

Lanka seeks new truce with Tigers

Warplanes hit rebel posts as heavy fighting rages

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka was ready to negotiate a fresh ceasefire with Tamil Tiger rebels as the Norwegian-brokered truce had virtually collapsed, a government minister said yesterday.

Defence ministry spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said the ceasefire arranged and put in place by Norway from February 2002 had been violated more than 10,000 times and was virtually dead.

"There is no point in beating round the bush," Rambukwella told reporters when asked if the government accepted that the truce agreement was still on place. "The government is ready to re-look at it."

"It has been violated over 10,000 times by the Tigers. Yes, the ceasefire is there to make the inter-

national community happy, but you know the reality," said Rambukwella who is also the minister of foreign employment.

He said the government reserved the right to take any action to safeguard its "national interests" despite any provision of the truce limiting military action against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Both the government and the Tamil Tigers have carried out air attacks against each other despite the ceasefire expressly prohibiting aerial strikes.

Rambukwella said the military would step up its aerial surveillance of rebel-held territory using supersonic jets hit positions near Iranamadu where the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) maintain a clandestine airfield, spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said.

He said a Tiger military training facility was targeted by the air

force, but had no details of casualties. "The training base had caught fire and was burning for several hours," he said.

In ground battles at Vavuniya, gateway to the rebel-held Wanni region, the military lost seven soldiers killed and 31 wounded in the past three days, Samarasinghe said, adding that the Tigers too had suffered heavy casualties.

He said the number of police commandos killed in a bomb attack in the east of the island Sunday had risen to four.

For their part, the Tigers said they had beaten back a military attempt to advance into the rebel-held part of Vavuniya and had killed at least five government troops for the loss of three of their own combatants.



PHOTO: AFP

People demonstrate Place de la Bastille in Paris, next to a car set on fire, after the announcement of estimates for the first results of the French presidential election on Sunday night. Rightwinger Nicolas Sarkozy won the French presidential election, beating Socialist Segolene Royal with about 53 percent of the vote.

Turkish govt seeks popular vote

AP, Ankara

Turkey's Islamic-rooted government, whose presidential candidate dropped his bid in the face of protests from pro-secular lawmakers, pushed Monday for a constitutional amendment that allows the president to be elected in a popular vote rather than in a parliamentary poll.

The withdrawal of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul's candidacy for the presidency on Sunday was a new defeat for the government, which had to call for early general elections in a standoff that has exposed a deepening divide between the government and its opponents. Secularism is enshrined in the Constitution and fiercely guarded by the judiciary and the powerful military.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan planned to overcome the deadlock in Parliament with a constitutional amendment that would require a popular vote for president. Parliament began debating the proposal and could hold the first round of voting on the measure on Monday.



PHOTO: AFP

Egyptian officials survey the site yesterday as they stand by part of the wreckage of a French military transport aircraft that crashed yesterday at the village of Biat Jered in the Sinai region. Nine members of a multinational peacekeeping force, eight French nationals and one Canadian, were killed when their plane crashed on Sunday during an emergency landing in Egypt's Sinai peninsula.

Former minister shot dead in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

A former provincial minister and leader of ex-prime minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party was shot dead along with a relative in northwest Pakistan, police said yesterday.

Sed Qamar Abbas, 52, and his nephew were killed by unidentified gunmen in a passing car in Peshawar late Sunday, senior police official Iftikhar Ahmad told reporters.

The pair were returning from a wedding reception on a motorcycle, Ahmad said.

Abbas had served as a provincial minister in Benazir Bhutto's governments from 1988-1990 and 1993-1996.

Police ruled out that the killings were linked to sectarian violence or the recent wave of terrorist attacks in the province.

"It is not a case of sectarian killing or terrorism," Ahmad said, adding that Abbas had made enemies in his career.

Hundreds of Abbas' supporters surrounded the local police station and blocked the main road, chanting slogans against the government to protest the killing, witnesses said.

Sarkozy vows to heal French pols wounds

Hundreds arrested in night of violence

AFP, Paris

Right-winger Nicolas Sarkozy, who had sought a mandate for radical reform, emphatically won France's presidential election on Sunday, but promised to heal the wounds of the bitterly fought campaign.

"I will not betray you, I will not lie to you, I will not disappoint you," Sarkozy told tens of thousands of supporters packed into a Paris square as news spread of his triumph over the Socialist Segolene Royal.

But riot police also fought hundreds of anti-Sarkozy rioters in Paris and other cities with tear gas and water cannon.

Hundreds of cars were set alight and hundreds of people arrested by police in a night of violence following the election victory of rightwinger Nicolas Sarkozy, police said Monday.

But despite the trouble, a police spokesman said that the widespread violence and rioting some had feared if Sarkozy won, was largely averted.

A total of 367 cars were burned in the high-immigrant suburbs in the hours that followed the triumph of the former interior minister over Socialist Segolene Royal in the presidential election.

"The second round of the presidential election did not result in large-scale urban violence in the flashpoint areas and only a few groups, here and there, set fire to garbage bins and cars," said a police spokesman.

Royal had warned in the runup to Sunday's election that the country could slide into violence and unrest, similar to the three weeks of rioting that rocked French suburbs in late 2005.

Sarkozy won the battle to be France's new generation leader in place of President Jacques Chirac with 53 percent of the vote against 47 percent for Royal, according to official results. The estimated turnout of 85 percent was the highest in three decades.

Amid wild celebrations in the capital, Sarkozy, 52, who has fought to soften his tough-talking image, said he would be the president of the whole nation.

