

President seeks unity, Tigers call for strike

Donors skip talks with LTTE after protests

AFP, Colombo

President Mahinda Rajapakse Friday urged unity and peace in Sri Lanka, even as a Tamil Tiger front organisation called for a one-day strike to coincide with today's independence day.

Rajapakse in a freedom day message urged all Sri Lankans to work towards ending ethnic bloodshed in a country where over 60,000 people have been killed in a Tamil separatist conflict since 1972.

"Sri Lankans are today engaged with utmost dedication to bring about amity, solidarity and peace among all of us," Rajapakse said. "When we unite there is freedom."

The government is staging its main freedom day celebration in Colombo with a military parade that involves tanks, helicopters and naval vessels.

But the "Tamil resurgence movement" urged a closure of shops and a halt to all transport in the restive northeastern district of Trincomalee on Saturday, when Sri Lanka marks the 58th anniversary of independence from Britain.

"They have distributed leaflets asking people to stay away from the streets tomorrow," a resident in Trincomalee, 260 kilometres (160 miles) northeast of the capital, told AFP.

Police said the organisation was of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which, prior

to a truce in 2002, had forced boycotts of the national day and carried out attacks.

Rajapakse's government has agreed to hold talks with Tamil Tiger rebels this month in Geneva on saving their tenuous ceasefire that came under pressure with an upsurge of violence that left at least 153 people dead since December.

However, since peace broker Norway clinched a talks deal between the two sides, the level of violence has dropped sharply.

Earlier Sri Lanka's key international leaders yesterday postponed a meeting scheduled with Tamil Tiger guerrillas after protests from pro-government Buddhist monks and Marxists, officials said.

A party of Buddhist monks and the main Marxist party -- key backers of the Colombo government -- had protested to officials of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund about the planned meeting with the rebels. The three international lenders said their meeting with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been rescheduled until after the guerrillas and the government hold talks in Geneva later this month to save their truce.

The monks and the Marxists argued the meeting would have given official recognition to the Tigers and legitimised their alleged attacks against security forces.

Manmohan talks tough against airport chaos

AFP, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday vowed to press ahead with plans to privatise two Indian airports despite a strike that has caused chaos at airports for three consecutive days, a Marxist leader said.

Singh's tough message was delivered in talks Friday with his leftwing allies, who oppose the privatisation of the airports in New Delhi and Mumbai and who support the strike by the 22,000-member Airports Authority of India (AAI) workers' union.

"The government said it would not reverse the privatisation process but that it can discuss other issues like the absorption of all airport employees," said Marxist leader Jyoti Basu, briefing reporters after the meeting.

