

LANKA ELECTION HEAD SAYS

No polls in Tigers' territory

AFP, Colombo

No polling for next month's presidential ballot will take place in territory held by Tamil Tiger rebels, Sri Lanka's election chief said yesterday, but people living there would still be able to vote.

Two minor candidates in the November 17 vote asked the Supreme Court Thursday to halt polling arrangements, saying the authorities were set to have voting booths in rebel territory, mainly in northeast Sri Lanka.

However, Elections' Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake said there would be no polling in territory held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but transport would be provided for people to cross into government-held territory and vote.

"The court was satisfied with the commissioner and there is no need for an interim order halting the process," Chief Justice Sarath Silva said in court.

However, he asked Dissanayake to brief all 13 candidates contesting the election about the arrangements.

Dissanayake said he would set up polling booths about 500 meters (yards) away from the LTTE front lines and ensure police provided armed protection.

The state would pay for transport to and from rebel-held areas.

The government has promised "free and fair" elections in the embattled northeast amid fears that violence could scare off voters.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga's office said she had agreed in talks with the main opposition candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe to ensure the vote in troubled areas would be fair.

"President Kumaratunga is to invite the main candidates and their representatives to meet regularly with her ... and review measures that need to be adopted to ensure a free poll in the north and east and the rest of the country," a statement said. Political parties had expressed fears that escalating violence would discourage the 650,000 voters in the northern and eastern provinces and could tilt the balance in a close election.

The LTTE holds large swathes of

the two provinces, which cover one third of the island nation of 19.5 million people.

A total of 13.3 million Sri Lanka-ns are eligible to vote.

Kumaratunga cannot stand as she completes her second and final term in office in December, but her party is represented by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse.

A celebrity Sri Lankan Buddhist monk legislator yesterday abandoned his political party and pledged support for the main opposition candidate in next month's presidential election.

Uduwe Dhammaloka, 37, said he broke ranks with fellow monk MPs of his National Heritage Party, or JHU, to back former premier Ranil Wickremesinghe's bid for the presidency in the November 17 vote.

The JHU which has nine seats in the 225-member parliament is supporting the ruling party candidate, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse.

"The prime minister is a good person to have as a friend, but I don't think he has the vision to improve the economy or solve the northeast conflict," Dhammaloka told reporters.

Rajapakse is campaigning on a Sinhalese nationalism plank while Wickremesinghe is seeking a broader consensus to solve the ethnic conflict with the Tamil minority.

Earlier suspected Tamil Tiger rebels shot dead yesterday a leading activist from the majority Sinhalese community in the embattled north-east of Sri Lanka, police said.

The victim, identified as Anura Abeyratne, was shot in the head in the port city of Trincomalee, 260km from the capital Colombo, a police official said by telephone.

"He was a key figure in the main (majority) Sinhalese organisation in Trincomalee and organised anti-Tiger demonstrations," he said. "There had been Tiger threats against him in the past."

The North-East Sinhalese Organisation has links with the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, which opposes the Tiger campaign for an independent homeland for minority Tamils concentrated in the region.

Tens of thousands evacuated as rains drench S India

AFP, Hyderabad

Tens of thousands of people have been evacuated as heavy rains lashed southern India for the third straight day yesterday, triggering floods, an official said.

Nearly 50,000 people were evacuated to higher ground as rains intensified in the southeastern state of Tamil Nadu, while a key airport in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh state was shut down because of flooding.

"Some of the low-lying areas have been marooned. Transportation has also been disrupted in several places. People are being shifted to higher places," a top official in the Tamil Nadu relief commissioner's offices said.

Officials said 56 people have died in the rains in Tamil Nadu, while another 26 have lost their lives in the southwestern state of Karnataka.

The Karnataka state government has called on the army for help as the driving rain has caused breaches in the state's Cauvery River, leading to floods in some areas.

Weather officials said the rains had been caused by a low pressure system over the Bay of Bengal which was likely to stay put over the next two days.



PHOTO: AFP

Opposition activists demonstrate outside the main Trade Ministry offices in Colombo yesterday demanding that the government bring down living costs. The agitation is part of campaigning ahead of the November 17 presidential elections.

Tax men raid homes of Bollywood bigwigs

AFP, New Delhi

Tax officials have raided the homes of around 20 Indian film personalities and confiscated unaccounted for cash and jewellery worth millions of rupees (tens of thousands of dollars), newspapers reported yesterday.

