

# Lanka urges donors to press LTTE for talks

AFP, Tokyo

A rebel sniper gunned down a soldier at a de facto front line in northern Sri Lanka, the army said yesterday as the country's foreign minister asked donor nations to pressure Tamil rebels to resume talks.

An army statement blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the soldier's death late Wednesday night at Muhamalai on the Jaffna peninsula.

The Tigers said two rebel positions in the area had twice come under attack by government forces late Wednesday and early Thursday.

They said LTTE fighters retaliated, forcing the army to withdraw. The Tiger statement did not make any mention of casualties.

Fighting was also reported later Thursday in the northeastern port district of Trincomalee, residents and police said.

Security forces were firing at suspected Tamil rebel positions from which they came under attack overnight, police said. Residents reported several mortar explosions within a half-hour period.

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera was in Tokyo seeking international help to curb the mounting violence which has left a four-year-old ceasefire in force only on paper. He headed to Japan ahead of a May 30 meeting of Sri Lanka's key financial backers.

"We are hoping that the donors will come up with the formula where we could get the LTTE back to the negotiation table at the earliest,"

the minister told AFP in Tokyo.

"I hope they will be able to use whatever influence they may have to ensure that the LTTE will immediately stop violence, stop attacks on civilians, stop suicide bombings and come back to the table," he said.

"We are just hoping that the co-chairs will put a little more pressure on them to come back to talk to us."

Violence between the government and the rebels has surged in the past month with more than 200 people killed.

Samaraweera also urged the United States and European countries to take measures to prevent the LTTE, which is fighting for a homeland for minority Tamils, from collecting crucial funds from Tamil communities living in their countries.

## Tribal leader's exit jolts BJP

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's main opposition BJP suffered a jolt when one of its prominent tribal leaders Babulal Marandi quit the party and his parliament seat, capping his strained ties with the party leadership.

Marandi, the party's national vice president from the eastern tribal-dominated Jharkhand where a BJP-led coalition government is in power, had recently attacked the party leadership accusing it of overlooking the "misdeeds" and "rampant corruption" of the Jharkhand government.

He had also charged with state government of failing to foster development in the state and tackle Naxalite violence.

Marandi, who was the sole BJP member to emerge winner in Lok Sabha polls in 2004 in Jharkhand, put in his papers on Tuesday, sending the party leadership into a huddle and putting a big question mark over the fate of the 14-month-old BJP-led government in the state headed by Chief Minister Arjun Munda.



PHOTO: AFP

Former chief minister of the West Bengal state Jyoti Basu (2R) applauds as he watches Buddhadev Bhattacharya's oath taking ceremony in Kolkata yesterday. Buddhadev was sworn in for a second consecutive term as Chief Minister of the state with a 44-member Council of Ministers.

## Top UN envoy to press Myanmar on reforms

AFP, Yangon

A top United Nations envoy arrived in military-ruled Myanmar on Thursday, in the highest-level mission for more than two years to press the junta on democratic reforms.

Ibrahim Gambari, the highest-ranking UN official for political affairs, arrived in Yangon around 11:45 am (0515 GMT) and was whisked away amid tight security to the military guesthouse where he will be staying.

Gambari was expected to meet senior government officials, members of civil society and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD).

His three-day mission comes as the junta pursues a military cam-

paign against ethnic rebels while stepping up pressure on the NLD, which is led by detained Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Gambari has asked to meet Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent more than 10 of the last 17 years under house arrest, according to UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric in New York.

NLD spokesman Myint Thein in Yangon said the party did not believe the military would approve a meeting between Gambari and Aung San Suu Kyi, whose house arrest is expected to be extended next week.

But Dujarric said Gambari would press for her release as part of efforts to push the country toward democracy.

## Age no barrier as 70-year-old scales Everest

AFP, Tokyo

A 70-year-old Japanese climber scaled Mount Everest on Wednesday, making him the oldest person in the world to achieve the feat, the climb organisers told Japan's Kyodo news agency.

A five-member team including Takao Arayama, who is aged 70 years, 7 months and 13 days, reached the summit of the 8,848-meter (29,028-foot) mountain on Wednesday morning, said the organiser, Tokyo-based Adventure Guides.

Arayama was just three days older than the Japanese man whose record he surpassed, Yuichiro Miura, a professional skier who made it to the top of Everest in May 2003.

## US wary of Maoists despite Nepali truce

REUTERS, Washington

The United States remains sceptical about the commitment of Maoist rebels in Nepal to a cease-fire after a decade of brutal insurgency, the top US diplomat for South Asia told Congress on Wednesday.

Richard Boucher, assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian Affairs, said the Maoists must renounce violence and lay down their weapons and said Washington was willing to help Nepal's security forces if the government requested it.

"Until the Maoists take steps to change their character, we will not be convinced that they have abandoned their stated goal of establishing a one-party, authoritarian state," Boucher told a hearing of the House

of Representatives Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific.

After mass demonstrations last month against the absolute rule he imposed in February 2005, Nepal's King Gyanendra, who imposed absolute rule in February last year, responded to mass demonstrations last month by handing power back to political parties.

The Kathmandu government and the Maoist rebels have agreed to a cease-fire and to hold talks to end the revolt in which more than 13,000 people have been killed.

Boucher said the cease-fire was holding but added that "there are multiple reports of the Maoists' continued campaign of violence, extortion (and) shakedowns."



PHOTO: AFP

Nepal's Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala (C), Deputy President and General Secretary of the Nepali Congress Shushil Koirala and Member of Parliament Ram Chandra Poudyal listen to Speaker of the House of Representatives Subash Newang as he reads a proclamation in the Parliament in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's parliament unanimously passed a proclamation presented by Koirala that slashed the political powers of King Gyanendra and took away his control of the army.

## Falling trees, lightning strikes kill 16 in Andhra Pradesh

REUTER, Hyderabad

Falling trees and lightning strikes killed 16 people, including a nine-month-old girl, as storms lashed Andhra Pradesh, officials said yesterday.

The deaths were reported from the state's southeastern districts during a hail and electrical storm on Wednesday.

Four women and the baby, part of a wedding party, were killed when strong winds felled a huge tree onto their vehicle near Kodad town, 165 km southeast of the state capital, Hyderabad, local official V.P. Jauhari said.

## Buddhadeb sworn in as West Bengal CM

REUTERS, Kolkata

India's top industrialists cheered as veteran communist leader Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was sworn in to lead the world's longest-serving elected communist government in West Bengal yesterday.

The left parties won power for a record seventh time in a row after a staggered state election which ended on May 8.

Bhattacharjee, pursuing a pro-business platform which aims to turn the state into a regional business centre, has won support from industrialists and communists alike, with businessmen dubbing the state

under his governance a good place to invest.

"The left policies have been very progressive," said Venugopal Dhoot, chairman of consumer goods maker Videocon Industries Ltd.

Dhoot was present at the glittering ceremony along with the chairman of tobacco firm ITC Ltd., Y.C. Deveshwar, and other captains of industry.

State capital Kolkata, once known for its urban poverty and Mother Teresa's efforts to ease its effects, is currently witnessing a surge in real estate and retail.