

Lankan president rules out snap election

Bomb found near president's meeting

AFP, Nawalapitiya

Sri Lanka's president has ruled out a snap parliamentary election to increase his slender majority, after battlefield success against the Tamil Tiger rebels boosted his government.

President Mahinda Rajapakse said he was keen that the current parliament serve its full six-year term. It was elected in April 2004, while the president came to power in November 2005.

"I am not interested in calling a snap election," the president told AFP late Saturday on the sidelines of his first public rally, in Nawalapitiya, central Sri Lanka, after troops captured the rebels' final bastion in the east.

"This is a very favourable time for our party, but I don't want to go for another general election and

spend two billion rupees (18 million dollars) to conduct that election.

"I can build a few more roads with that money. We have a stable government and I want other parties too to unite and move forward."

Blue flags signifying his party and banners welcoming him as a hero were raised across Nawalapitiya.

"Welcome our hero," said one blue-and-white banner. "Mahinda to secure our tomorrow," said another.

Maithripala Sirisena, the secretary of Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), said Saturday's public rally represented the first in a series due across the country.

"We want to use these engagements to respond to some of the key issues as well as respond to criticism by the opposition,"

Sirisena said.

Two SLFP dissidents last week formed an alliance with the main opposition in the first open bout of defiance since Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency.

Rajapakse's minority government secured a simple majority in the 225-member assembly in February after engineering the defection of 17 opposition legislators.

Local media reports have speculated that Rajapakse may opt for an early election to capitalise on the government's recent military victory.

Rajapakse told a large public gathering in Nawalapitiya, 150 kilometres (93 miles) east of Colombo, that he wanted unity among parties to end the tropical island's drawn out ethnic conflict.

Last week, Rajapakse said the

Tamil Tigers must decide between war and peace, and that he was prepared for both.

Meanwhile, a powerful bomb was found at a market along a road leading to a conference venue where Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse addressed workers from his Freedom Party Sunday, police said.

The bomb weighing about eight kilograms (17.5 pounds) was hidden in a bag at the roadside market in the Colombo suburb of Delkanda, police said.

"The bomb was rigged up with a timing device," a police officer at the scene said. "But it was not primed to go off. We suspect that the attacker dumped it hastily because of tight security in the area."



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse (R) hands over keys to a house built by local volunteers for a government soldier during a public rally Saturday in the central tea-growing region of Nawalapitiya. Rajapakse ruled out snap elections to improve his parliamentary majority by building on a popular military campaign against Tamil Tiger rebels.

No talks with CM: Mamata

TIMES NEWS NETWORK, Kolkata

Trinamul Congress chief Mamata Banerjee on Saturday ruled out talks with chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee saying that he lacked "credibility".

Mamata wanted the chief minister to own up responsibility for the Nandigram killings and step down, leaving enough indications that she will maintain her defiant stance till the panchayat polls.

"I can't go for talks with a person who has no credibility and who is responsible for loss of lives in Nandigram. He has to resign," Mamata said amid applause from a huge gathering that stalled the traffic at Esplanade for quite a few hours.

The Trinamul chief urged her supporters to take on CPM politically. Calling this strategy "Operation CPM", Mamata said: "We need to fight them tooth and nail, or else they will get us. Are you ready for an intense political battle?" The crowd roared to voice their assent.

With an eye on next year's panchayat election, the Trinamul chief asked her followers to start the groundwork now. "We need to organise political workshops at the grass-roots level. I know CPM is trying to hatch a conspiracy before the Haldia polls. They don't believe in political courtesy," Mamata said.

