

RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY Lanka rejects US criticism

AFP, Colombo



Nisha Biswal

Sri Lanka yesterday rejected "patently unfair" allegations by the United States that its rights record had deteriorated in the five years since the end of a bloody separatist war.

Foreign Minister G L Peiris said remarks by Nisha Biswal, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, at the end of a two-day visit on Saturday suggested that she wanted to believe the worst of the regime in Colombo.

"Her observations are indicative of a mindset that solely wants to believe the worst and enthusiastically leaps to conclusions based on tendentious claims," a foreign ministry official quoted Peiris as saying.

Biswal told reporters in Colombo Saturday that the US was concerned about the worsening human rights situation as well as the weakening of the rule of law and an increase in the levels of corruption and impunity in Sri Lanka since a 37-year conflict ended in May 2009.

"All of these factors lead to undermine the proud tradition of democracy in Sri Lanka," Biswal said, adding that Washington was moving a third resolution against Colombo in as many years to nudge the island to improve its rights record.

Biswal said Colombo had failed to ensure reconciliation, justice and accountability, and pressure was building for a foreign probe.

"Lack of progress in Sri Lanka has led to a great deal of frustration and scepticism in my government and in the international community," Biswal said. "The international community's patience is wearing thin."

But Peiris said her observations were based on unsubstantiated allegations.

"The treatment of Sri Lanka (by the US) is highly selective and patently unfair," Peiris said.

Sri Lanka is under increasing international pressure to probe its own troops over allegations that they killed thousands of civilians in the final stages of the war.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's government denies any civilians were killed by its troops and has rejected calls for an international inquiry.

Government forces declared victory nearly five years ago after wiping out the leadership of Tamil Tiger rebels in a no-holds-barred offensive.

At least 100,000 people were killed during the war, according to UN figures.

AFGHAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION Campaign starts amid violence

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's presidential candidates held rallies in Kabul yesterday at the start of a campaign to elect Hamid Karzai's successor, as the killing of a frontrunner's aides highlighted the security threat to the poll.

Gunmen shot dead two members of former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah's team in the western city of Herat on Saturday, dealing an early blow to hopes of a peaceful campaign as the country prepares for its first democratic transfer of power.

The April 5 election is seen as a key test of the effectiveness of the 350,000-strong Afghan security forces as foreign troops prepare to exit the country, while the future of US troops in the country beyond 2014 is set to dominate the agenda.

In the capital thousands of people, mostly men, gathered in giant wedding halls where candidates delivered speeches and called on war-weary Afghans to vote for them.

Abdullah, who came second to Karzai in the chaotic and fraud-riddled 2009 election, outlined his priorities as "security in the far villages of Afghanistan, fighting corruption, (and) enforcing rule of law". Earlier, Abdullah's rival Ashraf Ghani, a 64-year-old academic, pledged reforms in every quarter of the society.

Wahe Wafa, a political analyst, described Abdullah and Ghani as the front-runners, with Karzai loyalist Zalmay Rassoul seen as a possible third force. Karzai has ruled the country since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. He is barred from seeking a third term.

Former AFP journo killed in Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Former Agence France-Presse journalist Mel Gunasekera was stabbed to death yesterday after a break-in at her family's home in Colombo, police said.

Gunasekera, 40, was currently working for the international ratings agency Fitch, police spokesman Ajith Rohana said.

Police have launched an investigation, said Rohana adding that no arrests had been made.

As well as reporting extensively on financial and political affairs in Sri Lanka, she also made several visits as a journalist to the Maldives. She was also the founding editor of Lanka Business Online, which is one of Lanka's best known financial news portals.

Philip Seymour Hoffman found dead in New York

AFP, New York

Oscar-winning actor Philip Seymour Hoffman was found dead in his New York apartment yesterday, a law enforcement official said. He was 46.

Media reports suggested a drug overdose could be to blame, but the official, who declined to be named, told AFP the cause of death was unknown.

