

## Lanka presses rebels to free captive soldier

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka pressed for the release of a soldier captured by Tamil Tiger rebels following a heavy mortar duel at the weekend that killed at least 16 combatants, officials said yesterday.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) returned the bodies of 12 soldiers killed by them Friday at the village of Vakameri in eastern Sri Lanka, but were holding onto a 24-year-old soldier, a defence ministry official said.

"We have asked the ceasefire monitors to intervene and get the soldier released," the official said as the government also renewed a call for the release of a police officer the Tigers have held for more than 10 months.

The Tigers said they killed 12 troops and lost four of their own men in Friday's long-range battle, the highest toll since a sea battle killed 15 sailors and about 30 guerrillas on June 17.

# India puts off peace talks with Pakistan

## Manmohan to push for cohesive G8 response to terrorism

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India has put off peace talks with Pakistan due this week following Mumbai train bombings as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh left for Saint Petersburg in Russia yesterday to attend the G8 summit seeking a cohesive response to international terrorism.

The foreign secretary-level talks between India and Pakistan were scheduled for July 21, but it was postponed suspecting Pakistan's link with the Mumbai train blasts that left 200 people dead.

The secretary-level meeting was a part of the ongoing peace process started by the two countries in January 2004. Fresh dates for resuming negotiations would be

fixed through diplomatic channels, an official of Indian External Affairs Ministry said.

Saran said it was difficult to take the Indo-Pak peace process forward because of the adverse public opinion against Pakistan in India after the Mumbai blasts.

He said positive public opinion was needed to carry on with the peace process with Pakistan and it was missing at this point of time.

In seeking postponement of the foreign secretary-level talks, India however made it clear that it was not calling off the peace process with Pakistan.

There has been widespread public anger over the terror attacks in Mumbai trains on July 11 and India suspects Pakistani hand in the

incidents.

Manmohan Singh, who was in Mumbai three days after the blasts, had also said it is difficult to normalise ties with Pakistan if acts of terrorism from across the border are not stopped.

In a statement to the media on the eve of his departure, Singh said "terrorism is a scourge that continues to afflict different parts of the world and the tragic human cost that this entails was brought forth once again by the recent attacks in Mumbai and Srinagar."

"We will impress upon the leaders gathered at the G-8 Summit that the international community must adopt an approach of zero-tolerance for terrorism anywhere," he added.

"The international community must isolate and condemn terrorists wherever they attack, whatever their cause and whichever country or group provides them sustenance and support", the Indian prime minister said.

During his three-day visit to the Russian city to attend the summit of Group of 8 countries, Singh will meet US President George W Bush, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Hu Jintao and other leaders.

At the summit, the Indian prime minister will make a strong pitch for a "coordinated, unambiguous and global response" to terrorism in the wake of the Mumbai blasts. Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran told reporters here on the eve of the visit.



United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Chairperson and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (L) greets Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) in New Delhi yesterday prior to his departure to Russia for attending the G-8 Summit.

## Major anti-Taliban drive on in Afghanistan

### 37 more Taliban, 6 Afghan soldiers killed

AFP, Kandahar

British, Canadian and US troops in Afghanistan pushed on with their biggest joint operation in decades Sunday as officials announced 37 rebels, six Afghan soldiers and a coalition soldier died in new violence.

The US-led coalition in the capital meanwhile flatly denied claims it had killed scores of civilians in air strikes in southern Helmand province's Nawzad area, accusing the Taliban of lying for propaganda reasons.

Elsewhere in Helmand -- in Sangin district -- Afghan, British, Canadian and US troops pushed on with a major drive against Taliban

fighters that was launched early Saturday.

"The last time the three countries were together on such a scale was during the Korean War (in the early 1950s)," coalition spokesman Major Scott Lundy said.

The coalition was not allowed to divulge how many troops were involved in the operation in Sangin, where five British soldiers have been killed in hostile action in the past month, but Lundy said "thousands" were taking part.

Helmand police announced meanwhile that 27 Taliban were killed in a battle in Sangin late Saturday and eight more in another clash in the same district. Two more

were killed in neighbouring Uruzgan province, a provincial official said.

Sangin, 70km north of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, has seen regular clashes with Taliban fighters who are said to have joined forces with drugs barons in Helmand, the country's top opium-producing province.

A British base there has also been attacked several times, ranging from major assaults to potshots.

"We are going to continue until we are confident that the security situation has changed to the point when we can meet with the local population in a Shura (council)," Lundy said in the southern city of Kandahar.

