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SUMMARY

BANGLADESH :Bangladesh has sought New Delhi's help to nab two of the six fugitive killers of its founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was assassinated 35 years ago. Bangladesh authorities Saturday handed over Ranjan Daimary, chief of the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), to India where he is wanted for ordering bomb attacks, A domestic news agency reports lightning has left at least 16 people dead and scores others injured in parts of Bangladesh. The World Bank approved on Wednesday \$292 million in loans to finance two infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, through its Investment Promotion and Financing Facility (IPFF) The lead investigator at Bangladesh's new war crimes tribunal, set up to prosecute perpetrators of atrocities during the 1971 independence war against Pakistan, resigned. Foreign Minister Dipu Moni will visit New York from May 2-4 to attend the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, The cabinet on Monday assigned two ministers and an adviser to the prime minister to scrutinise a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on import of electricity from India which was signed between the two neighbouring countries during Prime

Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January this year. Bangladesh's exports in March rose 18.4 percent from a year earlier to \$1.5 billion as the global economy slowly recovered, the third consecutive rise after two straight months of declines. Bangladesh's central bank Wednesday ordered banks to hold more cash in reserve in a bid to rein in inflation, which has neared double digit rates in the impoverished South Asian country. Bangladesh's southeastern hills are again simmering with ethnic tension, raising concerns that a fragile peace reached 13 years ago will collapse. Hundreds of ethnic Chakma. One person was killed, about 200 injured and 150 buses damaged at Wednesday noon in a clash between the activists of Bangladesh's ruling party Awami League and the main opposition party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), according to Xinhua. Canadian oil and gas company Niko Resources Ltd (NKO.TO: Quote, Profile, Research) stopped the production of natural gas in Bangladesh. Bangladesh imposed a ban on the import of poultry from India due to reported cases of bird flu in the country, Bangladeshi musician Abdul Sabuj does not own a passport and rarely ventures far from the Dhaka slum he calls home, but thanks to a new vote-donating project, he will have a say in Britain's elections

BHUTAN: PM Bhutan expresses satisfaction on success of 16th SAARC summit. Although Bhutan is yet to join the South Asia consortium for interdisciplinary water resources studies (Saci WATERS), where India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are already members, A local church is helping to make the transition to America a little easier for 100 refugees from Bhutan. The bilateral relations including trade ties between the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and India have been traditionally close for decades.

MALDIVES: The Maldives prides itself on having built one of the most advanced telecommunications systems in the region. With the country's well-developed national network, the capital Malé is particularly well served, as are the tourist resort islands. No terrorist group has set up a training base in any part of the country, Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) has said on Wednesday. According to statistics provided by the Maldives Tourist Promotion Board (MTPB), China ranked the 8th in the year 2008 with 40,000 of its people choosing Maldives to be their tourist destination.

NEPAL: Tourists hit by Maoist shutdown in Nepal. Buses ferried stranded tourists out of the Nepalese capital Kathmandu on Tuesday and shopkeepers said their premises had been attacked as Maoist protesters enforced the third day of a general strike. Armed police escorted fuel and food trucks into Nepal's capital Tuesday on the third day of a crippling general strike called by former Maoist rebels demanding the prime minister's resignation. In the largest protest against the Maoists imposed indefinite strike, tens of thousands of apolitical protesters today poured onto the streets of the Nepalese capital, handing out a 48-hour ultimatum to the former rebels to end what they called a virtual siege in the country. The World Press Freedom Day is being observed in Nepal Monday with the slogan "Freedom of Information: Right to Information". In conjunction with the occasion, South Korean who became the first woman to scale the world's 14 highest peaks returned to the Nepalese capital from Mount Annapurna on Monday, saying she's ready to take a break from mountaineering. Nepal's Maoists have thrashed and beaten up four journalists while enforcing their strike in the national capital despite their commitment to respect press freedom. Improper handling of differences and failing to reinstate peace by Nepal's political parties has made China restive. Following forceful retaliation from the locals and cadres of ruling parties against the indefinite strike called by the former rebel party, Unified Maoists, at

various centers of the country, the party of the former rebels have instead decided to adopt the policy of "Retaliation if attacked. In a further set back to embattled Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal already grappling with Maoist campaign to unseat him from his post, influential leaders from his own party CPN (UML) have urged him to give a way out to the current political crisis by resigning from his post. Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal on Wednesday tried to allay concerns of foreign diplomats in Nepal about the complicated political situation of the country. The ongoing general strike enforced by UCPN (Maoist) has afflicted several aspects of economy. Chaos, emergency rule and constitutional crisis loom large in Nepal as former Maoist guerrillas begin an indefinite general strike and the government refuses to step down. The Maoists are demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, who heads an alliance of 10 parties and has the support of nearly a dozen more. While the deadlock and the strike continue, Nepal is hurtling toward the most severe constitutional crisis it has ever known in a turbulent history marked by massacres, coups, two pro-democracy protests and the overthrow of its royal family.

SRILANKA:Long struggle for displaced Sri Lankan Tamils . in northern Sri Lanka, 80,000 war-displaced people still live in army-run camps, waiting while their devastated land is cleared of mines and jungle. The International Monetary Fund urged the Sri Lankan government on Wednesday to speed up fiscal reforms and produce a more comprehensive deficit cutting plan if wants to get a multi-billion dollar loan back on track." The government is not addressing Tamil grievances that led to war in the first place SOON after they killed him, the Sri Lankan government sent text messages to mobile phones across the country heralding the demise of Velupillai Prabhakaran, Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse yesterday announced plans to review the final phase of the battle against Tamil Tiger rebels last year. Sri Lanka's parliament on Wednesday voted to scale back tough state of emergency laws that were first introduced 27 years ago to deal with separatist Tamil rebels. Sri Lanka's court of appeal on Monday ordered the suspension of a court martial against ex-army chief and defeated presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka. Sri Lanka's ex-army chief on Thursday vowed to "expose" any war crimes committed at the end of the country's civil war, raising pressure on the government, which has resisted calls for a probe. India is prepared to resume ferry services between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, Indian High Commissioner Ashok K Kantha said on Wednesday. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa urged the opposition in the country to be patriotic and back him on Saturday."Opposition must not disrupt economy and the good name of the country. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific announces that Sri Lanka has recorded a significant economic development during this year. Sri Lankan shares hit a record high on Wednesday led by telecoms on a possible rise in tariffs and earnings hopes analysts said. International service providers in Sri Lanka and their employees are given permission to open foreign currency accounts in licensed commercial banks with effect from May 07th, the Central Bank announced today. Sri Lankan government announced that it will send a high level delegation to Brussels to hold discussions with the European Union on the Generalized System of Preference plus (GSP+) facility on May 20-21.

DETAILED NEWS:

Bangladesh seeks India's help to nab Mujib killers

Bangladesh has sought New Delhi's help to nab two of the six fugitive killers of its founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was assassinated 35 years ago. Home minister Sahara Khatun, who made the request to Indian High Commissioner Rajeev Mitter, did not say when the fugitive killers visited India. Mitter assured full cooperation, The Daily Star newspaper said on Thursday. "One or two killers visited India and we just want cooperation of the country to arrest and extradite them to Bangladesh," the minister told the envoy here Wednesday. Bangladesh media recently speculated that two of the fugitives had surfaced in India some time back. Called Mujib, Rahman was killed along with most of his family members in a coup Aug 15, 1975. A dozen former army officers were sentenced in a prolonged trial and five of them were hanged earlier this year. Of the seven others, one died and six are on the run. The present government headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who is Rahman's eldest daughter, has sought the help of Interpol to track down the fugitives.

Bangladesh hands over NDFB chief to India

(IANS) Bangladesh authorities Saturday handed over Ranjan Daimary, chief of the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), to India where he is wanted for ordering bomb attacks, officials said. He is the fifth top separatist leader to be evicted out of Bangladesh in the past four months. An Indian official said Daimary, along with at least two other NDFB militants, were handed over to the Border Security Force (BSF) at a border post in Dawki in Meghalaya early Saturday. The BSF then handed him over to the Assam Police. Daimary and the two other NDFB militants have since arrived in Guwahati and were being interrogated by senior Assam Police intelligence officials at a safe house in the city. According to police sources, the NDFB leader was arrested April 17 in Jinaighati town in Sherpur district of Bangladesh and held in custody before being handed over to Indian authorities Saturday. 'He is a big catch no doubt,' the official said requesting anonymity. The Assam government has, however, refused to confirm Daimary's arrest. The arrest was made following a tip-off about Daimary's presence in Jinaighati by the Indian military intelligence to the Detective Branch of the Bangladesh police in early April. Sources said Indian military intelligence officials gave specific information about Daimary's son who is a student at a school in Dhaka. It is through him and subsequent telephone intercepts between the NDFB chairman and his wife that led to the arrest. Formed in 1986, the NDFB is a rebel group fighting for an independent homeland for the Bodo tribes people in Assam. The NDFB was blamed for the Oct 30, 2008 serial explosions in Assam that killed about 100 people and wounded up to 800 more. Earlier, the Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina handed over four top leaders of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) to India - chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, deputy commander-in-chief Raju Baruah, foreign secretary Sasha Choudhury, and finance secretary Chitraban Hazarika. All the top four ULFA leaders are now in Guwahati jail. 'We are committed to fighting terror,' Mohammed Zamir, political advisor to Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, told IANS over telephone from Dhaka. But he too refused to deny or confirm Daimary's arrest. According to Assam government sources, Daimary would be interrogated for at least two days before being produced in court. In 2005, a faction of the NDFB led by its general secretary Gobinda Basumatary entered into a ceasefire with New Delhi, but Daimary preferred to continue his armed struggle out of Bangladesh.

Lightning kills at least 16 in Bangladesh

A domestic news agency reports lightning has left at least 16 people dead and scores others injured in parts of Bangladesh. The United News of Bangladesh agency says most victims were on farmland or at their homes. Others were walking along roads. The agency says six people died in the northeastern district of Habiganj, 75 miles (120 kilometers) northeast of the capital, Dhaka. It said four others were injured in the district. It said 10 more people died in five other districts in northern, central, southern and northeastern Bangladesh. The report said the injured were taken to hospital. Officials could not be reached immediately for comment.

World Bank approves \$292 mln loan for Bangladesh

DHAKA (Reuters) - The World Bank approved on Wednesday \$292 million in loans to finance two infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, through its Investment Promotion and Financing Facility (IPFF). The IPFF, operating since 2006, has helped boost Bangladesh's electricity generation capacity by 5 percent by adding 178 megawatts electricity to the national grid and two special economic zones at Dhaka and Chittagong. Bangladesh currently faces up to 2,000 megawatts (MW) of electricity shortage a day that causes severe sufferings as well drastic fall in industrial production. The IPFF operates under the oversight of Bangladesh's central bank and funds are allocated to local financial institutions for on-lending to private-sector infrastructure projects. "Bangladesh has an enormous investment need in infrastructure," said Zafrul Islam, World Bank's acting country director for Bangladesh. "We expect this financing ... will be used to increase infrastructure supply in the power sector - renewable energy and energy savings - as well as bridges, ports, container terminals, water treatment plants, waste disposal projects, and others," a World Bank statement quoted him as saying. The credits from the International Development Association (IDA), the World Bank's concessionary arm, have 40 years to maturity with a 10-year grace period; they carry a service charge of 0.75 percent

Bangladesh war crime probe chief quits

The lead investigator at Bangladesh's new war crimes tribunal, set up to prosecute perpetrators of atrocities during the 1971 independence war against Pakistan, resigned Wednesday, an official said. Abdul Matin, a former top bureaucrat, submitted his resignation in the wake of allegations by senior officials that he had ties to the country's main Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, which sided with Pakistan during the war. "He resigned citing personal reasons," the home ministry's senior information officer Mohammad Sahenor Miah said. Matin was named the head of the seven-member investigation team for a special tribunal, set up in March this year, to prosecute Bangladeshis who sided with Pakistan and committed murder, rape and arson during the war. Leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami have been accused of both committing and facilitating the murder of freedom fighters and many of the country's intellectuals during the nine-month struggle. Last month Alauddin Ahmed, an advisor to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, accused Matin of being a key activist for the Islamic Chhatra Sangha -- the now defunct student wing of Jamaat. Matin has vigorously denied being a member of the student wing, saying that he was neither a freedom fighter nor an activist for any group which opposed the liberation struggle in 1971. Bangladesh was part of Pakistan until an independence campaign, led by Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman, saw the country achieve independence, after a bloody war that the government claims killed three million people. Rahman, the father of current prime minister Hasina, had planned to put alleged war criminals on trial before his assassination in a 1975 coup, which Hasina claims was masterminded by war criminals. At least 11,000 detained war crime suspects were set free by the post-coup government, and Bangladesh has since struggled to come to terms with its bloody birth and the break-up of the subcontinent's Muslim homeland. A private local organisation that has investigated the conflict has identified 1,775 people, including Pakistani generals and local Islamists allied with Pakistan, as being complicit in the atrocities.

