

Chen holds out possibility of 'future One China'

Beijing hints at compromise after new Taiwan President's inauguration

TAIPEI, May 20: Taiwan's new President Chen Shui-bian today held out the possibility of a "future One China" incorporating Taiwan and the mainland, in a dramatic concession to Beijing, reports AFP.

Chen, who took office earlier in the day, vowed in his inaugural address not to carry through his pre-election vow to move the island towards formal independence from the mainland unless China tried to force reunification by invading.

He also acknowledged a common cultural and spiritual history.

In the run up to his election on March 18, Beijing threatened war if the island chose to formally break away from China in a campaign aimed at Chen and his separatist Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

It has claimed Taiwan as a part of China since Chinese nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek fled to the island and split it from the mainland after their

defeat by Mao Zedong's communists at the end of a civil war in 1949.

Taiwan's status has remained uncertain ever since, neither formally independent nor in practice under communist control.

But as Taiwan's military maintained a state of "heightened alert," Chen used his address and the occasion of the first peaceful and democratic transfer of power in Chinese history to emphatically distance the government from his pre-election separatism.

"The people across the Taiwan Strait share the same ancestral, cultural, and historical background," said the former dissident, who, along with several members of his cabinet, was jailed under the totalitarian nationalist regime of Chiang's Kuomintang.

While upholding the principles of democracy and parity, building upon the existing foundations, and constructing

conditions for cooperation through goodwill, we believe that the leaders on both sides possess enough wisdom and creativity to jointly deal with the question of a future 'One China'.

Analysts in Taipei said that, relying heavily on nuance, Chen was in effect raising the possibility of a communist China and a democratic Taiwan existing side by side as part of a greater Chinese nation.

And the new president said he would not incorporate his predecessor Lee Teng-hui's proposal of relations on a "state to state" basis into the constitution or change Taiwan's formal name from the Republic of China.

Citing Taiwan's security, he added: "As long as the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) regime has no intention to use military force against Taiwan, I pledge that during my term in office, I will not change the

national title. I will not push forth the inclusion of the so-called 'state-to-state' description in the constitution, and I will not promote a referendum to change the status quo in regards to the question of independence or unification."

Earlier Chen and Vice President Annette Lu were sworn in at a ceremony at the presidential office in Taipei.

Meanwhile, China today hinted at compromise with Taiwan on the key issue of "One China", saying the two sides could hold dialogue after expressing commitment to the key principle in "their own way".

An official statement after the inauguration of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian said Beijing and Taipei should resume dialogue after Taiwan has embraced the "One China" principle accepting the island is a part of China.



New Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian gives his inaugural speech outside the presidential office in Taipei yesterday. — AFP photo

Colombian woman widowed thrice in 12 years

BOGOTA, May 20: A school teacher in northern Colombia buried her third husband in 12 years this week — all three of them victims of the country's seemingly uncontrolled violence, local media reported on Friday. Reuters reports from Bogota.

Flor Puello Pertuz, known as "Dona Flor" in her hometown in Magdalena province, told Bogota's respected El Espectador newspaper the body of her first husband, also a teacher, was found dumped in a vacant lot in May 1988 with signs of torture.

Her second spouse was murdered just four months after they married and her third was shot dead by two gunmen on a local bus on Saturday.

"It's a question of destiny," Puello Pertuz told El Espectador. "I leave it all in the hands of God."

Her tale highlights the harsh, bloody reality of life in the isolated backwaters of rural Colombia. The country's murder rate is about 10 times higher than that of the United States and one of the highest in the world.

Authorities last year reported more than 23,000 homicides in the country of about 40 million torn by a long-running conflict.



French flautist Jean-Pierre Rampal dead

PARIS, May 20: The celebrated French flautist Jean-Pierre Rampal died early today following a heart attack at his Paris home, his agent said, reports AFP.

Rampal, 78, was the first flautist in history to attract worldwide audiences equal to those drawn by virtuoso pianists and string players.

Primarily known as a champion of Baroque music, his eclectic repertoire also included excursions into jazz, English folk songs, Japanese classics and Indian rhythms.

The musician was born in 1922 in Marseille, where his father was a professor of music and first flautist with the city's symphony orchestra.

