

UN humanitarian chief John Holmes is talking to internally displaced Tamil civilians in a government camp in Vavuniya, northern Sri Lanka yesterday. Having escaped the nightmare of Sri Lanka's war zone, tens of thousands of Tamil civilians find themselves stuck in military-run camps, stalked by deprivation and deep anxiety about their future.

PHOTO: AFP

## Lanka snubs Sweden FM as tension over war mounts

### Colombo blocking access to civilians in war-zone: UN

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka barred Sweden's foreign minister yesterday from entering the island on a humanitarian mission, as diplomatic tensions mounted over the conduct of the war on the Tamil Tigers.

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt had been due to travel to the war-torn country this week to press demands for aid workers to be given full access to civilians trapped by heavy fighting between government troops and the rebels.

But a Sri Lankan foreign ministry official indicated that Colombo felt it had already done enough by allowing Britain and France's top diplomats -- David Miliband and Bernard Kouchner -- to visit Wednesday.

"The Swedish minister also wanted to jump on that bandwagon and we said no," the official said.

"Some think they can land up at our airport and expect a red carpet treatment. We are not a colony and neither a bankrupt Third World country. Our main donors are in Asia, not in Europe," the

official added.

Bildt described the snub as "exceedingly strange behaviour," and said he was recalling the Swedish ambassador to Colombo.

The row came a day after the United Nations' humanitarian chief John Holmes also saw his requests for greater humanitarian access turned down, despite mounting international concern over civilian casualties.

Sri Lanka is refusing humanitarian access to its war zone where some 50,000 people are believed trapped, a top UN diplomat said on Monday, while welcoming a government move to slow down its military offensive.

The UN's humanitarian chief John Holmes failed to secure agreement with President Mahinda Rajapakse in talks here Monday to send a humanitarian mission to the shrinking conflict area on the island's northeast coast.

"We don't have agreement on this," Holmes told reporters here after talks with Rajapakse, referring to a request by United Nations Secretary-General Ban

Ki-moon to get a UN team to the conflict area. "I am disappointed about this."

Colombo has said security conditions would not allow aid workers into the area, even though the government on Monday announced that all "combat operations have reached their conclusion."

A UN document circulated among diplomats in Colombo last week said as many as 6,500 civilians may have been killed and another 14,000 wounded in the government's offensive against the separatist rebels so far this year.

The UN also estimates that some 50,000 non-combatants are still trapped in the conflict area, and the world body's rights chief has said both sides in the long-running ethnic war may be guilty of war crimes.

The government maintains that the number of trapped civilians is fewer than 20,000, and accuses the outnumbered and encircled rebels of using them as human shields.

President Mahinda Rajapakse pledged Monday that air strikes and attacks using heavy-calibre weapons would stop.

## Indian SC orders probe into role of Modi, 63 others in Gujarat riots

ANI, New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Monday asked the Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the role of 64 people, including that of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi in the post-Godhra riots cases.

The apex court order was passed in response to a petition filed by Congress parliamentarian Ehsaan Jaffery.

The court asked the SIT to submit the report within three months.

The order came over two months after Gujarat High Court judge A. S. Dave declined to hear a SIT petition that challenged the anticipatory bail granted to State Minister Maya Kodnani and the former VHP leader Jaydeep Patel in connection with the Godhra case.

"Not before me. The case will now be transferred to the

court of another judge and the date of hearing would be decided later," Justice Dave said without giving any reason.

The SIT had moved the Gujarat High Court and challenged the anticipatory bail granted by a lower court to Kodnani and Patel, in the post-Godhra and Naroda Gram riot cases.

The Supreme Court had constituted a five-member Special Investigation Team (SIT) to re-investigate the post-Godhra communal riots.

The SIT is re-investigating into nine post-Godhra riot cases and was expected to submit its report to Supreme Court by February 15.

Several prominent leaders like, Maya Kodnani of BJP and Jaydeep Patel of Vishwa Hindu Parishad are at the centre of investigation, following many witnesses naming them in their statements in the Naroda Gam riot case.

## Insurgents gun down 10 people in Thailand

AP, Pattani

Suspected Muslim insurgents killed ten civilians in a flurry of attacks in the insurgency-plagued southern Thailand, the army said yesterday, the fifth anniversary of a bloody assault by security forces against militants at a mosque.

In the deadliest incident, at least six gunmen in a pickup truck stormed into a house in Yala province late Monday, opening fire on a Muslim family of five, army spokesman Col. Parinya Chaidilok said. Four people were killed.

