

Thai PM to stay in north amid tension with army

Travellers trickle out, but 90,000 still stranded

AFP, AP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat will remain in the northern city of Chiang Mai "indefinitely" because of tensions with the military, a government spokesman said.

Thai authorities launched last-ditch talks with protesters occupying Bangkok's main airports Friday after demonstrators vowed they would "fight to the death" any attempt to evict them.

Premier Somchai Wongsawat imposed a state of emergency at the airports late Thursday but a day later said he wanted to avoid potentially bloody clashes with the demonstrators, which include children.

Airlines began flying stranded travellers out of a naval base Friday but tens of

thousands of passengers are believed to have missed flights after four days of unrest that have badly hit Thailand's tourist industry.

Somchai was forced to land in Chiang Mai from a trip abroad on Wednesday after anti-government protesters seized control of Bangkok's two airports.

He declared a state of emergency at the airports on Thursday night as rumours of a possible military coup swept the capital, although the army said it was not intervening.

"As there are still uncertainties in the tensions between the government and army, for his safety the prime minister will stay in Chiang Mai," government spokesman Suparat Nakhunnam told AFP.

"He has no schedule to return to

Bangkok, he will stay in Chiang Mai indefinitely for his security," Suparat said.

Cabinet ministers flew to Chiang Mai for an urgent meeting on Thursday, effectively setting up a government in exile from the capital, which remains cut off by air from the rest of the world.

Meanwhile, frustrated tourists stranded in Thailand began trickling out from a Vietnam War-era military airport Friday, but the majority of 90,000 passengers who missed flights remain stuck in the kingdom.

Travellers and tourists have been trapped in the self-proclaimed "Land of Smiles" since Tuesday, when anti-government protesters besieged the main Suvarnabhumi international airport and forced the suspension of all flights.



Protesters hold up posters as they start again their anti-government rally at Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's embattled premier declared a state of emergency at Bangkok's main airports, seeking to clear them of protesters as the country's political crisis set off rumours of a coup.

Seven dead in Pak suicide attack

AFP, Peshawar

A suicide bomber killed at least seven people when he detonated his explosives-laden car near a police van in a northwestern Pakistani town Friday, police said.

The blast happened in Bannu, near the lawless tribal region where Pakistani troops are battling al-Qaeda- and Taliban-linked militants, local police chief Mohammad Alam Shinwari told AFP.

"The bomber rammed his car into a police van and at least seven people were killed," he said, adding that casualties included both police and civilians.



PHOTO: AFP

In this picture released yesterday by the Tamilnet website, the widow of former Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) negotiator Anton Balasingham, Adele Balasingham (C) listens as General Secretary of Indian political party Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) Vaiko (2L) speaks at a ceremony in London on Nov 27. Reportedly some 40,000 people gathered at the ceremony which coincided with an annual speech by LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

Bomber strikes Shia mosque after Iraq approves US pact

AFP, Hilla

A suicide bomber shattered Friday prayers in a Shia mosque south of Baghdad, killing nine people the day after Iraq's parliament approved a landmark pact allowing US troops to remain until 2011.

The attack came as the hardline Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr declared three days of mourning to protest at parliament's approval on Thursday of the accord, which will govern the presence of some 150,000 US troops across the

country.

The blast ripped through the main mosque in the town of Musaib after the attacker, strapped with explosives, mingled with the some 300 worshippers inside, police Lieutenant Kadhim al-Shammari said.

One of those killed was an old woman begging for alms at the entrance to the mosque, he added. Another 15 people were wounded in the attack, which destroyed the building's windows and doors and filled it with smoke.

Tigers may go back to guerrilla war as mini state crumbles

AFP, Colombo

A pledge by Sri Lanka's Tamil rebel leader to fight on despite a military onslaught raised fears yesterday of a return to a hit-and-run guerrilla war as his mini-state faced potential collapse.

Separatist chief Velupillai Prabhakaran vowed Thursday the rebels would "continue with our struggle until the alien Sinhala occupation of our land is evicted," referring to Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese population, and appealed to Tamils abroad for support to shore up his military machine.

Government forces have surrounded Prabhakaran in his political capital of Kilinochchi in the biggest-ever military campaign in the history of Sri Lanka's armed separatist struggle, which dates back to 1972.

Prabhakaran's speech delivered over Voice of Tigers radio contained veiled threats against civilians and suggestions the rebels would revert to hit-and-run attacks as their territory

shrank, observers said.

"Prabhakaran acknowledges there's fighting all around him and that he's under siege," said retired army brigadier general Vipul Boteju. "When he says he will fight on, it means he will return to his classic guerrilla tactics."

State radio warned Friday that Tiger rebels could resort to "desperate attacks" and called for public vigilance as heavy fighting raged in the island's northern regions where Tamils predominate.

Security across the country had been stepped up, officials said, after a spate of bombings in Colombo and elsewhere targeting key political and military figures as well as government installations.

Recent bombings against public transport were seen as retaliation for similar strikes by security forces inside rebel-held territory where the Tigers have maintained a mini-state since 1990, including their own police, courts and banks in Kilinochchi.

S Korean train makes last trip to North

AP, Dorasan Station

A South Korean cargo train chugged its way across the heavily fortified border into North Korea on Friday for what may be its last run, with the North putting an end to the historic rail service that had raised hopes for reconciliation between the Cold War foes.

"Let's meet again soon!" North Korean railway workers told their South Korean counterparts as they bid one another farewell, one train staff member said.

The suspension illustrates the rapid souring of relations between the two Koreas, at odds since Seoul's conservative President Lee Myung-bak assumed office in February and made a series of moves that upset the North.

