

Moderates fear for Lankan peace

President, PM at loggerheads

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's moderate Tamils yesterday expressed fears for the island's already faltering peace bid after the prime minister pledged a U-turn in power-sharing with minorities if he was elected president.

The main minority Tamil party, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), said they believed the Norwegian-backed peace process could suffer a fatal blow if premier Mahinda Rajapakse delivered on his election promise.

Rajapakse's pledge Thursday compounded a deadlock between Colombo and the Tamil Tigers over moves to agree on a venue for talks

on salvaging their troubled ceasefire that has been in place since February 2002.

Outgoing President Chandrika Kumaratunga slammed Rajapakse for signing the pact without her approval, an official in her office told AFP.

"She has basically accused him of violating party discipline and ignoring democratic norms," said the official who had seen the letter before it was delivered to Rajapakse Friday.

There was no immediate reaction from the prime minister or his office to the strongly-worded letter delivered Friday.

Kumaratunga had also ordered state-controlled media to play down

Thursday's deal with the Marxists.

The Daily News pushed a report on Rajapakse's pact with the Marxists to the bottom of the front page while splashing across the top a story on Kumaratunga giving jobs to 700 graduates.

The premier, in his pre-election pact with the island's main Marxist party, pledged to abandon the government's commitment to work towards devolving power to minority Tamils that was part of peace talks in December 2002.

In return, the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, pledged their full support to Rajapakse in the presidential elections to be held between October 22 and November 21.

Israeli army packs up in Gaza

AFP, Rafah

The Israeli army was demolishing the last of its buildings and packing up remaining equipment yesterday while awaiting final orders for a lightning withdrawal from Gaza after a 38-year occupation.

Massive explosions boomed across the territory from dawn, drowning out the sound of the Muslim call to prayer, as troops dynamited some of the last remaining buildings.

The Mor bridge, built to separate the now-departed settlers and Palestinian traffic in southern Gaza, was dismantled and hauled away by crane.

A series of watchtowers which have come to symbolise the Israeli presence in Gaza were reduced to rubble.

The army also blew up its liaison

headquarters with the Palestinian Authority in the northern Gaza Strip, military sources said.

The main Abu Holi checkpoint was closed, cutting the link between northern and southern Gaza, as the wreckers continued their work in the final hours before the start of the Jewish Sabbath.

"Everything should be packed up by the end of the day," a military source told AFP, as the army awaited a Sunday cabinet meeting when ministers should rubber-stamp the departure of the soldiers.

Troops had been due to leave next Thursday but their departure is being brought forward on the recommendation of Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, with troops becoming targets of stone-throwing Palestinian youths.



PHOTO: AFP
MoveOn members and supporters march in protest of the handling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster relief by the administration of US President George W. Bush, in front of the White House Thursday in Washington, DC.

'War on terror saves few lives' US policy will cause enormous unnecessary deaths

REUTERS, Washington

The US "war on terror" is saving fewer lives than just spending the money on disease prevention and research, and has probably caused deaths by taking money away from basic services, an expert said on Thursday.

The accusation is not new, but Dr. Erica Frank of the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta said she has calculated the cost, in terms of lives, of the Bush administration's terror policies.

"The most recent effects of these diversions of funding have been seen in the unfolding tragedy of

Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the surrounding area," Frank wrote in a commentary published in the British Medical Journal.

"Governments must protect their citizens, and anticipating these possible future threats is appropriate and could prove essential to Americans' health."

Frank warned there is a threat that because of the US government's policy, enormous numbers of Americans will die unnecessarily.

On September 11, 2001, 3,400 people died because of the four intentional plane crashes in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. But 5,200 other Americans died that same day from common diseases, according to

Frank.

To estimate how many Americans died of routine causes on September 11, Frank used national estimates of mortality from various causes.

"Predictable tragedies happen every day. We know strategies to reduce deaths from tobacco, alcohol, poor diet, unintentional injuries, and other predictable causes. And we know that millions of people will die unless we protect the population against these routine causes of death," she wrote.

