

Tigers must choose between war and peace: President

AFP, Colombo

The Tamil Tigers must decide between war and peace, Sri Lanka's president said Thursday as the government celebrated its capture of the rebels' final bastion in the east of the island.

Mahinda Rajapakse insisted he was leaving the door open for the resumption of negotiations with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which collapsed in October last year.

"War or peace, we are ready," the president said in an interview with the state-run Daily News. "It is in their hands. It is now up to the Tigers to decide which path they want to tread on."

"We have never hesitated to negotiate and we never left the

negotiating table. It was the LTTE which always abandoned talks midway."

Last week, government troops captured Thoppigala, a vast jungle area near the lagoon town of Batticaloa. The operation means the Tamil Tigers only have formal command centres in their well-entrenched mini-state in the north.

Sri Lanka's Eastern province, an area of 9,635 square kilometres (3,720 square miles) and under government control for the first time in more than a decade, has now been earmarked for an ambitious rebuilding programme, the president said.

"I fervently hope, especially our international friends, will help us to rebuild the east," Rajapakse said as he kicked off state-sponsored

celebrations at Independence Square in Colombo's leafy Cinnamon Gardens.

"I believe with optimism that our international friends would help us in this task. Friends, please come to the East."

Sri Lanka's government is, however, currently facing cuts in international aid with several donors expressing frustration over a worsening human rights situation and the government's apparent determination to push for a military solution to the 35-year-old ethnic conflict.

Rajapakse, who is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, received a 21-gun salute after security forces released hundreds of balloons to mark the occasion.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Congress President and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Chairperson Sonia Gandhi (C) walks with others after casting her vote in the Indian presidential election at Parliament in New Delhi yesterday. Lawmakers in India were expected to elect the nation's first woman president in voting that began following the most scandal-dogged contest in six decades of independence.

Five US soldiers killed in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Insurgents killed five more US soldiers in Iraq, including four in a roadside bomb attack against their patrol in Baghdad, the military reported yesterday.

The four soldiers and their Iraqi interpreter were killed when the bomb detonated near the patrol on Wednesday in the eastern half of the Iraqi capital during "combat operations", the military said.

It did not specify the exact location of the blast.

Another service member, a Task Force Marine soldier, was killed by small arms fire on Thursday south of Baghdad, the military said in a separate statement.

Meanwhile, Sunni lawmakers ended their five-week boycott of parliament Thursday, raising hopes the factious assembly can make progress on benchmark legislation demanded by Washington. The US announced that two American soldiers have been charged with killing an Iraqi.

Abbas asks PLO for early polls to snub Hamas

AFP, Ramallah

the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994.

Hamas -- which is not a member of the organisation -- swiftly rejected the call.

"We reject early elections as they were called by a party that does not have the ability to organise them and by an illegitimate central council," spokesman Ayman Taha told AFP in Gaza.

In an impassioned speech, Abbas again denounced the "putsch" that the Islamists committed in Gaza with "their gangs and militias" and ruled out any dialogue with the movement.

"There will be no dialogue with the putschists," he said. "They've dug their own grave."

"Today they commit crime after crime and murder after murder against the sons of our people. They didn't carry out such acts against the occupation, but they have carried

them out against their compatriots," he said.

The Islamic Resistance Movement "uses religion to cover its crimes while they have nothing to do with religion," he said. "They utter lies worthy of the devil."

"They have hijacked our people like someone hijacks a plane. We want to retrieve our people to save them from suffering. But Hamas should be punished."

Abbas said he planned for the elections to take place on party lists only, a move that would make it easier to organise the poll in Gaza, which is now ruled by the Islamists who are opposed to early polls.

During the last parliamentary election in January 2006, swept by Hamas, half of the 132 lawmakers in the Palestinian Legislative Council were elected according to party lists and half through single constituency votes.

US, India extend talks to salvage nuke deal

AFP, Washington

The United States and India extended nuclear talks by another day after failing Wednesday to finalise an implementing accord for their landmark civilian atomic deal, officials said.

