

Lanka moves to trim president's powers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government, saying it needed space to broker peace with Tamil Tiger rebels, moved Thursday to strip President Chandrika Kumaratunga of her power to dissolve parliament from December.

The constitutional amendment proposed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's coalition passed its first reading Thursday and a parliamentary vote is expected early next month, officials at the house said.

Wickremesinghe is in an uneasy cohabitation with Kumaratunga, who has criticised his drive to broker an end to the long-running Tamil separatist war and hinted at sacking the parliament.

The proposed 19th amendment to the 1978 constitution would strip the president of the authority to dissolve parliament after it completes one year — a power that would allow Kumaratunga to disband the assembly anytime after December 5.

Kumaratunga was elected separately and remains president

until December 2005.

Delegations from Wickremesinghe's government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) held historic peace talks this week in Thailand, where the guerrillas for the first time said they were willing to settle for autonomy short of a separate state.

But Kumaratunga, who narrowly escaped a 1999 assassination bid by the Tigers, believes Wickremesinghe has already made too many concessions, such as lifting a ban on the LTTE.

"We cannot go on with the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads," said a spokesman for Wickremesinghe's government, G.L. Peiris.

"We need political stability to exercise the public mandate we received for a full term of six years. We cannot allow the president to arbitrarily cut short our term."

But it is far from certain whether Wickremesinghe can muster the two-thirds of the 225-member assembly he needs to amend the constitution.



PHOTO: AFP
Naji Sabri, Foreign Minister of Iraq (L) shakes hands with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (R), on Wednesday before their meeting at UN headquarters in New York. Sabri last saw Annan September 16, when he gave him a letter saying that Iraq was willing to let UN arms inspectors return without conditions.

US crafting Iraq steps in face of anti-war mood

Baghdad urges UN not to bow to 'US blackmail'

REUTERS, United Nations

Facing an anti-war mood, the United States and Britain will try to craft a resolution setting timetables for arms inspections in Iraq and declaring Baghdad in "material breach" of a dozen UN Security Council measures, diplomats said Thursday.

But a senior Western envoy said a document was not expected to emerge until next week while the two allies sought at least partial agreement from Russia, France and China, who hold veto power in the 15-member council.

"The drafting is the easy part once the concepts are agreed," an American diplomat said.

Russia opposes any resolution before UN weapons inspectors are back on the ground following Iraq's decision on Monday to let them return without conditions. France has reservations and China is expected to abstain on any measure that hints of war.

Evoking a "material breach," declaration, in U.S. eyes, would provide grounds for an attack on Iraq and serve as a substitute for the more contentious direct authorisation of the use of force.

The outlines of a new resolution are to be discussed by Secretary of State Colin Powell at a Washington dinner with his Russian counterpart Igor Ivanov Thursday.

And Friday President Bush lays out his case to the Russian foreign and defence ministers at a meeting with Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Powell.

Before that chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix briefs the Security Council Thursday afternoon. That meeting follows a speech by Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri to the UN General Assembly.

Worried that Iraq's surprise decision to readmit the inspectors without conditions might undercut fragile world support for military action, Bush and other officials kept the rhetorical heat on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. They sought a resolution from Congress to grant authority to strike Iraq unilaterally, if needed.

The inspectors, sent to destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, were withdrawn in December 1998, just before a U.S.-British bombing blitz designed to punish Baghdad for its alleged failure to cooperate with them.

Wednesday evening, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Blix met Sabri and his delegation, with Annan making clear that the inspectors were expected to have "free and unconditional" access, a UN statement said afterward.

Blix told Sabri he hoped his mission could get off to a "flying start" and Sabri pledged Baghdad's full cooperation, according to the statement.

But one worry point for the United States are arrangements made for circumspect inspections of "presidential" sites in Iraq in 1998. Any new resolution might revoke such exceptions.

AFP adds: Iraq urged the United Nations on Thursday not to bow to blackmail by the United States, which still has Baghdad in its sights despite the Iraqi offer to resume UN weapons inspections after a four-year break.

"We urge the Security Council to work according to its prerogatives and rules and not to what a single state is seeking to get through its usual blackmail," said Ath-Thawra, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath party in Baghdad.

Ath-Thawra accused US President George W. Bush's administration of wanting to "seize hold of the riches" of the Gulf and "split the region into small states based on religion or ethnicity to help US hegemony and Zionist desires."

India won't reduce troops along Pakistan border

AP, New York

India has ruled out any reduction of troops along its frontier with Pakistan, where more than a million soldiers from the two nuclear-armed nations are massed and clashes are frequent.

Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha on Wednesday also said there would be no resumption of peace talks with Pakistan, a country with which it has fought three wars, two of them over claims to the Himalayan region of Kashmir.

