

## Lanka war takes toll on innocents

AP, Kilinochchi

Palani Amma Subramaniyam sits in quiet despair, surrounded by woven baskets and terra cotta pots in her deserted market stall in rebel-controlled territory in northern Sri Lanka.

"That small period was the best time of my life. And now I'm getting close to dying and I don't know how things will turn out," Subramaniyam said.

A partial economic blockade of the rebel areas that has been in place for nearly a year has badly damaged the economy. Unemployment has exploded, incomes have fallen and the price of everything from chicken to baby formula has soared.

With a gas embargo imposed by the Sri Lankan government, the streets are nearly empty of cars and trucks. Instead, they are filled with bicycles and motorcycles that are rigged to run on kerosene and trail a thick, syrupy smell behind them.

The recent return to open warfare between the government, dominated by the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, and Tamil rebels demanding a separate state for the Hindu minority, has plunged the already poor people of the rebels' mini-state in parts of the north into financial despair.

The government restricts access to the rebel areas, but in a rare visit by reporters, residents usually fright-

"Economically, it's a disaster," said Kandiah Mylvaganam, a Tamil activist.

## Pak opposition leader demands resignation of Musharraf

AP, Lahore

An outspoken Pakistani opposition leader yesterday demanded that President Gen Pervez Musharraf step down so upcoming elections could be held free of his military government's interference.

Javed Hashmi, the acting leader of exiled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's party, spoke at a news conference Sunday, a day after being released from prison on bail after serving four years of a 23-year sentence for trying to incite a mutiny against Musharraf.

He said Musharraf should allow Sharif and another exiled former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, to return to Pakistan to contest legislative elections due by early 2008. Presidential elections are also expected soon, with Musharraf likely to seek another five-year term.

Hashmi said Musharraf should step down to prove that he was committed to free and fair elections.

"A man who held presidential elections according to his own wish, how can he be expected to hold transparent elections," Hashmi said at a news conference in the eastern city of Lahore.

Musharraf is facing the toughest period of his rule since he ousted Sharif in a bloodless coup eight years ago, with a combination of rising militant violence and growing political demands for the restoration of full democracy.

Attacks and clashes on Saturday killed 23 people in the northern tribal regions, where pro-Taliban militants have been waging a campaign against Musharraf's administration, a key US ally in the fight against terrorism. It was the latest in almost daily violence that has killed more than 350 people in the past month.

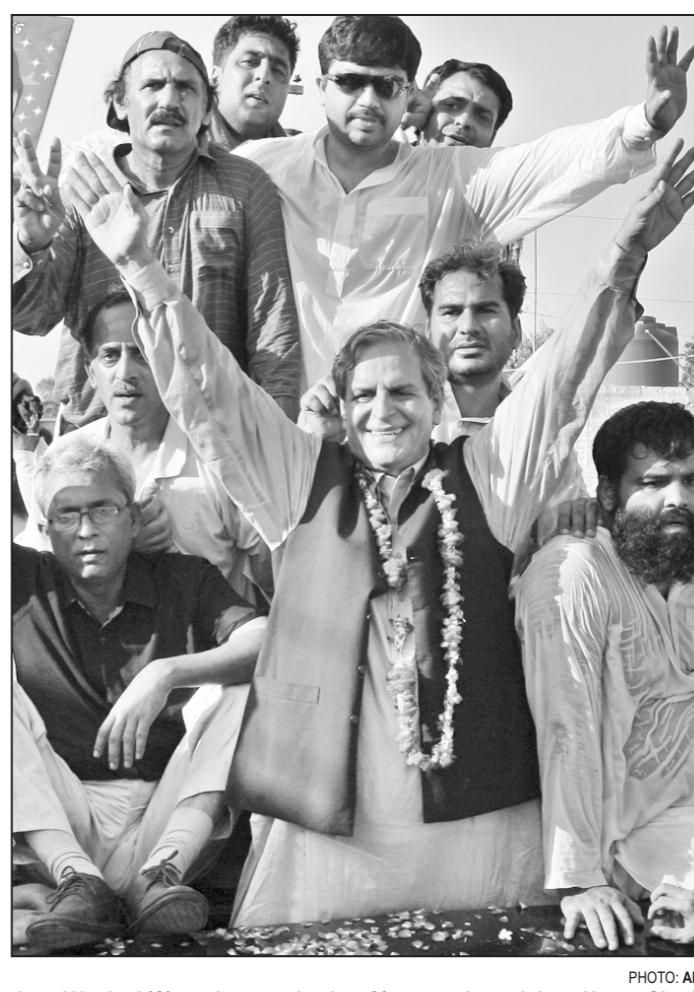
The Supreme Court granted Hashmi bail Friday on charges of treason and inciting an army mutiny against Musharraf. Hashmi will be free while the court considers whether it should review his case, which rights and opposition groups have criticised as politically motivated.

