

Monitors fear dampened turnout for Lankan polls

Tigers accuse military of harassment

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Election monitors fear a Sri Lankan court judgement requiring rigorous identity checks for voters could put some off voting in the Nov.17 presidential vote, while stories spread about bids to steal the vote.

The Supreme Court ruled on Wednesday that voters did not need an identity card in order to cast their ballots, but officials can question voters deemed suspicious -- a move aimed at avoiding fraud involving people coming to vote from areas held by Tamil Tiger rebels.

"Concerns remain that some aspects of the Supreme Court judgement may have the effect of discouraging people from voting or delaying the process," European Union Chief Observer John Cushman told reporters on Friday in the northern city of Jaffna.

"We will monitor polling day to see if such fears are realised."

With the race between Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and main opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe seen as too close to

call, the votes of the island's Tamil minority could be crucial.

"A lot of people in these areas do not have identity books," said Kingsley Rodrigo, chairman of Peoples' Action for a Free and Fair Election (PAFFREL), which will deploy 20,000 monitors. "This could become harassment of the electorate."

While no polling stations will be set up in Tiger-controlled areas, voters who so wish will be bused across no-man's land to booths a kilometre inside government territory. Monitors say they have found fake documents saying the booths will be in army camps, probably forged with the intent of scaring Tamils away.

Most had been expected to back Wickremesinghe, broker of a 2002 ceasefire that still holds, and who is seen as a less hardline candidate than Rajapakse. But on Thursday the Tigers' political proxies, the Tamil National Alliance, said they believed neither candidate would address their concerns.

While one senior opposition United National Party figure said the Tigers might issue a last-minute instruction to

Tamils to back Wickremesinghe, analysts said it was also possible they might order an outright boycott -- although the group has said voters are free to choose a candidate.

Sri Lanka's Tamil rebels yesterday accused the military of harassment ahead of next week's presidential elections, when the minority community is expected to play the role of king-maker.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the military had increased checkpoints ahead of the election to restrict movement between rebel- and government-held territory.

"The Sri Lanka army is claiming that the reason for heightened security checks falls under the pretext of the upcoming presidential election," the LTTE said in a statement posted on its website Friday.

Sri Lanka's military blames a rising tide of grenade attacks on army posts in the north and east on the Tigers -- who control roughly a seventh of the country -- trying to create a climate of fear to deter voters.

Earlier in the week, one newspaper reported the army had intercepted

radio traffic suggesting a Tiger ground offensive was imminent. An army spokesman denied that story.

Police also said they had found a suicide bomber's jacket of a type used by the Tigers in central Colombo, but did not know why it had been left in a pile of rubbish nor if it had been intended for use.

The independent Daily Mirror quoted Opposition United National Party Deputy General Secretary Tissa Attanayake as saying the party feared Rajapakse's supporters might stage a bombing or attack one of his rallies to create a sympathy vote.

"This is the level of their desperation," he said. "We fully expect a disruption in the coming days."

The Prime Minister's campaign said the claim was completely false, and they were confident of victory.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga lost an eye to a Tiger attack in the 1999 campaign, and analysts say a sympathy vote helped cost Wickremesinghe the election.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian girl lights a candle in front of a portrait of late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Gaza City Thursday. One year after his death, Yasser Arafat remains the ultimate symbol of the Palestinian struggle for independence.



PHOTO: AFP

Bhutanese refugee women participate in a sit-in protest outside a UN building in Kathmandu yesterday in an attempt to draw attention of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit members to the plight of the over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees. They have been living in the seven UNHCR-run refugee camps in Nepal.

Deep despair in quake zone

Survivors in wintry dilemma where to stay

DAUD KHAN, from Balakot, Pakistan

Deep uncertainties and hints of resentment now characterise this destroyed and ailing valley, one month after the catastrophic earthquake that struck north western Pakistan, killing as many as 80,000 people and leaving some 3 million homeless.

Recent travels through Balakot, one of the worst hit areas just off the epicentre of the quake, revealed a shattered landscape of devastation and doubt. The most pressing question for many survivors here remains where to spend the winter.

Thousands of survivors have come down from the hills to seek medical treatment and food in Balakot, a low-lying area with relatively moderate temperatures. Many say they will stay here, finding shelter in tent villages set up by the government and international NGOs. Government officials appreciate the survivors for the encouraging move.