"There is no chance of a dialogue, until and unless Pakistan puts an end to cross-border terrorism," Sinha told The Associated Press in an interview during his visit to New York for the U.N. General Assembly.

Sinha accused Pakistan's President Gen. Pervez Musharraf of ignoring promises he made to curb terrorism against India.

"Musharraf has to fulfill the promises he has made to the international community," Sinha said. "And if he does not, then I am afraid, there is no atmosphere for dialogue."

The 700,000 troops India has deployed along its western border will remain because "the situation

continues to be uncertain," he said.

"One doesn't know what they are up to, so we have to be on our guard," he said.

Musharraf, in his speech to the General Assembly last Thursday, said he has never condoned acts of terrorism in India and blamed India for rejecting his calls for peace talks. He proposed that the two countries agree to reduce forces along the frontier in Kashmir and observe a cease-fire.

But Sinha said Musharraf cannot be trusted and the Pakistani military continues to encourage, train and arm Kashmiri extremists, fighting to liberate the Muslim-majority territory from predominantly Hindu India.

The tensions in South Asia were discussed in bilateral meetings that President Bush and U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan had with Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee last week. Annan and U.S. officials urged both sides to consider opening peace talks.

Sinha said, "It's easy for them to suggest there should be talks. It's not easy for us to resume a dialogue when Pakistan is holding

a gun to our head."

India has ruled out considering demands for Kashmiri independence, but Sinha said on Wednesday his government was willing to discuss greater autonomy for the region. Many Kashmiris blame their troubles on New Delhi's heavy-handed policies and the inefficiency of local administrators.

Once local elections, now underway in India's Jammu-Kashmir state, end in October, New Delhi is ready to enter into talks with the new elected representatives on autonomy, he said.

Pro-separatist groups have rejected the legislative vote, but India hopes a free election with a good voter turnout will boost chances for peace and convince critics that ordinary Kashmiris don't support the separatist campaign. The turnout in the first phase of balloting was nearly 48 percent, according to Indian officials.

"It has been free and fair and it has been reasonably peaceful," Sinha said, pointing out that the vote had been monitored by a team of diplomatic observers and the international and local media.

Pak infiltration goes up amid Kashmir election: US

Washington sees polls a positive start

AFP, New Delhi

The infiltration of Islamic rebels from Pakistan into the Indian zone of Kashmir rose in the two months since New Delhi announced assembly elections in the restive province, US Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill said Thursday.

"Infiltration is certainly going on - absolutely. Our judgement is it is up in August and up in September and we condemn it," Blackwill said in an interview to Indian television channels in New Delhi.

India on August 2 announced dates for the assembly election in Kashmir, which is in the throes of a 13-year insurgency that has left at least 36,500 people dead. Separatists say the toll is twice as high.

India said in June that US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had secured a pledge from Pakistan to halt the flow of rebels in Kashmir.

PTI adds: Welcoming India's commitment to holding free and fair elections in Jammu and Kashmir, the United States has described the polls process as "positive" despite being plagued by violence.

"We do welcome the Indian government's commitment to holding an election that's free and fair and perceived as such internationally and within India. We have diplomats and others do as well, up in the area observing the elections," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters on Wednesday.

The statement is being perceived as a strong rebuff to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, who, in his speech to the UN General Assembly last week - much before the first phase of assembly polls in the state began - had said that the elections would be rigged.

Boucher said that despite the election-related violence, reports from the region indicate a positive beginning to the election process.

"We do have reporting from our US Embassy in New Delhi that indicates positive start to the process," he said.

Boucher said that the United States saw "an open...Free and fair election" as a major step forward in the direction of a meaningful dialogue on Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

