

Lankan war victors battle for vote

Rajapakse vows to ensure fair polls on eve of today's voting

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse vowed yesterday to ensure the first post-war nationwide election goes off peacefully...

Rajapakse urged the authorities to conduct a free and fair vote on Tuesday, seeking to counter opposition claims that he would launch a coup to cling on to power...

"The Sri Lanka government calls for a peaceful election, and stands committed to taking whatever steps deemed necessary to ensure the same," his office said in a statement.

Rajapakse, who ordered the military offensive that ended the 37-year conflict

against Tamil rebels in May last year, faces a strong challenge from Sarath Fonseka, the army chief who led the troops in battle.

A total of 68,000 police and 250,000 public officials will be on duty to monitor the election, which is seen as too close to call.

In the run-up to the vote, the opposition and government have made claim and counter-claim about each other's malevolent intentions, raising tension and the prospect of instability and a contested result.

At least five people have been killed and hundreds wounded during campaigning, according to the private Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV). Foreign Minister Rohitha

Bogollagama said Monday the government was concerned about armed army deserters who were allegedly working with Fonseka's campaign.

"There are 600-800 that

have got into some kind of lead role in the opposition campaign," he told reporters, saying the renegades were under the commander of a former major general.

He also claimed foreign interests had a hand in the opposition campaign, but declined to identify them until after the vote.

The opposition accused the government of planning to rig votes and unleash violence to intimidate voters, claiming Sunday that the army, state television and police had been prepared for a coup to keep Rajapakse in power.

The two Sinhalese nationalists fell out after the war, with Fonseka retiring from the military after he was sidelined by Rajapakse and launching his surprise bid for the presidency.

The CMEV said in a report it had found serious flaws in the electoral process in the run-up to the race, which has 22 candidates standing.



Police officials take notes before departing for their respective polling stations at the district secretariat in Vavuniya, some 290km north of capital Colombo yesterday.

Sri Lanka presidential vote

Infographic containing election details for Sri Lanka, including candidates Mahinda Rajapakse and Sarath Fonseka, population statistics, and a map of Sri Lanka.

Man hurls shoe at Sudan President

AFP, Khartoum

A Sudanese man hurled his shoe at President Omar al-Beshir on Monday but missed him, witnesses said, adding that the assailant was immediately arrested.

The man, who was not identified but appears to be in his 50s, threw the shoe at Beshir in a hallway of the Friendship Hall, where the president hosts guests, witnesses said on condition of anonymity.

Security men detained the shoe thrower immediately, they said. It was not immediately clear why he had attacked the president.

Beshir has ruled Sudan since seizing power in a military coup in 1989 and he is standing for re-election in April, when Sudan holds its first general election in 24 years.



Lebanese army troops carry the debris of an Ethiopian Boeing 737 that crashed off the Lebanese coast, south of the capital Beirut yesterday.

Myanmar may set free Suu Kyi in Nov

AFP, Yangon

The political party of Myanmar's detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi has heard that the military regime could set her free in November, a spokesman said yesterday.

The Nobel peace laureate has been kept in detention for 14 of the past 20 years, and in August she was ordered to spend another 18 months in detention after being convicted over an incident in which a US man swam to her house.

According to media reports and local residents, Home Affairs Minister Maung Oo told a meeting of local officials in central Myanmar four days ago that her release would come in November.

"We also heard about it. But it's difficult to confirm," Nyan Win, her lawyer and a spokesman for her National League for Democracy (NLD) party told AFP. But he added that the news was "not a strange thing at all".

"If we calculate the period, Daw Suu's house arrest will be completed in November," he said.

A local resident in the town of Kyaukpadaung, where the meeting was held, said he had heard the same date from witnesses of the speech.

"We were told by some local officials who attended the meeting last Thursday that... Daw Aung San Suu Kyi would be released in November," he said, asking not to be named. Daw is a term of respect in Myanmar.

Zardari's presidential nomination challenged

Lawyers plan strike to get NRO verdict implemented

ANI, THE DAWN ONLINE, Islamabad/Lahore

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari's eligibility to contest the presidential elections has been challenged before the Election Commission of Pakistan following the Supreme Court declaring the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) as unconstitutional and illegal.

Maulvi Iqbal Haider, a lawyer from Karachi, has filed a "constitutional reference" under Articles 63(2) and 41(3) of the Constitution asking the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) "to re-scrutinise the candidates of the presidential elections" due to the fact that the NRO was "conditionally operational" at the time, The Dawn reports on Monday.

