

# India asks Lanka to extend truce, halt civilian deaths

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

With the humanitarian crisis aggravating in Sri Lanka, India yesterday urged Colombo to extend the pause in hostilities to enable civilians trapped in the war zone to move to safe areas and made it clear that any further civilian casualties will be 'totally unacceptable'.

The government of Sri Lanka must extend this pause in hostilities to prevent further casualties and enable trapped civilians to leave the area to secure locations," External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee said in a hard-hitting statement here.

"Continuation of precipitate military actions leading to further civilian casualties at this time would be totally unacceptable," Mukherjee added.

"While it is incumbent on the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to release all civilians and IDPs under their control, the government of Sri Lanka cannot be oblivious to the evolving human tragedy and the fate of the Tamil

civilian population caught up in the so-called no fire zone," he said.

"There is no reason not to continue with the pause in military actions in the no fire zone."

"India is deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka. The continuing conflict has taken a heavy toll on Tamil civilians and internally displaced persons caught in the crossfire."

"India expects the government of Sri Lanka and others concerned to respond positively to this appeal in the interest of the Tamils who are citizens of Sri Lanka," the minister said.

Sri Lanka announced a 48-hour temporary ceasefire to mark the Tamil and Sinhala New Year this week to enable civilians to leave the conflict zone. It resumed its offensive against the LTTE Wednesday.

Mukherjee also announced India's decision to send another consignment of 40,000 family packs -- containing commodities needed by families -- to the civilians hit by the conflict in northern Sri

Lanka.

New Delhi has sent medicines, food and other supplies to the civilian population in the conflict zone. A 62-member medical unit from India has treated more than 1,500 serious medical cases among civilians.

Mukherjee's statement comes a day after four Tamil MPs from Sri Lanka urged New Delhi to put pressure on Colombo to stop the war in the island nation to protect civilians caught up in the fighting.

The members of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which is sympathetic to the LTTE, conveyed the message to National Security Advisor MK Narayanan here late Wednesday.

Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians, their number put at more than 100,000 by some, are caught in a small strip of territory the LTTE still holds in Mullaitivu district.

The area where the civilians are holed up is known as a no-fire zone but reports say the military continues to target it in response to activities of the LTTE.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan army soldiers carry out a random search of a bus and its passengers at a checkpoint in Piliyandala suburb of Colombo yesterday. Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers believe the United Nations and foreign governments are tacitly supporting a military offensive that risks the lives of civilians, a pro-rebel website said.

