

## Lanka MPs vote in sweeping powers for president

BBC ONLINE

Sri Lankan MPs have approved proposals to let President Mahinda Rajapaksa seek an unlimited number of terms, in a move critics say could lead to dictatorship. The constitutional amendment also hugely boosts the president's powers. Amid protest and counter-protest in the capital Colombo, MPs in the 225-member parliament voted for the proposals by 161 to 17 against. The main opposition United National Party boycotted the vote, but many of its MPs voted with the government. The lifting of the two-term presidential limit allows Mr Rajapaksa to stand again in 2016. The amendment also empowers him to appoint all the top judges and commissioners for elections, human rights and other affairs, unfettered by any legal veto. The BBC's Charles Haviland in the capital Colombo says some opposition supporters accuse the government of

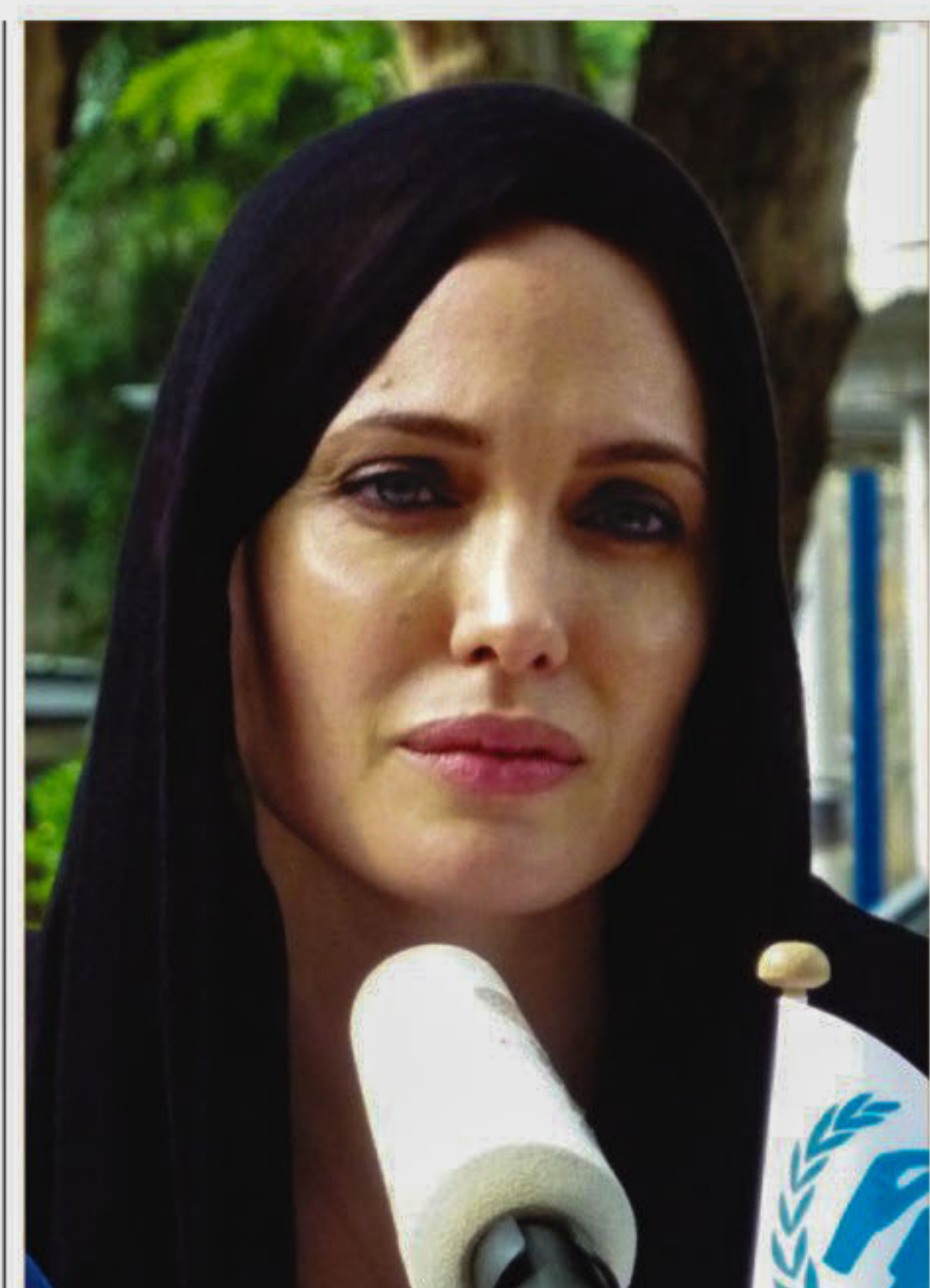
using bribes and threats to secure MPs' votes, which the administration denies. The administration had been expected to easily win on Wednesday the two-thirds majority needed to pass the amendment. Opposition and human rights groups questioned why the government had pushed the amendment through the supreme court and parliament in barely 10 days, declaring it an urgent matter. Civil society activists called Wednesday a "black day" and asked Sri Lankans to wear that colour. Mr Rajapaksa is popular among the country's Sinhalese majority for presiding over the defeat in May last year of the Tamil Tiger rebels, after a 25-year separatist insurgency. Supporters of the president, who was soundly re-elected for the second time in January, said the measures would strengthen democracy in Sri Lanka. Foreign Minister GL Peiris told parliament: "Political instability is the last thing