Fiji coup plotters threaten to kill PM after military pledges support

Vajpayee urges speedy return of democracy

SUVA, May 20: Gunmen beat Fijian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and threatened him with death today as the country's armed forces and president joined ranks to oppose an attempted coup, reports AFP.

The men who stormed parliament Friday, taking Chaudhry and 45 parliamentarians captive, apparently became enraged after the military and police pledged their support for the elected government.

Businessman George Speight, the son of an opposition lawmaker, and men under his command declared Friday they had taken control of the country in the name of indigenous Fijians.

Chaudhry is Fiji's first ethnic Indian prime minister and the coup attempt is the latest manifestation of long-standing ethnic tensions in the country, where some 43 percent of people are of Indian origin.

The security forces Saturday held firm against the coup, pledging their loyalty to the constitution and Chaudhry's government.

"I want to state unequivocally that the Fiji Police is the custodian of the law in Fiji and respects the 1997 constitution," said Police Commander Isikia Savua.

President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara later made a televised address to the nation and condemned the gunmen as a "terrorist group".

He said his government had the support of all the instruments of the state and would not bow to threats. He said he had assumed executive authority.

"The government will go to great lengths to avoid a violent confrontation with the attackers who terrorise our nation and threaten the lives of its government," he said.

"We wish to see the impasse broken and the captives set free but we will not bow down to

threats and coercion.

"The perpetrators should not under-estimate my unshakable determination to maintain the integrity and stability of the state and to protect the rights and interests of the people."

But the situation became unclear when reports emerged that Speight had held a gun to Chaudhry's head and threatened to shoot if he did not call Mara and tell him to order the military away from parliament.

State-owned Fiji Television said that Chaudhry told him to go ahead and shoot.

Deputy Prime Minister Tupeni Baba is then reported to have given his support to the new interim government. Baba is also being held hostage and may be under duress.

Speaking on radio from parliament in support of the new regime, he sounded confused and upset. Baba called for negotiations with the new government and for an end to the violence.

During the dramatic broadcast, Chaudhry was heard in the background calling out "we are not legitimising anything."

He declared himself interim prime minister after being sworn in by Ratu Jope Seniloli, a man described as interim president, in a bizarre ceremony in parliament.

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today deplored the attempted coup in Fiji and called for a speedy return to democracy.

"It is unfortunate and we hope that democracy will return to the nation as early as possible," Vajpayee said here on the sidelines of a meeting with the chief ministers of Indian states, according to Indian news agencies.

India on Friday called for the immediate restoration of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian premier.



A member of the Taukei militia patrols the front gate of Parliament House in Suva yesterday after Prime Minister Mahendra Pal Chaudhry was overthrown in a military coup led by George Speight. Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic-Indian prime minister, continues to be held hostage inside the Fijian Parliament while Speight has declared himself prime minister. — AFP photo

India ready to act on Lankan civil war 'if necessary': PM

Fighting for Jaffna escalates as army rejects surrender call

NEW DELHI, May 20: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today said New Delhi was ready to act on Sri Lanka's ongoing civil war with Tamil Tigers rebels "if necessary," reports AFP.

Vajpayee said on the sidelines of a conference with Indian state chief ministers that the situation in Sri Lanka was extremely fluid, domestic news agencies reported.

"If we have to take any step, we are ready for it, if necessary," he said and added that India was willing to extend all humanitarian help possible.

India has ruled out military intervention in Sri Lanka but said it would consider humanitarian assistance, and help in brokering a peace agreement if approached by both Colombo and the Tamil rebels, who are locked in combat in the northern Jaffna peninsula.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels have vowed to re-take the town of Jaffna, which Sri Lankan Tamils consider their cultural capital.

Indian experts say the government is trying to defer a decision on Sri Lanka as much as possible but expect the government will be forced to take a stand if Jaffna should fall into rebel hands.

Defence Minister George Fernandes today said India would not be forced to play a role in Sri Lanka.

Fernandes was reacting to Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar's comments that New Delhi could be compelled to take a stand if something drastic happened.

"I don't see who can compel us," Fernandes told the Press Trust of India, adding that while New Delhi was willing to involve itself in "humanitarian and other aid including evacuation" there was "no question" of

providing military assistance to Sri Lanka.

