

Lanka to free all Tamil civilians from camps

AFP, Vavuniya

Sri Lanka said yesterday it would grant free movement to the remaining war-displaced civilians held in internment camps, meeting a key demand of the international community.

The government also reiterated it would complete the resettlement of civilians by the end of January.

"We will allow complete freedom of movement," senior presidential adviser Basil Rajapakse told inmates of the Manik Farm complex, the main facility housing displaced civilians.

The United Nations welcomed the announcement that camp inmates will be able to come and go freely from December 1, saying it was in line with a pledge Sri Lanka gave Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

The announcement came amid intense international pressure on Colombo to release tens of thousands of

civilians held in the camps since security forces crushed Tamil Tiger rebels in May.

UN humanitarian chief John Holmes visited the area earlier this week and pressed authorities to grant free movement to the camp inmates.

The government's announcement was a "pleasing" development, the UN representative in Colombo, Gordon Weiss, told AFP.

"This is in keeping with the assurances given to the Secretary-General," he said. "It is a pleasing sign of progress and we look forward to its full implementation."

Over 136,000 men, women and children remain inside camps across the island's north, down from 280,000 at the end of the fighting in May with the defeat of the guerrillas.

Camp inmates will be allowed to come and go freely from the start of December, said Rajapakse.

The country's former top military general, Sarath Fonseka, who defeated

the Tamil Tigers in May, had criticised the government for dragging out the civilian resettlement process.

Fonseka, who quit as chief of defence staff last week and is widely expected to challenge President Mahinda Rajapakse in elections expected by next April, had vowed to work for the speedy release of civilians.

Basil Rajapakse, the younger brother of the president, repeated a pledge the entire resettlement will be completed on schedule by January 31.

He made the announcement at the Manik Farm complex, 257 kilometres (160 miles) north of the capital, where he handed over relief supplies.

A batch of 41,000 people were allowed to leave the camps in October, the biggest single release so far.

In May, Sri Lankan troops defeated the Tamil rebels who had been fighting since 1972 to carve out a separate nation in the Sinhalese-majority island.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan war-displaced civilians peer from behind barbed wire fences surrounding their internment camp in Vavuniya yesterday. Sri Lanka said it plans to allow some 136,328 war-displaced civilians to come and go freely from their camps from December 1 with resettlement completed by January 31, 2010.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani non-governmental organisation workers walk in the damaged building after a bomb blast in Peshawar yesterday. A bomb exploded near the building of an NGO offering treatment to the blind in northwest Pakistan city yesterday, injuring one person.

China has stake in Kashmir's peace

Says separatist leader

AFP, Srinagar

The leader of Indian Kashmir's moderate separatists said on Saturday that China has a stake in restive Kashmir as part of the disputed Himalayan region is under Beijing's control.

The statement came amid rising Sino-Indian tensions over a Chinese embassy policy of issuing different visas to Indian Kashmir residents and the disputed Indian border state of Arunachal Pradesh.

"I believe China is not a party to the Kashmir conflict but it has stakes as far as peace in the region is concerned," Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, who heads moderate separatists, said in a statement.

Kashmiri separatists have rarely mentioned China's role in resolving the dispute over Kashmir that is mainly divided between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan. China holds a small area of Kashmir.

"China has a direct link with Kashmir as certain parts of Kashmir, including Aksai Chin, are under its control," said Farooq, adding he would soon visit China on an invitation from a non-governmental organisation.

23 Taliban militants killed in Afghanistan clashes

AFP, Kabul

Afghan and foreign troops killed 23 Taliban militants in separate operations a day after the president pledged to take responsibility for security in his new five-year term, police said Saturday.

The militants were killed on Friday in clashes with Afghan and foreign forces in southern and eastern Afghanistan, the police said.

Eleven Taliban died during an operation in Zahri district in southern Kandahar province, deputy provincial police chief Fazal Ahmad Shirzad told AFP, adding the Taliban bodies were left at the scene.

In the Sanzari area of the same district, eight Taliban were killed, he said.