Terror leader slams US, Afghan govts

AP, New York

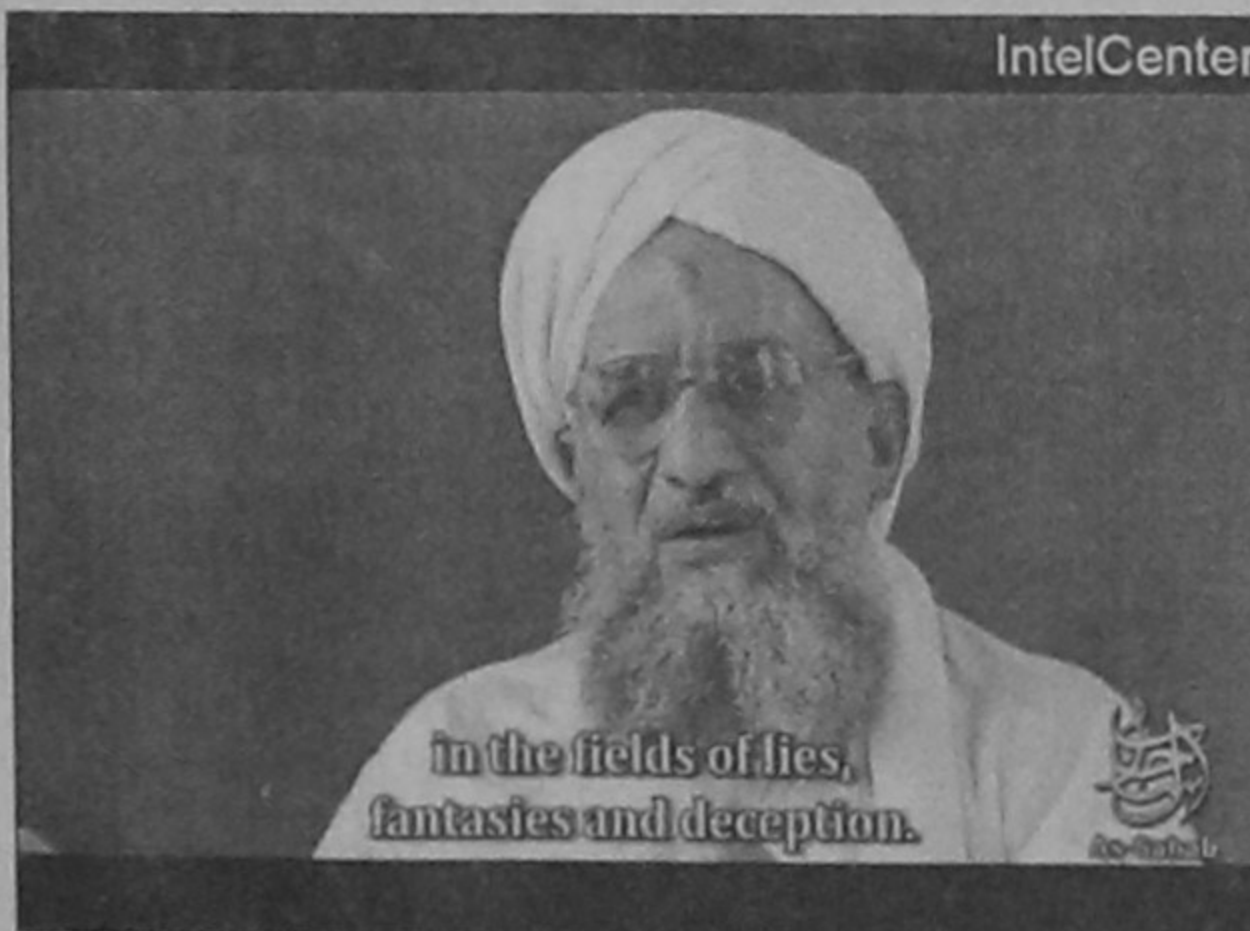
al-Qaeda's No 2 leader has lashed out at Afghanistan's government and claimed that any US gains in Iraq will be temporary, a terror monitoring group said Thursday.

In a new video, Ayman Al-Zawahiri also lauded his group's fight in several countries and criticized leaders of those nations for their fight to counter the terrorists, according to SITE Intelligence group.

Zawahiri's comments, carried

on a militant Web site Thursday, came about a week after his last message in which he accused President-elect Barack Obama of turning his back on his black heritage to gain power.

Osama bin Laden's top lieutenant didn't refer to the attacks in Mumbai, India, late Wednesday and early Thursday that killed scores. Intelligence analysts said the violence carried trademarks of al-Qaeda but evidence has been pointing to homegrown terrorists.



IntelCenter

PHOTO: AFP

This still image obtained on Thursday from IntelCenter shows Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the second-in-command of al-Qaeda, is delivering a video message from an undisclosed location.

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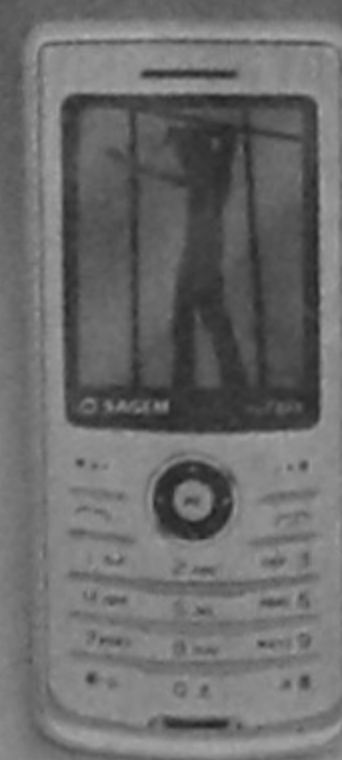
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