Yet more money is spent to protect against deaths that are not likely to happen.

Nepali cops net 200 anti-king marchers

AFP, Kathmandu

More than 200 people were arrested in the Nepalese capital and the southwestern town of Mahendranagar yesterday, the sixth day of anti-monarchy protests, police and party officials said.

Police said 149 demonstrators had been rounded up in Kathmandu during afternoon protests in the popular Bhotahity and Baneshwor market areas against the king's February seizure of power in the Himalayan kingdom.

Witnesses said several hundred women activists of the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist

and Leninist (NCP-UML) rallied at Bhotahity while hundreds of writers, artists and politicians had gathered at Baneshwor.

In Mahendranagar, meanwhile, more than 3,000 people, led by the People's Front Nepal, led by a demonstration against the king, PPN leader Lilamani Pokharell said.

"In the demonstration, more than 60 party activists were arrested," he said.

The PPN is one of the members of a seven-party alliance, including the Nepal Congress and NCP-UML, which has been organising daily demonstrations since last Sunday against the king's seizure of executive powers.

Mubarak wins fifth term in Egypt polls

REUTERS, Cairo

President Hosni Mubarak has won a fifth six-year term in Egypt's first contested presidential election, taking more than 80 percent of the vote in a low turnout, state newspapers said yesterday.

"Mubarak... is the elected president," said al-Gomhuria in a headline. "Mubarak obtains the trust and support of the people," said another government newspaper, al-Akhbar.

The Presidential Election Commission, which ran the election on Wednesday and is supervising the count, is expected to announce the official result late on Friday or on Saturday.

According to monitors and the opposition, the voting was marred by

widespread abuses and irregularities, mainly by Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) and by the organizers.

However, the abuses would not have affected the overall result, said several monitoring groups, including the independent Egyptian Organization for Human Rights.

The election commission, whose decisions are final, on Thursday rejected a rerun request from Ayman Nour of the liberal Ghad (Tomorrow) Party, Mubarak's best known rival.

Detailed voting figures from 15 of Egypt's 26 provinces, published in the state newspaper al-Ahram, showed that Mubarak won everywhere, with between 69 and 98 percent of the vote.

'World was reluctant to recognise Kashmir violence as terrorism'

AFP, New Delhi

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in comments broadcast yesterday that the world had been reluctant to recognise the insurgency in Indian-ruled Kashmir as terrorism.

"Personally I have always condemned terrorism in respect of Kashmir," Blair told NDTV television in an interview recorded while he was in New Delhi Thursday for talks with Indian leaders.

"But I think there has been a reluctance -- not confined to the UK alone incidentally -- to see this terrorism for what it is ... but the world has woken up."

New Delhi has since 1989 battled an Islamic insurgency in its part of the divided Himalayan state of Kashmir in which at least 44,000 people have been killed.

India accuses Pakistan of aiding, arming and funding the Muslim rebels and of allowing them to set up training bases on Pakistani soil.

Islamabad denies the claims and charges that Indian troops are perpetrating wide-scale human rights abuses in Indian-ruled Kashmir.

The picturesque region of Kashmir, which both countries claim in full, has been the spark of two of three wars between the now nuclear-armed rivals since they gained independence from Britain in 1947.

India has in the past asked Britain, the United States and other countries to use their influence with Pakistan to ensure that the "infrastructure of terrorism" is shut down, but has complained that its calls go unheeded.

Blair said: "Terrorism is not only an obstacle to progress -- and that is true whether it is Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, wherever -- The fact is, all it does is cause hatred and make dialogue impossible."

Pakistani extremists aid terrorists: US

AP, Washington

al-Qaeda leaders in hiding and foot-soldiers preparing for terrorist attacks are turning to outlawed Pakistani extremist groups for spiritual and military training, shelter and logistical support, say US officials who see them as an emerging threat.

