

Lankan monks won't support any coalition

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's influential Buddhist monks who won a crucial nine seats in a hung parliament ruled out Sunday supporting any coalition despite overtures from the parties of the president and the prime minister.

The monks' National Heritage Party said it will neither support nor help bring down a minority administration that would be formed after final results are declared in the April 2 election.

"People have voted for us not to align ourselves with any of the two main parties," said Athuraliye Ratana, a spokesman for the monks, who has been elected to the new parliament.

The Freedom Alliance of President Chandrika Kumaratunga secured some 107 seats in the 225-member assembly in initial results, short of the 113 seats required to muster an absolute majority.

Blair faces new pressure over Iraq intelligence

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair Saturday came under fresh pressure over the way he took Britain to war on Iraq, after US Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged key intelligence no longer appeared "solid".

Powell's comments Friday referred to pre-war information he gave the United Nations on Iraq's mobile biological weapons laboratories to justify the military campaign last year led by the United States and staunchly backed by Blair.

Powell's remarks prompted calls from British critics of the war for Blair's government to explain whether claims it had made about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs in pre-war debate were also from the same source.

The failure to find such weapons in Iraq following the country's occupation has proved an embarrassment for both Washington and London.

Gunmen storm police post in Karachi: 5 cops killed

REUTERS, Karachi

At least 10 gunmen stormed into a police station in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi early yesterday, killing five policemen and wounding one after demanding the officers recite Islamic verses, police said.

One of the attackers died in the shoot-out near the airport in the city, Pakistan's largest and the scene of frequent religious violence. The rest of the assailants escaped by car, said Syad Kamal Shah, police chief in southern Sindh province.

The assault was one of the boldest in recent years on Karachi's police, who were the

target of several bomb attacks last year that caused mostly injuries.

"Police are looking for who is responsible and what were the motives," said Shah.

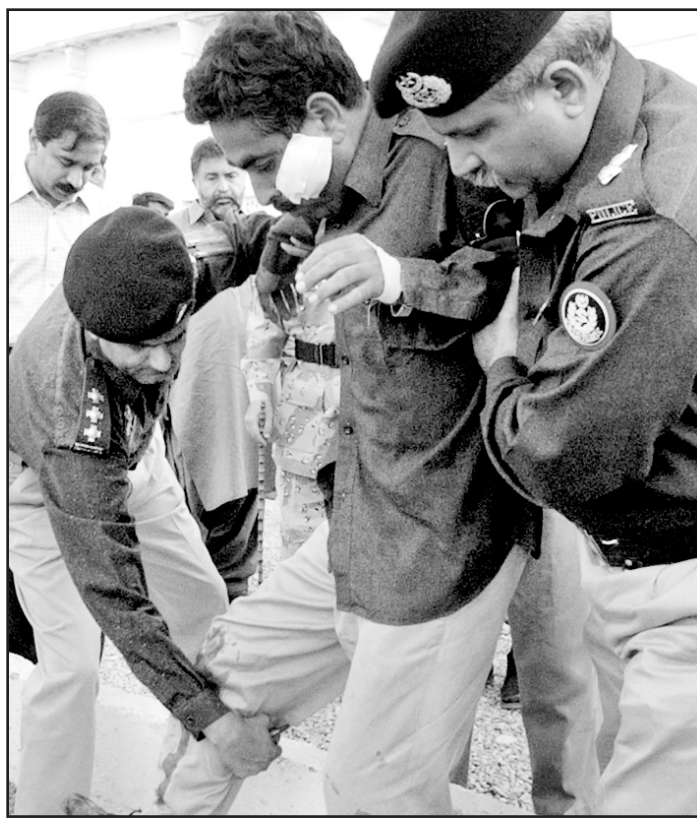
Policeman Hasan Jatoti, who was wounded in the gunfight, told Reuters the clean-shaven men shot several of the officers in the head at close range after bursting into the station at about 5:15 a.m. (0015 GMT).

Tension is high in Pakistan following a raid involving about 5,000 troops on 400 to 500 suspected al-Qaeda and other Islamist fighters last month in the tribal region of South Waziristan near the Afghan border in which more than 120 people were killed.

Islamic militants have been blamed for a string of attacks in Pakistan since Musharraf backed the US-led war on terror in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks.

A police source said the attackers retrieved the body of the dead gunman before speeding off in several cars from the police post in Gulistan-e-Jauhar, a middle-class neighborhood about five km from Quaid-e-Azam International Airport.

Police arrested a suspected Islamic militant with explosives in Karachi last week. Some officials said he had been plotting to attack the prime minister but others denied the premier was a target.



An injured Pakistani policeman (C) is helped by colleagues after an attack on a police station in Karachi yesterday.

