



Thousands of supporters of Sri Lanka's Tamils burn an effigy of President Mahinda Rajapaksa during a demonstration on Monday near EU headquarters in Brussels demanding peace in the island nation.

PHOTO: AFP
INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Brussels

Israel-Hamas prisoner swap talks sink

AFP, Jerusalem

Eleventh-hour talks on a Israel-Hamas prisoner swap appeared to collapse yesterday as both sides accused each other of about-turns and bad faith in their Egyptian-brokered negotiations.

Cairo has been hosting talks aimed at securing the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, seized by Gaza militants in June 2006, in exchange for the freeing of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

For Israel, the issue has gained in urgency as outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert hopes to strike a deal before he steps down and hawkish Benjamin Netanyahu -- whose

cabinet is likely to assume a hardline stand -- takes over.

Olmert on Tuesday accused the Gaza Strip's Hamas rulers of hardening their stance in the negotiations.

"It became clear during the discussions that Hamas had hardened its position, reneged on understandings that had been formulated over the past year and raised extreme demands," Olmert's office said after two envoys returned from talks in Cairo.

Hamas' stance comes "despite the generous proposals that had been raised in this round in order to advance and exhaust the negotiations and bring about the soldier's release," it said.



PHOTO: AP
A 'cybernetic human' HRP-4C, designed to look like an average Japanese woman, appears during its demonstration in Tsukuba, near Tokyo, Monday.

Walking, talking female robot to hit Japan catwalk
AP, Tsukuba

A new walking, talking robot from Japan has a female face that can smile and has trimmed down to 43 kilograms (95 pounds) to make a debut at a fashion show. But it still hasn't cleared safety standards required to share the catwalk with human models.

Developers at the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, a government-backed organisation, said their "cybernetic human" shown Monday, wasn't ready to help with daily chores or work side by side with people as many hope robots will be able to do in the future.

Music can enhance kids' reading skills
ANI, Washington

Music lessons can significantly improve children's cognitive performance in reading skills, says a new study.

The study by researchers from Long Island University, USA, has shown that children taking music tuition involving training in increasingly complex rhythmic, tonal, and practical skills display superior cognitive performance in reading skills compared with their non-musically trained peers.

Lead researchers Joseph M. Piro and Camilo Ortiz sought to determine if children who have received keyboard instruction as part of a music curriculum would demonstrate better vocabulary and verbal tasks, than those who did not receive keyboard instruction.

Stop commentary

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there is every chance that the probe may be blown off-course.

Sadly though, Commerce Minister Faruk Khan, saddled with the task of coordinating the probe into the February 25-26 BDR carnage, has been doing exactly the same since getting his new status. Everyday he has been talking to reporters at every possible function about what the probe finds. It is from him that we have come to know that Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) militants are "involved" in the carnage. The next day, the probe even proceeded further to include "others" along with the JMB in the bloodbath.

Put what the CID and Rab investigators are saying, albeit anonymously. And remember when people talk anonymously they tend to get a bit of a free rein, they tend to brag and amplify things. Yet, as far as our correspondents have gathered from them, they said they still could not identify any link to the masterminds or "conspirators". They have been able to identify the killers who were involved in the murders. Cautious and measured information they give out, indeed.

As it looks now, the commerce minister has been trying to play to the gallery, or he has been trying to act foolishly to alert those who were "behind" the carnage, or he has been trying to etch out political mileage out of the probe.

His comments may influence the probe and investigations.

EC moves to get back

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Officials in the EC Secretariat said the commission would also suggest that the registered political parties be allowed to withdraw candidates from the electoral race.

According to current provisions, only a lawfully nominated candidate can withdraw his candidature.

If the Representation of the People Order (RPO) is amended to that effect, a political party will be able to retract its nomination of a candidate. In that case, the candidate's reluctance to quit the race will not stand, noted the officials.