Legal experts believe that the reference filed by Haider, known for filing petitions on sensitive and controversial matters, is likely to be rejected because a disqualification reference against the president cannot be filed in any forum.

The eligibility of a candidate could only be challenged by rival candidates at the time of

elections, they pointed out.

When contacted, presidential spokesman Farhatullah Babar said: "The reference does not warrant a comment."

However, he claimed that Zardari had not been convicted by any foreign or local court in any case.

Meanwhile, the National Coordination Council of Lawyers, which was revived on Sunday, has given a call for a countrywide lawyers' strike on Jan 28 to press for implementation of Supreme Court's verdicts, especially in the NRO case.

The announcement of strike was made by Supreme Court Bar Association's president Qazi Mohammad Anwar and Raja Zulqernain, who were elected chairman and secretary of the council at a meeting held at the Lahore High Court barroom.

They said lawyers would hold meetings to press for their demands and adopt resolutions against the government for not implementing Supreme Court's judgments.

Republic Day attack plot foiled in Kashmir

Say Indian police

AFP, Srinagar

Troops in insurgency-hit Kashmir found a large cache of arms and explosives that were to be used in an attack on India's Republic Day celebrations, police said yesterday.

Rebel violence routinely increases in the revolt-hit Muslim-majority state of Kashmir ahead of January 26, an annual national holiday.

The discovery of the cache rendered "a severe blow to a sinister plan of militants to launch a major offensive on the eve of Republic Day," Shakeel Beigh, a senior district police officer, told reporters.

Grenades, detonators, mines and guns were found in the northern district of Baramulla and at another site in Rajouri district near the de facto border dividing Kashmir between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan.

The region had been relatively stable in recent months.

But there has been a spike in violence in the run-up to the Republic Day festivities, including a militant siege of a Srinagar hotel that resulted in the death of two militants, a policeman and a civilian bystander.

Republic Day marks the date in 1950 when India's new republican constitution came into effect. India gained independence from Britain in 1947, but went through a transitional phase when it was still classed as a dominion.

Kashmiris have spurned the celebrations since the insurgency against rule from New Delhi began two decades ago.

Pak-Afghan presidents hold security summit

AFP, Istanbul

The presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan met yesterday for talks on closer cooperation against the Taliban, after the Nato commander in the war against the militants said he wanted a negotiated peace.

The meeting between Afghanistan's leader Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan is the fourth round of fence-mending talks since 2007 to be held under Turkish auspices.

It comes just days before a major conference in London aimed at promoting Afghanistan's development, at which Karzai will unveil a plan to pay off the insurgents.

Turkish President Abdullah Gul, hosting the summit in Istanbul, met Karzai and Zardari separately earlier Monday.

The meeting is also being attended by military and intelligence chiefs from Afghanistan and Pakistan. A joint declaration is expected to be issued at its conclusion.

Relations between Kabul and Islamabad have become increasingly strained as extremists who fled the US-led ouster of Afghanistan's Taliban regime in late 2001 found a safe haven

in Pakistan's northwestern tribal regions.

Afghanistan claims much of its insurgent violence, including attacks on US and Nato soldiers, is planned in Pakistan and has accused its neighbour of not doing enough to curb the militants.

Afghan and US officials suspect Pakistan's powerful military is sponsoring the Taliban, preparing for when US troops leave so Islamabad can influence a Taliban government and offset regional superpower India.

Turkey, the sole Muslim country in Nato, is using its traditionally close ties with both countries to mediate in the dispute.

Under a plan announced by US President Barack Obama in December, 30,000 US troops will go to Afghanistan this year -- on top of more than 70,000 already there -- before they begin withdrawing in July 2011.

In an interview with Britain's Financial Times published Monday, the Nato commander in Afghanistan said he aims to use the surge to weaken the Taliban insurgency to the extent its leaders would accept a political settlement.



A street vendor tries to bar the crowd from stealing her goods in Port-au-Prince on Sunday. Police in the Haitian capital counted their losses and gathered their forces, preparing for a surge in crime they are certain will follow the devastating January 12 earthquake.

US commander signals peace talks with Taliban

BBC ONLINE

Nato's top commander in Afghanistan has said increased troop levels could bring a negotiated peace with the Taliban.

US Gen Stanley McChrystal told the UK's Financial Times newspaper that there had been "enough fighting".

He said a political solution in all conflicts was "inevitable". His remarks came as the top UN envoy in Kabul said it was time to talk to the militants.

Afghan and Pakistani leaders are in Turkey to discuss tackling the Taliban-led insurgency in their countries.

