

Greek Cypriots tear down wall dividing Nicosia

AFP, Nicosia

A concrete wall in Nicosia symbolising the decades-old Cyprus conflict was demolished by Greek Cypriots early yesterday to make way for a crossing point in the heart of the world's last divided capital.

The move was welcomed by the Turkish Cypriots and by the United Nations, whose troops have for decades patrolled a buffer zone between the two sides.

Ledra Street, a pedestrian shopping area inside the Venetian walls of the old city, was cordoned off late on Thursday and demolition teams dismantled the barrier between the Greek Cypriot south and the Turkish occupied north.

"This is a show of goodwill on our side to contribute positively to opening Ledra Street," Cypriot government spokesman Christodoulos Pashardes said.

The surprise move came four years after the opening of an initial crossing that allowed unprecedented movement across the UN-patrolled buffer zone for the first time in three decades.

Nicosia's first woman mayor, Eleni Mavrou, said "the important thing now is for Ledra to open, to have communication and the city to come to life."

But Pashardes said people could not start crossing as long as Turkish troops remain in the northern sector of Nicosia.

"This doesn't mean Ledra is open yet."

Cyprus has been divided along ethnic lines since 1974, when Turkey seized its northern third in response to an Athens-engineered Greek Cypriot coup in Nicosia aimed at uniting the island with Greece.

Turkey, which still maintains around 42,500 troops in northern Cyprus, had no immediate reaction to the wall coming down.

Pashardes said the government had invited the Turkish Cypriots to a dialogue to discuss outstanding issues. "That is if they really want to come to the table," he said.

Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos, speaking in Brussels, said "the obstacle is not the wall but the Turkish troops. If the troops pull back and allow the UN to check for landmines, as we believe there are, then the crossing can open, but troops must withdraw."

Opposing troops are at their closest distance in Ledra, and the government would like to see Turkish and Cypriot National Guard troops pull back some 100 metres (yards) from their present positions, which separate them by only about 50 metres.

House of Representatives Speaker Demetris Christofias, who is acting president while Papadopoulos is out of the country, said "the National Guard are fully prepared to move back."

"If the other side ... responds then it will happen soon; if not, it won't," he added.

Mohiuddin

FROM PAGE 1 and several crore taka in secret accounts in different banks. He owned a luxurious building and allegedly financed a posh hotel in Bangkok which he visited frequently.

Moreover, investigation is on also into the reported fraud involving Tk 20 crore detected in the CCC audit report in 2005, and into the mayor's link with different corrupt syndicates at the CCC, sources said.

The mayor allegedly helped one Zafar Ahmed to misappropriate several crore taka from the CCC aphant plant.

Crates of taka was allegedly embezzled in the name of a garbage treatment plant at Ananda Bazar in Halishahar. The plant now runs under the supervision of the mayor's wife.

Besides, there are many allegations against Mohiuddin concerning illegal grabbing of land and properties and for helping his loyalists in such mischief.

Sources recalled that the mayor encroached upon landed property worth around Tk 50 crore of the Hindus in the port city's Gopalganj area. Leaders of the Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikya Parishad sued him for this and took the matter up to the High Court.

Mohiuddin played the key role in paralysing Chittagong port repeatedly for political and personal gains. The country's premier seaport remained paralysed for a total of 28 days during the period from October 28 last year to January 10 this year at the directive of the CCC mayor.

The losses incurred by the garment and shipping sectors alone due to the suspension of port activities amounted to about Tk 6,000 crore, business leaders alleged.

Earlier in 1996, the mayor forced suspension of port activities for 18 days causing the national economy to suffer losses of at least Tk 4,000 crore, they mentioned.

Heidi Sabit Soyer, prime minister of the breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, welcomed the demolition as a "positive development."

He said the administration of his statelet, recognised only by Turkey, would soon begin work on opening up a passage in the area.

The UN chief of mission, Michael Moller, said the demolition represents a "very welcome and positive contribution of great symbolic significance."

"Both in efforts to open a crossing point at this historic location and to create a positive atmosphere in which a search for a comprehensive settlement can flourish," he said in a statement.

The UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) is "assisting both sides with practical arrangements to move this much anticipated process forward" and "expedites progress," Moller said.

Before a normal crossing point can operate, crumbling buildings will need to be shored up, and the area will have to be swept for landmines.

"Once the sides are in agreement as to the way ahead, UNFICYP will immediately move, with EU funded support, to ensure the area's overall safety," said Moller.

A makeshift partition has replaced the Ledra Street wall until there is mutual agreement on the way forward.

UNFICYP estimated it would take five to six weeks to make a viable crossing at Ledra once both sides are agreed.

A crossing in the area had been mooted in 2005, but a dispute over an elevated walkway erected by the Turkish Cypriot side brought a halt to proceedings until it was dismantled in January.

Ledra Street would be the sixth crossing point across the divide since April 2003, when the border was opened.

Ledra Street is where barricades were first erected in Nicosia during intercommunal violence that flared in 1963. A year later, UN peacekeeping troops arrived on the island and have remained ever since.

Manipur rebels

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Manipur, situated on the border with Myanmar, is home to as many as 19 separatist groups with demands ranging from independence to greater autonomy.

In the neighbouring state of Assam, where a separatist struggle for an independent homeland has raged for almost three decades, one person was killed and 18 wounded in a powerful bomb explosion at a marketplace late Thursday.

Police said they suspected the separatist United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) was behind the attack, the first blamed on the group since it offered talks with the government in New Delhi a few weeks ago.

No group has claimed responsibility for the blast.