Bangladesh's Foreign Minister To Attend New York Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Conference

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni will visit New York from May 2-4 to attend the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, a foreign ministry announcement said on Saturday. The foreign minister will make a statement at the General Debate scheduled to be held on May 4 at the General Assembly Hall in New York. She is expected to attend a bilateral meeting with Yukiya Amano, Director General of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), on May 3, according to the announcement.

Bangladesh to Review MoU on Power Import from India

The cabinet on Monday assigned two ministers and an adviser to the prime minister to scrutinise a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on import of electricity from India which was signed between the two neighbouring countries during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January this year. "The cabinet has formed a high-powered committee to settle the agreement on power import from India," Abul Kalam Azad, press secretary to the Prime Minister told reporters after the cabinet meeting at the Secretariat. Finance Minister AMA Muhith, Planning Minister AK Khandker and Prime Minister's Finance Affairs Adviser Dr Mashiur Rahman were asked to submit the report in this regard soon. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina presided over the cabinet meeting. The MoU on power import was signed during Sheikh Hasina's recent visit to India. The government would also ratify the MoU after getting the report, press secretary said. Azad said the government has decided to import power from the friendly nation to meet the demand alongside producing electricity locally. He said that a contract would be signed between Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and the National Thermal Power Corporation of India on the import. The press secretary said the cabinet also approved Bangladesh Parjatan Board Bill-2010 for the improvement of services in the tourism industry. On December 24, 2009, the cabinet sent back the law for further amendments and final approval. The meeting also approved Bangladesh Non-government Primary Teachers Welfare Trust Bill-2010. Under the new bill, a teacher would be the member secretary of the welfare trust and there would be two vice-chairmen in place of one. Ministers, state ministers and secretaries, among others, were present at the meeting. Besides, the cabinet approved the final draft of Ansar (Amendment) Act-2010 to regularise the jobs of the Ansars after nine years of service, which previously was 12 years. The cabinet meeting was also informed about the recent visit of Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas Employment (MEWOE) Eng Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain to Lebanon for exploring market.

Bangladesh March exports up 18 pct on year

Bangladesh's exports in March rose 18.4 percent from a year earlier to \$1.5 billion as the global economy slowly recovered, the third consecutive rise after two straight months of declines. Exports for July-March, the first three quarters of the 2009/10 fiscal year, were down 0.8 percent at \$11.54 billion from the same period in the previous year, data from the Export Promotion Bureau showed on Wednesday. The central bank earlier said that exports had stabilised and would return to growth in the second half of the current fiscal year as global demand gradually recovers from the financial crisis. Orders for clothes, which account for 80 percent of Bangladesh's total overseas sales, are growing from its key markets, the United States and Europe. Earnings from readymade garments, including knitwear and woven, in July-March slid 3.3 percent to \$8.9 billion from the same period of the previous year. Late last year, the government announced a second stimulus package worth \$145 million to help exporters weather the impact of the global slump. However, exporters fear Bangladesh is unlikely to achieve its \$17.6 billion export target for the current financial year, 13 percent above last year's figure. The impoverished South Asian country's exports rose 10.3 percent to \$15.56 billion in the 2008/09 fiscal year, the lowest growth in six years. Exports contribute close to a fifth of Bangladesh's gross domestic product. The economy is expected to grow 6 percent in 2009/10 against 5.9 percent in the previous fiscal year, the government says. But the Asian Development Bank warned growth might slow further to 5.5 percent in the current fiscal year, pointing to slowing exports and investment.

Bangladesh moves to tame inflation

Bangladesh's central bank Wednesday ordered banks to hold more cash in reserve in a bid to rein in inflation, which has neared double digit rates in the impoverished South Asian country.

The Bangladesh Bank raised the cash reserve ratio (CRR) for banks by 50 points to 5.5 percent, effective from May 15, the bank's general manager Razia Sultana told AFP. "It's the first time since October 2005 the bank has raised the CRR and it comes after point-to-point inflation in February hit this year's high at 9.06 percent, outstripping the central bank target of 6.5 percent," she said. "We have raised the CRR to combat inflation. The hike will mop up liquidity and rein in inflation. It's a precaution, a move to halt the upward trend in prices," she added. She said broad money supply in the market had already risen to 21.9 percent, far higher than the central bank target of 15.5 percent, as inflation soared on the back of rising commodity prices in the global market. Experts said increased cash reserves would raise the cost of borrowing for consumers and companies and risked dampening economic activities at a time when key exports and industries are showing signs of revival. The country's main Dhaka stock exchange shrugged off the reserve hike with the benchmark DGEN index up 1.2 percent at midday, buoyed by the government's announcement that exports grew an impressive 18.38 percent in March.

Tribal anger rises in Bangladesh's volatile hills

Bangladesh's southeastern hills are again simmering with ethnic tension, raising concerns that a fragile peace reached 13 years ago will collapse. Hundreds of ethnic Chakma, a Buddhist tribal group indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, lost their homes in February when violence broke out between them and Muslim Bengali settlers, prompting a harsh army crackdown. "With the assistance of the army, the settlers came here to attack us," said Joshna Chakma, who lost her house and says her village has been plagued by violence since Bengali settlers and an army post arrived around two years ago. "Last year, there were 78 houses burned down by the settlers,

helped by the army," said Joshna, who is a member of the local council in the remote Baghaichhari district.

"This year, it was the same: the Bengali settlers came into our village chanting slogans. We know that the chant is a signal, so we ran into the forests, and when we got back the houses were all burned down," she said. The three-day bout of arson, violence and arrests left three dead and scores injured in the impoverished area, while Joshna said 410 houses and several pagodas were torched. Two tribal people were killed when the army opened fire on villagers protesting the arson attacks. A Bengali settler from a nearby village was killed in clashes with tribals two days later. It was the worst violence since a peace deal was signed in 1997, ending the tribal groups' slow-burning insurgency, which official figures say has claimed more than 2,500 lives since the early 1980s. Villagers say the episode and how it was handled by the Bengali-dominated army, with bullets and mass arrests, is proof tribal people are second-class citizens in Bangladesh.

"The army tell us: if you have courage, live here, if you do not then run away, as for us to kill you is like a tree losing its leaves in the winter," said Ganandu Chakma, who is leader of a land committee in the area. Joshna's account of settler-led, army-backed violence was supported by Pornomas Bhikkha, a Buddhist monk, who said he was forced to flee when his temple was attacked by 35 settlers with help from around 50 soldiers. "I could see the settlers, they had sticks, knives and other weapons. The army was just behind them. I went out and they tried to attack me, so I ran away and they broke into the temple and burned it to the ground," he said.

The army had come back after the incident to cut down the teak trees on the grounds of the pagoda, he said. Villagers say the settlers encroach on tribal land, including ancient burial grounds and fields which are periodically left fallow, and view the arson and army brutality as an attempt to drive the tribal community away for good. "Where are our rights? Why does the state only respect the Bengali settlers not us?" asked Joshna, lowering her voice to point out the gun-toting army patrols that inspect the dusty, burned-out village on a daily basis. Bangladesh's sprawling hills and their ethnic inhabitants have for decades been a source of tension in this majority-Muslim nation of 144 million, which is one of the most densely populated countries on earth. Since the early 1980s, successive governments pursued policies of Bengali settlement in the area, moving poor, landless farmers like Mohammad Abu Hamid, 47, to the hill tracts and giving them five hectares (12.4 acres) of land to farm. "This land was given to me by the government but the ethnics demand it, saying it was their forefathers' land. But I have documents, they have none, and I have farmed this land for decades," Hamid told AFP. Such policies meant that by 1991 49.5 percent of the local population was "non-tribal", up from just 2.0 percent in 1947. No figures were given in the 2001 census, but tribal leaders say Bengalis are now likely the majority. The hundreds of thousands of settlers have been "used by the Bangladesh state as political pawns," said Bhumitra Chakma, a tribal academic who teaches politics at England's Hull University. The militarisation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Bengali settlement policy means "ethnic cleansing is going on and in a way which is rather indirect and gradual, but effective," he said. The February violence was a textbook example of the type of army-backed settler-led violence that has for decades underpinned all land grabs in the region, and which goes ignored by central and local authorities, he said.

The key provisions of the 1997 peace deal were to resolve land disputes and dismantle major army camps, but both have faltered, and violence like that seen in February makes implementation harder, tribal leaders say. The Awami League government, which does not support new settlements and negotiated the 1997 deal, condemned the February attacks and hinted anti accord elements of the Islamist-allied opposition may be involved. "There is no

question of anything like ethnic cleansing or anyone driving the tribal people off the land -- that's not possible," said Abdus Sobhan Sikder, the most senior official at Bangladesh's home ministry. "The tribes have been living there with the Bengalis for years and the government is trying to make the region more peaceful," he added. The government provided rice and construction materials to help the victims of February's violence. Local police chief, Mohammad Abu Kalam Siddiq, who was moved to his post shortly after the violence as part of a "routine rotation", said that his brief was to attempt to get the community to live in harmony. "As far as land goes, it is a national problem and it is a problem for policymakers to solve," he said. Other local officials such as Rangamati's deputy district administrator, Viswajit Bharttagharya, called the fires "an accident, an act of god, like an earthquake". "Most of the victims are anyway living on land that should not be theirs," he said, adding that it was illegal to live on or own Forestry Administration land. For Hull University's Bhumitra, who has carried out extensive field work in the hill tract area, the result of such mixed messages and government inaction will be a new insurgency. "Many (young tribal people) vowed to take up arms again. It is highly likely that violence will become more intense in the coming years," he said.

1 killed, 200 injured in political clash in Bangladesh

One person was killed, about 200 injured and 150 buses damaged at Wednesday noon in a clash between the activists of Bangladesh's ruling party Awami League and the main opposition party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), according to Xinhua. The clash happened when a convoy of buses and minibuses of BNP activists from northern districts on way to Rajshahi district, 256 northwest of capital Dhaka, to attend the BNP grand rally, private news agency UNB reported. Witnesses said several hundred Awami League and Jubo League, the youth wing of the ruling party, activists in a pre-planned way launched attack on the convoy. Armed with bamboo sticks and sharp weapons, the attackers stopped the buses, pulled down the BNP activists and beat them indiscriminately. Some 150 buses out of about 300 in the convoy were damaged. Police rushed to the spot and managed to bring the situation under control at 3 p.m.. Traffic on the highway was disrupted during the clash.

Visa norms for Bangladeshis may be relaxed

India on Wednesday said it was considering a proposal to relax the procedure relating to grant of Conference Visa to Bangladeshi citizens. Referring to the proposal, Union home minister P Chidambaram on Wednesday said: "The matter is under consideration." Currently, Bangladesh and seven other countries, including Pakistan and China, require their citizens to get prior mandatory security clearance from the home ministry. The other countries in this category are Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Sri Lanka and Sudan. A conference visa is meant for foreigners who intend to take part in any international conference, seminar or workshop pertaining to an event where substantive discussions/deliberations/interaction and exchange of thoughts and ideas takes place on a specific subject matter. Answering questions in the Rajya Sabha, Chidambaram said some of the other categories of visitors for whom visas might be relaxed include professionals regularly visiting India and requiring longer stay than one year in rare and exceptional cases. "Visa on medical grounds including for those accompanying attendants and relatives may also be eased," he said. As for Indians visiting Bangladesh, he said the visa regime is reciprocal. To a question from Congress member Sushila Tiriya, the home minister ruled out India working on any plan to declare a unilateral no-fire zone along the Bangladesh border.

