

Tigers to let Tamils vote for Lankan president

US to fund polls monitoring

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tiger rebels will allow minority Tamils to vote in next week's presidential election, the guerrillas' proxies in parliament said yesterday.

The Tamil vote could decide the winner in the closely-contested November 17 vote.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) met earlier in the day with 22 legislators who are guerrilla proxies in the national parliament to discuss their stand on the election.

R. Sampanthan, head of the Tiger proxy Tamil National Alliance, said the LTTE would not interfere with the electoral process and neither encour-

age or discourage people to vote.

"Tamil people have decided that they have nothing to gain from the presidential election," Sampanthan said in a statement after meeting the Tiger leadership in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi.

The LTTE's political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan told AFP in a recent interview that they were uninterested in the election because all majority Sinhalese leaders of Sri Lanka had let them down in the past.

However, Thamilselvan said they would not interfere with the election and invited candidates to campaign in large parts of the rebel-held north and east.

The Tamil minority is concentrated in the island's embattled northern and eastern provinces and their block vote looks crucial in the expected face-off between the two main Sinhalese contenders.

The majority Sinhalese community is seen as split down the middle between the top candidates -- Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Wickremesinghe is campaigning on a promise to push talks with the Tigers and revive a Norwegian-backed peace bid while the premier has pledged a complete overhaul of peace moves.

Some 650,000 Tamils voted almost en bloc to elect 22 Tiger proxies to parliament at the April 2004 elections. More than 13 million Sri Lankans are eligible to vote.

Meanwhile, the United States will fund two private election monitoring outfits in Sri Lanka in a bid to ensure that next week's presidential vote is free and fair, the US embassy said yesterday.

The two organisations have been appointed to "monitor and report on the 2005 presidential election and to help ensure a free and fair poll on November 17," it said in a statement.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Indian foreign minister and currently a minister without portfolio Natwar Singh (C) attends a Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting in New Delhi yesterday. A meeting of the Congress Working Committee was held to condole the death of former Indian president Kocheeril Raman Narayanan.

Pakistan protests to India over abduction

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has protested to India over the abduction of a son of a Pakistani embassy official in the Indian capital, saying he was forced to pose for photographs holding a knife next to three dead bodies.

The man, Roshan Ali, 19, was abducted by unknown people in New Delhi on Tuesday evening and freed early on Wednesday, the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

"During his detention at an unknown location, the hands of Mr Roshan Ali were smeared with the fresh blood of three dead bodies," the ministry said in a statement.

"He was forced to hold a large blood stained knife in his hands and to stand next to the dead bodies. He was then photographed," it said.

Rain in Pak quake zone heightens disease fears

AFP, Muzaffarabad

United Nations officials warned yesterday that widespread rain in Pakistan's quake zone could be disastrous for their struggle to contain an outbreak of acute diarrhoea in squalid tent camps.

There have been at least 200 cases and possibly as many as 750 at one camp for homeless quake survivors in Pakistani Kashmir, amid fears that it could be cholera, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Unicef said.

"Rain would be disastrous," WHO emergency coordinator Rachel Lavy

told AFP at the main camp on the sports ground of the devastated university in the regional capital Muzaffarabad. About 3,000 people are living there.

"Diarrhoeal illness and rain water go hand in hand," she said.

Rain -- the first for six days -- started in quake-hit northern Pakistan and parts of Kashmir early Thursday and was due to continue on Friday, while snow is expected at night, the Pakistani meteorological department said.

Winter weather poses the biggest threat to survivors of the October 8

quake, which killed 74,000 in Pakistan and 1,300 in India. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has warned there could be a massive second wave of deaths.

The disaster left around three million people homeless. The numbers in the camps that have sprung up in almost every town and village are swelling as people come down from the freezing Himalayan mountains.

Aid workers said they were now focusing on preventing life-threatening diarrhoea at the camps in Muzaffarabad, by teaching people how to keep clean, digging new

latrines and setting up an isolation tent for the sick.

UN officials are still investigating whether the cases are cholera, but added that there are other waterborne microbes that could be equally serious.

"We are taking it as seriously as if it were cholera," said Jan Vandemoortele, the UN Emergency Coordinator in Pakistan. "We are still awaiting confirmation but this is in line with what we have been saying, that sanitation is a potential timebomb."

Disease is on the rise across quake-hit areas as cold weather closes in.

16 killed in Afghan truck plunge

AFP, Kabul

Sixteen people were killed and another five hurt early yesterday when a truck they were travelling in swerved off a road and plunged into a river near Afghanistan's capital, police said.

