

Lankan military kills 41 rebels in fresh fighting

Six soldiers also slain, bomb found in Colombo VIP area

AP, AFP, Colombo

Government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels battled each other with rifles, mortars and artillery across northern Sri Lanka yesterday, in fighting that killed 41 rebels and six soldiers, the military said.

In the worst violence in the Mannar district just south of rebel-held territory, guerrilla fighters attacked soldiers in an offensive aimed at recapturing land the military seized over the weekend, military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said.

The military repelled the attack in a battle that left 35 rebels and six soldiers dead, he said. Also on Monday, soldiers killed four guerrillas in a pre-dawn clash in the northern Jaffna peninsula, Nanayakkara said. Troops suffered no casualties.

Troops killed two rebel fighters in separate fighting in the Vavuniya district, and discovered more than

400 anti-personnel mines in caches in the area, he said.

Fighting across northern Sri Lanka - where the separatist rebels control a de facto state - has intensified in recent months, following the government's victory over the Tamil Tigers in eastern Sri Lanka in July. Senior officials have said they hope to finally destroy the group.

A series of attacks over the weekend killed a total of 56 rebels and six soldiers, the military said.

Rebel spokesman Rasiah Ilanthirayan said large battles had taken place in the north, but said the military's death tolls were inaccurate. He did not provide figures of his own, saying they were not yet available.

Each side routinely exaggerates the other's casualty numbers and plays down its own. Independent confirmation of the casualties was not available because access to the conflict zone is restricted.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan forces

defused a package bomb hidden in the garden of a heavily guarded Colombo apartment building filled with lawmakers' homes Monday, just days after two bombings blamed on the rebels killed 20 civilians, the military said.

The 1.2 kilogram (2.7 pound) explosive - discovered by a resident - was presumed to be an assassination attempt on the air force chief, Air Marshall Roshan Goonetilleke, whose house is located nearby, Nanayakkara said.

"There are so many senior officers living there - including parliamentarians, military officers - it is not possible to say who (the target) is. But we suspect they targeted the air force commander," he said.

The bomb attempt appeared part of a new wave of attacks by the rebels in the capital that the military said showed how badly the rebels were suffering from the fighting in the north.

Australian PM ratifies Kyoto Protocol

AFP, Sydney

Labor Party leader Kevin Rudd became Australia's 26th prime minister Monday and immediately began dismantling the former government's policies by ratifying the Kyoto Protocol on climate change.

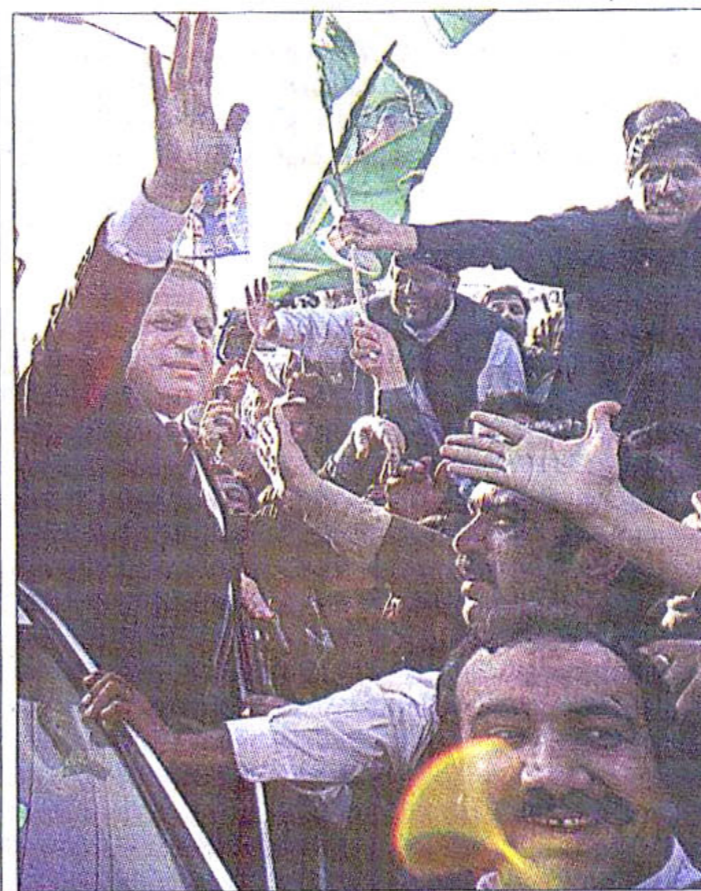
Rudd had pledged to commit Australia to the landmark United Nations treaty on greenhouse gas emissions as his first priority and kept his word after his official swearing in at Government House in Canberra.

"Today I have signed the instrument of ratification of the Kyoto Protocol," the former diplomat said in a statement.