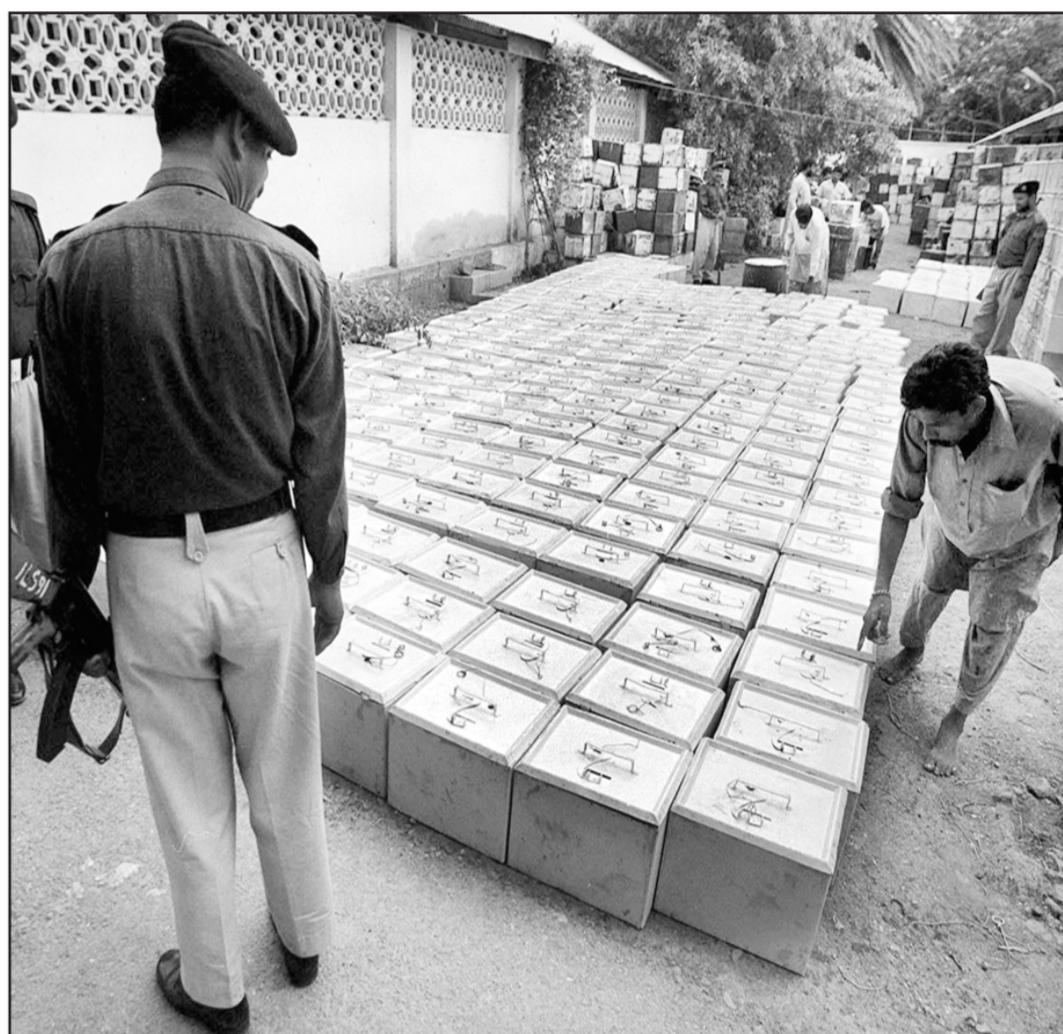


PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani police stand guard while a labourer counts newly repainted ballot boxes in one of the Election Commission offices in Karachi on Thursday. Political activities have gained momentum ahead of October 10 parliamentary polls announced by President Pervez Musharraf.

'S Asian peace hinges on Kashmir settlement'

AFP, Islamabad

Peace in all of South Asia hinges on a settlement of the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said Thursday.

"The unfortunate reality is that peace in this region is entirely based on Indo-Pakistan relations and resolution of the Kashmir dispute..." Musharraf said.

"A principal resolution of the dispute that takes into account the wishes of the people of Jammu and Kashmir will unlock the door to normalisation of relations," he told a conference on regional peace and security.

"I don't think the geo-strategic environment, the situation between India and Pakistan, can ever allow

an improvement in relations between India and Pakistan without addressing this core issue of Kashmir."

Pakistan has offered India a no-war pact, mutual reduction of forces, denuclearisation and finally economic cooperation, he said.

"Instead of greeting our hand of friendship India is intent on pursuing a path of coercive diplomacy."

"India's continued intransigence, maybe in the hope of further concessions, is totally misplaced because I have no more concessions from this side," Musharraf said.

Pakistan and India have deployed one million troops along their border since a December attack on the Indian parliament

which New Delhi blamed on Islamabad.

In June Musharraf promised US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage he would halt infiltration across the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border in disputed Kashmir.

India claims Musharraf has reneged on his pledge.

"The government of Pakistan is neither allowing nor sponsoring nor encouraging any movement across the LOC or the working boundary," Musharraf said.

But he said it was practically impossible to completely seal the long and rugged line of control and even the Indians had failed with hundreds of thousands of troops.

"They should not expect this from Pakistan."



PHOTO: AFP
Members of the All India Democratic Youth Organisation (AIDYO) shout anti-government slogans as they burn the effigy of an online lottery placard (L) during a protest in Bangalore on Thursday. The protestors were demanding the withdrawal of the recently introduced online-lottery, which has been a huge success amongst punters, claiming that it is luring common people living below the poverty line to indulge in placing bets and in some cases even committing suicide when not winning.