The passengers were packed into the open back of the truck, a cheap and common way of travelling in Afghanistan, an official in the police media office said.

The truck left the road near Sarobi, about 50km from Kabul, and fell down a steep embankment into the Kabul River, he said.

Taliban kill 2 civilians, 7 Afghan policemen

AFP, Kandahar

Taliban militants killed seven policemen and beheaded two civilians, while an Afghan soldier was shot dead after he opened fire on US troops, government and army officials said yesterday.

The policemen were killed in an ambush Wednesday on a three-vehicle convoy on a highway between Uruzgan province and Kandahar, a former Taliban hotbed, Uruzgan governor Jan Mohammad told AFP.

One of the vehicles escaped but two were destroyed.

"Seven police were killed on the spot and two are missing," Mohammad said.

A man identifying himself as a

spokesman for the Taliban, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, claimed responsibility for the ambush in a telephone call to AFP.

"We ambushed the police convoy, killed a big number of them and destroyed their vehicles and seized a radio, two vehicles and weapons," he said.

In another incident in Uruzgan, Taliban insurgents abducted two civilians on Monday and beheaded them, Mohammad said.

The killings led to a security force sweep in which two Taliban rebels were arrested and eight motorcycles seized, the governor said.

The Afghan soldier was killed in central Paktia province Wednesday

after he opened fire on US troops at a base near the provincial capital Gardez, the US-led coalition said.

"He walked into the middle of the base and started firing," spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jerry O'Hara told AFP.

"Coalition soldiers fired back and killed him. Two US soldiers were slightly injured, treated at the scene and returned to duty."

The Afghan National Army said it was investigating.

Also in Paktia Wednesday two men in Afghan army uniforms stopped a truck delivering food and water to a coalition base and set it alight, intelligence officials said. The driver was assaulted and released.

Students protest Nepal king's participation in Saarc summit

AFP, Kathmandu

Students protested in Kathmandu yesterday against King Gyanendra's planned participation in the South Asian regional summit in Dhaka this weekend, witnesses said.

Dozens of students shouted slogans and carried banners denouncing Nepal's king, who sacked the government and seized power in the Himalayan kingdom in February, declaring the step necessary to put down a Maoist rebellion.

Political leaders sidelined by the power grab have challenged Gyanendra's right to represent Nepal at the November 12-13 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese students shout slogans during a rally held yesterday protesting the participation of King Gyanendra in the forthcoming South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit, scheduled to take place in Dhaka on Nov 12 and 13.

Azahari death deals serious blow to terrors: Analysts

AFP, Jakarta

The death of Azahari Husin, a terrorist at the top of police most-wanted lists across Southeast Asia, would deal a serious but not fatal blow to terror networks in the region, analysts said.

Fugitive bomb expert Azahari was believed to be among three terror suspects who blew themselves up Wednesday after police encircled a modest house in the East Java hills resort town of Batu and demanded they surrender.

The bodies of the three men remained in the explosives laden house as bomb squad police prepared to enter Thursday.

Parliamentary commission member Djoko Susilo, who visited the site

Wednesday, said he was "95 percent" certain that Azahari, thought to be a key member of the al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network, was now dead.

"I think this dealt a serious blow to the terror network here and in the region, although not a fatal one," said Susilo, whose commission deals with justice, human rights and security affairs.

In Indonesia alone, JI has reportedly staged more than 50 bombings or attempted bombings since April 1999, according to the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

Susilo said Azahari was believed to have been actively recruiting and training new bombers for three years.

India delays new border opening along LoC

REUTERS, Muzaffarabad

India postponed the opening of a third crossing between Pakistani and Indian Kashmir aimed at helping survivors of last month's massive earthquake.

India said the crossing into Pakistan's hard-hit Neelum valley, which it earlier said would open on Thursday, had been put off until Saturday because the Pakistani army had not finished work on a border bridge.

But Pakistani military spokesman

Major General Shaukat Sultan said his side was ready and frustration was growing with Indian "rigidity" over border opening.

"We are ready at Titwal. Our bridge is ready, we are all set," he said, referring to the crossing from the Indian village of Titwal into the Neelum valley.

"I think the people are frustrated. The purpose was not really to exchange goods, the purpose wasn't symbolic. We don't want to get into this symbolism."

The old rivals last month agreed to open five points along their de facto Kashmir border, known as the Line of Control, on Nov. 7 under a plan to let quake survivors from divided families meet and to facilitate the flow of relief supplies.

But India, citing logistical problems, opened only one point on Monday and another on Wednesday.

The Oct. 8 quake killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan, most of them in Pakistani Kashmir, and about 1,300 people in Indian Kashmir.