

Lankan Muslims have critical say in the crisis

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's influential Muslim Congress party said on Sunday its crucial support for Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's coalition government will depend on how much say the country's Muslims have in areas that would be led by Tamil Tiger rebels under a proposed peace plan.

"Right now we are backing the prime minister in the present crisis, but it will also depend on what course the peace talks take," the party's general secretary, Hashan Ali, said.

The Muslim Congress is an important player in the 225-seat Parliament, where Wickremesinghe's coalition has only a two-seat majority.

With 12 seats, the Congress can turn the situation against Wickremesinghe in case of a no-confidence vote.



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (L) reads his notes prior to talking with other cabinet members, during a meeting in Colombo yesterday. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told his cabinet that he was ready to face a snap election four years ahead of schedule to end a bitter stand-off with hostile President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Lankan PM seeks snap polls to head off crisis

Peace talks postponed indefinitely

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government yesterday said it was ready to face polls to head off a power struggle with the president as the political crisis led to peace talks with the Tamil Tigers being postponed indefinitely.

The government's chief peace negotiator, G. L. Peiris, said they would discuss the crisis with Norwegian peace brokers following President Chandrika Kum-aratunga's sacking of three ministers and suspension of parliament.

But he made it clear that face-to-face

talks which the government had expected to hold with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) later this month or in early December will not go ahead until the political turmoil is resolved.

"Given everything that has happened in the past few days, it is logical to assume that we have to resolve this threshold issue before anything else," Peiris said.

He was referring to the power struggle with Kumaratunga who took over the key portfolios of defence, interior and information from the government of her

arch-rival, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, on Tuesday.

On Sunday Wickremesinghe dropped a bombshell, offering to step down from leading the peace initiative and transfer the responsibility to Kumaratunga.

Wickremesinghe said he could not be responsible for maintaining a truce with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) while a hostile president held onto vital levers of power.

Meanwhile Kumaratunga sent a letter to the premier inviting him for

talks on forming a government of national unity.

"In view of the current political situation in the country and my proposal last week to form a government of reconstruction and reconciliation, I would like to meet you in order to discuss your views on this matter," she said.

Kumaratunga, who narrowly survived a Tamil Tiger assassination attempt in 1999, has repeatedly criticised the government for its concessions to the rebels.

'Taliban control 4 dists in Afghan province'

AFP, Islamabad

The Taliban control at least four districts in southeast Afghanistan's Zabul province, Zabul's deputy governor told the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) yesterday.

The former hardline rulers are now trying to take control of the Zabul capital Qalat, where a powerful bomb went off at the headquarters of the province's governor on Saturday, Mawlawi Mohammed Omar told the Pakistan-based agency.

Zabul, which neighbours Pakistan, is on the frontline of increasing attacks by Taliban fighters regrouping in southern Afghanistan and in Pakistani border regions. They were ousted from power under a United States-led military assault two years ago.

Israel-Hezbollah prisoner swap deal in jeopardy

Qorei set to present cabinet to MPs

AFP, Jerusalem

A prisoner exchange deal between Israel and Hezbollah was in jeopardy yesterday after the Shiite fundamentalist group insisted that all of its detainees must be set free.

The Israeli cabinet narrowly agreed Sunday to a swap with the Lebanese-based movement but ruled out freeing Samir Kantar who was jailed in 1980 for murdering an Israeli family.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who has already warned that "any deal that excludes any Lebanese prisoner will be refused," made clear Monday that his

movement was in no mood for compromise.

Critics of the swap have contrasted Sharon's willingness to set free 400 Palestinian prisoners in one fell swoop in a deal with the headline Hezbollah, with his reluctance to agree to pleas by the moderate former Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas for significant numbers of releases.

Abbas, who was also weakened by a power struggle with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, triggered a month of political turmoil by quitting in September.

His successor Ahmed Qorei, who has

been heading an emergency administration, was preparing Monday to submit an enlarged government for parliamentary approval.

Qorei announced Sunday that negotiations on a new government had concluded and that the line-up would be submitted to parliament for a confidence vote Wednesday.

A major hurdle to the much delayed formation of the new Palestinian cabinet was cleared Friday when Qorei accepted Arafat's choice for the key post of interior minister.

Iran, Russia engage in nuclear talks

AFP, Moscow

Iran's top nuclear official was to meet Russian ministers yesterday amid reports that Moscow was planning to add its voice to strong international pressure for the Islamic state to ally fears it was secretly building an atomic bomb.

"Russia is an important country in the international arena and a neighbor and friend of the Islamic republic," said Hassan Rowhani, who as secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council handles the country's nuclear affairs.

"On the nuclear issue, we are discussing with the Russians ways we could cooperate in the next IAEA meeting and international issues regarding the nuclear activities," he told Iranian reporters in Moscow in comments broadcast in Tehran.

Bush fails to make US safer: Gore

AP, Washington

Former Vice President Al Gore accused President Bush on Sunday of failing to make the country safer after the Sept. 11 attacks and using the war against terrorism as a pretext to consolidate power.

