

## Tigers attack Lankan army: 11 killed

### Rajapakse in India to talk peace process

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo/ New Delhi

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels staged two bomb attacks in Sri Lanka's embattled regions yesterday, killing 10 soldiers and a constable and heightening fears for a faltering truce in the island's ethnic war, military officials said.

The soldiers were ambushed with a Claymore mine at Puloly in the Jaffna peninsula, where 18 soldiers were killed in two similar attacks earlier this month, an official said by telephone.

"The soldiers were in a convoy transporting lunch for their colleagues when they were hit," the official said, adding that eight soldiers escaped with injuries.

In the eastern district of Batticaloa, suspected rebels threw an explosive device at a police patrol, killing a constable and wounding two, a military official in the region said. "It was a claymore attack," said military spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe, referring to the claymore fragmentation mines used in the assault near the northern town of Point Pedro.

"Definitely the LTTE is behind

this attack," he said, using the initials of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. "No-one else is capable of doing this kind of claymore mine attack in Jaffna except the LTTE."

A military official said four other soldiers were admitted to hospital after the attack, some in critical condition.

On Friday 13 sailors were killed in an ambush by suspected Tiger rebels using claymore mines and rocket-propelled grenades in the island's northwest.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's

President Mahinda Rajapakse arrived in India yesterday for a four-day visit, which he has said will aim to secure a greater role for India in the island's fragile peace process.

"They are our closest neighbour and it is very important for me to have them involved in the process," Rajapakse told reporters in Colombo ahead of the visit.

The trip is the first foreign visit by Rajapakse since he took office after winning the November 17 presidential election.

## Nepal vows to hold polls 'at any cost'

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

Local elections called by the king in Nepal will go ahead next February despite threats by Maoist rebels and opposition by political parties, the government said yesterday.

"The elections will be held at any cost," Home Minister Kamal Thapa told a press conference. "All the security arrangements are complete."

Rebel Maoists have said they would "take action" against candidates standing in the election, and have called for a week-long general strike intended to shut down the whole of Nepal, timed to coincide with polling day on February 8.

"Those who try to foil the elections will be dealt with according to the law," the minister said, without clarifying what punishments would be imposed.

A seven-party opposition alliance, kicked out of power when King

Gyanendra took total control in February, have said that the elections are a sham, and that they will encourage people to abstain from voting.

"The so-called municipal polls will not solve the present political problems in the country," Subash Nemwang, a leader of the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist and Leninist) told AFP by telephone after the minister's announcement.

"They (the royal government) are trying to hold elections to legitimise

their activities, so we are boycotting the polls."

The local elections are part of the king's 'roadmap to democracy' plan, which proposes local elections next February and then general elections in 2007.

Foreign powers have been urging the king to restore democracy to the troubled nation as soon as possible, but there has been no indication that the king is bowing to international pressure.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse (C) shakes hands with Indian Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed (R) as his wife Shirani Rajapakse (L) looks on after his arrival in New Delhi yesterday. Rajapakse arrived in India for a four-day visit during which he will aim to secure a greater role for India in the island's fragile peace process.

## Aceh rebels disband armed wing

AP, Banda Aceh

Indonesia's Aceh rebels formally disbanded their armed wing yesterday in a major step toward ending one of Asia's longest separatist conflicts.

Peace efforts gained momentum after Aceh province was devastated by the massive earthquake and tsunami on Dec. 26, 2004, killing more than 131,000 people in the province and leaving half a million others homeless.

The announcement came shortly after rebel representatives met with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh province.

"The Aceh national army, or the armed wing of the Free Aceh Movement, has demobilized and disbanded," Sofyan Daud, a former rebel commander, told reporters. "The Aceh national army is now part of civil society, and will work to make the peace deal a success."

## Iraq protesters call for unity govt

### Two US pilots die in helicopter crash

AP, AFP, Baghdad

More than 10,000 people marched through Baghdad yesterday in support of a national unity government of Sunnis and Shias, but insurgent attacks killed six Iraqi policemen and two civilians in a fresh surge of violence.

The US military yesterday said two US pilots died in a helicopter accident in western Baghdad. The accident was under investigation; the military said no hostile fire was involved.

"There was no hostile fire involved," it said in a statement, without giving details.

Dozens of US-led forces have been killed in helicopter crashes since the invasion of March 2003, some in accidents and some after being fired on by insurgents with shoulder-fired missiles or small arms.

