



Sri Lankan displaced women talk as they sit outside their tent provided by an Italian relief team, in Galle, some 120 km south of Colombo yesterday. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) more than half the number of people initially displaced in the December 26 tsunamis have now moved back to their houses and have begun reconstruction.

Blasts rock Assam ahead of Republic Day festivities

Rebels in India's northeast have staged a string of blasts and other attacks, killing two people and blowing up an oil pipeline in a show of force before national Republic Day festivities, police said yesterday. Such violence is common in the northeast, a cauldron of rebel outfits fighting for causes ranging from autonomy to independence, ahead of the Republic Day celebrations and other national events. There were three bomb blasts, two grenade attacks and a shootout in different parts of oil- and tea-rich Assam state late Wednesday, police said. "Two people have died and at least 12 more have been critically injured in the attacks," a police official told AFP. Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi accused militants of trying to whip up panic ahead of next Wednesday's Republic Day and said "security forces are on alert" to foil more attacks.

MOVE TO CURB MAOIST REBELS India, Nepal sign extradition treaty

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi Facing insurgency problem, India and Nepal have signed a revised extradition treaty for extradition and mutual legal assistance. A revised draft of the 1953 treaty was finalised at a meeting between Home Secretaries of India and Nepal Dharendra Singh and Chandni Prasad Shrestha here on Wednesday. Singh later told reporters here Wednesday evening that the discussions with Shrestha covered issues like bilateral cooperation in combating activities of terrorists and criminals and elements involved in printing and circulating fake Indian currency notes. "We have been working on the revised treaty for quite some time because the present extradition treaty is rather limited. The existing treaty required a new look given how things are moving in the world and

how international relations have changed," he said. Echoing the view, Shrestha said revised extradition treaty was in keeping with today's requirements of the two countries as times have changed since the signing of the 1953 treaty. The revised treaty, said Indian Home Secretary, would be signed at an appropriate high level soon. India faces insurgency and terrorism in several parts of its territory and Nepal too is buffeted by Maoist problem. Earlier this week, India put its soldiers on "full alert" along the border with Nepal after intelligence reports that Maoist guerrillas were seeking to set up bases in its revolt-hit northeast. The alert was sounded after the rebels kidnapped and later released 14 Nepalese Gurkha soldiers serving with the Indian army.

Afghan warlord Dostum escapes assassination attempt

REUTERS, Kabul A suicide bomber blew himself up in northern Afghanistan on Thursday wounding two people, but the apparent target of the attack, ethnic Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, escaped unhurt, his aides said. A Dostum aide who was at the scene of the attack said the bomber struck as worshippers walked from a park in Dostum's hometown and headquarters in Shiberghar after prayers for the Eid-ul-Azha Muslim festival. "The bomb went off some distance away from where Dostum was. It was strapped to the bomber's chest. It could have gone off early, or maybe there was a fault," said the aide, Ehsanullah. "Dostum was just heading toward his car when it went off and he was unhurt," he told Reuters. Another aide to Dostum, a veteran fighter who came fourth in October's presidential elections, blamed the attack on al-Qaeda and the former Taliban government.

Taliban chief rejects talks with US

AFP, Islamabad Fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar has rejected negotiations with US-led forces and the Afghan government and vowed to continue his "holy war", a statement purportedly from the radical cleric said yesterday. Omar, who has evaded a man-hunt since his Islamic regime was ousted in late 2001 by US-led forces, was apparently referring to indications by President Hamid Karzai that Taliban footsoldiers could be offered an amnesty. "It is astonishing that on the one hand aggressor armies have occupied our country and on the other they are talking about negotiations with Taliban," Omar said in a statement sent to the Pakistan-based private Afghan Islamic Press. "Taliban are not ready for any negotiations while there is even one aggressor soldier present in the sacred land of Afghanistan," Omar said in an unsigned, computer-composed fax in Pushto. The statement came on the eve of the Muslim holy day of Eid-ul-Azha. Statements said to be from Omar arrive at Pakistani media offices the day before most religious festivals.

