

Sri Lanka rights abuse probe ends abruptly

AP, Colombo

A Sri Lankan government investigation into human rights abuses during its war with Tamil Tiger rebels has been disbanded with more than half of its cases unresolved, an official said yesterday.

The decision came as the government brushed off demands for an international investigation into the final ferocious battles of the war, which ended last month after the military routed the rebels in an offensive the U.N. says killed more than 7,000 civilians.

Human rights groups accused the military of shelling civilian areas and said the rebels held hundreds of thousands of people as human shields, shooting those who attempted to flee.

A presidential commission of inquiry was established two years ago under intense international pressure to investigate earlier claims of abuses in the war. It was assigned 16 cases of alleged abuses by both sides, including the 2006 execution-style slaying of 17 aid workers for the French organization Action Against Hunger.

Nissanka Udalgama, a former Supreme Court justice who chaired the commission, said it had only completed work on seven of the assigned cases by the time its mandate expired Sunday. Extensions had been routinely granted

in the past, but not this time. Instead, the commission was dissolved, he said.

"We ran out of time," he said. "If we had gotten another year, probably we could have done it."

It was not clear why the inquiry was ended. "I have no idea what the reasoning is," said Rajiva Wijesinha, the secretary in the Ministry of Human Rights, who usually serves as a government spokesman in such matters.

The commission's dissolution came days after Amnesty International accused the government of failing to seriously investigate reported abuses during the 25-year civil war. It said the few cases that are brought to trial rarely end in convictions and accused the government of using bribes, threats and even murder to eliminate witnesses. Government officials denied the allegations.

The London-based rights group called for the establishment of an international commission to investigate allegations of recent human rights violations. The government has repeatedly rejected such calls as a violation of its sovereignty.

Udalagama said even in the cases the commission completed, it was often unable to identify the perpetrators.

In the killing of the 17 aid workers, "we are unable to pinpoint and tell exactly who it is, but there are certain possibilities," he said.

Maoists kill 4 policemen in India

AFP, Ranchi

Suspected Maoist rebels in India killed at least four policemen in a gun battle in the eastern state of Jharkhand, officials said yesterday.

Between 30 to 40 guerrillas opened fire on security forces, killing four officers and injuring three others in a three-hour-long shoot-out.

"The security personnel were killed in a gun battle with Maoist rebels," said police spokesman Satyanarayan Pradhan, adding that authorities were hunting for the militants.

Police said the clash occurred in the district of Palamau, 190 kilometres from the state capital Ranchi.

A Maoist insurgency, which grew out of a peasant uprising in 1967, has hit more than half of India's 29 states. The guerrillas say they are fighting for the rights of neglected tribespeople and landless farmers.

Six die, 24 trapped in Indonesia mine blast

AP, Jakarta

An explosion ripped through a coal mine in western Indonesia yesterday, killing six people and trapping at least 24 others who were feared dead.

Dozens of rescuers tried to reach the trapped men in the 300-foot-deep mine, but rock slides and a mix of gas and coal debris forced them to resurface after four hours of digging, police Chief Yasman Esha of West Sumatra province said by phone from the scene.

"We ear the miners are dead by now," Esha said.

Rescuers recovered six bodies in the hours after the morning blast. Officials said three other people were in critical condition at a hospital.

Police were trying to determine what caused the blast. A preliminary investigation said it was triggered by leaking methane gas.

The mine, owned by a local company, is 900 km northwest of the capital, Jakarta.

Indonesia has some of the world's largest coal deposits and is a major coal exporter.

UK appoints new head of MI6

AFP, London

Britain's ambassador to the United Nations was yesterday named as the new head of its MI6 foreign intelligence service, who is traditionally known by his James Bond-style moniker "C."

John Sawers will take over at MI6, or the Secret Intelligence Service, in November, replacing John Scarlett who has spent more than five years in the job.

Foreign Secretary David Miliband said: "I welcome the appointment of Sir John Sawers as the new 'C'. I look forward to working with him on the challenges we face as a country."

"International terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the growth of regional conflict and instability mean that there has never been a time when the skills and dedication of our intelligence agencies, including SIS, have been more necessary to our national security and the safety of our people around the world."

Iran could have N-bomb by 2014: Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

The head of Israel's Mossad spy agency said yesterday that Iran would have a ready-to-launch nuclear bomb within five years unless its nuclear programme was interrupted.

"Unless their programme experiences technical problems, the Iranians will have by 2014 a bomb ready to be used, which would represent a concrete threat for Israel," said Meir Dagan.

"This threat must be removed," he told parliament's foreign affairs and defence committee.

