

Lankan peace process, ceasefire in tatters

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's peace process is in tatters with both the government and Tamil Tigers once again pushing for a military solution, according to diplomats close to efforts to end the conflict.

International sponsors of the peace process are also resigned to Asia's longest-running civil war dragging on for years to come, saying the two sides are only likely to return to talks once they are exhausted by more bloodshed.

"Neither the government nor the Tigers are interested in paying anything more than lip service to the

peace process and the 2002 ceasefire," said one official involved in the Norwegian-led peace effort.

"The Norwegians are only acting as facilitators, not to impose anything. But at the present time, they are not being asked to facilitate anything," said the diplomat, who asked not to be named.

The ceasefire, along with the peace negotiations, broke down last year — leaving both sides squaring up for another round in the 35-year-old ethnic conflict.

Last November, Tamil Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran declared his people would pursue their own independent state —

slamming the door on a prior opening that could have seen the Tamil minority win a form of autonomy.

Recent months have seen a sharp escalation in the fighting, with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) losing ground in the east in January and the armed forces vowing to clear the entire area of rebels once and for all before turning their attention to the Tigers' mini-state in the north.

The LTTE's political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan vowed the rebels would hit back soon, describing the loss of territory for them as a simple change in their tactics.

20 killed in Afghan violence

AFP, Khost

Afghan security forces backed by international troops killed 16 militants while a suicide attacker killed four Afghan employees of a US-owned private security firm, officials said Sunday.

The Afghan defence ministry said 10 rebels were killed in fighting in the Barmal district of eastern Paktika province bordering Pakistan early Sunday when Afghan security forces and NATO-led troops raided a rebel hideout.

Ten enemy fighters were killed and 15 others were injured in an operation in Barmal district this morning," the ministry said in a statement. One militant was cap-

tured and some weapons were seized, it added.

Governor for Paktika, Mohammad Akram Ikhpolwak, earlier said the dead included an al-Qaeda-linked Arab fighter. The troops also captured a Pakistani national he said, but gave no details.

The US-led military in a statement said coalition forces detained one extremist and discovered material for making explosive devices in a compound in Paktika province early Sunday.

"The compound consisted of multiple safe houses that use natural terrain to facilitate the movement of fighters from Pakistan," the statement added.



PHOTO: AFP

An Afghan man inspects the wreckage of a (USPI) vehicle at the site of a suicide attack in Kandahar yesterday. Four Afghan employees of a US-owned private security firm were killed in a suicide attack near a base housing thousands of international troops on Sunday.

Pak minister fears for life over edict

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan's tourism minister says she fears for her life after clerics at a radical mosque issued an edict accusing her of sinning by hugging her French parachute jumping instructor, the state news agency reported.

Minister of Tourism Nilofar Bakhtiar told a parliamentary committee of her fear on Saturday following the Taliban-style edict against her by Islamic clerics at Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, in Islamabad, the Associated Press of Pakistan reported.

The clerics said the hug was "an illegitimate and forbidden act" and "without any doubt, she has committed a great sin."

Two clerics at the mosque issued the edict against Bakhtiar last Sunday, demanding that she be sacked, her family punish her and she be made to ask for forgiveness after pictures in the Pakistani media showed Bakhtiar hugging her parachute jumping instructor at a fundraising jump in France.

Hundreds of students from an Islamic seminary attached to the mosque have been running an anti-vice campaign in Islamabad, threatening music shops and brothels, in a bold challenge to President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, a US ally who has pledged to promote moderate Islam.

The mosque's chief cleric, Maulana Abdul Aziz, has threatened to stage suicide attacks if authorities try to raid the mosque.

Nepal's June 20 polls 'not possible': EC

THE KATHMANDU POST/ ANN, Kathmandu

Nepal's Election Commission (EC) has finally said it is technically impossible to conduct free and fair constituent assembly (CA) polls on June 20 as decided by the ruling eight-party coalition.

Speaking at a press meet organized at the EC, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Bhoj Raj Pokharel said, "It's not the government but the EC that conducts the

polls...given the current situation free and fair CA polls can't be conducted on June 20".

He also said the EC has written to the government stating that it needs at least 110 days to conduct free and fair CA polls even after all the election-related legal processes are completed. In its letter, the EC has also urged the government to immediately announce a suitable date for the polls.

He said the CA poll date should be announced, as that should be favourable to voters, candidates, the politi-

cal parties, observers and the officials to be deployed for conducting the elections.

"Besides election-related technical aspects, peace and security situation of the country hasn't yet become stable," Pokharel said, adding, "It may create further complications if we go to elections without addressing all the other political issues related to the electoral system."

