

Fire in Latvian home kills 26 people

AP, Riga

A fire raced through a home for the elderly and disabled in western Latvia on Friday, killing 26 people, rescue officials said.

The blaze, which started after midnight in the town of Alsunga, about 60 miles west of Riga, was the worst in the Baltic nation's history, the Latvian State Fire and Rescue Service said. All the victims were residents of the convalescent home, rescue service spokeswoman Inese Veisa said.

She said the blaze caused the roof of the two-story building to collapse. Eighty people were rescued but the search for survivors continued Friday as firefighters worked to put out the blaze.

Their efforts were hampered by extreme cold as the temperature reached minus 13 Fahrenheit as several sources of water were frozen. Veisa said firefighters were forced to dig holes in the ice to find water.



Philippine journalists release doves to symbolise press freedom in the face of killings of media men during the International day of action against scribe killings in Manila yesterday. More than 50 journalists have been killed in the Philippines since President Gloria Arroyo came to power in 2001.

Truce is dead, battle for statehood alive: LTTE

Truce monitors quit Lankan town amid security fears

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka truce monitors pulled out of an embattled northern region where thousands of civilians were on the run fearing a fresh military offensive, as Tiger rebels said the ceasefire was all but dead.

The local employees of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) were no longer at their posts in Vavuniya -- gateway to the Tamil north of the island -- after withdrawing Thursday, spokesman Thorfinnur Omarsson said.

He said Scandinavian monitors had not been in Vavuniya for about a week, as thousands of Tamil civilians, fearing fighting, began fleeing a de facto front line between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels.

"The local staff have left because of some security issues," Omarsson said. "They want to return together with the foreign staff later."

The ceasefire brokered by Norway was meant to end a conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives on this island nation in the past 35 years, but after temporarily halting the bloodshed for two years, the deal unravelled.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on Thursday night announced they were relaunching their "freedom struggle" to "achieve statehood."

The announcement came nearly three months after the guerrillas said they might be forced to consider independence.

The ceasefire, signed separately

Rajapakse for trying to find a military solution to the drawn-out Tamil autonomy campaign.

Defence spokesman Keheliya Ramkewala said the government was ready to talk peace but was not willing to compromise national security.

"National security will not be compromised. We will do all we can to protect and safeguard the sovereignty of the country," Ramkewala vowed. "We will hit back if we are attacked."

The Sri Lankan navy on Thursday evening sank two boats it believed were transporting Tiger rebels. A navy spokesman said at least nine people aboard the two craft were killed.

India renews pressure on Pakistan over militants

REUTERS, New Delhi

India wants better ties with Pakistan but the peace process will only bear fruit if Islamabad fully curbs "cross-border terrorism", the president said yesterday, days after a train between the neighbours was bombed.

The nuclear-armed rivals renewed their vows to push for peace this week despite the attack on a cross-border train that killed 68 people, and India refrained from the usual finger-pointing that has followed such violence in the past.

But President APJ Abdul Kalam, laying out government policy at the start of parliament's first session of the year, said New Delhi was still worried about the infiltration of militants into India from Pakistan and attacks launched by them.

"The success of the dialogue process is predicated on Pakistan fulfilling its commitment not to permit any territory under its control to be used to support terrorism in any manner," he told Members of Parliament.

The attack on the Samjhauta Express came seven months after the bombing of commuter trains in India's financial hub of Mumbai in July that killed 186 people.

While the Mumbai attack was blamed on a Pakistan-based Islamist militant group, investigators are yet to make much progress on the Samjhauta attack. But suspicion has fallen on Muslim extremists opposed to the peace moves.

"We should not allow this tragic event to affect our common quest for normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan," Kalam said.

Muslim nations to hold ME talks in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The foreign ministers of seven key Muslim nations will meet in Pakistan this weekend to discuss a joint strategy to end the worsening turmoil in the Middle East, officials said yesterday.

The conference on Sunday will focus on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the ongoing strife in Iraq and tensions between the United States and Iran over Tehran's nuclear programme, Pakistani foreign ministry officials said.

The ministers from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Malaysia, Egypt and Indonesia will prepare the ground for a summit of their leaders to be hosted in Saudi Arabia by King Abdullah at a later date.

Cluster bomb opponents agree to seek ban by 2008

AFP, Oslo

Forty-six of 49 countries attending a conference on cluster bombs in Oslo agreed yesterday to seek a ban on the munitions by 2008, host country Norway said.

"Forty-six of 49 countries agreed on this declaration. It is a huge achievement and we are very satisfied," Norway's state secretary for foreign affairs Raymond Johansen told AFP.

Japan, Poland and Romania refused to sign the accord, while key nations such as Israel and the United States did not take part in the conference.

Abbas calls for end to 'unjust' boycott

AFP, Berlin

The so-called Quartet for Middle East peace -- Russia, the European Union, the United States and the United Nations -- said after a meeting in the German capital this week that they would await the formation of the new Palestinian government before deciding whether to lift the aid and economic sanctions.