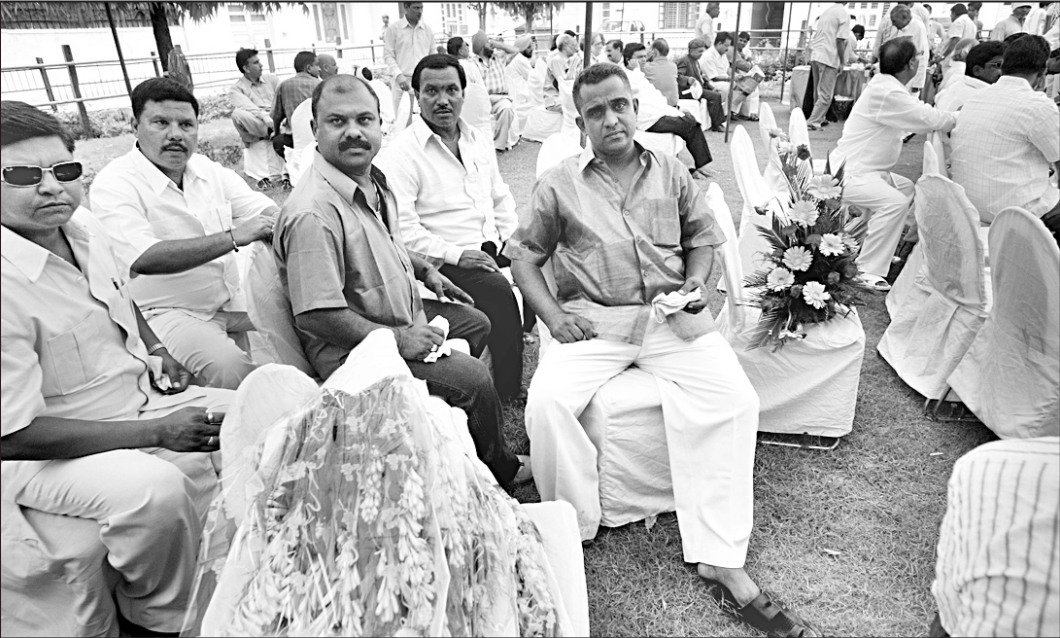


PHOTO: AFP

Congress party workers from the Indian state of Maharashtra wait to meet and congratulate president-elect Pratibha Patil in New Delhi yesterday. India's first female president, Pratibha Patil, savoured her election win as supporters hailed the victory as a significant step forward for women in the South Asian nation.

26 Polish pilgrims killed in French bus crash

AFP, Grenoble

At least 26 people were killed Sunday when a coach carrying Polish pilgrims skidded and fell down a ravine near Grenoble in the French Alps, emergency services said.

Twenty-four people were injured, 14 of them seriously, they said.

The coach, with 49 passengers and two drivers on board, was going down a steep and winding road between Gap and Grenoble in eastern France when it had problems with its brakes at around 9:30 am (0730 GMT) near the town of Vizille, officials said.

The coach tour was returning from the Roman Catholic shrine of Notre Dame de la Salette, where the Virgin Mary is believed to have

appeared to two children in 1846.

The coach from Poland smashed through the safety barrier on the side of the road and hurtled 40 metres (130 feet) onto the banks of the river Romanche below.

It burst into flames as it came to rest beside the river and was gutted by fire. Local people rushed to the scene and tried to put out the blaze with buckets of water.

Large numbers of rescue workers were at the scene after the local prefecture -- or governor's office -- activated an emergency plan. The injured were shuttled to hospitals by ambulance and helicopter.

Divers were called to the scene to search for victims who may have been thrown into the river.

Blair to meet Abbas, Olmert tomorrow

AFP, Jerusalem

Tony Blair, the new special envoy for the Middle East peace Quartet, will meet Palestinian and Israeli leaders tomorrow during his first visit to the region in his new role, officials said.

Blair will meet Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in Ramallah in the afternoon and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem in the evening. Palestinian and Israeli officials said.

The former British prime minister will arrive in the region on Monday for a three-day visit, his first as the Quartet's new special envoy, his spokesman told AFP.

Delhi, Naga rebels to decide on ceasefire on July 30-31

PTI, New Delhi

The government and NSCN-IM are expected to decide on extending the 10-year-old ceasefire in Nagaland in their talks to be held in Dimapur on July 30-31 amid indications that the rebels have hardened their stance on the demand for "sovereignty".

NSCN-IM's move to insist on another round of talks on extending the truce, which ends on July 31, is being seen in the Union home ministry as part of pressure tactics to get the government to agree to its controversial demands, including the unification of Naga-inhabited areas of the northeast.

