

Tamil 'kingmakers' shun Lankan election

Only 15 cast votes in 64 centres

AFP, Omanthai

Polling booths in this de facto border post were built for thousands of minority Tamils, seen as kingmakers in Sri Lanka's presidential elections Thursday, but only 15 turned up to vote.

Election official P. Paskaran said 64 polling booths in this northern frontier area of Sri Lanka, racked by a deadly ethnic conflict, saw only 15 voters cast ballots although 84,361 people in the region were eligible to vote in the tight presidential race.

"Not a single ballot has been cast in most of the booths," Paskaran told AFP inside a tin-roofed polling centre. Police chatted with election officials as

they whiled away the nine-hour voting period that ended late afternoon.

Violence marred voting in the Tamil-dominated northeast with two suspected rebels killed and 17 people wounded in grenade attacks and a bomb explosion, police said.

Reports from rebel-held areas said guerrillas burnt tyres on roads to discourage voting in at least two areas of the island's eastern province.

Tamil Tiger rebel leaders, who have campaigned for a separate state, dismissed the election, whose results are due Friday, as meaningless for the minority community but had stopped short of issuing a call for a boycott.

Both front-runners -- Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and

opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe -- are members of the majority Sinhalese community which had appeared split between the two candidates.

Rajapakse has vowed a hardline approach to the Tigers if elected. Wickremesinghe wants to revive peace talks and seal a final deal.

Wickremesinghe's hopes had been buoyed by media reports that the Tamils, who usually vote as one bloc, were leaning toward him. A failure by Tamil voters to turn out at the polling booths would favour the prime minister, analysts say.

Further north at Muhamalai, in the Jaffna peninsula, only one man crossed rebel lines and entered the

government-held area to vote, a local official contacted by telephone said.

"We catered for 91,000 Tamil voters, but only one, yes only one, turned up to vote," the official said.

In Jaffna peninsula where security forces are in control, residents stayed indoors while shops and offices shut.

Two men, believed to be members of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were killed and seven were injured when a bomb ripped through a house in Pandirippu in the northeastern Batticaloa district, police said. Separately, grenades were lobbed at two booths in the same district, injuring 10 people.



PHOTO: AFP

Voters stand in a queue before casting their ballot papers at a polling booth set up at the de facto border post of Omanthai yesterday during the country's presidential election. Polling booths in this de facto border post were built for minority Tamils, seen as potential kingmakers in Sri Lanka's presidential elections, but only 15 turned up to vote.

Key rebel group condemns wave of bombings in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's most powerful Muslim rebel group yesterday condemned a wave of bombings that killed ten civilians and injured 120 others this week in the revolt-hit region.

On Wednesday a suicide bomber travelling in a car blew himself up at a busy intersection in the summer capital of Srinagar killing four civilians and injuring 60 others, eleven of them women.

A little-known rebel group, Al Arifeen, claimed responsibility for the explosion in a telephone call to the Kashmir News Service. Police said it was a front for the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba.

A day earlier suspected rebels attacked the rally of a former tourism minister in northern Baramulla district, killing six and injuring 60 others. No group claimed responsibility for that attack.

US calls on Nepal king to restore democracy

AFP, New Delhi

The US ambassador to Nepal yesterday called on King Gyanendra to restore democracy after talks with India's foreign secretary on a growing Maoist insurgency in the country.

The ambassador, James F. Moriarty, met with Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran in New Delhi, the US embassy in the Indian capital said in a statement.

The meeting came four days after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met the king in the Bangladesh capital of Dhaka on the sidelines of a South Asian summit and urged him to restore press freedoms and democracy.

"We discussed the continued need for the king to reach out to the political parties to find an effective way to work toward restoring democracy and to address the threat of the Maoist insurgency," Moriarty said of his talks with Saran.

Gyanendra sacked a four-party coalition government and seized power in February to stem a Maoist rebellion that has claimed more than 12,000 lives since 1996.

India, Britain and the United States suspended arms sales to Kathmandu after the power grab but New Delhi later eased some curbs.

Moriarty said the visit to New Delhi was part of regular discussions

with Indian officials and told reporters after the meeting with Saran that the country was at a "crossroads".

"The king has some tough choices to make. Nepal is reaching a crossroads," the Press Trust of India quoted him as saying. "There is need now for action. My country hopes to see some action in coming days and weeks."