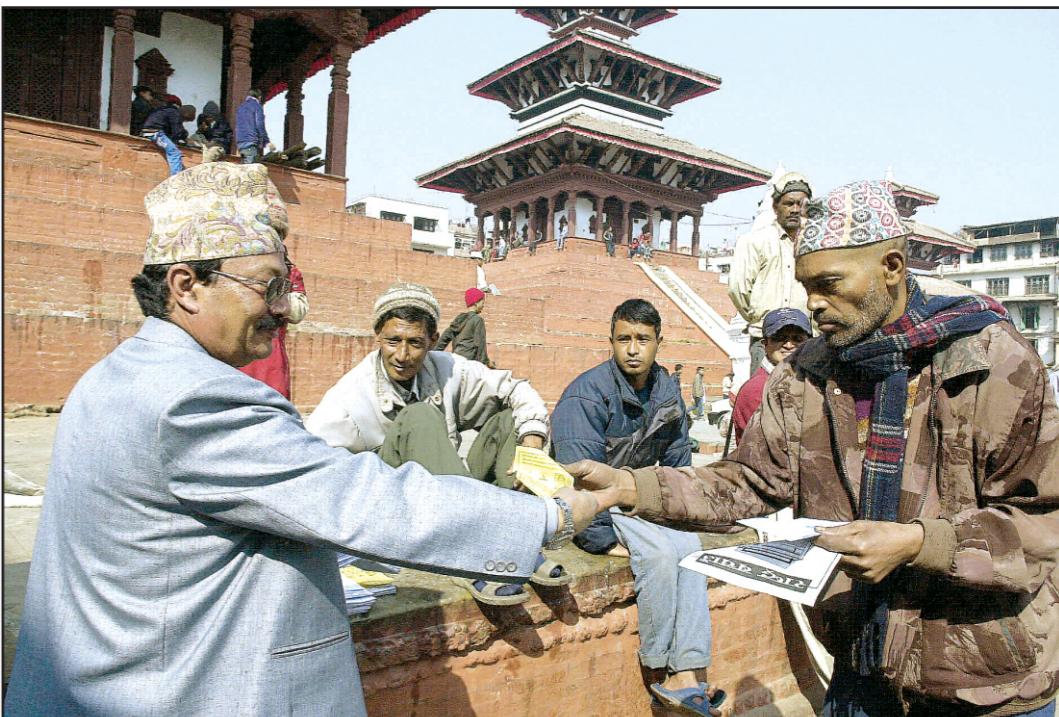


PHOTO: AFP
Nepalese mayoral election candidate Hiranya Lal Shrestha (L) distributes pamphlets to the pedestrians during election campaigning in Kathmandu yesterday. Suspected Maoist rebels have killed a politician who was a candidate for next week's municipal polls and bombed two other candidates' homes.

Hindus clash with police at disputed religious site in India

AFP, Bhopal

Police fired tear gas and used batons yesterday to prevent Hindus from entering a religious site in central India sacred to both Hindus and Muslims, an official said.

Police later clamped a curfew on most parts of Dhar town, Madhya Pradesh state, to avert more violence.

"A curfew has been imposed in Dhar where police had to use batons and lob tear gas to disperse devotees seeking to enter the disputed premises beyond the permissible time," said the senior police official, asking not to be named.

He said there were no injuries.

The trouble erupted when Hindus wanted to offer prayers at the shrine while Muslims were worshipping there on their holy day.

Normally, according to a plan devised by authorities, Hindus pray on Tuesday at the 11th-century site while the Muslims worship there Fridays.



PHOTO: AFP
A woman and a child light candles in front of Leipzig's Nikolaikirche church on Thursday during a vigil for two Germans taken hostage in Iraq. The engineers, who work for a German gas equipment installation company at Beiji in Iraq, were captured on January 24 by armed men in military uniform.

'Blair, Bush were ready for war from Jan 2003'

AFP, London

US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair were ready to go to war against Iraq with or without a second UN resolution, Britain's Channel 4 News television claimed Thursday.

The allegation was based on a White House memo -- which the programme said it had seen -- following a meeting between the two men in Washington on January 31, 2003.

The disclosures -- also reported on the Guardian newspaper's online edition Thursday -- are contained in "Lawless World", by British lawyer and university law professor Phillippe Sands, Guardian Unlimited reported.

A new edition of the book is published Friday.

In the memo, Bush is alleged to have said that military action against former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein would start on March 10, 2003. The war started 10 days later on March 20.

Bush is said to have stated that the US would put "its full weight behind effort to get another (UN

Security Council) resolution" and would "twist arms" and "even threaten" to get it.

"If ultimately we fail, military action would follow anyway," Bush is alleged to have added.

Blair is then alleged to have replied that he was "solidly" behind the US president and that he was "ready to do whatever it takes to disarm Saddam".

For the British prime minister, "a second United Nations resolution (against Iraq) would provide an insurance policy against the unexpected and international cover, including with the Arabs".

On the other hand, in January 2003, less than two months before the start of the military action, the two leaders did not seem persuaded that Iraq had made any material breach of United Nations resolution 1441.

During their discussion at the White House, Bush is alleged to have said that the United States thought of "flying U2 reconnaissance aircraft with fighter cover over Iraq painted in UN colours", explaining that "if Saddam fired on them, he would be in breach".

Maoists kill Nepali politician, aide

Candidates' homes bombed

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Suspected Maoist rebels in Nepal have killed a politician and his aide ahead of next week's municipal elections, which the guerrillas have vowed to disrupt, a district official said yesterday.