The EC seeks the amendment to avoid unpleasant situation it faced before the last parliamentary election. At that time, parties informed the EC in writing about their decisions to withdraw certain candidates and endorse others, but the candidates kept

refusing to pull out of the contest.

The caretaker administration empowered the EC to scrap a political party's registration for failing to pick parliamentary contenders from panel prepared by the grassroots and forming associated bodies consisting of teachers, students and employees or workers.

The commission could also cancel registration of a party lacking provisions in its constitution for electing its committee down to the grassroots level through councils and setting aside 33 percent of all committee positions for women by 2020.

But the bill passed in parliament on February 24 to ratify the RPO (amendment) ordinance curtails the EC's power to enforce these provisions.

Election commissioners Muhammed Sohul Hussain and Brig Gen (retired) M. Sakhawat Hossain yesterday

BB doubles banks

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rate of interest, and it is difficult to repay the loan.

A high official of the central bank admitted that lending rate in Bangladesh is excessive. "We are trying to bring it down and our efforts will continue," he added.

According to the memorandum of understanding (MoU) of the central bank with the SOBs -- Sonali, Janata, Agrani and Rupali banks -- growth of their loans and advances in a fiscal year cannot exceed five percent.

At yesterday's meeting, the growth limit has been raised to 10 percent.

In the credit market, the four SOBs' share is about 25 percent. As a result of increase of the growth limit, they will be able to provide loans of around Tk 6,000 crore this fiscal year.

Due to the increased single

Lanka situation risky and dangerous: EU official

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Brussels

The situation in Sri Lanka was 'very risky and dangerous', a senior EU official has said.

"Approximately 170,000 people -- it seems civilian people -- are trapped in the north part of Sri Lanka and neither the Sri Lanka government nor the LTTE have until now accepted our appeal for an immediate ceasefire or for finding possibilities for bringing food, basic goods, into this last resort where the fighting is going on," EuAsiaNews reported EU commissioner for external relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner as saying.

"I hope that rather soon a (EU) political troika of maybe the vice-ministers or political directors can go there and

we will work in different ways also with other allies in order to find a solution," she told a press conference Monday evening after a regular meeting of EU foreign ministers.

An estimated 5,000 diaspora Tamils participated in a demonstration in central Brussels Monday to protest Sri Lanka's military offensives in territories held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Speaking to journalists earlier Monday on developments in Pakistan, Ferrero-Waldner welcomed the reinstatement of the sacked Pakistani Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry.

"I think it is a good step forward and hopefully now both President Zardari

and opposition leader Nawaz Sharif and the political opposition can work together to confront the political enemies that are there and also the difficult situation in many parts of Pakistan," she said.

Ferrero-Waldner said that during a EU Troika meeting with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Mahmood Qureshi in Prague last Friday the EU told him that 'we wanted to see the government come to a compromise with the opposition'.

"We think it is very important that there is political stability in the country because we have an enemy and the enemy is extremism and fundamentalism. This has been our message," she added.

Ship-breaking ordered shut

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have appropriate disposal arrangements for hazardous waste and protection of environment.

The Court expressing utter dismay has observed that none of the ministries has cooperated to ensure compliance with the environmental laws.

Besides, the Department of Shipping has always taken interest in importing more and more ships ignoring public interest, workers' welfare and environmental protection, the court observed.

The court also directed the ministry of Environment and Forest to frame within three months necessary rules on ship-breaking relying on the obligations of Bangladesh under the Basel Convention, 1989, the Environment Conservation

Act, 1995 and the Environment Conservation Rules, 1997.

The ministry has been ordered to inform the court after three months the status of framing of the rules.

Some 30,000 workers are engaged in ship scrapping in Chittagong's Sitakunda, which houses the world's second largest ship-breaking industry after China. At least 250,000 people in the country live off the industry directly and indirectly, according to experts.

Last year 84 vessels were scrapped in Sitakunda. Scrapping a ship takes one month to one and a half months depending on its size.