He said while relations with Bangladesh had improved over the last few years, "I agree there are several un-demarcated areas on both the sides." He said discussions are on. "There is progress and we would be able to resolve the matter," he said. The home minister agreed that the issue of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh "is a grave problem. But we are addressing it." He said policies of several successive governments had been the same over the years on the matter. He said as per provisions under the Foreigners Act and the tribunal order, over one lakh illegal immigrants from Bangladesh have been deported and pushed back between 2000 and 2008. Regarding those who had illegally migrated before 1971 to India, he said the provisions to deal with the issue are addressed in the provisions of Assam Accord.

Niko stops Bangladesh gas output over non payment

Canadian oil and gas company Niko Resources Ltd (NKO.TO: [Quote](#), [Profile](#), [Research](#)) stopped the production of natural gas in Bangladesh on Wednesday because of lack of payments from the authorities, a senior energy official said. Niko has not been paid about \$35 million for the sale of gas from Feni field, 150 kilometres (94 miles) southeast of Dhaka. "So it has stopped extraction activities in the field and we will not receive any gas from there in our national grid from today," said Mohammad Hossain Monsur, chairman of state-run Bangladesh Oil, Gas and Mineral Corporation or Petrobangla. "The government has formed a committee to settle the issue as soon as possible as it will have some effect in our energy sector," Monsur told Reuters. The company last week lodged an arbitration with the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) over the payment issue.

Bangladesh bans import of Indian poultry

Bangladesh imposed a ban on the import of poultry from India due to reported cases of bird flu in the country, an official said here. "The revenue board in line with the direction of the ministry of commerce Tuesday issued a gazette notification imposing ban on import of eggs and chicks from India," National Board of Revenue official Syed A. Momen told Xinhua. He said no import of Indian poultry and eggs is allowed from now on.

Scheme allows Bangladeshis to 'vote' in UK poll

Bangladeshi musician Abdul Sabuj does not own a passport and rarely ventures far from the Dhaka slum he calls home, but thanks to a new vote-donating project, he will have a say in Britain's elections. Ahead of polling day in Britain on Thursday, Sabuj and thousands of others like him in Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Ghana have used votes "donated" by members of the British public. The "Give Your Vote" scheme asks British citizens to pass on their votes to residents of poor countries that are heavily affected by British foreign policy. Under the experimental system, British voters are matched with people in the three countries who then inform a centralised text messaging service of how they want the vote used. "I voted for the Liberal Democrats as they've pledged major cuts in carbon emissions by 2050," Sabuj, 36, told AFP after casting his vote by sending a text message. "Many people, including my family who lost their house to river erosion, are suffering from climate change in Bangladesh, and I know that developing countries are most responsible for this," Sabuj said. "When I heard of 'Give Your Vote' I saw this was an opportunity for me to have a say." Bangladesh-based Give Your Vote organiser Clemmie James said she had encountered some criticism of the pioneering project from foreigners living and working in the South Asian country. "Many have told me it is naive to

take the campaign to Dhaka's slums, assuming that people will not even know or care about the UK government," she said.

"But the people I have conversed with are not ignorant of things that go beyond their everyday existence." London-based organiser May Abdalla said several thousand votes had been donated, but could not specify how many votes Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Ghana would each receive until after the vote donation line closes on Tuesday night. The "Give Your Vote" website said it would try to pair people up individually but admitted the plan was untested. "If necessary, we will calculate the proportions for each party, randomise who to send which result to, and fire out the emails and texts," it explained. "On the eve of the UK election, participants in the UK will receive an SMS or email, indicating which party their partner in Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Ghana wishes them to vote for." A plan for donors to take pictures of themselves voting had to be scrapped as it was illegal under British electoral law. Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats appeared to be wildly popular in Bangladesh, with Labour far back in second and the Conservatives struggling to make any impression, Abdalla said. "We're not trying to swing the election on the basis of these votes, the significance of it is to prove that people outside of national borders want and can be involved in decisions that affect them," Abdalla told AFP. "The idea that people are 'global citizens' who can participate and make a stand for democracy resonates very much in this interconnected world." The "Give Your Vote" scheme named Adam Elliot-Cooper as one British citizen who gave his vote away. "Our economic policy affects Ghana," he told the website. "Our climate policy affects Bangladesh hugely due to the danger of flooding (and) of course our foreign policy affects the people of Afghanistan a great deal." The project has been backed by South African peace activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who described it as an idea that was "exciting, brave and emphasises our common humanity." The opportunity attracted many young Bangladeshi students, like Mottaki Bin Kaml, who has never voted in his own country's elections, but is passionate about Britain's May 6 poll. "I didn't vote in Bangladesh as I don't support any of the parties here, they're all corrupt, but I want to vote in the British election as global warming is a big issue for us here," he said. "I hope that this project will have an impact, it is really great that people are showing solidarity by donating their votes like this," he said.

BHUTAN

PM Bhutan expresses satisfaction on success of 16th SAARC summit

Expressing satisfaction on the success of 16th SAARC Summit that concluded here Thursday, Prime Minister of Bhutan Lyonchhen Jigmi Yoeser Thinley said engagement between the prime ministers of Pakistan and India was also a clear indication of the success of the summit. Addressing a press conference here at the conclusion of two day 16 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Prime Minister of Bhutan said all the countries in SAARC are equal. He said both Pakistan and India participated in the summit despite their issues at home and came here with determination to actively participate in the summit. He said it was good for the region that if two countries have any concern, they can have the opportunity to hold bilateral talks to discuss them. The issue of meeting between prime ministers of Pakistan and India was subject of media and not by the SAARC secretariat, he added. Referring to the talks held between Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani and Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of SAARC summit, the Prime Minister of Bhutan said it demonstrated mutual desire of the two countries to have negotiations. He said the negotiations and dialogue process is always helpful in promoting the relations between the two countries and it would be

helpful in promoting bilateral relations and it was mutual desire of all the countries. He said Bhutan and all other countries are willing to have further interaction between Pakistan and India so that the people of the two countries could be brought closer. Replying to a question about big and small countries in the SAARC, the Prime Minister of Bhutan said there is no discrimination on the basis of size of the country and all the members of the SAARC are enjoying equal status. He said, "I am very optimistic and improvement in Pak-India relations will help in the betterment of the SAARC region." About the summit, he said, "We remained committed to the agenda prepared for it and discussed it and approved it with the active participation of all the leaders." Replying to a question about the role of observers, the Prime Minister of Bhutan said, they believe in SAARC and interested to have positive contribution for the betterment and improvement of the region through their support. He gave the example of China for announcing the donation of dollars 300,000 for the SAARC Development Fund and expressed the hope that there is positive contribution from other observers. Prime Minister of Bhutan said due to lack of trust there has been problem in the implementation on the agreements previously signed by the SAARC and assured that as new Chairman he would ensure early implementation on these agreements. He said that new mechanisms are being formulated for the implementations on the agreements. He added that Youth Forum of SAARC is being established and each head of the state and government in SAARC would be the patron of this new wing of the SAARC to promote interaction between the youth of the region. Answering a question about opening up of embassies of members of SAARC in Bhutan, he said, there are over 200 countries in the world and it is not possible to have embassies of all the countries here. He however said Bhutan is situated in the corner of the world and it is difficult for many countries to have embassy here. The Prime Minister of Bhutan however assured there will be progress regarding opening of embassies of SAARC countries here and this process will start soon. Regarding relaxation of visa for common people travelling the among the members states of SAARC, the Prime Minister of Bhutan said due to security issue it is not the safest region in the world, therefore it is difficult to provide the facility of free travel. He said with the passage of time and with growing understanding and reduction in cross border terrorism, there is possibility that in future there will be more relaxation in visa regime among the SAARC summits. He said all the leaders are satisfied on the progress and success of the summit and they are leaving Bhutan with the hope for the better future of the region

5th S.Asia research workshop in Bhutan

Although Bhutan is yet to join the South Asia consortium for interdisciplinary water resources studies (Saci WATERS), where India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are already members, the fifth south Asia research workshop was held for the first time in Bhutan on May 3 at Hotel Taj in the capital. The workshop was organised in Bhutan by the royal society for protection of nature (RSPN), combined with Saci WATERS. The workshop focused on privatisation of water services, human wellbeing, urbanisation and changing configurations around the state in water resource management. "The reason behind for the research workshop to be held in Bhutan is because of the tremendous water resources Bhutan has and per capita water availability in the country is among the highest in the world, and Bhutan is also well known in the world for its commitment to environmental protection," said the coordinator of the environment education unit, Ugyen Lhendup. Globalisation of governance and implication for water management in south Asia, being the theme of the project, received 32 water professionals and researchers from

the four countries. The coordinator said that, unlike other countries, Bhutan faced minimum problem with regard to water. "The water problem arises mainly because of poor management and harvest of water, with limited experts in the field of water." An official from RSPN said that it was a very good experience, not only for Bhutan but for all the countries involved in the conference, since it provided knowledge that can be utilised by a country facing similar kind of problems.

Local church helps Bhutanese refugees settle in

A local church is helping to make the transition to America a little easier for 100 refugees from Bhutan. Midvale Community Lutheran Church in Madison held a ceremony to welcome some of the families who recently arrived and inform the community about what it can still do to help. Lachhu Man Baral and his wife Kala Woti Baral first arrived in America just 10 days ago. They came from the other side of the world, first Bhutan, then to a refugee camp in Nepal. They are Hindu and had to flee a Buddhist government's ethnic cleansing in the 1990s. Now, after 19 years in the refugee camp, the Barals have a new home. Today Midvale Lutheran gave a warm welcome to the refugees, even serving Nepali food for lunch. Midvale and other Lutheran organizations will try to make the transition to America as smooth as possible. "There's learning how to pay your bills on time every month, rent, dealing with your children's school system.... These folks have been through a lot already; they just need to be guided through these first few steps and at the same time access this warm community who seems happy to have them here," said Rebekah Johnson, who helps Bhutanese refugees locate. Church members are excited to teach their new friends about life in Madison and learn a few things from them, too. "Madison has always been such an open community and the more we have opportunities to share like this and realize that we're all humans on Earth and we all have the same thoughts and hopes for our children and the same aspirations for life; it's just terrific," said Bill Kessler, a member of Midvale Lutheran Church. It may not be easy, but Baral says he's grateful for a chance at a better life.

Rangiya traders urge restoration of Bhutan ties

The bilateral relations including trade ties between the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and India have been traditionally close for decades. However, stagnation in business exchange especially at places adjoining east Bhutan border near Rangiya, Nagrijuli, Tamulpur etc; have kept the small businessmen here worried. After signing of the first ever friendship treaty in 1865 between India and Bhutan, relations with Assam had been very conducive. With the eastern part of Bhutan lying very close to Rangiya subdivision in Kamrup district, people had been familiar with the neighbouring country's people, customs, and benefited from the country's trade business.

Darranga Mela, was a hub of different small businesses, which seems to have come to a temporary halt due to various problems mainly because of the insurgency one. Till recently before combined force of Indian and Royal Bhutan Army carried on the 'Operation All Clear' against insurgents of banned ULFA, NDFB, and BLT taking shelter in Bhutan, there was the normal trade between both the countries at Darranga mela site. However after the action both, there was a temporary halt in free economic exchange as before.

Mentionably, it was through Darranga mela here, that essential commodities including rice, oranges, woolen garments etc; were traded. After temporary halt in business. East Bhutan has now opted for West Bengal for procuring various raw, and finished products for its use. Bhutan businessmen have opted for other places for exchange of vital items like dal, clothes and

machineries, etc; from Indian market. Also, many of the local businessmen are concerned here that Rangiya has lost out on trade items like gypsum material from Bhutan, coal, and other at valuable forest goods the exchange of which between Bhutan and to India is going on regularly. Opting distant places for procuring for essential goods from India by Bhutanese people has affected the economic development of this place. As, there was a strong business relationship albeit on a small scale in the border areas, people of Rangiya, Tamulpur, Nagrijuli etc;. Samrupjonghar, Darranga near Bhutan, and at other bordering areas were greatly benefited. Based on the recently held 16th SAARC summit at Thimphu, Royal Bhutan Government and the Government of India should consider strengthening the relations between both the countries and give ample scope of earning of livelihood to the people of both the countries by restoring the business hubs at places like Darranga mela.