"This is the first official act of the new Australian government, demonstrating my government's commitment to tackling climate change."

Rudd, who ousted conservative John Howard in elections nine days ago on a platform that included reversing the previous government's policy and ratifying Kyoto, had taken the oath of office just hours earlier.

The centre-left leader said ratification of the treaty on combating global warming was approved by the first meeting of the government's executive council and later by the governor general.



Pakistani former prime minister Nawaz Sharif (L) waves to his supporters upon arrival in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani authorities rejected Nawaz Sharif's candidacy for general elections to be held on January 8, 2008.

Putin's party wins crushing victory

AP, Moscow

Vladimir Putin's party won a crushing victory in parliamentary elections Sunday, paving the way for the authoritarian leader to remain in control even after he steps down as president.

The vote followed a tense Kremlin campaign that relied on a combination of persuasion and intimidation to ensure victory for the United Russia party and for Putin, who has used a flood of oil revenues to move his country into a more assertive position on the global stage.

"The vote affirmed the main idea: that Vladimir Putin is the national leader, that the people support his course, and this course will continue," party leader and parliament speaker Boris Gryzlov said after exit polls were announced.

Several opposition leaders accused the Kremlin of rigging the vote, and the Bush administration called for a probe into voting irregularities. Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov called the election "the most irresponsible and dirty" in the post-Soviet era and party officials vowed to challenge

theresults.

With ballots from nearly 98 percent of precincts counted, United Russia was leading with 64.1 percent, while the Communists trailed with 11.6 percent, the Central Election Commission said.

The Kremlin portrayed the election as a plebiscite on Putin's nearly eight years as president with the promise that a major victory would allow him somehow to remain leader after his second term ends next year.

Putin is constitutionally prohibited from running for a third consecutive term, but he clearly wants to stay in power. A movement has sprung up in recent weeks to urge him to become a "national leader," though what duties and powers that would entail are unclear.

Pollsters said United Russia's performance would give it an overwhelming majority of 306 seats in the 450-seat State Duma, or lower house. The Communists would have 57 seats.

Two other pro-Kremlin parties, the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and populist Just Russia, also appeared to have made it into parliament, with 8.2 percent and 7.6 percent, respectively.



Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez (R) exits the polling station, next to his daughter (C) and grandson, after voting in the constitutional referendum on Sunday in Caracas.

Chavez suffers stunning defeat in referendum

AP, Caracas

President Hugo Chavez suffered a stunning defeat Monday in a referendum that would have let him run for re-election indefinitely and impose a socialist system in this major US oil supplier.

Voters rejected the sweeping measures Sunday by a vote of 51 percent to 49 percent, said Tibisay Lucena, chief of the National Electoral Council. She said that with 88 percent of the votes counted, the trend was irreversible.

Opposition supporters shouted with joy as Lucena announced the results on national television early Monday, their first victory against Chavez after nine years of electoral defeats.

Some broke down in tears. Others began chanting: "And now he's going away!"

"This was a photo finish," Chavez told reporters at the presidential palace, adding that he has "heard the voice of the people and will always continue to hear it."

Chavez said his respect for the outcome should vindicate his standing as a democratic leader.

"From this moment on, let's be

calm," he declared. "There is no dictatorship here."

Critics including Roman Catholic leaders, press freedom groups, human rights groups and prominent business leaders feared the constitutional reforms would have granted Chavez unchecked power and threatened basic rights.

"Don't feel sad," Chavez urged supporters, who gave him a re-election victory with 63 percent of the vote exactly a year ago. He blamed the loss by "microscopic margins" on low turnout among his supporters. Voter participation was 56 percent overall.

The defeated reforms would have created new forms of communal property, let Chavez handpick local leaders under a redrawn political map, lengthened presidential terms from six to seven years and let Chavez seek re-election indefinitely. Now, Chavez will be barred from running again in 2012.

Other changes would have shortened the workday from eight hours to six, created a social security fund for millions of informal laborers and promoted communal councils where residents decide how to spend government funds.

