

Local election sidelines Lankan peace move

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday voted at local elections after a lack-lustre campaign where even the usually divisive peace process was pushed to the background, officials and analysts said.

Voting was slow across the country, elections officials said adding, however, that there was no balloting in the island's restive northern and eastern regions where Tamil Tiger rebels are in control.

"This is not an election that will impact on the peace process," said Sunanda Deshapriya, director at the Centre for Policy Alternatives think tank. "The peace issue was left out of the campaign by almost all the key parties."

The vote is the first test of public opinion since President Mahinda Rajapakse came to power at the November 17 election with the support of nationalist Buddhist monks and Marxists.

The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, appeared more active in the campaign that was dominated by local issues such as garbage disposal and public utilities.

The JVP as well as the party of monks oppose Norway's role as peace broker and is also against any concessions to Tamil Tiger

rebels.

Although they are united in their opposition to the peace process, they are contesting against each other at Thursday's vote where the two main parties in the fray are the president's People's Alliance and the main opposition UNP.

Tamil politician Dharmalingam Sidhathan said he did not believe the election "will impact on the peace process".

"But if the president's People's Alliance does well, he could go for a quick general election to tighten his grip on parliament."

Some 10.1 million people are eligible to vote for municipal and urban councils as well as village councils responsible for the maintenance of utilities.

Elections Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake 10 days ago put off polling for six months in restive northern and eastern regions, large tracts of which are under the control of Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

The decision followed reports from local administrators, who complained of practical difficulties in staging the poll in areas where the rebels hold sway.

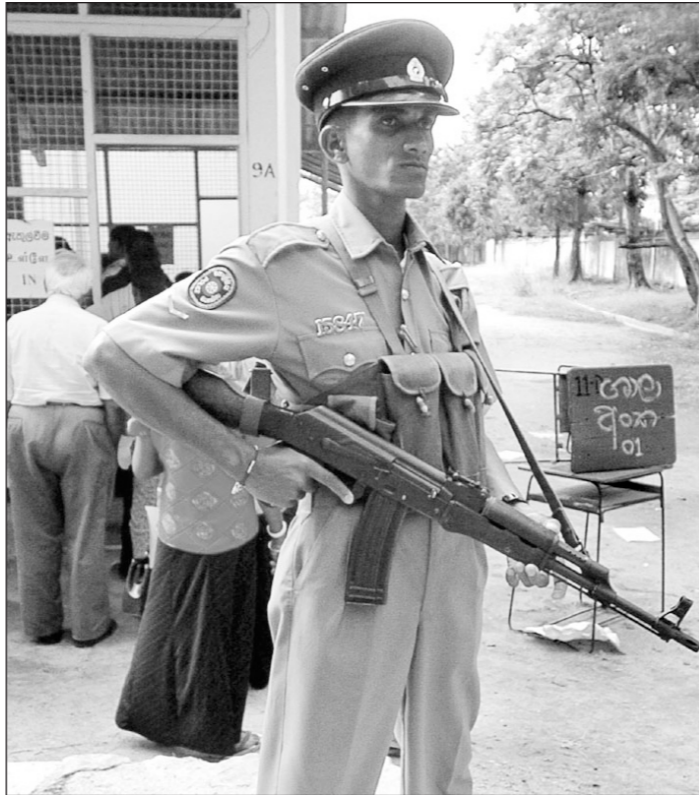


PHOTO: AFP

A Sri Lankan policeman keeps watch over a polling booth near Colombo yesterday as people vote for electing local government bodies. The election is seen as a popularity test for President Mahinda Rajapakse who came to power four months ago.

Manmohan, Sonia to campaign in Assam

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE,
Guwahati

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi will be visiting Assam to give the ruling party a major push in the Assembly elections next month.

While Sonia will be visiting the state on Thursday for a day, the Prime Minister will arrive for a two-day visit on Saturday.

The Prime Minister will address at least four meetings, including one at Tezpur in northern Assam, the heart of the opposition Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)-dominated area from where its president Brindaban Goswami is contesting.

The Congress president is expected to address at least four election rallies, beginning with one at Silchar in southern Assam where Bithika Dev, the wife of Central minister Santosh Mohan Dev, is the party candidate.

Indian nuke thirst must follow int'l rules: Wen

AFP, Sydney

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said yesterday he had no objection to India cooperating with other countries to develop nuclear power, provided nuclear non-proliferation protocols were followed.

Asked about a US-India agreement to share nuclear technology reached earlier this month, Wen said there was no problem provided non-proliferation signatories met their obligations.

"India is a friendly neighbour of China and we do not object to its developing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and cooperating with other countries in nuclear power generation," he said in an interview with The Australian newspaper.