Kadirgamar was quoted by India's Outlook news magazine as saying events could force India to play a role in resolving his country's ethnic problem.

"It is gearing itself up for assuming a role, one that might even be thrust upon it by events," he said.

"[In] Sri Lanka there is a mood in favour of India coming in and doing something," Kadirgamar said.

However he added a note of caution saying: "I don't think that we should expect the impossible from India."

The Sri Lankan minister also said: "For a variety of reasons, India makes no bones of its opposition to the LTTE."

India blames the LTTE for the May 21, 1991 assassination of former premier Rajiv Gandhi. Gandhi had sent Indian troops to Sri Lanka in 1987 in a similar crisis during which some 1,200 Indian soldiers were killed.

"India will take whatever action to meet its stated position. If it feels Sri Lanka is seriously threatened, India will, I believe, take necessary action. I can't predict what the action might be, but we can be sure it will be a well-considered one," Kadirgamar said.

Fighting escalates as army rejects surrender call

Meanwhile, ferocious battles gripped Sri Lanka's northern peninsula of Jaffna today as the military rejected rebel calls for a surrender amid heavy casualties on both sides.

A top army general, Jaanaka Perera went on national television today to reject a call by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to surrender within a week.

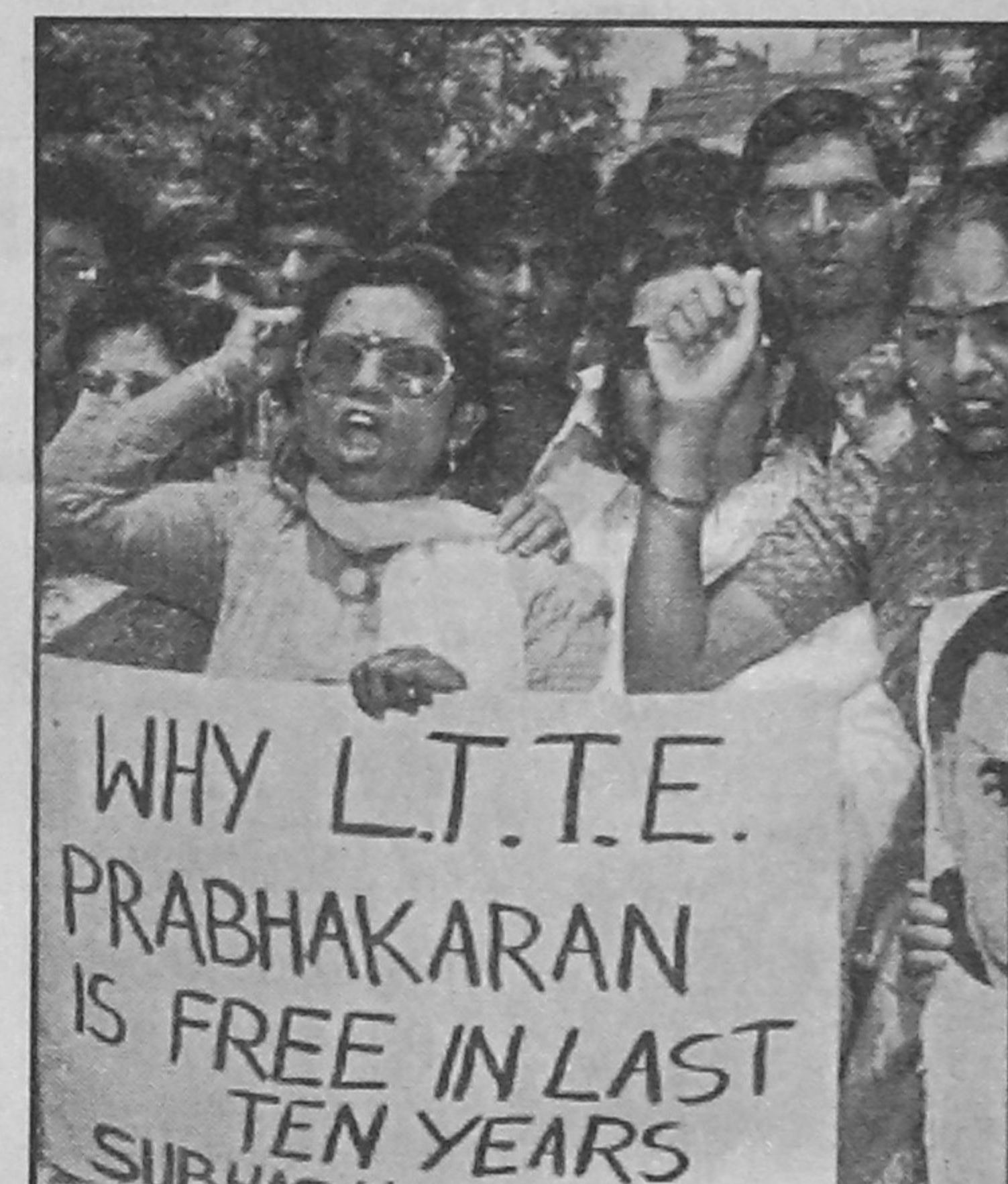
"We will not leave Jaffna,"

