

Lankan Marxists quit Chandrika govt

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main Marxist party yesterday quit the 14-month-old coalition government to protest an aid deal with Tamil rebels, but kept the door open for reconciliation with President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The JVP, or People's Liberation Front, said its decision had gone into effect at midnight, leaving Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party as a minority administration backed by smaller parties.

JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe said the party might still return to the fold if the president agreed to reconsider her plan for a joint mechanism with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"This is not the first nor the last alliance between the (Freedom



Somawansa Amara-singhe

Party) and the JVP," Amarasinghe told reporters here.

However, he said the JVP's 39 legislators would take their seats

alongside the opposition as an independent entity, but declined to say how they would vote in the 225-member assembly.

There was no immediate reaction from Kumaratunga's office, but a senior minister said she had decided to present the tsunami aid deal to parliament for approval by the House.

With the main opposition supporting Kumaratunga's plan to share aid with the LTTE, parliament is almost certain to approve it overwhelmingly despite the JVP quitting, political sources said.

Amarasinghe, however, said he strongly believed that Kumaratunga's plan would compromise the country's sovereignty and national security.

"The LTTE is not going to perform miracles when they join the

joint mechanism," Amarasinghe said. "The LTTE has a warfare machinery, but not a welfare machinery."

Amarasinghe said the JVP's withdrawal from the coalition could lead to Kumaratunga losing her grip on power "within weeks" in the national parliament as well as on several local council bodies.

Kumaratunga in a letter to the JVP Wednesday vowed she would go ahead with the aid-sharing deal and asked her Marxist coalition partner to change its headline stand.

The withdrawal of the party has not led to the immediate collapse of the government because Kumaratunga has secured the support of others in the parliament to survive.

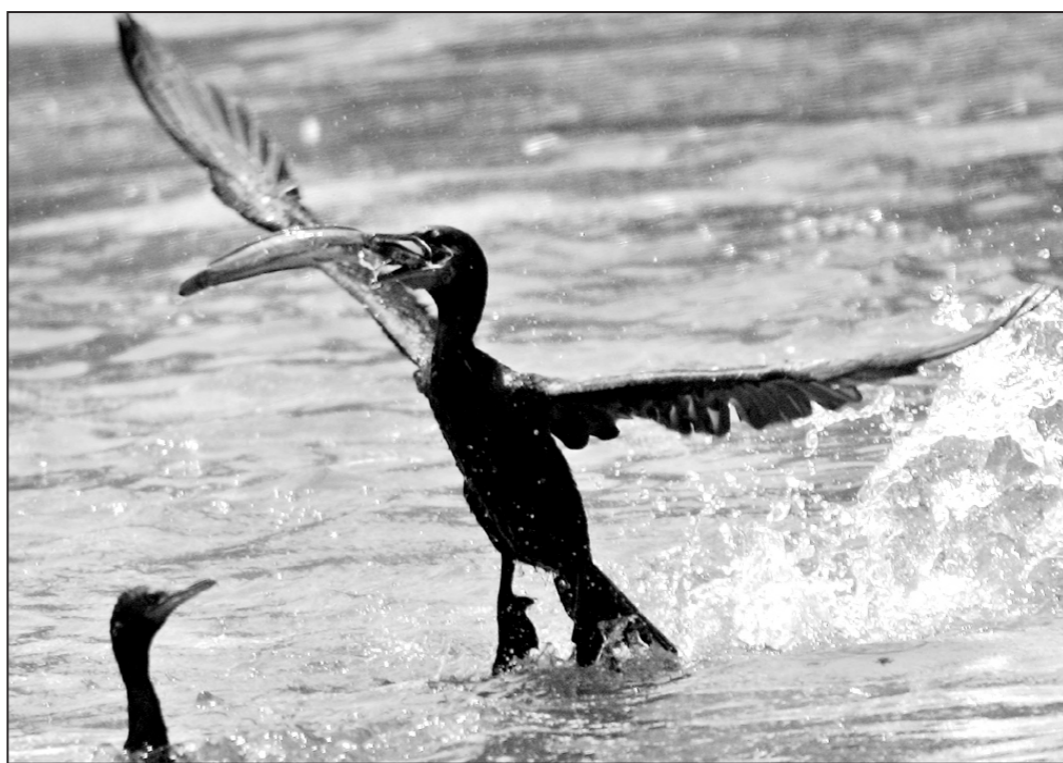


PHOTO: AFP

A waterfowl catches a fish in a pond at the zoological park in New Delhi yesterday. Northern India is experiencing extreme summer conditions even after the arrival of the seasonal monsoon rains with day temperatures remaining above the 40 degree Celsius mark.

