

## CHANDRIKA ACCEPTS RANIL'S PROPOSAL

# Lankan rivals for bipartisan peace approach

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president and her main political rival have agreed for the first time to forge a bipartisan approach to the island's peace process aimed at ending decades of ethnic bloodshed, officials on both sides said yesterday.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga accepted a proposal by opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to adopt a common approach to solve the Tamil separatist conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972, officials said.

During two-hours of closed door talks on Monday evening, the two leaders discussed the fate of a Norwegian-backed peace initiative after numerous failures to revive peace talks that have been stalled since April

2003.

A spokesman for Kumaratunga said they discussed Wickremesinghe's proposals for a broader bipartisan deal, contained in his manifesto for the November 17 presidential election, and agreed on the need to work together.

There has been no unity between the two main Sinhalese parties on ending the long-festering ethnic strife in the island. Traditionally they have undermined each other's initiatives in the past.

"What has been agreed is for the first time for both parties to have a common position on solving the problem," an official close to the talks told AFP. "This is what the international community too had wanted, but failed to secure in the past."

A statement from Kumaratunga's

office underlined the importance of the rare meeting of the two political foes.

"They both agreed on the importance of all major political parties working together in order to resolve the country's most troubled issue, that of war and peace," a statement from her office said.

All previous attempts by the two main Sinhalese political parties, led by Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, to work together have failed.

Western diplomats involved with the Sri Lanka peace process have noted that a consensus among the Sinhalese is essential to ensure devolution of power to minority Tamils will work properly.

"What was primarily discussed was how they would work together after the election," a spokesman for

Wickremesinghe told AFP. "They agreed that any solution to the conflict would be within a united Sri Lanka."

Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, although from rival parties, have both pledged to work towards a federal state in exchange for ethnic peace and the Tiger rebels giving up their demand for a separate state.

However, they have sharp differences on the overall peace process and how it should be conducted.

Kumaratunga's own prime minister, Mahinda Rajapakse, who is her nominee to contest the presidency and replace her, is at odds with her over a final peace deal -- underscoring the difficulties in achieving a consensus.

## 'Most Americans now feel Iraq war was wrong'

AFP, Washington

For the first time, a majority of Americans believe the Iraq war was the "wrong thing to do", according to a poll published yesterday in The Wall Street Journal.

Fifty-three percent of those asked in the Harris Interactive survey felt that "taking military action against Iraq was the... wrong thing to do", against 34 percent who thought it was correct, the newspaper said.

The percentage of people opposing the US-led invasion of the country in March 2003 was up from a figure of 49 percent in a parallel poll in September, rising above 50 percent for the first time since the surveys began.

A year before, in September 2004, both sides were even at 43 percent.

The latest poll also found that 66 percent of Americans believed President George W. Bush was doing a "poor" or "only fair" job of handling Iraq, against 32 percent who deemed it "excellent" or "pretty good".



Villagers carry their belongings through a flooded village in Khudi in the East Midnapore district, about 190km from Kolkata Monday. Rescue workers struggled to deliver food and water to at least one million people living in villages cut off by floods after six days of rains in West Bengal state.

## UK MP Galloway challenges US

AFP, London

British MP George Galloway challenged the United States on Tuesday to charge him with perjury after he was accused of lying to a Senate committee over the UN oil-for-food programme in Iraq.

Galloway, a strident opponent of the Iraq war, said he was "completely bemused" by fresh allegations that he personally solicited and received eight oil vouchers from Saddam Hussein's regime between 1999 and 2003.

During sworn testimony in May the bombastic left-winger told a US Senate subcommittee investigating the oil-for-food scheme that he never benefited from the controversial programme.

Speaking on BBC radio Tuesday, Galloway said: "I did not lie under oath in front of the Senate committee."

He said he had not seen the latest allegations from the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, which he accused of being "cavalier with any idea of process and justice".

Galloway added: "I'm still willing to go to the United States and still willing to face any charge of perjury in front of that Senate committee."



A Pakistani Kashmir mother holds her injured daughter at US army field medical camp in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir yesterday. The United States said on Monday it would nearly double its military forces in earthquake relief efforts in Pakistan to 1,000 as Washington steps up aid to its "war on terror" ally reeling from the deadly disaster.

## Agencies scramble to deliver aid

REUTERS, Muzaffarabad

Pakistan and international relief agencies scrambled to deliver much-needed aid to remote parts of the quake-hit country yesterday as experts said a narrow fair-weather window was closing rapidly.

