

Lanka court limits arrests as rights concerns mount

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court slapped restrictions on search and arrests by security forces on Monday amid mounting international concern over the country's human rights record.

Chief Justice Sarath Silva ordered authorities halt the night-time operations where areas are sealed off and searched after human rights groups accused authorities of harassing and intimidating residents.

The order came after international human rights groups expressed concern about civilian safety and threats to civil liberties after the government announced it was formally quitting a truce with Tamil Tiger rebels next week.

Monday's ruling marked the first time the court has intervened to impose limits on military action in carrying out the cordon-and-search operations, court officials said.

EU urges Lanka to offer rebels 'substantive devolution'

Colombo slams Nordic nations over truce remarks

AFP, Brussels/Colombo

The European Union on Monday called on the Sri Lankan government to offer "substantive devolution" to Tamil rebels as fierce fighting, renewed since Colombo scrapped a ceasefire, claimed more victims.

The Slovenian EU presidency voiced deep regret at the Sri Lankan government's decision to end the truce with the rebel Tamil Tigers, saying the decision further exacerbates an already violent situation.

"The EU calls upon the government of Sri Lanka to come forward with a substantive devolution offer around which negotiations can start, as soon as possible," the presidency said in a statement.

"For an arrangement to serve as a feasible basis for negotiations, it needs to go beyond past offers and the EU urges both parties to work towards a solution that would bring a peaceful and lasting resolution to the conflict."

Earlier Sri Lanka Monday took exception to a statement by Nordic nations, which voiced distress over the situation in the Indian ocean island, where the government abrogated an Oslo-arranged truce.

The foreign ministers of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland said in a joint statement last week that they were "deeply concerned about the worsening situation in Sri Lanka."

The remarks followed Colombo's decision to withdraw

from a 2002 ceasefire on January 16. Quitting the truce sparked fears of further violence in a country where 6,000 people have been killed in fighting between rebels and government soldiers in the past two years.

The Sri Lankan government said the Scandinavian statement was unhelpful and could lead to further polarisation of the ethnically divided nation, where Tamil Tiger rebels are fighting for full independence.

"The continuing good faith of the government of Sri Lanka received no plaudits from Scandinavia," the government's Peace Secretariat said in a statement.

"Continuing acts of terror by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) received no criticism."



A Sri Lankan army soldier stands guard at the site of a roadside bomb attack at Ja-Ela, a suburb of Colombo yesterday. Sri Lankan Minister of Nation Building DM Dassanayake was killed and 10 others wounded in a powerful roadside bomb attack by suspected Tamil Tiger rebels near the island's capital.

Kenyan opposition agrees to talks

AFP, Nairobi

Opposition leader Raila Odinga said yesterday he was prepared to meet President Mwai Kibaki to resolve Kenya's political deadlock but only if the African Union chief acted as mediator.

"He will not meet Kibaki for negotiations unless (Ghanaian President John Kufuor) is there," said Odinga's spokesman, Salim Lone.

Kufuor, the chairman of the African Union, was expected in Nairobi later Tuesday to help mediate an end to Kenya's political crisis after presidential elections that triggered an eruption of violence.

Kibaki's contested re-election victory over Odinga in last month's polls sparked nationwide riots and clashes that tore at Kenya's multi-ethnic fabric and left at least 600 people dead.

Attempts to bring the rival leaders together have so far failed, although Kibaki extended an invitation Monday to Odinga for face-to-face talks.

The opposition leader had previously made any negotiations conditional on the president acknowledging that the December 27 vote count was rigged.

Benazir husband slams Musharraf for death 'insult'

AFP, Naudero

Benazir Bhutto's husband has attacked Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf for saying the opposition leader was to blame for her own assassination by poking her head out of her car sunroof.

Asif Ali Zardari also told AFP that Musharraf's admission that a bullet may have killed her -- not a blow to the head from the sunroof lever as officials previously said -- showed the authorities had "something to hide."

"I think he is trying to shift responsibility, to say the least," Zardari, 51, said in an interview late Monday at the Bhutto family's ancestral home in the rural southern village of Naudero.

"She's on record of having written to him asking permission for international assistance and security which they denied her," said Zardari, who has called for a UN probe into his wife's death.



Pojaman Shinawatra, 51, wife of Thailand's ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra smiles as she arrives at the Court in Bangkok yesterday. Pojaman Shinawatra returned to Bangkok and was immediately taken to court to hear corruption charges against her, officials said.