In Dhaka on Sunday, Singh said the king had assured him that "a carefully worked out roadmap" would be drawn up.

In October, the king pledged to hold parliamentary elections by April 2007. Municipal elections have been scheduled for next February.

Annan urges world to help quake victims

REUTERS, AFP, Islamabad/Rawalpindi

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan beseeched the world yesterday to wake up to the scale of the earthquake disaster in Pakistan and give generously to help the country rebuild after last month's devastating tremor.

"We received some resources, but need much, much more to be able to help the people," Annan said on arrival in Pakistan to attend an international donors' conference on Saturday.

The earthquake killed more than 73,000 people in northern Pakistan, and more than 1,300 in Indian Kashmir. The devastation affected 3.3 million people and left hundreds of thousands homeless, with winter fast approaching in the Himalayan region.

While praising the world's response to the rescue and relief phase over the past few weeks, Pakistani President

Pervez Musharraf expressed disappointment on Wednesday over the small amount pledged so far toward reconstruction and rehabilitation.

Multilateral agencies estimate it will cost \$5.2 billion to rebuild the quake-ravaged parts of Pakistani Kashmir and North West Frontier Province, but Pakistan has only received pledges of just over \$300 million to help the region's long-term recovery.

Annan said he wanted the world's better-off governments, corporates and people to help Pakistan.

"I would expect the world, those with capacity, to give generously and give willingly, and I'm not just speaking to the governments but also to the private sector and individuals who can contribute," he said.

India unlikely to agree to Kyoto emission caps

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is unlikely to agree to any emission caps in the next phase of the Kyoto Protocol because of its expanding energy-hungry economy, but analysts say developed nations will continue to put pressure on the nation.

Asia's third-largest economy and home to about a sixth of humanity has some of the most polluted cities in the world, many of them continually shrouded in eye-stinging smog of noxious fumes from cars and industry.

Its growing energy needs are only expected to increase along with pollution levels in the next few decades, despite growing fears that global warming will spare no one.

The Kyoto climate change pact requires developed nations to cut their emissions of heat-trapping gases by 5.2 percent from 1990 levels by 2008-2012. The United States and Australia refused to ratify the pact and developing nations, such as China and India are exempt from emissions caps all four countries say threaten economic growth.

China's appetite for oil and coal is even greater than India's. Both are

likely to come under pressure to do more to curb emissions growth when they join officials from 150 countries in Montreal for a UN climate change summit.

The Montreal meeting from November 28 will help shape the Kyoto Protocol after its first phase ends in 2012, but disagreement is rife and hopes of progress slim.

"There is no way that anybody can expect countries like India to cap their emissions for the next 20-25 years," said S.K. Joshi, a senior official in the environment ministry.

"We welcome the talks among the parties for the second commitment period strictly in accordance with the requirements of the Kyoto Protocol. The issue of entitlements has to be addressed and the countries that have agreed to take on commitments under the protocol have to show demonstrable progress."

Many scientists blame the rapid increase in greenhouse gas emissions, especially carbon dioxide, over the past century for causing global warming, the worst effects of which could include rising seas, greater extremes of drought and flood and more intense storms.

Kashmiris reunite in grief across border

REUTERS, AFP, Chakothi/Srinagar

Kashmiris reunited in grief across the ceasefire line dividing their quake-stricken homeland yesterday, after arch rivals Pakistan and India relaxed border restrictions as a humanitarian gesture.

Around two dozen travellers from Indian Kashmir who were trapped on the Pakistani side of the divided mountain state by last month's earthquake made an emotional return home yesterday.

They crossed the heavily-militarised Line of Control through one of the crossings that has been opened to aid relief efforts for thousands of villagers after the devastating quake.

The group had travelled to the Pakistani zone on a trans-border bus launched this year as part of a slow-moving peace process between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan and were stranded there by the quake.

Beneath Himalayan mountains, a

temporary wooden footbridge has been built over a stream that divides the disputed region, enabling Kashmiris to check on surviving relatives on the other side after the devastating Oct. 8 tremor.

"I came. I was very happy. I saw all the family but after the earthquake they are living in a very bad situation. It is a very sad moment for me," said 72-year-old Attaullah Khawaja, his wrinkled face framed by a white beard and flat woollen cap.