One group Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, or Army of the Pure is an example of how Osama bin Laden's followers take advantage of scattered Islamic militant allies to maintain momentum, four years after a US-led military campaign destroyed al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.

Lashkar is among the organisations fighting for the disputed region of Kashmir. US officials say the group stands out for a number of

reasons, including its missionary work and other involvement outside the area.

Elements of Pakistan's intelligence services have supported Lashkar in the past. Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, banned Lashkar in 2002 for its alleged links to an attack on India's parliament.

Lashkar leaders insist the group's focus is freeing Muslims in Indian-controlled Kashmir not attacks on the West. Pakistani officials say the group is local, not international.

Pakistan's ambassador to the US, Jehangir Karamat, said in an Associated Press interview that he considers Lashkar incapable of international terrorism and particularly of working with al-Qaeda because the groups have different languages and agendas.

Katrina fuels global warming debate

REUTERS, Oslo

Hurricane Katrina has spurred debate about global warming worldwide with some environmentalists sniping at President George W. Bush for pulling out of the main UN plan for braking climate change.

Experts agree it is impossible to say any one storm is caused by rising temperatures. Numbers of tropical cyclones like hurricanes worldwide are stable at about 90 a year although recent US research shows they may be becoming more intense.

Still, the European Commission, the World Bank, some environmentalists, Australia's Greens and even Sweden's king said the disaster, feared to have killed thousands of people in the United States, could be a portent of worse to come.

"As climate change is happening, we know that the frequency of these disasters will increase as well as the scope," European Commission spokeswoman Barbara Helfferich said.

"If we let climate change continue like it is continuing, we will have to deal with disasters like that," she said. She said it was wrong to say Katrina was caused by global warming widely blamed on emissions from cars, power plants and factories.

Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf told reporters he was deeply shaken by the damage and suffering of millions of people.

"It is quite clear that the world's climate is changing and we should take note," he said. "The hurricane catastrophe in the United States should be a wake-up call for all of

us."

Climate change policies sharply divide Bush from most of his allies which have signed up for caps on emissions of greenhouse gases under the UN's Kyoto protocol. Bush pulled out of Kyoto in 2001, saying it was too expensive and wrongly excluded developing nations from a first round of caps to 2012.

In July this year, Bush launched a six-nation plan to combat climate change with Australia, China, India, Japan and South Korea focused on a shift to cleaner energy technology. Unlike Kyoto, it stops short of setting caps on emissions.

UN studies say a build-up of greenhouse gases is likely to cause more storms, floods and desertification and could raise sea levels by up to a meter by 2100.

Hurricane divides US

AP, Washington

The extraordinary showing of national and political unity displayed after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, is nowhere to be found in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Finger pointing and blame games have replaced the images of stunned Americans rallying around President Bush and of members of Congress standing on the steps of the Capitol singing "God Bless America."

The two events are similar in terms of the amount of devastation wrought possibly thousands of deaths, billions of dollars in structural damage and many, many lives turned upside down.

But it's the differences, observ-

ers say, that explain why a majority of the public and some lawmakers rushed to criticise Bush's response to Katrina and the flooding and subsequent evacuation of New Orleans.

Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Centre for the People & the Press, says the post-9/11 sense of unity was mostly a response to Americans feeling attacked by an external enemy.

"The biggest difference here," he said, "is we don't have an enemy to focus our anger on."

Daniel Laufer, who studies the public's response to crises, said the desire to place blame is natural. But it's harder, he says, for people to scapegoat a faceless intangible like Mother Nature as opposed to a real

person like Osama bin Laden, mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks.

"That's a face you can point to, bin Laden," said Laufer, who teaches marketing at the University of Cincinnati. "A hurricane, Mother Nature, the environment, that is not something people want to blame."

Two-thirds of the public, according to the latest Pew poll, and lawmakers of both parties blame Bush, who is one face of a federal government they say was too slow to respond. Another face is Michael Brown, the nation's disaster relief director who some lawmakers say should resign or be fired.

In turn, the federal government has blamed both state and local officials.