

International

Election to boost battle against Tamil Tigers

COLOMBO, Dec 22 : The re-election of Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga is seen here as a vote to strengthen a military drive against Tiger rebels who tried to assassinate her on the eve of the polls, reports AFP.

Kumaratunga, 54, who narrowly escaped death in a Tamil Tiger bomb attack, appeared on national television a day before the vote and urged Sri Lankans to unite with her efforts to "wipe out terrorism."

Asian diplomats here said the election may have raised expectations of a tougher line against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels who were blamed for Saturday's attempt on Kumaratunga's life.

"The hard-line elements within the (majority) Sinhalese community had sided with her closer to the election," an Asian

diplomat noted. "They may expect the president to use military muscle against the Tigers."

Kumaratunga's campaign towards its final stages sent conflicting signals to the minority Tamils with her accepting some hard-line elements from the opposition. Results released Wednesday showed Tamils voted against her.

Political analysts noted that the president could now afford to take a tough stand on any issue because she is not risking her political career.

Constitutionally her second term is also her last and she is debarred from contesting the presidency again.

"She will have to appease the electorate either by stepping up pressure on the Tigers militarily or politically," a Western diplomat said. "But the mood in the country does not seem to favour talks after the attempt

on her life."

Said radical newspaper editor Sunanda Deshpriya: "The president will lose credibility if she goes for talks without weakening the Tigers. This is a vote for war."

The Tamil Tigers had described her five-year rule as a "curse" on the minority community and that may have even helped to polarise some of the moderate Sinhalese votes in Kumaratunga's favour.

In August 1995, she unveiled a radical power-sharing plan widely called the "political package" which seeks to turn the country into a de facto federal state in exchange for ethnic peace. The Tigers rejected the plan.

Analysts say Kumaratunga's carrot-and-stick approach to the problem while offering a political deal and at the same time mounting military pressure on the rebels in the hope of getting them to the table had backfired.

Tigers by trying to assassinate the president may have actually helped her benefit from a sympathetic vote too," an analyst

An Ariane 4 rocket blasts off late Tuesday at Kourou, French Guiana, sending into orbit the biggest civilian telecommunications satellite ever built. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Mozambique President reelected:

Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano has been re-elected and his party has won parliamentary elections, according to official results published Wednesday. AFP reports from Maputo.

The announcement of final official results was delayed on Monday in order to verify the results with the political parties involved, the National Elections Commission had said. The former rebel Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) had already called for a re-run before the final results were published, claiming that the vote had been rigged.

13 pirates to die in China: Thirteen pirates -- 12 Chinese and one Indonesian -- were sentenced to death on Wednesday for slaughtering 23 sailors in the worst ship hijacking in China in 50 years, court officials said, reports AFP.

The men were among 38 accused of hijacking the Hong Kong-owned "Changsheng" cargo ship on November 16, 1998, murdering the crew of 23 Chinese and throwing the bodies in the sea as they sailed down the coast from Shanghai. The Intermediate People's Court in the southern port of Shantou in Guangdong province did not say when the executions would be carried out.

Russia-Belarus union treaty ratified in parliament

MOSCOW, Dec 22 : The Federation Council, upper house of parliament, on Wednesday overwhelmingly approved a Russia-Belarus union treaty that sets the stage for a possible merger between the two ex-Soviet states, reports AFP.

The council ratified the treaty, approved by the lower house earlier this month, in a 158-2 vote.

The union will create a Higher Council comprising the presidents, premiers and speakers of the two countries, although its precise role and powers remain vague. A joint

action program on putting the treaty's provisions into practice was also signed.

Authoritarian Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, in strong favor of union with Russia, lamented during the treaty's December signature with his counterpart Boris Yeltsin that true merger between the two may not happen for another decade.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said that Russia's union with Belarus, overwhelmingly approved by parliament Wednesday, strongly enhanced the country's military potential.

The Jordanian's wife had admitted in a letter to the Taliban that her husband was working for an unnamed intelligence service and pleaded for his life to be spared, Al-Hayat said.

Jordan announced last week that 13 Arab supporters of Bin Laden had been arrested in the kingdom after returning from Afghanistan where they received weapons training.

Washington said the arrests were linked to threats to bomb US targets.

Fresh rebel attempt to break out of Grozny, 30 killed

MOSCOW, Dec 22 : Around 30 Chechen rebels were killed overnight when they attempted once again to break Moscow's stranglehold on the capital Grozny, military officials said today, cited by Interfax news agency, reports AFP.

Some 200 guerrillas tried to break past Russian troops to the mountainous south, the officials said. There was no information about federal losses, they added.

Some 20 Chechen fighters were wiped out outside the Chechen capital in a similar failed assault, according to Moscow. Interfax said the attempted break-out had taken place on Monday night.

Around 100 "bandits" had

separated into two groups to attack federal troops simultaneously to the north and south of Grozny, military officials said today, cited by Interfax news agency, reports AFP.

"This attempt failed," he said, adding that only one Russian soldier had been wounded.

Russia pummels Grozny

Another report says, Russia today kept rebel defenders guessing when it would move on the Chechen capital Grozny, with one report saying an assault to capture the city would begin shortly, perhaps even within a matter of hours.

The source said the Russian military had received orders to take control of Grozny nearly 10 days ago.

The city's mayor, Lecha Dudyayev, said federal forces overnight had unleashed the fierce artillery barrage on Grozny in the past 10 days.

He said the blitz had begun late Tuesday and continued until daylight. "Missiles were exploding all over the city," Dudyayev said, cited by Interfax news agency.

Meanwhile, the AVN military news agency cited a high-ranking source at federal military headquarters as saying an assault to capture the city would begin shortly, perhaps even within a matter of hours.

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