But an equal number of survivors, driven by emotional attachments to their ancestral lands, intend to return to their remote mountain homes, to start life again even as the chilling winter approaches.

The split was evident at the Ayub

Medical Centre, a drafty, tomb like hospital in neighbouring Abbottabad, where many survivors have been sent.

Meskeen, a 63-year-old farmer, lay in a corner of a dark ward, his body wrapped in blankets, his arm bundled in bandages. He lost thirty family members to the quake, as well as 10 goats, his only asset. He also lost his house, and is now planning to live in a tented village. "My remaining family is still living under the open sky," he says. "We have no option. We're only looking for a tent."

Others, however, say they must return to their native lands, no matter how harsh the winter may be.

Khanani Ziman, 35, has been living for 15 days in a tent camp outside the hospital, waiting for his wife to recover from her leg injury. He lost 250 family members, including his four children. "Whenever my wife recovers, we will go back," he says, adding that he's not worried at all about the winter. "We will build a new house, and it will be enough for winter."

Women are subject to considerable uncertainties in the aftermath of the quake, as illustrated by the case of Nusrut, 18, who lost her leg. Her mother says they've been in the camp for 26 days, and have nowhere else to go. Her husband has another wife and

has gone off to be with her, leaving them alone. "We have to stay here," Nusrut's mother says. "Without government support, we can't go back."

All across Balakot, children are recognised as the worst affected, their futures most in doubt. Of the more than 15,000 patients treated so far at the Ayub Medical Complex, half of them have been children, according to Shafiqur Rahman, the hospital's Public Relations Officer. "For the first three days, we received only children. The number was so high that we couldn't collect data."

Hospital officials report that several children in the paediatric ward have become infected with tetanus. One child died just a few days ago from a tetanus infection, Rahman says, adding that essential medicines are in short supply. Without more aid, the children's future is uncertain.

For now, the only certain thing is that Balakot is utterly destroyed, its function as a once prosperous tourist town now a figment of history. Some 8,000 schools have been destroyed as well as an untold number of homes. Given the extent of the damage, some local government officials are pressing the federal authorities to relocate the town.

Palestinians mark the day of Arafat's death

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinians were commemorating the first anniversary of the death of Yasser Arafat, their iconic leader who even in death embodies their struggle for independence and statehood.

Twelve months to the day since Arafat died in a Paris hospital aged 75, thousands of Palestinians were expected to attend a rally in the West Bank to remember the man who guided Palestinian aspirations for four decades.

Conspiracy theories that he was poisoned abound despite doctors finding no trace of toxins, piling yet more mystery on the life and legacy of a man who shared the 1994 Nobel peace prize with Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Likened to Adolf Hitler by Israeli leaders, accused of fomenting violence and branded an obstacle to peace by Israel and Washington, Arafat's passing has done little to reignite the stagnant Middle East peace process.

His grave in the courtyard of the Muqataa, the Palestinian Authority headquarters in Ramallah, will provide the focus for official commemorations on Friday.

Indian airports beef up security after terror alert

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Security was tightened at airports across India on Thursday after intelligence reports spoke of a possible suicide attack or plane-hijack bid by terrorists.

India's Union home ministry issued a "general alert" to airports across the country, mentioning Mumbai airport in particular, and asked security personnel to maintain a strict vigil not only in airport enclosures but also along roads leading to them.

They were also asked to keep an eye on the vehicles plying on these roads. The "non-specific" alert was reportedly issued late Thursday night.

Close on the heels of the alert, the Quick Reaction Teams of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) guarding the airports were put on a state of readiness and security height-

ened. Additional barricades were put up on roads leading to several airport complexes.

At the Indira Gandhi Airport in the Capital, CISF personnel set up extra barricades while making sure that passenger movement was not disrupted.

In Srinagar and Jammu, CRPF personnel intensified patrolling in the airport enclosures and a multi-tier security ring was thrown around the premises to thwart any attack.

Security was also beefed up at Hyderabad and Chennai airports, where security personnel were seen frisking every one entering the premises, including airport staff. Even the international airport near Kochi raised its security level.

Passengers were frisked and their baggage thoroughly checked and vehicles approaching the airport were

flagged down and inspected.

In a related development, the representatives of the Airports Authority of India, all airlines, the CISF and other agencies met at the NSC Bose airport Thursday in response to the nationwide alert.

