

# 'Lanka heading for snap polls by year's end'

## Norwegian envoy resumes peace bid

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president has asked his party to prepare for general elections before year's end if the main opposition fails to back his minority government, a state-run newspaper said yesterday.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has summoned members of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party and asked them to get ready for elections, the Sunday Observer said, quoting unnamed sources close to the president.

The newspaper said he told party workers that elections would likely "be held before the year is up" to help pave the way for consensus on peace talks with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"It is more importantly an imperative for any move towards advancing a constitutional package with a view to addressing the country's

conflict," the newspaper said, citing the unnamed sources.

Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency last November and inherited a parliament where his party first secured power with the help of a Marxist group to form a minority government in April 2004.

Parliamentary elections are not due until 2010, but the president can use his executive power to dissolve the legislature and call a snap election after parliament sits for one year.

Rajapakse has been trying to rope in the right-wing United National Party, the main opposition group, while also wooing Marxists to join his party.

The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, has stayed outside of the cabinet and is opposed to Norwegian-backed peace efforts to solve a decades-old ethnic conflict with Tamil rebels that has left more

than 60,000 dead since 1972.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway is set for a fresh attempt to end a seven-month deadlock in talks after the warring parties agreed to meet, diplomats said yesterday.

Special envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer will begin meetings with political leaders on Monday during a four-day visit aimed at jump-starting stalled negotiations between the government and Tiger rebels, diplomats said.

"He will start the talks with Sri Lankan government officials tomorrow and then proceed to have talks with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)," Norwegian embassy spokesman Erik Nurnberg said.

Diplomatic sources said Hanssen-Bauer's visit was likely to be followed by another from Erik Solheim, Norway's International Development Minister and Sri

Lanka's top peace broker, who will try to arrange talks in Oslo later this month.

"There is fresh hope after the government's announcement last week that they had the commitments they were looking for from the Tigers before sitting round a table," a diplomatic source said.

Rebels from the LTTE have stepped up ambushes and land mine attacks since December and the attacks peaked with a suicide assassination bid against army chief Sarath Fonseka in April.

The military has retaliated heavily, using air, artillery and naval power to subdue the ethnic Tamil rebels across the island's embattled northern and eastern regions.

### Manmohan Singh honours Gandhi in South Africa

REUTERS, Pietermaritzburg

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Saturday commemorated Mahatma Gandhi's work in South Africa, retracing the train trip that politicised the Indian independence movement icon.

Singh, who began a four-day state visit to South Africa on Saturday, rode an old steam-powered train for 30 minutes before disembarking in Pietermaritzburg, the town where Gandhi was thrown off a train for riding in a whites-only compartment.

Gandhi's experience led to the 1906 launch of his "Satyagraha" movement, which advocated passive resistance against the apartheid system in place in South Africa at the time and the colonial rule that existed in India and elsewhere.

"It is a soul-stirring experience," Singh said on the platform of the train station in Pietermaritzburg, some 70 km north of Durban, the country's main port and home to much of its large Indian community.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) is accompanied by South African President Thabo Mbeki as they garland the bust of Mohandas Gandhi at Durban's Phoenix Gandhi Settlement yesterday in Durban, the site where Gandhi began the non-violent struggle against apartheid a century ago. Singh is on a four-day official tour to attend the Gandhi Centenary celebrations.

### Nato to lead US troops in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

Nato will take command of up to 12,000 US troops and the territory they control in Afghanistan in "few days," a spokesman for the alliance said yesterday.

The planned expansion of the alliance's operation to the rest of the country will consolidate most military responsibilities under the command of top Nato leader, British Lt Gen David Richards.

The overall American force level in the country will remain unchanged, said Mark Laity, an alliance spokesman in Kabul.

Some 8,000 US troops tracking al-Qaeda terrorists or involved in aerial operations will remain under direct US command, Laity said, but the US-led coalition commanded by US Lt Gen Karl Eikenberry will be phased out.

"In a few days, on a date yet to be decided, you will see the completion of the steady expansion of Isaf," the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force, Laity said.

The 12,000 US troops in the regional command in eastern Afghanistan headed by US Army Maj Gen Benjamin Freakley will fall under Nato command.



PHOTO: AFP

Thailand's newly appointed Prime Minister and former Thai army chief General Surayud Chulanont (L) arrives along with his wife Khunying Chitravadee Chulanout to speak with the media after his swearing in ceremony at the Government House building in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's new, military-appointed prime minister said that he wasn't sure if he deserved the job, but he had to "take the responsibility" after receiving a mandate from the king.

### New Thai PM hopes to end southern unrest within a year

AFP, Bangkok

Nearly 1,500 people have been killed since the unrest erupted in January 2004. The violence has been blamed variously on ethnic Malay separatism, religious extremism, local police corruption and smuggling rings.

Meanwhile, Thailand's junta leader said yesterday that the military has released four top aides to depose prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra who had been held since the September 19 coup.

"They have already been freed this morning," coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin told reporters when asked about the fate of the four senior politicians.