"They have taken us much farther down the road toward an intrusive, 'big brother'-style government toward the dangers prophesied by George Orwell in his book '1984' than anyone ever thought would be possible in the United States of America," Gore charged in a speech.

Gore, who lost the disputed 2000 presidential election to Bush, said terrorism-fighting tools granted after Sept. 11 amount to a partisan power grab that have led to the erosion of the civil liberties of all Americans.

He brought many the crowd of 3,000 to their feet when he called for a repeal of the Patriot Act, which expanded government's surveillance and detention power, allowing authorities to monitor books people read and conduct secret searches.

Gore chided the administration for what he said was its "implicit assumption" that Americans must give up traditional freedoms in order to be safe from terrorists.

"In my opinion, it makes no more sense to launch an assault on our civil liberties as the best way to get at terrorists than it did to launch an invasion of Iraq as the best way to get at Osama bin Laden," Gore said.

In both cases, Gore said, the administration has "recklessly put our country in grave and unnecessary danger."

Two terror hideouts busted in Kashmir

PTI, Jammu

The security forces yesterday busted two terrorist hideouts and recovered arms, ammunition and explosive material in Udhampur and Rajouri districts of Jammu and Kashmir.

Four pistols, nine pistol magazines, 59 rounds pistol ammunition, four radio sets, one UBGL, four UBGL grenades and 10 antennas were found from the Mahore area hideout in Udhampur during a search operation, official sources said, adding some ration, blankets and medicines were also found.

In Thanamandi forests in Rajouri, the forces recovered 2 AK rifles, 12 magazines, IEDs, 130 pistol rounds, one rocket, 7 UBGL grenades and two hand grenades, apart from ration and some other articles, they said.

Georgia truce talks end without any deal

AFP, Tbilisi

A political crisis in Georgia which has seen thousands of protesters calling for the resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze deepened early yesterday after late-night peace talks broke up without agreement.

After leaving the talks in Shevardnadze's lavish residence just outside the capital, opposition leaders joined the 5,000 protesters who are camped outside the parliament building and who say they will not budge until the president annuls a disputed parliamentary election and quits office.

"We will fight to the end, until this regime leaves," said Mikhail Saakashvili, who was at the failed talks. "Shevardnadze is leading the country towards civil war. He is responsible for whatever happens."

Koizumi retains power, but loses ground

AP, Tokyo

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's administration retained control of Japan's more powerful legislative chamber in national elections Sunday but lost ground to the largest opposition party, whose leaders called their gains "historic."

In his first test at the polls since winning the country's top job more than two years ago, Koizumi's personal popularity brought fewer votes than some analysts had expected. They said the outcome could encourage opponents of his no-pain-no-gain economic reforms.

The returns also showed voters are increasingly split between just two parties, suggesting Koizumi's Liberal Democrats can no longer count on dominating a fragmented political opposition as they have for decades.

According to preliminary results announced by the media and political

parties, the three-party coalition led by Koizumi's Liberal Democratic Party held onto a majority with 277 seats, or 58 percent, of the 480-seat lower house of Parliament, after counting independents who joined the LDP bloc after the election. Before the election, it had 287 seats.

The coalition kept a tight grip on the chamber retaining control of all committees as well as the ability to pass legislation.

"We earned a mandate for our reform path," said Shinzo Abe, secretary-general of the Liberal Democrats. "We fulfilled our responsibility."

Some analysts, however, said the party's assessment might be optimistic. The opposition gains could embolden anti-Koizumi factions within the ruling party who oppose his belt-tightening policies. It might also force the prime minister to pause before moving ahead with an unpopular plan to send Japanese peacekeepers to Iraq.

Assam to have 'people's army' to fight militancy

IANS, Guwahati

The Assam government said yesterday that it would raise a "people's army" by providing villagers with weapons to combat separatist insurgency in the region.

"We will soon be imparting arms training to villagers and equip them with weapons for combating militancy," Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi told journalists.

The decision to equip villagers with weapons was spurred by an unprecedented incident Saturday where locals in western Assam lynched five militants using machetes and spears.

Three civilians were killed in the incident when the rebels lobbed grenades at villagers who chased the militants before lynching all of them.

The government has decided to offer cash rewards to the villagers who killed the militants.

"It is a very heartening sign to hear

reports of villagers taking on armed rebels and hence our decision to use their services in fighting militancy along side our security forces," Gogoi said.

"In the past, we found villagers turning a blind eye and covertly supporting the militants. Things are changing and people are now fed up with violence and killings."

The proposed arms training will be given to volunteers of the Village Defence Party (VDP), a community policing organisation comprising locals in the villages of Assam.

The VDP, however, has remained defunct over the years with the government rejecting demands from locals to equip them with weapons.

"We will revitalise the VDP and use its services for effective results. Even now we have VDP volunteers who have been helping the police by providing intelligence support and other information," Gogoi said.