Awareness camp: Under the aegis of Social Development Association, a non govt registered body of Bihapara near here, in association with MSMEDI, Guwahati, a day long entrepreneurship awareness meet was held here at Dholkuchi LP school premises recently. Nearly 50 educated unemployed youths of the locality, who participated in the said awareness camp were apprised of different facts relating to entrepreneurship and small scale industries.

The meet was also attended by the former DI of schools, Rangiya Didar Hussain, who also spoke in this regard. National level awardee Hitendra Sarma, village head of Bihapara Rammohan Boro, former principal of Rangiya HS School Paresh Ch Dutta, beside office bearers of the body, and local people were present on the occasion.

MALDIVES

Research and Markets: Maldives - Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband

The Maldives prides itself on having built one of the most advanced telecommunications systems in the region. With the countrys well-developed national network, the capital Mal is particularly well served, as are the tourist resort islands. The critical issue of connectivity to the rest of the world for its relatively small population of less than 350,000 has been addressed with considerable success; this has been further enhanced by the provision of a major submarine cable connection to Sri Lanka; at the same time the opportunity was taken to provide undersea links between the main atolls, thereby substantially strengthening the domestic connectivity. Efficient telecommunications services have been established to all inhabited islands by the national telco, Dhivehi Raajjeyge Gulhun Pvt Ltd (Dhiraagu). Dhiraagu, a joint venture between the government (65%) and Cable & Wireless plc (35%), has played a major role in setting up the countrys infrastructure. The company, despite having been criticised in the past for its high tariff structure, has played an undeniably important role in establishing and delivering telephone services across the archipelago.

Dhiraagu was initially granted an exclusive licence to provide all telecommunications services in the country. With its licence renewal in 1995, the operator was given a more clearly stated mandate to provide telephone access to all inhabited islands by the year 2000. The Dhiraagu monopoly was officially set to run out in 2008. However, the government moved to open up the market earlier than that. The licensing of a second ISP by the government in 2002 signalled its intention to proceed with deregulation ahead of time. A second mobile licence was issued in 2004, but the new mobile operator Wataniya Telecom did not become operational until 2006. Despite the slow start, the introduction of a level of competition quickly saw the telecom market boom. By 2009 Wataniya had more than 100,000 mobile subscribers or around one quarter of the market. At the same time the incumbent was also continuing to vigorously grow its mobile

subscriber base. Mobile penetration in the Maldives had reached a remarkable 150% by early 2010. Both operators had launched 3G services.

Market highlights:

- The Maldives has continued to benefit from its newly competitive market, with overall service improving greatly since the arrival of Wataniya Telecom;
- With Wataniya quickly grabbing a 27% share of the market, the mobile market was continuing to expand, increasing at an annual rate of 20% coming into 2010;
- With Wataniya having launched a Third Generation (3G) service in the Maldives in mid-2008, Dhiraagu began offering a service it labelled 3G Plus in March 2010;
- Mobile penetration in the Maldives reached the 150% milestone in early 2010;
- With the incumbent Dhiraagu also continuing to promote fixed-line services, fixed subscriber numbers have continued to move steadily upwards;
- With a healthy proportion of broadband subscribers (more than 90% of the total Internet subscribers), Internet take up continued to expand; but Internet subscriber penetration was still below 5% coming into 2009;
- Having moved dramatically to a more democratic system of government with elections in 2008, the country found has been continuing to confront difficult economic conditions in 2009/2010 as its all-important tourist industry felt the impact of the global financial crisis;
- An overall slowing in the national economy was not surprisingly affecting the country's telecom sector; nevertheless, despite some slowing of growth, there were many encouraging signs in the way the sector had been responding. Maldives - key telecom parameters - 2009 - 2010
- Category 2009/2010 (e)

Fixed-line services:

- Total number of subscribers 49,100/51,000
- Annual growth 5%/4%
- Fixed-line penetration (population) 15%/16%
- Internet:
- Total number of subscribers 19,800/22,500
- Annual growth 11%/14%
- Internet subscriber penetration (population) 6%/7%
- Mobile services:
- Total number of subscribers 457,800/500,000
- Annual growth 14%/9%
- Mobile penetration (population) 148%/160%

This report provides an overview of the trends and developments in the telecommunications markets in Maldives.

Subjects covered include:

- Key Statistics;
- Market and Industry Overviews;
- Major Operators (Mobile and Fixed)
- Regulatory Environment;
- Infrastructure;
- Mobile Market;

No terrorist group operating in Maldives, says MNDF

No terrorist group has set up a training base in any part of the country, Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) has said on Wednesday. In a press release, MNDF denied reports in Indian media that a terrorist organisation has planned to set up a training camp in an uninhabited island of the Maldives and is attempting to attack India through Maldives. "We have not received information from the Indian government or any intelligence agency regarding the activities of Lashkare-Taiba or any other organisation in Maldives. There is no chance for any terrorist organisation to launch an attack against India or any other country from Maldives," the statement read. We assure [every country] that any organisation would not stand a chance to attack India or any other country through the Maldives." Referring to Indian government, Indian Express on April 27 claimed that the Pakistani terrorist organisation Lashkare-Taiba is attempting to attack India through Maldives and other countries of the region.

Maldives President: China leading in renewable energy

According to statistics provided by the Maldives Tourist Promotion Board (MTPB), China ranked the 8th in the year 2008 with 40,000 of its people choosing Maldives to be their tourist destination. This number has increased by 50,000 in 2009-2010 due to the charter flight that started in September 2009 between Guangzhou and Maldives, making China the 4th biggest contributor to Maldives tourism industry. Operated by China Southern Airlines, this only direct flight connecting China and Maldives is catered by Nanhu Business Travel Limited Company (Guangzhou). It has already sent 15,000 passengers by April 2010. Also this April, Nanhu Business and Paradise Holiday (Hong Kong) jointly hosted the filming tour of a program by Hunan TV, which was starred with many well-known Chinese pop singers. It takes only 6.5 hours now to fly to Maldives from China and the charter flight is running on a twice-a-week basis – every Thursday and Sunday.

Longevity Network

Quote or reproduce the contents of this site, please clearly mark the source "Longevity Network" Maldives, Singapore to share journalism expertise in Commonwealth assisted media workshop
A four-day Commonwealth Media Development Workshop organized in collaboration with the Maldives Journalists Association will be led by two senior editors from Singapore.

"Development journalism media seminars will be held in Malé from 14-17 June 2010," a statement from the Commonwealth Secretariat said. Mr Bhagman Singh, Senior Editor, NewsHub, MediaCorp News, which owns and operates the regional satellite news network, *Channel NewsAsia*, will lead on TV and radio journalism. Mr Jayandra Menon, Deputy Foreign Editor of *The Straits Times*, an English language daily, will share his skills on newspaper and online reporting. Reporting and editing, media law and ethics, media freedom, democracy and international relations, and the role of media in development, are some of the topics on the agenda of the free workshop offered to the Maldives media. The workshop showcases South-South co-operation in the sharing of expertise between Commonwealth countries, said Commonwealth Secretariat Deputy Spokesperson Manoah Esipisu. "The workshop in Maldives brings together two Commonwealth neighbours, Singapore and Maldives, in the sharing of expertise and experiences in media development."

"We have two small states in Commonwealth Asia – one learning from the Singapore experience, the other learning from the Maldives experience. These cross-cultural exchanges will

help to broaden and deepen understanding on journalism and the influence of politics and governance, culture, tradition, environment, education and technology," Mr Esipisu said.

"We hope that the workshop will improve the skills and knowledge of the media in Maldives. We are delighted that Mr Bhagman and Mr Menon have put their substantial experience in reporting Asia and global affairs at the disposal of their colleagues in Maldives, and look to their work in enhancing a sound tradition of media professionalism, leading to greater consistency in the accuracy, fairness and balance of news reports," he added. The Commonwealth Media Development Workshop is open to Maldives nationals working in the news media. Korea and Maldives, For Closer Economic Cooperation Chief of KOTRA, Jo Hwanik and the President of Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed attended a conference to boost economic ties. They discussed about Korean enterprises in the industry of New & Renewable Energy. Mohamed Nasheed who is a world famous environmentalist, came to Korea to receive award at the fourth annual meeting of the Business for Environment Global Summit (B4E) and also to notify the severity in the rise in sea level and climate change.

NEPAL

Tourists hit by Maoist shutdown in Nepal

Buses ferried stranded tourists out of the Nepalese capital Kathmandu on Tuesday and shopkeepers said their premises had been attacked as Maoist protesters enforced the third day of a general strike. Talks between the Maoist party, which has the largest number of seats in parliament, and the ruling coalition have failed to make a breakthrough since opposition supporters massed in the city at the weekend. Much of the country has been paralysed as the left-wing former rebels try to force the government to resign in a stand-off that threatens the Himalayan nation's fragile peace process. Buses carrying stranded tourists were allowed through Maoist roadblocks to the airport, witnesses said, adding that protesters checked that all passengers were foreigners. "We have been organising a shuttle bus service for tourists, to evacuate those who want to leave the country," Sarad Pradhan, a spokesman at the Nepal Tourism Board, told AFP. "Many have already left the city. The protesters have not targeted tourists or vehicles carrying tourists." He said some visitors were stuck on trekking holidays unable to return to Kathmandu, but he was unable to give numbers. Shopkeeper Asmita Thapa, 29, said her premises was one of 15 in one area vandalised by Maoist gangs when she tried to open for business on Tuesday morning. "People need to eat and so I was selling milk and vegetables. All of a sudden, a mob of around 25 came and started shouting and breaking tables and glasses," she said. "I don't know how the Maoists can call this a peaceful movement of the people. We are suffering. We are not happy to be closed inside our houses and if this goes on for long, there will be a revolt against the Maoists." Shops, schools and offices were all shut as opposition supporters staged mass rallies and threatened anyone who defied the strike. Maoist guerrillas fought a bloody civil war against the Nepalese state for 10 years before a peace agreement was signed in 2006, and the left-wing rebels then won elections in 2008 and held power for eight months. Lawmakers now have until May 28 to complete a new constitution that analysts say is crucial to ensuring lasting peace between the Maoists and the state -- but few expect the deadline to be met. Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, a moderate left-winger, has refused to resign and said the Maoists were damaging Nepal's future by imposing the strike. Minendra Rijal, the minister of federal affairs, said the government was working for a solution to end the shutdown. "Everything has to be negotiated. They cannot demand the resignation of the prime minister based on street protests," he said.

"The public want to open their shops, go to work, and defy the strike, but we don't want to do anything that would provoke the protesters. We have not lost hope. We believe we can solve the deadlock." Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who led the rebels during the decade of fighting in which at least 16,000 people were killed, has said the strike which began Sunday is indefinite. Dahal, known often by his nom-de-guerre Prachanda, was prime minister until May last year when his Maoist-led government fell after the president overruled its decision to sack the head of the army. "We are heading towards victory. We will not quit until we reach our goal," Agni Sapkota, a senior Maoist, told the crowds. "We want this to be over soon."

The coalition government has faced months of Maoist protests over demands that the left-wing former rebels disband the paramilitary structure of the Young Communist League and return seized property. Lawmakers are also struggling to reach an agreement on integrating nearly 20,000 former Maoist fighters languishing in UN-monitored camps around Nepal.