Hashmi told hundreds of members of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N who had gathered to greet him outside prison on Saturday that "true freedom for me will come the day when we will get rid of those generals who toppled the elected government."

In remarks aired Sunday, Benazir reiterated her demand that Musharraf quit the army if he wants another term as president.

"We are opposed to everything to do with a uniformed presidency whether it is elections now or tomorrow or the day after," Benazir said in comments broadcast by Geo TV.

Benazir said her party has not yet decided whether to support Musharraf in his re-election bid, stand its own candidate for president, or boycott the vote.



Javed Hashmi (C), senior party leader of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, waves to supporters and activists after his release from Kot Lakhpat central jail in Lahore on Saturday.

## Indo-US nuke deal to rock parliament

PTI, New Delhi

The monsoon session of Parliament beginning this week is expected to be a tumultuous affair with the opposition raising doubts over the Indo-US nuclear deal, being tom-tommed as the best possible pact by the government.

The month-long session beginning on August 10 will witness the vice presidential election on the opening day itself, and the victory of UPA-Left nominee Hamid Ansari appears to be a mere formality.

The opposition BJP is training its guns on the government and has demanded the setting up of a Joint Parliamentary Committee to examine the text of the 123 agreement to implement the civil nuclear deal with the US. It also wants parliamentary approval to be secured before the deal is signed.

The BJP has dubbed the pact as an "assault" on the country's nuclear sovereignty and its foreign policy options, and has made it clear that it is "unable to accept this agreement as finalised".

The Left parties, key outside supporters of the ruling UPA, have not revealed their stand on this issue as they are still studying the document thoroughly, while the Third Front, formally known as the United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA), has upheld its ante against the deal.

## Rain compounds flood misery of Indians

AP, Barabanki

Torrential rains overnight compounded the misery of 2 million marooned Indian villagers, killing another 11 people and raising the death toll from house collapses and floods in South Asia to 240, officials said Sunday.

Helicopters have dropped food to hundreds of thousands of people left homeless. The Indian army helped civil authorities mount relief and rescue operations for those living since last week on highways, railroad tracks and high river embankments in northern India's Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states.

At least 240 people have been killed in India and neighbouring Bangladesh, and 19 million driven from their homes in recent days. The South Asian monsoon season runs from June to September as the rains work their way across the subcontinent, a deluge that scatters floods and landslides across the region and kills hundreds of people every year.

An aged couple and two of their relatives, who refused to leave their village, were crushed to death when their home collapsed on them Saturday night in Uttar Pradesh state, Surendra Srivastava, a police spokesman, said on Sunday.

"The Saturday night rains (in Uttar Pradesh state) have worsened the flood situation as rising river waters have entered villages forcing people to move to safer places," Srivastava said.

At least 11 people died on Saturday in Uttar Pradesh, mostly in house collapses, he said.

Helicopters continued food drops with packets containing gram powder, salt, candles and match boxes to stranded villagers in India.

The flood water was receding in eastern Bihar state where nearly 10 million people have been effected in 19 of the state's 36 districts, said Manoj Srivastava, the disaster management secretary. Weather has cleared with no rains for the past three days in the state.

"Once road links are restored, the flow of relief material will naturally improve," Srivastava said.

People have started returning to their homes in India's northeastern state of Assam, where nearly 200,000 people have been living in government and makeshift camps since last week. There have been no rains since Thursday, helping improve the flooding situation.

The number of dead in Bangladesh has risen to 81, the country's information ministry said. Raging floodwaters

have battered 38 out of 64 districts in the delta nation of 145 million people.

Fakhruddin Ahmed, head of Bangladesh's military-backed interim government, visited the northwestern district of Sirajganj on Saturday. Despite the devastation, he said the government had enough food and medicine to distribute and foreign assistance wasn't yet needed.

One person looking for that help was 45-year-old Aleya Begum, who took shelter on an embankment with more than 50 other families after their homes washed away in Pabna, 75 miles north of the capital, Dhaka.

She said the group was short of drinking water.

"I've lost everything. We need help from the government to survive," Begum said.

Low-lying areas around Dhaka were under neck-deep water, and many residents were using boats to travel around. Government meteorologists said water levels in Dhaka continued to rise.

So far this year, some 14 million people in India and 5 million in Bangladesh have been displaced by flooding, according to government figures.

## India retains N-test right, says Burns

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

nuclear testing," he said.

"The reality is that India is not in a situation where it is currently testing," he said. But if there is a nuclear test, then American law says the President of the USA would have to decide whether or not to ask for fuel and technology back, Burns said. He hoped the situation demanding recall of fuel and technology will not arise.

"India retains its sovereign rights, but the USA retains its legal rights as well," undersecretary of state Nicholas Burns said Saturday when asked if New Delhi has the right to test.

