

Tiger saboteurs target Lankan power supply

Britain asks Colombo to end military campaign

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger saboteurs came close to cutting off a large chunk of Sri Lanka's electricity supply yesterday by skirting tight security and setting off a bomb against a key power line, officials said.

The device, which was rigged to a timer, was attached to a steel pylon located between a key thermal power generating facility and the main control centre in Colombo.

The high-tension line supported by the pylon forms the backbone of the country's power transmitting system.

The blast was heard five kilometres (three miles) away but caused only minor damage to the pylon, and no disruption to power supplies, officials said. No one was

hurt in the explosion.

"The line is energised and there is no immediate threat of the cables collapsing," a spokesman for the Ceylon Electricity Board said. "We have not switched off the supply, but we will start repair work soon."

The defence ministry blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have been fighting for an independent Tamil state in the north and east of the island since 1972.

Engineers said the bomb could have destabilised Sri Lanka's entire electricity network by disconnecting the thermal generators from the national grid.

Sri Lanka is heavily dependent on the generators due to a drought that is affecting hydroelectric power stations.

"We don't want to openly discuss the transmission and distribution networks, but obviously the attackers knew what kind of damage they could have caused," one engineer said.

Authorities have begun a major search in the area to track down any more explosives and patrols were also stepped up along the cable route, police said. Military bomb disposal units have also been dispatched.

The blast came as the capital was on high alert for Tamil Tiger bomb attacks.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake warned that Tamil Tiger rebels had rigged up a truck with over a tonne of explosives that could blow up half of Colombo, a city of over 600,000

people.

Meanwhile, Britain Monday asked its former colony Sri Lanka to end its military campaign and resume peace talks with separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

Britain's junior foreign minister, Kim Howells, said here that London was worried about growing rights abuses and an escalation in the conflict, which has left scores of combatants dead on both sides.

"The situation in Sri Lanka looks darker now than my last visit in February, where there were many hopes of an all-party political solution that would create a basis for future talks. That looks further away now," Howells told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

Separatist Tamil Tiger supporters demonstrate on Monday outside the United Nations (UN) Office in Geneva on the occasion of the 5th Session of the UN Human Rights Council. More than 8000 demonstrators took part in the rally.

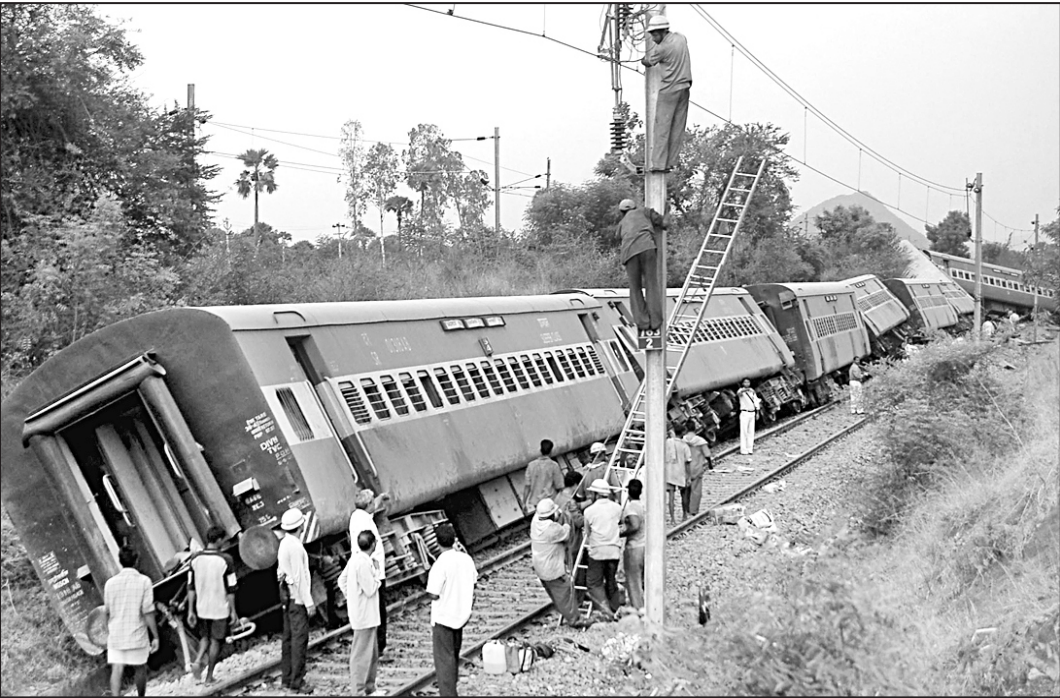


PHOTO: AFP

Indian railway workers disconnect power cables at the site of derailed carriages of the Nagarcoil-Howrah superfast Gurudev express at Duvvada, some 637km north east of Hyderabad yesterday. Four people died and more than 60 injured after 10 carriages on the train veered off the rail track.

