



Sri Lankan woman S. P. Padma Kumari (C) weeps as she reaches the police morgue yesterday to take away the body of her husband Sri Lankan soldier J. A. S. K. Jayalath, who was killed in a suicide attack targeting the convoy of Army Chief Sarath Fonseka on Tuesday in Colombo. Sri Lanka was facing fears of a return to civil war after government forces responded to a Tamil Tiger suicide bombing in the capital with air and naval strikes.

## Lanka hits back by air, land and sea

15 civilians killed in attacks, 15,000 Tamil villagers flee homes

AFP, Colombo/Trincomalee

Escalating violence between Sri Lankan forces and Tamil rebels left at least 15 civilians dead and 15,000 Tamil villagers fleeing for their lives, reports from both sides said yesterday.

Three people died and 13 were wounded when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired mortar bombs against a naval detachment in the Muttur area of Trincomalee district, defence ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said.

He denied earlier military reports which said the civilians were killed when an Israeli-built Kfir jet accidentally dropped a bomb on Muttur jetty while attacking suspected Tamil Tiger positions in the northeast.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet website reported 12 other civilians died when government warplanes struck the rebel-held Sampur area late Tuesday in retaliation for a suicide

bombing that killed 10 and wounded 30, including the army chief.

"Groups of people searching for casualties in Tuesday's attacks said at least 12 bodies of Tamil civilians were recovered so far," it said. "The death toll is expected to increase."

A large number of injured were seeking treatment in Sampur hospital.

It was not immediately clear if the military air strikes caused other damage, but Tamilnet said 15,000 villagers were fleeing their homes Wednesday as strikes continued.

The military launched the bombardments after a woman pretending to be pregnant blew herself up at army headquarters in the capital.

Sri Lanka vowed to keep attacking Tamil rebel targets with coordinated air, sea and land forces including artillery duels in the restive northeast Wednesday amid fears of full-scale war.

"If the LTTE continues attacking, there will be coordinated retaliation

in the form of defence," Plan Implementation Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said. "This will continue as long as the LTTE targets the security forces."

However, the government said it was still committed to a negotiated settlement to Sri Lanka's long-running Tamil separatist conflict which has claimed over 60,000 lives in the past three decades including many during a ceasefire in place since 2002. "The ceasefire agreement is still on," Media Minister Anura Yapa said. "We are trying our best through the Norwegian facilitator, the truce monitors and the (international) donors to bring the LTTE to the negotiating table."

But on the ground, violence escalated. Israeli-built Kfir jets and Ukrainian MiG-27 aircraft carried out air attacks while naval gun boats and army artillery units also exchanged fire.

Washington led international condemnation of the spectacular bomb attack blamed on a "Black Tiger" female suicide bomber.

## Rahul now willing to take 'key party role'



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Young lawmaker of India's ruling Congress party Rahul Gandhi, son of party chief Sonia Gandhi, has his willingness to take more bigger responsibilities to help revive the party's declining electoral fortunes in the politically key state of Uttar Pradesh.

"I am ready to take the responsibility of the party in the state if the high command asks. If the central leadership gives me the responsibility, I can turn around the fortunes of the party in the state," Rahul told reporters on Tuesday in Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha constituency where he

was campaigning for her mother seeking re-election.

Sonia Gandhi is set to cruise to a comfortable victory in Rae Bareilly, the seat she had quit in March in the wake of the controversy over office of profit as her main challengers include a Hindutva hawk Vinay Katiyar of BJP and two political greenhorns of Samajwadi Party and a regional outfit.

This is for the first time Rahul, who is a Lok Sabha member from Amethi adjacent to Rae Bareilly, indicated his readiness to move out of pockets of Uttar Pradesh and assume responsibility for reviving the party in the entire state ever since party rank and file have been requesting him to carve for himself a much larger role in the organisation.

Fresh elections to Uttar Pradesh legislative assembly are due early next year and the principal political players in the state are ruling Samajwadi Party led by Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav and Bahujan Samaj Party headed by Mayawati.

## Is it worth abiding by atomic rules?

Iran asks IAEA

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran has asked the UN nuclear watchdog to explain why Tehran should abide by international atomic protocols when it gets so little in return, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said on Wednesday.

Iran is a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) but often grumbles that it does not benefit from the treaty's entitlement to shared technology.

"We have asked them (the UN watchdog), and we are waiting for an answer: what have they given us in reward for doing our duty? What sort of help have they given us?" he told reporters after meeting Sudan's president in Tehran.

The president's remarks come two days before Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), will deliver a report on Iran's nuclear activities to the UN Security Council.

