

# Tigers vow to use navy

## Fresh violence kills 19

AFP, Colombo

At least 19 people have been killed in fresh violence in Sri Lanka, officials said yesterday, as Tamil Tigers vowed a "war" to deploy their navy even though truce monitors say it violates a ceasefire.

Thirteen of the victims were gunned down in separate incidents in the northern islet of Kayts on Saturday night, the military said. Two more people were killed in the restive northeastern port district of Trincomalee.

Another two were gunned down at Atchchuevi in the northern Jaffna peninsula, police said. On Sunday, a soldier was killed when suspected Tigers lobbed grenades at troops, the military said, adding that it retaliated and killed one of the attackers.

Authorities were investigating if the killings were linked to the ongoing Tamil separatist conflict amid a spate of tit-for-tat attacks in the north and east in recent weeks.

More than 200 people have died in clashes over the past month despite a four-year truce between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in an ethnic conflict that has claimed over 60,000 lives since 1972.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, 60, said in an interview with the island's Sunday Times that the government is still committed to a four-year ceasefire. However, he said he ordered recent air attacks against rebel positions as "preventive action to avert another war."

"If they insist on continuing their attacks, I have to defend my country," Rajapakse said.

The LTTE's naval wing chief, Thillaiampalam Sivanesan, better known as "Colonel Soosai", raised the stakes at the weekend by insisting that the rebels were "not prepared to relinquish sovereign rights to the seas" following a major naval battle last week.

"We will not hesitate to wage

war with anyone who attempts to prevent us from exercising our freedom," Soosai said in remarks published on the pro-rebel Tamilnet website.

The remarks came after Scandinavian truce observers known as the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) said in a statement last week that it was reviewing its practice of putting monitors on government vessels following the sea battle Thursday which it said violated the ceasefire.

Eighteen sailors were killed when the Tigers sank a gunboat that was escorting a ship transporting troops. The Tigers said four of their Sea Tigers were dead but the military said it killed about 30 guerrillas.

The Sri Lankan navy said the SLMM monitors had not boarded their craft since the sea battle, but the navy is continuing its patrols off the north and east.

"We have in fact stepped up our operations," navy spokesman

P.D.K. Dassanayake said.

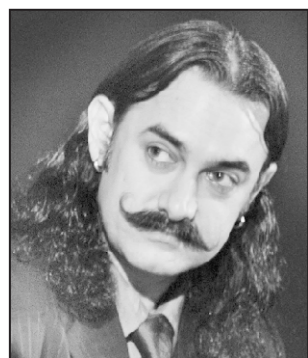
Soosai has strongly criticised the monitors for their ruling that the LTTE are in violation of the February 2002 ceasefire if they venture out onto the Indian Ocean or use Sri Lankan airspace.

He said the LTTE's naval arm, the Sea Tigers, had lost 1,200 men and women in the past 15 years and would not halt operations.

"Even during intense war, we were able to establish sea links with distant lands at our will. No party was able to stop us then. How can anyone, especially within a period of peace, try to scuttle this ability?" he said.

The Tigers have been increasingly taking their fight to the seas thanks to their secretive and lethal rebel "navy," a rarity among the world's guerrilla forces.

The European Union criticised the rebels Saturday for staging Thursday's sea battle and warned that it could wreck peace prospects.



## Aamir Khan slams Modi for Vadodara violence

PTI, Kolkata

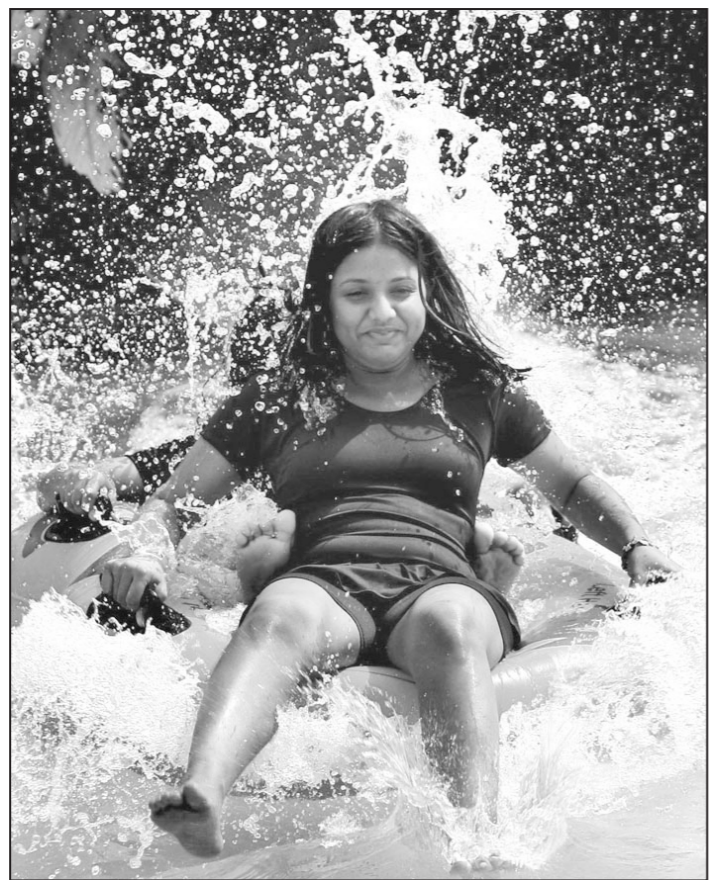
Bollywood star Aamir Khan, who had to face the ire of BJP and Congress workers in Gujarat when he had joined the protest against Narmada Dam in April, has slammed the Narendra Modi government for its alleged failure to control violence in Vadodara recently.