PHOTO: AFP
Outgoing Ambassador of Bangladesh to Thailand Hemayetuddin paid a farewell call on Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in Bangkok last Friday. Thaksin thanked Hemayetuddin for his contribution to the development of the bilateral relations.

Curfew in riot-hit Gujarat: One killed

AFP, Ahmedabad

A curfew was imposed in parts of the commercial capital of the western Indian state of Gujarat overnight following the death of a Hindu man in communal riots, police said yesterday.

The curfew was imposed in Ahmedabad's Muslim dominated Kalupur area after violence erupted when two Muslim youths were injured during a stabbing on Sunday night, police said.

"After the incident of stabbing, there was heavy stone-pelting and rioting. The mob went out of control. Police lobbed several teargas shells to disperse the crowd," said P.C. Thakur, joint commissioner of police.

Police said two Hindus on a motorcycle were accosted by a mob and one of them was burnt alive while the other was saved due to the arrival of security personnel.

SC stays arrest of The Hindu journalists

PTI, New Delhi

The Supreme Court yesterday stayed execution of the arrest warrants issued against five senior journalists of The Hindu newspaper by the Tamil Nadu Assembly Speaker pursuant to a resolution of the House sentencing them to 15 days imprisonment for breach of privilege.

A Bench comprising Justice YK Sabharwal and Justice SB Sinha granted the stay on the arrest of five senior journalists of The Hindu and editor of Murasoli.

The Bench also asked the Supreme Court Registry to forthwith intimate the order to Tamil Nadu Director General of Police.

The Bench issued notice to the Speaker of Tamil Nadu Assembly, Assembly Secretary and the Director General of Police on the petition filed by The Hindu journalists - Editor N Ravi, Executive Editor Malini Parthasarathy, Publisher N Rangarajan, Chief of Bureau V Jayant and Special Correspondent Radha Venketesan on Saturday.

The Bench also issued notice to Attorney General Soli Sorabjee for his assistance in the matter and fixed the matter for hearing after three weeks.

Tamil Nadu Assembly Speaker K Kalimuthu on November 7 had ordered 15 days simple imprisonment of the five "The Hindu" journalists and Editor of Tamil daily Murasoli S Selvam in a breach of privilege issue.

Reacting to the court order N Ram said, "I was least tensed on this. I had full faith in our judiciary and was confident that we will get justice."



PHOTO: AFP
Journalists stage a demonstration in Bangalore yesterday to protest against the Tamil Nadu assembly's order of issuing arrest warrants against six Madras based journalists for an article published in The Hindu in April 2003. In a latest development the Indian Supreme Court issued an interim stay order quashing the Madras assembly speaker's order of 15 days imprisonment.

Amnesty calls for end to torture, detention of Muslims in Gujarat

AFP, New Delhi

Amnesty International has called for immediate action to end illegal detentions and torture, particularly of Muslims, in the riot-scarred western Indian state of Gujarat.

The report -- Abuse of the law in Gujarat: Muslims detained illegally in Ahmedabad -- chronicles the alleged persecution of Muslims in the commercial capital of the state during and after the bloody riots which killed some 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, according to rights groups.

The violence was triggered after 59 Hindus were burnt to death in a train compartment at Godhra, allegedly by a Muslim mob, on February 27, 2002.

The state government was accused by national and international rights groups of turning a blind-eye to the violence.

"Information contained in this report points to a systematic pattern of human rights violations being carried out in Ahmedabad with the support of the state government and institutions of the criminal justice system with little or no chance of redress for its victims," Amnesty said in the report released last week.

"It also reinforces concerns about discrimination against Muslims within the criminal justice system in the state."

A majority of those arrested for the riots have been Muslims, many of whom have pleaded their cases be heard outside of Gujarat as they felt they were being denied justice.

In one of the bloodiest incidents

during the riots, a group of Hindu men allegedly attacked the Best Bakery on March 1, 2002 with petrol bombs and knives, burning to death 12 Muslims.

Twenty-one men charged with the attack were acquitted on June 27 after 35 witnesses retracted statements.

A key Muslim witness, Zaheera Sheikh, 19, approached the National Human Rights Commission about holding a new trial outside Gujarat because she lied in court after death threats by local leaders of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, which rules Gujarat.

The commission asked the Supreme Court to look into the matter. The court reprimanded the state government and even asked Chief Minister Narendra Modi to quit if he could not protect Muslims.

In an interview to Financial Times of London on Friday, Vajpayee pledged to punish the perpetrators of riots.

"Our public, media and judiciary are following it closely. Justice will not only be done; it will be done," he said.

But Amnesty said the law in Gujarat was being "blatantly used against the Muslim community".

"...Ahmedabad police from Gayakwad Haveli Police station have routinely resorted to arbitrary and illegal and incommunicado detention," the report said.

It added that those arrested were denied access to lawyers and relatives or medical attention and were tortured or ill-treated to induce confessions.