

Tigers demand lifting of emergency

Lankan president vows fair polls

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday demanded an end to a state of emergency imposed this month, saying the expanded police powers could derail proposed talks on a fragile ceasefire.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam said talks with the government to strengthen the ceasefire would be meaningless while emergency laws are in operation that give police far broader search and arrest powers.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga ordered the state of emergency after foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was killed by suspected rebels on August 12.

The LTTE has denied any role in the murder and says the sweeping powers given to police and security forces target the Tamil minority.

"If the state of emergency is to continue for long ... one foresees a tragic situation in which even direct talks may not be of any use," said the LTTE's official publication, the Viduthalaippuligal, or Liberation Tiger.

"It is therefore the yearning of all peace-loving people that the emergency should be lifted, and lifted immediately."

Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway is currently talking to the government and the rebels to arrange a face-to-face meeting to review a ceasefire in place since February 23, 2002.

Peace talks have remained on hold since April 2003 after six rounds of inconclusive talks. More than 60,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's drawn-out conflict since 1972.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan

President Chandrika Kumaratunga yesterday vowed a "free and fair election" in the conflict-torn island state after the Supreme Court last week ruled that her 11-year reign ends this year.

"The president's fervent wish is that the election campaign should focus on the issues and challenges that lie ahead and that we ensure a shared future, together, as a nation of diverse peoples," her office said in a statement.

Kumaratunga pledged that the elections, which have to be held between October 22 and November 21, will be orderly despite heightened security fears amid a shaky ceasefire with separatist Tamil Tiger rebels.

She also said she was committed to ensuring a "free and fair election".

"The difficult security situation in

the country and the deterioration in the ceasefire arrangements in the north and east need to be addressed urgently," said the statement, referring to Tamil strongholds areas.

On Friday, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ruled that Kumaratunga's term ends in December -- rejecting her argument that because she served just five years during her first term, she was entitled to extend her second term by a year.

The main opposition United National Party, led by former premier Ranil Wickremesinghe, and other groups welcomed the ruling.

"We have to now ensure there are free and fair elections," said Wickremesinghe, who lost the post of prime minister in 2004 and is expected to run for president in the upcoming vote.

Kashmir minister survives attack

AFP, Srinagar

A key minister in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir Saturday survived a rebel attack, while troops recovered a huge cache of explosives in a southern town, police said.

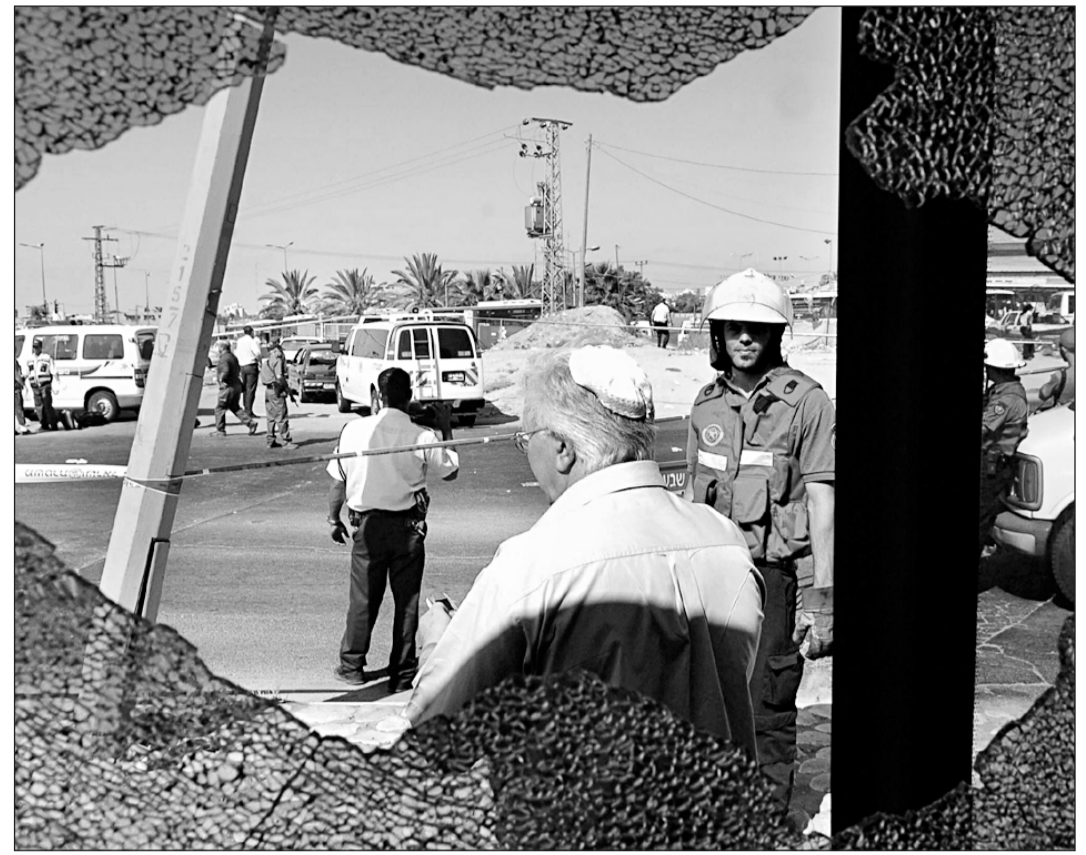
Suspected militants armed with automatic rifles opened fire on forest minister Ghulam Mohiudin Sofi's motorcade near Handwara 80km north of the state summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