Thaksin can return from exile: Junta

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday gave ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra the green light to return home for the first time since last year's military coup and fight to regain 1.5 billion dollars in frozen assets.

"His reason for wanting to return is understandable. He needs to come to fight the charges" made by a powerful anti-corruption panel, army-installed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont told reporters.

"He does not have to seek permission" from the military junta to return, Surayud said, although Thaksin would need to notify investigators on the Assets Examination Committee (AEC).

"It's his right to come back and answer the charges made by the AEC. We're all equal under the law," General Sonthi Boonyaratglin,

the junta leader, also said he would not oppose Thaksin's return.

Sonthi said Thaksin "would not be detained" because he has not yet been convicted of a crime.

The military-appointed anti-graft committee late Monday ordered a freeze on at least 52.9 billion baht (1.52 billion dollars) belonging to Thaksin's family.

That ruling followed an order in late May by a military-installed court that disbanded Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party and banned the billion-aire as well as 110 other party officials from running for office for five years.

Graft investigators have also recommended that criminal charges be filed against Thaksin over a land deal, while his wife has been charged with tax evasion and his children face a 789-million-dollar tax bill.

Bush to press for immigration bill

AP, Washington

President Bush, wading deeper into an issue that bitterly divides his party, hopes a personal appeal can help persuade sceptical Republicans to resurrect and pass his immigration bill.

Over lunch Tuesday in the Capitol, Bush planned an effort to change enough minds among GOP senators to salvage one of his top domestic priorities. The measure, which legalizes up to 12 million unlawful immigrants and tightens border security, stalled last week in the face of broad Republican opposition.

Bush "will talk about the fact that immigration reform is too important to let this opportunity pass, and this is the best opportunity that we have had in decades to reform the broken immigration system," said Scott Stanzel, a White House spokesman.

Five charged with stealing Tutu's Nobel Peace prize

AFP, Johannesburg

Five men were charged yesterday with stealing the Nobel Peace prize of South Africa's leading anti-apartheid hero Desmond Tutu during a burglary at his home in Soweto, police said.

"The police charged them with housebreaking, theft and being in possession of stolen goods," police spokesman Superintendent Thembi Nkwashu told AFP.

The five, aged 21 to 39, are all expected to appear before magistrates in Johannesburg on Wednesday, the spokesman added.

Apart from the gold Nobel medal, which the former archbishop of Cape Town won in 1984, electrical goods including two television sets and a DVD player were taken during the weekend break-in at the house in the Soweto township, on the outskirts of Johannesburg. The goods were recovered on Monday.

Iran ready for Iraq talks with US

Bush admn warned on detainees

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday warned that the United States would be made to "regret" its detention of five Iranian officials in Iraq but said it was still ready to consider continuing talks with its arch foe.

"We will make the Americans regret their ugly and illegal action against the consulate of Iran in Arbil in Iraq and kidnapping five of our diplomats," Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said according to state television.

He added that Iran in the next two days would send a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon protesting "the lack of attention and clear, indefensible discrimination of the Security Council" on the issue.

The United States in January

arrested five Iranian officials working for an Iranian office in the northern Iraqi city of Arbil, accusing the men of belonging to the elite special operations force of the Revolutionary Guards.

US military officials have also said two other Iranians have been detained in Iraq but it is unclear when and where they were arrested.

Iran insists that the men are diplomats working for a "consulate" and the affair has further soured the atmosphere between the two foes even after their highest-level public contacts in 27 years two weeks ago.

Those talks in Baghdad between Iranian ambassador to Iraq Hassan Kazemi Qomi and his US counterpart Ryan Crocker on Iraq's security appeared to achieve

no major breakthrough and no date was set for a further encounter.

However Iranian officials on Tuesday appeared to express readiness to continue the talks, as Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh visited Tehran.

"If the Americans decide to change their policies on Iraq we will examine positively a request from the Iraqi government to continue the discussions with the United States," Mottaki said.

"It is agreed that Iran will examine positively a request from the Iraqi government to continue discussions with the United States," added Kazemi Qomi, in Tehran for Saleh's visit.

Shootings, bombing kill 6 in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Insurgents killed six people in Iraq yesterday, four in shootings and two in a roadside bomb attack in central Baghdad, security officials said.

The roadside bombing killed two civilians at a popular market in central Baghdad's Rusafi Square neighbourhood, security officials told AFP.