He acknowledged that maintaining international sanctions against Iran could lead to a halt of Tehran's nuclear programme.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari (L) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) take part in a group photo shoot in Yekaterinburg yesterday during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. Singh met Zardari for the first time since the Mumbai attacks, bluntly declaring that Pakistani soil must not be used for terrorism.

Mumbai attacks report slams city police chief

AFP, Mumbai

Mumbai's police chief failed to lead his force from the front during last year's attacks on the city, a committee said yesterday as it released partial findings of a probe into how the crisis was handled.

The committee, headed by a high-ranking former Indian home ministry official, said senior officers had told them that Hasan Gafoor did not guide them adequately or ask about ongoing operations during the 60-hour standoff.

"During the whole operation, he (Gafoor) was stationed at only one location near Hotel Trident," according to the report, which was presented to lawmakers at the Maharashtra state assembly, sitting in Mumbai.

The report was not released in full for fear of prejudicing the ongoing trial of one of the alleged gunmen, state home minister Jayant Patil was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

"There was lack of co-ordinated and visible control due to which the message went to the public that police were ineffective in handling the situation," the report said, according to the PTI.

Even though Gafoor was in touch with senior officers trying to deal with strikes against multiple targets across the south of the city, colleagues did not feel they were part of a united force, it added.

Gafoor last weekend became the latest high-profile figure to lose his job after the

November 26-29 attacks, which left 166 people dead and more than 300 injured.

The former chief minister of the western Indian state, Vilasrao Deshmukh, and India's interior minister Shivraj Patil stepped down in the wake of the carnage.

The report also said Gafoor was responsible for procedural errors in the police and emergency service response to the attacks, but conceded that only a paramilitary force could have handled the "war-like" situation.

Indian media said that three opposition lawmakers were suspended after angry protests calling for the full report to be published, while state cabinet members thought the document was biased against Gafoor.

Afghan presidential campaign opens

AP, Kabul

A two-month campaign season began yesterday for presidential elections to decide who leads Afghanistan for the next five years, as the Taliban rebellion grows more violent and the US sends in tens of thousands of troops to combat it.

Campaigning got off to a slow start. The only signs of activity were the posters of President Hamid Karzai who is currently visiting Russia and some of his 40 opponents in the Aug 20 vote that appeared overnight on the streets of Kabul.

Karzai, who has served as Afghan leader since soon after the Taliban regime's ouster in 2001 and comfortably won the

first presidential vote in 2004, is expected to win again. But many Afghans are unhappy with his leadership.

Militant violence is rising and public anger reverberates against his government and US troops for accidental civilian killings in military operations. Economic issues will be crucial too. Poverty remains widespread and corruption is rife.

Karzai's main challengers are former Cabinet colleagues: former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani and former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah.

"The last election I voted for Karzai, but later I saw that he was not worth it," said Mohammad Shokran, a 28-year-old medical student,

standing at a street corner next to posters of the top three candidates.

"He (Karzai) could not do anything for development or progress for the country. Of all the people who are running for the presidency, Abdullah will be the best."

Key to Karzai's success could be his ability to gain win the support of his fellow Pashtun tribespeople in the south and east of the country the largest ethnic group in this diverse nation of about 30 million people.

In some campaign posters, the president appeared alongside his two vice presidential nominees, including a former warlord accused of rights abuses Mohammad Qasim Fahim.



PHOTO: AFP

An elderly Afghan man holds up a poster of Shahla Ata, a member National Assembly of Afghanistan, and a candidate for the August presidential elections at a market in Kabul yesterday. Campaigning for Afghanistan's second-ever presidential elections kicked off on June 16 with hundreds of posters hoisted in the capital and candidates setting out to win over voters new to democracy.

Gilani seeks restart of Indo-Pak talks

PTI, Islamabad

As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met President Asif Ali Zardari in Russia, premier Yousuf Raza Gilani has sought early resumption of the stalled dialogue process between India and Pakistan to address long-standing issues like Kashmir.

Gilani said the early resumption of the composite dialogue between Pakistan and India is "imperative to address the long-standing issues resulting in tension between the two countries i.e. Kashmir dispute as well as the water dispute".

He was speaking to a delegation led by Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs secretary general Paolo Cotta-Ramsunio that called on him yesterday.

Gilani assured the delegation of his "government's sincerity in proceeding with the dialogue process and for maintaining cordial bilateral relations with all its neighbours including India".

Zardari and Singh met today on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Russia.

Gilani also said the international community should fulfil its pledges of assistance to Pakistan in its efforts to assist the people displaced by the military operations against the Taliban in Swat and other areas of Malakand division.