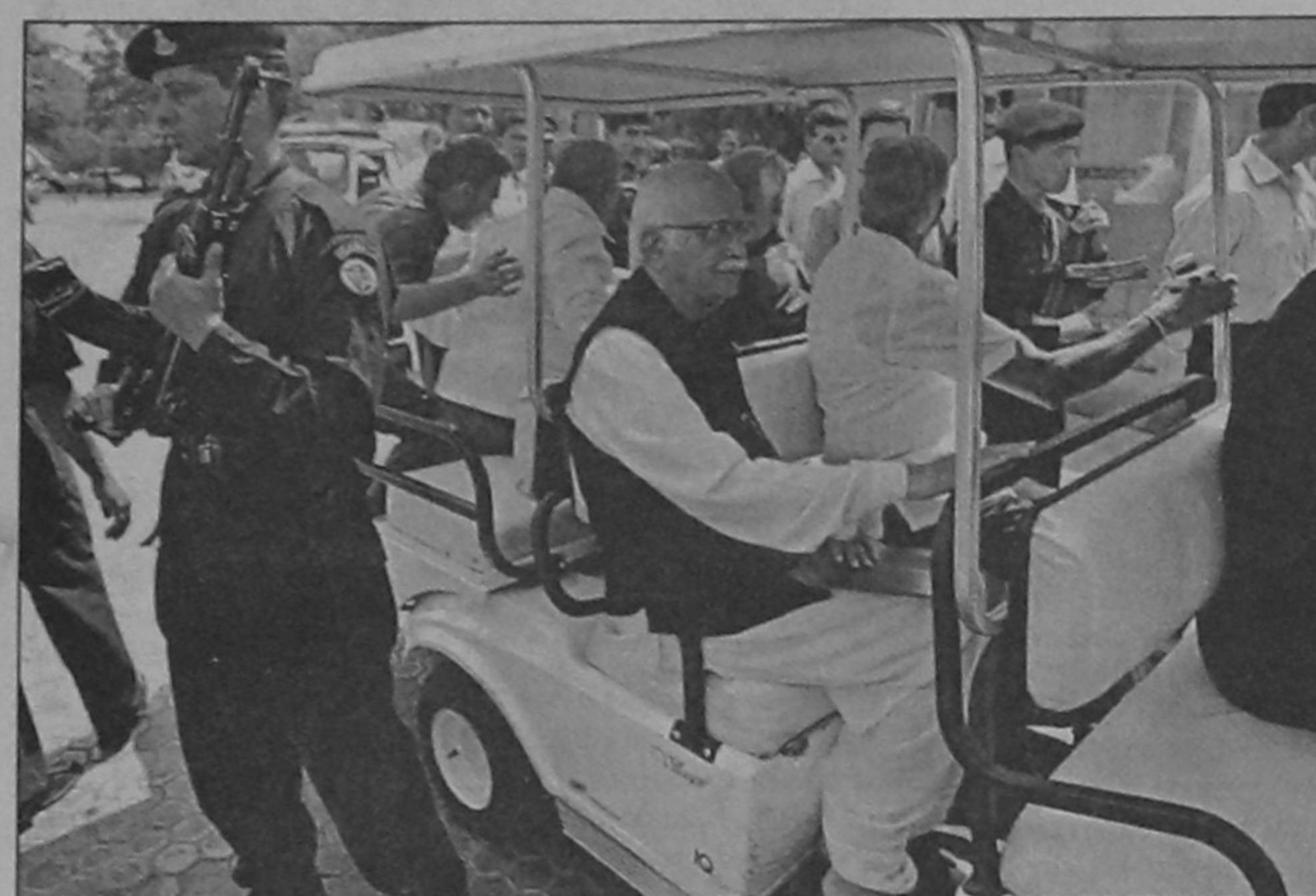


PHOTO: AFP

Opposition leader and right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) prime ministerial candidate LK Advani (C) gestures from a golf cart as he arrives for a press conference in Mumbai yesterday. Advani said that initiation of vigorous action to bring back Indian wealth hoarded in secret Swiss bank accounts will top the agenda of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) if given a clear mandate in the ongoing general elections.

# CPI-M accuses Congress, BJP of 'political match-fixing'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) has accused both the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of engaging in "political match-fixing" while ignoring "problems faced by the country and people."

"Both the Congress and the BJP appear to have adopted a trajectory of discourse during this election campaign that focuses on non-issues and inanities rather than on the problems faced by the country and people," noted the editorial comment in the latest issue of the party's mouthpiece People's Democracy.

"It is necessary that people see through this political match-fixing where both the BJP and the Congress seek electoral support without offering any alternative policy prescriptions that can provide relief to the people," it said.

The CPI-M said the two parties have not offered "anything substantial" for the people

on the issues like "the global economic recession and its impact on India."

"Both appear completely bereft on how to tackle this disastrous impact which has already seen the loss of over a crore of jobs, distress suicides and the sale of body organs by workers in misery to survive. Both seem to be in a complete state of denial on this score," the party said.

Referring to the verbal spats between Narendra Modi and Priyanka Gandhi as well as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and BJP leader LK Advani, the CPI-M asked: "Is this the sort of discourse that one would expect in the world's largest democracy with over 700 million voters?"

"It is clear that both the Congress and the BJP are avoiding any discussion on the basic issues affecting the people and their yearning for relief," the party said, adding it would strengthen the search among the people for a political alternative.



PHOTO: AFP

Newly-released Red Mosque chief cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz delivers a sermon during Juma prayers in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan released the hardline cleric on bail on Thursday, two years after he was captured after government forces besieged and stormed the mosque in July 2007, killing more than 100 people because al-Qaeda militants were allegedly holed up inside the building and an adjacent girls' school.

# Released cleric calls for Islamic order in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The most radical mosque in Islamabad reverberated Friday with calls for jihad as a cleric released on bail asked thousands of people to make sacrifices to turn Pakistan into an Islamic order.

Maulana Abdul Aziz, captured two years ago during a siege on the radical Red Mosque, was freed from house detention Thursday after the Supreme Court granted bail on a surety bond worth 200,000 rupees (2,500 US dollars).

The elderly cleric faces around two dozen cases involving terror, abduction and abetting the seizure of government property, but has yet

to stand trial.

"We will continue our struggle to enforce Islamic order in the country," said Aziz, delivering the main Friday sermon to nearly 4,000 worshippers overflowing from the Red Mosque.

"Will you render sacrifices?" he cried to a unanimous response of "yes".

"Will you go to jail? Will you render sacrifices for religion?" he shouted to replies of assent each time.

Members of the congregation frequently interrupted his sermon with chants of "Al-Jihad, Allahu Akbar (God is greater)" and "We salute the martyrs of the Red Mosque," in reference to those who died during the July 2007 government raid.