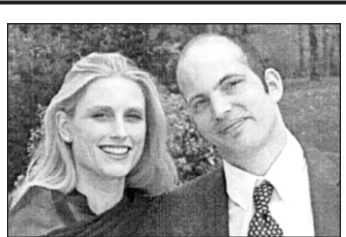
Tehran faces possible sanctions in the council after failing to persuade the international community it is enriching uranium for power stations and not for warheads.

Western diplomats argue Iran's demand for shared know-how under the NPT is spurious as this entitlement would only be valid if it were certain that Tehran's ambitions were peaceful.

Ahmadinejad reiterated his view that Iran could reconsider its commitment to the NPT and its co-operation with the IAEA if it felt it were being short-changed.

"We hope they fulfil their duties and make it unnecessary for the Islamic Republic of Iran to reconsider its relations with them," he said.

"Our scientists have mastered this technology with their own brains, their own might and their own hands," he added.



## Aga Khan's son to wed American sweetheart

AFP, Paris

The second son of the Aga Khan, the billionaire spiritual leader of the world's 15 million Shia Ismaili Muslims, is to marry his American sweetheart this year, the family said Tuesday.

Prince Hussain, 32, met Kristin J. White, who is two years his junior and who took the name Khaliya following her conversion to Islam, when the pair were graduate students at New York's Columbia University.

Their wedding is planned for the autumn, according to a statement from the Aga Khan's secretariat, based in a chateau in Gouvieux near Paris.

## Abbas ready for talks with Israel

AP, Oslo

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said yesterday that an international conference should be called immediately to jumpstart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and that the new Hamas government would not get in the way.

Speaking in the Norwegian capital, Abbas said he was willing to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians and that an international group should serve as a broker, possibly the so-called "Quartet" of the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations.

"I am ready to immediately resume negotiations with the Israeli government," Abbas said. "It is important for me to clarify that the Palestinian legislative elections, which brought Hamas to power, (are) not an obstacle in front of negotiations."

Abbas said his Palestine Liberation Organisation still has the mandate to negotiate in the Middle

East conflict because it signed all previous agreements with Israel.

Hamas, which ousted Abbas' Fatah Party from power in January parliamentary elections, has refused to renounce violence, recognises the Jewish state or accept past peace agreements.

In response to Abbas' comments, Israel said a formula already exists for resuming peace talks the long-stalled, internationally backed "road map" peace plan, which envisions the ultimate establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

"Israel believes that the best way to move forward is according to the road map, which is the international community's accepted plan for the Middle East peace process," Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Reggev said.

"The road map has been endorsed by Europe, America, Russia and the UN, and is the way forward. Unfortunately, the new Palestinian leadership under Hamas refuses to accept the road map or even Israel's right to exist," he added.

## 6 protesters killed by army in east Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Soldiers shot dead six people yesterday and wounded three others after firing on a crowd of protesters outside an army camp in eastern Nepal, an army official said.

The soldiers shot the demonstrators after they had gathered and fired two shots to protest the death of a woman who was killed by troops in an "ambush" after reported "suspicious activities" near the camp on Tuesday evening, the official said.

"For self-defence they opened fire and killed six people and injured three others," said the official on customary condition of anonymity.

A rights activist said some 2,000 people had gathered at the base after rumours spread that the woman had been raped and killed by a soldier. Security forces opened fire at 1:30 pm (0745 GMT) at the camp in the town of Belbari, 590 kilometres (370 miles) southeast of Kathmandu, said Kundan Aryal, general secretary of Informal Sector Service Centre, a Nepalese rights group.

## 600 Americans abused detainees: HR group

AFP, Washington

US rights groups said yesterday that more than 600 military and civilian personnel have been implicated in abuse of "war-on-terror" detainees in Iraq, Afghanistan and at the US Guantanamo detention camp.

The three groups who researched what they called "widespread" torture and detainee abuse by US personnel said many abuses were never investigated, or inquiries were often concluded or stalled without further action.

"Two years ago, US officials said the abuses at Abu Ghraib were aberrations and that people who abused detainees would be brought to justice," said Meg Satterthwaite of New York University's Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, one of the groups behind the study.

"Yet our research shows that detainee abuse were widespread, and few people have truly been brought to justice," Satterthwaite

said. The research project, also backed by Human Rights Watch and Human Rights First, examined allegations of mistreatment involving more than 460 detainees at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, sites in Afghanistan and the Guantanamo camp in Cuba.

They found that "many abuses were never investigated, and investigations that did occur often closed prematurely, or stalled without resolution," said a summary of the report.

Where abuses were proven and the perpetrators known, the report said, "military commanders often chose to use weak non-judicial disciplinary measures as punishment" instead of pursuing criminal cases.

"Only a fraction of the more than 600 US personnel implicated in these cases -- 40 people -- have been sentenced to prison time," the report said.