Nepal strike Day 3: Food, fuel running short

Armed police escorted fuel and food trucks into Nepal's capital Tuesday on the third day of a crippling general strike called by former Maoist rebels demanding the prime minister's resignation, officials said. Home Ministry official Jaya Mukunda Khanal said a few trucks loaded with essential goods were brought into the city during the early hours of Tuesday. They were escorted by police vehicles on the highways and arrived without incident. Maoist supporters on Tuesday vandalized several shops in Katmandu that had defied the strike and opened for business, Khanal said. In the capital, Katmandu, thousands of Maoist supporters continued Tuesday to protest on the streets and enforce the general strike. Thousands of police in riot gear also kept close watch. The opposition Maoists have imposed an indefinite general strike — banning all travel and preventing businesses and schools from opening under threat of violence — since Sunday demanding Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal resign and a new Maoist-led government take power. The strike has shut down most ground transport, schools, and businesses, grinding daily business down to a standstill. Maoists have allowed food shops to open for two hours in the evening, but stock is running low since the strike forbids trucks from bringing in goods on the highway or to the shops from wholesalers. The government was also working on a plan to transport people who need to be immediately moved such as those who need medical attention, Khanal said. The strike comes as Nepal is struggling to draft a new constitution by a May 28 deadline, when the term of the Constituent Assembly — which is to draft the charter — expires. The Maoists and the political parties in power have failed to reach any agreement despite several meetings between their leaders on Sunday and Monday. The standoff has raised fears of renewed violence in Nepal, where the Maoists ended their decade-old insurgency and joined a peace process in 2006. They won elections in 2008 and briefly led a coalition government, but a dispute over the army chief's firing split the coalitio

Thousands of people in Nepal protest Maoists' crippling strike

In the largest protest against the Maoists imposed indefinite strike, tens of thousands of apolitical protesters today poured onto the streets of the Nepalese capital, handing out a 48-hour ultimatum to the former rebels to end what they called a virtual siege in the country. Protesters ranging from business and professional communities rallied in the heart of the capital today to show their

disgust at the Maoists' strike that has paralysed the country since May 2 as they felt the pinch in the form of shortage of essential items.

Thousands of people, including civil society members, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, engineers, professors, journalists, artists and intellectuals asked the Maoists to withdraw their long and painful strike within 48 hours. They also called on all political parties to forge a consensus and find a way out of the standoff by peaceful means and dialogue. Shouting and carrying banners "enough is enough", the rallyists said people want no more strikes, shutdown and agitations. In a sharp dig at the Maoists, the speakers at the rally said the Maoists through their strike were keeping "28 million Nepalese people hostage". Today's outpour, followed smaller clashes and confrontations in the capital and outlying districts over the last two days as the Maoists called indefinite strike entered its sixth day paralysing life and movement in the country. The strike has led to essential supplies including foodstuffs and medicines running low and left thousands of tourists stranded in the absence of movement of public transport. Nepalese political leaders are struggling to meet a May 28 deadline to finish the drafting of a new constitution as stipulated by the peace process that brought the civil war to an end in 2006. The Maoists, who have around 35% of the seats in parliament, want the government disbanded, followed by the formation of a new coalition government led by them to rescue the peace process and draft a new constitution.

Chanting "we want peace and constitution" the anti-Maoist protestors said political parties should come to the negotiating table to break the political impasse. Addressing the peaceful rally, President of Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries Kush Kumar Joshi said "we don't want strike and shut downs, what we need is peace and consensus". He underlined the need for the political parties and the government to come to a negotiating table within two days to resolve the crisis through dialogue. "We want peace and constitution, therefore, the government and political parties should forge consensus and cooperation at the earliest to find a way out", he said. The peace rally was organised with massive public participation despite Maoists' threat. The Maoist cadres have obstructed people at different places to prevent them from participating in the rally. Similar rallies were also held in different parts of the country to promote peace and harmony and to call for the end of the strike. Clashes broke out between the Maoists and the youth wing of the ruling communist party, the Youth Force. Security forces had to fire teargas shells and resort to baton charge to control the situation. About a dozen people, including the Maoists and policemen, were injured when the protesters clashed with Maoists in different parts of the capital while they were dispersing. Meanwhile, leaders of the three major political parties -- the CPN-Maoist, the Nepali Congress and the prime minister's Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) -- met but failed to reach an agreement to end the standoff. The government today asked the Maoists to withdraw the six-day old agitation and come forward for dialogue to resolve the deadlock through constitutional means. "The government is making efforts to resolve the issue through dialogue and consensus and believes that the problem will be resolved through democratic procedures," the government said after an emergency Cabinet meeting chaired by prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal.

It underlined the government's effort to provide relief to the people suffering due to scarcity of daily goods. It said the efforts made by the government to protect the rights of the people to do their business, to run factories and free movement will show its results soon.

The US has asked the formal rebels to end their strike and appealed to political parties in the country to resolve the issue through political dialogue. "We call on the Maoists to end or suspend their strike and ease the hardship people are facing due to the strike," US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia Robert O Blake said. The standoff has raised fears of renewed

violence in Nepal, where the Maoists ended their decade-old insurgency and joined a peace process in 2006

Delhi alert after three Lashkar modules busted

The weekend alert in Delhi followed the busting of three separate Lashkar-e-Toiba modules over last week across Nepal, Jammu and Kashmir

and Hyderabad. While the former two modules were specifically tasked to hit crowded places in Delhi and were being directed by a common Pakistan-based handler, the Hyderabad module, led by local Lashkar operative Zia-ul-Haq, was on a mission to bomb multinational Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu's HITEC City offices in the Andhra capital. Umar Zargar, a resident of Srinagar in J&K, was arrested last week after the intelligence agencies intercepted a call made to him wherein a Pakistan-based handler was heard passing on instructions for setting off explosives in crowded market places of the national Capital on Saturday. Around the same time, another Kashmiri youth was picked up by the Nepalese law enforcement agencies for plotting strikes in India for Lashkar-e-Toiba. The Kashmiri, who is settled in Nepal and has a Nepali wife, was picked up after he was found to be in touch with the same Pakistan-based terrorist who was instructing Zargar in Srinagar. He is now in custody of the Nepalese authorities. With the busting of a third module — comprising Hyderabad resident Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq — on the basis of a tip-off from the National Investigation Agency (NIA), the security establishment has also thwarted an LeT bid to carry out a terror strike at the HITEC City in Hyderabad. Zia ul Haq, son of a well-placed businessman based in Saudi Arabia, had visited Saudi Arabia way back in 1995 and got indoctrinated by Lashkar commanders based in there. He was subsequently sent to Pakistan in 2002 for terror training. After the training, he came back to India and took a regular job as a driver in a taxi service hired by Deloitte, one of the world's biggest auditing firm. He used his access to Deloitte offices in Hyderabad to carry out a detailed reconnaissance of the facility. It was only in 2007 that Zia-ul-Haq collected grenades and pistols from a Lashkar conduit for a possible attack. A few weeks ago, his module, after years of being a sleeper cell, was activated and tasked with bombing Deloitte's Hyderabad-based office in HITEC City. NIA, however, got whiff of this and tipped off the Hyderabad police which nabbed Zia-ul-Haq last week

Press Freedom Day Observed In Nepal

KATHMANDU, May 3 (Bernama) -- The World Press Freedom Day is being observed in Nepal Monday with the slogan "Freedom of Information: Right to Information". In conjunction with the occasion, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) organised a morning procession rally on Monday. FNJ president Dharmendra Jha, in a message on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day, said that the status of the press freedom in Nepal is deteriorating and the free press and the journalists are facing risk. "I wish the World Press Freedom Day further inspire the Nepali journalists to be dedicated to their duty," he said. Similarly, giving a message on the occasion, Minister for Information and Communications Shankar Pokharel has said the present government is fully committed to the people's right to be informed. Minister Pokharel also said the government is working to protect and consolidate freedom of press and speech while fully remaining committed to these ideals that are the foundation of democracy.

1st woman to climb tallest peaks returns safely

South Korean who became the first woman to scale the world's 14 highest peaks returned to the Nepalese capital from Mount Annapurna on Monday, saying she's ready to take a break from mountaineering. "The last few years have been too tiring, now I am going to rest," 44-year-old Oh Eun-sun told reporters in Katmandu. Oh scaled Annapurna last week, the last of the 14 peaks above 26,247 feet (8,000 meters) she needed to climb to set the mark. She reached the summit — 26,545 feet (8,091 meters) above sea level — 13 years after she scaled her first Himalayan mountain, Gasherbrum II, in 1997. She scaled Everest in 2004. Oh said Monday she would take a break from climbing for the next three or four years before deciding what to do next. Oh conquered Annapurna on the same day as Spanish climber Tolo Calafat, who fell sick at (7,500 meters) and later died while waiting for help. Oh defended her team's decision not to attempt to rescue Calafat, saying they didn't know he was sick until they had returned to camp.

"We reached the summit around 3 p.m. and the Spanish climber got there an hour later. By the time we got back down to Camp 4 we were all exhausted," she said. Oh said she "really wanted" to help the climber but she and her Sherpa guides "were not in a state to climb up the slopes and rescue him." Oh said it would have taken them at least seven hours to reach the Spaniard.

Climbers say rescues at high altitudes where oxygen levels are low and trails are icy and steep are almost impossible and could put more lives in danger. Oh's record was not without controversy. Her rival, Edurne Pasaban of Spain, has questioned whether Oh reached the summit of Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest peak, at all. Oh said Monday that she has proof of her climb and has no plans to scale the peak again. Both the Nepalese government and Nepal Mountaineering Association have said they believe Oh has climbed Kanchenjunga.

Maoists thrash 4 journalists in Nepal

Nepal's Maoists have thrashed and beaten up four journalists while enforcing their strike in the national capital despite their commitment to respect press freedom. Sudarshan Ghimire of the *Shikshak Monthly* was beaten up by Maoists at Maharajgunj while he was riding a motorbike, according to the editor of the magazine Rajendra Dahal. They also thrashed Arjun Bista in Bhaktapur, Gyanendra Niraula in Jhapa and Kashiram Sharma in Surkhet. The journalists were hit by sticks and rods by the Maoist cadre. Meanwhile, Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries, journalists, professionals and local people of Kathmandu have decided to stage a grand peace rally in Kathmandu on Friday to show protest against the Maoists' indefinite strike as it has severely affected the normal life.

Nepal's political instability annoys China

When enough becomes enough even silent regional players make their annoyance clear. Improper handling of differences and failing to reinstate peace by Nepal's political parties has made China restive. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu, reports Xinhua News Agency, told a regular press briefing Tuesday, May 4, 2010 that "instability and conflict in Nepal will have its regional impact". We sincerely hope the Nepalese political forces will take the national interest into consideration, hold dialogue, coordinate, and seek a political consensus. China calls on the parties to properly handle differences, promote the hard-won peace process and realize political stability and economic development at an early date. It is what is in Nepal's fundamental interest, and what is good for regional peace and stability", said the Chinese Spokeswoman. It has become clear by now that China is pretty worried over Nepal's continued political

hotchpotch which, by implication, China concludes that a politically unstable Nepal may pose a great threat to the region including its own territories that adjoin Nepal.

To recall, the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Qiu Guohang, April 21, 2010, while talking to the members of Nepal-China media Forum had said that China wished to see a politically stable Nepal. It is just after fifteen days of Ambassador Qiu's Kathmandu remarks, the authorities in Beijing appear to have become "sensitive" analyzing the continued political unrest in Nepal. The Dragon's annoyance is logical. Now that Nepal's northern neighbor has exhibited its serious concerns over the prevailing political fluidity, it remains to be seen when and how Nepal's self declared "big brother" in the South, India takes the increasing political fragility here?

Nepal Maoists to retaliate with equal force if attacked

Following forceful retaliation from the locals and cadres of ruling parties against the indefinite strike called by the former rebel party, Unified Maoists, at various centers of the country, the party of the former rebels have instead decided to adopt the policy of "Retaliation if attacked." *Aayi Lagey...Jai Lagney..*

The Unified Maoists' Party Standing Committee meeting held twice on Thursday May 6, 2010 decided that if the cadres of ruling party carried out planned attacks on the 'peaceful protests', the Maoists' cadres will be forced to retaliate with equal force. While the meeting condemned the planned attacks, the party also concluded that the Indefinite General strike would be made more peaceful. "We will not make the first move, but if we are attacked we will retaliate, it is normal", said senior vice chairman Mohan Baidya Pokharel 'Kiran' talking to the media. Newton's Third Law of Motion will apparently be practiced soon. Meanwhile, talking to a local FM radio, the Kathmandu in charge of Young Communist League (YCL), erratic youth wing of Maoists' Party, Mr. Sagar threatened that they will not let the attackers escape even after the general strike came to a halt. "We have found that the cadres of NC and UML are involved in the attack. It will be impossible for them to escape from us even after the general strike comes to an end". Hairraising declarations and avowals indeed.