'India, Pakistan agree to keep tension low'

AFP, New Delhi Nuclear-armed neighbours India and Pakistan will work to defuse tensions following Indian complaints of a ceasefire violation, New Delhi's Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee said yesterday. New Delhi accused Islamabad of breaching the 14-month ceasefire when mortar bombs exploded in India-held Kashmir on Tuesday night but said it would exercise restraint. "Both sides have agreed that nothing should be done to heighten tension," Mukherjee told reporters. "Both sides are taking up measures to maintain the spirit of confidence-building," he said. In Islamabad a military statement said Pakistani and Indian military commanders spoke by phone Thursday for a second time in as many days. The commanders on Thursday "discussed the environment cre-

ated by unfounded Indian allegation of mortar firing from Pakistan side," it said. "Both sides agreed that such matters should be resolved at local level through flag meetings as has been happening in the past," it said. The Pakistan army has denied firing the mortars into the Poonch sector, some 245 kilometers (150 miles) northwest of Jammu, winter capital of Muslim majority Indian Kashmir. On Thursday, Pakistan reiterated its stance that no weapons were fired from its side and said it would be "pertinent if the Indian authorities investigated as to what happened in an area which is under their occupation." Pakistan was referring to Indian Kashmir which has been racked since 1989 by an Islamic revolt against New Delhi's rule. In violence Thursday, suspected Muslim rebels killed four people

while troops shot dead five rebels in separate gunbattles, police said. India and Pakistan launched a ceasefire on November 25, 2003, as part of a tentative peace process. A "composite dialogue" process has continued for a year covering a host of confidence-building measures and disputes, including the core problem of Kashmir, where tens of thousands have died in the insurgency. India, which holds two-thirds of Kashmir, accuses Pakistan of arming rebels and helping them cross the Line of Control, the de facto border. Pakistan denies the charge and says it is doing its best to stop infiltration. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is due to meet his Pakistani counterpart Shaukat Aziz on the sidelines of a regional summit in Dhaka on February 6-7. Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh is to visit Pakistan later next month.

CM urges Kashmiris to vote defying rebel call

AFP, Srinagar In the run-up to the municipal polls, militants have killed two senior ruling party officials and bombed a weekend election rally in Srinagar, killing two people and injuring a dozen. On Wednesday, a civilian injured in the rally bombing died of his wounds. Voters go to the polls in Srinagar and the state winter capital Jammu on February 1. Civic elections have not been held for 27 years, partly because the former ruling National Conference feared it would create a rival power base and partly because of the revolt that has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1989. The municipal polls were ordered by the state government led by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) as part of a move to bring more democracy to the state. The PDP came to power in 2002 vowing to bring a "healing touch" to the state after years of insurgency that has claimed more than 40,000 thousand lives by official count and at least dou-

ble that according to the separatists. "We want to strengthen all the democratic institutions in the state," Sayeed said. "Separatists have no reason to boycott the polls as they are not to decide the future of Kashmir. They can only help in the state's development." Sayeed's appeal came as Indian and Pakistani military commanders spoke by a telephone hotline Wednesday to calm tensions, a day after after mortars fired from Pakistan crashed into southern Indian-held Kashmir, endangering a 14-month ceasefire between the nuclear-armed neighbours. In other violence, police said eight militants died in clashes with Indian security forces in southern Kashmir. Suspected rebels also killed a civilian. Bloodshed in Indian Kashmir has continued despite a nascent peace process launched by India and Pakistan early last year. The two rivals hold Kashmir in parts, but claim it in full.

Court keeps Taj Mahal open for night visits

AFP, New Delhi India's Supreme Court ruled yesterday that moonlight viewing of the country's white marble monument to love, the Taj Mahal, could continue, dismissing security fears. Two officials of Central Pollution Control Board had filed a petition to halt the night visits because identity checks were not carried out. Tourists were allowed to visit the mausoleum at Agra under a full moon for the first time in 20 years after the court in November lifted a ban. Up to 400 tourists, in batches of 50, were let in on full moon nights and on the evening before and after from 8:30 pm to half-past midnight. The Taj Mahal was built in the 17th century by heartbroken Moghul emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his second wife Mumtaz Mahal. The night viewing ban was imposed after the 1984 Indian army assault to flush out militants from the Golden Temple, Sikhdom's holiest shrine, at Amritsar in northern India.

