

# Lanka offers cash, devolution to end ethnic bloodshed

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president yesterday offered 1.25 billion dollars to rebuild embattled regions and asked his advisors to come up with a power-sharing plan to end decades of ethnic bloodshed.

President Mahinda Rajapakse told a 15-member multi-ethnic panel appointed by him last week to come up with a formula that could lead to a new constitution that will grant extensive devolution of power to minority Tamils.

"Any solution must be seen as one that stretches to the maximum possible devolution without sacrificing the sovereignty of the country given the background to the conflict," the president said.

"It is only by doing so that the aspirations of the Tamil people can be addressed, not through streams of blood and shattered limbs."

He reiterated that than an invitation to the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to enter negoti-

ations with the government was still open.

"I have invited the LTTE to engage itself on this process. It is only by doing so that the aspirations of the Tamil people can be addressed, not through streams of blood and shattered limbs."

More than 60,000 people have been killed in the island's drawn out Tamil separatist conflict since 1972.

"Having suffered much over these decades of a war imposed on them by the LTTE, we must create a safe, stable and meaningful environment that enables the impoverished in the North and the East to participate in economic activity..."

"The government has allocated 1.25 billion dollars for this purpose and we are encouraging active private sector and international agency involvement in the development of the (embattled) North and the East," the president said.

He did not go into details of how the money would be spent, but said



Mahinda Rajapakse

the international community too was keen to participate in the reconstruction efforts.

The president said the formula that his advisory committee comes up with would be presented to a wider "All Party Conference" for adoption and form the basis for future negotiations with the Tigers.

However, there was no mention of a timeframe for the advisory committee to conclude their work. He said he wanted the advisory committee to study devolution models from countries such as Canada, India, Switzerland and Australia.

The 15-member committee comprises representatives of the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil and Muslim communities.

Government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said the government was ready to revive talks with the LTTE, who suspended their participation in Norwegian-brokered peace talks in April 2003.

Sri Lanka in 2002 offered wide autonomy to minority Tamils in exchange for peace.

The Tigers have also put down in writing their demands for an "Interim Self-Governing Authority" but the initiatives remain in limbo and there have been no direct discussions on power-sharing between the two sides.

# India, Pakistan ink quake aid pact after 9 months

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday approved a donation of 25 million dollars to buy building materials for Pakistani Kashmir nine months after a major earthquake killed 73,000 people there.

The Indian foreign ministry said the assistance was part of a pledge made at an UN-sponsored donors' conference for the victims of the October 2005 earthquake, which razed tens of thousands of homes in Pakistan.

"A memorandum of understanding setting out the modalities for release of these funds to enable Pakistan to procure reconstruction material according to its requirements was signed today," the ministry said in a statement.

The aid was pledged by New Delhi one month after the earthquake, which also claimed 1,300 lives in Indian Kashmir. The reason for the delayed disbursement was not given.



US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (L) and Afghan President Hamid Karzai address a press conference at the Presidential Palace in Kabul yesterday. Rumsfeld reiterated Washington's support for Afghanistan's fight against the Taliban but said that there must be more co-operation from its neighbours in order to stop 'cross-border violence'.

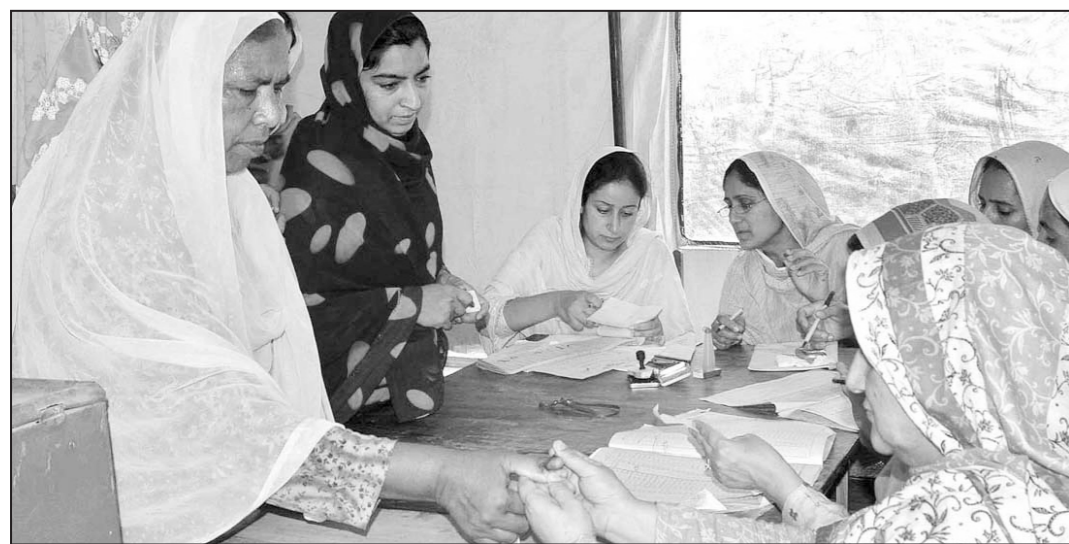


PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani Kashmiri polling agent (R) marks the thumb of a voter before she casts her vote at a makeshift polling station in the devastated city of Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir yesterday. Thousands of troops and police were deployed in Pakistani-administered Kashmir as voters elected a new legislative assembly, nine months after a huge quake devastated the Himalayan region.

