

US busts Asian network seeking arms for LTTE

Tigers, troops claim heavy damages after sea battle

AFP, Washington/ Colombo

US authorities said Thursday they had busted an arms-trafficking gang, arresting six Asians who had been trying to smuggle weapons from the United States to Tamil Tiger rebels.

Singapore man Haniffa Bin Osman, 55, was the latest person to plead guilty in the investigation, which saw undercover agents track the alleged arms dealers from the eastern port of Baltimore to the South Pacific US territory of Guam.

"The disruption of the supply chain of this organisation should reassure the public that the US government is committed to dismantling terrorist groups worldwide," said FBI special agent William Chase.

Osman and four Indonesians have now pleaded guilty to charges stemming from the investigation, from conspiracy to support a terrorist organisation to attempting to illegally export arms. They all face significant jail terms.

A sixth suspect, Sri Lankan Thirunavukarasu Varatharasa, goes on trial next month on charges of conspiracy, attempting to export arms, money laundering, and illegal possession of weapons.

"Keeping sophisticated US weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists has never been more important," said James Dinkins, Special Agent for the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Baltimore.

"This three-year undercover investigation ... highlights the reach and impact of international arms trafficking."

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are fighting for independence in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern regions. More than 60,000 people have been killed in the conflict since 1972.

The rebels have been black-listed as a terrorist organisation by the United States since 1997.

US attorney Rod Rosenstein said Osman had pleaded guilty

Thursday to conspiracy to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organisation and to money laundering.

In a statement, the Justice Department alleged that Osman conspired with two Indonesians to buy 53 military weapons, including sniper rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers as well as ammunition and night-vision devices for the Tamil Tigers.

They contacted an undercover business in Maryland to request a price list and negotiate a deal.

As the sting operation unfolded, Osman met in July with undercover FBI agents in Baltimore to discuss transferring the arms to Sri Lanka. He even provided coordinates for delivering the weapons in the Indian Ocean.

He asked about the cost of unmanned aerial vehicles, and test-fired several weapons including machine guns and sniper rifles.

Osman told the agents that if the first order, for some 900,000 dollars

worth of supplies, went smoothly a second one worth 15 million dollars could follow, according to a Justice Department statement.

In August some 250,000 dollars was wired from a Malaysian bank to an undercover US bank account as a down payment for the weapons' purchase.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's navy and Tamil Tiger rebels fought a sea battle off the island's northwestern coast yesterday with both claiming heavy losses for the other side.

Naval patrol craft engaged five boats of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) off the coastal district of Puttalam and one was sunk, a Sri Lankan military spokesman said.

"We believe one was carrying at least two suicide cadres and it exploded and sank when we opened fire at it," the spokesman said, adding the other four boats escaped.

A naval craft was damaged and a sailor was wounded during a firefight, the spokesman said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Defence Secretary Shekhar Dutt (2L) walks with Pakistani officials as he arrives at the Defence Ministry in Rawalpindi yesterday. Top Indian and Pakistani defence officials began talks on demilitarising a glacier in Kashmir where freezing temperatures have claimed more lives than actual combat.

Karzai met Taliban

Suicide car bomb kills 6 in Kabul

AP, AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai said yesterday he met with Taliban militants in attempts to bring peace to the country and urged supporters of the fundamentalist militia to lay down their weapons.

"We have had representatives from the Taliban meeting with different bodies of Afghan government for a long time," Karzai told a news conference in Kabul. "I have had some Taliban coming to speak to me as well," he said.

Karzai did not disclose any details of these meetings, or indicate if they included talks with senior militant leaders.

Hundreds of former members of the once-ruling hardline Taliban regime have reconciled with the government since they were ousted from power in the US-led invasion in 2001.

But senior rebels leaders have refused to hold talks, and thousands more fighters have picked

up guns and joined a bloody insurgency, particularly in the country's south and east, which last year alone left some 4,000 people, mainly militants, dead.

Karzai urged Taliban who were Afghans to lay down the weapons and join his government, but ruled out any deals with foreign militants.

"Afghan Taliban are always welcome, they belong to this country ... they are the sons of this soil," Karzai said. "As they repent, as they regret, as they want to come back to their own country, they are welcome."

But the foreign militants an apparent reference to militants from neighbouring countries such as Pakistan "should be destroyed," he said.

"They are destroying our lives, killing our people, they are not welcome and there will be no talks with them," Karzai said.