Senior UML leaders ask PM Nepal to resign

In a further set back to embattled Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal already grappling with Maoist campaign to unseat him from his post, influential leaders from his own party CPN (UML) have urged him to give a way out to the current political crisis by resigning from his post. Around 60 CPN-UML leaders and activists including senior party leader Bam Dev Gautam have submitted a memorandum to party chairman Jhala Nath Khanal demanding PM Nepal's resignation. The memorandum was submitted on Saturday when the Maoists were organizing a massive show of force in the streets of Kathmandu and other major towns across the country on the occasion of May Day celebration. In the memorandum signed by party's central committee members Sahana Pradhan, Kiran Gurung, Rajendra Shrestha, Prashuram Meghi Gurung, Radha Gyawali, Ram Prit Paswan and other leaders it has been stated that PM Nepal needs to step down immediately to give a way out to the current crisis. They have said it is inappropriate for PM Nepal to continue to remain in power when the current situation looks unfavorable for the constitution to be drafted on time and the peace process reaching to a successful conclusion. They further said that the prime minister's address to the nation on Saturday worked to further worsen the political crisis and escalate the conflict in the country than create an enabling atmosphere for consensus and understanding. "We strongly advise Prime Minister comrade Madhav Kumar Nepal to immediately resign from his post and pave the way for national consensus," the UML

leaders said in the memorandum, and advised the Maoists to relinquish their ultra leftist view and Nepali Congress of status quo mentality to forge consensus and unity by rising above partisan interest

PM Nepal tells diplomats govt ready to take difficult decision to end crisis

Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal on Wednesday tried to allay concerns of foreign diplomats in Nepal about the complicated political situation of the country. In a meeting with some 44 diplomats and heads of donor agencies in Nepal at his official residence in Baluwatar, PM Nepal said that he was ready to take difficult decisions to give a way out to the deepening political crisis. He, however, said that the unconstitutional steps taken by the main opposition Unified CPN (Maoist) to unseat the government is hindering attempts to resolve the problem facing the country. On the occasion, the diplomats expressed their serious concern over the worsening situation of the country. They complained that the growing instability in the country has put their people coming to visit Nepal in serious risk and warned that if the situations persist they will be compelled to issue travel advisories barring their citizens from traveling to Nepal. Stating that there is no alternative than to forge consensus among the parties to end the political crisis, the diplomats stressed on more dialogue and understanding. "We advised the prime minister that consensus is needed among parties to end the current political crisis," US ambassador for Nepal Scott H DeLisi told media-persons after the meeting. During the meeting, PM Nepal also assured that the UNMIN's term, which expires on May 15, will be extended. On the occasion, PM Nepal also requested the Unified CPN (Maoist) to call off its general strike and sit for talks

General strike taking its toll on economy

The ongoing general strike enforced by UCPN (Maoist) has afflicted several aspects of economy. The continued interruption in the supply has fuelled the price of commodities. The general strike is going to further push the inflation rate, which, although, has moderated to 11.2 per cent by the mid-March from 12 per cent of mid-February. During the first three months of current fiscal year, the inflation had moderated but from mid-November, the price started rising steadily from 9.3 per cent and reached 12 per cent till mid-February - the eighth month of the current fiscal year, according to Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB). The fluctuation in inflation is determined by the prices of food and beverage. There has been double digit inflation in the food and beverage group while non-food and service sector group's price was moving up from 2.1 per cent - in the beginning of the fiscal year - to more than doubled to 5.9 per cent at the end of the eighth month. The shortage of food grains and vegetables in the market has fuelled the price hike in recent days. The general consumers are bound to bear the burnt of this stir in the coming months in the form of price rise in essential consumer. On the other side, the indefinite strike is likely to make the revenue collections target set for the 10th month of the current fiscal year elusive. As the stir has severely hampered overseas trade, the collection of customs is also facing setback. The closure of markets, manufacturing and services have wrecked collections of value added tax (VAT) and excise duty. This will surely hurt income tax collections too. The Finance Ministry has itself admitted collections of revenues over the last four days have hit rock-bottom and collections from VAT and excise too are very insignificant. The government is planning to collect around Rs 15 billion in revenue this month (mid-April to mid-May). To achieve this target, the government is required to collect revenue at a growth rate of 24 percent. Till May 30, the collection had posted a robust growth of 28 percent. However, with the intensification of the Maoist agitation from May 1, it has gone downhill.

Chaos and Crisis in Nepal

Chaos, emergency rule and constitutional crisis loom large in Nepal as former Maoist guerrillas begin an indefinite general strike and the government refuses to step down, Sudeshna Sarkar reports for ISN Security Watch. By Sudeshna Sarkar in Kathmandu for ISN Security Watch

Nepal is in a state of lockdown. A young woman sits outside a maternity hospital in Kathmandu, the Nepalese capital, with nowhere to go and no chance of returning to her hometown with her newborn baby. Hundreds of thousands of others are also stranded amid a nationwide general strike launched by the opposition Maoist party. “We did not want to call this strike, we wanted peace and consensus, but it became imperative,” Maoist chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who led a 10-year guerrilla war against the government before signing a peace pact in 2006, said during his May Day address at a mass rally in the capital on the occasion of the 121st International Workers’ Day. “But the government does not want to conclude the peace process and write a new constitution. So we need to have this third people’s movement to create tremendous public pressure.” The nascent Himalayan republic, which had been expecting to boost its war-torn economy by drawing 1 million tourists next year, has been dealt a deadly blow by the strike. The two main highways connecting the land-locked country with neighboring India and China have been cut off by cadres wielding bamboo sticks. There is no traffic on the roads save an occasional UN or diplomatic vehicle, ambulances and other essential service vehicles, which have been exempted from the strike.

Shops, industries and educational institutions remain closed. Baton-wielding mobs have smashed shop fronts for daring to defy the strike, set vehicles on fire and clashed with security forces in several towns. Tourists are planning quick departures.

Prime minister under fire

The Maoists are demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, who heads an alliance of 10 parties and has the support of nearly a dozen more. “This is the most corrupt and ineffectual government in the history of Nepal,” Dahal, better known by his nom de guerre Prachanda (‘awesome’), told ISN Security Watch. “It was ready to enter into a clandestine agreement with the Indian government and barter away national security. Any other government would have resigned on moral grounds after the deal was scrapped by parliament. The PM is a man who lost the election from two constituencies. Only the prime minister’s resignation can create an atmosphere for dialogue.” Once the prime minister steps down, Prachanda says there should be a new government headed by his own party since it emerged as the largest after the elections, with nearly 30 percent of seats in parliament. Only this new “national” government, he insists, can deliver a new constitution. But so far, the prime minister has ruled out resigning under pressure. “It is undemocratic to try to topple a constitutional government through street warfare,” says Commerce and Supplies Minister Rajendra Mahato, whose Sadbhavana Party is an ally of the embattled prime minister. “The PM has the support of the majority of MPs. If the Maoists want to unseat him, they have to show a majority in the house. But they have failed to do that. The other option is consensus. We are willing to reach a negotiated settlement but for that, the Maoists have to call off their strike first,” Mahato told ISN Security Watch.

The ruling parties have their own conditions. “There can be a change in the government,” Yubaraj Gyawali, former minister and senior leader of the PM’s Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist Leninist, told ISN Security Watch. “But the Maoists have to empty their guerrilla cantonments first. They have to also dismantle the Young Communist League, which is actually paramilitary in nature. They have to return the public properties they captured during the

insurgency.”The Maoists’ guerrilla army - the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) - has proved to be one of the most serious obstacles to a negotiated settlement. There are nearly 19,600 PLA combatants, who, as per the peace pact of 2006, were to have been inducted into the national army. However, the army as well as the ruling parties are now against the merger after a leaked video tape showed Prachanda claiming that his party had inflated the PLA’s strength in order to control the army. Now, the ruling parties say they are willing to take about 3,500 PLA fighters in the army while the Maoists are still pressing for an en masse induction.

Constitutional crisis

While the deadlock and the strike continue, Nepal is hurtling toward the most severe constitutional crisis it has ever known in a turbulent history marked by massacres, coups, two pro-democracy protests and the overthrow of its royal family. The peace agreement and the ensuing interim constitution promised that by 28 May the country would get a new constitution, which, for the first time, would be written by the people themselves. Now it is certain that the new constitution will not materialize by the deadline. Constitutional experts and political observers are divided as to what is likely to happen after the deadline. “The constituent assembly that was elected to write the new constitution - and also serves as the interim parliament - would lose validity,” Shambhu Thapa, former chief of Nepal Bar Association, told ISN Security Watch. “If there is no new constitution, the interim constitution becomes null and void, parliament gets dissolved, the government ends and there is utter chaos.” But the government can extend its term by six months if there is a civil war or financial crisis or any other national emergency. “My feeling is that the government will announce a period of emergency and extend its term by six months,” said Thapa. “However, we recommend there should be fresh elections to choose a new constituent assembly.” Should that happen, the Maoists would lose the most. “In the past, the Maoists were a banned guerrilla outfit,” Mahato said. “They gained acceptance and respectability after the 2008 election that saw them emerge as the largest party in parliament. If parliament is dissolved, they lose that status. Since they are not in the government, they will have no standing left at all. The only option for everyone is to reach an agreement and amend the constitution.”

A provision in the interim constitution says the constitutional deadline could be extended by six months if two-thirds of the 601-member parliament agrees. However, the ruling parties cannot attain this goal unless the Maoists also agree.

The question is, will they? In an increasingly catch-22 situation, Prachanda has ruled out calling off the strike unless the prime minister resigns first. “We will continue the strike till that happens,” he told ISN Security Watch. “This time, we have the power to do so.”

But it could be an empty threat. There are reports of protesters abandoning the strike after outbreaks of diarrhoea, dysentery and other illnesses due to lack of adequate food and drinking water. Anti-strike protests by farmers and daily wage earners have also started. And there is growing pressure from civil society and the international community to call off the strike. “It is increasingly clear that the current situation cannot hold,” Richard Bennett, chief of the UN rights agency in Nepal, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in a statement to the media. “Nepal’s political leadership on all sides needs to come together to find a peaceful solution to the current stalemate, and avoid an extended strike that will have a negative impact on the ability of all citizens to exercise their rights.”

SRILANKA

Long struggle for displaced Sri Lankan Tamils

In northern Sri Lanka, 80,000 war-displaced people still live in army-run camps, waiting while their devastated land is cleared of mines and jungle. Tens of thousands are now beginning to

resettle near the homes they fled from, but it is not easy, says the BBC's Charles Haviland. It is early morning but sweat pours from the brows of labourers on a railway track north of Vavuniya. With a roar of exertion, they heave a piece of rail into place with a loud clanging of hammers and crowbars. These men are literally rebuilding the Sri Lankan railway. It is part of what the government calls the "northern spring" - the reconstruction of northern Sri Lanka's infrastructure after the war which ended a year ago. Just through the trees, others are rebuilding their own lives. About 15 years after fleeing the villages round here, they have come home from the refugee camps but found their old homes vanished, destroyed by war.

Grief

In the village of Paranattahal, Subramaniam brings in his cattle at dusk. His face is etched with grief and trauma. His wife was killed in shelling in the war's last days as they cowered in a bunker in the final conflict zone in the north-east. Both his son-in-law and son are now detained by the government, suspected of links with the defeated Tamil Tigers. He can visit his son, who is in a government "rehabilitation" programme, but he doesn't know when he will be out. He and his daughter have been discharged from the government camps with the bare minimum to start afresh. Subramaniam is very happy to be on his old land even though his house was demolished by the army as the frontline drew closer. From the camps they were dropped at the town council, registered, and then took a bus to the village. Later they were given 16 tin sheets for construction - but, he says, "that wasn't enough to do anything, so I went to the forest, cut this timber and made this little house." There are two rooms, a clay stove and utensils drying outside - and the cattle. It is very basic but he and his daughter are regaining an independence they have not had for years. On a small plot they are growing vegetables. Smoke rises from the chimneys.

