

Lanka vows to crush terrorism

Troops dismantle Tigers' de facto state

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president yesterday vowed to crush "terrorism" as his troops dismantled a de facto separate state run by Tamil Tiger rebels in the island's restive east.

President Mahinda Rajapakse said the military had the strength to cope with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has been leading a decades-old campaign for independence.

"Terrorism that many once swore cannot be defeated is now crouching in fear because we faced up to that challenge," Rajapakse said while launching a 350-million dollar irrigation project in the north-central part of the island.

"Our security forces have the

ability, will and strength to defeat terrorism," the president said. "Trust in them, for they have proved it in the east (of the island)."

Rajapakse said he did not use the war against the Tigers to boost his political image.

"The main secret about that success is that we did not give political targets or goals to the armed forces," he said. "We did not sell or market the war for our benefit."

Government forces captured the main rebel bastion of Vakarai in the island's eastern district of Batticaloa on Friday, and the military said security forces were dismantling structures put up by the rebels.

The Tigers ran Vakarai as a de facto separate state for over 10 years. The military captured Vakarai

after weeks of fighting that officially left 45 soldiers and 331 Tigers killed.

Rajapakse said there must also be a reasonable solution to the grievances of the island's Tamil minority.

"I believe very strongly that the most powerful weapon against communalism is being fair and doing justice by the innocent Tamil people," he said.

"If not, the cruel forces of communalism can completely destroy the great Sri Lankan civilization. We should understand this danger very well."

Government officials said the administration was working on a power-sharing plan to end the 35-year-old Tamil separatist campaign which has claimed over 60,000 lives.

Myanmar accuses US of encouraging terrorist acts

AFP, Yangon

Military-run Myanmar yesterday accused the United States of plotting to install a puppet government in the country, after US President George W Bush vowed to keep pressing it for reform.

The New Light of Myanmar newspaper, a government mouthpiece, accused the United States of pressing for a UN Security Council resolution against the country as a way of installing a new government.

China and Russia vetoed the resolution, but Bush said in his State of the Union address Tuesday that Washington "will continue to speak out for the cause of freedom" in Myanmar.

"In pursuing the scheme, the US in 2006 put pressure on the United Nations Security Council to intervene in Myanmar issues, while destabilizing tranquillity and peace and stirring up mass protests and destructive acts in synchronization in Myanmar," the New Light of Myanmar newspaper said.

"The most powerful neocolonialist country, for self-interest, is now organizing and encouraging its cohorts and lackey groups and resorting to all possible means to install a puppet government in Myanmar that will dance to its tune," the paper said.

The paper also warned against possible terror attacks in Myanmar, after a letter bomb exploded last week at a Yangon post office, injuring a postal worker.



PHOTO: AFP

President Vladimir Putin (R) is welcomed by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Putin arrived in India for a two-day visit to rejuvenate ties with Moscow's former Cold War ally and push for major energy and weapons deals.

Russia, India call for dialogue, diplomacy to solve Iran crisis

AFP, New Delhi

India and Russia yesterday called for "diplomacy and dialogue" in the worsening dispute over Iran's controversial nuclear programme, but also urged Tehran to comply with UN demands.

India and Russia are "convinced that an effective solution to the Iranian nuclear issue is best found through political and diplomatic efforts," the two sides said in a joint statement after talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Indian host Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Russia and India, however, said UN Security Council resolution 1737 -

- which bans the transfer of material and technology to Iran -- underlined the need for "more active and transparent cooperation" between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Both said the implementation of the resolution "should facilitate resumption of negotiations" between Iran and the international community "for a long-term comprehensive agreement".

It should also allow for the development of "relations and cooperation with Iran based on mutual respect and the establishment of international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme," the joint statement added.

'Support for Indian ruling coalition is strong'

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's ruling coalition would sweep to a landslide win if snap polls were held now, a survey released on Wednesday showed.

The coalition, in power for almost three years, is led by the Congress Party and popular support for both remained strong.

The survey, by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies for the Hindustan Times and CNN-IBN television channel, said the United Progressive Alliance could

secure a clear majority and shed its dependence on leftist coalition partners.

"The Indian electorate continues to have confidence in the ruling UPA coalition," the survey said. "In fact, the ruling coalition is placed better than it was in 2004."