Police responded to the scene in Manhattan's West Village after receiving a call at about 11:15 am (1615 GMT), the official said.

The Wall Street Journal, which broke the story, said Hoffman was found with a needle in his arm by a screenwriter in the bathroom of his apartment.

Hoffman -- whose recent movies included "The Hunger Games:



Catching Fire" and "The Master" -- won an Oscar for best actor in 2006 for "Capote" and was seen as one of the pre-eminent actors of his generation.

Born Philip Hoffman in July 1967 in New York state, he was the third of four children of a Xerox executive and a feminist housewife who divorced when he was nine.

An avid athlete, the stocky youth became involved in school theatrics after suffering an injury. He earned a drama degree from New York University in 1989, though he fell into alcohol and drug abuse for a while.

After inserting his grandfather's name, Seymour, between his existing names, he made his big screen debut in a 1991 independent film called "Triple Bogey on a Par Five Hole."

India set to ease visa restrictions

AGENCIES

Tourists travelling to India from up to 180 countries, barring handful a few like Pakistan, will no longer have to queue up at their local consulates to obtain visas, local media reported yesterday.

Most foreigners currently have to wait several weeks before learning whether they will be allowed to enter the country after submitting their applications at visa processing centres.

But India's intelligence agencies have now given their backing to proposals that would allow tourists to apply online and then wait only three days before receiving the green light, the Indian Express reported.

They would then be able to pick up their visas on arrival at any airport.

But visitors from countries which account for the bulk of its tourists -- such as the United States, Britain and France -- have to go through the time-consuming process of applying in person.

A final decision on the visa reforms is likely to be taken on Wednesday at a meeting to be attended by the country's top intelligence officers.

Barrel bomb raids 'kill 85'

AFP, Damascus

At least 85 people were killed in 24 hours of Syrian regime air raids on the city of Aleppo, a monitoring group said yesterday, after 10 days of inconclusive peace talks.

The deaths came as a suicide car bombing in a Hezbollah stronghold across the border in Lebanon killed four people on Saturday, in the latest regional spillover of the conflict.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said regime helicopters hit rebel-held areas of Aleppo with barrels packed with explosives.

The so-called barrel bombs are a controversial weapon, condemned by rights groups as indiscriminate.

"At least 85 people were killed, including 65 civilians, 10 of whom were children," on Saturday, the Observatory said.

The group said 34 people were killed in one neighbourhood alone, and 10 of the dead were jihadists from Al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

Once Syria's economic hub, Aleppo is now divided between regime and rebel-held areas, with large swathes of the city devastated by the fighting that began there in mid-2012.

Regime forces have launched an offensive on rebel-held areas in the east of the city, with Defence Minister

General Fahd al-Freij visiting the province on Friday.

Quoted by state news agency SANA, he praised the army for its "great victories and their liberation of many areas in Aleppo." The Observatory confirmed the army had seized most of Karam al-Turab, and said fierce fighting was underway around Zara.

The latest violence came the day after Syrian government and opposition delegations wrapped up peace talks in Geneva without tangible results or a government commitment to return to the table.

More than 136,000 people have been killed since Syria's conflict began in March 2011.

Meanwhile, The US State Department has denied a claim by Syria's foreign minister Saturday that Washington sought direct negotiations with them at peace talks in Switzerland.

"The Americans asked us to negotiate directly with them in Montreux," Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem told Syrian state media on the plane home from 10 days of peace talks in the Swiss cities of Montreux and Geneva.

"But we refused to do so before Secretary of State John Kerry apologised for what he said at the conference," Muallem added, in remarks carried by state news agency SANA.

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki denied there was any attempt at direct negotiations.