# 8 tourists killed in Kashmir grenade attacks

AFP, Srinagar

Eight tourists were killed and 39 people injured yesterday in a series of grenade attacks targeting holiday areas in the main city of revolt-hit Indian Kashmir, police said.

In the bloodiest of the attacks blamed on Islamic separatist rebels, six tourists including five women were killed and 15 people wounded when a grenade blasted a minibus in Srinagar's main tourist district.

A spokesman for the police control room said the injured included bystanders near the minibus. All of the tourists were from India's West Bengal state. The dead included a mother, her son and her daughter-in-law.

The grenade was hurled by

suspected rebels near the busy Dalgate area of the mountain-ringed Dal Lake in Srinagar, he said.

"The grenade landed inside the minibus and exploded with a bang," said local resident Imtiaz Hussain, adding that it smashed the vehicle's windows and sent people running for cover in all directions.

A second grenade attack in Srinagar's busy Regal Chowk injured four people who were travelling in a car registered outside Kashmir, police said.

In two more attacks on private passenger jeeps near Lal Chowk, the main commercial centre, two tourists were killed and ten people were injured.

The dead men were tourists from the eastern state of Bihar and most

of the injured were not Kashmiris. The attacks sparked fires in the vehicles.

A fifth explosion took place near Srinagar's tourist reception center and injured ten people, all of them Kashmiris, police said.

A suspect was held after the fifth blast and was being questioned, a police officer said.

Kashmir's Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad, visiting the injured in hospital, blamed Islamic militants.

"These people are killers of innocent people. They are enemies of people and we will have to fight them out," he said.

No militant group claimed responsibility for the Kashmir attacks.

# India will not be in nuclear club: Rice

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

The Bush administration is hard at work to win legislative approval for the Indo-US nuclear deal before the US Congress goes into summer recess on August 4.

However, Washington and its three major western allies are against India's entry into the nuclear club as a weapon state.

"Let me be clear: We do not support India joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a nuclear weapon state," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared at a joint power lunch hosted on Monday by two of the largest Indian American associations that have come together to

lobby for the deal.

"Rather, the goal of our initiative is to include India, for the first time ever, in the global non-proliferation regime," she said in a bid to sell the deal to critics who suggest that it would enable New Delhi to rapidly expand its nuclear arsenal.

By requiring India to place two-thirds of its existing and planned civil nuclear reactors under the watchful eye of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), this initiative would be a net gain for the cause of non-proliferation worldwide.

This is not the position of the US government alone but also that of Britain, France and Russia besides IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei, the custodian of global non-proliferation, Rice declared.

# Nepali Maoists reveal strength for first time

## They have 36,000 troops

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists have revealed for the first time how many soldiers they have -- 36,000 -- in remarks published on Tuesday, a week after Kathmandu invited the United Nations to monitor arms of insurgents and the state army.

"We are about 36,000 (fighters) in the People's Liberation Army now," Bibidh (one name), a Maoist commander was quoted by the Nepali daily, Kantipur, as saying.

"This keeps on changing at the time of fighting."

It was the first time the Maoists have disclosed the number of their fighters since they began fighting against the monarchy in 1996 in a

conflict, which has killed more than 13,000 people.

Nepali security officials have estimated rebel strength at around 15,000 combatants versus a government army of 100,000 besides thousands of police.

The Maoists and the government, set up after King Gyanendra handed power to political parties in April following mass protests against his absolute rule, have been observing a ceasefire for more than two months.

They are also holding peace talks aimed at ending the insurgency and the Maoists are expected to join an interim government in the Himalayan nation in the coming months.



PHOTO: AFP

Jyoti Basu, (C) former chief minister of West Bengal, offers a bouquet to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) while Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee looks on during a courtesy visit in Kolkata yesterday. Manmohan Singh was on a day's visit to lay the foundation stone of a new campus for the Indian Institute of Science.

# Rice meets Pak FM amid Afghan border row

AFP, Washington

Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri met US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Monday, and said he had offered "concrete proposals" to temper a row with Afghanistan over border security.

Kasuri's State Department visit came days after Afghanistan's foreign minister used an appearance in the US capital to urge Pakistan to do more to curb what he said were terrorists moving across the nations' mutual frontier.

Both Rice and Kasuri said they were committed to a full examination of relations between Washington and Islamabad, which the Bush administration strong-armed into being an early ally in its "war on terror" launched in 2001.

# Indian SC refuses to halt dam project

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court has refused to halt work to raise the height of a controversial dam after a plea by the prime minister that the project is important for development, a lawyer said yesterday.

The court Monday found no "reason to restrict construction at this stage as non-construction may endanger the safety of the dam," said lawyer Shanti Bhushan, who represented activists opposed to the project, quoting from the ruling.

"We have been asked to respond at the next hearing of the court which is in September."