In the Shia holy city of Karbala, municipal workers doing maintenance work uncovered remains that

police believed were part of a mass grave thought to date back to 1991, when Saddam Hussein's regime put down a Shia uprising in the south.

On Tuesday, the remains discovered on Monday were sent for testing in an effort to identify the bodies. Karbala police spokesman Rahman Mashawry said. He did not say how many bodies were found and the police claim could not be independently verified.

Human rights organizations estimate that more than 300,000 people, mainly Kurds and Shia Muslims, were killed and buried in mass graves during Saddam Hussein's 23-year rule, which ended when U.S.-led forces toppled his regime in 2003.

A lull in violence followed the Dec. 15 parliamentary elections. But that ended on Sunday, when 18 people were killed in attacks. On Monday, shootings and bombings killed at least two dozen people, including a US soldier.

## Indo-Pak peace talks to resume in Jan

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and Pakistan will hold a third round of peace talks here in January putting focus on security, confidence building measures between the two nuclear rival neighbours and the Kashmir issue.

The two-day talks starting from January 17 would be led by Foreign Secretaries Shym Saran of India and Riaz Mohammad Khan of Pakistan and review the progress made so far at lower-level meetings as well as chart a course for further negotiations, External Affairs Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told reporters here on Monday evening.

"The coming talks will focus on two subjects: peace and security, including confidence-building measures, and on Jammu and Kashmir," he said.

Saran and Khan had last met in Islamabad in September this year when the second round of peace talks held. The second round had concluded on October 4 when

India's then external affairs minister Natwar Singh held talks with his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri in Islamabad. The two sides had decided to hold the third round of negotiations in New Delhi in January, 2006.

Ahead of the foreign secretary-level talks, railway officials of India and Pakistan will hold three-day talks from January 4 to reopen a second rail link between the two countries. The train service would link Munabao, a sleepy town in the Indian state of Rajasthan, and Khokrapar, a border town in Pakistan's Sindh province, a route that had been snapped during the 1965 war between the two countries.

The first rail link between India and Pakistan had resumed last year connecting Amritsar and Lahore.

Ties between India and Pakistan, for long bedevilled by Kashmir issue, have improved since January 2004.

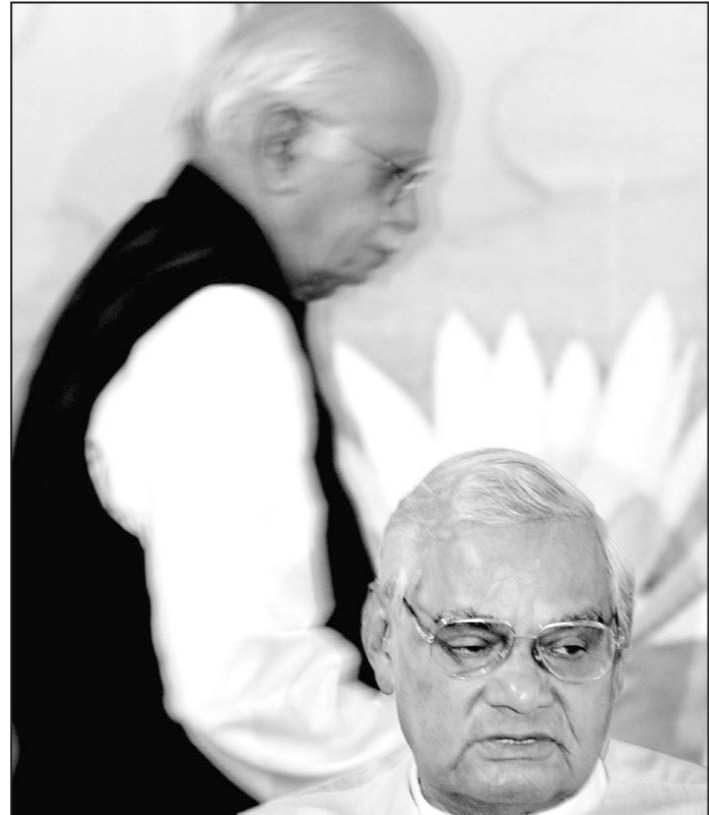


PHOTO: AFP

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president L.K. Advani (L) walks past former Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at the inaugural ceremony of the party's national convention in Mumbai Monday. The five day-long convention is being organised to mark the 25 years of formation of the right wing BJP.