Parinya says two Muslim rubber plantation workers were later found dead in the compound of a nearby mosque. Thai security officials blamed Islamic insurgents bent on stirring up communal tension between Buddhists and Muslims.

## Asia tightens grip against flu threat

AFP, Hong Kong

Asia tightened its already strict measures to keep swine flu from spreading across the region yesterday, after the World Health Organisation warned of a significant increase in the risk of a pandemic.

New Zealand confirmed three cases among 11 who are assumed to have caught the virus as the number of suspected infections across the region jumped.

Australia said it was probing 70 possible infections among those who had recently returned from Mexico or the United States. South Korea reported a single case and Thai medical authorities placed a woman in quarantine in hospital for tests.

Hong Kong said it was testing four people as queues formed outside pharmacies with residents, spurred by

memories of the deadly SARS virus, stocking up on medical supplies to counter any potential swine flu outbreak.

New Zealand confirmed three cases after samples from nine students and a teacher from Auckland high school Rangitoto College, who had earlier tested positive for influenza A, were tested for swine flu at a Melbourne laboratory.

An 11th person from the school was also reported by Auckland health authorities to have tested positive for influenza A on Tuesday evening.

They were among a group of 25 people from the school who returned from Mexico on Saturday.

"Unfortunately tonight we can confirm New Zealanders have tested positive to swine flu," Health Minister Tony Ryall told a press conference. "It's a time for caution and concern, but not alarm."



PHOTO: AFP

A family from Hong Kong wearing facemasks as a precaution against the deadly swine flu arrive at Sydney International Airport yesterday. Swine flu has created a "perfect storm" for an Australian tourism industry already reeling from the global recession and facing its worst downturn in 20 years, experts say.



PHOTO: AFP

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown (L) speaks with Pakistani former premier Nawaz Sharif in Islamabad on Monday. Brown held talks in Pakistan after announcing a new strategy to tackle a "crucible of terrorism" on a visit to Kabul.

## Brown touts anti-terror strategy in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown held talks in Pakistan Monday after announcing a new strategy to tackle a "crucible of terrorism" on a visit to Kabul.

Brown met with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to discuss terror threats after visiting British troops in insurgency-plagued southern Afghanistan and meeting

Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul.

"These border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan are the breeding ground, the crucible of terrorism," Brown told a news conference with Karzai.

"A chain of terror links these areas to the streets of many of the capital cities of the world," Brown added.

"We wish to support the Pakistani authorities... in

dealing with that terrorist threat and we will be discussing later today how we can work together... when I meet President Zardari in Pakistan," he said.

The strategy announcement follows growing concern in the West over Taliban advances in Pakistan, which Washington has put at the heart of the fight against al-Qaeda, and potential implications for the war in Afghanistan.

## Mexico faces criticism over flu response

AP, Mexico City

Two weeks after the first known swine flu death, Mexico still hasn't given medicine to the families of the dead. It hasn't determined where the outbreak began or how it spread.

And while the government urges anyone who feels sick to go to hospitals, feverish people complain ambulance workers are scared to pick them up.

A portrait is emerging of a slow and confused response by Mexico to the gathering swine flu epidemic. And that could mean the world is flying blind into a global health storm.

Despite an annual budget of more than \$5 billion, Mexico's health secretary said Monday that his agency hasn't had the resources to visit the families of the dead. That means doctors haven't begun treatment for the population most exposed to swine flu, and most apt to spread it.

It also means medical sleuths don't know how the victims were infected key to understanding how the epidemic began and how it can be contained.

Foreign health officials were hesitant Monday to

speak critically about Mexico's response, saying they want to wait until more details emerge before passing judgment. But already, Mexicans were questioning the government's image of a country that has the crisis under control.

"Nobody believes the government anymore," said Edgar Rocha, a 28-year-old office messenger. He said the lack of information is sowing distrust: "You haven't seen a single interview with the sick!"

The political consequences could be serious. China was heavily criticised during the outbreak of SARS for failing to release details about the disease, feeding rumours and fear. And Mexico's failed response to a catastrophic 1985 earthquake is largely credited with the demise of the party that had ruled the country since the 1920s.

"That is foremost in the minds of Mexican policymakers now," said George Grayson at the College of William & Mary in Virginia. "They're thinking, 'We don't want another '85.'"

Indeed, Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova was defensive at a news conference Monday as he was peppered

with questions about why Mexico took so long to identify the outbreak, attempt to contain its spread and provide information.

"We never had this kind of epidemic in the world," he said. "This is the first time we have this kind of virus."

