

Lanka asks Norway to revive peace move

Govt, Tigers trade allegations over killings

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government has asked Norway to help revive a moribund peace process amid an escalation of fighting between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels, a press report said yesterday.

A top aide of President Mahinda Rajapakse asked Norway's peace facilitator Erik Solheim to send his envoy Jon Hannsen-Bauer for direct face-to-face talks with Tamil Tiger rebels and help resume peace negotiations, the Sunday Times said.

There was no immediate word from the government, but diplomatic sources said Oslo had been asking for clearance to travel to the rebel-held Wanni region to meet with the rebels to discuss the future of the peace initiative.

The Sri Lankan government has turned down requests for Norwegian diplomats here to cross front lines and meet with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leaders, saying that it was unsafe because of ongoing fighting.

The Sunday Times said that the decision to invite a Norwegian envoy to travel to Wanni was an indication that the Colombo government was ready to save a collapsing truce and revive the peace process.

"It is also a reiteration of the government's commitment to the ceasefire agreement of February 2002," the Times said. "Official pronouncements had earlier cast doubts over the future of such killings."

Peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tiger

rebels collapsed in October last year leading to a further escalation of fighting.

Norway held a meeting of Sri Lanka's top aid donors last week in a bid to halt the new wave of bloodshed, but there was no breakthrough following that gathering.

More than 5,000 people have been killed in the new wave of fighting since December 2005 despite a truce in place since February 2002.

Meanwhile, gunmen have shot dead two civilians in Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula, officials said Sunday as the government and Tamil Tigers blamed each other for the latest in a string of such killings.

The men were murdered Saturday in two separate incidents on the government-controlled

peninsula, situated at the northern tip of Sri Lanka but cut off from the rest of the island by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) territory.

"The two civilians were shot dead by the suspected LTTE assassins in separate incidents in the Jaffna peninsula during the last 24 hours," the defence ministry in Colombo said.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website, however, said it was the work of military intelligence operatives.

"Informed Jaffna sources said that the terror campaign has been stepped up by military intelligence operatives following a Claymore attack in Navanthurai where a military intelligence official was reportedly killed," Tamilnet said.



A Pakistani army helicopter carrying relief items lands in a flooded village of Jhal Magri district, in the southwestern province of Baluchistan yesterday. Floods and heavy rains have killed more than 60 people and made around 200,000 homeless in Baluchistan province.

Maoists attack police post in Bihar: 9 killed

AFP, PTI, New Delhi

Some 200 heavily-armed Maoists attacked two police stations in India's eastern Bihar state, killing six constables and three villagers, police said yesterday.

The attacks on the neighbouring stations took place late Saturday, police said from district headquarters some 30km away.

"They attacked both the police stations so that they would not be able to aid each other," said a policeman in Rohtas district, more than 1,000 kilometres from New Delhi.

"They used petrol bombs, grenades, rifles and AK-47's. Whatever weapons the police avail of, they also had."

Five people were wounded in the attack and had been taken to neighbouring Uttar Pradesh state for treatment, the policeman said.

Patil to begin presidential campaign from Chennai

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Chennai

United Progressive Alliance (UPA) candidate Pratibha Patil begins her campaign for presidential elections in Chennai on Sunday with a rally that thousands of women are expected to attend.

Patil, who generally speaks in Hindi, is expected to speak in English when she addresses her Chennai audience.

DMK patriarch and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi is the host for the event.

The rally is being touted in Chennai as an all-women rally for Patil, who will be India's first woman president if she wins the July 19 election.

Pakistan releases 50 Indian fishermen

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan yesterday released 50 Indian fishermen who were caught poaching in its territorial waters, an official said.

"We have released 50 Indians, all of them are fishermen," the superintendent of Karachi's Landhi jail, Mohammad Shakir, told AFP.

He said they had been in jail for the past 17 months.