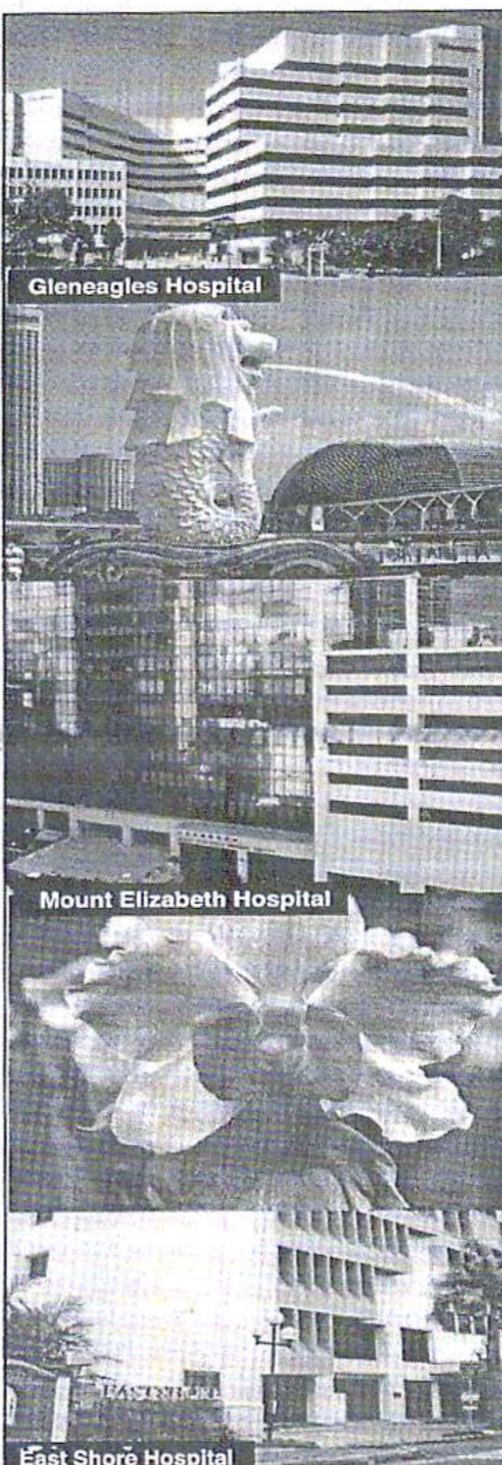
Bomb in Pakistani madrasa kills 6

AFP, Quetta

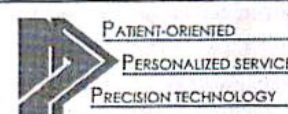
A powerful bomb ripped through an Islamic madrasa in troubled southwestern Pakistan on Monday, killing six people and injuring five others, an official said.

The bomb was hidden in a bundle of clothing left by an Afghan student after an overnight stay at the religious school in Qilla Saifullah, a town near the Afghan border in Baluchistan province, they said.

"Six people were killed and five others injured, all of them students at the Imdadul Uloom seminary, when a bomb hidden in the bundle exploded during a search," provincial home secretary Furqan Bahadur told AFP.



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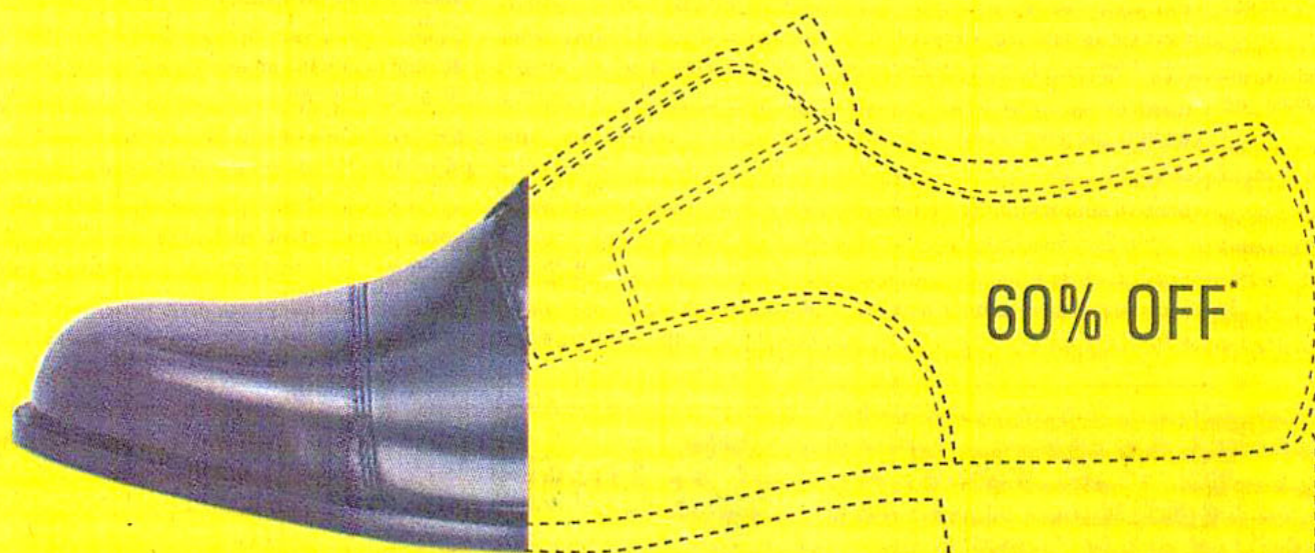
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