Lebanon."

Demonstrators in Beirut, at their nightly anti-government protest, celebrated with fireworks when the announcement of Halutz's resignation was made.

In his first public comment since Halutz resigned, Peretz warned Israel's enemies. "Do not misinterpret the army chief's decision to resign as a sign of weakness."

Speaking Wednesday evening in Haifa at a graduation ceremony for naval commanders, Peretz said Halutz's decision was "premature. I am sorry he won't be with us to complete the task" of restoring the army after the failures of the summer's war in Lebanon.

Iran offers to help train, equip Iraqi forces

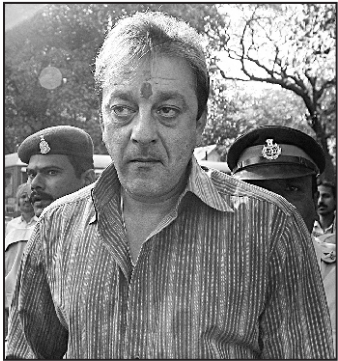
AFP, Baghdad

Tehran's ambassador to Baghdad said yesterday that Iran stood ready to help train and equip Iraqi security forces to combat what he called terrorism.

Speaking after talks with Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, Hassan Kazemi demanded to be shown "any shred of evidence that Iran is working to destabilise Iraq," as the United States alleges.

"We are working for, not against, security in Iraq, because we know that insecurity justifies maintaining foreign troops in the country," Kazemi told reporters.

"Iran is disposed to helping to train and equip Iraqi security forces to combat terrorism."



Sanjay Dutt

Court extends Sanjay Dutt's bail to Feb 6

AFP, Mumbai

A special court Thursday extended Bollywood action hero Sanjay Dutt's bail to February 6, some two months after he was convicted of illegal arms possession.

Superstar Dutt was found guilty last November of illegal weapons possession but cleared of a more serious charge of conspiracy in the deadly 1993 bomb attacks in India's financial hub Mumbai.

Dutt, whose weathered face is one of the best known in India, is awaiting sentencing and risks a maximum sentence of three years.

"The court will hear the arguments in his (probation) bail next month," one of Dutt's lawyers said.

The 47-year-old was one of 123 people accused in India's worst terrorist attacks that left 257 dead, although he was acquitted of any role in the bloodshed.

Suu Kyi faces tax evasion charge

AP, Yangon

State media yesterday accused pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi of evading taxes by spending her money from the 1991 Nobel Peace prize and other awards overseas.

Suu Kyi, the country's opposition leader, has been in prison or under house arrest for 11 of the last 17 years.

Myanmar's military junta regularly calls her a threat to national unity and says she and her party are trying to undermine the government by collaborating with foreign powers.



A leopard attacks a person in a residential colony in the Indian city of Nashik Wednesday. After going on the rampage in the city the leopard was finally caught and taken to a forest department park.

Residents chase, kill two rare leopards in India

REUTERS, Srinagar

Panic-stricken people chased and battered to death two rare leopards in different parts of India, highlighting increasing numbers of endangered wildlife that are killed as rapid economic development destroys habitats.

In Kashmir, villagers attacked a leopard late on Wednesday after it injured two boys in Pulwama district, 70 km south of Srinagar, police said.

"Panicky villagers ruthlessly killed the leopard with stones and sticks," police officer Farooq Ahmad said.

In Nasik, local television footage showed a leopard darting across a residential park, scaling a boundary wall and running through houses.

A group of people were shown beating the leopard with logs as it lay on the ground, apparently after being cornered. It later died of its injuries.

Manmohan for addressing woes of home-based S Asian workers

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The Saarc countries should give high priority to women empowerment and concerns of home-based workers, majority of whom are women, to ensure the benefit of regional and international trade, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said here yesterday.

"I would like the Saarc Summit in New Delhi to consider the Kathmandu Declaration and address the problems of home-based workers," Singh said in his inaugural address at a three-day South Asian Policy Conference on home-based workers.

The Kathmandu Declaration adopted by the Unifem Conference on the rights of South Asian home-based workers identifies areas of deprivation faced by them, including recognition, social protection, skill-

building, technology development, credit availability and political participation.

Singh said the Saarc member-states must identify the products of the home-based workers and ensure their benefit from regional and international trade. "I do believe that women's empowerment should be a major objective of our social, political and economic policy in our region as a whole," Singh said.

Addressing the gathering that comprised experts and other representatives from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Philippines and the UK, the prime minister noted with concern that most home-based workers receive very low income due to a chain of middlemen. He said the main challenge was that of increasing the skills, productivity and earnings of these workers.