The men will travel to the eastern city of Lahore and will be handed over to the Indian authorities at the Wagah border crossing on Monday, officials said.

Provincial interior minister Waseem Akhter said they were released "as a gesture of goodwill."

Floods, rain kill 60 in Pakistan

AFP, Quetta

Floods and heavy rain have killed more than 60 people and left some 200,000 homeless in the southwestern Pakistani province of Baluchistan, officials and police said yesterday.

Hundreds of villages were inundated in at least 10 districts, affecting 1.5 million people, with 90 percent of crops, cattle and houses destroyed in some areas, relief commissioner Ali Gul Kurdi told AFP.

"At least 54 people have died in the past six days, 30 of them in Turbat district alone where many villages were submerged under more than three feet (one metre) of water," he said.

A tropical cyclone, Yeminy, struck coastal areas in Baluchistan and southern Sind provinces last Tuesday and was followed by heavy rains.

The storm and downpours had left around 200,000 homeless, Kurdi added, warning that the casualty figures could rise as dozens of

people had been reported missing.

Police said four more people, including a woman and her three children, were killed when their house collapsed in Machri early Sunday.

Five other people were killed when they were swept away by heavy water and two others were crushed to death when the roof of their house caved in due to heavy rain in Bela district, local mayor Naseer Ahmed said.

Navy boats, helicopters and aircraft were taking items like food, tents, blankets and medicines to affected areas, including the coastal towns of Gwadar, Pasni and Ormara, Kurdi said.

Improved weather on Sunday had allowed the relief operation to get into full swing, provincial chief minister Owais Ghani said.

"There are fears of another heavy spell of rain in coming days and we want to rush food and other relief goods to as many people as possible before any other calamity hits the province," he told reporters.

India rebuffs US call over foreign policy

AFP, New Delhi

India has rebuffed a US call to ditch the Non-Aligned Movement, saying it remains strongly committed to the 116-member organisation that includes some of Washington's biggest foes.

"There can be no question of India's firm and abiding commitment to non-alignment," Indian foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna said in a statement Saturday.

India's declaration came after US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called on New Delhi last Thursday to "move past old ways of thinking" and chart a

global partnership with the United States.

Rice told the United States-India Business Council in Washington that non-alignment may have "made sense during the Cold War when the world really was divided into rival camps" but since then it "has lost its meaning."

The Times of India newspaper quoted on Saturday unnamed Indian government officials as saying the timing of Rice's comments was "particularly poor," as India and the United States are at a sensitive stage of discussions to clinch a landmark civilian nuclear technology deal.

Pakistan asks India to activate body on prisoners

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistan has accused India of delaying the exchange of prisoners by not activating the bilateral mechanism agreed upon and set up in March this year.

This was communicated to New Delhi through diplomatic channels earlier this week along with a call for early convening of the committee's inaugural meeting.

It is likely to be discussed at the home secretary-level talks scheduled in New Delhi next week, Dawn newspaper said Sunday.

Quoting unnamed diplomatic sources, it said that the proposal underlines the need for drawing up the committee's terms of reference. It also suggests procedures for the committee to address the plight of prisoners by expediting consular

access and determining national status.

During the foreign ministers meeting held in Islamabad in January, Pakistan and India had agreed to establish a committee on prisoners. It comprised four rear- judges of the superior judiciary of each side, who would visit jails in the two countries.

The committee, formed at Pakistan's initiative, is meant to propose steps to the two governments to ensure humane treatment and expedite release as well as repatriate prisoners on both sides.

Despite repeated claims by Pakistan and India of attaching high priority to the issue of civilian prisoners and treating it on humanitarian grounds, they have failed to convene a meeting of the committee on prisoners, the newspaper said.



Sri Lanka's elite Special Forces commandos gather in the eastern jungles of Thoppigala during an operation against Tamil Tiger guerrillas. Sri Lanka's military says it is about to wrest total control over the vast jungle area after two months of heavy fighting.