During an interactive interview to the BBC Asian Network's new Hindi/Urdu show, Khan also criticised US president George Bush for his Iraq policy.

"I think it is (Vadodara incident) very sad and what happened in Gujarat a few years ago was also equally unfortunate. It's a shame that the administration is not able to control the situation there and it is resulting in deaths of innocent people," according to a BBC transcript of the interview.



A Pakistani woman gives water to her child at a bus stop in Lahore yesterday. International Mothers' Day was celebrated in various countries around the world to pay tributes to a personality who undoubtedly shapes the life of every individual.



Indian girl enjoys a ride in a water park at Appu Ghar in New Delhi yesterday. Temperatures in northern India already hover around 45 degrees Celsius as a heatwave, that has killed 60 people nationwide in the past week, drags on.

# Thailand prepares for election

## But turmoil far from over

AFP, Bangkok

Thai courts and election officials are to begin planning new elections this week, but analysts warn an end to months of turmoil could still be a long time coming.

The process is already off to a bumpy start, less than a week after the Constitutional Court invalidated last month's snap polls that left the country without a functioning parliament and forced prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra to step aside.

The leading opposition parties, which boycotted the last elections, have refused to attend a meeting Monday with the Election Commission and court officials to decide when new polls should be held.

The parties insist they still plan to contest the next election, but have called on the commission to resign since the court tossed out the April 2 vote.

"It would be difficult for this Election Commission to organise

the next polls as a free and fair election, because the public has no faith in them," Democrat party spokesman Ong-art Klampaiboon said.

The court -- which only took action after the king publicly castigated the judges -- ruled that the campaigning period for the last election was too short, and that the polling booths did not provide enough privacy as voters ticked their ballots.

Hundreds of other cases are still pending, including claims that Thaksin's party illegally financed campaigns by fringe groups.

The timing of the election carries important consequences, because Thai law requires that candidates belong to their parties for at least 90 days before the vote.

If the election is delayed until late this year, that could encourage a defection from Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party, said political analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak from Chulalongkorn University.

"I don't think any factions will flock to TRT," he said. "I think the factions could leave TRT."

"The longer it is until the election day, the better it is for the opposition," he added.

Few expect the elections could happen within the next month, because Thailand is busy preparing for the 60th anniversary of revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne in June.

"The celebrations place restrictions on timing, so they shouldn't rush it," said Mike Nelson, a visiting scholar at Chulalongkorn.

"They should proceed in an orderly way. This is a very important celebration, but as soon as they're over one can have the elections."

He expected the polls could take place no sooner than late July.

The other burning question is whether Thaksin, who tearfully stepped aside on April 4, will decide to run again for prime minister.

# India ready for test of longest-range missile

AFP, New Delhi

India's longest-range ballistic missile is ready for a test launch, the country's top military scientist announced yesterday.

"We are technically ready for the test-firing of the missile," M. Natarajan, scientific advisor to the defence ministry, announced at an official function in New Delhi which was also attended by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

"We are awaiting a nod from the government," he said of the Agni-III (Fire) nuclear-capable ballistic missile, which has an official range of 4,000 kilometres (2,480 miles).

Some experts believe the solid-fuel missile can travel a distance of 6,000 kilometres (3,720 miles) but the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), which built the system, declined to confirm

the estimates.

India has been putting off tests of the Agni-III since November 2004 reportedly under pressure from the United States concerned it could spark an arms race with New Delhi's rival Pakistan.

