

Rajapakse win irks Tamil Tigers

LTTE blasts new president's inaugural speech

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil rebels reacted angrily yesterday to the election of hardline President Mahinda Rajapakse and his inaugural speech, saying they showed the country's Sinhalese majority had no understanding of Tamil aspirations for a homeland.

Rajapakse, after assuming office Saturday, reiterated his opposition to the Tamil Tigers' demand for an independent state on the Indian Ocean island. But he also said he did not want to return to war.

The rebels have demanded wide autonomy in the country's northeast, where most of the 3.2 million ethnic

Tamils live, saying they can only prosper away from the domination of the Sinhalese majority.

"The pillars of the Tamil demand, namely, Tamil homeland, Tamil nation, and Tamil self-determination will never be accepted by them," the rebels said Sunday on their official Web site, referring to Rajapakse's hard-hitting speech and his supporters.

"There is no space to talk of a federal solution," they added.

Rajapakse narrowly defeated opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, who favored granting the rebels more autonomy. An election boycott by the rebels prevented thousands of ethnic Tamils

from casting ballots.

Rajapakse sought the support of hardline Sinhalese Buddhist and Marxist groups by promising to review the Norwegian-brokered 2002 ceasefire that has grown increasingly fragile in recent months. The truce brought an end to fighting after nearly two decades of civil war.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam rebels have fought since 1983 for a Tamil homeland in the northeast, where they already run a de facto state. The war has claimed some 65,000 lives. The government and the rebels held six rounds of inconclusive peace talks before they were halted in April 2003 over the rebels' sweeping demands for autonomy.

Killer quake bridges Kashmir divide

REUTERS, Teetwal

Last month's earthquake killed tens of thousands in Kashmir but, for divided families in the disputed region, it also opened up new routes to reunite with long-lost relatives across the frontier.

Two dozen men and women from Indian Kashmir created history on Saturday when they became the first in nearly 60 years to be allowed to cross over a new bridge on foot to the Pakistani side to learn the fate of relatives.

"Finally Kashmiris are walking across, but unfortunately at a very high cost," said Shah, a Teetwal resident who plans to travel to Pakistani Kashmir next week to meet relatives.

The Oct. 8 quake killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistani Kashmir and elsewhere across Pakistan. About 1,300 people were killed in Indian Kashmir.

India and Pakistan, who have been at loggerheads over Kashmir for more than half a century and have fought two wars over it, agreed two weeks ago to allow cross-border movement of aid and meetings of divided families as a humanitarian gesture.