There were indications that the ceasefire could be extended only for six months, unlike last July's one year.

Though top rebel leader VS

Atem said talks between the NSCN-IM and government in New Delhi on Friday were held in a "very positive" atmosphere and both sides respected each other's position, sources said the rebels had hardened their position on the key "sovereignty" issue and sought a commitment from the Centre on it.

"The issues of unification of Naga-inhabited areas and sovereignty indeed figured in the discussions," a senior NSCN-IM leader said.

Sources said the rebels wanted to know why the ceasefire should be extended if it "did not serve any purpose". They questioned New Delhi's response to their proposals made six years ago for a settlement raised queries about what the government is willing to commit to the Nagas, the sources said.

4 militants killed in Gaza clashes

AFP, Gaza City

At least two activists of militant Palestinian group Islamic Jihad were killed on Sunday in an Israeli air raid in the north of the Gaza Strip, medical sources said.

The deaths followed the killing of two Hamas militants by Israeli gunfire earlier in the day, also in Gaza.

The air strike was against a group of men firing rockets at Israel in the Beit Hanun sector of the impoverished coastal strip, the sources said.

The Israeli army confirmed the air raid.

"We targeted two men firing rockets at Israel. We apparently hit

them," an army spokesman said.

Earlier, an Israeli woman was lightly injured by a rocket attack launched by Gaza-based Palestinian militants against the southern town of Sderot, medical sources said.

The two Hamas activists were killed early morning on the northern border of the Gaza Strip, the armed wing of the Islamist movement announced.

"Two of our fighters were killed in an exchange of fire" with the Israeli army, the Ezzedin Al-Qassam Brigades said.

Palestinian medical sources said the two men were killed near the electric fence surrounding the Gaza Strip, near Beit Lahiya.

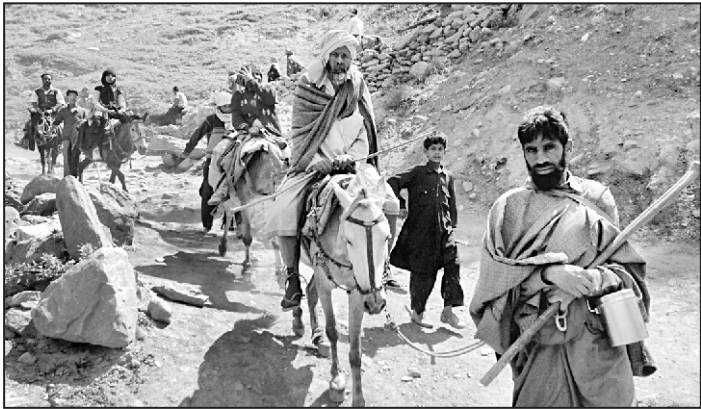


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Hindu pilgrims trek through the mountains on their way to the Amarnath cave during the two-month pilgrimage at Dumail Baltal, some 134km northeast of Srinagar yesterday.

Manila, Moro rebels prepare for war

AFP, Manila

Muslim separatist rebels in the Philippines said yesterday they were prepared for all-out war with the military, and pledged not to surrender those responsible for last week's deadly ambush of 14 Marines.

Fighters from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) on southern Basilan island "will defend themselves to the death," rebel spokesman Eid Kabalu said.

"They will live and die in Basilan. The MILF is prepared for any eventuality, while staying on a defensive mode," Kabalu told AFP by telephone from his base in the southern Philippines.

Armed forces chief General Hermogenes Esperon had given the MILF until the end of Sunday to turn over those behind the deaths of the Marines, 10 of whom were

beheaded and mutilated, or face a military offensive.

The Marines were on a search mission for kidnapped Italian priest Giancarlo Bossi when they were ambushed by MILF rebels, allegedly assisted by al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf militants.

Bossi, who was freed Thursday, has said he was never on Basilan during his ordeal.

The 12,000-strong MILF, which has a three-year-old truce in place, admits its forces attacked the marines after they entered MILF territory without advance notice, but denies any role in the beheadings.

