

Lanka says could hang ex-army chief

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's top defence official has threatened to hang the country's former army chief if he cooperates with any investigation into war crimes during the civil war that ended one year ago.

Defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse told the BBC's Hardtalk programme that Sarath Fonseka, who is currently being court-martialled on separate charges, would be executed as a traitor if he tried to expose alleged war crimes.

Fonseka fell out with President Mahinda Rajapakse and his brother Gotabhaya after the Tamil Tiger guerrillas were defeated in May last year.

The United Nations estimated that 7,000 civilians were killed in fighting in the early months of last year as government troops overwhelmed the rebels and ended the decades-long separatist campaign.

The London-based Guardian quoted Gotabhaya Rajapakse speaking in a BBC interview to be broadcast later this week.

The newspaper report, co-authored by the BBC's Stephen Sackur, who conducted the interview, said Rajapakse responded angrily to the prospect of Fonseka giving evidence at any international war crimes probe.

"He can't do that. He was the commander," Rajapakse said. "That's a treason. We will hang him if he does that. I'm telling you. How can he betray the country? He is a liar."

Fonseka quit the army in November and unsuccessfully ran for the presidency and was then arrested on charges of dabbling in politics and corrupt deals while in uniform.

Rajapakse repeated a promise by the president that the authorities would not allow any international investigation into the conduct of the armed forces.

"We are an independent country, we have the ability to investigate all these things," he said.

Fonseka, who is now a member of parliament, has called for an investigation and offered to cooperate.

Indian court convicts eight in Bhopal gas disaster

BBC ONLINE

A court in the Indian city of Bhopal has sentenced eight people to two years each in jail over a gas plant leak that killed thousands of people in 1984.

The convictions are the first since the disaster at the Union Carbide plant - the world's worst industrial accident.

The eight Indians, all former plant employees, were convicted of "death by negligence". One had already died - the others are expected to appeal.

Campaigners said the court verdict was "too little and too late".

Forty tonnes of a toxin called methyl isocyanate leaked from the Union Carbide pesticide factory and settled over slums in Bhopal on 3 December 1984.

The Indian government says some 3,500 people died within days and more than 15,000 in the years since.

Campaigners put the death toll as high as 25,000 and say the horrific effects of the gas continue to this day.

The site of the former pesticide plant is now abandoned.

It was taken over by the state government of Madhya Pradesh in 1998, but environ-

mentalists say poison is still found there.

The eight convicted on Monday were Keshub Mahindra, the chairman of the Indian arm of the Union Carbide (UCIL); VP Gokhale, managing director; Kishore Kamdar, vice-president; J Mukund, works manager; SP Chowdhury, production manager; KV Shetty, plant superintendent; SI Qureshi, production assistant. All of them are Indians.

The seven former employees, some of whom are now in their 70s, were also ordered to pay fines of 100,000 Indian rupees (£1,467; \$2,125) apiece.

Although Warren Anderson, the American then-chairman of the US-based Union Carbide parent group, was named as an accused and later declared an "absconder" by the court, he was not mentioned in Monday's verdict.

Rights groups and NGOs working with the victims of the gas leak said that the verdict was inadequate.

"It sets a very sad precedent. The disaster has been treated like a traffic accident. It is a judicial disaster, and it is a betrayal [of Indian people] by the government," activist Satinath Sarangi said.

Rashida Bee, president of the Bhopal Gas Women's Workers group, told the AFP

BHOPAL GAS TRAGEDY

- Early on Dec 3, 1984, a pesticide plant run by Union Carbide leaked about 40 tons of deadly methyl isocyanate gas into the air of Bhopal and killed quickly about 3,500 people.
According to activists 25,000 died in the aftermath of the disaster.
The then chairman of Union Carbide India Ltd Keshub Mahindra, currently chairman of Mahindra & Mahindra, was convicted.
Up to two-year jail sentences for convicts.

Source: Reuters, AP

news agency that "justice will be done in Bhopal only if individuals and corporations responsible are punished in an exemplary manner".

Afghan resignations threaten US-led security drive

AFP, Kabul

The shock departure of two of Afghanistan's most respected security chiefs at a critical juncture in the US-led fight against the Taliban threatened to leave a void yesterday and raised questions about unity.



Hanif Atmar

Interior minister Hanif Atmar and head of intelligence Amrullah Saleh are out of office, on the face of it, because militants fired rockets towards a key peace conference, embarrassing President Hamid Karzai mid-way through a speech.

The presidency said they were summoned to account for last week's attack -- which was thwarted and failed to hurt any of the 1,600 delegates at the "peace jirga" -- and had resigned over a "serious security breach".

Atmar had been in the job since 2008 and Saleh since 2004. They were among the most respected members of Karzai's government, both at home and in the Western capitals bankrolling an intensifying fight against the Taliban.

As interior minister, Atmar was responsible for building up the police force, which has struggled with poor equipment and recruitment. As director of the National Directorate of Security, Saleh was key to anti-Taliban operations.

RAJAPAKSE'S VISIT TO INDIA New Delhi to discuss Lankan reconciliation

INDO ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

India, heavily involved in the reconstruction of Sri Lanka's northeast, will discuss the process of political reconciliation in the country when President Mahinda Rajapakse arrives here today on a state visit.

On the agenda of the official discussion will be how and what kind of plans Rajapakse has in his mind to give the Tamil and Muslim minorities self-governance they can be proud of.

Since the time he became president in November 2005, Rajapakse has repeatedly promised to devolve powers to the minorities.

But he and his aides have also argued that he needed to be political secure to unleash devolution that would be acceptable to the Sinhalese majority while also pleasing the Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslims.

After militarily crushing the Tamil Tigers in May 2009, Rajapakse scored decisive wins in the presidential and parliamentary elections in January and April this year, becoming one of the most powerful presidents in Sri Lanka.

Now, analysts and policy makers say, Rajapakse needs to deliver.

Rajapakse will review a military guard of honour at the Rashtrapati Bhavan to kick-start a busy Wednesday when he will lay a wreath at the Raj Ghat and follow it up with a meeting with his Indian counterpart Pratibha Patil and wide-ranging talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Manmohan begins Kashmir visit amid shutdown

INDO ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Srinagar

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh began a two-day trip to Jammu and Kashmir yesterday even as a general shutdown called by separatists to protest the visit-affected life in this summer capital.

The prime minister addressed the 5th convocation of the Sher-e-Kashmir University of Sciences and Technology (SKUAST) at its convention complex on the banks of Dal Lake.

He arrived in a special plane accompanied

by wife Gursharan Kaur and union ministers Ghulam Nabi Azad and Prithviraj Chauhan. Security was heightened and restrictions imposed in parts of this city in view of the shutdown.

TKA Nair, principal secretary to the prime minister, Shiv Shankar Menon, the national security advisor, and Harish Khare, media advisor to Manmohan Singh, are also part of the delegation.

Governor NN Vohra, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, his father and union minister Farooq Abdullah received the prime minister.

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