

# Lanka offers power-sharing to reach peace deal

## Army death toll hits 129 after fierce battle

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president offered cabinet posts to the main opposition yesterday in a bid to strike a bipartisan deal to end the island's ethnic bloodshed, his office said.

President Mahinda Rajapakse in talks with opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe invited his United National Party (UNP) to join the cabinet and work towards solving the island's festering ethnic conflict.

"President Rajapakse invited the UNP to join the cabinet of ministers to effectively carry out the agreed program of work," an official state-

ment said, adding that the two sides would work towards a formal agreement.

The initiative came as planned Sri Lankan peace talks hung in the balance after Tamil Tiger rebels inflicted heavy losses on government troops in fierce fighting that left hundreds killed or injured.

Norway has been working to restore a 2002 ceasefire and end spiralling violence that has claimed over 2,200 lives since December.

Opposition chief Wickremesinghe told reporters his party was supporting moves for a negotiated settlement with Tamil Tiger rebels,

but had not decided on whether to accept cabinet positions.

Tiger rebels had said they would settle for extensive devolution of power. But any concession to the guerrillas requires a constitutional amendment, which needs passage by a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

Rajapakse's left-of-centre coalition is a minority government and it has to depend on the opposition to rewrite the constitution.

The opposition has supported talks with Tamil Tiger rebels and backed a devolution of power as a way to end the ethnic bloodshed which has claimed over 60,000 lives

since 1972.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's military said Thursday 129 soldiers were killed and over 500 wounded in fighting with Tamil Tiger rebels in the island's north on Wednesday, while claiming 200 rebels also died.

The defence ministry said 55 soldiers were killed in heavy clashes along the de facto front line in the Jaffna peninsula.

The ministry said the rebels on Thursday had returned the bodies of 74 more troops, which may belong to an infantry company attacked in Tamil Tiger territory.

## Pak cops break up coup anniversary protest

REUTERS, Lahore

Pakistani police baton-charged supporters of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday after they refused to end a protest to mark the seventh anniversary of his ouster in a coup.

Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League party had called for nation-wide protests to mark the anniversary of the bloodless coup by army chief General Pervez Musharraf on Oct 12, 1999.

About 30 protesters, including some women, gathered on a main road in the eastern city of Lahore chanting: "Go Musharraf Go", "Killer of Democracy: General Musharraf" and "Long Live Nawaz Sharif".



PHOTO: AFP

Western tourists and locals ride on the back of a military truck to cross the flooded main road from airport on the outskirts near Mandalay in central Myanmar Wednesday. At least ten were killed and three are still missing following floods in eastern and central Myanmar.

## Court clips Indian president's powers of pardon

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court on Wednesday clipped the president's power to pardon convicts on death row.

The ruling came in the midst of a national debate on the death penalty after the family of a Kashmiri Muslim, sentenced to hang for plotting a 2001 attack on parliament, appealed to President Abdul Kalam to spare his life.

Powers to grant pardon were subject to judicial review if there was an "extraneous consideration in the exercise of that power", the court ruled.

"Undue considerations of caste, religion and political loyalty are prohibited from being grounds for grant of clemency," Supreme Court judges Arjitt Pasayat and Justice SH Kapadia said, according to a Press Trust of India report.



PHOTO: AFP

A young girl holds a party flag as people from various walks of life stage a protest rally outside the venue where the government and Maoists are holding high-level peace talks in Kathmandu yesterday.

## Probe panel sends Nepal's king questions about power abuse

AFP, Kathmandu

A panel formed to probe abuses of power during mass protests in April in which at least 18 people killed, has sent a list of questions to Nepal's beleaguered monarch, an official said yesterday.

"We are asking questions of the king not as head of state, but as the then chairman of the council of ministers," said Dilli Raman Acharya, a member of the probe committee.

King Gyanendra sacked the government in February 2005 and assumed direct control of the impoverished nation as head of the council of ministers.

"We have sent the questions and are seeking a reply," said Acharya, adding that no deadline had been set for the king to

respond.

Mass protests in April organised by political parties and rebel Maoists forced Gyanendra to relinquish direct control and restore parliament.

At least 18 protesters were killed by security forces, and thousands were injured in demonstrations across the country.

The commission investigating abuses of power during Nepal's "people's movement" in April has already questioned senior royal-appointed politicians and security officials.

Acharya declined to reveal what the king had been asked.

The commission has no judicial power but will present its findings and recommendations to the government once the probe is completed, Acharya said.

