

Lanka govt seeks peace talks with LTTE

Seven killed in violence

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president offered to open peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels on Friday even as security forces were locked in combat with the guerrillas.

President Mahinda Rajapakse would enter negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) if they agreed to resume where they left off in October 2006, his spokesman Chandrapala Liyanage told AFP.

"I am ready to talk even today in the present circumstances," he quoted the president as saying.

"I am a total democrat and I believe in a peaceful negotiated settlement."

The Tigers last week insisted that they would not resume Norwegian-brokered peace talks unless the Sri Lankan government halted its military action.

Security forces are keeping up air, ground and sea attacks against the Tigers in the island's northern

and eastern regions.

At least seven people have been killed in the embattled regions since Thursday, officials said.

Security was also reinforced against Tiger bomb attacks in the capital. Two blasts in the past week killed nine people and wounded 44. Both blasts were blamed on Tiger rebels.

Hundreds of minority Tamils were Friday asked to leave the capital Colombo and return to their villages — some located in conflict areas — as they posed a "threat to national security," police chief Victor Perera said.

"Those who are loitering in Colombo will be sent home. We will give them transport," Perera said. "We are doing this to protect the people and because of a threat to national security."

Perera, a member of the majority Sinhalese community, denied media reports that 56 lodges, or hostels, in Colombo had been asked to evict Tamil guests.

"We have asked lodge owners to send away suspicious people or those who can't produce valid identification papers."

Thousands of Tamils from violence-ridden areas arrive in the capital monthly in the hope of obtaining passports to travel abroad for employment or secure political asylum overseas.

They are required to register with the police to travel from embattled regions under a de facto visa system in place to prevent rebel infiltrations of the capital.

Despite the worsening security climate, President Rajapakse said he was keen on a negotiated end to the Tamil separatist conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives in the past 35 years.

The president noted that he had not ordered troops to enter the rebel-held Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu regions despite stepped up fighting and said he was still abiding by the Oslo-arranged truce.

"The ceasefire agreement has

been violated 8,000 to 9,000 times, but we have still not given up the ceasefire," Rajapakse said.

More than 5,000 people have been killed in a new wave of violence since Rajapakse came to power in November 2005 and officials privately admit that the truce is all but dead.

Since then two rounds of peace talks have ended in failure and led to more fighting with the rebels, who want independence.

The Tigers, who have been on the defensive since April last year, turned tables on the military in March by using light aircraft for the first time to attack military and economic targets.

The air raids prompted the authorities to shut the only international airport at night. On Friday they announced the suspension of domestic air services amid fears of more rebel attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters from India's ethnic Gujar community hold sticks as they stand on a portion of the blocked Jaipur-Ajmer highway, in India's northwestern state of Rajasthan yesterday after pelting stones on unseen security forces. Police in northern India issued shoot-on-sight orders Friday to stop arson attacks and rioting amid a week of ethnic clashes that have left at least 28 people dead.



PHOTO: AFP

US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns (2R) shakes hands with Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon (2L) as India's top nuclear negotiator Shyam Saran (L) and US Ambassador to India David Mulford look on during a meeting in New Delhi yesterday.

US, India hold 2nd day of nuke talks

AP, New Delhi

Indian and US delegates met for a second day yesterday to seal a much-touted civilian nuclear deal between the two countries, officials said.

The deal has been delayed by disagreements over clauses that India says could limit its nuclear weapons programme and impinge on its sovereignty.

Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns met with India's junior External Affairs Minister Anand Sharma in New Delhi, said Unni Menon, a US Embassy official. Technical-level talks were also held.

"The deal is mutually advantageous," Burns told reporters. "In good spirit we can reach a final agreement."

The agreement would let the US ship nuclear fuel and know-how to India in exchange for safeguards and UN inspections at India's 14 civilian nuclear plants. Eight military plants would be off-limits.

Details were not immediately available on the progress of the

talks, which were set to end Saturday.

The nuclear pact is the cornerstone of an emerging partnership between Washington and New Delhi after decades of Cold War wariness.

One of the biggest sticking points has been India's displeasure with a clause that would let the United States halt cooperation if India tests a nuclear weapon.