It remained unclear where and how the epidemic began, how it has spread, who it has killed or how fast it is growing. And the government has yet to take some basic steps critical to containing any outbreak, such as quick treatment of people who had contact with the victims.

In the town of Xonacatlan, just west of Mexico City, Antonia Cortes Borbolla told The Associated Press that nobody has given her medicine in the week since her husband succumbed to raging fever and weakened lungs that a lab has confirmed as swine flu.

No health workers have inspected her home, asked how her husband might have contracted the illness or tested the neighbours' pigs, she said.

Cordova acknowledged that her case isn't unique.

"We haven't given medicine to all of them because we still don't have enough personnel," he said.

## US drone attacks counterproductive

### Sharif tells Brown

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan Muslim League-N chief Nawaz Sharif has urged British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to use his influence to make the US shun its policy of drone strikes in the Tribal Areas.

The appeal came at a meeting between Sharif and Brown who had called on the PML-N chief at Punjab House.

At the 40-minute meeting, the two leaders exchanged views on several issues of mutual interest.

Sharif said that the drone

attacks were compounding anti-American sentiments in Pakistan, and such strikes would be counter-productive in the long run.

He said that the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis were opposed to extremism and militancy.

"The prevailing problems in Pakistan need to be seen in the context of the long years of military rule and denial to the people of their fundamental democratic rights," The Daily Times quoted Sharif, as saying.

## US ex-soldier faces death for rape, murder of Iraqi girl

AFP, Paducah

A former US soldier accused of being the ringleader of the gang rape of an Iraqi girl and the murder of her family bragged about how "awesome" it was, a prosecutor told jurors Monday.

Specialist Steven D. Green -- a soldier discharged for a "personality disorder" before the slaying was discovered -- faces the death penalty if convicted in a civil trial being held in Kentucky.

Three other soldiers were given life sentences in the March 2006 atrocity, which was allegedly devised over whiskey and a game of cards at a traffic check point in Mahmudiyah, south of Baghdad.

## Myanmar opposition to decide later about 2010 poll

AP, Yangon

Members of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's party said Tuesday they will wait to see whether laws governing next year's elections conform with democratic standards before deciding if they will contest the polls.

Aung Shwe, chairman of the National League for Democracy, said the party has already called for Myanmar's restrictive constitution to be reviewed. He said it has many flaws and its main objective is perpetuating military rule.

The party believes the referendum that approved the constitution had serious shortcomings, he said.

Aung Shwe said the party will wait until the election and party registration laws come out before it decides whether to participate in the 2010 election.

"We have to wait and see whether they will be based on democratic principles," Aung Shwe said at the opening of the party meeting attended by reporters, politicians, diplomats and more than 150 party members from around the country.

## Sick Gazans victims of Hamas-Fatah power struggle

AP, Gaza City

Hundreds of Palestinian patients have been trapped in the Gaza Strip, unable to travel abroad for crucial treatment for cancer and other diseases, because of political infighting between Gaza's militant Hamas rulers and their Palestinian rivals.

Eight Gazans who were waiting to travel abroad have died since the crisis began in March, when the dispute shut down a medical referral committee that helps sick residents find treatment outside of Gaza, according to the World Health Organisation.

Others are hanging on, waiting. Ten-year-old Ribhi Jindiyeh, a lymphoma patient, lies in bed at home, skinny and jaundiced, too weak to move. He underwent chemotherapy last year in an Israeli hospital, and when he returned home in January, he seemed better. But in March, he began urinating blood.

Gaza doctors can't find the problem and give him infusions every two days to keep him alive.

"Nobody here knows why he is losing so much blood, but nobody can refer us to a hospital abroad, either," his mother, Nevine, 38, said.

