



Members of Sri Lanka's Special Task Force survey the damage in front of the Colombo's Town Hall yesterday at the site where a suspected Tamil Tiger suicide bomber detonated a device during a campaign rally Saturday, that killed at least 21 people and injured Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The blast took place on the last day of campaigning for presidential elections due to take place tomorrow. — AFP photo

Clinton leads chorus of concern for Chandrika

COLOMBO, Dec 19: US President Bill Clinton led a chorus of international shock and concern today over the assassination bid on Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga by a woman suicide bomber, reports AFP.

In a personal message, Clinton said he had been shocked and saddened to learn of the "cowardly attempt" on Chandrika's life at an election rally in Colombo on Saturday night.

Chandrika was injured in the blast that killed 21 people and injured 110. The attack -- believed to be the work of the separatist Tamil Tigers -- coincided with a separate blast at an opposition rally that left 12 dead.

"It is particularly distressing to me that these heinous acts have occurred during a demo-

cratic election campaign," Clinton said.

"I have full faith that these events will only reinforce the strong commitment of the Sri Lankan people to democracy and peace," he said, wishing Chandrika a full recovery.

In a similar message, French President Jacques Chirac condemned the "despicable bomb attempt" and asked to convey the "compassionate feelings" of the French people to the victims and their relatives.

Neighbouring India labelled the two bomb attacks "acts of wanton terrorism," with President K.R. Narayanan and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee sending personal messages of concern and sympathy to Chandrika.

According to diplomats here, the Indian government also of-

fered medical assistance to the Sri Lankan president, who was said Sunday to be recovering from surgery to one of her eyes.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook condemned the two bomb blasts and said he deeply regretted the loss of life and injuries caused.

"There is no place for violence in the democratic process. It is essential that the forthcoming elections are held peacefully in an atmosphere free of intimidation and violence," Cook said.

Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Sadaaki Numata delivered a similar message.

"Terrorist acts are not only a serious challenge to the democracy of Sri Lanka but also a challenge to the whole of the international community," Numata said in a statement.

Sun sets on European colonial empire in Asia

MACAU, Dec 19: The curtain was due to fall on European colonialism in Asia at midnight Sunday when Portugal was to hand back the tiny gambling and sex trade enclave of Macau to China after more than four centuries, reports AFP.

Macau -- which became the first European territory in the Far East when it was rented by China to Portuguese silk and spice traders in 1557 -- is to be returned by Lisbon under the "one country, two systems" formula used for the handover from Britain of Hong Kong in 1997 which guarantees autonomy for 50 years.

The re-establishment of Chinese rule over the small peninsula and two islands -- home to 450,000 people -- means the grand 50-year Chi-

nese plan of national reunification is two thirds complete.

The ultimate prize, Taiwan, which split from the communist mainland in 1949, still refuses to rejoin.

The handover also releases the final outpost in Portugal's once vast empire, which began with Vasco da Gama's circumnavigation in the 15th century and eventually stretched to Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, India, Malaysia, and East Timor.

The return also marks the passing of the colonial era in Asia, which at its height also saw Britain, France, Holland and Spain conquer vast possessions across Asia.

Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio said he would have mixed emotions when the Por-

tuguese flag was finally lowered here at midnight, to be replaced by China's red and gold banner.

"First you have the sensation that 500 years of history are going in front of you in 30 seconds. And the second feeling ... I feel proud. I think we did our job as best we could."

Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who arrived Sunday, has hailed Macau's reintegration as a stepping stone to Taiwan as state media celebrated an end to the "shame and humiliation" of the colonial era.

Like Hong Kong, the handover was to be marked by a series of parades and cultural events, a huge waterfront firework display and a banquet for world dignitaries, 2,500 in all, hosted by Sampaio and Jiang.



Macau Governor, Rocha Vieira (R) together with his wife and Portuguese Prime Minister, Antonio Guterres (C), during mass at the Macau Cathedral yesterday. Macau was handed over to China yesterday. — AFP photo

Russians elect new Duma amid war in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Dec 19: Russians across this vast country went to the polls today with a surge of patriotic fervour over the war in Chechnya drowning out discontent over deep economic hardship, reports AFP.

Unlike the 1995 vote for the State Duma, when the governing party fared badly as a result of the bloodbath during the last North Caucasus war, this time around voters are rallying around the flag.

Few have reaped the benefits as much as the Unity Party, backed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, which has surged into second place in little over two months since its inception.

Polling stations opened at 8 a.m. (11:00 am BST) in the capital Moscow and Saint Petersburg, Russia's biggest cities, Moscow Echo radio reported.

Voting was to end in these two cities and the surrounding regions at 8 p.m.

Besides electing members of the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, Moscow is also to choose a mayor. The incumbent Yury Luzhkov is favourite for the job.