With winter approaching and rain predicted in coming days, authorities were racing against time to reach thousands of people cut off by the deadly Oct. 8 quake.

Pakistan meteorological department officials said winter was expected in around three weeks, leaving army engineers and aid workers racing to clear distribution lines, reopen roads and provide shelter for hundreds of thousands of homeless.

"There is a three-week window of opportunity to deliver assistance to mountainous areas before the first snowfall," the United Nations humanitarian office said in a statement.

Rain was also expected later on Tuesday and into Wednesday, creating more misery for quake survivors and likely grounding relief helicopters.

"It is a weak spell and weather is expected to remain clear for the rest of the week," senior meteorologist

Mohammad Hanif told Reuters.

Army engineers are working around the clock to reopen roads destroyed in the quake, which killed at least 53,000 people and left more than 75,000 seriously injured.

Only when the roads are rebuilt -- and in some cases this could take weeks -- can aid be delivered in sufficient quantities to an estimated 2,000 still inaccessible villages to allow hundreds of thousands of people to survive the rapidly approaching winter.

The fleet of aid helicopters, although growing, cannot reach them all, or deliver enough supplies to the worst-hit areas of Pakistani Kashmir and adjacent North West Frontier Province.

In Muzaffarabad, officials were hoping to open the first tented school in a camp for homeless quake survivors as residents tried to get on with their lives.

A US army field hospital, popularised by the hit Vietnam war-era movie and television series M\*A\*S\*H, opened for business in the devastated city on Tuesday -- part of a force of more than 1,000 American service people that will operate in Pakistan.

## UNSC split on how to handle Syria

AFP, Washington

While the US and France are seeking a resolution to pressure Syria to cooperate with an investigation into the murder of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, other members are asking for more time, The Washington Post said yesterday.

Algeria, China and Russia believe it is premature to consider punishing Damascus before chief investigator Detlev Mehlis concludes his probe on December 15, officials from the UN and Europe told the daily.

Mehlis, who led the four-month UN probe into the murder, was to outline on Wednesday the findings of the damning report he released last Thursday, which named senior Syrian security officials as suspects in the massive bomb blast that killed Hariri and 20 others in Beirut last February.

## UN ACTION AGAINST IRAN

# US, EU want Russia on their side

AFP, Vienna

The United States and the European Union will hold off taking Iran before the UN Security Council over its nuclear programme until they get Russia to back them and may even allow Tehran to do some nuclear fuel work, diplomats told AFP.

"If the Russians don't come around, there could not be referral in November," a European diplomat said, referring to a November 24 meeting of the Vienna-based UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which could send Iran to the Security Council.

The IAEA's 35-nation board of governors in September found Iran in non-compliance with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, paving the way for the matter to be referred to the Security Council if Iran does not halt nuclear fuel work and cooperate fully with an IAEA investigation.

Diplomats spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

The United States and EU negoti-

ators Britain, France and Germany fear Iran is secretly developing nuclear weapons and want it brought before the Security Council, which has the power to impose penalties such as trade sanctions.

But Russia, which has a lucrative contract to build Iran's first nuclear power reactor, has a veto on the Security Council.

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## Iraqi charter adopted

# US death toll hits 2,000

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's constitution has been adopted despite opposition of the country's disaffected Sunni Arab minority, electoral officials announced yesterday amid an upsurge of violence across the country.

"It is an accomplishment for all Iraqis," said commission spokesman Farid Ayyar said in announcing the results 10 days after the landmark referendum on a charter that lays down a democratic future for the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq.

The draft passed by a simple majority while opponents failed to muster a two-thirds majority against in at least three of Iraq's 18 provinces.

Meanwhile, the US death toll in Iraq reportedly hit 2,000 amid a sharp spike in violence that killed 14 Iraqis across the country.

The US network CNN, quoting Pentagon sources, reported that the number of soldiers killed since the March 2003 invasion of Iraq had reached 2,000 with the deaths of two more soldiers, a toll likely to add pressure on the US administration over its role in the violence-ravaged country.

For the first time, a majority of Americans believe the Iraq war was the "wrong thing to do", according to a poll published in The Wall Street Journal.

Ten people were killed in a string of bombings in the Kurdish stronghold of Sulaimaniyah in northern Iraq, while another four were killed in Baghdad, the day after a spectacular bombing blitz on hotels housing international reporters and contractors killed 17.

The Sulaimaniyah attacks targeted a building housing Kurdish peshmerga militiamen and the convoy of a senior Kurdish politician, while security sources also defused a bomb outside a hotel used by journalists.

