

## Thailand lifts ban on political activities

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's military-backed government yesterday lifted a ban on political activities in the kingdom, paving the way for members of the dissolved Thai Rak Thai party to regroup.

"The cabinet agreed for existing political parties and groups of politicians to carry out their political activities," government spokesman Yongyuth Mayalarp told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

"This resolution is effective immediately," he added.

After seizing power in a bloodless coup last September, the junta imposed martial law and suspended all political activity. Martial law was lifted in half the kingdom in January, but the ban on political activity remained.

Last week, Thailand's Constitutional Tribunal dissolved Thai Rak Thai (TRT), the party founded by ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, after finding it guilty of violating election regulations in polls in April 2006.

The court banned 111 senior party members, including Thaksin, from politics for five years. TRT's main

political rivals the Democrat Party were cleared of similar vote fraud charges.

Members of TRT on Monday petitioned Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont to lift the ban on political activity, saying it hampered their efforts to form a new party.

They warned that if it were not lifted, elections promised by the junta by December this year would not be democratic, fair or transparent.

"This is a good sign which will lead to elections," said former TRT executive Suwat Liptapanlop after Tuesday's announcement.

"This relaxing will contribute to building confidence and reducing conflicts in society, because the politicians will have an outlet so they won't have to go underground."

Democrat Party spokesman Ong-art Klampaiboon told AFP they welcomed the decision to lift the ban, and said that the party, which is the oldest in Thailand, would begin their activities almost immediately.

"It is the right thing to do to relax the ban ... because we will have a referendum on the constitution and eventually elections in December, so we should have a democratic cli-

mate," he said.

But members of TRT who are hoping to register a new party with the Election Commission will have to wait for a new law to be passed by the junta-appointed parliament, the National Legislative Assembly.

While lifting the ban on political activities required only simple cabinet approval, a new law is required to repeal a junta order suspending the registration of new political parties.

The Council of State, the nation's top legal body, will next week send a draft bill on party registration to the cabinet, who will then forward it to the parliament for consideration.

There is no timescale for the passage of the bill.

Martial law was lifted in 41 of Thailand's 76 provinces on January 26.

Restrictions remain in 35 provinces, mostly in the rural north and northeast, the powerbase of ousted Thaksin, and in some southern provinces where a separatist insurgency rages.



Pakistani and foreign media journalists carry torch lights as they march against restrictions on media and Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) during a protest rally in Islamabad on Monday. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf handed the country's television and radio watchdog greater powers amid protests against the alleged blocking of three news channels.

## Musharraf tightens controls on media

AP, Islamabad

Police said yesterday they have filed a preliminary complaint against about 200 journalists for defying a ban on rallies in the capital by protesting curbs on the media, the latest sign of government intolerance of coverage of a political crisis.

Although no arrests were made immediately, the move came a day after hundreds of journalists, lawyers and opposition supporters rallied in Islamabad to protest the imposition of an emergency ordinance by President Gen Pervez Musharraf that tightened the regulation of electronic media, including private TV channels that he has accused of anti-government bias.

In addition, more than 60 opposition activists have been detained in Lahore and five other cities in Punjab province since Monday on government orders to keep them from joining in journalists' protests and creating law-and-order problems, a senior Lahore police official

said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to make media comments.

"I have talked to senior police officials but they are not telling me under what charges the action is being carried out," said Naveed Chaudhry, a spokesman for the opposition Pakistan Peoples Party.

Musharraf's new ordinance authorises the government to seal the premises of broadcasters or distributors breaking the law, and raises possible fines for violations from \$16,665 to \$166,650. An offender can also have its license suspended.

"This presidential decree is another brick in the wall of censorship that the government is building to shield itself at a time of political upheaval," said Joel Simon, executive director of the international media group Committee to Protect Journalists. "We call on the government to rescind the decree immediately."

## ETA calls off truce

AP, Madrid

The Basque separatist group ETA called off its ceasefire yesterday, saying the government was not committed to ending the nearly 40-year conflict.

Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero broke off contacts with the ETA after the group blew up an airport parking garage in December, killing two people. The group responded by saying it considered its March 2006 truce still valid and insisting the

deaths were unintended.

On Tuesday, however, the group notified two Basque newspapers that the cease-fire will end at midnight and described itself as "active on all fronts to defend the Basque homeland."

ETA had declared the cease-fire unilaterally, saying it wanted to negotiate an end to the conflict, which has left more than 800 people dead.

The government agreed to talk but said it would make no political concessions.

The talks widely believed to have

taken place but never officially confirmed made little progress.

The group reiterated assertions that the Spanish judicial system continued to arrest and try ETA members and suspects while the truce was in effect.

"Minimum democratic conditions for a negotiating process do not exist," ETA said in the statement sent to the pro-independence newspapers Berria and Gara.

"Zapatero's character has turned into a fascism that left parties and citizens without rights," ETA said.

## Japan moves to restore tattered Lanka truce

AFP, Colombo

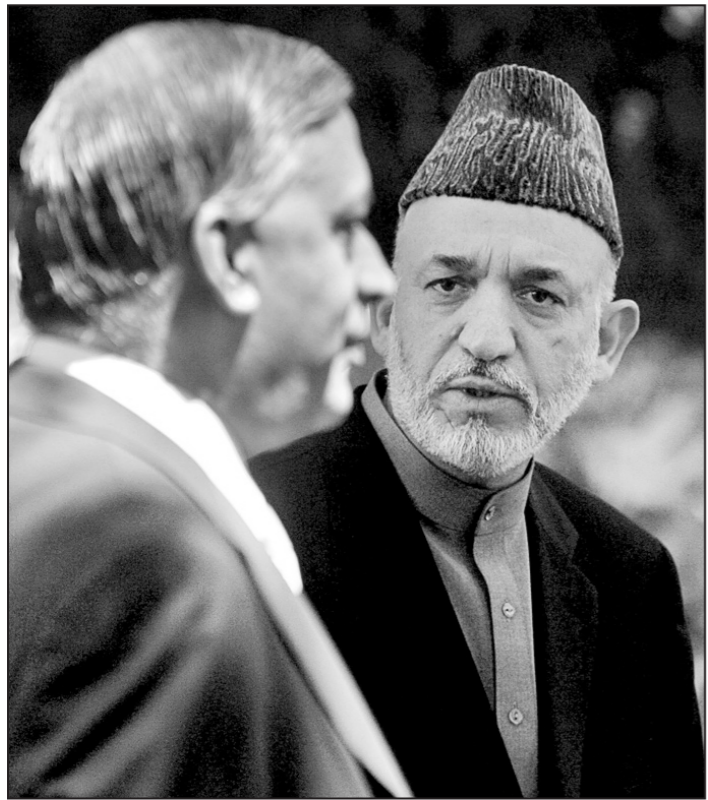
Top Japanese envoy arrived in war-torn Sri Lanka yesterday to try and restore a tattered peace process after some of the bloodiest battles between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels this year.

The run-up to the visit by Yasushi Akashi, a former UN diplomat and trouble shooter in Cambodia and Kosovo, has been marred by an upsurge in fighting in the north of the island that left scores of

combatants dead.

The 76-year-old envoy will "discuss with the government and the parties concerned, the current situation of the peace process and its future," the Japanese embassy said in a statement.

Just before Akashi's arrival, a powerful roadside blast killed a senior police officer in the eastern district of Batticaloa, an area the Japanese envoy is due to visit on Thursday, officials said.



## Pakistan will do all it can against 'terrorism': PM

AFP, Kabul

Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said here yesterday his nation was doing all it could to fight "extremism and terrorism" and would work with Afghanistan to solve these common challenges.

This includes a "peace jirga (tribal council)" due in August to bring together hundreds of people from both sides of the border to address the growing Taliban-led insurgency that sees most attacks along the frontier.

Aziz, on a one-day visit, met President Hamid Karzai for talks that the leaders said touched on outstanding differences around the jirga: reluctance in Pakistan for women to attend or for a third country to act as an "umpire."