Thaksin's wife arrested and then released on return to Thailand

AFP, Bangkok

The wife of Thailand's ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra returned yesterday to defend herself in court against charges of corruption, as her husband insisted on their innocence.

Pojaman Shinawatra, a shrewd political player in her own right, arrived in Thailand with her husband's political allies facing legal hurdles to forming a new government despite their victory in last month's general elections.

She was immediately escorted by police to the Supreme Court and then to the special investigations unit of the justice ministry to hear the corruption and fraud charges.

A short while later she was released after posting a total of six million baht (178,000 dollars) in bail. Pojaman smiled at the throngs of reporters who followed her every move but said nothing.

Dressed in a black suit and dark sunglasses, Pojaman was accompanied by her three children and

waved to the handful of supporters who had gathered on the sidewalk to greet her.

The 51-year-old has spent more than six months overseas with her husband while investigators here piled charges against them.

"She came here today to prove her innocence," her lawyer Noppadon Pattama told reporters after the court hearing.

She and Thaksin are both charged with corruption in the purchase of a plot of prime Bangkok real estate. Investigators say Pojaman used her husband's political influence to buy the land from a government agency at one-third of its estimated value.

They are also accused of making fraudulent filings to securities regulators in 2003 when they listed a property firm on the local exchange.

Pojaman, her step-brother Banpot Damapong and her personal secretary Kanchanapa Hongharn also face additional criminal charges of tax evasion.

New Hampshire vote dawns with Obama, McCain leading polls

AFP, Manchester

Democrat Barack Obama was poised to deal a second crushing blow to Hillary Clinton's White House hopes Tuesday and boost his quest to become the first black US president as New Hampshire voted in key presidential primaries.

Just five days after his Iowa triumph spun momentum into his White House quest, Obama enjoyed a solid lead in New Hampshire and for the first time shattered Clinton's advantage among Democratic voters nationally, polls showed.

The former first lady showed up with her daughter Chelsea outside a polling station in Manchester in a chill predawn and offered coffee to a clutch of her supporters holding signs and chanting "Hillary."

Asked how she was feeling, Hillary Clinton said, "really good," a day after she choked back tears on the campaign trail in a rare

emotional display, as the strain of her damaged White House bid showed through.

Republican John McCain meanwhile looked set to lock in his advantage over rival Mitt Romney, who needs a strong showing after coming in a grim second last week in the Iowa caucuses, which launched this year's White House race.

The tiny resort village of Dixville Notch, New Hampshire voted in the minutes after midnight (0500 GMT), with all 17 of its registered voters casting ballots, in keeping with an eccentric tradition.

Results written on a board showed Obama with seven votes; former senator with John Edwards with two; and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson one, on the Democratic side.

McCain was the Republican victor with four votes, while Romney took two and former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, one.

Pakistan needs to do more for 'credible' polls: British FM

AFP, London

Pakistan must do more to ensure "credible" elections next month, including freeing all political detainees and lifting remaining media curbs, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said Monday.

In a statement to lawmakers, he reiterated it was "regrettable" that elections were delayed by six weeks to February 18, following last month's assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto.

He welcomed Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's decision to stand down as army chief, to lift a state of emergency and most media restrictions and to release almost all political detainees.

"But more needs to be done, and we have continued to stress the Pakistani government's responsibility to create a level playing field under which credible and trans-

parent elections can take place," Miliband said.

"This means that all remaining political detainees need to be released and the remaining restrictions on the media must be lifted."

"We continue to call on the government of Pakistan to improve the prospects for credible elections, particularly by increasing transparency, both now and on election day itself."

This includes detailing where all the 54,000 polling stations will be, posting the results for each station publicly immediately after the count, "and ensuring that the media's ability to report is untrammelled," he said.

Miliband noted that a five-strong team of police from Scotland Yard had travelled to Pakistan to help investigate the death of Bhutto, a former prime minister who led the main opposition Pakistan People's Party.

Abbas-Olmert hold talks ahead of Bush trip

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian leaders were meeting yesterday to try to revitalise their hobbled peace negotiations on the eve of US President George W. Bush's regional tour.

Underscoring tensions in the volatile region, police said two rockets slammed overnight into northern Israel after being fired from neighbouring Lebanon, the first such incident in nearly seven months.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert hosted Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas at his Jerusalem residence for their second meeting since they relaunched peace talks at a US conference in late November.

Israeli settlements and military operations against Palestinian militants -- key sources of discord since talks were revived -- were due to feature prominently in Tuesday's meeting and during Bush's visit.