CISF Commandant Sanjay Prakash said that all the airlines had been asked to ensure that their staff frisked each person entering the aircraft for any purpose, including cleaning, sweeping or bringing in catering material.

Also, that every item, including foodstuff, that went on board should be checked so that no weapon found its way to the plane.

He said: "The CISF would assist in frisking or any other surveillance work if need be." He said the number of people on the security detail had been increased.

AL-QAEDA SAYS

4 Iraqis carried out Amman attacks

AFP, Dubai

Four Iraqis, including a husband and wife, carried out the triple suicide bombings against luxury hotels in the Jordanian capital, al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq said in an Internet statement yesterday.

"The group charged with planning, preparing and implementing (the attacks) was made up of three men: commanders Abu Khabib, Abu Muaz and Abu Omaira. Their fourth was the venerable sister Om Omaira," said the statement.

"All the members of the group were Iraqis," said the statement, whose authenticity could not be verified, adding: "Om Omaira chose to follow her husband, Abu Omaira, on the path of a martyr."

At least 57 people died and hundreds were wounded in bomb blasts at three luxury hotels in the Jordanian capital on Wednesday.

MOST AMERICANS SAY

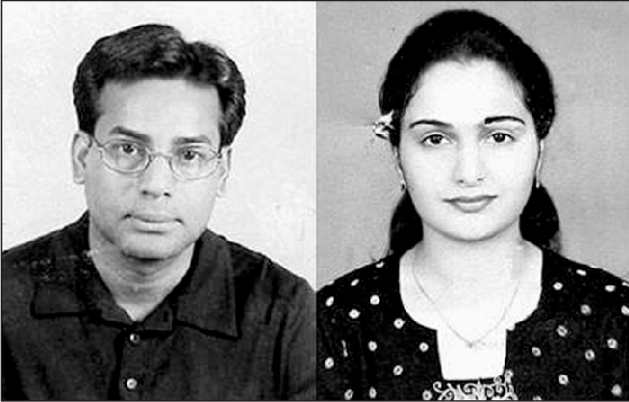
Bush not honest

AP, Washington

Most Americans say they aren't impressed by the ethics and honesty of the Bush administration, already under scrutiny for its justifications for an unpopular war in Iraq and its role in the leak of a covert CIA officer's identity.

Almost six in 10 57 percent said they do not think the Bush administration has high ethical standards and the same portion says President Bush is not honest, an AP-Ipsos poll found. Just over four in 10 say the administration has high ethical standards and that Bush is honest. Whites, Southerners and evangelicals were most likely to believe Bush is honest.

Bush, who promised in the 2000 campaign to uphold "honour and integrity" in the White House, last week ordered White House workers, from presidential advisers to low-ranking aides, to attend ethics classes.



Portugal extradites Mumbai don

Salem placed on police remand

PTI, New Delhi

Underworld don Abu Salem, who has been extradited from Portugal, was yesterday remanded to police custody till November 23 by the TADA court.

Salem was produced amidst tight security before the designated TADA court hearing the 1993 Mumbai serial bomb blast case, in which he is one of the prime accused.

He was produced before the designated judge of TADA (P) court PD Kode.

Salem, who was extradited early on Friday along with his girlfriend Monica Bedi for travelling on forged documents, was among the absconding accused of the 1993 Mumbai bomb blast case.

However, according to CBI, Salem has been extradited to India in connection with eight cases which included the Mumbai serial blasts in 1993, two cases of passport forgery from Lucknow, three cases of extortion from Delhi and another murder case from the metropolitan.

Salem, who was extradited early on Friday, was among the

absconding accused of the 1993 Mumbai bomb blast case that was probed by CBI, and therefore the Portugal authorities have handed him over to CBI.

However, apart from the Mumbai bomb blast case, Salem is the prime accused in the other 25 cases registered in Mumbai, crime branch sources said.

"The CBI already has details of the cases in which Salem is wanted in Mumbai and we will be pursuing to get his custody as soon as possible", a senior Mumbai crime branch officer said.

The officer said that senior officials of Mumbai police have got in touch with CBI higher-ups and it will soon be decided whether to interrogate Salem jointly or independently.

The gangster is alleged to have arranged delivery of firearms to Dawood Ibrahim henchmen in Mumbai prior to the 1993 bomb blasts.

According to CBI, Salem's men allegedly delivered an AK-56 automatic rifle to Bollywood star Sanjay Dutt at his Bandra residence, a charge which the actor has denied.