Major General Jaanaka Perera said on the ITN television network from the northern peninsula of Jaffna. "We will push the Tigers out."

Government spokesman Ariya Rubasinghe said nine government soldiers were

killed and another 19 were wounded in heavy fighting in the Tanankilappu sector near Jaffna town early Saturday.

Rubasinghe said security forces had recovered the bodies of 17 Tiger guerrillas in the latest fighting.



Congress Party supporters shout anti-LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) slogans during a demonstration in New Delhi yesterday. India blames the Tamil Tigers for the May 21, 1991 assassination of former Prime Minister and Congress Party chief Rajiv Gandhi in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. — AFP photo

Giuliani drops out, clears Hillary's path to Senate

NEW YORK, May 20: Cancer-stricken New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani on Friday withdrew for the November US Senate race, giving an apparent boost to the rival campaign of First Lady Hillary Clinton, reports AFP.

Giuliani's decision follows the announcement late last month that he had prostate cancer and would need time to undergo treatment.

"I have decided what I should do is to put my health first and that I should devote the focus and attention that I should to being able to figure out the best treatment and not running for office," the Republican mayor told a press conference here.

He and First Lady Hillary Clinton have been running a tight battle for months in the

polls and the withdrawal of the acerbic mayor launches the first lady much closer to her goal of assuming the New York Senate seat left vacant by the retirement of the Democratic incumbent, Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Hillary Clinton held a press conference shortly after Giuliani made his announcement and wished her one-time nemesis a speedy recovery.

"I certainly hope and pray as all New Yorkers do that he will have a full and speedy recovery," said a stern-faced Clinton. Giuliani said he had not yet decided what form of treatment he would follow for the cancer.

Clinton refused to speculate about who her Republican opponent would be.

Iraqi-US dispute deadlocks NPT conference

UNITED NATIONS, May 20: A conference to strengthen efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons was on the brink of failure early today as the United States and Iraq failed to compromise on the one remaining obstacle to consensus, reports AFP.

Two hours after he stopped the clock just before midnight on Friday (10:00 BST), chairman Abdullah Baali urged "all those interested to make the necessary efforts to salvage the conference."

Baali, the Algerian ambassador to the United Nations, asked delegates to "the five-yearly review of the 1970 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to break into regional groups and to reconvene after an hour."

Delegates said they thought

Baali hoped to find a procedural way to keep the conference from foundering.

It was important, they said, to preserve agreements made since the start of the conference four weeks ago on a wide range of issues, in particular on nuclear disarmament.

Earlier, delegates had hailed as a breakthrough an agreement by the five declared nuclear-weapons states to "an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish total elimination of their nuclear arsenals."

Although it set no timetable, the agreement went beyond a commitment to "the ultimate goal" of nuclear disarmament, which the five had reaffirmed in a joint statement on May 1 and which was rejected by most other countries.

Israel considers early pullout from Lebanon

JERUSALEM, May 20: Israel may complete its troop withdrawal from south Lebanon before July in light of the increased number of attacks of the Shiite Hezbollah movement on its forces, a senior Israeli army official said today, reports AFP.

"The possibility of early withdrawal is indeed being considered, it needs to be weighed in light of logistical considerations and the current events in Lebanon," Major General Giora Eiland, army head of operations told Israeli public radio.

