

Lankan minister who tied up official is sacked

BBC ONLINE

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has sacked a minister who tied a government official to a tree last week in the capital, Colombo.

Deputy Highways Minister Mervyn Silva tied the official up after accusing him of not attending meetings to discuss a dengue fever outbreak.

Officials say the president sacked Mr Silva after he was suspended from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

They say that he is currently undergoing disciplinary action.

Officials say that the dismissed minister has been "involved in a number of controversial incidents" and had "failed to discipline himself despite multiple warnings".

Mr Silva - who organised and attended a series of meetings to discuss the outbreak of dengue fever - was angry that the official he tied up did not attend any of them.

Correspondents say he has a reputation as colourful politician.

Mr Silva told the BBC last week that he tied the official up to warn him of the seriousness of not tackling dengue fever.

Lanka war commission begins public hearings

AP, Colombo

A government-appointed commission looking into Sri Lanka's civil war began public hearings yesterday amid international scepticism about its credibility as it has no mandate to investigate allegations that thousands of civilians died in the final months of the conflict.

The United Nations says at least 7,000 civilians were killed in the last five months before the war ended in May 2009 when government forces finally crushed ethnic Tamil rebels who had been fighting for an independent state for a quarter-century. The rebels had claimed marginalisation of minority Tamils by ethnic Singhalese-controlled governments.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa appointed the commission in May, a year after the end of the war, to determine why a Norway-brokered cease-fire signed by the government and Tamil Tigers in 2002 collapsed and who was responsible.



A file photo showing a panoramic view of St Peter's Square during mass celebrating the end of the Roman Catholic Church's Year for Priests, with 15,000 priests in attendance, on June 11, 2010. A US lawyer who has successfully sued the US Catholic church over the long-running child sex abuse scandal on Tuesday said cases against the Vatican are crumbling and he was throwing in the towel.

Kashmir separatists reject Indian PM's autonomy offer

AFP, Srinagar

Separatist leaders in Indian Kashmir dismissed yesterday overtures from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh about political autonomy in the region following months of anti-India unrest.

Appealing to Kashmiri Muslims to "give peace a chance", Singh had said Tuesday that his government would consider any consensus proposal for autonomy as long as it remained "within the ambit" of the constitution.

He also announced the creation of a panel of experts that would draw up a "jobs plan" for Indian Kashmir where rampant unemployment -- especially among young people -- has fuelled resentment against Indian rule.

But senior Kashmir separatists rejected Singh's initiative.

"Our fight is for independence, not autonomy," Javed Mir, a former militant commander turned separatist politician, told AFP.

"We will continue our fight for our goal through peaceful protests," said Mir, who had been among the first Kashmiris to take up arms in 1989 when frustration against Indian rule boiled over into a full-blown insurgency.

Under the terms of its accession to India in 1947 -- after independence from Britain and

the sub-continent's division -- Kashmir was granted a relatively high degree of autonomy, excluding areas like defence and foreign affairs.

But those powers have been eroded over the years, and renewed promises of greater autonomy gain little traction in separatist circles.

In a separate development, three policemen and a woman were killed in Indian Kashmir, police said yesterday, as the restive Muslim-majority region prepared to begin the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

The woman was killed and eight other people injured when their bus was caught in cross-fire between Muslim militants and Indian soldiers during an ambush, police said.

Militants also killed three policemen in a separate attack about 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

Kashmir is divided between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan, which both claim the region in full and have fought two wars over their territorial dispute.

The Kashmir legislative assembly in 2000 passed a resolution favouring full restoration of the state's autonomy, but it was rejected by the then Hindu-nationalist government in New Delhi.

Autonomy is the main demand of the ruling National Conference, the state's biggest pro-India political party.

No one from govt should aid Maoists: Indian minister

ANI, THE INDIAN EXPRESS ONLINE, New Delhi

A day after the Opposition attacked the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government over Railway Minister and Trinamool Chief Mamata Banerjee's pro-Maoist remarks at a rally in Lalgarh, West Bengal, Union Home Minister P Chidambaram yesterday said the Government would certainly not encourage anyone to support the Maoists.

On being asked in the Parliament if the Government would take action against those who appreciate the anti-democratic movement in the Naxal areas and pay tribute to the harbingers of Naxalism, Chidambaram said: "To a question that is framed in such a general manner, the answer can also be in a general manner. No-one should support the Maoists and the government would certainly not encourage anyone to support the Maoists."

Earlier on Tuesday, the proceedings in both houses of Parliament were disrupted after the Opposition sought a clarification of Banerjee's pro-Maoist remarks.

Addressing a public rally in Lalgarh on Monday, Mamata Banerjee said the way Maoist leader Cherukuri Rajkumar, alias Azad was killed was not right and asked for a probe into his death.

Azad was killed by Andhra Pradesh Police in the Jogapur forest area at Adilabad District on July 2.

Meanwhile, a day after Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee's car was rammed from behind at Kolaghat in East Midnapore district while she was returning from the Lalgarh rally, the state government has ordered an inquiry into the accident.

"Prima facie, it was an accident. However, I have sought a report from the SP on this issue," said Home Secretary Samar Ghosh.

Pak Taliban urge rejection of foreign aid

UN envoy warns of militant threat

AFP, Sakkur/ Paris

Pakistan's Taliban have denounced all foreign aid for victims of the country's catastrophic flooding, and said they can match the latest US pledge of 20 million dollars.

"We condemn American and other foreign aid and believe that it will lead to subjugation. Our jihad against America will continue," a spokesman for the group, Azam Tariq, told AFP by telephone.

"The government should not accept American aid and if it happens, we can give 20 million dollars to them as aid for the flood victims," he said.

Meanwhile, the UN aid envoy to flood-stricken Pakistan warned yesterday that armed militants could take advantage of the country's worst humanitarian disaster by operating among its displaced victims.

"We all hope that militants will not take advantage of the circumstances to score points" by exploiting people driven from their homes by the floods, Jean-Maurice Ripert, the United Nations' aid envoy for Pakistan, told Le Monde.

"The people's misery can always be exploited by those who have political or militant aims," the newspaper quoted him as saying, describing the floods as "the worst natural disaster the country has known."

His comment came in response to a question about reports that some local aid groups working for the victims in Pakistan had links to extremists.

The floods have been most devastating in the Taliban's stronghold in the northwest. Across Pakistan they have left six million people dependent on humanitarian help for their survival, the United Nations said.

The United States announced Tuesday it would increase its flood aid by another 20 million dollars to 55 million dollars, while the UN said it would launch an international appeal for several hundred million dollars.

The world body believes 1,600 people have died in the floods while the Pakistani government has confirmed 1,243 deaths.

US aid so far has included 436,000 halal meals and 12 pre-fabricated bridges, while the White House said that US helicopters had helped to save more than 1,000 lives in Pakistan.

But critics say that as the worst floods in living memory spread across Pakistan, the official relief effort has been woefully slow, and Islamic charities have been stepping into the breach.

Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Taliban faction is a key architect of extremist violence that has killed more than 3,570 people across Pakistan in three years.

However Daniel Feldman, a senior State Department official working on Afghanistan and Pakistan, on Tuesday dismissed reports of extremist groups providing aid to needy Pakistanis as "quite overblown".

Referring to US efforts to win public support in a country where anti-American feeling runs high, Ward said the US government tries to "brand as much as possible" of its aid.