In Baghdad, four people were killed, including two security officials shot dead in the violent southern neighbourhood of Dura.

The capital was recovering from a triple suicide car bomb attack against hotels which killed at least 17 people Monday as Iraqis sat down to break their fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

A cement truck packed with explosives was stopped before it reached the Sheraton hotel, and disappeared in a massive flash that sent up a towering

column of gray and black smoke.

The blasts rocked Firdus Square, where the statue of ousted president Saddam Hussein was pulled down when US troops marched into Baghdad in April 2003, and shook the Palestine, Sheraton and Sadir hotels.

"If the cement truck had not been stopped in time by guards who opened fire, it would have totally devastated the Sheraton," a security source said.

In the past week, almost 100 people have been killed as the number and strength of attacks surged following the start of former dictator Saddam Hussein's trial for crimes against humanity last Wednesday.

The latest blasts also underscored tension over the outcome of Iraq's draft constitution, which had rested on the undeclared results of Sunni-dominated Nineveh province after a second region rejected it.

US and Iraqi officials hope the constitutional process will lead smoothly to general elections in mid-December and draw Sunni Arabs towards a political solution to end sectarian strife.

## Tension mounts in Gaza after attacks

# US still committed to ME roadmap

AFP, Gaza City

Tensions mounted in the Gaza Strip yesterday after Israel launched air and artillery strikes following Palestinian rocket attacks to avenge the killing of a militant.

As the Israeli army vowed to use all means to protect its citizens, US President George W. Bush insisted Washington was "fully committed" to the largely sunk roadmap peace plan drafted by the international community.

Israel's killing of a top West Bank militant Sunday, revenge rocket attacks from Gaza and subsequent Israeli strikes have added up to the worst violence since headline groups agreed to stop Gaza-based attacks on Israel last month.

With most of Israel grinding to a halt to mark the Jewish religious holiday of Sukkot, the army vowed to use all means possible to protect its citizens.

"The Israeli army will react with determination to put an end to attacks and will use all means in order to prevent Israeli citizens from coming to harm," a spokeswoman told AFP.

Late Monday, Israeli artillery shelled open fields in northern Gaza before aircraft bombed neighbouring land that the army said was a rocket launch site.

Aircraft then fired a missile into a building belonging to Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party in the northern town of Beit Hanoun and another office in Rafah, in the south, used by radical group Islamic Jihad.

Five people, including two women and a child, were wounded in the Rafah attack, Palestinian interior ministry spokesman Tawfiq Abu Khossa said, condemning what he called "Israel's escalating aggression" in the Gaza Strip.

Israeli jets broke the sound barrier, unleashing deafening booms over Gaza City four times since late Monday, an AFP correspondent said.

The Israeli military said aircraft had shelled a Beit Hanoun building of the Fatah-linked Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades as well as a Jihad building in Rafah.

"The shelling targeted the uninhabited area from where the rockets were fired," a military source told AFP.



Lourdes Garcia (R) is helped by family members as they salvage belongings from their mobile home that was destroyed by hurricane Wilma Monday in the Palma Nova Trailer Park in Davie, Florida. Hurricane Wilma furiously cut across Florida, killing eight people and leaving more than six million people without power.

## 6m without power after Wilma lashing

AP, Weston

Beginning an agonising, all-too-familiar process, Floridians lined up for generators, chain saws and other clean-up supplies only hours after Hurricane Wilma cut a costly, deadly swath across the peninsula.

The storm slammed across the state in about seven hours Monday, causing billions in insured damage and leaving 6 million people without electricity. Wilma was blamed for at least six and possibly as many as eight deaths statewide.

Officials in the state's three most populous areas Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties were prepping to distribute ice, water and other items to storm-struck residents Tuesday, while utility restoration efforts could stretch into weeks.

"It will be days or weeks before we are back to normal," Miami-Dade

Mayor Carlos Alvarez said.

President Bush promised swift help for the storm-ravaged areas. He signed a disaster declaration and was briefed on the situation by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, acting FEMA director David Paulison and Bush's brother, Gov. Jeb Bush.

"We have pre-positioned food, medicine, communications equipment, urban search-and-rescue teams," the president said. "We will work closely with local and state authorities to respond to this hurricane."

The hurricane arrived as a Category 3 and littered the landscape with damaged signs, awnings, fences, billboards, roof tiles, pool screens, street lights and electrical lines.

Felled trees and blown roofs dotted expressways, and all three of South Florida's major airports Miami International, Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood and Palm Beach were closed, halting air travel.