According to an International Labour Organisation report, 551 minor and 42 major accidents took place in the country's 36 ship-breaking yards from 1996 to 1998.

The recent report of a survey conducted by two internationally reputed organisations, Greenpeace and International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), says on average at least one worker is injured a day and one dies a week.

The report styled 'The Human Cost of Breaking Ships' published last December simultaneously from Bangladesh, India and Switzerland says at least 1,000 workers died in the last 20 years in Bangladesh's ship-breaking yards. The figures do not include the deaths from diseases caused by toxic fumes and materials workers are exposed to all the time.

Globally some 700 ships are scrapped a year, mainly in five countries -- China, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Vietnam -- and some in Turkey too, says a Greenpeace source.

With the global fleet growing fast, from 15,000 ships in the 1960s to 62,000 in 2000, the matter will appear for order on April 7 when the DoE will have to inform the court the progress made in closing the non-compliant yards and operation.

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The BELA petition was moved by former attorney general Fida M. Kamal with assistance from S. Rizwana Hasan, Bahreen Khan and Iqbal Kabir.

Meanwhile, SM Al Mamun, son of Awami League lawmaker Abul Kashem Master, destroyed 125 acres of Para forest in Sonaichhari, planted 18 years ago, to build a shipyard after the AL came to power.

Sircar sees bid to tarnish image

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of the House was involved in those work," Sircar told reporters at a press briefing at his Uttara residence.

"The main reason to form a parliamentary probe body ahead of the by-election is to tarnish my image and to give advantage to Awami League candidate," alleged the former speaker who is contesting the by-polls in Bogra-6 constituency.

"Allegations against me were brought at such a time when I am contesting the by-election and I have a fair chance of returning to parliament," Sircar alleged.

If there is any allegation against him then it should be investigated following proper legal process, he added.

Sircar demanded formation of probe body for all previous speakers of the House, including the incumbent speaker Advocate Abdul Hamid and late Humayun

Rasheed Choudhury.

He also demanded that the committee must have representatives from all political parties. "Formation of probe body only against me to dig out alleged corruption is discriminatory," he added.

Speaker Advocate Abdul Hamid on Monday announced the decision to form a parliamentary probe body to investigate alleged corruption charges against Sircar in the face of demands by the ruling party lawmakers.

The speaker said that he would ask the comptroller and auditor general to audit the expenditures of the Parliament Secretariat since 1972.

Most of the ruling party lawmakers talked about the corruption of the immediate past speaker. But opposition lawmakers demanded that if the probe body is formed then it should investigate allegations

of my heart operation."

"If he (Choudhury) could draw money without having an operation then what's wrong when I took money after submitting voucher for the operation," he added.

Replying to another question on medical expenses, he said, "Late speaker Choudhury took Tk 35 lakh from the government citing his heart surgery which he did not undergo. But I took Tk 26 or 27 lakh submitting voucher of my heart operation."

The real victims of the crisis are the people who have made no contribution whatsoever to this crisis, the bottom half of the world population," he said.

"They will be the ones who will lose their jobs, the ones who will lose income and livelihood and food... There is no bailout package for them."

No bailout package

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Tokyo, said the ongoing worldwide downturn is an opportunity to build a more people-focused financial system, not one "based in a fantasy economic world."

"The financial system has to be totally redesigned," he said. "This financial system didn't work for the people anyway. It worked for the rich people, yes. Big business, yes. But not for people in general."

Dr Yunus and his Grameen Bank were honoured with the Nobel peace award in 2006 for efforts to lift people out of extreme poverty by giving

them small loans.

He said the fact that "a small number of people in one country (the US) can create such a disastrous situation for all the people of the world" shows "how fragile our system is, how weak the foundation of our system is."

"The real victims of the crisis are the people who have made no contribution whatsoever to this crisis, the bottom half of the world population," he said.

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