'Bush sought Blair's backing for removing Saddam after 9/11'

AFP, London

President George W. Bush first asked British Prime Minister Tony Blair to support the removal of Saddam Hussein from power just nine days after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, a British newspaper reported yesterday.

Bush's approach came at a private White House dinner with Blair, said the Observer, which quoted Sir Christopher Meyer, the former British ambassador to Washington, who was at the meal.

The paper cited Meyer as saying that Blair told Bush he should not get distracted from the initial goal of the "war on terror" -- dealing with the then Taliban regime and the al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan.

According to Meyer, Bush replied by saying: "I agree with you, Tony. We must deal with this first. But when we have dealt with Afghanistan, we must come back to Iraq."

It was clear, Meyer said, "that

when we did come back to Iraq it wouldn't be to discuss smarter sanctions".

Meyer also said Blair always believed it was unlikely that Saddam would be removed from power or give up weapons of mass destruction without a war.

Faced with the prospect of a further war, Blair "said nothing to demur", according to Meyer.

The Observer said that details of the conversation would be published this week in a 25,000-word article on the path to war with Iraq in the May issue of the US magazine Vanity Fair.

According to the British paper, the discussion implies that, even before the bombing of Afghanistan, Blair already knew that the United States intended to attack Saddam next, although he continued to insist in public that no decisions had been taken until almost the moment that the invasion of Iraq began in March 2003.

'Arafat more serious obstacle than Yassin'

Israel beefs up security fearing attacks

AFP, Jerusalem

Health Minister Danny Naveh kept up the Israeli government's campaign of intimidation against Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat yesterday by declaring him a "more serious obstacle" than the assassinated Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

"Yasser Arafat and his gang of terrorists who came from Tunis (their base before their 1994 return to the Palestinian territories) represent a more serious obstacle than Hamas and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin," said Naveh.

The minister, who is member of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's right-wing Likud party, also made a new call for Arafat's expulsion from his headquarters in the West Bank town of Ramallah where the 74-year-old

has been effectively confined to house arrest for more than two years.

"His expulsion is important, for he continues to transfer funds to the terror organisations and encourages attacks by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades," he said in reference to a radical offshoot of Arafat's Fatah movement.

In an interview with the Haaretz daily on Friday, Sharon hinted that both Arafat and the head of the Lebanese militia Hezbollah, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, might be in Israel's sights.

"I wouldn't suggest either of them (Arafat and Nasrallah) feels immune.... Anyone who kills a Jew or harms an Israeli citizen, or sends people to kill Jews, is a marked man, period," he said in one of his most threatening remarks to date.

The debate about the fate of Arafat has come back into the spotlight after the wheelchair-bound Yassin was assassinated in an Israeli air strike nearly two weeks ago in Gaza City.

Meanwhile, Israeli security forces were on a high state of alert Sunday ahead of the week-long Passover holiday, with extra troops being deployed around Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the police and army said.

The move follows the killing of a Jewish resident of the northern West Bank settlement of Avnei Hefetz in the early hours of Saturday, carried out by a member of the radical Hamas movement. The attacker was himself shot dead.

BJP chief appeals for dignified polls campaigning

PTI, New Delhi

With attacks and counter-attacks marking the polls campaign, BJP president M Venkaiah Naidu yesterday appealed to leaders across the political spectrum, including Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, to exercise restraint and conduct electioneering in a dignified manner.

"I advise all in Congress, BJP and Left parties to exercise restraint and conduct a dignified campaign based on issues of national importance. This advice is not only for Modi but also for all," Naidu told reporters here.

The campaigning for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls has seen Vajpayee being branded as an "informer of British police" and his deputy LK Advani as a "Pakistani". Congress president Sonia Gandhi is also under attack for her foreign origin.

"The campaign should reflect the tolerant Indian culture and tradition that respects everyone," Naidu said after participating in Bharat Uday Yagya here, the debate should be on development and policies which would make India a superpower, he said.

It should also be on the leadership and what individuals had contributed to the nation, Naidu said.

The BJP chief, however, did not miss the opportunity to attack Congress terming it as a party of "dilemma".

"Congress is suffering dilemma of leadership, agenda, vision, future and alliance," Naidu said accusing it of bringing disrespect to people by calling Advani a "Pakistani" for being born in a part of undivided India which now is in Pakistan.



Police officers investigate around the body of one of the suspects in the March 11 Madrid train bombings after he was ejected in a swimming pool next to the building where an explosion took place in the Madrid suburb of Leganes yesterday. One Spanish special force policeman and four suspects died in the explosion during a police stake-out as part of an investigation into the March 11 train bombings. The suspects blew themselves up after they were surrounded in the massive security raid.

Pak tribes join hunt for al-Qaeda

Govt moves to win tribal support

AFP, Wana

Pakistani tribal leaders Saturday rushed hundreds of armed men to remote villages near the Afghan border to hunt down al-Qaeda fighters as the authorities set a new deadline for their surrender, local leaders said.

