



Indian tribal supporters of the Jharkhand Party (Naren) make a last minute campaign through the 'Jangal Mahal' (Forest area) of Belpahari, some 260kms south of Kolkata Saturday. With the boycott calls given by the Maoists, elections will be held in 45 out of 294 assembly constituencies of West Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia districts in West Bengal today in the first phase of polling.

Pakistan reports third bird flu outbreak

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities yesterday reported the country's third outbreak of deadly H5N1 bird flu strain at a chicken farm near the capital Islamabad.

"We found some 3,600 birds dead at the farm on Friday evening. We collected samples and conducted tests," Mohammad Afzal, spokesman for the Food, Agriculture and Livestock Ministry told AFP.

"The tests Sunday confirmed it is a case of the deadly H5N1 strain of bird flu," he said.

The H5N1 strain was found at a farm in Sihala town about 20km east of Islamabad, Afzal said.

Blasts dim Lankan peace hopes

AFP, Colombo

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday wounded two soldiers with a landmine attack in Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula, the defence ministry said, the latest in a series of blasts which have killed 55 people in the past week.

The government's top peace negotiator said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have stepped up their attacks because they are not serious about attending planned talks in Switzerland on saving a shaky ceasefire.

Palitha Kohona, the head of Colombo's peace secretariat, said the Tigers were trying to stay away from the talks rescheduled for April 24-25. They were originally due to start on April 19, but pushed back after the rebels asked for more time.

"I believe the ball is now in their court," Kohona told AFP. "We are doing everything to go to Geneva for the talks but we can't clap with one hand. There must be commitment by both sides."

For their part, the Tigers accused the navy of scuttling preparations for the talks by "excessive interference" in the transport of rebel field commanders between the east and the north of the island on Saturday.

The Tigers had said they wanted internal consultations among field commanders before the Swiss talks but the navy had imposed conditions on their transport arrangements.

The Tigers called off a planned

movement of some 32 senior officials and raised doubts about the Geneva meeting. But they have stopped short of pulling out of the talks, which have been trimmed to two days instead of three.

"We wish to emphasise today's incident (regarding the navy) has put into question our decision and subsequent efforts to go to Geneva," the LTTE's political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan said in a letter to Norwegian peace brokers Saturday.

"We strongly suspect the latest act of the government of Sri Lanka is aimed at worsening the situation by rejecting the goodwill measures already in existence since the signing of the ceasefire."

Diplomats involved in the peace

process said the latest stand-off could lead to more violence. Most of the 55 people killed in the past week by mine attacks were security personnel.

"We are going down a slippery slope," a diplomatic source said. But he added: "The two parties can still make a commitment to uphold the ceasefire and they have the power to put an end to the violence."

Four previous peace efforts have ended in failure in a country where over 60,000 people have been killed in three decades of ethnic bloodshed between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils.

The Swiss talks on saving a shaky February 2002 ceasefire have already been postponed once at the request of the LTTE.

WEST BENGAL POLLS
Left parties expected to win more seats

AFP, Kolkata

Millions will vote for state assembly seats in India's West Bengal under tight security as opinion polls predict communist parties would beat rivals and emerge stronger on the national scene.

The polls for 294 seats in the east Indian state will be held in five stages beginning today.

A pre-poll survey predicted that communists, also known as the Left

Front, would win more than 233 seats. The communists are crucial outside allies of the Congress-led federal government but staunch critics of its economic and foreign policies.

"The Left Front appears set to win the seventh consecutive assembly election and add to the size of its majority," said a survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, a research group based in Delhi.

King no longer sacred in Nepal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

For centuries, the Shah kings of Nepal have swung from being absolute monarchs to titular figureheads and back again, usually after horrific violence.

As present King Gyanendra, the 12th of the dynasty, battles pro-democracy protesters who want him to cede power to a representative government, many are wondering if he can remain on the throne at all.

"Gyanendra, thief, leave the

country" is the warcry of the tens of thousands campaigning against his rule, a slogan that would have been heretical just a few years ago when the Shahs were worshipped by the Himalayan nation as reincarnations of the Hindu Lord Vishnu.

"That kind of traditional respect is over," says Yubaraj Ghimire, editor of the local weekly Samay. "A kind of momentum is building up."

To be fair to the king, the mystique surrounding the dynasty was

torn apart by a 2001 palace massacre in which then Crown Prince Dipendra killed nine royals including his parents and then turned the gun on himself in a drink and drug fuelled rage.

"That incident sent a strong message that people we worship like gods are using drugs and killing their parents," says Ghimire. "How are they different from any common criminals? That was a flashpoint."



Nepali aristocrat linked to royal massacre to marry Indian

AFP, New Delhi

Nepal's Devyani Rana, once the girlfriend of crown prince Dipendra who shot dead nine members of his family and himself in a spectacular regicide in 2001, will marry into an Indian political dynasty, reports said yesterday.

Rana, who also has links with India's aristocratic Scindia family, fled Nepal soon after the bloodbath in which a drunken Dipendra shot his parents, King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, and seven other members of the royal family before killing himself.

Unofficial reports said the crown prince's shooting spree was probably triggered by his parents' opposition to his plans to marry Rana, whose family had been at loggerheads with the kingdom's monarchy.