The measures were imposed after the Islamist Hamas movement took control of the Palestinian government following elections in January 2006. Hamas will join with Abbas's Fatah movement under the deal struck this month in Mecca.

Democracy opponents agree to seek ban by 2008

AFP, Oslo

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are on their way to give a joint press conference yesterday at the Chancellery in Berlin after bilateral talks. They met two days after a meeting of the so-called Quartet for Middle East peace held in Berlin. Abbas said talks had given him optimism that the "unjust" embargoes would be scrapped.

Diplomats to work on new Iran resolution

AP, United Nations

among other options.

US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, who announced the London meeting in Washington, said Thursday that Iran was "effectively thumbing its nose" at the international community by expanding its uranium programme, a top US official said, setting the stage for difficult negotiations on new UN sanctions, with the US likely to push for tougher measures.

In the wake of the UN nuclear agency's confirmation that Iran expanded its uranium enrichment programme, senior diplomats from the five permanent Security Council nations and Germany will meet on Monday in London to start work on a new resolution to try to pressure Iran to suspend that programme, which can lead to the production of nuclear weapons.

Among the permanent council members, Britain and France are likely to join the US in a call for harsher sanctions than Russia and China will accept.

Some diplomats said the new measure may invoke travel bans, expand the list of technology and materials countries are banned from making available to Iran and create stiffer economic sanctions,

Nepali Maoists return to UN camps after funds pledge

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepali Maoists, who fled their UN-monitored camps in droves looking for food, are returning after the government promised to improve supplies, their commanders said yesterday.

The former rebels, who agreed to live in camps across the country as part of a peace deal, started leaving this week, complaining of poor conditions and lack of food.

"All the Maoist People's Liberation Army who had left their camps returned Thursday evening after the government promised to improve the living conditions at the camps," said Samthong Budha, a commander at a camp located in the southwest Chitwan region.

More than 2,000 unarmed Maoist fighters had walked out of that camp searching for employment in nearby villages.

The Maoists said the 350 million rupees (nearly five million dollars) the government had budgeted for the camps had run out.

"The government will make its utmost effort to improve the conditions within a week in all the cantonments where the Maoist armies are stationed," Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula told AFP on Friday.

Japan, Poland and Romania refused to sign the accord, while key nations such as Israel and the United States did not take part in the conference.

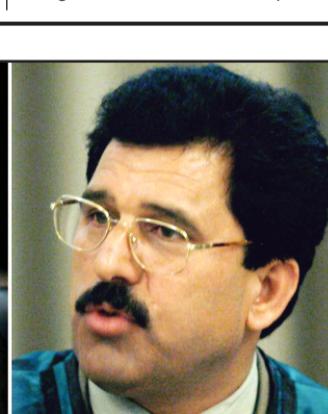


PHOTO: AFP

A combo of recent file portraits shows Iraq's ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein (L) and his defence attorney Khalil Al-Dulaimi.

Lawyer plans book on Saddam 'secrets'

AFP, Amman

Saddam Hussein's Iraqi lawyer said on Friday he will write a book revealing "many secrets" told to him by the executed dictator about the fall of Baghdad, his arrest and imprisonment.

"The book will contain information never before revealed and many secrets about the fall of Baghdad," Khalil al-Dulaimi told AFP in a telephone interview about the book he is planning.

"It will contain 200-300 letters, poems and other texts handwritten by President Saddam while the rest will be devoted to stories he revealed to me during more than 140 interviews in jail," Dulaimi said.

"It is not just his memoirs," he added.

According to Dulaimi the book will be more than 500 pages long and "could be out in a year."

"I am still collecting the material before writing it and finding a publisher," he said.

The ousted Iraqi dictator was hanged in Baghdad a month after December 30, a month after

Democrats move to limit Bush authority

AP, Washington

Four years ago, Congress passed legislation authorising President Bush to go to war in Iraq. Now Senate Democrats want to take it back.

Key lawmakers, backed by party leaders, are drafting legislation that would effectively revoke the broad authority granted to the president in the days Saddam Hussein was in power, and leave US troops with a limited mission as they prepare to withdraw.

Officials said Thursday the precise wording of the measure remains unsettled. One version would restrict American troops in Iraq to fighting al-Qaeda, training Iraqi army and police forces, maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity and otherwise proceeding with the withdrawal of combat forces.

Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nevada, intends to present the proposal to fellow Democrats next week, and he is expected to try to add the measure to anti-terrorism legislation scheduled to be debated later this month. Officials who described the strategy spoke only on condition of anonymity, noting that rank-and-file senators had not yet been briefed on the details.

Italian president reviews new Prodi coalition pact

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's president began a new round of talks on Friday to see whether Romano Prodi can stay on as prime minister and guarantee a stable centre-left government to end the country's political crisis.

Prodi, who won the narrowest election victory in Italy's post-war history last April, clinched crucial support from his allies at a meeting late on Thursday, a day after he resigned following a revolt in his Catholics-to-communists coalition.

He must now convince President Giorgio Napolitano, who has been holding consultations with political leaders, that he has mustered enough support to lead a sustainable government.