# Slush funds stashed abroad a threat to security: Advani

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Mumbai

Expressing apprehensions that Indian slush funds stashed abroad could be used for terrorism, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader L.K. Advani announced here Friday that if voted to power, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would bring back the money within 100 days.

Addressing the media here, Advani said the BJP has set up a special task force to ascertain the entire gamut of Indian slush funds deposited in foreign banks, including Swiss banks.

"The four-member task force has already submitted its interim report. Not just the Swiss banks, there are around 70 tax havens worldwide which are used to stash slush monies," Advani said, using the country's commercial capital to highlight the BJP's stance on black money.

Quoting from the report, he said anything between between Rs.25 lakh crore and Rs.70 lakh crore (Rs.25-70 trillion/\$503 billion-1.41 trillion) is lying abroad.

"We are ready to share the interim report with the next government that takes power and all other political parties for a debate," the prime ministerial aspirant added.

Advani also called for a 'national consensus' on its plans to bring back the slush funds after the elections.

# Congress has slight edge over BJP

Says US think tank

PTI, AFP, Washington/ New Delhi

Congress appears to have a slight edge over the BJP in key states but both parties are likely to fall short of a majority in the Lok Sabha elections which may lead to intense horse-trading before a new government assumes power, an American think tank has predicted.

It also feels there is small chance that a Third Front could emerge in these elections should the communist parties link up with key regional parties to challenge Congress and the BJP.

"Congress appears to have a slight edge over the BJP in key states, but neither party is likely to win a clear majority of seats," Stratfor, based in Texas, said in its analysis on the Indian elections released after the first phase of polls.

The influence of these national parties has faded over the years while smaller regional and caste-based parties have proliferated, Stratfor said concluding as a result, intense political

horse-trading will ensue after the election.

"Both Congress and BJP therefore will need to throw all their efforts into cobbling together a coalition with smaller parties to have a chance at taking office June 2," it said, without explaining how it expected the new government to be formed on a particular date.

Meanwhile, Indian newspapers applauded Friday the millions of voters who cast their ballots during the first day of marathon general elections, despite attacks by Maoist rebels in several states.

"Red Terror can't stop India's Ink," ran the headline in the Hindustan Times, which noted a turnout of around 50 percent in those states where Maoists, known in India as Naxals, had threatened to disrupt the polls.

"That people turned out in substantial numbers shows that they still have more faith in our flawed democracy than the Naxal version of rule through the barrel of a gun," said the paper.

# Extremist websites offer intelligence 'gold mine'

Say experts

AFP, El Escorial

Western governments are increasingly unwilling to close or filter extremist websites, viewing them instead as an intelligence "gold mine" on terrorist activities, experts say.

"Almost all Western governments are thinking along the same lines -- that it's better to monitor these sites than to try to censor everything on the Internet," said Dr Peter Neumann, director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR).

He spoke to AFP on the sidelines of the two-day Conference on Terrorism and Cyber Security which concludes Friday in El Escorial, outside Madrid, under the

"Governments are trying to maximise their efforts to use the Internet as a source of intelligence gathering on terrorists, particularly al-Qaeda," he told AFP.

"But of course this has human rights implications too, as not everyone who is monitored is necessarily a terrorist."



Nations look to Kenya as venue for piracy trials

AP, The Hague

Dutch prosecutors are dusting off the oldest international felony in their country's books to tackle the 21st-century wave of piracy.

Five Somali pirates will be tried, likely next month, for the 17th-century offence of "sea robbery." The bandits were captured by the Danish navy in January following a failed attack on a Dutch Antilles-flagged cargo ship off Somalia's lawless coast.

Several more piracy suspects are in French jails awaiting trial. And a pirate who surrendered during Sunday's dramatic rescue of the American captain of the Maersk Alabama will be tried in New York, a US official said.

# Forests could flip from sink to source of CO2: Study

AFP, Paris

Forests that today soak up a quarter of carbon pollution spewed into the atmosphere could soon become a net source of CO2 if Earth's surface warms by another two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), cautions a report to be presented Friday at the UN.

Plants both absorb and exhale carbon dioxide, but healthy forests -- especially those in the tropics -- take up far more of the greenhouse gas than they give off.

When they are damaged, get sick or die, that stored carbon is released.

"We normally think of forests as putting the brakes on global warming," said Risto Seppala, a professor at the Finnish Forest Research Institute and head of the expert panel that produced the report.

"But in fact over the next few decades, damage induced by climate change could cause forests to release huge quantities of carbon and create a situation in which they do more to accelerate warming than slow it down."

# Obama shields CIA agents over 'torture'

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama has assured CIA agents involved in tough terror interrogations they will not be prosecuted as he released graphic memos detailing methods approved by the Bush White House.