# Nato wants to copy Pak militant peace deal

## Says Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

Nato approves of Pakistan's peace deal with militants in a volatile tribal region and wants Islamabad's help to do the same thing in Afghanistan, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf said Wednesday.

Musharraf said the commander of the Nato force fighting a spiralling Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, British General David Richards, had agreed with Pakistan's strategy when he visited him earlier this week.

Richards "absolutely agrees with

the environment and my analysis and he is asking for our help to do the same thing, and we will proceed on the same course," Musharraf told reporters, referring to the accord in North Waziristan.

Pakistan's allies in the US-led "war on terror" have previously expressed reservations on the controversial accord, which was signed on September 5 by the authorities and by tribal leaders and insurgents.

Under the accord, Pakistan released dozens of detained tribesmen and agreed to dismantle

checkpoints in North Waziristan. The rebels pledged to end targeted killings and cross-border attacks into Afghanistan.

Ahead of his talks with Musharraf on Tuesday, Richards said that Pakistan's arrangement could set an example for the 31,000-strong Nato-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

Nato had reached a deal of its own with tribal elders in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province that cut violence, he said, although it had not made any pact with insurgents.

## Asians foresee US losing superpower status to China: Poll

AFP, Washington

Asians see the United States losing its undisputed superpower status in 50 years to possibly China amid waning trust in Washington to act responsibly in the world, a poll showed Wednesday.

But most Asians felt the growth of Chinese military power would be a potential source of conflict between major powers in the region, according to the study by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA), an independent US think tank.

In the immediate term, US power in the eyes of Asians remains secure.

US influence today is "substantially above any other country" even

as others have gained clout, and Asians do not predict much decline in US influence over the next decade, according to the survey in partnership with the US-based Asia Society.

In half a century, however, a majority in all countries covered by the poll - China, India, South Korea and the United States - believed "another nation" will become as powerful or surpass the United States in power.

"There is a clear agreement across the board that over the next half century Asians see the United States no more the sole superpower that it is or considered to be today," CCGA president Marshall Bouton told a news conference in Washington.

# 57 die in Thai, Myanmar floods

AFP, Mandalay

At least 57 people have been killed and thousands forced to abandon their homes as the worst floods in recent memory wreaked havoc across Thailand and Myanmar yesterday.

Military-run Myanmar, one of the world's poorest countries, struggled to cope with floods that have so far killed 13 people, according to state media.

The Myanmar authorities evacuated 500 homes on the outskirts of the central city of Mandalay after floodwaters rose overnight, one official said, while residents said about 10,000 people had fled to emergency shelters.

Some sought refuge in schools, but many were forced to camp out

by the side of the road. Desperate villagers piled whatever possessions they could carry into canoes as floodwaters submerged homes.

"I've never seen flooding like this before in my life," said one 67-year-old villager.

The road between Mandalay and the tourist city of Bagan was blocked, as was the main highway between Yangon and Mandalay, with lorries backed up for miles waiting for some five feet (1.5 meters) of water to subside.

Most official media made no mention of the devastating floods, although the official Mirror newspaper said 10 people had been killed when the floodwaters hit Kyaukpantaung township, 240km southwest of the city of Mandalay

on Tuesday. A Burmese-language state-run newspaper put the overall toll at 13.

State media reported Wednesday that more than 3,000 homes and 900 acres (364 hectares) of farmland were inundated.

The floods, which began last August, have affected two million people in 46 provinces, causing an estimated 236 million baht (seven million dollars) worth of damage, and deluging 1.5 million rai (600,000 acres) of farmland.

Ministry of health officials said that 260,000 people are suffering from flood-related diseases.

# Nepali Maoists, officials in race to seal peace deal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Negotiators struggled to seal a last-minute peace deal between Nepal's Maoist rebels and the government yesterday, hours before their leaders were due to resume talks that are key to the troubled country's future.

Officials said the dialogue could be delayed or postponed if the negotiators failed to clinch an agreement ahead of the talks between Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and Maoist chief Prachanda.

Koirala and Prachanda met on Sunday and Tuesday after peace moves stalled for months due to differences over disarming the rebel army and the future of the monarchy in the Himalayan nation.

Although the two sides were unable to settle the thorny dispute over whether the 35,000 guerrillas would lay down their arms before joining an interim administration, they remained upbeat after talks on Tuesday.

The two leaders also asked their junior negotiators to bridge the

divide ahead of their meeting on Thursday.

Both sides held talks on Wednesday but were nowhere closer to an agreement, negotiators said.

"We have not been able to strike any deal yet on key political agenda," Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told Reuters.