Eiland said that Hezbollah guerrillas have stepped up at-

tacks against Israeli troops in south Lebanon and the proxy South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia in order to give the impression that they are the force pushing out the Israeli troops.

"We have no intention of allowing the current situation in which mortar fire, artillery and anti-aircraft missiles are fired at us every day to become routine," he added.

Eiland said that after the withdrawal is completed Israel will not tolerate such attacks. He also warned of new alliances being formed in Lebanon.

"The cooperation between Hezbollah and dormant Palestinian organisations is increasing. (The alliance) will get even

stronger after the withdrawal," Eiland said.

Israel has said it will complete its troops withdrawal from a buffer zone it has been occupying for 22 years by July 7 at the very latest. Hezbollah has stepped up attacks on the Israeli forces and the SLA since Israel started to withdraw its forces Sunday.

Israeli jets raid Hezbollah bases

Meanwhile, Israel's air force carried out two bombing raids early today on a Hezbollah stronghold to the north of the Israeli-occupied zone in southern Lebanon, police here said.

Rebels stage grenade attack in Srinagar

SRINAGAR, India, May 20: Suspected Muslim militants staged a grenade attack in the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar, injuring four policemen and three civilians, police and witnesses said today, reports AFP.

The attackers tossed a hand grenade at a paramilitary vehicle near a busy bus stand at Srinagar's Batamalo quarter late Friday, injuring four members of the federal riot police and three pedestrians, one of whom is in a critical condition.

The paramilitary troops were escorting a private television team, which was filming in the area.

The explosion sparked panic among shopkeepers and street vendors who abandoned their shops and kiosks, witnesses said.

Council of Europe adopts steps against human trafficking

STRASBOURG, May 20: The Council of Europe's ministerial council approved Friday a series of measures aimed at fighting against the trafficking of people and the sexual exploitation of women, children and teenagers, reports AFP.

In a recommendation, the council proposed a series of measures to the body's 41 members on pursuing traffickers, preventing sex tourism and protecting the most vulnerable groups of victims.

The move is one of the first attempts at internationally coordinating government's actions against sexual slavery linked to organised crime.

Malaysia under fire for direct talks with Abu Sayyaf group

JOLO, Philippines, May 20: Malaysia today came under fire for holding direct talks with the Abu Sayyaf Muslim extremist group holding 21 hostages in the southern Philippines, as efforts to launch formal negotiations with the rebels hit a snag, reports AFP.

Malaysian Ambassador Mohamad Arshad Manzoor Hussain met four commanders of the Muslim rebel group on Thursday at the coastal village of Taulug on Jolo Island, Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said in Kuala Lumpur.

Top Philippine negotiator Roberto Avenajado slammed Kuala Lumpur for unilaterally starting the talks with the Abu Sayyaf, local television reported in Manila.

Avenajado, a special envoy of President Joseph Estrada, said Kuala Lumpur's move would not boost government-led talks for the freedom of the captives and denied Manila had authorised the ambassador's mission.

Estrada's Executive Secretary Ronaldo Zamora added to the Philippine fury over the surprise Malaysian visit to the Abu Sayyaf mountain camp in Jolo Island.

"We understand why Malaysia has such a large interest in this matter but if you ask us if you agree with these unilateral efforts, naturally, we do not agree with them," Zamora said.

Nine Malaysians are among the hostages who were taken to Jolo by speed boat after their abduction.

BRIEFLY

Lanka shuts down newspaper

Sri Lankan authorities Saturday shut down the main Tamil-language newspaper in the northern Jaffna peninsula for allegedly violating strict censorship laws, official sources said, AFP reports from Colombo.

The Uthayan newspaper was shut down late Friday and there was no paper distributed Saturday, officials said adding that it was the first newspaper to be closed after the imposition of tight censorship on May 3.

Russia gives 30 tanks to Yemen: Russia has delivered 30 T-72 tanks to Yemen as part of a broad deal to sell the Arab nation Russian-made combat hardware, a news report said Friday, AP reports from Moscow.

Guerilla to die in Myanmar: Myanmar's military rulers sentenced a member of an ethnic guerrilla group to death for "high treason" following an embassy seizure in Bangkok in October, the official Myanmar Radio and Television said, Reuters reports from Yangon.