Voters went to the ballot box

first at the sparsely populated and icy northeastern tip of Kamchatka in the far east at 8:00 a.m. Sunday (2:00 am BST Saturday).

By 2:00 pm there, 27.5 per cent of voters had cast their votes, surpassing the necessary 25-per cent minimum for the elections to be valid, ITAR-TASS reported.

In Siberia, local electoral officials said they feared freezing temperatures of between minus 30 and 40 Celsius degrees might deter people from coming to polling stations from remote villages in the Irkutsk region.

More than 107 million people are eligible to cast ballots in post-Soviet Russia's third free Duma poll. Turnout is not expected to top 60 percent after a campaign marked by unprecedented mud-slinging that left many voters disaffected.

The last polls are due to close late Sunday evening in the western enclave of Kaliningrad.

The voting across Russia's 11 time zones, in the world's largest country, will take nearly 24 hours.

Preliminary results are due early Monday.

Among the 26 registered par-

ties contesting the elections, most polls suggest the communists will maintain their grip as the largest bloc in the Duma.

The party has confidently scheduled a victory press conference for Sunday evening.

The most important battle is that for second place between Unity, which has scored 12.20 percent in polls, and its bitter for Fatherland-All Russia (OVR) led by ex-premier Yevgeny Primakov, which has been scoring nine to 16 per cent.

The Kremlin had struggled for much of the year to build a party that would support ostracised President Boris Yeltsin while assuring that the next Russian president guarantees the current regime's future safety.

Meanwhile, Putin's backing of Unity, coupled with a media assault on OVR which among other things accused Luzhkov of murder, has deflated the anti-Kremlin juggernaut into a party wreathing for life.

In a last-minute bid to grab headlines and attract Russia's attention to OVR, Primakov on Friday unexpectedly declared that he had decided to run for president next year.

Falun Gong sect members demonstrate in Macau

MACAU, Dec 19: Shortly before Chinese President Jiang Zemin's arrival in Macau, police on Sunday broke up a gathering of about 30 visiting members of a sect banned in China who defied "warnings and demonstrated ahead of the enclave's return to Beijing's control, reports AP.

Macau police removed the Falun Gong practitioners -- lifting some of them off the ground and carrying them away as they rigidly maintained cross-legged meditation positions.

Authorities would not immediately confirm whether the Falun Gong adherents had been arrested, deported or merely dispersed. The demonstrators were mostly from Hong Kong or Chinese immigrants who live in Australia, Japan and the United States.

"We just want China to understand us. We don't have a political agenda," said Zhang Shuk, 32, a resident of South Korea, who was police escorted her off the square with her 6-year-old daughter.

Authorities confiscated banners which proclaimed Falun Gong is not a cult, the characterization used by communists China, where leaders are unsettled by the sheer num-

ber of practitioners.

A Hong Kong reporter was arrested after minor scuffles with police.

Although there was no official comment on the police action, officers at the scene were heard talking among one another and saying the Falun Gong practitioners were illegally assembling in public.

Mainland China began massive arrests of Falun Gong members after banning the set in July, but the practice remains legal in Hong Kong and Macau, which was returning to Chinese sovereignty at midnight Sunday.

Falun Gong practitioners said they applied for a permit to demonstrate but it was denied, although Macau officials had said previously they had been given such application.

"Falun Gong is not a cult. We are not here to challenge the Chinese authorities," said Li Bo, 27, a system engineer in Tokyo. "We're very worried that after today, Macau authorities will also muzzle our voices due to Beijing's pressure."

The departing Portuguese governor, Vasco Rocha Vieira, said before the demonstration that no one had been kicked out for their belief in Falun Gong.

Ex-Punjab chief minister barred from politics for 21 years

LAHORE, Dec 19: A former chief minister of Pakistan's eastern Punjab province was barred from politics for 21 years after being found guilty of corruption, a senior government official said Saturday, reports AP.

Arif Nakai was the first politician to be disqualified from politics since the army took power in a bloodless coup on Oct 12 and imposed a strict new anti-corruption law.

According to the court ruling, Nakai spent 1.9 million rupees, or drs 352,000, of state funds on a private visit to Islam's holy sites in Saudi Arabia in 1996 along with six other family members, said Deputy Attorney General Sher Zaman.

Army chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf has promised ruth-

less and swift accountability of corrupt politicians.

Zaman said Nakai admitted misusing state funds during a hearing before a newly formed accountability court. Nakai apparently deposited the amount he was accused of misusing thus avoiding arrest.

"Because he has admitted corruption, he can no longer hold public office or take part in politics under the new accountability laws," Zaman said.

Corruption is a major issue in Pakistan where four elected governors have been ousted from power since 1990.

Both Nawaz Sharif, whose government was thrown out by the army on Oct 12 and Benazir Bhutto have been accused repeatedly of relentless corruption.

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