In documents published Thursday, George W. Bush-era legal officials argued that the tactics such as simulated drowning, face slapping, the use of insects to scare prisoners and sleep deprivation did not amount to torture.

"This is a time for reflection, not retribution," Obama said.

"We have been through a dark and painful chapter in our history. But at a time of great challenges and disturbing disunity, nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past."

The four memos offered a stunning glimpse inside the covert interrogation programme intro-

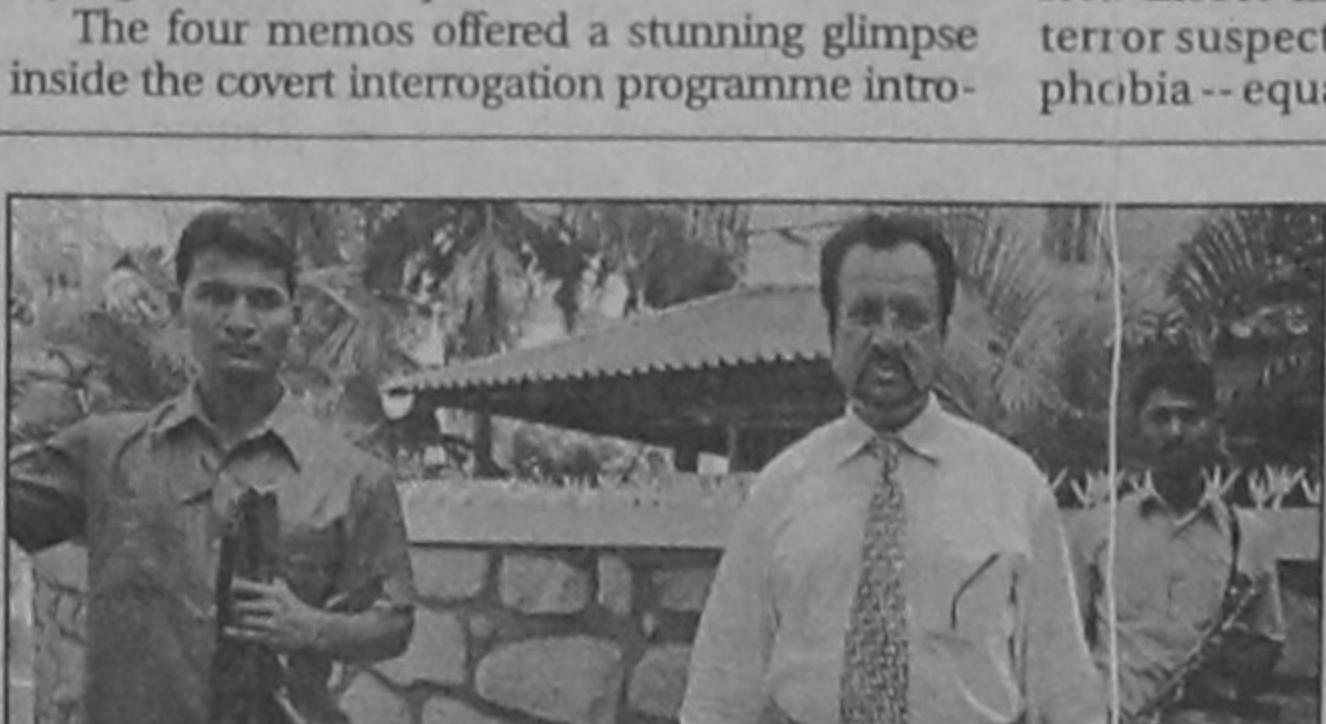
duced after the September 11 attacks in 2001, which critics say amounted to torture, and Obama said undermined America's moral authority.

The documents argued that a long list of coercive techniques did not equal torture since they did not inflict severe mental or physical pain.

Detailing methods used to question al-Qaeda terror suspects, the memos reveal the use of dietary manipulation, forced nudity, facial and abdominal slaps, and the use of confined or "stress positions" for suspects.

In one technique known as "walling," interrogators could push a suspect against a false wall, so his shoulder blades make a slamming noise and lead him to think the impact is greater in reality.

The memos also show interrogators asked for a ruling on whether the placing of a harmless insect in a cramped box with al-Qaeda terror suspect Abu Zubaydah -- who had a bug phobia -- equated to torture.



Philippine leader calls on Myanmar to release Suu Kyi

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo called on Myanmar to release detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi at a recent meeting with Prime Minister Thein Sein, the foreign department said yesterday.

Arroyo asked Myanmar's ruling junta to release Aung San Suu Kyi once the extension of her house arrest expires next month, urging it to reach out to political opponents for the sake of national unity.