In Nochchimoddai nearby, some of the new dwellings are simply a tin room on four sticks without any covering for the earth. One school is built from shiny new corrugated iron and a roof thatched with coconut leaves. It is not clear when there will be the resources to build stronger structures.

Fund shortage

Some returnees are restoring and rebuilding a destroyed well. They can use it themselves and for this work they also get a bit of cash from a local non-governmental organisation. They need it. Because there is currently a shortage of international donor funds to the war-displaced Tamils, the \$220 grant offered to returnees is, for now, suspended. Like Subramaniam, many villagers say they are glad to be back on home soil. But they do have problems. "Because the land is being cleared, there's not much jungle cover," says Nagappan. "Soldiers are deployed everywhere, too. So the women cannot go to the toilet. Toilets are urgently needed now. We need water, too. We'll be thankful if these needs can be fulfilled immediately." Others have tried to grow crops but many plants have died as the rain has failed. Those still living in the huge camps west of Vavuniya cannot farm. They are getting by in other ways. It is still extremely difficult for the BBC to visit the camps but we meet IDPs who have come into the town on temporary exit permits.

Aid for sale

Market stalls have sprung up under bright umbrellas. But in among the usual fruit and vegetables and cheap clothing there is a curious sight - big sacks of flour, lentils and rice with the stamp of aid agencies on them. "Not to be sold or exchanged" say sacks marked "USAID - From the American People". It is ignored. The refugees are here to sell their camp rations so they can get a greater variety of fresh food with the cash.

The funding crunch is making life in the camps tougher. United Nations agencies now depend on a special emergency fund to finance the camps and those resettling. One woman, Vijayakumari, is selling everything from sanitary towels to razors to tins of chickpeas - all provided as aid, some that she has bought from other displaced people. For her and others in the camps, the main wish is to leave. "Life inside the camps is very difficult," she says. "These days we only get the absolute basics." In the evening in Paranattahal, Sinhalese soldiers and former Tamil refugees play a good-humoured game of cricket. Here they seem to get on well. There are army camps scattered around the north. Critics of the government accuse them of excessively militarising post-war northern Sri Lanka. But the military spokesman, Prasad Samarasinghe, insists that they have to prevent any possible resurgence of militancy and says they will in time give way to the police. "Development work is going to come. Investments are going to come. The people should need security for those developments. Investors will not come if you don't have security," he says. As the development and investment starts coming in, it is clear that more everyday and basic needs must urgently be attended to as well.

IMF urges Sri Lanka reforms to get loan moving again

The International Monetary Fund urged the Sri Lankan government on Wednesday to speed up fiscal reforms and produce a more comprehensive deficit cutting plan if wants to get a multi-billion dollar loan back on track."The disbursement of the next tranche (of the loan) is linked most importantly with the budget," Koshy Mathai, the IMF resident representative for Sri Lanka, told Reuters in an interview."What we looking for is the budget and meaningful steps towards reducing the deficit, and also doing it in an economically sensible way, raising revenue in a sustainable way, introducing sensible tax reforms and cutting inefficient expenditures."Mathai said the IMF was not demanding immediate results today or tomorrow but wanted to see a firm plan over the medium term.The IMF in February delayed the release of a third tranche of the \$2.6 billion loan after the government overshot its 2009 budget deficit target. The shortfall rose to an eight-year high of 9.7 percent, according to the finance ministry, well above the original target of 7 percent.The IMF had said it would disburse the next tranche if Sri Lanka lays out concrete plans for fiscal consolidation in its budget after the April elections. The loan was approved last July to help Colombo avert a balance of payments crisis.But the government said last week it would only introduce fiscal reforms including tax changes in its 2011 budget, not this year's as it had previously pledged.Economists and analysts say the IMF loan is important in maintaining investor confidence in the \$40 billion economy as the country works to recover from a 25-year civil war

Sri Lanka risks losing the peace

The government is not addressing Tamil grievances that led to war in the first place

SOON after they killed him, the Sri Lankan government sent text messages to mobile phones across the country heralding the demise of Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of militant group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam.In case anyone missed the point -- or considered his death an elaborate hoax -- footage of Prabhakaran's lifeless body was aired extensively on television. A bright crimson wound on his forehead marked the spot where Prabhakaran's life, and the separatist movement he founded, ended.These days you have to travel a long way to find Tamils who think Prabhakaran is still alive, although it was a fairly common belief in the immediate aftermath of his death.

But they are there. In a village in the country's north, The Weekend Australian encountered a young Tamil woman who was convinced the corpulent paramilitary leader was not only alive but readying himself for the final stages of the conflict. Start of sidebar. Skip to end of sidebar.

End of sidebar. Return to start of sidebar. Forced to fight by the Tigers in the closing stage of the war, and hideously wounded for her troubles, the young woman's eyes danced when the subject turned to Prabhakaran. "Tamil people are not happy because they still believe the leader is still alive and the fight will start soon in [Batticaloa]," she said. "The leader wants to get together the community because the Tamils are suffering because Sinhalese are running the country. Mr Prabhakaran wants to change this attitude." That's not going to happen. But in the young woman's misguided optimism there is a concealed truth: the LTTE may be dead but the grievances from which it drew its strength remain alive. More than 12 months after the end of Sri Lanka's bloody conflict there is growing concern among analysts that the reconciliation efforts needed to prevent the resurrection of Tamil militancy are being neglected. For Australia, this is not a neutral question. Roughly 20 per cent of the boatpeople who have so far arrived on our shores have been Sri Lankan, mostly Tamil. While their passage has been facilitated by the profit-driven smuggling networks that have exploited Australia's asylum policies, the market has been fed by a widespread sense of disenfranchisement among Tamil Sri Lankans.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa won overwhelmingly both the presidential and parliamentary polls earlier this year. His main domestic rival, general Sarath Fonseka, the man who prosecuted the war against the LTTE, is facing charges of corruption and sedition. As a result, the president's authority in Sri Lanka is unrivalled. "There is a real opportunity for Rajapaksa to be a statesman," one diplomat told The Weekend Australian. And yet Rajapaksa has shown little appetite for meaningful reconciliation. The prescription favoured by most, a devolution of power to allow greater autonomy in the Tamil regions -- similar to the Indonesia model -- has been ruled out. Instead, foreign investment has been concentrated in the country's south, Rajapaksa's Sinhalese base. Shanaka Jayasekara was one of five directors of Sri Lanka's peace secretariat, the co-ordinating body charged with implementing the Norwegian-brokered 2002 ceasefire. He says since the war ended in May last year the government has mostly concerned itself with reconstructing the battle-affected areas in the north and northeast of the country. "That's definitely required," Jayasekara told The Weekend Australian. "But that was not the reason the LTTE and the Tamil militants went to war. They felt that there was some level of inequality and they were trying to correct that." There hasn't been any initiative to address those issues. Jayasekara says there is a very strong risk Tamils will turn to militarism once more if their grievances are left unaddressed. "What the Sri Lankan government has eliminated is the military response to the ethnic issue," he says. "The Rajapaksa administration now has the opportunity to revise or reform the constitution, which would bring in some concessions for the Tamil areas and Tamil community." One senior Australian source familiar with Sri Lankan politics says the fall of the LTTE and the micro-state it established in the northeast of the country has led to a widespread feeling of despondency among Tamils. "There [is] a feeling that this country is not for us," the source says. It is that feeling that has been helping to sell boat tickets to Australia. But now that the Australian government has said it will start rejecting Sri Lankan refugee claims because of the improved humanitarian situation in their country, the question is: is it safe for Tamils in Sri Lanka?

Most agree that it is. There is a common misconception in Australia, fed in part by the Tamil diaspora, that Tamils are subject to acute, daily persecution in Sri Lanka. They are not.

Tamils number about 12 per cent of Sri Lanka's 20 million people. (Sinhalese comprise 74 per cent). Most Tamils live in Colombo, Sri Lanka's raffish southern capital. They exist side by side with the Sinhalese majority, studying, working and prospering.

Australia has so far returned about 20 Tamils to Sri Lanka, most to the Colombo region. Australian authorities maintain a discrete watching brief on deported Sri Lankans, although The Weekend Australian understands the Australian government harbours no real concerns about their safety. Jayasekara says there is no direct threat to returning Tamils.

"If they have no LTTE connections, I think it's relatively safe," he says. "From what I understand the government is not going after people who are just Tamils for the sake of Tamils. But if they have affiliation with the LTTE, then the government would have some concerns."

In the north, the situation is more complicated. There, many Tamils are victims of war and trauma or are displaced. The northern regions of Sri Lanka are battle-scarred and dilapidated.

One senior humanitarian source in the country describes the present situation as fragile.

"Let's not forget that the conflict ended a year ago," the source says. "Many, many other countries take much, much longer to get to the point where they are at present. The government has done a lot. That's not enough." Tamils have long complained they are victims of institutionalised prejudice in Sri Lanka, much in the same way Malay Chinese have been discriminated against by Malays. During the war they were more likely to be stopped and checked at security checkpoints. There were frequent reports of harassment by the security forces or paramilitary groups. During the final stages of the war, the Sri Lankan government showed precious little restraint in its pursuit of the LTTE, freely shelling civilian areas, although the civilian death toll was greatly augmented thanks to the LTTE's tactic of using non-combatants as human shields. Secretary of the Australasian Federation of Tamil Associations, Victor Rajakulendran, says Sri Lankan Tamils harbour little hope the Rajapaksa government is serious about reconciliation. He sees the president's decision to appoint three of his brothers to key government posts, including the defence department, as significant for Tamils. "[The] message is loud and clear," he told The Australian. "Whatever I give you, you have to accept. That is the message. Already Sinhalese of the area is happening." Rajakulendran agrees there is risk new Tamil militant groups will emerge to pick up the standard dropped by Prabhakaran and the LTTE. He is not alone in that view. As the young girl with the dancing eyes puts it: "Mr Prabhakaran doesn't want to see Tamil people being beggars living in tents"

Sri Lanka to review war-time abuses

Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse yesterday announced plans to review the final phase of the battle against Tamil Tiger rebels last year. In a statement, he said he would appoint a commission that would also recommend measures to prevent a return to conflict. But he stopped short of calling it a war crimes probe - amid allegations that surrendering rebels were killed while thousands perished in the crossfire or were deliberately targeted. His statement came as former army chief Sarath Fonseka said he was ready to testify before any international tribunal and vowed to expose anyone guilty of war crimes. Colombo has refused to allow any independent foreign investigation into the alleged rights abuses.

Sri Lanka scales down state of emergency

Sri Lanka's parliament on Wednesday voted to scale back tough state of emergency laws that were first introduced 27 years ago to deal with separatist Tamil rebels. Government troops finally defeated the Tamil Tiger guerrillas a year ago after a massive military offensive and the country

is now beginning to recover from the decades of ethnic fighting. Prime Minister D. M. Jayaratne also told parliament on Wednesday that the government would set up a reconciliation commission to foster ethnic unity between the majority Sinhala and minority Tamil ethnic groups. "The commission is expected to prevent the communities falling into an unfortunate situation again," the prime minister said. The assembly in Colombo voted to reduce some of the strictest provisions of the state of emergency, which has been extended monthly since 1983 to give sweeping powers to security forces. Soldiers will now have reduced powers to carry out search operations, while the police will lose the right to ask for details of householders in any part of the island. The authorities previously required residents to register all overnight visitors at the nearest police station. Parliament also reduced the period that a suspect can be held in custody without being produced before a magistrate from 18 months to three months, but many elements of the state of emergency law remain in place. "There cannot be a wholesale lifting of the emergency. It will be done part by part," External Affairs Minister Gamini Lakshman Peiris told parliament during the debate on Tuesday. He also stressed that the easing of emergency regulations would not lead to the automatic release of some 11,700 Tamil rebel suspects who have been in detention for over a year. The UN estimates that up to 100,000 people died in Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist conflict after the Tigers took up arms in 1972. The separatists fought for an independent homeland for the island's 12.5 percent ethnic Tamil minority concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the country. France had led international calls to scrap the emergency laws soon after the defeat of the rebels. The emergency has also been used in the past to impose press censorship, arrest and detain journalists, shut down newspapers and introduce curfews. Opposition parties and international human rights groups have accused the government of using the laws to suppress legitimate dissent and freedom of expression.