SYRIA CRISIS

US denies regime claim of seeking direct meeting

Car blast kills 4 in Lebanon

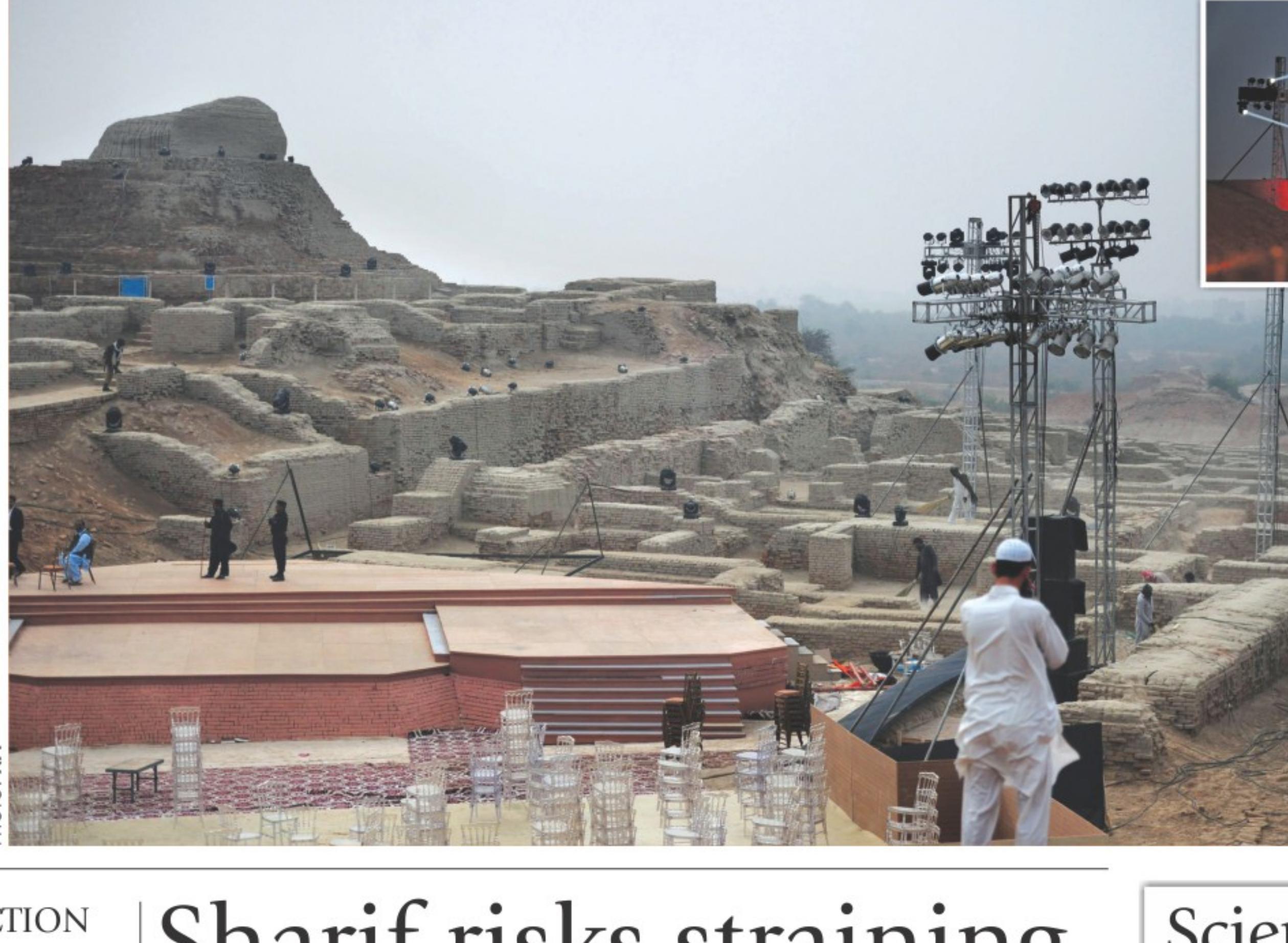


PHOTO: AFP

MIDEAST PEACE TALKS

Israel rebuffs US's boycott warning

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday rejected remarks by US Secretary of State John Kerry warning of a growing boycott threat against the Jewish state if peace talks fail.