A police spokesperson said the device went off Thursday outside a hardware shop in the village of Kakapbarat, about 530 kilometres east of Assam's main city of Guwahati.

Sadani Dar, a senior police official, told AFP a shop owner sounded the alarm over an unclaimed bomb shortly before the blast.

"Less than two minutes after we were informed about the bag, the explosion took place. There was a crowd of people who gathered around the bag and hence so many were injured," he said by telephone.

Seven members of the shop owner's family were among the casualties, of whom one died in hospital later.

"Minutes later we recovered another powerful bomb barely 100 metres away from the blast site," he said.

Another police officer, who asked not to be named, said the "modus operandi of the blast points to ULFA," as they are known to attack in crowded places."

Ulfa, which has been fighting for an independent homeland since 1979, was blamed for a string of attacks in January that killed about 80 people, 61 of them Hindi-speaking migrant workers in eastern Assam.

More than 20,000 people have lost their lives in the insurrections in Assam and Manipur over the past two decades.

Tarique who is believed to have virtually ruled the country for the last five years from the alternative powerhouse Hawa Bhaban, was arrested in the early hours of Thursday from his mother's cantonment residence in the biggest ever manhunt by the joint forces.

Sources said joint forces men in plainclothes raided Hawa Bhaban around 4:30pm yesterday and stayed there for about 20 minutes.

During the raid they called in BNP chairperson's office's computer operator SM Parvez and picked him up, the sources added.

Meanwhile, IO of the extortion case filed against Tarique visited Hawa Bhaban yesterday afternoon along with seven to eight other police officials to get a sketch of the place of occurrence of the alleged crime.

"It's a routine work. We neither raided Hawa Bhaban, nor arrested anyone from there," said IO Mahbub Morshed.

The joint forces raided the houses of those who took part in the programmes on Thursday night but could not arrest anyone.

Later, Saiful Islam, a sub-inspector of Sadar Police Station, filed the case against 15 to 16 leaders including Lovely Rahman, president of district Mahila Dal, and Nilu Quddus, ward commissioner of Bogra Pourasava.

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Banani Graveyard.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday expressed her deep shock at the death of Rosy Afari.

She prayed for the eternal peace of the departed soul and conveyed her sympathy to the members of the bereaved family.

In a separate message, BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan also expressed deep shock at the death of Rosy.

Giasuddin Al Mamun, a business partner of Tarique Rahman,

India will join trans-Asian rail project

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India has decided to join a trans-Asian rail project that will connect vast parts of Asia and Europe, seeking to give a boost to trade and tourism.

The Indian cabinet at its meeting on Thursday evening gave its clearance for signing and ratifying the inter-governmental agreement on Trans-Asian Railway which will link various countries from China in the east to Bulgaria in the west. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Priyaranjan Dasmunshi told reporters here.

The inter-governmental agreement, already signed by 18 countries, including Russia, China, Iran, several Central Asian countries, Turkey, Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Nepal, Laos and Mongolia, will formalise the coordinated development of the Trans-Asian Railways.

Indian Railways will set up a 350-km link between Jiribam (India) and Moreh (Myanmar) for the proposed link-up. The Myanmar government will share part of the project cost. The project cost for India is estimated at around Rs 1,800 crore and the total cost is expected to be about Rs 3,000 crore.

The inter-governmental agreement on Trans-Asian Railway Network was adopted at the 62nd session of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Ecap) held in Jakarta on April 12, 2006.

India initially had some security concerns over the project but later decided to join the ambitious project.

India seeks to attract several tourists from Southeast Asian countries to its Buddhist pilgrimage sites who can use the cheaper rail route.

Besides, the rail link is expected to help India's burgeoning trade with Asean.

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FROM PAGE 1

The interior ministry has granted citizenship to 1,294 stateless residents in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the first group to benefit from a promise made last October, local media reported yesterday.

The official WAM news agency said "the ministry started on Thursday to hand over registration certificates to an initial group giving rise automatically to obtaining Emirati nationality."

It gave no figures for those receiving the certificates but the daily Gulf News said "more than 30 people" were involved.

According to a ministry source, around 10,000 stateless people – mainly originating from Iran, Asia or Zanzibar – have registered for naturalisation.

Last October, Interior Minister Sheikh Saif bin Zayed al-Nahyan promised naturalisation to those who had been proven "were living in the country before the proclamation of the (Emirates) Federation" on December 2, 1971. He gave no figure.

Police said they suspected the separatist United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) was behind the attack, the first blamed on the group since it offered talks with the government in New Delhi a few weeks ago.

No group has claimed responsibility for the blast.

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Giasuddin Al Mamun, a business partner of Tarique Rahman,

Syria trains thousands of rockets on Israel

ISRAELI MILITARY, govt sources say

AFP, Jerusalem

Syria has positioned on its border with Israel thousands of medium and long-range rockets capable of striking major towns across northern Israel, military and government sources told AFP.

Inbar, as well as the military sources, believe that "Assad could be preparing for low-intensity war, a type of war of attrition with Israel, where Syria fires several rockets against Israel without provoking full-fledged war."

"Israel has absolute superiority in several fields in warfare," a senior government official said, referring mainly to Israel's advanced air force and "smart" weapons.

"So Syria is investing in fields where it can have an edge. It has invested in recent years in anti-aircraft weapons, rockets, missiles and bunkers. The war in Lebanon proved to the Syrians they were right to do so."

Israel's military intelligence chief, Major General Amod Yadin, told the government's annual intelligence assessment that while Syria was beefing up its military, war between the two neighbouring countries was unlikely in 2007.

"Syria is continuing its military build-up and preparing for war," he told the cabinet.