They were scheduled to end their two-day meeting in Washington on Wednesday but one official said they decided to pore over some "technical issues" on Thursday in a bid to secure an agreement.

"They had a good meeting. They are continuing the discussions tomorrow," said Tom Casey, a State Department spokesman.

The two powers have been for two years trying to devise a comprehensive agreement under which the United States would provide nuclear technology and fuel after agreeing in principle to reverse three decades of sanctions.

Both sides had identified possible solutions to issues blocking the accord, a senior State Department official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"I think they have clearly identified the issues, I think there are certainly possible solutions to both sides," the official said.

Indian embassy spokesman Rahul Chhabra confirmed the talks would continue Thursday but refused to divulge further details.

In an apparent bid to find a



PHOTO: AFP

Indian rescue workers look for survivors as excavators uncover debris of a collapsed building in Borivali on the outskirts of Mumbai yesterday. Some 27 people were killed and dozens more were feared trapped after part of a seven-story building collapsed in India's commercial capital Mumbai on Wednesday evening.

Republicans torpedo Iraq troop pullout plan

AP, Washington

Senate Republicans torpedoed legislation Wednesday to force the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq, bowing to President Bush's adamant refusal to consider any change in war strategy before September.

The 52-47 vote fell far short of the 60 needed to advance the legislation and marked the final act in an all-night session that Democrats engineered to dramatize their opposition to the war.

"Time and the American people are ... on our side," said a defiant Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, who has made ending the war the Democrats' top goal since they took control of the Senate in January. "We will do everything in our power to change course in Iraq," he said moments after the vote.

Wednesday's vote unfolded as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited the Capitol for private meetings with lawmakers and the nation's top military officer cautioned that the United States faces decades of fighting in the larger global war on terror.

"We can vote to fight it in one place or another," said Gen. Peter Pace, whose term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is nearing an end.

"But the bottom line is that as long as our enemy is sworn to destroy our way of life, we are going to not choose to lose it," said Pace, addressing troops in Afghanistan.

choose any other course," said McCain, a Republican presidential contender.

The Senate's action left no doubt that Bush's decision last winter to deploy additional troops to Iraq will have at least two more months to produce results. Gen. David Petraeus, the top US general in Iraq and architect of the president's latest strategy, is to deliver a report to Congress on Sept. 15.

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PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani people gather at the site of suicide blast at Hub district some 25 kms from Karachi yesterday. At least 29 Pakistanis were killed when a suicide bomber hit a police-guarded convoy of Chinese workers in the country's troubled southwest, police said.

Pak militants try to sour China ties

AFP, Islamabad

Chinese citizens in Pakistan have been regularly targeted by Islamic militants and tribal rebels alike in an apparent campaign to split President Pervez Musharraf from his closest ally.

Around 5,000 Chinese people live and work in Pakistan where they are engaged in several Beijing-funded development and engineering projects, many of which are opposed by various insurgent groups.

A suicide attack aimed at Chinese workers in southwestern Baluchistan province on Thursday, which killed at least 29 Pakistanis, was the deadliest in a series of such incidents.

"It is a vital relation for Pakistan but it appears that somebody wants to damage it," foreign office spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam told AFP after the blast in the industrial town of Hub.

China told Pakistan earlier this month to step up security for its citizens after three Chinese workers were shot dead in Peshawar in the same region.

Political uncertainty sparks crime wave in Nepal's capital

AP, Kathmandu

Shankar Raj Adhikari was working at his photography school last week when five men with guns and swords burst in and took him to a forest near Nepal's capital and demanded an 8,000-dollar ransom.

Adhikari is just one of the victims of a crime surge targeting Kathmandu's affluent that has sprung up since Nepal's mainstream political parties made peace with former rebel Maoists earlier this year.

Although a bloody decade of civil war has ended, Kathmandu's middle and upper classes complain that for them, life is more dangerous than ever, with a decline in the heavy security presence that marked life during the revolt.

"Over the past few months, crime rates have increased in Kathmandu. The criminals' morale seems to be high because their

actions remain unchallenged," Upendra Kanta Aryal, Kathmandu's top police officer told AFP.