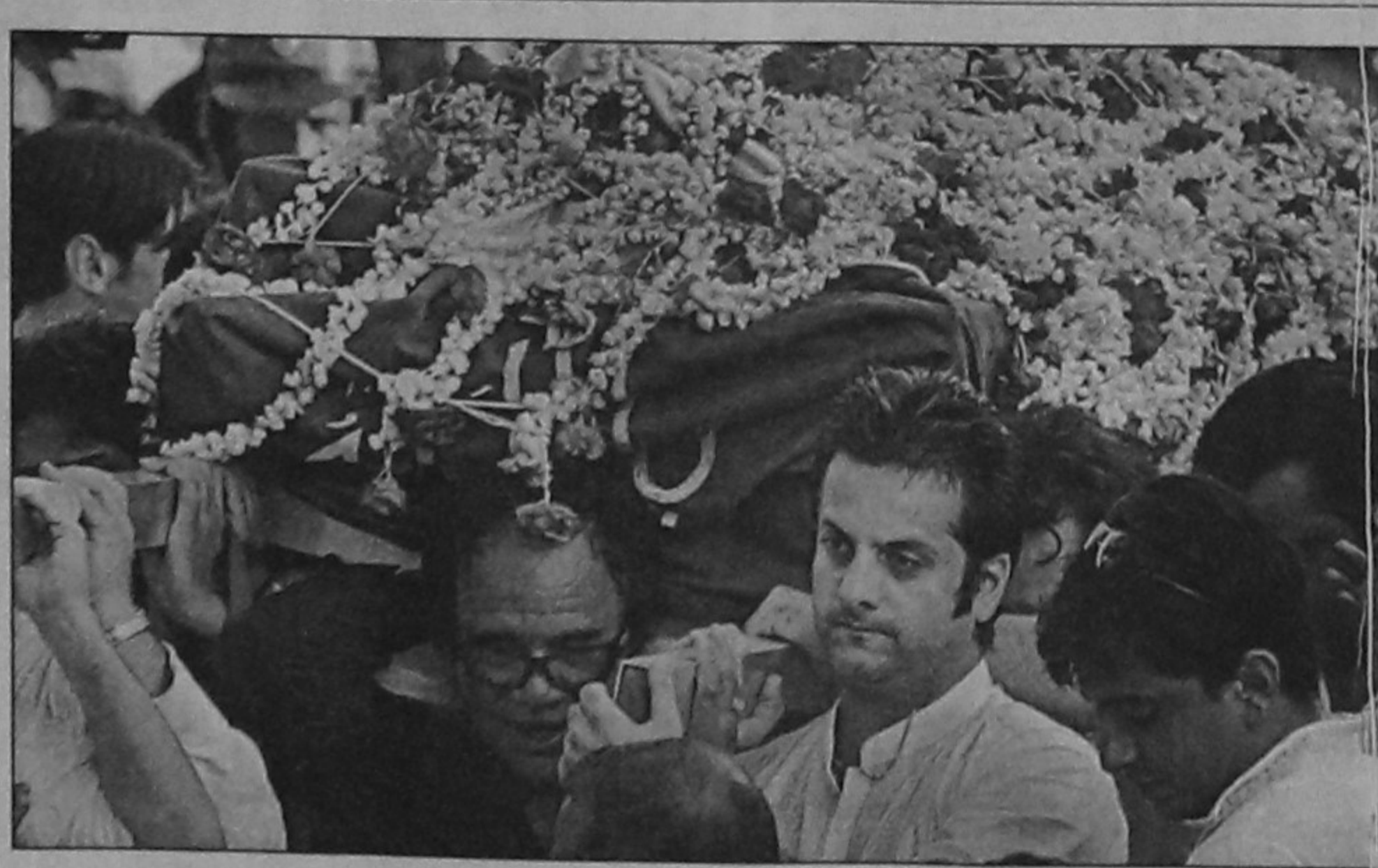


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Hindi film actor Fardeen Khan (C) carries the body of his father Feroz Khan at the burial ground in Bangalore on Monday. Bollywood's flamboyant actor-producer-director Feroz Khan, known for blockbusters like "Qurbani" and "Dharmatma", passed away at the age of 69 years at his farmhouse after a prolonged battle with cancer. He made his entry on the silver screen in 1960s.

## US 'ready to lead' climate change fight: Hillary

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told envoys from 17 major economies meeting here Monday that the United States is ready to lead the fight against global climate change.

President Barack Obama "and his entire administration are committed to addressing this issue and we will act," Hillary Clinton told delegates from major European countries, China, India, Indonesia and other powers.

"The United States is fully engaged and ready to lead and determined to make up for lost time both at home and abroad," she told a forum Obama set up to build political momentum for the climate talks in December in Copenhagen.

"The United States is no longer absent without leave," she said alluding to widespread criticism that the preceding administration of president George W Bush played down the

threat from climate change and failed to do much about it.

German Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel hailed the US turnaround, saying he was glad "the Americans are no longer standing aside but are participating actively in negotiations about climate protection."

"The atmosphere in the negotiations is completely different from how it used to be under the previous US administration," he said.

But he warned that the negotiations would be tough.

"I don't expect a breakthrough before the UN conference in Copenhagen in December," he said.

Carroll Muffett, campaigner for the environmental group Greenpeace, called for tougher action by Obama and the US Congress to commit the United States to reducing greenhouse gases.