Norwegian envoys begin talks on saving Lanka peace process

AFP, Colombo Norway's top peace envoys Thursday opened talks with Sri Lanka's political leaders in a bid to jump-start negotiations between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels, officials said. Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen and special envoy Erik Solheim held talks with opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and the main Muslim leader Rauf Hakeem, officials involved in the talks said. "They discussed the present state of the negotiations and the possibilities of resuming the dialogue," an official said. However, the more crucial round for the Norwegians will be a meeting scheduled for Saturday between Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen and Tamil Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, officials said in Colombo. Petersen arrives here Friday to join the team of Norwegians preparing the ground for his rare meet with

the elusive Tiger supremo who three days before the tsunami tragedy rejected Colombo's latest proposal to revive talks. Prabhakaran had announced in November that his Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) might resume its "freedom struggle" unless Colombo agreed to end the impasse in peace talks, stalled since April 2003. Saturday's meeting is going to be crucial and it would be premature to expect any breakthrough, a diplomatic source close to the talks process said. However, the Tigers were bringing down their London-based chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, ahead of Saturday's meeting that will take place in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi, in the island's north. The Norwegian embassy said Petersen would be accompanied by Minister for International Development Hilde E Johnson on a mission to assess the damage and needs of tsunami-affected areas in the north as well as the south.

Indian cops kill 3 Maoists as strike grips Andhra

AFP, Hyderabad state capital Hyderabad. But police were on alert in the city and guarded power installations, fuel depots, government buildings and a technology park which houses hundreds of foreign software firms. Authorities said businesses and schools were shut in northern interior parts of Andhra Pradesh and southern Anantapur district that are Maoist strongholds and where many poverty-stricken farmers are in dire straits and suicides by debt-hit farmers are common. Fears of violence during the strike grew after police said three Maoist rebels died early Thursday in a gunbattle with police in Srisila, some 150 km north of Hyderabad. "We had information a group of ultras were on their way to blast the bus depot. When we tried to stop them they opened fire," local police chief Rajiv Ratan told AFP. State transport officials canceled bus services to interior villages to prevent arson attacks during the strike. The strike call was ignored in the

The three-decades-old conflict has claimed more than 10,000 lives. The Maoists agreed to the government's offer of peace talks in June last year but refused to lay down their arms. The first round of talks was held last October. Both sides agreed to an informal ceasefire while the talks were on but over the past few weeks there have been increasing clashes between rebels and police. Police say the rebels used the peace process as a ploy to regroup and re-arm. "The rebels have been misusing the peace process to regroup, extort money and arm themselves," Hyderabad police chief Swarnjit Sen told reporters. India's ultra leftists have ties with Maoists battling to overthrow the monarchy in neighbouring Nepal and concern has been expressed in India that the Maoist revolt in Nepal could spill over the border.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) talks with Chilean President Ricardo Lagos (C) as Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (L) and Luisa Duran de Lagos (2nd-R) look on during a welcome ceremony at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi yesterday. Lagos is in India on a five-day official visit.



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Unpunished murders soaring in Nepalese civil war: Amnesty

AFP, Kathmandu Government and Maoist forces in Nepal's civil war are murdering an increasing number of people and getting away with it, Amnesty International charges in a report released yesterday. "Both the security forces and the Maoists are deliberately executing civilians and unarmed fighters," said Ingrid Massage, Amnesty's Asia director. "These unlawful killings are part of a terrible spectrum of human rights abuses. The Nepali people are living amid daily torture, rape, disappearances and arbitrary arrests," Massage said. "What is most chilling is that these killings are going completely unpunished, despite numerous promises by the government and

Maoist leaders to uphold human rights." In "Nepal: Killing with impunity", the London-based group details unlawful killings by both sides since the breakdown of a ceasefire in August 2003. It documents increasingly sophisticated cover-ups by security forces, including burying bodies and forcing people to sign false witness statements. Even the most high-profile cases, such as the execution of 19 unarmed Maoists in Doramba village, Ramechhap district in August 2003, have not been prosecuted, Amnesty says. On September 3, 2004 three teenage girls were allegedly killed by security forces. Hira Ram Rai, 15, Jina Rai, 16, and Indra Kala Rai, 16, were followed by soldiers as they left school in Basikhora village, Bhojpur district.