Trident Majhi, a member of a small royalist party headed by a cabinet minister, and a colleague were shot late on Thursday by two alleged rebels in the town of Biratnagar, 450 km east of the capital, Kathmandu.

Both men died later in hospital. Majhi had registered as a candidate for controversial Feb. 8 municipal elections called by King Gyanendra as part of his plan to restore democracy in the troubled Himalayan kingdom.

Meanwhile, suspected rebels bombed late Thursday the homes of two candidates running for mayor in Tikapur in western Nepal, the

army said in a statement, adding that no-one was hurt.

There was no comment from the rebels who have threatened to thwart Wednesday's polls. The Maoists have been waging a decade-long "People's War" to topple the monarchy in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

Gyanendra sacked the government and seized executive power on Feb. 1 last year.

The move threw Nepal into turmoil as he jailed politicians and suspended civil liberties, triggering widespread protests at home and drawing stinging international criticism.

The king said his takeover had been necessary to crush an insurgency that has left more than 13,000 dead since 1996 and to tackle endemic corruption.

Street protests erupted across the country on Wednesday, the anniversary of Gyanendra's power

grab, despite a promise by the palace to hold national polls by 2007.

Main political parties are boycotting the municipal elections, the first in Nepal in six years, saying they were aimed solely at prolonging the king's rule, and have entered into a loose alliance with the Maoists.

The parties have launched a series of protests in the last few weeks, many of which have ended in street fighting between activists and heavily armed police and soldiers.

The Maoists have called for a week-long general strike starting from Sunday to disrupt the vote.

They have targeted candidates with a string of bomb blasts and are blamed for the death of a politician last month in the southeastern town of Janakpur.

Wednesday's polls are taking place in 58 districts with more than 4,000 seats up for grabs.

Hamas defies pressure to recognise Israel

REUTERS, Gaza

Defying international pressure, the militant Islamic group Hamas said yesterday it will never recognise Israel but might be willing to negotiate terms for a temporary truce with the Jewish state.

Khaled Meshal, the top leader of Hamas which won last week's Palestinian parliamentary election by a landslide, made the offer to Israel via a column titled "To whom it may concern," published in the al-Hayat al-Jadida newspaper.

"We will never recognise the legitimacy of the Zionist state that was established on our land," Meshal, the Damascus-based head of the political and military wings of the militant Islamic group, wrote in the column.

The United States and European Union have demanded that Hamas renounce violence, disarm and change its charter calling for the destruction of the Jewish state or risk losing foreign aid to a Hamas-led Palestinian

Authority.

Hamas leaders have stood firm in their refusal to buckle to international pressure.

They have said they might heed a truce with Israel as an interim measure that could include the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank, but would not abandon a long-term goal to destroy Israel.

"If you (Israel) are willing to accept the principle of a long-term truce then we will be ready to negotiate with you over the conditions of such a truce," Meshal wrote.

Hamas officials say Meshal is the group's No. 1 overall political leader. There are other leaders who oversee political operations in Gaza and the West Bank but answer to Meshal.

Brushing aside Meshal's suggestion as "verbal gymnastics," Israeli officials demanded Hamas unequivocally recognise Israel's right to exist as a sovereign state, abandon "terrorism" and destroy its "terror" infrastructure.

"Anything short of that will simply maintain the current situation in which the absolute majority of the community of nations determine Hamas to be a terrorist organisation, and as such, not a legitimate interlocutor for political negotiation," said Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev.

The United States has suspended the start of new projects in the Palestinian territories after Hamas' election victory, but expects some US aid to flow in the future regardless of whether Hamas leads the Palestinian Authority government.

Jacob Walles, the US consul general in Jerusalem, said in an interview with Reuters that Washington is concerned Hamas might turn to Iran for funding.

"We're proceeding with (US aid) activities that are under way, but we're not starting new activities. We don't want to get into a situation where we may start something and not be able to finish it," Walles said.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi Sunnis burn a Danish flag as well as Danish products in a small bonfire after Juma prayers in Baghdad yesterday. Hundreds of Iraqis and other Asian Muslims were staging protests against cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) published by a popular Danish daily.