In eastern Kunar province Taliban claimed casualties among foreign troops after clashes in the Manogai district, but ISAF said only four militants were killed.

"Four Taliban were killed when ISAF soldiers returned fire, and there were no casualties

among the troops," Sabawon Hotak, an ISAF interpreter told AFP.

The Taliban are waging a bloody insurgency against the government of President Hamid Karzai, with Afghan forces backed by more than 100,000 troops under US and Nato command.

Karzai was sworn in Thursday for a second term, pledging in his inauguration speech to bring peace to the nation and take over security in five years.

Earlier a 13-year-old Afghan forced by militants to plant a roadside bomb in southern Afghanistan was killed when it exploded, the interior ministry said Saturday.

The child died while placing the improvised explosive device (IED) on a road in the Zahri district of southern Kandahar province, where Taliban influence is concentrated, the ministry said in a statement.

"A 13-year-old child, under the influence of terrorists, planted a mine under a culvert on Friday... that went off and killed the child," it said.

MUMBAI ATTACKS

Italian cops net 2 Pak suspects

AP, Rome

Italian police yesterday arrested two Pakistani men accused of providing logistical support for last year's terror attacks in Mumbai, officials said.

The two, father and son, were arrested in an early morning raid in Brescia, police in the northern Italian city said.

The suspects managed a money transfer agency and helped fund the November 26 attacks, police said in a statement. The day before the attacks they transferred money to activate an Internet phone account that was used by the attackers and their accomplices, said Stefano Fonzi, the head of anti-terror police in Brescia.

Italian police began the probe in December after being alerted by the FBI that the money had been sent from Italy, Fonzi told The Associated Press.

The funds were transferred under the identity of another Pakistani man who had never been in Italy and was not involved in the alleged crimes, he said.

Mandela and wife voted 'heroes' by world's children

AFP, Stockholm

Former South African president Nelson Mandela and his wife Graca Machel have been voted Decade Child Rights Heroes by 7.1 million children, the World's Children's Prize foundation said Friday.

"The 7,136,222 voting children have elected Graca Machel and Nelson Mandela as their first Decade Child Heroes," the World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child foundation, based in Sweden, said in a statement.

The laureates were announced on the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children at 53,000 schools in 101 countries voted for their favourite children's right advocate out of 13 candidates.

"Machel is being honoured for her long struggle for the rights of vulnerable children, primarily in Mozambique, and for her work for girl's rights in particular," the foundation said.

India-US partnership is essential: Manmohan

PM embarks on 4-day trip to Washington

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, ANI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday said India is looking forward to building on the strategic dialogue with the US and seeking greater cooperation in areas such as trade and investment, services, energy, science and technology and defence.

"The last several years have witnessed a transformation in India-US relations. Today, they are characterised by greater maturity, depth and convergence of interests," Manmohan Singh said in his departure statement before his four-day trip to Washington as the first state guest of the Obama White House.

On Sunday, his entourage will reach Washington from Geneva. He will be received at the Andrews Air Force base.

US President Barack Obama will welcome

Dr Singh to the White House on Tuesday morning as the first State Guest of his presidency.

The State Dinner is scheduled for Tuesday evening; soon after his ceremonial welcome at the White House, the first meeting between the two leaders in the United States and a press conference.

Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will host a lunch for Dr Singh. He will also deliver an address to the Council for Foreign Relations and meet the Indian community in Washington during his four-day visit.

"The United States is our largest trading partner in goods and services, and we have deep economic ties. There is a large Indian American community and robust people-to-people exchanges. Above all, we share common values and commitment to democracy, pluralism and human rights," he said.

BALUCHISTAN UNREST

ISI gives CIA evidence of Indian hand

ANI, Islamabad

Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief Ahmed Shuja Pasha, during his meeting with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Leon Panetta, has reportedly presented evidence regarding India's hand in fanning terrorism in Baluchistan and Waziristan.

Sources privy to the meeting said differences cropped up between the two intelligence chiefs after General Pasha criticised the US for its failure to help Pakistan in its counter-terror efforts.

