



Tiger supremo turns 50

AFP, Colombo

Elusive Tamil Tiger guerrilla supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, who turns 50 today, is arguably the man who will decide whether Sri Lanka remains at peace or returns to war. Born on November 26, 1954 in the Tamil heartland of Jaffna, Prabhakaran has been a guerrilla fighter for more than half his life. Even though he is a fugitive from justice, he has been sought after by diplomats trying to broker a permanent end to more than two decades of ethnic bloodshed that have claimed over 60,000 lives. "He is the only man in Sri Lanka who can decide if there should be war or peace," said former Tamil guerrilla Dharmalingam Sithadhan, who is now a politician.

Nepal sets peace talks deadline for Maoists

Bodies of 25 rebels found after battle

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's premier said yesterday his government is determined to press ahead with parliamentary elections as he set a January deadline for Maoist rebels to come to the peace talks table. "When King Gyanendra constituted the present government under my prime ministership, we were given the mandate to hold elections peacefully after holding talks with the Maoists," Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba said. But Deuba told reporters the government's patience with the rebels was running out and unless they agreed to peace talks by January 13, the process for holding elections would be set in motion. Nepal has been without a parliament since November 2002 when Gyanendra dismissed Deuba as prime minister, branding him incompetent for failing to hold planned elections. Deuba, who was reappointed prime minister by the king in June, had said in 2002 the deadly insur-

gency made it impossible to stage elections for the 205-member House of Representatives. The rebels have been fighting to topple the monarchy and install a communist republic since 1996 in the impoverished kingdom sandwiched between China and India. They have spurned repeated government offers for talks to end the conflict which has claimed more than 10,000 lives. Since his reappointment as premier, Deuba has said repeatedly he would begin the election process even if the rebels failed to come to the negotiation table but this is the first time he has set a deadline. The Maoists want elections for a new constituent assembly to redraft the constitution that ultimately would be aimed at establishing a communist state. The Maoists have refused to talk to Deuba and say they only want to meet King Gyanendra who has declined to speak to the rebels. Deuba renewed Thursday the government's offer to "hold discus-

sions on any subject that the Maoists have been raising and to solve the problem on the basis of national consensus." He added the government would provide full security for Maoist participants in talks. The Maoists have threatened to sabotage any polls that are not held to elect a constituent assembly. Deuba set no date for elections. The king had earlier told Deuba's government to start preparations for elections by mid-May. The last peace talks collapsed in August 2003 over the rebels' demand for a constituent assembly, leading to an upsurge in violence. Nepal's army said yesterday it had found the bodies of 25 Maoist rebels after a weekend battle in the country's remote far west. But it added according to witness accounts as many as 300 more militants may have been killed or hurt in the raid by troops on a guerrilla camp. The Maoists often carry away their injured or dead comrades on their backs from the battle sites.



A Nepalese soldier moves through the undergrowth at Paundaun training camp in the Kailali district of western Nepal yesterday after heavy fighting with Maoist rebels. During a briefing at the camp Brigadier General of the Royal Nepal Army Rajendra Thapa said that over 300 militants may have been killed during a battle on November 20.

Top separatist rules out autonomy as solution to Kashmir dispute

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's hardline separatist leader Syed Ali Geelani yesterday ruled out autonomy for the disputed Himalayan region. "We will not accept autonomy to Kashmir as a solution," Geelani told a news conference in the summer capital of Srinagar. He said India, which holds two-thirds of Kashmir, wants a resolution of the dispute on "the lines of autonomy." "But we will oppose it tooth and nail," said Geelani. "Autonomy can never provide a durable and acceptable solution." Kashmir separatists are divided between those who want either independence or autonomy for Kashmir and those who want it incorporated into Pakistan, which holds the remaining third of the territory. The Kashmir state legislative assembly in 2000 passed a resolution favouring autonomy for the state except in defence, finance and communication -- an arrangement that was in place before 1952. However, India's government rejected the resolution passed

unanimously by the assembly. Geelani, who has the backing of Islamic militants and Pakistan, heads the hardline faction of the region's main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference. Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukri Aziz failed to unite Kashmiri separatists after marathon meetings with the groups opposed to Indian rule during a two-day visit to New Delhi this week. He met hardline and moderate separatists beyond midnight Tuesday to try to persuade them to unite on a resolution of the Kashmir dispute. On Thursday Geelani said that if "autonomy was forced on Kashmir, we will resist it and continue our peaceful struggle." "We will not surrender before India's military might," he said. Geelani said there was not an "iota of difference in the approach and attitude of Pakistan and himself towards the resolution of the Kashmir issue." He, however, opposes a planned bus service supported by India and Pakistan between the Pakistani and Indian zones of Kashmir.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) listens as King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan speaks during a meeting at Singh's residence in New Delhi yesterday. Wangchuck is in India for a six-day visit during which he will meet with senior political leaders.

Right atmosphere exists to pursue dialogue: Aziz

PTI, XINHUA, Islamabad

Returning home after his visit to India, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukri Aziz has said right atmosphere exists between the two countries to pursue the peace process and Islamabad believes that the composite dialogue process would yield "satisfactory results." "We feel that right atmosphere exists and that process of composite dialogue process will eventually lead to satisfactory results," Aziz told the state-run PTV on board his special plane while returning home last night from a two-day visit to New Delhi. He said he had a wide-ranging interaction with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, President A P J Abdul Kalam and several ruling and opposition leaders. "With India we want peace. We will make progress on all issues. We pursue confidence building measures but their progress has to be in tandem with the progress on the Kashmir issue," Aziz, who visited Sri Lanka and Maldives as Chairman of SAARC, before going to New Delhi, said his visit to Colombo and Male has helped to consolidate Pakistan's

relations with the two countries. Xinhua adds: Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukri Aziz arrived home from New Delhi after his second leg of Saarc countries tour to Sri Lanka, Maldives and India, according to a report of the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) in Islamabad yesterday. Shaukri Aziz visited these countries as the outgoing chairman of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), the report said. The four-day visit took the prime minister to Sri Lanka, Maldives and India. Earlier in the month he had visited another three members of Saarc, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. This was Shaukri Aziz's first visit to these countries and it is a Saarc tradition that the Chairman makes farewell calls to Saarc capitals before the next summit. Shaukri Aziz held wide ranging talks with the leaders of Maldives, Sri Lanka and India covering matters of regional cooperation and on ways and means to promote existing bilateral ties, the report of APP said.



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