

Security tight for last stage of Pak local polls

REUTERS, Islamabad

Security was tight across Pakistan yesterday as thousands of councillors elected in two rounds of local polls in August prepared to vote for powerful district chiefs.

The local elections in all of the country's 110 districts were officially held on a non-party basis but were keenly contested by political factions trying to consolidate power bases before general elections in 2007.

The national parliament and four provincial assemblies elected in 2007 will later that year elect the next president.

"All arrangements for the nazim elections have been made," Kanwar Mohammad Dilshad, permanent secretary at the Election Commission, told Reuters late on Wednesday.

Nazims are heads of districts and sub-districts. They manage development funds in their areas and can wield their political and financial influence to play a crucial role in a general election.

Tigers may emerge as kingmakers

Key parties in Lanka back opposition

AFP, AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's minority parties have aligned with the two main contenders for next month's presidential election hoping to be kingmakers, but analysts say it is the Tamil Tiger rebels who will end up calling the shots.

The stalled peace bid with the Tigers is emerging a key issue in the run up to the November 17 ballot and all key minority parties, except the Tigers, have already rallied behind the two main Sinhalese candidates.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) wield considerable influence in the island's embattled northeast where minority ethnic Tamils

are concentrated and could tip the scales in a close race.

"It will be the Tamils who will eventually decide who will be king," said Harry Gunatillake, political analyst and former advisor to President Chandrika Kumaratunga. "The Tigers will show which way the people there should vote."

Main opposition candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe secured an early boost this week when the key minority Muslim party and a powerful union of Tamil tea plantation workers pledged their backing.

That leaves the Tigers to decide who they will support. No one expects them to make a public statement, but

their leanings would be known to the electorate in an area under their iron-fist control.

Governing party candidate Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse has won the support of the main Marxist party, the JVP or People's Liberation Front, and a hardline group of majority Sinhalese.

"We can see a polarisation on ethnic lines in the days to come," said Sunanda Deshapriya, a director at the Institute of Policy studies think-tank.

"We run the risk of a more nationalistic campaign by the prime minister."

Deshapriya said the Tamil Tigers, although officially not taking part in the campaign, could be a powerful

factor that would decide the ballot.

Sri Lanka's minority Tamils and Muslims are considered kingmakers because their followers often vote as a block while the majority Sinhalese electorate is divided down the middle.

Diplomats and analysts say that any signal from the Tigers to the Tamil electorate could be the deciding factor in the election.

The LTTE's political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan in an interview with AFP late last month was critical of the two main Sinhalese candidates -- Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe -- saying they both capitalised on the ethnic conflict to gain power.



PHOTO: AFP
A Sri Lankan woman walks past a barricade at the main street leading to the main election office yesterday in Colombo. Some 14 candidates are running for the November presidential election, but the two main contenders are Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe.

EU warns of Nepal's political collapse

AFP, Kathmandu

A European delegation warned yesterday that Nepal faced political collapse in the wake of King Gyanendra's seizure of power in February unless urgent action was taken to restore democracy.

"We believe the government should reach out to the political parties to develop a common agenda for a full return to multi-party democracy," EU delegation leader Tom Phillips said.

"Unless all involved move quickly to address Nepal's problems effectively, there is a strong risk of political collapse in the country," he told reporters at the end of a three-day visit to the impoverished Himalayan country.

Phillips is also head of South Asia and Afghanistan at Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The group met with senior govern-

ment leaders, including the vice chairman of the council of ministers Tulsu Giri, as well as opposition leaders in Kathmandu.

"We have told the Nepalese government leaders that events in 2005 have darkened the prospects for a resolution of the armed conflicts and political crisis," he said, referring to the king's takeover in February.

Gyanendra seized power, saying the move was necessary to end the revolt by the Maoists who are battling to install a communist republic.

Phillips said that the EU did not believe "the Maoist ideology is the answer to the problem of Nepal or to the needs and wishes of the Nepalese people".

At the same time he welcomed the Maoist's unilateral three-month ceasefire announced early last month. He urged the government to reciprocate and that both sides make such a ceasefire permanent.



PHOTO: AFP
Injured Ravi Shankar Prasad (R), who was civil aviation minister in the previous Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, sits in a helicopter as he is rushed to a hospital for treatment. He was shot and wounded in the left arm during an electoral campaign rally ahead of the state assembly election in Sasaram district yesterday in Patna, capital of India's lawless Bihar state.

Nato to send 10,000 extra troops to Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Nato will send more than 10,000 extra troops to Afghanistan, the 26-nation group's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said Thursday, which would double its force in the insurgency-hit country.

The expansion of the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) into the volatile southern part of the country "will of course lead to the arrival of certainly a few thousand extra Nato forces," he told reporters.

"I can't give you the exact numbers, but you may say it will be well over 10,000, between 13 and 14, 15,000," he said after talks with President Hamid

Karzai.

The ISAF force has been in Afghanistan since late 2001, shortly after the toppling of the hardline Islamic Taliban regime, and came under Nato control in 2003. It currently numbers about 10,000 troops.

At the moment the force ensures security in the capital Kabul and across parts of northern and western provinces but it is due to move into the southern part of Afghanistan next year.

A 20,000-strong US-led force is currently in the south to tackle a rising insurgency by the Taliban and to hunt al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden. This has been the bloodiest year in Afghanistan since 2001.

Norway envoy sets stage for truce talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Norway's ambassador to Sri Lanka met with Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday ahead of a review of Oslo's peace initiative and talks next week on salvaging a shaky truce, diplomats said.

Ambassador Hans Brattskar travelled to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi for talks with Tamil Tiger political wing chief S. P. Thamilselvan, Norwegian embassy spokeswoman Kjersti Tromsdal said.

"The ambassador wanted to touch base with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) before he goes to Oslo next week for a review of the peace process by the new (Norwegian government) team involved in Sri Lanka,"

Tromsdal said.

Top peace broker Erik Solheim told AFP last month after he was elected as part of Oslo's new government that he would remain engaged in Sri Lanka.

"After the new government is formed ... it will formally contact the (Colombo) government and the Tamil Tigers offering to continue its services in whatever manner the parties want," Solheim said after his election.

Last month, Oslo's outgoing administration named retired general Trond Furuhoide as a special envoy to hold talks with Colombo and the Tamil Tigers following new strains on the truce after the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on August 12.