Meanwhile, a suicide bomber detonated a taxi filled with explosives near Afghanistan's parliament in the capital Kabul yesterday.

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PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala (L) receives flowers from party cadres in Kathmandu yesterday upon his return from neighbouring India. Prime Minister Koirala returned from the two day 14th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Sarc) summit, which was concluded on April 5 in New Delhi.

US revs up pressure on Iran after sailors' release

AFP, Crawford

The United States Thursday shrugged off Iran's release of 15 captured British sailors and warned it faced tougher sanctions if it does not bow to UN demands to halt its uranium enrichment operations.

Refusing to accept the idea that the return of the Britons 12 days after they were seized showed Tehran's readiness to engage the international community, the White House reminded Tehran of the UN Security Council's demands on its nuclear programme.

"I would view the detention of the British sailors as not in line with their willingness to work with the international community," the White House national security council spokesman Gordon Johnroe said, referring to Iran's

leaders.

"What would show that they are more in line with the international community is to comply with the UN Security Council resolutions, and suspend their uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities," said Johnroe.

"We'd be hopeful to not have to go back to the UN Security Council for an additional sanction regime," the spokesman said.

And US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack accused Iran of using "hostage-taking as a tool of its international diplomacy."

For its part Tehran Thursday declared its refusal to bow to pressure on its nuclear programme, which it says is for power generation but major Western powers believe is aimed at developing nuclear weapons.

Taliban seize southern Afghanistan district

AFP, Kandahar

More than 100 Taliban militants seized control of a mountainous district in southern Afghanistan's Zabul province early Friday, the provincial governor's spokesman said.

In a separate incident the Taliban killed five security guards in an attack on a company working on a highway near Qalat, the capital city of the same province, spokesman Ghulam Shah Ali Khil told AFP.

Police made a "tactical" withdrawal from the remote Khak Afghan district after the Islamist rebels attacked the district headquarters from several directions at once, Ali Khil said.

There were no immediate plans in place to retake the district, he said.

Sonia makes last-ditch appeal to Indian voters

AFP, Kanpur

Ruling Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi appealed to voters in India's largest state to stand by the party of "every Indian" ahead of month-long local polls set to begin today.

But the last-minute appeal is likely to have little effect across Uttar Pradesh, where as many as 50 million are expected to vote for 403 seats.

The state has seen campaigning from a cast of colourful characters that include a feisty woman from India's untouchable classes and a former wrestler.

Sonia reminded a crowd of some 5,000 Congress stalwarts of the party's history in the independence struggle and asked them not to cede to the caste-based claims of her opponents.

"I want to remind you that the Congress was every Indian's party then and is still every Indian's party today," said the Italian-born Sonia, emphasising the word "every," as she spoke in the blazing heat.

But Congress now has very little

support in the northern state, where it has been wiped out in the last 15 years, except in pockets like this rundown former mill town.

Two of the paltry 25 seats that the party won in state polls five years ago were in this city.

Meanwhile, parties that appeal to untouchables -- or Dalits as they are now known -- at the bottom of the caste system and "other backward class" Hindus have forged ahead across the state.

"You have to decide whether you want parties that divide the people among themselves to form the next government or a government that takes everyone forward together," she said in fluent but accented Hindi.

The ten-minute speech met with polite clapping from the motley crowd rounded up by party workers from some of the city's poorer sections and ferried to the dusty Moti Jheel park where red and white plastic chairs had been laid out.



PHOTO: AFP

A file photo taken on November 16, 2006 shows a helicopter landing on the northernmost iceberg off Dunedin. Up to 30 percent of animal and plant species will be vulnerable to extinction if global temperatures rise by 1.5-2.5 Celcius (2.7 F to 4.5 F), UN climate experts said in a key report in Brussels yesterday.

Global warming threatens natural wonders

AP, Brussels

An environmental group said Thursday some of the world's greatest natural treasures are threatened with destruction because of global warming from the Great Barrier Reef to the Amazon rain forests and the unique ecosystem of the Mexican desert.

On the sidelines of a climate change conference in Brussels, the World Wide Fund for Nature issued a list of 10 regions suffering serious damage from global warming, and where it has projects to limit further damage or help people adapt to new conditions. "What we are talking about are the faces of the impacts of climate change," said Lara Hansen, WWF's chief scientist on climate issues.