Soldiers, several 'rebels' killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Two Afghan soldiers and several suspected militants were killed in fighting and raids across insurgency-hit Afghanistan, authorities said yesterday.

The soldiers, from the US-trained Afghan army, died after their patrol was attacked by rebels in the northeastern province of Kunduz on Monday, the defence ministry said in a statement.

Three militants were also killed during "very intense fighting," the statement said. Eight rebels were injured and four others captured, it added.

Kunduz, where hundreds of German troops have been deployed under a UN-mandated force that arrived in Afghanistan in 2001, has seen a surge in militant violence in recent months as have other parts of Afghanistan.

Most insurgent attacks are however concentrated in the south and east of the country.

Several suspected militants were killed in operations on Monday by Afghan and US-led military forces in the country's south, a joint statement by the US-led force and Afghan defence ministry said.

UN says refugee numbers set to surge in 2009

AFP, Geneva

The number of people uprooted from their homes fell to 42 million in 2008 but is set to surge this year because of conflicts in Pakistan, Somalia and Sri Lanka, the UN refugee agency said yesterday.

The total of internally displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers around the world dropped by 700,000 last year, according to UN High Commissioner for Refugee's annual "Global Trends" report.

But fresh displacement, which was not included in the report, including some two million in northwestern Pakistan, had "more than offset that decline", the UNHCR said.

"In 2009, we have already seen substantial new displacements, namely in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Somalia," High Commissioner Antonio Guterres said. "While some displacements may be short-lived, others can take years and even decades to resolve."

Some 80 percent of the people uprooted in the world are in developing nations, the UNHCR said, noting that wealthy nations were growing increasingly reluctant to take in asylum seekers as the economic crisis bites.

"It also shows that some of the more vocal criticism that you hear in some industrialised countries from populist politicians and some media about being 'flooded' with refugees is perhaps a bit overdone," said UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond.



PHOTO: AFP

A homeless Indian child sleeps in a shady corner in New Delhi yesterday. The unrelenting heat is persisting in the Indian capital as temperatures reached 44 degrees Celsius with weathermen forecasting a severe heatwave across the plains of northern India.

Lee and Obama to discuss North Korean threats

AP, Washington

As North Korea threatens nuclear war, President Barack Obama and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak will be eager to show the North the unity of their alliance and a determination not to back down.

North Korea's pledge to expand its nuclear programs gives their meeting Tuesday at the White House a sense of urgency. The presidents probably will express their refusal to accept the North as a nuclear weapons state and condemn recent missile and nuclear tests.

Before leaving Seoul, Lee said he supported Obama's appeal for a world without nuclear weapons. However, he told The Wall Street Journal, "we are faced with North Korea trying to become a nuclear power, and this really is a question we must deal with now."

The United States, during Lee's visit, is likely to pledge its continued commitment to use its military muscle to protect the South should the North attack. Such comments are welcome in Seoul and Tokyo, no matter how many times U.S. officials repeat them. Lee's talks with Obama

come on the second day of a three-day visit also scheduled to include meetings with US trade envoy Ron Kirk, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton welcomed Lee to Washington on Monday, the same day tens of thousands rallied in Pyongyang to condemn sanctions imposed by the United Nations after the country's latest nuclear test.

Lee's office released a statement saying Clinton had called for close cooperation between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan in implementing the UN sanctions to "get North Korea to realise that its bad behavior will bring due consequences."

Lee told Clinton that "as long as the United States and its allies maintain a firm stance, North Korea's belief that it will be rewarded for its bad behavior if it waits long enough will dissipate," the statement said.

North Korea is reportedly readying a possible test of a missile that could reach Alaska. The North also may be preparing for a third nuclear test in defiance of the UN sanctions.

The US government offi-

cially confirmed Monday that North Korea carried out an underground atomic test in late May. The Americans said the blast was somewhat larger than the country's first test, conducted in 2006.

Victor Cha, a senior Asia adviser in President George W. Bush's administration, said another nuclear test could motivate UN member states to actively enforce the sanctions specified in the UN resolution against the North.

Lee has infuriated North Korea since he took office in early 2008. He ended a decade of liberal rule in which South Korea sought to embrace the North and refrained from criticism, a so-called "sunshine" policy that provided aid without demanding concessions. Pyongyang regularly calls Lee a traitor.

While the nuclear standoff will top discussions, another tense issue looms for Lee and Obama: an ambitious South Korean-US free trade agreement to slash tariffs on goods and services.

The deal was painstakingly negotiated but currently is in limbo, stalled over US lawmakers' worries it could hurt an already suffering American auto industry.