## Nepal steps back from abyss, long trek ahead

REUTERS, Kathmandu

The Himalayan kingdom of Nepal stepped back from the abyss this week, when its stubborn and autocratic king finally bowed to weeks of street protests and handed power back to political parties.

But the challenges are only just beginning for one of the world's poorest countries as it tries to build a new road towards peace and bring an end to a decade-long Maoist insurgency.

"It was a remarkable climbdown by the king, and overall we must be happy with this," said Roderick Chalmers of the International Crisis Group think-tank. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be looking at the various problems which need to be addressed."

The biggest problem is undoubt-

edly the insurgency, and how to bring Maoist rebels, who control vast swathes of the countryside, back into the political mainstream.

The rebels are demanding elections for an assembly to write a new constitution -- something the political parties promised when they entered a loose alliance with the guerrillas to end royal rule last year.

The parties have vowed to honour that promise by calling constituent assembly elections as soon as parliament reconvenes on Friday. They also plan to offer the Maoists a ceasefire. If accepted, it would be a major step forward.

On the face of it, the Maoists hardly seem in the mood to trust them, denouncing the king's climbdown as "a sham" and accusing the parties of making "another historic mistake".

The rebels initially clamped a blockade on Kathmandu and other district capitals, but later suspended it until Friday -- on condition that parliament call elections for an unconditional constituent assembly.

Their strongly worded statement on Tuesday raised some diplomats' hackles, and is sure to have rung alarm bells in Washington, whose ambassador refers to the Maoists as terrorists who simply cannot be trusted.

But other observers say there was as much bluster and posturing in the Maoists' statement as genuine anger.

"It was a warning to the parties not to forget promises they made, and it was also designed to ensure the (Maoist) rank and file don't rebel over this," said Kunda Dixit of the widely read Nepali Times.

## Rice, Rumsfeld in joint push for Iraq unity govt

AFP, Baghdad

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld urged Iraqi leaders yesterday to swiftly form a national unity government after the two flew in unannounced to Baghdad.

The surprise visits by the two top US officials, who arrived separately, came just hours after Iraq's most wanted man -- al-Qaeda frontman Abu Musab al-Zarqawi -- voiced new defiance of Washington in his first video appearance, posted on a website. Iraq is still without a new government four months after a December election for the country's first full-term post-Saddam Hussein parliament and raging violence has raised fears the country is sliding into civil war.

A long-running deadlock over the prime minister's job was broken last week after Shia leader Jawad al-Maliki was nominated and he said Tuesday he hoped to have his

cabinet line-up ready within two weeks.

Rice and Rumsfeld together met Maliki and re-elected Iraqi President Jalal Talabani on Wednesday but the details of their discussions were not immediately known.

Rice earlier hailed Maliki's designation, saying his government would be key to breaking the sectarian violence that is engulfing Iraq.

"It is a government of national unity and it is one that may be the greatest threat to efforts to separate the Iraqis and turn them against one another," Rice told the accompanying press.

She suggested that the video message from Zarqawi, who has a 25 million dollar US bounty on his head, was a reaction to the threat to his influence that the political breakthrough posed.

"I think Zarqawi knows very well that... this government is representative of the broad Iraqi populace," Rice said.



US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld smiles as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (L) shakes hands with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani at the Presidential Council Office in Baghdad yesterday.

## Businessmen back communists in West Bengal election

REUTERS, Kolkata

Pradip Chopra, a real estate developer in Kolkata, seems to be on a perpetual high these days.

Chopra's business has grown 10 times in the last five years and he is now building shopping malls and housing complexes worth 3 billion rupees.

Elsewhere in India, where urban growth is spiralling, this would not have come as a big surprise.

But in Kolkata, the heart of the country's leftist citadel and home to the world's longest-serving elected communist government, it is seen as nothing short of a miracle.

The turnaround has come as the communist government of West Bengal, of which Kolkata is the capital, has proved to be an ally of the capitalists with its liberal economic policies.

The state votes on Thursday for a new provincial assembly in a staggered process ending early next month and the communists, bolstered by support from business-

men, are widely expected to win a seventh straight election since 1977.

"I am comfortable with this government and will support it," Chopra said, sitting in his office in a spanking new steel-and-glass building, in the heart of Kolkata, which also votes on Thursday.

"They have changed Kolkata's image of a dying city to one that is vibrant and a happening place to invest."

Businessmen like Chopra credit West Bengal's growth in the last five years to changed priorities of the communists, once known for promoting militant unionism and miles of red tape.

After years of pushing land reforms in the countryside in the late 1970s and 1980s, the communists changed tack.

They realised rural goodwill was a dwindling electoral asset and started hard-selling the state as an investment destination, analysts said. The strategy seems to be working.