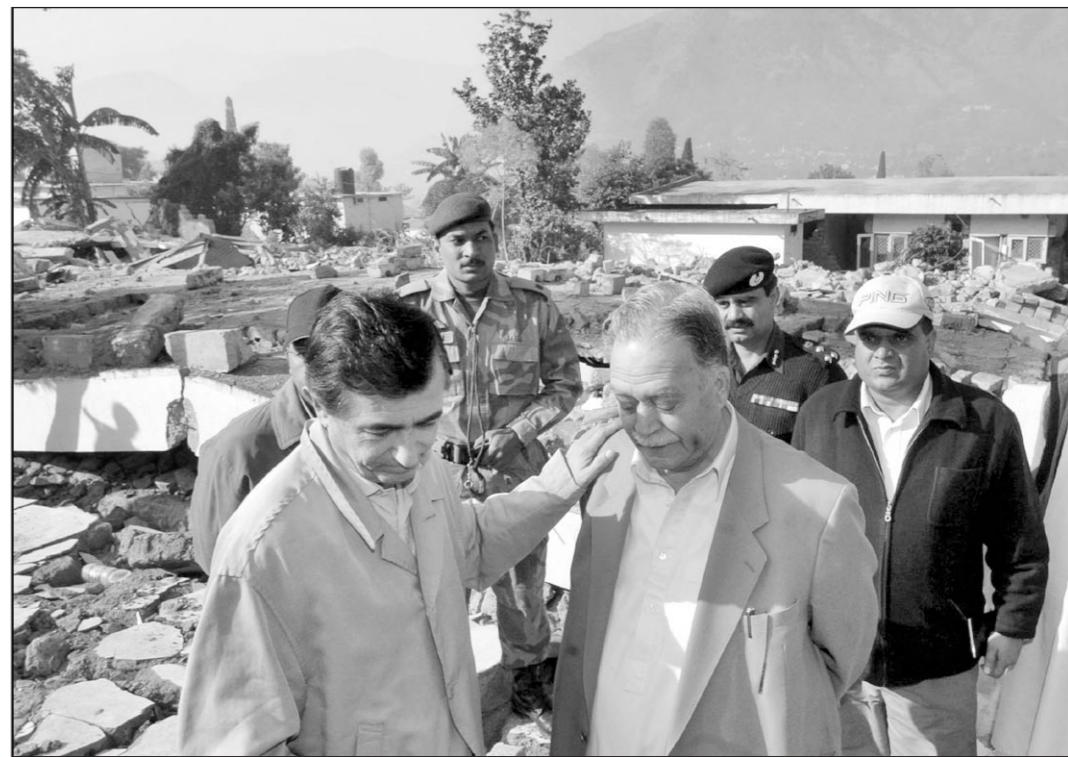


PHOTO: AFP
French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Philippe Douste-Blazy (L) talks with Pakistani administered Kashmir Prime Minister Sardar Sikander Hayat during a visit to Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani-administered Kashmir yesterday.

Rice voices concern over China's military might

REUTERS, AFP, Beijing

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice voiced concern yesterday over China's military build-up, saying that the United States hoped to keep a balance in the region.

Meanwhile, Chinese President Hu Jintao sought to reassure visiting President George W. Bush that China's rise would be peaceful.

"There's a question of intent," Rice told reporters, referring to the mod-

ernization of the 2.5-million-strong People's Liberation Army -- the world's biggest fighting force.

China's assertion that its intention was peaceful was "a very good thing," Rice said.

"But obviously both in terms of our own military presence and forces, we expect that we will be able to keep a balance in this region," she said without elaborating.

Beijing claims sovereignty over Taiwan and has vowed to attack the

self-ruled democratic island of 23 million if it formally declares independence.

Washington switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, but remains the island's main arms supplier and trading partner.

When he first came to office Bush vowed to do whatever it took to help Taiwan defend itself.

Hu said he had briefed Bush about China's unwavering commitment to a role of peaceful development.

RESTORATION OF DEMOCRACY

Koirala asks Maoists to join move

AP, Kathmandu

Nepal's veteran former prime minister G.P. Koirala said Saturday he has appealed to Maoist rebels to ally with mainstream parties to restore democracy in the insurgency-racked nation.

King Gyanendra sacked the coalition government in February and seized power in a move he said was aimed at stemming the Maoist revolt.

"I asked them to come to the

political mainstream and I told them your future is only in mainstream politics," Koirala told reporters at the airport on his return to Kathmandu from a nine-day private visit to New Delhi.

Koirala, who leads the Nepali Congress, Nepal's largest democratic party, said he spoke to the Maoists by telephone. He did not say who he talked to or when the conversation took place.

Taliban abducted Indian engineer

3 killed in attack on ex-warlord's vehicle

REUTERS, AFP, Kandahar/ Khost

Taliban insurgents have kidnapped an Indian road engineer in southern Afghanistan, a spokesman for the militant group said yesterday.

The Indian man, whose identity was not immediately available, was abducted from his car along with two guards and a driver from the Khash Rod district of Nimroz province late on Saturday, he said.

"We have him," Qari Mohammad Yousof told Reuters by satellite phone from an undisclosed location. He gave no other details.

Afghan Interior Ministry spokesman Yousof Stanzezai confirmed the abduction, but did not know who the captors

were.

The Taliban have kidnapped several Turkish and Indian engineers involved in roadworks in southern Afghanistan in the past years. One of the Turkish engineers was killed and the rest were freed, apparently after ransoms were paid.

Earlier three people were killed in volatile southern Afghanistan Saturday when a bomb blew up a car belonging to a former warlord who had laid down his arms, a provincial official said.

Militants loyal to the hardline Taliban regime that was toppled in a US-led operation in late 2001 claimed responsibility for the roadside blast in southern Helmand province.

Laden evades capture by Pak troops

PTI, London

al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the world's most wanted terrorist, has evaded capture by Pakistani troops by just 30 minutes as they zeroed in on him in a remote village close to the Afghan border, a media report claimed here yesterday.

Data from a mobile phone used by one of bin Laden's closest aides helped the Pakistani troops to pinpoint his hideout but by the time they could mount a raid, the al-Qaeda chief had slipped away, 'News of the World' tabloid reported.

"It was in the spring. We acted on intelligence reports and were close. Such fleeting opportunities come and either you succeed in a moment or you fail and miss the opportunity for a long time," it quoted Musharraf as saying in Islamabad.

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PHOTO: AFP
US President George W Bush (L) and Chinese President Hu Jintao give a joint press conference after their bilateral meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Bush is on a three-day visit to China after the Apec conference in South Korea.