Some in India also fear the deal could limit the country's right to reprocess spent atomic fuel, a key step in making weapons-grade nuclear material and thus hamper its long-standing weapons programme.

American critics, meanwhile, say the plan could set off a nuclear arms race in Asia by allowing India to use the extra nuclear fuel, which the deal would provide, to free up its domestic uranium for weapons.

The unrest in the western state of Rajasthan began Tuesday at a protest attended by thousands of Gujjars, who are the dominant community in nine of the state's 32 districts but make up only five percent of the state population.

The Meenas, comprising 15 percent of Rajasthan's population, have better access to education compared to the Gujjars and are better represented in the state's law enforcement agencies.

Meena leaders had threatened to take action if the state accorded the Gujjars favours.

The simmering anger erupted into clash Friday between the Meena community, primarily farmers and traders, and the Gujjars, who are nomadic shepherds.

Eight people were killed and up to 20 injured in fierce street fighting in the first direct confrontation between the groups since the protests began.

A policeman was among those killed in an eastern district of the desert state, prompting authorities to call in the army, police official SN Jain said.

Gujjars continue to block the state's main highway to New Delhi, and several train services have

Shoot-on-sight order to quell Rajasthan rioting

Death toll rises to 28

AFP, Jodhpur

Police in northern India issued shoot-on-sight orders yesterday as eight more people were killed in ethnic clashes that have left 28 dead so far.

A protest campaign by the ethnic Gujjar community to demand more government benefits has degenerated into bloodshed and lawlessness, and police said they would act to stop the unrest.

"Anyone seen indulging in arson and rioting will be shot," local police inspector-general Ajit Singh said.

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India urges Lanka not to shop for arms in China, Pakistan

AFP, Chennai

India is urging Sri Lanka not to buy weapons from China and Pakistan to fight Tamil rebels, New Delhi's national security advisor said.

"We are the big power in the region. It is very clear," MK Narayanan told reporters Thursday evening.

"Whatever their requirements, they (Sri Lanka) should come to us. We will give what is necessary," he said after meeting Tamil Nadu state chief minister M. Karunanidhi.

At the same time, Narayanan insisted that India would not provide any "offensive" weaponry to Sri Lanka, where fighting has escalated between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The comments followed reports that Sri Lanka had told India it would have to approach China and Pakistan for arms, if India was unable to supply them.

Sri Lanka blames its inability to track down low-flying Tamil Tiger

aircraft on a "faulty" radar supplied by India. Sri Lankan officials have also said that New Delhi objected to Colombo trying to secure a better radar from China.

However, both China and Pakistan are key suppliers of small arms to Sri Lankan security forces.

Islamabad supplied multi-barrel rocket launchers to Sri Lankan troops in 2000 when Tiger rebels were on the verge of capturing the northern Jaffna peninsula. India at the time offered help to evacuate 40,000 troops in Jaffna.

An increase in attacks on Indian fishermen across the narrow Palk Straits in recent weeks has strained relations between the two neighbours.

The federal security adviser visited Chennai, formerly known as Madras, after the state's chief minister raising concerns about the safety of Indian Tamils fishing in the straits, between India and Sri Lanka.

'US in truce talks with Iraqi insurgents'

AFP, Washington

"initial success" in increasing security in Anbar province, he added, "we now see opportunities for further engagement across Iraq with other tribes and entities, to include mainstream Sunni and Shia insurgents."

Odierno provided an update of the US troop "surge" announced in January as part of a new last-ditch effort to restore security to the country, focused on Baghdad and Anbar province.

He said that US and Iraqi troops have not yet made sufficient inroads in their campaign to quell the violence in Baghdad.

"We've made small progress here. We have not made the progress that I think is necessary yet, but I hope over the summer that we will continue to make progress," he said.

He acknowledged that the violence had risen again in May compared to April, despite the ongoing US troop increase.

Videotape of kidnapped BBC reporter surfaces

AP, Gaza City

Kidnapped British reporter Alan Johnston appeared Friday in a videotape posted on an Islamic militant Web site, saying his captors had treated him well, denouncing Israel and blasting British and US Middle East policy.

It was the first sign of life from him since he was abducted almost three months ago.