"Compared to previous years, kidnappings and robberies have increased in the Kathmandu valley," said Aryal, chief of Kathmandu's Metropolitan Police Crime Department, adding that he could not give precise numbers.

Nepal's political instability, corruption and ineffective policing mean organised criminals in Kathmandu are having a field day.

"The gangs are taking advantage of the transitional period," Kosh Raj Koirala, crime reporter at the English-language Kathmandu Post, told AFP.

"The criminals are targeting rich businessmen, whose family members are kidnapped for ransom. Most of the cases have gone unnoticed as victims are reluctant to seek police help," said Aryal.

Former French president Jacques Chirac was questioned Thursday by a judge looking into a party funding scam dating from his time as mayor of Paris, judicial officials said.

Two months after leaving office, Chirac, 74, was interviewed as an "assisted witness" in the presence of his lawyer -- rather than as an ordinary witness -- which means that the possibility of criminal charges against him remains open, Le Monde newspaper reported.

The interview with judge Alain Philibeaux, which lasted about four hours, took place at Chirac's office on the rue de Lille in Paris's Left Bank.

"You will have noticed that this was an interview which within a judicial context was relatively short, it went ahead calmly and courteously," Chirac's lawyer, Jean Veil said after the interview ended just after 1:30 pm (1130 GMT).

Huge steam pipe blast kills one in New York

AP, New York

An underground steam pipe explosion tore through a Manhattan street near Grand Central Terminal on Wednesday, swallowing a tow truck and killing one person as hundreds of others ran for cover amid a towering geyser of steam and flying rubble. Mayor Michael Bloomberg said the explosion was not terrorism, though the blast caused a brief panic about a possible attack.

"There is no reason to believe whatsoever that this is anything other than a failure of our infrastructure," he said of the 24-inch steam pipe installed in 1924.

One person was pronounced dead at Bellevue Hospital from an apparent heart attack, Bloomberg said. About 30 people were injured, at least four seriously. Authorities could not immediately account for how the most seriously wounded

victims were injured.

The explosion caused widespread chaos as residents and commuters heard a huge blast and feared for the worst. Thousands of commuters evacuated the train terminal, some at a run, after workers yelled for people to get out of the building.

A geyser of steam and mud shot from the centre of the blast, generating a tremendous roar. The initial burst of steam rose higher than the nearby 77-story Chrysler Building, one of Manhattan's tallest buildings.

A city bus was abandoned in the middle of Lexington Avenue, covered with grit. A woman who was bleeding profusely was being helped by police while a man lay on a stretcher in the street.

Soot fell from the sky, covering some pedestrians. Others looked wet. The sky was blackened. And people wandered aimlessly, not knowing where to go.



PHOTO: AFP
A firefighter walks past the scene of a steam pipe explosion on Lexington Avenue Wednesday in New York City. Steam and mud were forced from the ground near Grand Central Station on East 41st street from Third to Lexington Avenue forcing people to evacuate the area and also causing subway delays.

Hekmatyar declares ceasefire

AFP, Kabul

Afghan rebel leader and former premier Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has announced a ceasefire with the government, a statement carrying Hekmatyar's signature said yesterday.

But a man who claims to be spokesman for Hekmatyar denied that the rebel chief had issued any such statement, saying that it was cooked up by Afghan and foreign spies.

Hekmatyar is believed to be hiding in eastern Afghanistan or Pakistan while leading his Hizb-i-Islami (Islamic Party) faction. A one-time anti-Soviet fighter, he has been declared a wanted terrorist by the United States.

The statement in Pashto language, which has Hekmatyar's photo on top and his purported signature at the bottom, was aired by a local TV station and circulated among officials.

Read by telephone to AFP by a national security council official, it calls on Afghanistan's Taliban militia and other opponents of Karzai to end violence. Its authenticity could not be confirmed.

"Hezb-e-Islami members have refrained from killing brothers (fellow Afghans) and the destruction of the country and have resumed political activities," the statement read.

The group "has come to the conclusion that with fighting one can neither build a government nor a country. We have experienced this in the past 20 years of war," it said.