Pakistan will discuss these points further, the prime minister said.

"Pakistan is doing all it can to ensure that extremism and terrorism must be fought in any form," Aziz told reporters after the meeting at the presidential palace.

## US-led coalition claims killing of 24 Taliban

### 30 militants drown as boat sinks

AFP, Kabul

Meanwhile more than 30 Taliban militants drowned when a boat sank in southern Afghanistan, the defence ministry said yesterday, as the coalition force said two dozen more were killed elsewhere in fighting.

Soldiers under attack in southern Afghanistan called in military bombers in a four-hour battle that left an "estimated two dozen enemy fighters killed," the US-led coalition said

yesterday.

Afghan and coalition soldiers were attacked with rocket and gunfire Monday in the same area of Kandahar where soldiers from the separate Nato-led force came under fire the day before, leaving eight wounded.

"Coalition close air support was requested and munitions were dropped on three enemy positions," the coalition said in a statement.

"There were an estimated two

dozen enemy fighters killed during the four-hour battle and no reports of Afghan civilian injuries," it said.

Meanwhile more than 30 Taliban militants drowned when a boat sank in southern Afghanistan, the defence ministry said Tuesday.

The boat sank after coming under fire from soldiers as it crossed the Helmand River on Monday carrying Taliban fighters escaping military operations, the defence ministry said.

## Don't play with lion's tail, Iran warns UN

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad yesterday warned the UN Security Council against imposing new sanctions against Iran over its nuclear drive, telling the world body it risked playing with a "lion's tail".

"We advise them not to indulge in child's play. Our actions are legal and Iran is a great country," Ahmadinejad said at a news conference.

"They say that Iran is a lion sat down in a corner. And we tell them: Do not play with the lion's tail," he warned.

Iran has infuriated the West by

refusing international demands to suspend uranium enrichment, a process Europe and the United States fear could be used to make nuclear weapons.

Ahmadinejad on Tuesday warned Western powers it was too late to stop Iran's nuclear programme, amid new efforts to impose fresh UN sanctions against the Islamic republic.

"It is too late to stop the progress of Iran," Ahmadinejad said at a news conference. "We have broken through to a new stage and it is too late to push us back."

## Maoist attack in India leaves millions without power

AFP, Raipur

An estimated 2.5 million people in central India were left without electricity yesterday following a Maoist guerrilla attack on power lines, police said.

Three government employees were killed and five security personnel injured in the attacks in Chhattisgarh state by the rebels, who champion the rights of tribes and farmers they say have been left behind by India's economic boom.

"Those who were killed in the blast were involved in the electricity repair work," police inspector-general RK Vij told AFP in the state capital Raipur.

State chief minister Raman Singh put the cost of the power outage in the millions of dollars.

## Kashmir risks return to all-out violence

AFP, Srinagar

A top separatist in Indian Kashmir accused New Delhi yesterday of only using peace talks with Pakistan to buy time to crush Muslim rebels.

Moderate faction leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said the scenic Himalayan region, currently enjoying a period of relative calm, also risks a return to all-out violence reminiscent of the early days of the 17-year-old insurgency.

"The time is ripe to resolve the dispute over Kashmir. If that doesn't happen we may return to square one and violence may stage a comeback," he told a news conference in Srinagar, the urban hub of the anti-India revolt.

"New Delhi is trying to buy time to crush the insurgency. It has never

## Kashmir risks return to all-out violence

### Warns separatist leader Farooq

been sincere in talks," said Farooq, who is also the region's top Muslim cleric.

"If the Indians think they can end the movement in Kashmir by crushing the insurgency, they are highly mistaken," he said.

The divided territory of Kashmir has sparked two of the three wars fought between India and Pakistan since their independence from Britain in 1947, and an insurgency against Indian rule began in the state in 1989.

A peace process was launched by the two nuclear-armed neighbours in 2004, and although violence has dipped significantly on the ground there has been scant progress on issues such as troop reductions.