"My thoughts go out to all those French people who did not vote for me," he said in a victory speech at the party headquarters of his Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).

"I want to say to them that -- above and beyond the political fight, above and beyond differences of opinion -- for me there is only one France. I will be president of all the French. I will speak for all of them," he said.

Sarkozy gave the same unifying message to more than 30,000 followers in the Place de la Concorde where he promised to "turn a new page" in French history.

"I recognise the immense responsibilities that weigh on my shoulders," he declared. "I want to say to everyone: I will not betray you, I will not lie to you, I will not disappoint you."

At the Socialist Party headquarters, Royal supporters, many in tears, gloomily digested a third consecutive presidential defeat after 1995 and 2002.

Israeli PM faces no-confidence

AFP, Jerusalem

Embattled Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was due to face motions of no-confidence in parliament yesterday, the latest backlash over a scathing inquiry into his handling of last year's Lebanon war.

Parliament was due to debate three no-confidence motions that were lodged by both right-wing and left-wing opposition parties at an afternoon session, officials said.

Most observers do not expect the measures to pass as Olmert still enjoys the support of most of his 78-member coalition in the 120-seat chamber.

"The government is expected to survive Monday's no-confidence vote by a large margin, so even if some individual coalition MPs do vote against the government or abstain from voting, their votes will be more of an insult than a real threat to its stability," wrote the liberal Haaretz daily.

Earlier the head of the main right-wing opposition Likud party, a sponsor of one of the motions, called on Olmert to step down.

N Korea ready to shut down nuke reactor

AP, Pyongyang

North Korea is ready to quickly shut down its nuclear reactor as soon as it receives funds that had been frozen in a banking dispute, the Foreign Ministry said Monday.

"The shutdown is something that can be done immediately and it won't take long," Ri Kyong Son, vice spokesman at the ministry, told APTN in an interview in Pyongyang.

North Korea missed an April deadline to close the Yongbyon nuclear reactor under a February agreement with the United States and four neighbouring countries, but has said its commitment to the deal remains unchanged.

The North's key precondition to move on disarmament is the release of some \$25 million frozen after Washington blacklisted a Macau bank where the North Korean regime held accounts. Washington helped unfreeze the funds to win the North's promise to start dismantling its nuclear weapons programmes, but technical issues have stalled the transfer.

Iran weighs compromise at nuclear meeting

AP, Vienna

Iran's delegation consulted with its government Monday on whether to opt for compromise at a 130-nation nuclear meeting or continue opposing language of the conference agenda, even at the risk that the gathering could end in failure.

At issue is Tehran's refusal to accept a phrase calling for the "need for full compliance with" the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

That position has delayed adoption of the agenda since the conference opened a week ago. Tehran argues the language could lead to its becoming a target at the meeting because of its refusal to heed UN Security Council demands to cease uranium enrichment and other parts of its nuclear programme that could be misused to make nuclear weapons.

"If I reduce it to a simple sen-

tence, it's this," said a senior European diplomat. "The Iranians are blocking things."

Another delegate said that Monday "is likely a day of decision on whether to go on or go home."

Originally planned to end May 11, the meeting adjourned Friday to give the Iranian delegation time to consult with officials in Tehran on whether to accept a South African compromise proposal. That suggestion would have the conference decide whether to accept an appended statement specifying that "all provisions" of the treaty must be fully observed including the need for the United States and other nuclear weapons states to disarm.

Iran argues it is entitled to enrich under the treaty provision giving all pact members the right to develop peaceful programmes.

Northern Ireland set for new dawn

New power-sharing govt takes over today

AFP, London

After decades of sectarian violence and terrorism, Northern Ireland will inaugurate a historic power-sharing government today that it hopes will finally bring peace and stability.

The 108-seat Northern Ireland Assembly, where rival Protestants and Catholics will share power, is to be revived after four-and-a-half years during which the peace process stalled.

Firebrand Protestant preacher Ian Paisley, the leader of the Democratic Unionists (DUP), is to become the province's first minister, while convicted terrorist Martin McGuinness of the opposing Catholic Sinn Fein party will be his deputy -- a prospect, which would have been unthinkable even five years ago.

McGuinness on Sunday insisted

that the coalition of the DUP and Sinn Fein would succeed, saying that governing with the DUP would show that self-rule was a more favourable alternative to being controlled by London.

"We are determined that this latest political initiative will not fail. We want to build a new relationship with unionists on this island," he said.

"We want to demonstrate to them the benefits of sitting down and resolving problems ourselves and overcoming challenges without the need or interference of British ministers with no mandate in Ireland."

That the two sides have been able to come together in government is an extraordinary triumph after years of painstaking progress -- one that outgoing British Prime Minister Tony Blair will be keen to claim as his own.



Pakistani lawyer Aitzaz Ahsan (C) who represents suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry leaves The Supreme Court Building in Islamabad yesterday after a petition hearing. Pakistan Supreme Court stayed a judicial inquiry into misconduct charges against country's top judge, a decision likely to embarrass the government of President Pervez Musharraf.



Cops seek to seize MF Hussain's property

AFP, Mumbai

Indian police said yesterday they are taking steps to seize property from acclaimed Indian painter MF Hussain after he failed to appear in an obscenity case.

"Preliminary steps have begun to attach his property following the Hardiwar court order," Brijesh Singh, Mumbai deputy police commissioner said.

The court in North India issued the order after the 91-year old -- known for large canvases that have fetched millions of dollars at auction -- failed to appear in a 2005 case lodged over two paintings depicting semi-nude Hindu deities.