Among those being questioned, the reports said, was well-known composer A.R. Rahman, who penned the score for the hit musical "Bombay Dreams" and for the stage version of "The Lord of the Rings".

Other celebrities who woke up to the taxman's knock on Wednesday were film stars Vikram, Vivek and Trisha, composer Harris Jayaraj and film financiers Sanjay Wadhwa, Subash Nahar and Pankaj Mehta, the reports said.

The raids, conducted in the city of Chennai -- where the popular South Indian film industry known

as Kollywood is based -- were "basically to unearth unaccounted money", chief income tax commissioner Santosh Dutta told the Press Trust of India (PTI).

"We (the department) acted on the basis of information and the whole process began about two months ago," he said.

Some 300 tax inspectors were involved in the raids, which were carrying into Thursday, PTI said.

"This is a clear signal not only to the film industry but also (other) segments that there should be voluntary tax compliance," said Dutta.

A.R. Rahman has sold almost 200 million albums, with his score for the movie "Lagaan" alone selling more than 3.5 million copies, according to his discography posted on Indian websites. He has composed the soundtracks to more than 50 Bollywood films.

Diseases kill survivors

World aid pledges may be too late to save lives

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Relief officials yesterday warned that world aid pledges for Pakistan's quake may be too late to save lives, while doctors said 22 people had already died of tetanus and one of measles.

Donors at an emergency United Nations conference Wednesday promised an additional 580 million dollars amid a life or death race to deliver help to tens of thousands of injured or homeless people before winter.

British aid agency Oxfam said much of the funding in the pipeline was coming "too little, too late", with only three weeks of good weather left to get tents, blankets and food into the devastated region.

"It appears that almost half of the money pledged is for longer-term reconstruction work which, although

vital, won't save a single one of the thousands of lives currently hanging in the balance," it said in a statement.

The October 8 quake sent a 7.6-magnitude shockwave through South Asia, killing at least 54,000 people in Pakistan and 1,300 in India, as well as leaving more than three million without roofs over their heads.

The UN said it was still unclear which pledges were meant for its half-billion-dollar "flash appeal" for aid over the next half-year, and which were for later rebuilding.

"We must assess the human cost when deciding whether that money is spent now or in six months' time," the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Pakistan, Jan Vandemoortele, said in a statement.

"The winter is coming and we must save babies from diarrhoeal disease, keep mothers and grandmothers warm, and avoid unneces-

sary amputations where people are still waiting for assistance."

The UN's spokeswoman in Pakistan, Amanda Pitt, said the world body was grateful for the pledges but added: "We don't want to see this second wave of deaths that we have kept warning about."

"The money pledged at the donors conference is no way near enough. It is just pie in the sky if we see the scale of devastation," added Moeed Yousaf, relief consultant at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute.

Almost three weeks after the disaster, rescuers travelling in helicopters and on mule trains are still struggling to reach some remote mountain villages to bring vital aid and evacuate casualties.

The World Health Organisation said 22 quake victims had died from tetanus and 111 cases had been reported overall since the earthquake.



PHOTO: AFP

Norwegian Minister for International Development Erik Solheim (R) talks with an injured earthquake survivor at a makeshift camp for people made homeless by the October 8 earthquake, in Ghari Dupatta some 21km from Muzaffarabad yesterday.

Nepali parties call for strike to protest FM radio news ban

AFP, Kathmandu

An alliance of Nepalese political parties called for a general strike in the capital today in a move to try to overturn a government ban on FM radio news broadcasts, a party leader said.

At a joint meeting late Wednesday, the parties called for a strike to protest against the media ordinance and call for its immediate withdrawal, Gopal Man Shrestha, acting president of the Nepali Congress (Democratic), said yesterday.

Nepal Sunday banned FM radio stations in Kathmandu from airing news-oriented programmes, a move that followed a media ordinance by King Gyanendra on October 9, which imposed strict controls on ownership and fines and jail for criticism of the royal

government.

Gyanendra seized power in February from a four-party coalition government in an effort to stem a Maoist rebellion in the country that has claimed more than 12,000 lives since 1996.

The Federation of Nepalese Journalists has asked the Supreme Court to overturn the ban and the International Press Freedom Mission to Nepal also protested the move.

The alliance of seven political parties, which held daily protests in September against the king's takeover that drew thousands, said it would rally to oppose the news ban and renew the demonstrations suspended for Dussain, a widely observed religious festival that ended October 17.