## Pressure mounts on Mumbai cops to produce results

AFP, Mumbai

Indian police said yesterday they have two suspects in the Mumbai train bombings that killed 181 and injured 900 as pressure mounted for results in the huge investigation.

Officers declined to give names or details of those they were looking for amid growing complaints over the failure to make any arrests five days after Tuesday's rush-hour blasts.

"We have a couple of suspects. We're not giving their names," additional commissioner of police Jayjit Singh, responsible for the anti-terrorist squad, told AFP.

But he added officers were investigating many groups and individuals. "We're looking at so many people, so many theories are in mind," he said.

Seven blasts went off within 15 minutes of each other along Mumbai's western railway line on Tuesday evening, tearing open first-class train carriages packed with rush-hour commuters.

Some 25 people had come forward with information about "suspicious-looking men" but conflicting descriptions had made it difficult for the police to zero in on suspects, the NDTV news channel reported.

Mumbai police said they had picked up hundreds of people from different areas of India's financial capital for questioning. Eleven held after a pre-dawn swoop Saturday were for minor crimes like theft and burglary, reports said. Police said "targeted" swoops were continuing.

## Hundreds of Pak tribal militants surrender

REUTERS, Quetta

Some 600 rebel tribesmen have surrendered to the authorities in Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan, a government spokesman said on Sunday.

The fighters, led by three commanders, agreed to lay down their weapons at a parley with Baluchistan's Home Minister Shoaib Nausherwani in Dera Bugti district on Saturday.

Khan Mohammad Masoori, one of the commanders, pledged to halt attacks on government installations as his men handed over AK-47 rifles, machineguns, rocket launchers and mortars in Baker town, 400 km northeast of Quetta, officials

said.

Baluch government officials hoped the fighters' decision to stop fighting would sound the death knell for a revolt led by tribal chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti.

"It is a big success for the government and setback for the rebels," Raziq Bugti, a spokesman for the Baluch government in Quetta, told Reuters. "The Bugti chapter has almost been closed now and militancy won't come back."

On Sunday, however, a bomb wounded nine people in a town close to Baker, the spokesman said.

The Bugtis have not been alone, however, in fighting to throw off federal government control.

Leaders of the Marri and Mengal tribes have also been in revolt, and the shadowy Baluch Liberation Army has carried out attacks too.

Baluchistan is the poorest, and most thinly populated of Pakistan's four provinces. A desert region bordering Afghanistan to the north, and Iran to the west, it is rich in mineral resources, including copper, uranium and gas.

The militants want more autonomy, greater political representation, and more money from the exploitation of its mineral resources, particularly gas. Baluchistan has the country's largest gas reserves.



PHOTO: AFP

Local residents look at the site of a landslide at Dangsing village in western Nepal Saturday after 17 people were killed and another 13 feared dead.

## 'Pak Jihad poses threat to regional peace'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan could jeopardise peace in South Asia by clinging to a "Jihadi option" despite a high-profile crackdown on Islamic militants by President Pervez Musharraf, analysts say.

Military ruler Musharraf, a major US ally in the "war on terror", has also failed to tackle the so-called holy warriors because he needs Pakistan's hardline Muslim parties on-side, they say.

The result is worsening ties with India -- which says Tuesday's Mumbai bombings were carried out with "cross-border" help -- while Afghanistan is urging him to purge Taliban rebels allegedly based on Pakistani soil.

"Musharraf and his government have not totally abandoned the jihadi option," Samina Ahmed, South Asia project director for the International Crisis Group, told AFP.

Pakistan's plethora of extremist outfits were once a principal foreign policy tool, being used to fight the 1979-1989 US-backed war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and later in the divided state of Kashmir.

When Musharraf sided with Washington after the September 11, 2001 attacks, however, he

began a widespread campaign against militancy in his own country.

He banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of the names in the frame for the Mumbai attacks, and another top Jihadi outfit after militants attacked the Indian parliament in December 2001, nearly plunging the nuclear-armed rivals into war.

Pakistan has since caught or killed dozens of al-Qaeda and Taliban members, many of them along its northwestern border with Afghanistan, while three attempts on Musharraf's life highlighted the risk he was taking.

Even India admitted after launching peace talks with Pakistan in early 2004 that extremist infiltration into Indian-held Kashmir had tailed off.

Yet analysts say his focus has slipped. Prominent Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, author of the book "Taliban", said Musharraf was distracted by troubles at home.

"Pakistan is entering a very tense domestic political crisis, almost, with the military regime wanting to continue and hold elections again next year, which many people fear could be rigged again by the military," he told the BBC this week.