IRAQ BID-RIGGING
Ex-Pentagon contractor pleads guilty

AFP, Washington

A former Pentagon contractor pleaded guilty Thursday to charges of conspiracy, bribery and money laundering in connection with his work overseeing reconstruction projects in Iraq.

Robert Stein also admitted in federal court in Washington to unlawful possession of machine guns and being a felon in possession of a firearm.

The charges against Stein, 50, relate to a period beginning in December 2003 when he was in charge of tens of millions of dollars of reconstruction money in the south-central Iraqi city of Hillah.

Stein, who was hired by the Coalition Provisional Authority -- the US-led administration that was then running Iraq -- admitted to conspiring with other public officials, including several senior US Army officers, to rig the bids on contracts.

Bhutan king delays democracy plans

REUTERS, Guwahati

The people of the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan will have to wait for their first chance to vote after astrologers convinced their absolute monarch the stars were stacked against democracy.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has been slowly pulling his isolated mountain state into the modern world and declared his desire to relinquish some of his powers.

A new draft constitution has been drawn up and was to have been put to the people in a referendum last year. Elections were to follow for the remote country's first parliament.

But royal astrologers believe the stars will not be favourably placed until 2008 for the country, wedged between India and China, to take the plunge and abandon royal rule. To do so would bring serious problems, a palace official said.

The king took their advice very seriously. That's the reason why he has decided to hold the first democratic elections in the kingdom in

Koreas agree to hold military talks

AP, Seoul

The two Koreas agreed yesterday to hold military talks for first time in nearly two years.

The negotiations had been on hold due in large part to the North's criticism of the annual military exercises conducted jointly by South Korea and the United States.

North Korea denounces the drills as a US rehearsal to attack the communist country, a charge Washington denies.

The South Korean government announced the agreement after a meeting at the border village of Panmunjom. The divided Koreas agreed to hold the high-level talks in late February or early March, the Unification Ministry said.

The last round of high-level military talks was in June 2004.

The two Koreas have remained technically in a state of conflict since the 1950-53 Korean War, which ended in a cease-fire, not a peace treaty. But their relations have warmed significantly since an unprecedented summit of their leaders in 2000.

Anger over cartoons spreads across Asia

REUTERS, Paris

Outrage spread across the Islamic world yesterday over Danish cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM), as Muslims condemned them as "blasphemous" and more European newspapers published them, arguing freedom of speech was sacred.

Up to 300 militant Indonesian Muslims went on a rampage in the lobby of a building housing the Danish embassy in Jakarta.

Shouting "Allahu Akbar" (God is Greatest), they smashed lamps with bamboo sticks, threw chairs, lobbed rotten eggs and tomatoes and tore up a Danish flag. No one was hurt.

The drawings have touched off international fury as well as a debate on the clash between freedom of speech and respect for religion.

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen summoned foreign envoys in Copenhagen to discuss the outcry and the government's response to the publication of the drawings, which first appeared in Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten.

Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman Yuri Thamrin said the dispute was not just between Jakarta and Copenhagen.

"It involves the whole Islamic world vis-a-vis Denmark and vis-a-vis the trend of Islamophobia," he said.

Pakistan's parliament on Friday passed a resolution condemning the cartoons as "blasphemous and derogatory." Muslims consider any images of Hazrat Mohammad (SM) to be blasphemous. Among the Danish drawings, one depicted him in a turban resembling a bomb.

"This vicious, outrageous and provocative campaign cannot be justified in the name of freedom of expression or of the press," the Senate resolution said.

Danish's Rasmussen, who was to meet ambassadors later on Friday, said the issue was a question of free speech and he could not control what appeared in the Danish media.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy condemned the protests.

"I am totally shocked and find it unacceptable that -- because there have been caricatures in the West -- extremists can burn flags or take fundamentalist or extremist positions which would prove the cartoonists right," he told LCI television.