There was no way to tell when the video was recorded, and it was not clear why his captors chose this time to post it. The British Broadcasting Corp. journalist, who has been covering the Palestinian territories for three years, has a reputation for objectivity, and it seemed likely he was reciting what he was told to say.

The videotape appeared on the Al-Ekhlas Web site, frequently used by Islamic militants. It bore the logo of the Army of Islam, the shadowy Palestinian group that had been believed to be holding the 45-year-old reporter, and opened with Arabic chanting and verses from the Quran.



Lebanese soldiers take up positions outside the refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared in the northern Lebanon yesterday. Fighting erupted anew Friday between troops besieging a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon and Islamist militants holed up inside, where the humanitarian situation was described as desperate.

Musharraf fighting for his political life

Pak army chiefs voices support

AP, AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's president has survived two al-Qaeda assassination attempts, faced down opposition to his alliance with the US and held onto the support of fellow generals for nearly eight years.

But from the columns of Pakistan's most influential newspapers to conversations in the streets, the view is growing that Gen Pervez Musharraf's bungled effort to remove the country's top judge has left him seriously weakened and perhaps close to the exit.

"Musharraf says he saved Pakistan after 9/11, but I think he has failed," said Javed Arshad, a 26-year-old shopkeeper in Multan, a city in Punjab, the country's dominant province and a key battle-

ground in upcoming elections. "Musharraf is on the way out." But Pakistan's top army commanders voiced full support for President Pervez Musharraf yesterday, a statement said, amid the biggest crisis of his eight-year military rule.

"The corps commanders and principal staff officers of the Pakistan Army affirmed to stand committed for the security of their country under the leadership and guidance of the President," the military statement said.

The general, who seized power in a bloodless 1999 coup, has presided over a period of sustained economic growth and relative stability unusual in Pakistan's turbulent 60-year history. He stands as a secular pragmatist seeking to restore good governance.

But his image has been battered since the March 9 suspension of the Supreme Court's chief judge for allegedly abusing the powers of his office. Opposition parties contend Musharraf really wanted to sideline the independent-minded judge before the elections.

The judge's removal touched off street protests against Musharraf's plans to stay in power, and the government's harsh reaction to the uproar has drawn charges of authoritarianism and predictions of escalating unrest.

Violence in Karachi on May 12 killed more than 40 people and left Musharraf fending off accusations that a pro-government political party was to blame for the worst of the bloodshed.

'French Spiderman' jailed for Shanghai climb

AFP, Shanghai

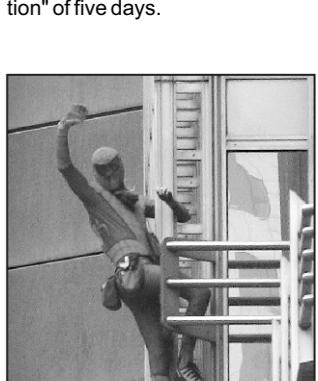
Intrepid climber Alain Robert, nicknamed the "French Spiderman," has been jailed for five days after scaling China's tallest building, police and French officials said yesterday.

Robert's climb up Shanghai's 430-metre (1,420-feet) Jin Mao Tower Thursday without safety ropes attracted a large crowd and stopped traffic. He was arrested upon returning to ground level.

"Alain Robert has not been expelled, but he has been jailed for an expected period of five days," France's deputy consul general in Shanghai, Anne Denis-Blanchard, told AFP.

"We are trying to obtain a reduction in his punishment and get access to him in prison."

A spokeswoman for China's Public Security Office, who gave only her surname Xin, confirmed that Robert had been arrested after his daring feat and would face an "administrative detention" of five days.



Intrepid climber Alain Robert, nicknamed the "French Spiderman", gestures as he climbs up Shanghai's 430-metre (1,420-feet) Jin Mao Tower on May 31, without safety ropes, attracting a large crowd and stopped traffic. Robert was arrested upon returning to ground level and has been jailed for five days.



Rickshaw pullers wait for passengers during a day long general strike in Kathmandu yesterday. A one-day strike by ethnic minority groups closed schools and businesses across Nepal and emptied the usually busy streets of the capital Kathmandu and other areas.