"The main issues to be discussed are how to make 2008 the year for a peace treaty putting an end to the occupation and allowing the realisation of the two state vision," senior Palestinian negotia-

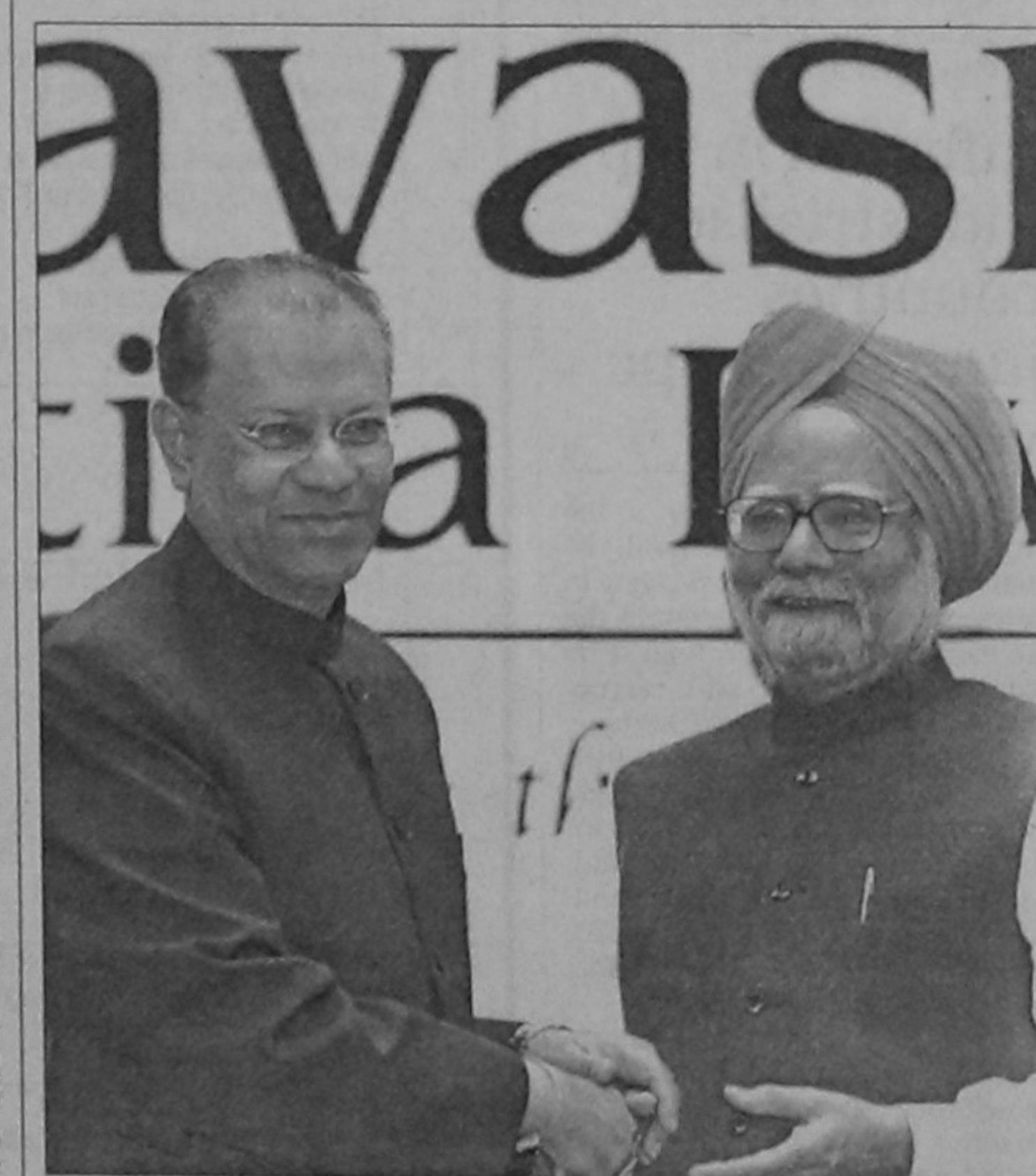
tor Saeb Erakat told AFP. "The continuation of the settlement activity and the Israeli aggressions... will also figure," he said, referring to incursions in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank, which have killed more than two dozen Palestinians, mostly militants, over the past 10 days.

A senior Israeli government official said Tuesday's meeting will "try to finalise an agreement on the structure and procedures of the peace talks... how to move forward."