"It is the police's responsibility to take care of them," he added.

The three were released the day after the junta strengthened a panel investigating graft allegations against Thaksin and members of his government.

Thaksin's deputy Chidchai Vanasathidya and Prommin Lertsuridej, the secretary to the premier, were detained one day after the coup and were held at a military guesthouse on the northern outskirts of Bangkok.

Thailand's new military-backed prime minister said yesterday he would try to heal the nation's political divisions and end an Islamic insurgency in the country's south within one year.

"Two urgent problems are the political problems and the southern violence. Solving these requires unity and full cooperation from the public," retired army chief Surayud Chulanont told reporters shortly after taking office.

"I will put these two issues at the top of my agenda," he said. "I will make a great effort to solve these two problems within one year."

The military named Surayud as prime minister Sunday after ousting Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup on September 19.

The coup came after months of political turmoil surrounding Thaksin's government, sparked by claims of endemic corruption.

Among the complaints against Thaksin were that his heavy-handed tactics exacerbated unrest in Muslim-majority provinces of southern Thailand.

### ALLEGED ISI LINK WITH MUMBAI BOMBING Indo-Pak peace talks strained yet again

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan's slow-moving peace process will likely be strained but not derailed by charges that Islamabad's spy agency had a role in the Mumbai train bombings, analysts said yesterday.

India police said on Saturday that Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency and Pakistan-backed militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba were involved in the train bombings that killed 186 people and injured nearly 800 people on July 11.

"The new charges will test the resilience of the process that started in January 2004. But I don't think you can take a country to war over terrorism charges, as some would suggest," said C. Uday Bhaskar, a security analyst with the Institute for

Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi.

After the Mumbai blasts, India called off talks with Islamabad, but decided to resume the dialogue after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf last month on the sidelines of a summit in Cuba.

The South Asian rivals agreed to share intelligence on terrorist activities in the region and the foreign secretaries of the two countries are scheduled to meet this year.

India Sunday decided to put the agreement to its first test, saying it would give evidence gathered by police to Pakistan showing the involvement of its spy agency and militant groups in the train bombings.

The country's new Foreign

Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon, who most recently served as ambassador to Pakistan, said that Islamabad's repeated denial of any involvement in the blasts would have to be reassessed after it reviewed the evidence and that India would "judge it by its actions."

Security experts said the decision to hand over police evidence to Pakistan will put the anti-terror agreement to a severe test.

"Pakistan has been saying 'show us the evidence.' Now there is a mechanism for that. Let India take up the matter under the process, which will be put to the test now," said C. Raja Mohan, Strategic Affairs Editor at the Indian Express newspaper.

### India resigned to wait as Indo-US nuclear deal delayed

REUTERS, New Delhi

India sought to put on a brave face yesterday over an unexpected delay in the approval of a landmark nuclear deal with the United States amid nervousness in New Delhi that the controversial pact could slip away.

The deal, which aims to give India access to US civilian nuclear technology for the first time in three decades, had been expected to be approved by the US Senate last week before it adjourned for elections in November.

However, the chamber could not take up the bill due to differences between Republicans and Democrats despite both sides expressing strong support for the deal and pointing fingers at the other for the delay.

"The bill actually enjoys bipartisan support and it is our hope that this will find its way through US domestic

legal procedures as soon as possible," said India's new foreign secretary, Shiv Shankar Menon.

"I think our interest in the agreement, in it passing through Congress and our interest in the terms staying as they are, is quite clear," Menon told reporters after taking office.

Privately, some senior Indian officials expressed helplessness about a deal that has faced a storm of opposition in both countries since it was agreed in principle by President George W Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July 2005.

The Senate could take up the bill when it returns for a "lame duck" session after the November elections, but other approvals are needed beyond that and they are likely to push the deal's final fate into 2007.

### Bus careens off bridge in China: 30 die

AP, Beijing

A bus careened off a bridge and plunged nearly 100 feet into a river Sunday, killing 30 people in the southwestern Chinese city of Chongqing, a government news agency said.

Another 20 passengers were injured in the accident and were being treated in a local hospital, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

The packed bus had driven through a guardrail of the bridge that spans Chongqing's Jialing River on Sunday afternoon, it said.

China's roads are among the world's deadliest. Overloading of vehicles, reckless driving and poor road conditions are frequent causes of fatal accidents.

### ISI under fire from all sides

REUTERS, Islamabad

Five years into a war on terrorism, abiding distrust of Pakistan among allies and neighbours was laid bare in the past few days through a series of accusations against its military secret service.

On Saturday, Indian police said the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), along with Lashkar-e-Taiba, branded a terrorist group by the United States, was behind bomb blasts that killed 186 people and wounded hundreds in Mumbai on July 11.

President Pervez Musharraf had already spent the latter days of a lengthy overseas trip fending off Afghan and British insinuations that members of his security apparatus were covertly supporting the Taliban insurgency raging in southern Afghanistan.