Trinamool in a dilemma over alliance with BJP

PTI, Kolkata Trinamool Congress is in a dilemma over whether to continue its alliance with the BJP or make tactical adjustments with the Congress, especially in view of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation elections to be held sometime in the middle of this year. The issue would be debated threadbare at the two-day state council session of the party starting from Friday at Contai in east Midnapur district, party sources said. The Trinamool Congress chief, Mamata Banerjee, has so far said that alliance with the Congress is not possible as long as it took CPI-M support at the Centre, but analysts said, she is aware of the negative impact of her party's support to BJP's over Hinduva line which characterised its political strategy ever since it suffered defeat in the last Lok Sabha poll.

Maldives set for polls despite tsunami

AFP, Male The Maldives, submerged by the Indian Ocean tsunamis, will stage no-party parliamentary elections tomorrow that may turn into a referendum on Asia's longest serving leader, officials and diplomats said. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom is not among the 149 candidates contesting 42 seats up for grabs, but the vote will be a key test of his popularity, diplomats said. They said Gayoom, president since 1978, emerged stronger after the December 26 calamity that dampened spirits of pro-democracy activists, some of whom were granted post-tsunami presidential pardons. "People turn to the government for tsunami relief as well as reconstruction," an Asian diplomat here said. "This helps the president. The

election results could reflect that. Gayoom will see his men elected." The dissident Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) agrees that their chances have been slashed, but blame it on Gayoom's strong-arm tactics of locking up key activists, four of whom were given a post-tsunami reprieve. "We are hopeful that we will get about 10 to 15 seats for the candidates we are backing," spokesman Mohamed Latheef said from the Sri Lankan capital Colombo where he lives in exile. He said if the MDP-backed candidates could campaign freely, they would have won 30 to 35 seats and secured a two-thirds majority in the parliament. The 1998 Maldivian constitution does not recognise political parties, but Gayoom himself says he wants further reforms to allow a multi-party system in the atoll nation of 300,000 Sunni Muslims.

Lanka should include war-displaced in tsunami resettlement: UNHCR

AFP, Colombo Tens of thousands of Sri Lankans displaced by the island's long-running ethnic conflict should be included in the government's post-tsunami resettlement plans, the UN refugee agency said yesterday. Around 80,000 people displaced by the war have been living in makeshift camps in the east and north of the country for years and need proper housing, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said. The UNHCR would like to see those displaced by the war, mostly ethnic Tamils, included in the resettlement plans now being drawn up by the government for those uprooted by the tsunami, the organisation's assistant high com-

missioner Kamel Morjane told a media briefing here. "This is a good opportunity and a logical one," Morjane said. "There are (some)... who have been displaced by the conflict and again for a second time displaced by the tsunami," he added. Other UNHCR officials said some people had been back in their homes only for a month or two after years of living in camps for the war-displaced when the tsunami struck and left them homeless yet again -- a few for the third or fourth time. Morjane headed a high-level UNHCR delegation during a two-day tour of parts of Sri Lanka affected by the tsunami, including areas in the northeast controlled by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The rebels have been fighting for a separate Tamil homeland for more than three decades in a conflict which has claimed at least 60,000 lives and displaced tens of thousands. The numbers of war displaced had in recent months slowly been decreasing as people started returning to their homes in the wake of a Norway-brokered ceasefire between the warring sides in February 2002, Morjane said. "The picture now, however, was 'very complicated' because aside from those displaced by the war, hundreds of thousands of others were left homeless by the tsunami while a 'third category' -- which one UN official estimated would run into tens of thousands -- consisted of those hit both by war and waves.