



Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) shakes hands with his Malaysian counterpart Abdullah Ahmad Badawi upon arrival at Prime Minister House in Islamabad yesterday.

## Upsurge in Lankan violence inevitable

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military and Tamil Tiger rebels are again accusing each other of gearing up for war after peace talks collapsed in Switzerland, with analysts saying an upsurge in violence is inevitable.

The government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) failed a week ago to buy time for another round of negotiations despite intense foreign pressure to keep their Norwegian-brokered initiative alive.

Retired air force chief Harry Gunatillake says the country was dangerously heading towards a conflagration following the failure of the Swiss talks.

"There is going to be an escalation and a large number of lives will be lost," Gunatillake said. "I hope my words won't be prophetic. I

pray that I will be proved wrong." Diplomats involved in the faltering process said they feared renewed air attacks by the military could trigger more bloodshed and add to the 3,000 bodies piled up after the previous round of talks in Switzerland in February.

As negotiators from both sides returned home, Sri Lankan war planes kept up three days of bombings, with one strike damaging the main hospital inside rebel-held territory.

In a clear bid to pull the parties from plunging into more conflict, the island's main international backers — the United States, European Union, Japan and Norway — last week asked both parties to act with restraint.

The quartet, known as co-chairs because they presided over the raising of 4.5 billion dollars to

support the island's peace efforts in 2003, expressed "deep regret" over Thursday's bombing that hit the Kilinochchi hospital.

"Why did this happen just three days after holding direct talks in Geneva," the Tigers asked in a statement. "The only possible interpretation... can be that the government wants to drag the whole island into a full-scale war."

Sri Lanka's defence ministry last week made it clear that it was bracing for more attacks by the LTTE ahead of the 52nd birthday of the group's leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, later this month.

"The situation created by the Tiger terrorists indicate that they will launch their attack in the east (of the island) prior to the birthday of their leader on the 26th (of November)," the defence ministry said.

## 50 held for attempt on Musharraf

PTI, London

Several young officers with the Pakistani Air Force with access to President Pervez Musharraf's innermost security circle were among 50 people arrested for trying to assassinate him soon after he returned from a visit to the US and Britain in late September, a report said yesterday.

The rocket strike was aimed at the President's high-security personal residence-office in Rawalpindi.

"About 50 people are being held on suspicion of involvement in the September attack, which involved a battery of Russian-made 107 m projectiles launched by a signal from a mobile phone," Pakistani intelligence sources were quoted as saying by The Sunday Telegraph.

"Alarming, many are understood to be young officers serving in the Pakistan Air Force, some of whom have access to high-security zones of the presidential offices, parliament and the intelligence service," they said.

# Israel vows to press on with Gaza offensive

## Troops kill 2 more Palestinians

REUTERS, Gaza

Israeli forces shot dead two Palestinians including a policeman and kept up the shelling of militant targets in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday, residents and medical officials said.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Israel's assault on rocket-launching squads and gunmen would not be open-ended but declined to say when it would finish. He appeared to acknowledge the rocket threat could not be wiped out by the operation.

At least one homemade missile hit the Israeli border town of Sderot, the Zaka rescue service said. No one was hurt.

Israeli forces have killed 47 people in the five-day operation, one of the biggest since the army and Jewish settlers pulled out of Gaza last year after 38 years of

occupation.

More than half of the fatalities in the current operation have been gunmen, Palestinian medical officials have said.

"We have no intention of conquering Gaza," Olmert said at the start of a cabinet meeting in Jerusalem.

"We have declared that we will never accept the ongoing (rocket) fire and that we would take any steps needed to considerably reduce the fire and prevent terror activity."

The assault is mainly focused on the town of Beit Hanoun, home to 30,000 Palestinian and not far from the border.

It is part of a wider offensive launched in late June after militants including members of the governing Hamas movement abducted an Israeli soldier in a cross-border raid from Gaza.

Medical officials and police said Israeli troops shot dead the policeman near his post in northern Gaza. Israel's army said it was checking the report. A gunman belonging to the Hamas armed wing was shot in a clash with soldiers in Beit Hanoun.

Israeli analysts expect Olmert will end the operation before he heads to Washington for talks with President George W. Bush, scheduled for November 13.

The United States has said Israel has the right to defend itself against rocket attacks.

But it has also pressed Israel to relax its curbs on Gaza's crossings to ease a humanitarian crisis in the strip, already suffering under a Western aid embargo imposed when Hamas refused to recognize Israel after taking office in March.

Since the start of the overall offensive in late June, 320

Palestinians have been killed, around half of them civilians, hospital officials and residents say. Three Israeli soldiers have been killed.

Militants have fired some 300 homemade missiles at Israel this year from Gaza, Israel says. They are rarely deadly.

The Israeli assault coincides with efforts by the Palestinians to form a unity government they hope will lead to a lifting of Western sanctions.

Mustafa Barghouti, an independent lawmaker who has been mediating between Hamas leaders and rival President Mahmoud Abbas, said there could be an announcement within days on formation of a government to replace the Hamas administration.

"We are very close to finalising everything," Barghouti told Reuters.

## Pakistan must seal its border, Nato send more troops, says Dutch FM

AFP, Kabul

Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot pressed Pakistan Saturday to seal its border with Afghanistan to stop the infiltration of militants and also called on Nato nations to send more troops.

Bot, who is due to visit Pakistan Sunday, has made similar appeals in previous visits to Afghanistan to visit Dutch troops, most of them based in the province of Uruzgan on the Pakistan border.

"The world community, including The Netherlands, is very serious in exerting pressure on Pakistan to (see) ... that its borders is sealed off and the terrorists can no longer cross from Pakistan into Uruzgan, into south of your country," Bot told reporters.