Rahul is Up's future, says Manmohan

PTI, Aizalgarh

In a significant move aimed at reviving the fortunes of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Sunday projected young MP Rahul Gandhi as the state's new leader, saying he is its future.

"Rahul Gandhi is your future. He is sweating it out for you. Only one chance is needed to make this state a new Uttar Pradesh," Singh told an election rally, his first during the current assembly polls.

"Let's make a new Uttar Pradesh, just like (late prime minister) Rajiv Gandhi dreamt of making a new India 20 years ago," he said, seeking votes for the Congress ahead of the third phase of polls scheduled for April 18.

Noting that the state has undergone a sea change during the past 15 years, Singh lamented that non-Congress governments had only shed blood "in the name of temples and mosques", shattering the peace and tranquility of Uttar Pradesh during the period.

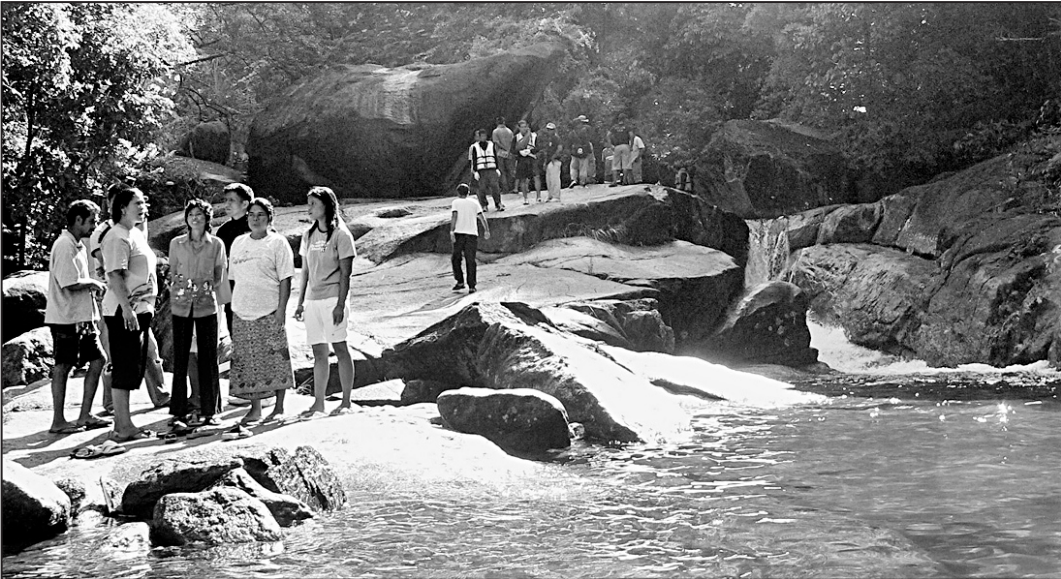


PHOTO: AFP

Relatives and rescue workers look for survivors and victims' bodies at a waterfall following a flash flood in Thailand's southern Trang province yesterday. Rescue workers continued their search for survivors a day after a flash flood killed at least 37 holidaymakers who were bathing in two waterfalls in southern Thailand.

37 killed in Thai flash floods

AP, AFP, Bangkok

Flash floods swept over two waterfalls on a southern Thai mountain packed with picnickers and swimmers celebrating the country's New Year, killing at least 37 people and leaving dozens more missing, officials said.

About 200 people were thought to have been at the Sairung and Praisawan waterfalls on Saturday when the flood hit.

"Twenty-eight bodies were retrieved on Saturday before the rescue teams stopped due to darkness, and we found seven more bodies on Sunday morning," said Soralak Thiepwu, deputy chief of the provincial disaster prevention centre.

He said about 120 people swept

into the water at Sairung or stranded on rocks had been rescued.

Klinpaka Saengkul, a nurse and member of a rescue team at Sairung, said she saw rescuers pull the bodies of three women from the water.

She estimated that dozens more remained missing.

"We do not know for sure how many people are missing, but believe that more dead bodies are still in the water in the jungles somewhere," Soralak said.

The falls, about three miles apart, are in a forested area in the Yantakao district of Trang province, 420 miles south of Bangkok. Swimmers and picnickers gather alongside streams at the base of the cascades.

4 rebels killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops shot dead four suspected Islamic militants in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir, police said yesterday, while a Muslim man was also beheaded in further violence.

Two of the rebels were killed in a clash Sunday with troops near Shopian, 55 kilometres (34 miles) south of the summer capital, Srinagar, police said, adding the two were members of the region's most powerful rebel group, Hizbul Mujahedin.

Two other militants were shot dead Sunday in a similar clash with troops and police in a district south of Shopian, a police spokesman said.