Burns explained that four specific fuel assurances that President Bush made to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on 2 March, 2006 had been written verbatim in Hyde Act. One of the assurances is that the USA will help India create a multilateral reserve of fuel. He said the USA intends to be "very supportive" of India at the Nuclear Suppliers Group meeting and help convince other countries that the Indo-US nuclear deal was in everyone's interests.

Two US lawmakers have expressed reservations over the civilian nuclear agreement with India, and said the accord needed to be examined in the context of New Delhi's "deepening" relations with Tehran. Illeana Ros-Lehtinen, a lawmaker from President Bush's Republican Party, issued a statement voicing concern over grant of reprocessing right to India and ambiguity over action that could be taken if New Delhi were to conduct an atomic test.



A man rows a boat near his submerged home at Amlighat, about 85km east of Guwahati, in India's Assam state on Saturday. Torrents of water washed away homes, crops and cows, leaving hungry and frightened villagers perched in trees or on roofs.

## Taliban, Koreans talk over meeting venue

AP, Kandahar

Face-to-face talks between the Taliban and South Korean officials over the fate of 21 hostages will not happen unless the officials travel to Taliban territory or the UN guarantees the militants' safety elsewhere, a purported spokesman said yesterday.

The spokesman, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, said the militants had talked to the Korean officials "many times" over the phone the last three days but that there had been "no results."

"We gave them two choices: either come to Taliban-controlled territory or meet us abroad," Ahmadi said from an unknown location. "They accepted these options and told us, 'We are trying to persuade the UN to give you a guarantee to meet us in another country.'"

"The Koreans also said if the UN did not agree to give the Taliban a guarantee we will come to your areas to meet. They have not done any of the above promises yet," he said.

A UN spokesman said the interna-

tional body was "fully supporting" efforts by the South Korean and Afghan governments to resolve the crisis.

"We are obviously aware of the unconfirmed reports suggesting that those holding the aid workers have requested our assistance to meet with the South Korean delegation at a neutral venue, but we have not been approached directly on this issue," said Dan McNorton of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

Twenty-three South Koreans from a church group were kidnapped by the Taliban on July 19 while traveling from Kabul to Kandahar to work on medical and other aid projects. Two of the male hostages have been executed. Among the remaining 21 hostages, 16 are women.

The Taliban have demanded that 23 militant prisoners being held by Afghanistan and at the US base at Bagram be freed in exchange for the Koreans' lives, but the Afghan government has all but ruled out that option,

saying it would encourage more kidnappings.

An official at the Korean Embassy in Kabul said the location of a potential meeting between the Koreans and the Taliban was not important. Asked if paying a ransom is an option, he declined to comment. He spoke on condition he not be identified in line with embassy rules.

South Korea has appealed to the United States to get more involved in the negotiation process, and the Koreans are expected to be one of the topics on the agenda for Afghan President Hamid Karzai and President Bush when they meet at Camp David on Sunday and Monday.

Ahmadi said the Taliban have been waiting for negotiations to start and have extended many deadlines to the Koreans' lives.

If an agreement is not reached for in-person negotiations, then the Taliban will not be responsible for "anything bad" that happens to the hostages, Ahmadi said.

dent said.

The Taliban insurgency began months after their 2001 ouster by US forces and has intensified recently, having already claimed thousands of lives, mainly of militants.

But a counter-offensive by US-led and NATO forces has led to increasing civilian deaths, and Karzai has angrily accused foreign soldiers of an "extreme use of force."

Experts say Karzai, who was on the way to the United States early Sunday, is especially interested in reducing the civilian casualties as the largely Western forces intensify bombing raids on hideouts of the Taliban, which has increasingly adopted Iraqi-style insurgency tactics such as suicide bombings and kidnappings.

## US, Afghan presidents to talk Taliban surge

AP, Washington

US President George W Bush is to welcome Afghanistan's leader Hamid Karzai to his Camp David retreat Sunday for talks expected to focus on the Taliban insurgency and mounting civilian casualties.

The White House said they would discuss security and the US-led "war on terror" and "review their work together to enhance Afghanistan's long-term democracy, prosperity, and security."

They would also discuss ways of improving governance and fighting corruption including the drug trade, as well as measures to boost the Afghan economy and step up the battle against Taliban and other militants, the office of the US presi-

dent said.

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## Poppy cultivation skyrockets in Afghanistan

AP, Washington

Afghanistan will produce another record poppy harvest this year that cements its status as the world's near-sole supplier of the heroin source, yet a furious debate over how to reverse the trend is stalling proposals to cut the crop, US officials say.

As President Bush prepares for weekend talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, divisions within the US administration and among Nato allies have delayed release of a \$475 million counternarcotics program for Afghanistan, where intelligence officials see growing links between drugs and the Taliban, the officials said.

UN figures to be released in



Afghan women hold photographs of their missing loved ones during a demonstration in front of the United Nations office in Kabul yesterday. More than 100 people, many of them widows, held up images of loved ones missing in Afghanistan's decades of war in a sombre demonstration prompted by the discovery of a new mass grave.