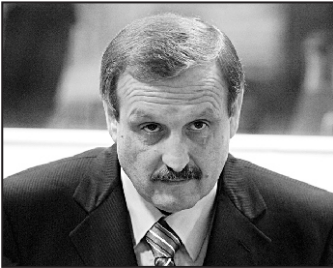
Insurgents often target markets in Baghdad in a bid to inflict maximum casualties as US and Iraqi forces try to rein in the violence with an ongoing security clampdown in the capital.

Four more people were reported killed northeast of Baghdad in the restive province of Diyala.

Two people, including a schoolchild, were killed when gunmen sprayed their minibus with bullets in Al-Aswad near the town of Khalis, police Lieutenant Ahmed Ali said from the provincial capital of Baquba.

In a similar incident, gunmen shot dead two more people in the village of Albu Aziz, east of Baquba, he added.

Attacks in Diyala have risen since the military crackdown in Baghdad as Iraqi insurgents seek easier targets in neighbouring provinces.



Milan Martić

Former Croatian Serb leader jailed for 35 years

AP, The Hague

The Yugoslav war crimes tribunal convicted a wartime leader of Croatia's rebel Serbs of murder, torture and persecution Tuesday and sentenced him to 35 years in prison for a brutal ethnic cleansing campaign of non-Serbs in Croatia.

Judges said Milan Martić, 52, was responsible for hundreds of murders from 1991 when Serbs in the Krajina region of northeastern Croatia rebelled and set up a break-away ministate until 1995 when Croatian forces recaptured the area.

He also was convicted of ordering two days of indiscriminate cluster bomb shelling of the Croatian capital, Zagreb, in May 1995 that killed at least seven civilians and injured more than 200.

Most of the crimes were "committed against elderly people, persons held in detention and civilians. The special vulnerability of these victims adds to the gravity of the crimes," said presiding judge Bakone Moloto.

Martić stood still and showed no emotion as Moloto read out the verdict and his sentence.

The three-judge UN panel said Martić was deeply involved in a criminal plot with other Serb leaders including Slobodan Milosevic, Gen.

US to maintain close links with Musharraf despite criticism

AFP, Washington

Washington said Monday it would continue its close links with Pakistan military ruler Pervaz Musharraf's administration despite a call by a leading US newspaper to distance itself from the embattled general.

The US State Department said it had faith in "war on terror" ally Musharraf's efforts to implement political reforms, and hoped he would keep his pledge to hold free and fair elections this year and shed his military uniform.

"We continue to work with the Musharraf government and others within the Pakistani political system to continue their process of political reforms," department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters.

He said Musharraf, facing the biggest protests of his eight years in power, had made "some progress" in terms of political and economic reforms as well as media freedom.

"What the Pakistani political system is learning -- as you open up, more of that brings with it heightened expectations for what might be done," McCormack said, as the New York Times called Monday for Washington to begin to sever its ties to Musharraf.

"Pakistan seems to be rapidly approaching a critical turning point, with a choice between intensified repression and instability or an orderly transition back to democratic rule," the influential daily wrote in an editorial.

Pakistan presses tribesmen to expel al-Qaeda rebels

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani authorities yesterday issued a fresh appeal to tribesmen in a rugged region bordering Afghanistan to expel Taliban and al-Qaeda rebels and their supporters.

The call came as President Pervaz Musharraf faces continued pressure from his US and Western allies about militancy in the impoverished tribal belt and peace deals between the government and the rebels.

Local administrator Pirzada Khan told 500 tribesmen and Islamic clerics in North Waziristan

that he was bringing a message direct from Musharraf and the governor of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province.

"Pakistan is under tremendous pressure from foreign countries over militant activity," Khan told the jirga, or tribal assembly, in Miranshah, the main town in the district.

Amid allegations that there were foreign militants and training camps in Waziristan, Khan said that "to find a solution we shall have to expel those who are not with the nation."



PHOTO: AFP

United Arab Emirates (UAE) Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdallah Bin Zayid Al Nahyan (L) listens to his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Kasuri (R) during their talks at the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad yesterday.

Afghanistan going same way as Iraq

Says worried Blair

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair voiced concern yesterday that Afghanistan could descend into the same spiral of violence as Iraq.

While defending his backing for the US-led invasions of the two countries in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, he said care needed to be taken tackling the mounting violence in Afghanistan.

"In any situation, whether in Iraq or Afghanistan, where you are trying to bring about a different form of government, these people will try to stop us," he told reporters.

And, referring to Iraq, he added: "The worry is that we should be careful that Afghanistan is not subject to the same attempts to undermine and collapse the proper support for democracy."

Blair, who is to stand down on June 27 after a decade in office, made his comments as the Red Cross warned that Afghan civilians were paying the price of increasingly bitter fighting between foreign forces and Taliban rebels.

The death toll among international forces in Afghanistan is over 80 so far this year. Last year 191 soldiers involved in the international mission to the war-scarred country were killed.