Coming just two weeks after Musharraf managed to get India to resume a peace process that New Delhi froze after the Mumbai blasts,

the timing of the allegation against the ISI is bad.

The agency is well-used to being blamed, though the West had been happy to enlist its support in a covert war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s, just as it is now being used in the war on terrorism.

"Ever since I can remember, whenever there is something on, whenever a blast takes place here, or something in Afghanistan, there is the September 11, all sorts of things, so ISI is always in the eye of the storm," said Lieutenant-General Asad Durrani, a former head of the ISI.

Despite becoming a crucial ally of the West, despite making a foreign policy U-turn in 2001 to abandon support for a Taliban government hosting al-Qaeda, and despite starting peace talks with India almost three years ago, doubts remain about whether Pakistan's spies are still playing a double game.

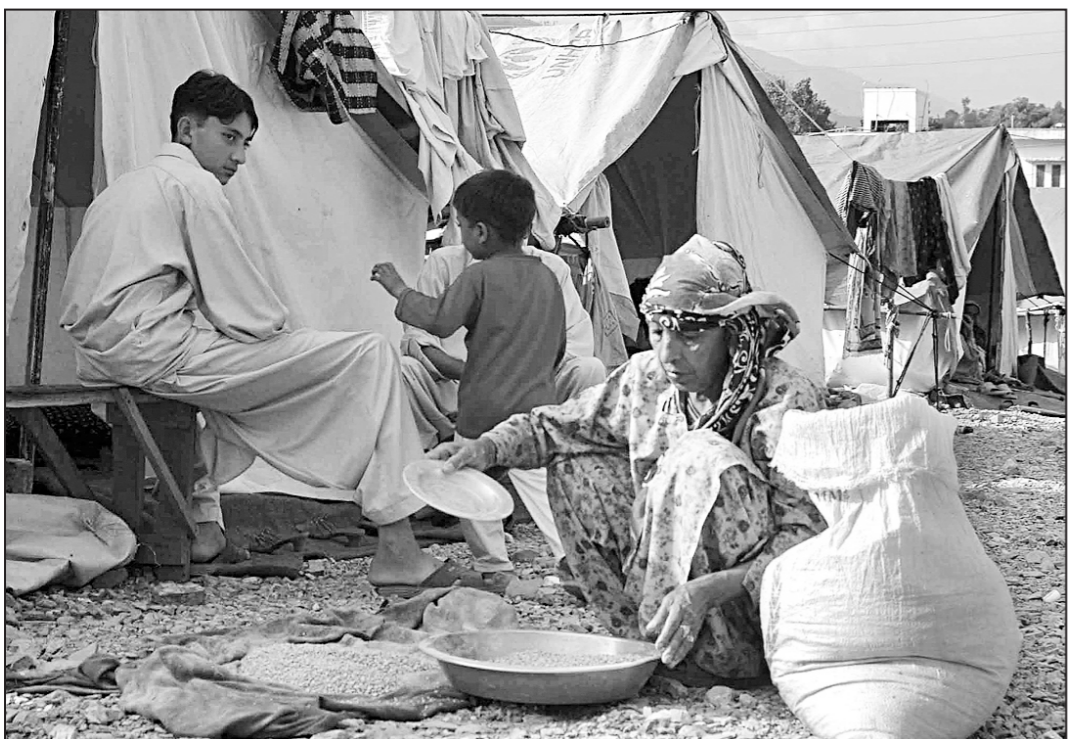


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Kashmiri quake survivors sit outside their tent in Muzaffarabad, the quake-devastated capital of Pakistani-administered Kashmir on Saturday. A year after a catastrophic earthquake ripped through South Asia, up to 60,000 survivors face another winter in tents despite some progress in rebuilding the shattered region.

### Winter threatens survivors a yr after Kashmir quake

AFP, Muzaffarabad

A year after a catastrophic earthquake ripped through South Asia, up to 60,000 survivors face another winter in tents despite some progress in rebuilding the shattered region.

In parts of scenic northwestern Pakistan and Kashmir fallen minarets still lie on piles of rubble, flimsy tin shacks serve as schools and hospitals and angry quake victims protest about the pace of reconstruction.

Most of the survivors who are expected to attend memorial services for the more than 74,000 people who died on October 8, 2005, will have no permanent homes to go back to afterwards.

"We have been in this tent for almost a year, life has been so hard. Please pray for me," wept grand-

mother Zeinab Bibi, 60, in Muzaffarabad, the devastated capital of Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

The United Nations warns it will take 10 years to recover from the 7.6-magnitude quake, which left 3.5 million people homeless, sheared off mile-high mountainsides and swept whole villages into foaming rivers.

A global relief effort led by the Pakistani and Indian armies also involved Islamic Kashmiri militants and dozens of helicopters from around the world to keep survivors alive through the winter last year.

Twelve months later, officials claim that reconstruction work on the 600,000 homes, 8,000 schools and 350 hospitals destroyed by the temblor is well underway, funded by international pledges of nearly six billion dollars.