The survey comes as India's economy has been growing at around 8 percent over the past three years, but the government has faced pressure from leftist coalition parties to tone down its market-friendly reforms.

Musharraf floats Muslim ME peace move

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf said Wednesday that he had agreed with five Arab leaders to develop a Muslim peace initiative for the Palestinian conflict, which he said lay at the root of worsening violence around the region.

"Destructive violence is going on in Iraq, Lebanon is mired in crisis, and the most dangerous aspects of these two are the visible sectarian undertones which cause a special concern to us in Pakistan," Musharraf told reporters in the United Arab Emirates at the end of a five-nation Middle East tour.

"The core lies in the Palestinian dispute and the core lies in the disharmony within the Muslim world, which is leading to terrorism and extremism," he said.

"This is a time to act and adopt a reconciliatory approach... toward starting a fresh initiative to facilitate peace, a resolution of the Palestinian dispute and bringing harmony to the Muslim world."

Musharraf said there had been a "total consonance of views" on the need for such an initiative among the leaders of the countries he visited -- Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria, as well as the UAE.

"We have agreed to undertake this mission in a responsible, prag-

matic, but forceful manner," he said, adding that the initiative would have to be a compromise capable of winning broad support.

"The European Union is a very important player, it must be on board. And definitely ... the major players of the world must have faith in this new initiative."

"It has to be a middle course initiative acceptable to both extremes."

The Pakistani president gave no details of how he intended to advance the initiative or how it would mesh with the internationally drafted peace roadmap, which has made next to no progress since its launch nearly four years ago.

REPUBLIC DAY India redeploys troops in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

India has redeployed its troops in insurgency-wracked Kashmir in a bid to prevent attacks by Islamic militants during Friday's Republic Day celebrations, officials said yesterday.

"To thwart militant attacks we have deployed extra security personnel around the Republic Day venues," senior Kashmir police officer S.M. Sahai told reporters in Srinagar.

"They may try to attack but we are ready to take them on," he said.

Militants battling Indian rule routinely increase their attacks on Indian troops ahead of Republic Day, celebrated every year on January 26, and have attacked the venues in the past despite tight security.

India is believed to have some 400,000 troops stationed in the disputed Himalayan region, which is split between India and Pakistan.

The redeployment has been focussed on the towns of Srinagar and Jammu, Kashmir's summer and winter

capitals respectively, where the main Republic Day events will be held.

Both Republic Day venues in the cities have been sealed off and troops have taken positions in adjoining buildings.

Indian troops meanwhile shot dead a militant during a gunbattle Thursday in northern Baramulla district, army spokesman Hemant Joneja told AFP.

Both the hardline and moderate factions of the region's main separatist alliance, the Hurriyat Conference, have called for a "total strike" on January 26.

Kashmiris have spurned Republic Day since the eruption of an insurgency against Indian rule in 1989.

The day marks the date in 1950 when the country's new republican constitution came into effect. India gained independence from Britain in 1947, but went through a transitional phase when it was still classed as a dominion.

Ethnic leader warns of unrest in Nepal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal will face further turmoil following its decade-long Maoist revolt if the government ignores the demands of Madhesi people living in the southern plains, a protest leader from the ethnic group said.

Anti-government protests in the Terai, a narrow strip of fertile plain bordering India and mainly populated by Madhesis, have left five people dead and dozens wounded over the past week in a blow to what had been a fast-moving peace process.

The Madhesi People's Rights Forum, which has led the protests, said the government -- dominated by elites from the highlands -- had discriminated against Madhesis over jobs in the government, police and army as well as seats in parliament.

"We will continue the struggle if the government ignores our demands, and the future of the country will be difficult," Upendra Yadav, the forum's chairman, told Reuters in Kathmandu on Thursday.

The latest unrest comes after a

November peace pact ended a Maoist revolt that left 13,000 people dead. That agreement brought impoverished Nepal close to stability as former rebels joined an interim parliament and began to lock up their weapons.

The arrest of 48-year-old Yadav this month, for burning a copy of the interim constitution, was one of the incidents that sparked protests in the southeastern town of Lahan, which is still under curfew after becoming the focus of unrest.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan soldiers stand near the bombed remains of a Tamil Tiger base near the former Tamil Tiger rebels bastion of Vakarai, which was captured from the guerrillas about a week ago, in Verugal on Wednesday.