

Mamata ends fast over car factory

AFP, PTI, Kolkata

An opposition leader in eastern India ended her 25-day fast against a car project early yesterday after the country's prime minister and president asked her to call off the hunger strike.

The outspoken Mamata Banerjee, who heads the opposition Trinamool Party in communist-ruled West Bengal state, had been fasting to protest the government's move to sell farmland to Indian auto giant Tata Motors for a factory.

"I am calling off the fast at their request. I hope they will do justice to our cause," said Banerjee, before leaving for a nursing home in the state capital Kolkata, citing a pledge by the Indian premier to address her concerns.

Activists and landowners say the government has acquired prime fertile land for the 220 million dollar plant in Singur, 40km north of state capital Kolkata, where production is slated to begin in 2007.



PHOTO: AFP
Muslim pilgrims arrive at Mount Arafat, southeast of the Saudi holy city of Makkah yesterday. Over two million Muslim faithful arrived in Mina as the annual Hajj pilgrimage reached its climax in Saudi Arabia amid tight security.

Tiger-held town to fall soon

Says Lankan military

REUTERS, Colombo

An eastern stronghold of Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels will likely fall to the military soon following weeks of fighting that has forced thousands of civilians to flee, a brigadier said yesterday.

Vakarai, the scene of intense artillery battles with the Tigers since November, is the last major rebel-held town on the east coast after the military drove them out of territory near the strategic port of Trincomalee further north.

"It's a matter of time now. It could be days, or weeks, but we will get there," Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe, the top military spokesman, told Reuters in a interview.

"The only thing holding us back is the fear of civilian casualties; they are using them as human shields," he said.

Analysts said the offensive on Vakarai was a key step in the gov-

ernment's plan to clear the Tigers from the east. Once the rebels are pushed out, the government plans to hold local elections that a faction of renegade rebels opposed to the Tigers and aligned to the military are expected to win.

"Once it's cleared, there won't be any big bases left in the area. There will be sporadic incidents, but not like this," Samarasinghe said.

But the rebels, who want to create a separate homeland for minority Tamils in the north and east, have warned of a full-scale war if the military pressed its offensive.

The Tigers accuse the military of war-mongering, and Nordic truce monitors say the plan violates the terms of a now tattered 2002 ceasefire.

But Samarasinghe said the Tigers had been carrying out attacks on the army from near urban centres, provoking a retaliation.

Israeli army killed 660 Palestinians in 2006: Rights group

AFP, Jerusalem

An Israeli human rights association said on Thursday that 660 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army in 2006 -- three times more than in 2005.

B'Tselem, which monitors human rights in the Palestinian territories, said that 141 of those killed were minors and that at least 322 of the victims had taken no part in hostile acts.

In the Gaza Strip alone, 405 Palestinians -- 88 minors among them -- were killed by the Israeli army since Corporal Gilad Shalit was captured in a June 25 cross-border raid.

"Of these, more than half (205) were not involved in fighting with Israeli forces," B'Tselem said.

Seventeen Israeli civilians and six soldiers were killed during the year by Palestinians, the group said.

'Israel will not free Palestinians now'

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has dropped the idea of freeing Palestinian prisoners as a gesture to President Mahmoud Abbas ahead of a Muslim holiday, Israeli political sources said on Friday.

Following his first formal meeting with Abbas on December 23, Olmert had suggested such a release could happen as a way to strengthen Abbas and cement hopes of a revival in peacemaking even before militants in Gaza free a captured Israeli soldier.

But the sources said that Olmert did not have sufficient support in his cabinet for the move ahead of the holiday, which starts on Saturday, and had also faced criticism from the family of the soldier held in Gaza, Corporal Gilad Shalit.

"It does not look as though there will be anything before Shalit is out," said one political source.

An official in the prime minister's office said no decision had been taken yet on when prisoners might be freed.

EU, UN restate opposition to Saddam execution

Iraqis divided over fate

AFP, Helsinki/ Geneva

The Finnish presidency of the EU yesterday restated its opposition to the execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, after speculation in Iraq that Saddam's death penalty could be carried out immediately.

"The EU opposes the death penalty and it should not be applied in this case either," Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja said at an informal press conference in Helsinki.

Earlier on Friday the US military in Iraq had asked lawyers for Saddam to collect the former Iraqi dictator's personal effects in advance of his execution.

Saddam, his half brother Barzan al-Tikriti and Awad Ahmed al-

Bandar al-Sadun, a former chief judge of the revolutionary court, were sentenced to death by hanging by the Iraqi High Tribunal for the massacre of 148 Shia villagers from Dujail north of Baghdad after an assassination attempt there against the Iraqi leader in 1982.

The court on December 26 rejected their appeals against their convictions and ordered the executions be carried out. Under Iraqi law, this must occur within 30 days of the order.