Although he repeated the denial on Sunday, Kabalu said any MILF forces found to be involved in the beheadings would be punished by the rebels themselves, and not turned over to the government.

Pakistani troops kill 19 militants

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani troops killed 19 militants in clashes near the Afghan border, officials said Sunday, a day after the US president fully backed Islamabad's efforts to combat extremism.

Six rebels died in a gunbattle Sunday after they ambushed a troop convoy with a roadside bomb in the tribal agency of North Waziristan, where fighting continued with helicopter gunships, the army said.

Troops also killed 13 pro-Taliban fighters in overnight clashes after the rebels attacked several military checkpoints in the lawless region, where authorities were simultaneously trying to revive a 10-month-old peace deal.

Fighting in the rugged border lands has intensified amid a wave of Islamist bloodshed that has killed more than 200 people nationwide, sparked by the army's storming of the radical Red Mosque in Islamabad earlier this month.

US President George W Bush in his weekly radio address Saturday linked the US global campaign against al-Qaeda to Pakistan's efforts to quell Islamist violence, including the deadly storming of the pro-Taliban mosque.

Bush expressed full US support for embattled Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's efforts "to rid

all of Pakistan of extremism" including an al-Qaeda "safe haven" in western tribal areas.

In the first attack on Saturday night in North Waziristan, chief military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad said four "miscreants" were killed when they attacked a checkpoint and security forces returned fire.

"After some time they attacked five other security posts in the area and nine other militants were killed," Arshad told AFP. "The miscreants have fled with the bodies, but security forces have arrested seven people."

In another attack Sunday, seven soldiers were wounded when a roadside improvised explosive device hit their convoy as it passed Qutab Khel village, six kilometres (four miles) east of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan.

Just after the blast militants fired on troops from nearby hills and the soldiers returned fire in a clash that was ongoing, the official said.

Security forces are using artillery, he said. Helicopter gunships were also taking part in the clash, local sources said.

Authorities on Sunday also found the body of a pro-government tribal elder dumped, along with his severed head, by a road in the neighbouring tribal district of South Waziristan, secu-

rity officials said.

Amid the violence, a delegation of elders and religious leaders drawn from Pakistan's seven tribal districts bordering Afghanistan on Sunday continued negotiations over the collapsed peace accord in North Waziristan.

The deal, signed in September, was heavily criticised by Washington and Kabul. Militants tore it up a week ago amid complaints about new checkpoints in the area and a lack of compensation for damage in previous army operations.

Bush in his radio address backed the military action and insisted that Musharraf had recognised that the September 2006 deal with tribal chiefs to police their own region had failed and that he was "taking active steps to correct it."

"Earlier this month, he sent in Pakistani forces to go after radicals who seized control of a mosque, and then he delivered a speech vowing to rid all of Pakistan of extremism," the US president said.

"Pakistani forces are in the fight, and many have given their lives," he said. "The United States supports them in these efforts. And we will work with our partners to deny safe haven to the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan -- or anywhere else in the world."

US offers next generation F-35 fighters to India

PTI, New Delhi

In a major move, the United States has sent feelers that it is now ready for transfer of hi-technology weaponry to India, including its 5th generation Joint Strike Fighter F-35.

Though Pentagon has offered New Delhi participation in its missile shield, top of the shelf 4th generation F-16 and F-18/A fighters, weapon locating radars and its new brand of long range maritime reconnaissance aircraft, it has so far kept

the F-35 under wraps.

But in a surprise move last week, a high-level team from US Defence Major Lockheed Martin met top officials of the Indian Air Force to convey that the F-35 Lightning-II was available for IAF's 5th generation fighter requirements.

Lockheed Martin's Vice President for Business Development, Rob Weiss told PTI after the meeting that they had indicated that the F-35 was ready to be in reckoning for India's fighter

needs beyond the induction of the 126 Multi Role Combat Aircraft.

The offer would come in handy for India as the country's security experts have been struggling to find partners to develop futuristic 5th generation fighters.

Though New Delhi has been in negotiation with Moscow for joint development and joint investment in next generation fighters, the Russian concepts of such fighters is currently only on the drawing board.