The Agni ballistic missile can be deployed through rail or road mobile launchers and has greater accuracy for its 200 to 300-kilogram (440-660-pound) conventional or nuclear warhead payloads, according to the DRDO.

India's arch-rival Pakistan on April 29 test fired a nuclear-capable missile with a range of 2,000 kilometres (1,250 miles).

India has already tested several variants of the Agni missiles with the ability to strike targets between 800 (496 miles) and 1,500 kilometres (930 miles) and has developed an arsenal of other surface and maritime missiles.

# Israeli court upholds unification law

AP, Jerusalem

Israel's high court Sunday narrowly upheld a controversial law that bars West Bank Palestinians from joining spouses and children living in Israel.

The law, passed in 2002 at the height of Israeli-Palestinian fighting, is believed to have kept hundreds, and possibly thousands, of Palestinians from moving to Israel to live with relatives who are Arab citizens of the Jewish state. A panel of judges voted 6-5 against a petition to strike it down.

"This is a very black day for the state of Israel and also a black day for my family and for the other families who are suffering like us," said Muad el-Sana, an Israeli-Arab attorney who is married to a Palestinian woman from the West Bank town of Bethlehem.

"The government is preventing people from conducting a normal family life just because of their nationality," el-Sana told Israel

Radio, minutes after the ruling was announced.

The government has repeatedly said the law was based on security concerns, but the restrictions also cut to a more sensitive demographic issue fear that Israel's Jewish majority could be threatened if too many Palestinians are granted citizenship.

Critics of the law have slammed it as racist and discriminatory. Amnesty International called on Israel to repeal the law, calling it "explicitly discriminatory."

"I had hoped and expected the high court to be the last arena for protecting democracy," lawmaker Zehava Galon of the dovish Meretz Party told Israel Radio. "In essence we are talking about a means to halt the demographic threat. There are no real security issues."

Oma Kohn, an attorney from Adalah, a group that fights for the rights of Israeli-Arabs, said the ruling causes "grave damage to the basic rights of thousands of people."

# Tarun Gogoi sworn in as Assam CM

PTI, Guwahati

Incumbent Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi was on Sunday sworn in for his second consecutive term, ushering in Assam's first coalition government headed by the Congress.

The oath of office and secrecy was administered to Gogoi by Governor Lt Gen (retired) Ajai Singh at a simple function in the Durbar Hall of the Raj Bhavan in Guwahati.

The members of the new ministry will be sworn in at a later date.

Gogoi, 70, heads the coalition government led by the Congress and supported by the Hagrama faction of the Bodoland People's Progressive Front (BPPF), NCP and independents.

# Indian doctors strike over caste-based quotas

AFP, New Delhi

Medical services across India were hit yesterday as doctors at state-run hospitals staged a strike against plans to set higher quotas for disadvantaged students at leading universities.

In the capital New Delhi, the strike at five top government hospitals entered its third day Sunday as protests spread across the country, sometimes leading to violent clashes with police.

At many hospitals appointments were cancelled, but officials said emergencies were being attended.

"Consultants and senior doctors are manning the emergency services," student leader Anirudh Lochan of the University College Medical Sciences said.

# Maoists storm relief centre in Chhattisgarh

## Four cops killed

AFP, Raipur

Four special police were killed and five people were injured Saturday when hundreds of Maoist rebels stormed a relief centre in central India sheltering those fleeing guerrilla violence, officials said.

The rebels attacked the government centre in the Chhattisgarh state's Dantewada district, triggering a fierce gunbattle with security forces for more than an hour, he said.

"The Special Police Officers (killed) were not from the uniformed forces but were surrendered Naxalites (Maoists) appointed by the government to counter their former comrades," state home minister Ramvichar Netam told AFP.

The emergency centre was one of 27 the state government has set

up to house and protect nearly 50,000 people from Maoist violence. Maoist rebels virtually run parallel administrations in 10 of the state's 16 impoverished districts.

At least 145 people including policemen have died this year in stepped-up violence by the rebels in Chhattisgarh, one of 15 of India's 29 states where leftwing rebels are active.

The Maoist rebels are called Naxalites in India after a village in West Bengal where the movement began in 1967. The guerrillas claim they are fighting for the rights of neglected tribes and landless farmers.

The state government announced new security measures in the district Saturday to deal with rebel violence, including digging channels on the sides of roads to prevent landmine attacks.

# Rahul steps into spotlight

AFP, New Delhi

The clamour is growing for Rahul Gandhi, scion of India's most powerful political dynasty, to step into the spotlight after steering his mother Sonia Gandhi to a landslide by-election win.