Delhi lacks desire to hold talks: Ulfa

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Guwahati

One of Assam's top militant groups, the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), yesterday accused New Delhi of trying to derail the outfit's peace initiatives by militarising the region.

"When the process of beginning a dialogue between Ulfa and the Government of India has already been set in motion, the reinforcement of Indian occupation forces (security forces) in Assam by double the original strength is not conducive to creating a positive environment," an Ulfa statement said.

"This only betrays the real intention of the Government of India, that is, the military suppression of our legitimate national liberation struggle."

The Ulfa is an outlawed militant group fighting for an independent Assamese homeland in Assam since 1979. The rebel group said it wanted peace talks with the Government to end close to three decades of violent insurgency in the region.

3 Sunni party activists gunned down in Pakistan

AFP, Karachi

An angry crowd went on the rampage in the volatile Pakistani port city of Karachi yesterday after three activists of a Sunni Muslim party were found murdered, police said.

Supporters of the local Sunni Tehrik (ST) party set ablaze two buses and forced shopkeepers to pull down their shutters in several southern neighbourhoods, residents said.

Riot police took up positions in sensitive areas as hundreds of mourners gathered for the funeral of the men later Thursday.

Two workers for the Sunni Tehrik party were shot dead late Wednesday while the bullet-riddled body of another activist was found early Thursday, police said.

"These were targeted killings," Karachi police chief Tariq Jamil told AFP.

He said police were investigating whether the killings were linked to political rivalry between the Sunni party and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM).

"Police and paramilitaries are patrolling the city following the killings and tension in different parts of the city," Jamil said.

Tension has been simmering between Sunni Tehrik and MQM activists since Tuesday, when a gunbattle between rival workers left three people injured.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf gestures while delivering his speech to the Asia Society in Sydney yesterday on the final leg of his groundbreaking three-day official visit to Australia. President Musharraf held counter-terrorism and bilateral trade talks with Australian Prime Minister John Howard.

MUSHARRAF SAYS Pakistan 'broken the back' of al-Qaeda

Flexibility a must to resolve Kashmir row

AFP, Sydney

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said yesterday his military has "broken the back" of al-Qaeda and reduced the terrorist organisation to small isolated bands hiding in the mountains on the Pakistan-Afghan border.

Musharraf, on the first visit to Australia by a Pakistani head of state, called on the United States to help undermine one of the root causes of terrorism by resolving the Palestinian issue.

The president said he valued his country's role as a leading moderate Islamic state and was determined to stamp out terrorism and extremism.

Meanwhile, Pakistani President said there was "light at the end of the tunnel" in the long-standing dispute with India over Kashmir but warned flexibility was needed on both sides to resolve the issue.

Musharraf, on the first visit to Australia by a Pakistani head of state, said a process of rapprochement was underway and there was a genuine desire for peace among the peoples of India, Pakistan and India's Muslim-dominated Kashmir.

"I am optimistic, I see light at the

end of the tunnel, I only feel that if we show sincerity in our approach and show flexibility ... we can come to a central point of agreement," he told an Asia Society function in Sydney.

"That means flexibility, giving up set positions, giving up fast, cemented positions of the past 50 years."

"There are extremists on both sides who would derail the process, whatever's decided, we need to be bold enough to stand up to them."

He said the Pakistani people were sentimentally and emotionally involved in fate of Kashmir and the issue had to be resolved.

"Terrorism will be confronted with force, we have done that and we have been successful," Musharraf told an Asia Society function in Sydney.

"Terrorists are on the run, al-Qaeda in the mountains, we got about 700 in our cities and deported them."

"Then we went into the mountains, today 70,000 troops are operating in the mountains, we've paid a heavy price, 250 soldiers have died."

"But ... we have occupied their sanctuaries, they are on the run."

Pakistan lifts travel ban on rape victim under US pressure

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Wednesday lifted a travel ban on the victim of a notorious gang rape after key ally the United States strongly condemned attempts to prevent her from leaving the country.

The turnaround came less than a day after Mukhtaran Mai, who was raped on the orders of a tribal jury in 2002, called on the government to remove her name from its so-called exit control list.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian affairs Christina Rocca had also said Washington was "dismayed" that Mai was stopped from going to the United States at the invitation of rights group Amnesty International.