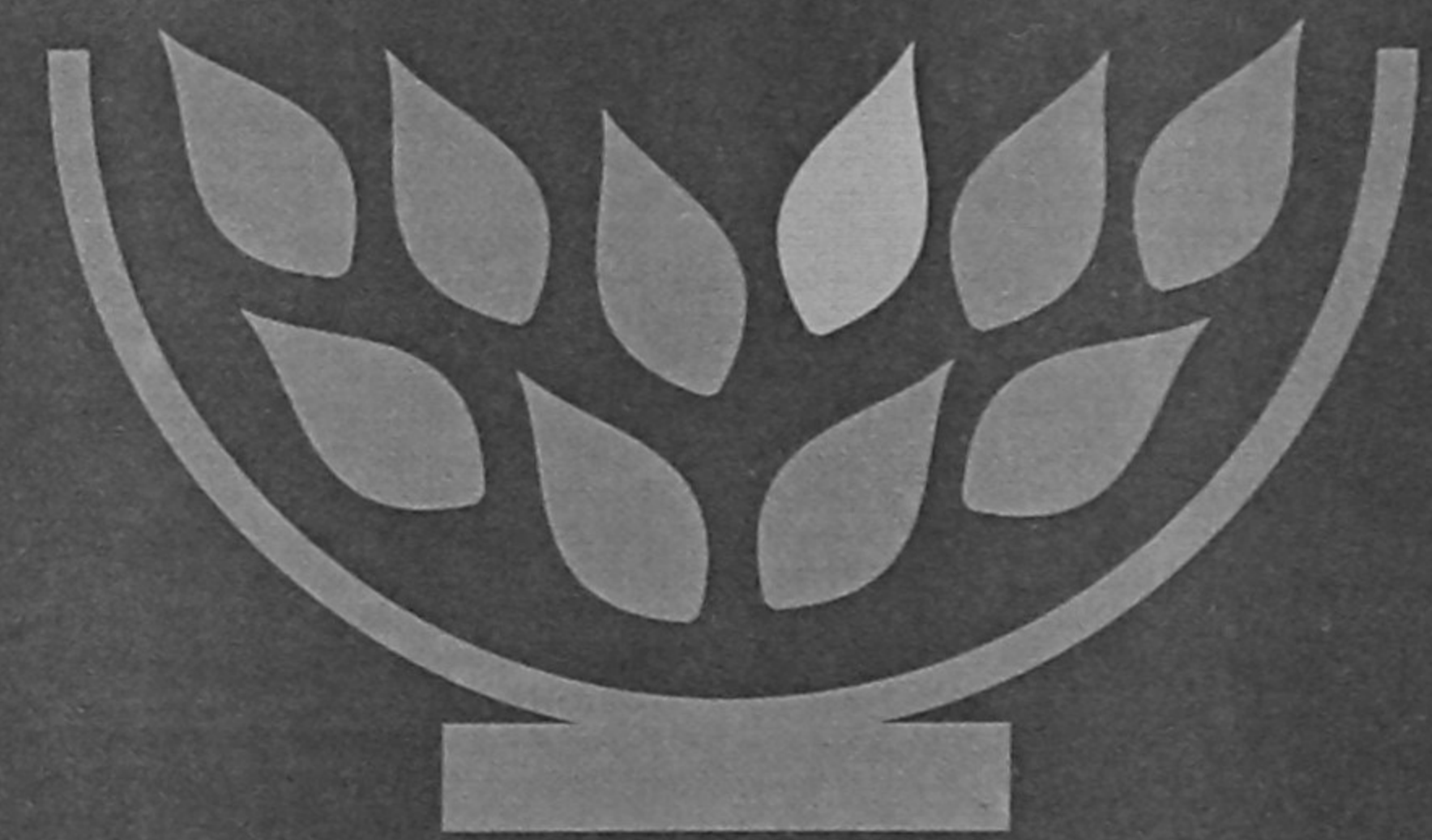
"We want to show Bush that significant progress has been made since Annapolis," when the two sides relaunched final status negotiations after a seven-year hiatus and pledged to aim for a peace deal by the end of 2008.

Negotiating teams led by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and former Palestinian premier Ahmed Qorei have failed to make much progress in several meetings since the Annapolis conference.

Late Monday, the teams could not reach an agreement over the logistics for the revived peace process. Livni and Qorei attended Tuesday's meeting between Abbas and Olmert, officials said.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) shakes hands with Mauritian Prime Minister Navinchandra Ramgoolam at the opening ceremony of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2008 in New Delhi yesterday. Some 1,500 delegates from 50 countries across the world have gathered for the annual three-day gathering of expatriate Indians.



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