"Son Rises," said the Times of India in a headline after Sonia racked up a record 417,000-vote victory margin last Thursday in the family bastion of Rae Bareilly in politically pivotal Uttar Pradesh state.

Indian newspapers called the clean-cut politician's role as manager of Sonia's campaign "Rahul's launchpad" while critics from ruling Congress members for him to take a leading party role have been getting louder.

Italian-born Sonia had triggered the by-election by quitting as MP to defuse a bitter controversy about elected politicians holding other paid posts.

While thanking voters, Sonia who is Congress president, cred-



ited her win in equal measure to "Mr Rahul Gandhi and the team of Congress who made it possible," and spoke of finding a role for her son in the party organisation.

Asked whether Rahul, 35, who bears a powerful resemblance to his assassinated father Rajiv, would take on a bigger role, The Hindustan Times quoted Sonia as saying: "Yes, this could be thought about now."

His sister Priyanka, whose charisma is highly rated but who

has pushed her bachelor brother forward while she focuses on raising two children, also said he would have to "shoulder larger responsibilities in the future."

"The expectations now are very high. People expect he will be named general secretary or to some other high post after a party meeting" in late March, said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

Until his sortie for his mother's campaign, Rahul had been almost politically invisible as a parliamentarian following the party's surprise electoral win in May 2004 over the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

Rahul has spent his time tending his constituency of Amethi in Uttar Pradesh and travelling around the nation learning the political ropes, saying leadership has to be built "brick by brick".

# Militants behead govt official in Baluchistan

REUTERS, Quetta

Suspected tribal rebels kidnapped and beheaded an administration official in the restive southwestern Pakistani province of Baluchistan, officials said yesterday.

The official, identified as Shahzad Bugti, was kidnapped along with two guards on Saturday and his headless body was found on Sunday near the town of Dera Murad Jamali, region's administrator Abdul Samad Lasi told AFP.

A note found with the bullet riddled body of Shahzad read that anyone opposing the rebel chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti would meet the same fate, Lasi said.

Shahzad's security guards were still missing and a case has been registered against Haji Juma Khan Bugti, a Baluchistan lawmaker and relative of Nawab Akbar Bugti, said.

Shahzad was investigating claims of land ownership by Kalpar tribes who oppose Nawab Akbar Bugti and have recently repatriated to their villages under a government-sponsored programme from neighbouring Sindh province, Lasi said.

# Bush to push today for immigration reform in televised speech

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush will address Americans on the heated immigration debate today in a televised speech in which he may announce the deployment of troops to the border with Mexico.

With his popularity at all-time lows, Bush will speak from the Oval Office in the White House as the Senate resumes debate on legislation that could lead to legalization of at least part of the estimated 11.5 million undocumented workers in the United States.

According to US media, Bush will use the 8:00 pm (0000 GMT) speech to announce the deployment of troops to the border, a measure approved on Thursday in the House of Representatives as a way to halt the smuggling of drugs and people.

The immigration debate has divided Republicans ahead of legislative elections in November, as some call for the creation of a guest-worker programme while others want tougher laws.

"I think members of the House

will like what the president has to say on border security," a senior administration official told the Washington daily on condition of anonymity.

Bush's possible deployment of troops could help settle differences among his fellow Republicans.

"Congressional Republicans who back Bush's call for a guest-worker programme and a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants say (the deployment) is precisely what they need to win over House conservatives," the Washington Post said Saturday.

The announcement of Bush's address coincided with a meeting Friday between Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and his Mexican counterpart, General Clemente Ricardo Vega, at the Pentagon's invitation, to discuss border security.

The differences between what the Senate means by "immigration reform" and what was passed in December by the House of Representatives highlights the strong differences within the Republican Party.

# Sunni militant group claims Iran roadside killings

AFP, Tehran

A hardline Sunni militant group has claimed responsibility for the execution-style murders of 12 people in Iran's restive southeast, a police official was quoted as saying yesterday.

"Terrorist elements from the so-called Jundallah group, headed by Abdolmalek Rigi, claimed responsibility for the killing of 12 innocent Iranians by phoning us," Iranian police commander Askandar Moemeni told the ISNA news agency.

Official media reported that the victims were blindfolded, handcuffed and shot in cold blood on the side of a highway between the cities of Kerman and Bam. Their bodies were dumped in a trench.

Only a young boy was spared, but he was reported to be traumatised after witnessing the shootings.

"Six of the bandits were killed in a shootout after we caught them in an area between Kerman (province) and Sistan-Baluchestan province," Abolqasem Nasrollahi, a deputy of Kerman province's governor-general, told state television.