"Attempts to impose a boycott on the State of Israel are immoral and unjust. Moreover, they will not achieve their goal," he said at the weekly cabinet meeting.

"Second, no pressure will cause me to concede the vital interests of the State of Israel, especially the security of Israel's citizens. For both of these reasons, threats to boycott the State of Israel will not achieve their goal."

Netanyahu's remarks came a day after Kerry warned of the potential economic impact on Israel.

A growing number of governments and international businesses have in recent months said they will not trade with any Israeli firms with ties to Jewish settlements, highlighting the creeping success of a Palestinian-led boycott campaign.

The so-called BDS movement -- boycott, divestment and sanctions -- works to convince governments, businesses and celebrities to cut all ties with Israeli companies active in the occupied Palestinian territories, in a bid to repeat the success of the boycott which ended apartheid in South Africa.

"For Israel, the stakes are also enormously high," the US diplomat warned at a security conference in Munich.

Since January 1, the European Union has blocked all grants and funding to Israeli entities operating beyond the pre-1967 war lines, sparking growing alarm in Israel.



Pakistani men monitor labourers as they dismantle the stage used for a cultural gala at the ancient ruins of Moenjodaro, the UNESCO World Heritage site, in Sindh.

Chairman of Pakistan Peoples Party Bilawal Bhutto inaugurated a two-week festival on Saturday to commemorate Pakistan's cultural heritage with a fund raising call to preserve the ancient city. But experts warned the site built around 2600 BC, in danger.

NEWS IN brief

Ukraine leader to end sick leave

CNN ONLINE

Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovych will return to work today, after taking ill amid political unrest that has paralyzed the eastern European country.

Yanukovych went on sick leave on Thursday with "acute respiratory disease," his office said.

Iraq forces hit Anbar militants

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi government forces pressed their assault on militant strongholds in Anbar province yesterday as attacks elsewhere killed 10 people, with intensifying violence fuelling fears of a return to all-out conflict.

The effort to win back parts of Ramadi, capital of the western province of Anbar and one of two cities that either entirely or partially fell out of government control weeks ago, comes with violence at its

Cargo ship sinks off Yemen: 12 killed

REUTERS, Aden

A cargo ship sank off the coast of Yemen killing 12 Indian sailors onboard, Yemen interior ministry said on Saturday. The ship, which was carrying car tyres and car parts, ran aground on Thursday night but the incident did not come to the attention of Yemeni security until 10 hours later, its statement said.

The jihadist group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis has claimed some of the deadliest attacks in Egypt since Morsi's overthrow. Analysts say the group is inspired by Al-Qaeda, but Egyptian security officials claim it is derived from the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood, to which Morsi belongs.

10 pilgrims killed in Nepal bus accident

PTI, Kathmandu

A bus carrying 66 Hindu pilgrims skidded off a mountain road and fell down more than 300-metre in eastern Nepal, killing at least 10 people, police said yesterday. Fifty-six passengers, who were seriously injured, have been admitted to Katri Hospital in Udayapur, Neuro Hospital in Biratnagar and B&B Hospital in Lalitpur district.

Scientists grow first heart cells in lab

MAIL ONLINE

Heart cells have been grown in the laboratory for the first time, scientists announced yesterday.

The breakthrough, described as a scientific "milestone", paves the way for a revolution in heart treatment.

A team of Israeli researchers grew the tissue from embryonic stem cells - unprogrammed cells with the potential to become any part of the body.

Although not fully developed, they have all the hallmarks of early-stage heart cells called cardiomyocytes.

The scientists are convinced that if they were placed in an adult human heart they would produce mature cardiac muscle.

Professor Sir Charles George, medical director of the British Heart Foundation, said of the achievement "a fascinating and important milestone".

"It gives real hope that people with heart disease may benefit from stem cell technology in the future," he said to get you down."

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