Afghan officials allege that Taliban and other insurgents have training facilities in Pakistan and find

support and finance among extremist circles there.

They say the government is not doing enough to crack down on these groups, a claim Islamabad rejects.

Bot, who was talking to reporters after meeting his Afghan counterpart Rangin Dadfar Spanta, said he had raised the issue with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during a recent visit to United States.

He said he hoped Pakistan realised the world was watching.

"Tomorrow again I will convey that message to Pakistani authorities... if Pakistan realises that the world is looking at them, then I am also sure that we can put a halt to it," he said.

Bot, who had met President Hamid Karzai for talks earlier Saturday, said he would also urge Nato member countries at their November 28-29 summit to send more troops to Afghanistan.

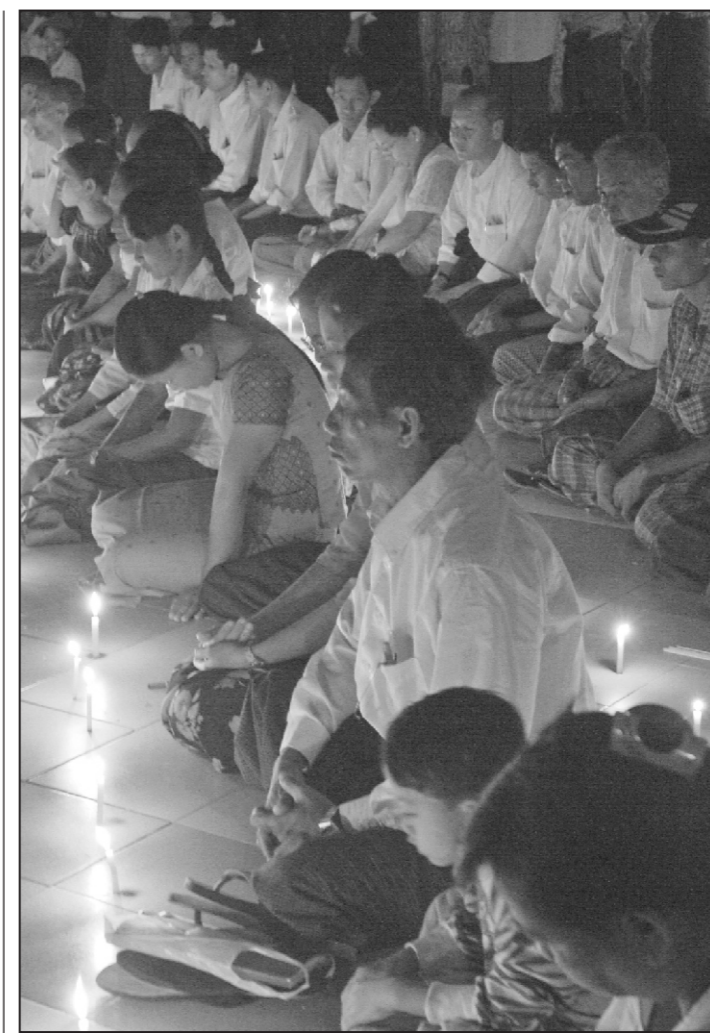


PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar democracy activists hold a candlelit peace vigil at Myo U Pagoda in a suburb of Yangon Saturday. Under the watchful eye of some 20 plainclothes security officers, more than 150 pro-democracy activists held the peace vigil in military-run Myanmar ahead of a visit by a top UN envoy.

## Democrats seek gains in Republican territory

AP, Washington

Long locked out of power, Democrats appear poised to win control of the House and possibly the Senate in midterm elections this week amid a national clamour for change after four years of war in Iraq.

Democrats also are on track to replace Republican governors in several states, New York, Ohio and Massachusetts among them.

Republican Gov Arnold Schwarzenegger seems safely on his way to a first full term in California, the most populous state.

Six years after President Bush took office and with his poll ratings at no better than 40 percent, all 435 House seats are on the ballot, as well as 33 Senate and 36 gubernatorial races. Voters in 37 states will determine the fate of ballot initiatives, deciding whether to raise the

minimum wage, ban gay marriage, endorse expanded embryonic stem cell research and in South Dakota impose the country's most stringent abortion restrictions.

State legislative and local races by the thousands filled out the ballots in nearly every county.

The elections counted as the costliest ever, with spending expected to reach \$2.6 billion, much of it paying for caustic television commercials.

## Twin blasts kill 8 in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

At least eight people, mostly shoppers, were killed and more than 20 injured in two simultaneous bomb attacks yesterday in the northeastern Indian city of Guwahati, police and witnesses said.

Police said the first bomb ripped through the upscale Fancy Bazaar shopping arcade in the heart of Guwahati, the largest city in the nation's strife-torn state of Assam.

"The first blast occurred at 6:40 pm (1340 GMT) and three people died on the spot and two others succumbed to injuries on the way to hospital," Guwahati deputy police chief Rajan Singh told AFP.

Twenty more people were seriously wounded in the market-place bombing, he said, adding that the place was crowded with shoppers and vendors when the explosion occurred.

"There is chaos and panic and we

are now engaged in removing the injured to hospitals," Singh said.

Several cars were also damaged in the explosion at the market, which sells everything from vegetables to electronics and clothes, he said.

The second bomb went off almost simultaneously in Patharkuwari on the city's outskirts, leaving three dead, he said.

"There has been some injuries but we are still getting details of the second bombing," he said.

The Press Trust of India news agency put the number of injured in the two attacks at 25.

Federal officials suggested the target of the second bombing was sensitive installations of the state-owned Indian Oil Corporation in Patharkuwari.

In the past month, 10 people including some Indian soldiers have died and in a dozen bomb attacks in oil- and timber-rich Assam.