"On a directive by Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, the name of Mukhtaran Mai has been removed from the exit control list," Aziz's spokesman told AFP without elaborating.

The list is normally used to restrict the movements of criminals and political opponents of the government of military ruler President Pervez Musharraf.

AMNESTY SAYS US, UK arms fuelling rights abuse in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Amnesty International accused Britain, the United States and India Wednesday of facilitating human rights abuses in Nepal by selling the country weapons used against civilians in the nine-year Maoist revolt.

The international rights watchdog said there was "overwhelming evidence" that military assistance from these countries and others had "been used for the killing and abduction of civilians by both sides in the conflict."

"With the conflict poised to escalate, any further military assistance would be highly irresponsible," said Purna Sen, director of Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific programme, in a statement.

"Arms should not be exported as long as there is a clear risk that they might be used to commit serious human rights abuse. As has already been demonstrated, civilians will be those who suffer most."

More than 11,000 people have been killed in the Maoist insurgency launched in 1996 to install a communist republic in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

King Gyanendra sacked the government and assumed absolute power in February after accusing

politicians of failing to stem the rebellion.

His hand-picked government warned it would launch massive operations against the rebels, who are present in all 75 districts of the mountainous country.

Amnesty said India had exported 25,000 5.56mm infantry rifles to Nepal "despite evidence of their use in grave human rights violations".

India had also supplied Lancer helicopter gunships, produced under license from French company Eurocopter, which the army had used to attack mass meetings called by the Maoists, "often resulting in the killing of civilians", it said.

India, Nepal's biggest arms supplier, suspended military aid to the kingdom after King Gyanendra's February 1 takeover, but has said the resumption of arms supplies was under "constant review".

The United States had supplied Nepal with 20,000 M16 automatic assault rifles and 29 million dollars in military funding since 2001, Amnesty said.

It accused Britain of sending a number of shipments of small arms as well as 6,780 assault rifles in contravention of the 1998 European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Kashmiri leaders want ticket to talks

Hurriyat team's bus is back

REUTERS, Muzaffarabad

After being feted for two weeks in Pakistan, Kashmiri separatist leaders went home to India's side of the border yesterday with hopes they can finally join a peace process between South Asia's nuclear rivals.

Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, the spiritual leader of Kashmiri Muslims and one of the 9-member delegation to visit Pakistan, said the next move was up to India.

"We expect the government of India to show seriousness and play its role in carrying forward this process," Farooq, the leader of a moderate faction in the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, told reporters in Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistan's Kashmir. He and the rest of the delegation later joined a bus, which travels across the border once every two weeks between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar, the main city in Indian Kashmir.

"The time has come for all three parties in the conflict to be involved in the peace process and I feel the

first step towards that has been taken now," Farooq said, summing up a visit that included talks with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf.

They went to Pakistan with India's blessing, and return with Musharraf's support for more say in their homeland's future.

The start of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus route in April is the most tangible result from 18 months of India-Pakistan talks that have still to focus fully on the core dispute over Kashmir.

Both countries claim Kashmir in its entirety, and have twice gone to war over the region, the only Muslim-majority area in predominantly Hindu India. Since 1989, a Muslim revolt against New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir has added to the tension, with India claiming Pakistan, an Islamic nation, supports the separatists.

Islamabad says it only provides moral support to a Kashmiri struggle for self-determination.

AMNESTY SAYS Myanmar junta steps up arrests of dissidents

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar's military rulers have intensified their crackdown on political opponents and stepped up the arrests of activists, human rights watchdog Amnesty International said yesterday.

Some 1,350 political prisoners are being held incommunicado, without access to lawyers and subjected to torture or mistreatment, said an Amnesty report released three days before pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi's 60th birthday.

The Nobel laureate is the best-known of the political prisoners, having spent most of the last 15 years under house arrest, and her supporters are organising worldwide protests on her birthday Sunday to call for her release.

Five opposition members of

parliament -- elected in 1990 polls but never allowed to take office -- were jailed in February and March, more than in the previous 21 months, the report said.

"Myanmar's political prisoners are being held hostage by the authorities," said Amnesty's secretary general Irene Khan.

"The continued use of detention to remove senior leaders from the political process is a major obstacle in resolving the political deadlock that has existed in the country since 1988," she said in a statement.

"The justice system, which should be protecting the human rights of all the citizens of Myanmar, is being systematically misused to deny and restrict the right to peaceful exercise of freedom of expression, association and assembly."