Finland currently holds the six-month rotating presidency of the EU and is due to hand over the role to Germany on January 1.

In Geneva, the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers Thursday added his voice to those opposing

the execution of former dictator Saddam Hussein, due to take place within the next month.

"The decision of the Iraqi high court does not seem to be preoccupied with the serious breaches of the trial," Special Rapporteur Leandro Despouy said.

Saddam was denied the right to be tried in an independent and neutral court and to a fair defence, Despouy said.

Meanwhile, Iraqis across the country lamented that his death would do nothing to bring an end to the bitter sectarian war that erupted after Saddam's downfall, plunging the country into a crisis bordering on civil war.

"Whether we execute him or not is not important," sighed Mukhalled Jaralla, a 42-year-old teacher in the northern city of Mosul, speaking for many among Iraq's long-suffering 26-million-strong population.

lent years.

While many rejoiced in what they regard as just punishment for a despot with the blood of tens of thousands of his countrymen on his hands, many members of Iraq's embattled Sunni minority expressed anger at the verdict.

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Nepal constitution needs to be amended: PM

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala yesterday said an interim constitution, finalised earlier this month, needs to be amended as it has given unlimited power to the premier.

Earlier this month, senior political leaders and the Maoists finalised an interim constitution that paves the way for the rebels to join the government and transferred King Gyanendra's powers as the head of the state to the prime minister.

"Since the interim constitution has made the prime minister all powerful, there is a danger that he can act as a dictator, so it needs to be amended," Koirala told reporters at his hometown in Biratnagar, 548 kilometers (342 miles) east of Kathmandu, on Friday.

"There should be the balance of power by defining the authority of

the legislature, the executive and the judiciary bodies... all powers should not be limited to a single person," Koirala said.

He also said that his party, Nepali Congress - the largest party in the coalition government - is in favor of the "ceremonial monarchy" and that the king's fate would be "decided by people through constituent assembly elections".

Koirala, the respected octogenarian architect of Nepal's peace deal to end the decade-long civil war, also said that the interim constitution would be endorsed only after the management of arms and armies of the Maoists was underway.

The temporary basic law is to remain in force until elections slated for June 2007 for a constituent assembly that will rewrite the constitution permanently and decide the monarchy's ultimate fate.

'Taliban won't accept defeat in Afghanistan'

10 militants killed in fighting

AFP, AP, Kandahar

Fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar called Friday on his fighters to avoid harming civilians in Afghanistan in an anti-government insurgency he said would never accept defeat.

In a message on the eve of Islam's three-day Eid-ul-Azha festival, the rebel commander praised his followers' efforts in the insurgency launched months after the Taliban was toppled from power in 2001.

But Omar urged them to be "mindful of not resorting to actions that may result in casualties of innocent ordinary people."

"We must be more cautious and careful in focusing the target. We

should have friendly and sincere relations with our own Muslim people," he said in a statement was circulated in Kandahar city, a Taliban stronghold.

In fresh fighting Nato and Afghan forces killed more than 10 Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan, police said Friday.

The Taliban attacked a police post late Thursday night with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, said Khost provincial police commander Mohammad Ayub. The ensuing battle lasted more than an hour.

Nato spokesman Maj. Dominic Whyte said there were no dead or wounded among Nato troops. Ayub said there were no casualties among Afghan forces.

Ice mass snaps free from Canada's Arctic

AP, Toronto

A giant ice shelf the size of 11,000 football fields has snapped free from Canada's Arctic, scientists said. The mass of ice broke clear 16 months ago from the coast of Ellesmere Island, about 497 miles south of the North Pole, but no one was present to see it in Canada's remote north.

Scientists using satellite images later noticed that it became a newly formed ice island in just an hour and left a trail of icy boulders floating in its wake.

Warwick Vincent of Laval University, who studies Arctic conditions, travelled to the newly formed ice island and could not believe what he saw.

"This is a dramatic and disturbing event. It shows that we are losing remarkable features of the Canadian North that have been in place for many thousands of years. We are crossing climate thresholds, and these may signal the onset of accelerated change ahead," Vincent said Thursday.

In 10 years of working in the region he has never seen such a dramatic loss of sea ice, he said.

The collapse was so powerful that earthquake monitors 155 miles away picked up tremors from it.

The Ayles Ice Shelf, roughly 41 square miles in area, was one of six major ice shelves remain-



Melting Arctic sea ice.

ing in Canada's Arctic.

Scientists say it is the largest event of its kind in Canada in 30 years and point their fingers at climate change as a major contributing factor.

"It is consistent with climate change," Vincent said, adding that the remaining ice shelves are 90 percent smaller than when they were first discovered in 1906.

"We aren't able to connect all of the dots... but unusually warm temperatures definitely played a major role."

Laurie Weir, who monitors ice conditions for the Canadian Ice Service, was poring over satellite images in 2005 when she noticed that the shelf had split and separated.