The bullets narrowly missed the minister's car as his security guards returned fire, forcing the attacker to flee, he said.

Sofi, a former separatist, was returning home after addressing a public rally in a neighbouring village.

Meanwhile, Indian troops recovered 600 kilograms (1,320 pounds) of explosives from the basement of a multi-storey building in Anantnag town, 50km south of Srinagar, on Saturday, a police spokesman said.

"One person has been arrested. The hunt is on to track the owner of the building," he said.



Israeli paramedics and policemen inspect the place where a suicide bomber wounded five Israeli people, two of them in a serious condition after he blew himself up near a bus station in southern Israeli city of Beer Sheva in the first attack since Israel evicted all of its settlers from the Gaza Strip.



Nepalese students with their faces covered with masks shout slogans as they take part in a demonstration to protest price rises of petroleum products in Kathmandu yesterday.

Hardliners, Musharraf face off over madrasas

AFP, Islamabad

In a fresh test of his fight against extremism, key Western ally President Pervez Musharraf faces a bruising stand off with hardliners over the registration of Pakistan's controversial Islamic schools.

On Wednesday, as part of a widespread crackdown launched after the July 7 London bombings, the government ordered the country's estimated 14,000 madrasas to sign up by the end of the year or face closure.

But Pakistan's vocal fundamentalist Islamic parties which have so often proved a thorn in Musharraf's side have vowed to defy the measures, along with the Wafaq-ul-Madaris, Pakistan's main grouping of seminaries.

Madrasas offer free religious education and board for more than

one million Pakistani children, many of whom have no access to state education, but some have been accused of being breeding grounds for extremism.

Britain pushed Musharraf to take a tough stance after it emerged that at least two of the London bombers had visited the country before the July attacks and that one or more may have visited madrasas.

With shots of madrasa pupils nodding frantically as they recited the Koran being repeatedly shown on television news channels -- and Pakistan's reputation as a big player in the "war on terror" at stake -- Musharraf took action.

Hundreds of so-called extremists were arrested, Musharraf ordered the estimated 1,400 foreigners studying in Pakistan's madrasas to leave, and then the registration order was introduced.

Earlier this month General Musharraf called on his countrymen to reject "retrogressive elements politically and socially" ahead of four-yearly municipal polls seen largely as a test of Musharraf's bid to sideline hardline Islamic groups.

As Pakistan's ruling party claimed victory in the two-stage polls that ended Thursday, officials said the vote had given a clear boost to the General's mission to curb extremism in the Islamic republic.

"The outcome of the elections throughout the country is a victory for the moderates, for the enlightened and a defeat for the extremists," Musharraf said on Friday.

However a group of key religious parties which control more than 8,000 seminaries and schools run by a hardline Sunni Muslim school of thought remained defiant.

Suicide blast punctures ME peace hopes

AFP, Beersheva, Israel

A Palestinian blew himself up while trying to board a bus in southern Israel yesterday in the first suicide attack since the evacuation of settlers from the Gaza Strip, puncturing hopes that the historic pullout would break the cycle of violence.

Around 40 people were taken to hospital after the blast in Beersheva, the vast majority of them suffering from shock, although two were in a serious condition, medical sources said.

More serious carnage appeared to have been averted after security at the city's main terminus prevented the attacker from boarding.

Police and witnesses said the attacker had blown up himself after being challenged by two security guards and a bus driver.

The attack comes almost exactly a year to the day after 15 Israelis were killed in a twin attack on two buses in Beersheva.