The group said coral reefs around the world, including the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Mesoamerican Reef off Belize, begin to lose their colour and die with a rise in ocean waters of just 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit. They are also threatened by the increasing ferocity of tropical storms, another effect of global

warming.

Environmentalists project the temperature of the Amazon River could rise by 3.6 to 5.4 degrees Fahrenheit within 50 years, turning between up to 60 percent of the rain forest into a dry savanna.

In the Bering Sea, warmer winters are leading to the earlier breakup of spring ice and driving salmon stocks closer to the North Pole, disrupting the Arctic ecosystem. Melting ice is also diluting sea water and affecting nutrients for small organisms on which fish feed.

In the Valdivian rain forest in Chile and Argentina, the Alerce tree which can live for 3,000 years is threatened by forest fires and declining rainfall. Melting glaciers mean groundwater in the region will also become more scarce.

The Chihuahuan Desert straddling the US-Mexican border is suffering from drought and intensive farming and overgrazing. North America's largest desert, the Chihuahuan has 3,500 unique plant species, including an array of cactus and yucca, that could be at risk.

Many of the regions at risk were singled out in a report by the

Israel stalls US arms sales to Saudis

AFP, Washington

Israel has stalled a US plan to sell advanced weaponry, including satellite-guided arms, to Saudi Arabia, the New York Times reported Thursday.

The Times said on its website that Israeli officials, including former defence minister Shaul Mofaz, have strongly lobbied Washington to block parts of a planned arms package for the Saudis and unspecified others in the Middle East that could be worth five billion to 10 billion dollars.

Israel is particularly concerned that the United States will supply the Saudis with precision-guided, air-based weapons that could erode Israel's military superiority in the region, the newspaper said, citing unnamed US government sources.

"The Israeli complaints have introduced a new uncertainty into the administration's plan to beef up Persian Gulf militaries as a bulwark against Iran and as a demonstration that, no matter what happens in Iraq, Washington remains committed to the Sunni Arab governments around the region," the Times said.

Documents indicate no Iraq-Qaeda cooperation

AFP, Washington

Interrogations of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and documents seized after the 2003 US-led invasion confirmed that his regime had not been cooperating with al-Qaeda, the Washington Post reported on its website Friday.

The report contradicted a strong argument for the invasion made by the administration of

President George W. Bush that Baghdad had a working relationship with al-Qaeda, the Afghanistan-based group led by Osama bin Laden blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

The Post reported that a newly released declassified Department of Defence report said information obtained after the fall of Saddam confirmed the prewar position of the US

Central Intelligence Agency and Pentagon intelligence that the Iraqi government had had no substantial contacts with al-Qaeda.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistanian Islamists shout slogans outside the Lal Mosque after burning CDs and DVDs during a protest in Islamabad yesterday. Abdul Aziz, a radical Pakistani cleric who is leading a Taliban-style anti-vice drive in the heart of the capital told AFP that he would set up an Islamic "Sharia" court at his mosque.

Cleric sets up court in Pak mosque, threatens suicide attacks

AFP, Islamabad

A radical Pakistani cleric said yesterday he had set up a Taliban-style Islamic court at his mosque in the capital and threatened suicide attacks if the government tries to shut him down.

The move comes a week after students affiliated to Islamabad's Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, kidnapped a woman accused of being a brothel owner and mounted morality patrols targeting music and DVD shops.

"I announce the setting up of a Sharia (Islamic) court from today. I hereby declare the start of Islamic law from this mosque," mosque leader Abdul Aziz told 2,000 supporters in a sermon during traditional Friday prayers.

The court would consist of 10 muftis, or Islamic scholars, he said.

Aziz warned the government not to try to storm the mosque, where hundreds of burqa-clad women and male students waving bamboo sticks have regularly mounted

shows of defiance.

"If this (storming the mosque) is the government's last option, then our last option can be suicide attacks. We have tens of thousands of people who can shake the government with 'fidayeen' (suicide) attacks," he said.

As bearded supporters shouted slogans, Aziz also gave the government a one-month deadline to close what he called brothels, gambling dens and secret alcohol outlets "or our own male students will complete the task."

The Pakistani government has failed to take any action so far against the mosque, despite growing fears that the Islamic republic of 160 million people, is becoming increasingly "Talibanised".

Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao said the cleric had no credibility and insisted that law and order would be maintained, without specifying what action the government would take.