Sources said General Pasha, during the meeting, expressed his disappointment over CIA's failure to provide credible information to Islamabad regarding the extremist groups working in Afghanistan to create trouble in Pakistan.

'Israel-Palestinian conflict kills 8,900 in 20 years'

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has claimed almost 8,900 lives in two decades, the vast majority of them Palestinians, the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem said in a statement published yesterday.

Israeli forces killed 7,398 Palestinians, including 1,537 minors, both in Israel and the occupied territories during that period, while Palestinians killed 1,483 Israelis, including 139 minors, B'Tselem said.

Among the Israeli victims, 488 were police officers or military troops, and the remaining 995 were civilians killed in attacks in Israel or in the occupied territories, the statement said.

Britons warn Somali captors 'losing patience'

AFP, London

A British couple held hostage by Somali pirates said in a video telecast Friday that their captors are "losing patience" and could kill them "within a week" if no ransom is paid.

The video of Paul and Rachel Chandler -- held since their yacht, the Lynn Rival, was boarded in the Indian Ocean on October 23 -- was made on Wednesday and broadcast on Britain's Channel Four News programme.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani meets with CIA chief Leon Panetta in Islamabad on Friday. Panetta held talks in Pakistan and found agreement on intelligence cooperation as President Barack Obama nears a decision on troop deployments to Afghanistan, Islamabad said.

US still hopes Iran will change mind on nuclear deal

Tehran holds aerial defence war games to protect nuke sites

AFP, Washington/ Tehran

The United States said Friday it hopes Iran will still accept a confidence-building nuclear deal even as it plans to meet again with five other world powers to discuss steps to end Tehran's defiance.

Meeting in Brussels on Friday, the six powers expressed disappointment that Iran has "not responded positively" to a deal to ship low-grade nuclear fuel abroad or agreed to new talks.

But US State Department deputy spokesman Robert Wood said that the United States and its negotiating partners Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany were not yet "at the point" of closing the window on dialogue.

Speaking to reporters in Washington, Wood said that the six powers would hold another

meeting to discuss "next steps" but added that no date for a meeting had yet been determined.

In the past, the United States has raised the possibility of another round of sanctions against Iran.

Meanwhile, Iranian air defence forces will conduct five days of manoeuvres involving simulated attacks on the country's nuclear sites, a senior air defence commander said on Saturday.

"From tomorrow (Sunday) we will start a big aerial defence manoeuvre that will last for five days... covering an area of some 600,000 square kilometres in north, southwestern Iran and parts of south and central Iran," Brigadier General Ahmad Mighani, the army air defence chief was quoted by the Fars news agency as saying.

Karzai an 'unworthy partner'

Says top US Democrat

AFP, Washington

Calling Afghan President Hamid Karzai an "unworthy partner," a key Democratic leader warned Friday that Congress cannot fund an expanded military mission without a reliable ally in Kabul.

Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the House of Representatives, said moreover she did not think there was political support for sending more US troops to Afghanistan, as President Barack Obama is contemplating.

"How can we ask the American people to pay a big price in lives and limbs, and also in dollars, if we don't have a connection to a reliable partner?" said in an interview with National Public Radio.

"So, you know, the whole thing is let's not just talk about troops. Let's talk about what is the strategy and what are the resources that are needed in that regard?"

Her comments reflected the deep discomfort among Obama's Democrats over calls by US military commanders for a major buildup in

troops to stem a growing Taliban insurgency.

The White House said a decision on whether to send more troops would not come until after the Thanksgiving holiday on November 26.

Currently, there are some 68,000 US troops in Afghanistan, but the options under consideration are reported to range to up to more than 40,000 additional troops.

Pelosi and other Democrats opposed a similar surge in US troops to Iraq two years ago, arguing at the time that more troops were needed in Afghanistan, the main front against al-Qaeda.

Pelosi acknowledged that since then the conflict in Afghanistan has become more pervasive, reaching parts of the country that before were relatively free of violence.

"That says one of two things: Either we need many more troops so that we -- this doesn't continue to happen, which I don't think there's any support for. Or we need to reevaluate what our approach has been for the past eight years," she said.