This is the fourth such meeting initiated by Turkey, which has offered to broker talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Both Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart, Asif Ali Zardari, will attend an international conference on Afghanistan in London on Thursday.

"I'd like everybody to walk out of London with a renewed commitment, and that commitment is to the right outcome for the Afghan people," Gen McChrystal told the Financial Times.

He said the arrival of the extra 30,000 US troops pledged by President Obama and the additional 7,000 troops promised by other Nato countries should deliver "very demonstrably positive" progress in 2010.

But he warned that the level of Taliban violence could increase sharply this year.

The Taliban wanted to create the perception that Afghanistan was on fire, and that President Karzai and his Western allies could not cope, Gen McChrystal said.

However, if the new US-led strategy was successful, the militants "could look desperate" in a year's time, he said.

"I think they will look like an entity that will be struggling for its own legitimacy... I think they will be on the defensive militarily, not wiped out."

On the issue of reconciliation, Gen McChrystal said, "I believe that a political solution to all conflicts is the inevitable outcome. And it's the right outcome."



Smoke rises hundreds of metres into the sky following an explosion in the area near Baghdad's Palestine Hotel yesterday. At least 36 people were killed in three massive blasts in the Iraqi capital. The first one near the Palestine Hotel followed minutes later by two loud explosions near the international Green Zone.

Manmohan worried as politics fails to woo the brightest

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday expressed concern that the country's politics "is not attracting the best and brightest" among the people and that educated professionals often shy away from participation in electoral process.

Addressing the diamond jubilee of the Indian Election Commission, he said, "there is a genuine concern that politics in our country is not attracting the best and the brightest among our people. It is also a matter of concern that educated professionals and the growing middleclass often shy away from the participation in the electoral process. Many of them are not even willing to take the trouble to cast their vote."

"Poor turn-out in many constituencies undermines, to some extent, the legitimacy of the victor in a 'first past the post' system that we follow. There is a general worry that people without sufficient means cannot contest elections," Singh said.

Bodies pile up as Haiti begs for aid

AFP, Port-au-Prince

Earthmovers cleared rotting corpses from Haiti's ruined capital as donors met yesterday to draw up a recovery plan from an earthquake now known to have killed at least 150,000 people.

With strong aftershocks bringing new terror to the streets of Port-au-Prince, police struggled to control fresh outbreaks of looting in the city where hundreds of thousands are homeless, hungry and wounded.

Haitian police shouted out from time to time to deter the gangs, but with little conviction and less success. The police shot one young man, witnesses said, who was treated by US troops.

With the search for survivors officially over, mechanical diggers demolished damaged buildings and cleared downtown rubble in the tropical heat.

The stench from bodies which had been entombed in the rubble since tragedy struck on January 12 reeked through the capital.

Communications Minister Marie-Lawrence Jocelyn Lassegue said she had been told by the national recovery commission to expect "a figure of 150,000 dead by Monday", referring to the number of bodies found and officially counted.

"It's very difficult to estimate how many more people might be dead, but the prime minister has spoken of 200,000," she added.

Previously, Haitian health officials had quoted a figure of just over 112,000 dead.

There were no reports of new casualties after a 4.7-magnitude aftershock rattled Haiti Sunday.

"I heard a sound like a grumbling, then a drumbeat, as if something wanted to burst from the belly of the earth," said Patrice Dumont, a teacher from the ruined town of Leogane, west of the capital.

Ministers in Montreal will discuss how to streamline the delivery of food, water, drugs, and medical supplies to the swelling number of people living in makeshift camps around the shattered capital.

Mumbai gunman demands trial by int'l court

AP, Mumbai

The alleged gunman in the 2008 bloody siege of Mumbai said yesterday he should be tried by an international court because he does not expect justice in India.

Mohammed Ajmal Kasab, 21, told a special court that police had falsely implicated him in the case.

"I should be tried in an international court," he told Judge M.L. Tahilyani.

Ten gunmen rampaged through India's commercial capital Mumbai in a commando-style attack on two luxury hotels, a busy train station and a Jewish centre in November 2008. The three-day siege left 166 people dead, and nine of the gunmen were killed.

Last month, Kasab retracted his confession that he sprayed gunfire into a crowd at the railroad station. He also said police tortured him into admitting having a role in the attacks.

Kasab also said Monday he wanted to call witnesses from Pakistan for his defence, and that he should be allowed to meet Pakistani officials. Witnesses would include a passport officer, he said, without providing other details.