The armed group known as a "tribal lashkar" headed to the troubled borderlands with a mission to conduct a house-to-house search to purge South Waziristan region of foreign terrorists, tribal leader Malik Shireen Jan told AFP.

He said the decision to raise the lashkar was agreed at a meeting of hundreds of tribal elders in South Waziristan's main town Wana.

The meeting was also joined by some 5,000 tribesmen from the area, he said.

"The gathering was unanimous that presence of al-Qaeda members is fraught with dangers for the tribal population. We have therefore

decided to use force against them," he said.

He said the tribal gathering also issued an ultimatum to foreigners to quit the Pakistani territory by Sunday and asked local sympathisers who played host to al-Qaeda fugitives to surrender over the next 24 hours.

"If any local provided food or shelter or extended any cooperation to the foreign terrorists the tribal lashkar is empowered to demolish his house in addition to imposing a fine of one million rupees (about 17,500 dollars),"

The elders have also asked all tribes in South Waziristan to identify al-Qaeda sympathisers so that the lashkar can arrest and hand them over to the authorities, he added.

The gathering on Saturday was "very effective" as all tribal groups in the semi-autonomous northwestern region bordering Afghanistan were represented and its actions cannot be challenged, he said.

"The tribesmen appear to have understood the gravity of the situation and they have vowed to cooperate with the government," another tribal elder Malik Ajmal said.

The decision follows a warning by the government that it would mount a fresh military offensive if the tribes did not hand over the leading local allies of extremists by April 10.

Meanwhile, Pakistani authorities have stepped up efforts to muster greater support from tribal leaders to flush out hundreds of foreign militants in the region bordering Afghanistan, a top security official said yesterday.

More than 100 tribal leaders will hold a grand jirga (council) in Peshawar with the North West Frontier Province governor, Syed Iftikhar Ali today, regional security chief Brigadier Mahmood Shah told AFP, speaking by telephone.

Iran insists it has no secret nuke sites

AFP, Tehran

Iran insisted yesterday that it was not hiding any of its nuclear facilities from UN inspectors, and that its resumption of work on a key part of the nuclear fuel cycle was not a violation of its commitment to suspend uranium enrichment activities.

"There is no nuclear site that the (International Atomic Energy) Agency is not aware of and that we have hidden from IAEA inspectors," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters ahead of a key visit by the UN watchdog's director, Mohammed ElBaradei.

"We have a transparent and constructive cooperation with the agency, and this will continue," the spokesman said, describing ElBaradei's visit on Tuesday as "important".

"We are committed to our engagements, and up to now have not violated any of them," he said.

Iran is under mounting international pressure over its nuclear programme, and angrily denies US charges that its civil atomic energy programme is a cover for ambitions to secretly develop nuclear weapons.

In March it was condemned by the IAEA for continuing to hide sensitive nuclear activities, including designs for sophisticated P2 centrifuges for making enriched uranium which could be weapon-grade.

In addition, Britain, France and Germany have condemned Iran's decision to resume work on a key part of the nuclear fuel cycle.

In a deal with the IAEA brokered last year by the European Union's big three, Tehran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment and related activities while UN inspectors delved into its programme.

But Asefi claimed the resumption of work at a uranium conversion facility near the central city of Isfahan, announced here last week, was not a violation of the deal.

"The resumption of activities at

Isfahan does not violate any of our commitments. It is for the production of UF4 in an experimental fashion, which is nothing to do with our commitment to voluntarily suspend uranium enrichment," he told a weekly news conference.

UF4, or uranium tetrafluoride, can serve as a base for the production of uranium hexafluoride (UF6) — a compound then used in enrichment.

Asefi also confirmed indications from IAEA headquarters in Vienna that a new visit by inspectors would take place later this month, with the latest probe focussing on "the suspension of enrichment and the P2" centrifuge.

Brazil refuses to let IAEA inspect nuclear facility

AFP, Washington

The Brazilian government has refused to allow UN nuclear inspectors to examine a facility for enriching uranium under construction near Rio de Janeiro, The Washington Post reported yesterday.

Citing unnamed Brazilian officials and diplomats in Vienna, the newspaper said the International Atomic Energy Agency and Brazil were at an impasse over the inspections.

Brazil maintains that the facility in Resende will produce low-enriched uranium for use in power plants, not the highly enriched material used in nuclear weapons, according to the report.

Nonetheless, Brazil refuses to let IAEA inspectors see equipment in the plant, citing a need to protect proprietary information, the paper said.



French President Jacques Chirac (L) shakes hands with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin before Chirac's visit to the top secret Russian space centre in Krasnoznamensk some 45km outside Moscow on Saturday. Chirac is on a one-day working visit to Russia.