Sri Lanka suspends court martial against Fonseka

Sri Lanka's court of appeal on Monday ordered the suspension of a court martial against ex-army chief and defeated presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka. The court ordered that the military tribunal that began the hearing against Fonseka on March 16 should halt its work until a decision was made on the validity of the military legal proceedings. Fonseka, who was defeated by incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa at January polls, was arrested in February and charged with engaging in politics before he had quit the army in November. He says the charges were part of a political vendetta. Fonseka last year led troops to victory over Tamil Tiger rebels after decades of ethnic conflict on the island, but he later fell out with Rajapaksa. Meanwhile, a second court martial hearing against him is expected to go ahead on Tuesday. The second court martial is probing charges of violation of military procurement procedures by Fonseka.

Sri Lanka ex-army chief vows to expose war crimes

Sri Lanka's ex-army chief on Thursday vowed to "expose" any war crimes committed at the end of the country's civil war, raising pressure on the government, which has resisted calls for a probe. The United Nations estimated that 7,000 civilians perished in fighting in the early months of last year when government troops overwhelmed Tamil Tiger rebels and ended their 37-year separatist campaign. General Sarath Fonseka, who fell out with President Mahinda Rajapakse and quit after successfully crushing the Tamil rebels, said there were allegations that should be thoroughly and independently investigated. "I will go out of my way to expose anyone who has committed war crimes," Fonseka told reporters. "I will not protect anyone, from the very top to the bottom."

Fonseka, who was taken into military custody in February, spoke with reporters inside parliament after being escorted to attend Thursday's session as an opposition MP. He won a seat at April parliamentary polls. Fonseka said the government was afraid that he would expose anyone found guilty of rights abuses and was "hell bent" on silencing him. "It is not patriotic to protect anyone who has caused injustices to Tamil youth," Fonseka said, adding that he himself was not personally aware of any instances of abuses but wanted all charges investigated. Even as he spoke, the president announced plans to review the final phase of the battle against Tamil Tiger rebels, but stopped short of calling it a war crimes probe. The president in a statement said he would appoint a commission to assess the lessons from the last stages of fighting and recommend measures to prevent a return to conflict. "In assessing the lessons learnt from the recent conflict phase there will be the search for any violations of internationally accepted norms of conduct in such conflict situations, and the circumstances that may have led to such actions, and identify any persons or groups responsible for such acts." It did not specifically refer to rights abuses and allegations that surrendering rebels were killed while thousands perished in the crossfire or were deliberately targeted. Fonseka has accused the president's brother, defence secretary Gotabhaya, of ordering the execution of surrendering rebels, a charge he has vehemently rejected. In an interview published Thursday, Gotabhaya said Fonseka was planning to use his parliamentary position to "fast track" and force an international war crimes investigation against Sri Lanka. "Any Sri Lankan promoting an agenda which is detrimental to the country is nothing but a traitor...", said Gotabhaya. "Traitors deserve capital punishment and no one should shed crocodile tears for them," he told the privately-run Island newspaper. "Those bent on destabilising the country would now exploit Fonseka's parliamentary privileges to fast track their sinister campaign (for a war crimes probe)." Fonseka was arrested shortly after contesting presidential elections in January and faces court martial proceedings for allegedly dabbling in politics before he quit as army chief in November. "There were a lot of things said at the time (of the final offensive)," Fonseka said. "If there is any international investigation, I will fully support that." Sri Lanka has strongly resisted calls for an international probe, saying no civilians were harmed by government forces in its battle against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Sri Lanka insists it carried out a "humanitarian operation" to free Tamil civilians from rebel control, but the UN and Western nations, including the United States and EU member states, have insisted on accountability.

India ready to resume ferry services with Sri Lanka

India is prepared to resume ferry services between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, Indian High Commissioner Ashok K Kantha said on Wednesday. The two ferry services are expected to connect Talaimannar in northern Sri Lanka and Rameshwaram and Colombo and Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu. "The Government of India also favoured an early resumption of the ferry service between Talaimannar and Rameshwaram as also between Colombo and Tuticorin," a statement from the High Commission of India quoted Kantha as saying. Kantha was speaking after inaugurating a visa office in the northern town of Jaffna. In July 2009, India and Sri Lanka had decided to resume the ferry service between Cochin and Colombo after a gap of 25 years. That decision was taken at the SAARC transport ministers' conference here which was attended by an Indian delegation led by Minister of State for Road Transport and Highways, RPN Singh. Speaking on this occasion on Wednesday, Kantha reiterated the commitment of the Government of India to promote closer ties between the people of India and Sri Lanka and conveyed that

India was looking forward to opening a Consulate in Jaffna in the near future. He said the Jaffna visa centre would benefit the people of Jaffna and neighbouring areas as they would not have to travel all the way to Colombo to submit their India visa applications.

This initiative on the part of the High Commission of India will facilitate the visa applicants to submit their visa applications in Jaffna and to take delivery of the passports from the India Visa Application Centre, Jaffna. The High Commissioner hoped that the opening of the India Visa Application Centre, in Jaffna would encourage many more people to obtain visas to India from this region and travel more frequently to India. This would promote the traditional close ties between the people of Jaffna and India. Internationally recognized nuclear-weapon-free zones reinforces nuclear non-proliferation regime: Sri Lanka Sri Lanka said here Thursday that the establishment of internationally recognized nuclear- weapon-free zones strengthens world peace and reinforces the nuclear non-proliferation regime. This statement came as Palitha T.B. Kohona, Sri Lanka's ambassador to the United Nations, was addressing the conference to review the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which entered its fourth day here Thursday. "My delegation is convinced that the establishment of internationally recognized nuclear weapon free zones on the basis of agreements entered into freely among the states of the zone concerned, strengthens world and regional peace and security," Kohona said. He added that this helps reinforce the nuclear non- proliferation regime which then contributes to the achievement of nuclear disarmament. "Sri Lanka believes that there is a need to have an institutional mechanism with a standing bureau to guide the NPT process," Kohona urged. Kohona emphasized that in particular for nuclear weapon states, they need to "recognize that we can aspire to and realize a holistic concept of security only if there is a serious commitment to and practical steps towards eventual nuclear disarmament while pursuing nuclear non-proliferation measures." He said that the 2010 Review Conference can only be successful if "we adopt decisions that are duly implemented."

Sri Lankan president urges opposition to back him

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa urged the opposition in the country to be patriotic and back him on Saturday. "Opposition must not disrupt economy and the good name of the country. They must think more about the country," Rajapaksa said addressing a May Day rally in the capital Colombo. Sri Lankan President said the public had given him large mandates at elections which the opposition must appreciate. "They must understand the public will and join hands with me," Rajapaksa said. Rajapaksa won both the presidential election and the parliamentary election with near 60 percent of the vote.

The opposition appeared to be in disarray since the defeat in the presidential election.

Rajapaksa's government now prepared to do quick fix of the economy which suffered from global recession and a costly military campaign against the Tamil Tiger rebels.

The opposition accused the government of doing nothing to tackle high cost of living despite the war with Tamil Tigers coming to an end a year ago.

ESCAP hails economic development in Sri Lanka.

The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific announces that Sri Lanka has recorded a significant economic development during this year. The organization expects that the country will mark 6 percent economic growth at the end of this year. The ESCAP launched report on the Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific in Colombo today. The ESCAP hopes that the improvement in security in Sri Lanka should also boost agricultural output in the north and east. As a result of improving security confidence among consumers and

businesses has also risen. It is expected that current stability in Sri Lanka will help to narrow trade deficit in the future. The ESCAP hailed measures taken by the government to narrow the trade deficit and increase income generation

Telecom shares push Sri Lanka bourse to record high

Sri Lankan shares hit a record high on Wednesday led by telecoms on a possible rise in tariffs and earnings hopes analysts said. But foreign investors were net sellers as the International Monetary Fund urged for reforms to continue its \$2.6 billion loan. The All-Share Price Index .CSE of the Colombo Stock Exchange rose 1.3 percent to hit a new record high of 4,260.11 points, surpassing its previous all-time high of 4,246.08 hit on Monday. It closed 0.34 percent firmer at 4,219.76. The island nation's leading mobile phone operator Dialog Axiata DIAL.CM jumped 13.3 percent to 8.50 rupees, while top fixed-line phone operator Sri Lanka Telecom SLTL.CM closed 2.7 percent firmer at 38 rupees. "The expected new tariff is expected to boost revenue in telecom firms," said Jaliya Wijeratne, institutional sales director at SMB Securities. "Investors also hope Dialog may have recovered after and return to profit." The bourse is up 24.6 percent so far this year, making it Asia's best-performing market. Traders expect the market to move up further on heavy retail buying, with hopes of better earnings, post-war economic development and foreign direct investment under the newly elected stable government despite a delay in the budget. Investors had been expecting the government to come up with long-needed fiscal reforms to improve the investment climate, but the Treasury Secretary P.B. Jayasundera last week said those changes would be introduced in the 2011 budget

International service providers of Sri Lanka allowed to open foreign currency accounts

International service providers in Sri Lanka and their employees are given permission to open foreign currency accounts in licensed commercial banks with effect from May 07th, the Central Bank announced today. Any resident company or partnership registered in Sri Lanka or any individual resident in Sri Lanka, who are providing certain categories of international services, and their employees are eligible to open and maintain these foreign currency accounts. The accounts can be current, savings or term deposits. Credits to the accounts are confined to proceeds on international services received from abroad through banking channels. Employers can make the payments in foreign currency in the form of bank transfers to their employees who are directly involved in the projects carried out by the employer by debiting the said account, the Central Bank advised. Accounting, book keeping or auditing, tax advisory services, services of a draftsman, engineering services, software development, data processing, data base development or system designing, advertising outside Sri Lanka, research work and report writing, photography, publishing outside Sri Lanka, beauty culture, hairdressing or modeling outside Sri Lanka, services of a sports person or an artist, services of a valuer or auctioneer, services of a plumber, mason or carpenter, quantity surveying, health care services are some of the eligible services. The Central Bank says these new measures will allow international services providers and their employees to avail themselves with income tax exemptions granted by the Inland Revenue (Amendment) Act No. 19 of 2009.

Sri Lanka to send high level delegation to negotiate GSP+

Sri Lankan government announced that it will send a high level delegation to Brussels to hold discussions with the European Union on the Generalized System of Preference plus (GSP+) facility on May 20-21. External Affairs Minister Prof. G.L. Peiris announced in the parliament

today that the government is diligently continuing the discussions to retain the GSP+ tariff concession which is to be suspended from August. Foreign Secretary Romesh Jayasinghe and Treasury Secretary Dr. P. B. Jayasundara have participated in the last round of talks with the European Union on the GSP+ issue. The European Union in February this year decided to withdraw the preferential tariff benefits given to Sri Lanka under the GSP+ following an investigation by the European Commission that said the country fell short in implementing three UN human rights conventions relevant for benefits under the scheme. The EU allowed six months of time for Sri Lanka to take remedial measures to address the problems identified during the EU investigation as the objective of the EU remains to use GSP+ as an incentive to bring about the improvements in the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. The EU said it will remain open to a full dialogue with the Sri Lankan government to encourage taking necessary steps towards an effective implementation of the human rights conventions relevant to the trade benefit. The Sri Lankan government said it will continue to engage with European Commission to retain GSP+ concessions within certain parameters determined by Sri Lanka and EC has agreed to discuss further on its impending termination. The government hopes the discussions will result in the timely reversal of the temporary suspension and continuation of the trade agreement that would immensely benefit the garment industry in Sri Lanka.