There was no immediate claim of

responsibility for the latest attack but it came just four days after five militants were killed by Israeli troops during an arrest operation in the West Bank town of Tulkeram.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas told reporters that he condemned the attack, describing it as a "terrorist operation."

His national security advisor Jibril Rajub said however Israel had to expect the consequence of its "crime" in Tulkeram.

"Israel must know that if it continues with this state terrorism it will lead to more violence in the region," Jibril Rajub told AFP.

Israel's Internal Security minister Gideon Ezra said that the action of the bus driver and security guards "had averted a major disaster".

Ezra said Israel would "not hesitate to respond" to the attack which he said underlined how "the Palestinian Authority must dismantle the terrorist groups."

Sharon's son indicted over corruption scandal

AFP, Jerusalem

A district tribunal indicted Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's son Omri Sunday in connection with a corruption probe into the funding of his father's leadership campaign, judicial sources said.

Omri, who is an MP for his father's right-wing Likud party, was charged by the tribunal in Tel Aviv with providing false testimony and falsifying documents in connection with the 1999 campaign for the Likud leadership.

Attorney general Menachem Mazuz decided to press the charges last month but had to wait until a bill was passed which limited MPs' immunity against prosecution.

Prosecutors have said that a company controlled by Omri, named Annex Research, took contributions from companies in Israel and abroad worth some 1.3 million dollars, which were all illegally ploughed into his father's campaign.

The prime minister himself has always insisted that he had no knowledge of the financing of his campaign, saying it was run exclusively by his son.

Kashmir's top woman rebel forms squad to raid brothels

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's leading female separatist Aasiya Andrabi yesterday formed a squad to raid brothels in the scenic Himalayan state and appealed to people for help in reporting cases of adultery.

The move follows raids by police in the summer capital Srinagar and other parts of the Muslim-dominated Kashmir valley over the past few weeks on suspected brothels, resulting in several arrests.

"I urge people to keep an eye on hotels, restaurants, houseboats and residences where they feel such activities take place," Andrabi said in a statement.

"We will send a special squad there to ascertain the compulsions of the women involved in the flesh trade," she said.

She has also provided a mobile phone number for people to call for the squad "whenever you are convinced that man or woman has entered some place to commit adultery".

UK to engage Muslims to tackle extremism

ANSAR AHMED ULLAH, from London

The British government will unveil specific programmes in September to work in collaboration with the Muslim communities living in the United Kingdom.

The purpose is to work jointly with the Muslim leaders to address the issue of extremism that exists within the Muslim communities.

The July 7 and the subsequent failed London bomb attacks on Underground trains and buses were all acts of home grown suicide bombers and terrorists. It is believed that various extremist Islamist groups are operating in the United Kingdom and are recruiting young men and women with 'hate preaching' against other religious communities.

And from this realisation, UK authorities have already had a number of meetings with Muslim leaders and more are planned.

Hazel Blears, a Home Office minister has visited Muslim communities to build trust and a close relationship with the community. Hazel Blears said community rela-

tions in the UK are extremely good, and the relations are as good as they were before the July bombings in London. The communities are united in their resolve and efforts not to let those events affect the overall race or community relations in the UK.

Vast majority of Muslims have not only condemned the bombing but also wanted to work with the authorities in fighting the extremism.

The minister's visits to the Muslim communities are part of the confidence building measures the government are taking to boost the relationship and the emphasis is on measures 'what unites Britain as a country'.

The purpose of meeting members of the Muslim communities is not just to talk about fighting terrorism, but also to look at the whole range of related issues like housing, education, job opportunities and opportunities for young people etc. All these issues were equally highlighted in discussions with the Muslim community as social conditions might also contribute to make a disadvantaged youth to be a member of extremist groups.

Hazel Blears also said after meetings with members of the Muslim community that they want us to help them root out extremists, who are often not in the mosque but hang around outside mosques. Everybody wants us to tackle terrorism, but it is equally important that the police men reassure the community that any type of racial or religious hate crime would not be tolerated. The Police are fully aware of this, and are planning to work closely with the community on these issues.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair wants to establish a Commission on Integration, which will be led by Hazel Blears. It would look at how members of Muslim community can better integrate into mainstream British society.

On another front of the fight against terrorism, the government is taking no chances with hard line clerics and listed ten of extremist clerics as being not conducive to the public good for national security reasons and detained them. A number of others could also be arrested and deported to their country of origin.



A child injured in a grenade blast is assisted at Guwahati Medical College Hospital in Guwahati, the capital city of India's restive north-eastern state of Assam Saturday. One person was killed and at least eight people were injured in two grenade attacks.