we want in Sri Lanka as we seek to derive the fullest benefit for our people from the unique opportunity we have today having eradicated terrorism." But Sarath Fonseka - the general who led the army to victory against the Tamil Tigers before falling out with Mr Rajapaksa, then unsuccessfully challenging him at the ballot box in January - said it was "the last nail into the coffin of democracy." "The president is trying to take the country towards dictatorship and we will fight against it," he said. Mr Fonseka is a prisoner of state but, as an elected MP, able to attend parliament. He has been dishonourably discharged from the army and is being tried for alleged corruption, but he says he was victimised simply for daring to stand against Mr Rajapaksa in elections. Critics accuse the president of trying to set up a family dynasty - his son is an MP, and three of the president's brothers are in top positions.

## BABRI MOSQUE CASE Indian court to give ruling on Sept 24

AFP, Lucknow

An Indian court said yesterday it would hand down on September 24 a much-awaited ruling on a disputed religious site that in 1992 triggered the worst sectarian violence in post-partition India. A three-judge bench of the Allahabad High Court in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh will deliver its judgement on the decades-old fight for the ownership of the site of the Babri Mosque in the temple town of Ayodhya. "The judgement would be pronounced by the special bench on September 24," said a notice issued by the High Court registrar. An official source told AFP the date for the ruling was disclosed to help the state administration to make security arrangements ahead of the decision, which risks inflaming tensions between Muslims and Hindus. Fearing a repeat of the violence, the local government has sought 35,000 extra paramilitary police for security duty as the state prepares to deal with any fallout. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said the ruling will be one of the top political challenges for his country. "The way the country handles this -- the aftermath -- will have a profound impact on the evolution of our country," he was quoted as saying on Tuesday in The Hindu newspaper after a meeting with editors. In 1992, the 16th-century Babri Mosque was razed by Hindu zealots who said it had been built on the ruins of a temple marking the birthplace of the Hindu warrior god, Ram.



## Angelina Jolie pleads for Pakistan flood aid

AFP, Islamabad

Hollywood film star Angelina Jolie yesterday urged people to put aside corruption fears and donate cash to help Pakistan's 21 million flood victims, as she ended a tour of areas devastated by deluges. Pakistan's government has been heavily criticised at home and abroad over perceived corruption, which many attribute to the slow pace of donations to the UN's flood appeal, which has raised two thirds of its 460 million dollar goal. "I don't want some people to use it (corruption) as an excuse not to give assistance," Jolie told reporters at the UN refugee agency's Islamabad office. "I have seen what they have done in the field. I've physically seen people assisted, so if you are nervous about giving money directly in one way there are other ways to do it," she said. The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) said its own appeal is only half-funded, and Elisabeth Byrs, spokeswoman at the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said extra monies were "still stagnating". Jolie, clad in a grey dress and black head scarf, spoke after visiting the militant-hit northwest of the country, home to 1.7 million long-term Afghan refugees who have fled fighting in their neighbouring country. "I think the size of this disaster's one that I have never seen the scale of," said Jolie. On Tuesday Jolie, 35, a roving envoy for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, spent time talking to long-term Afghan refugees, Pakistani communities and aid workers in Khyber Pakhtunwa province.

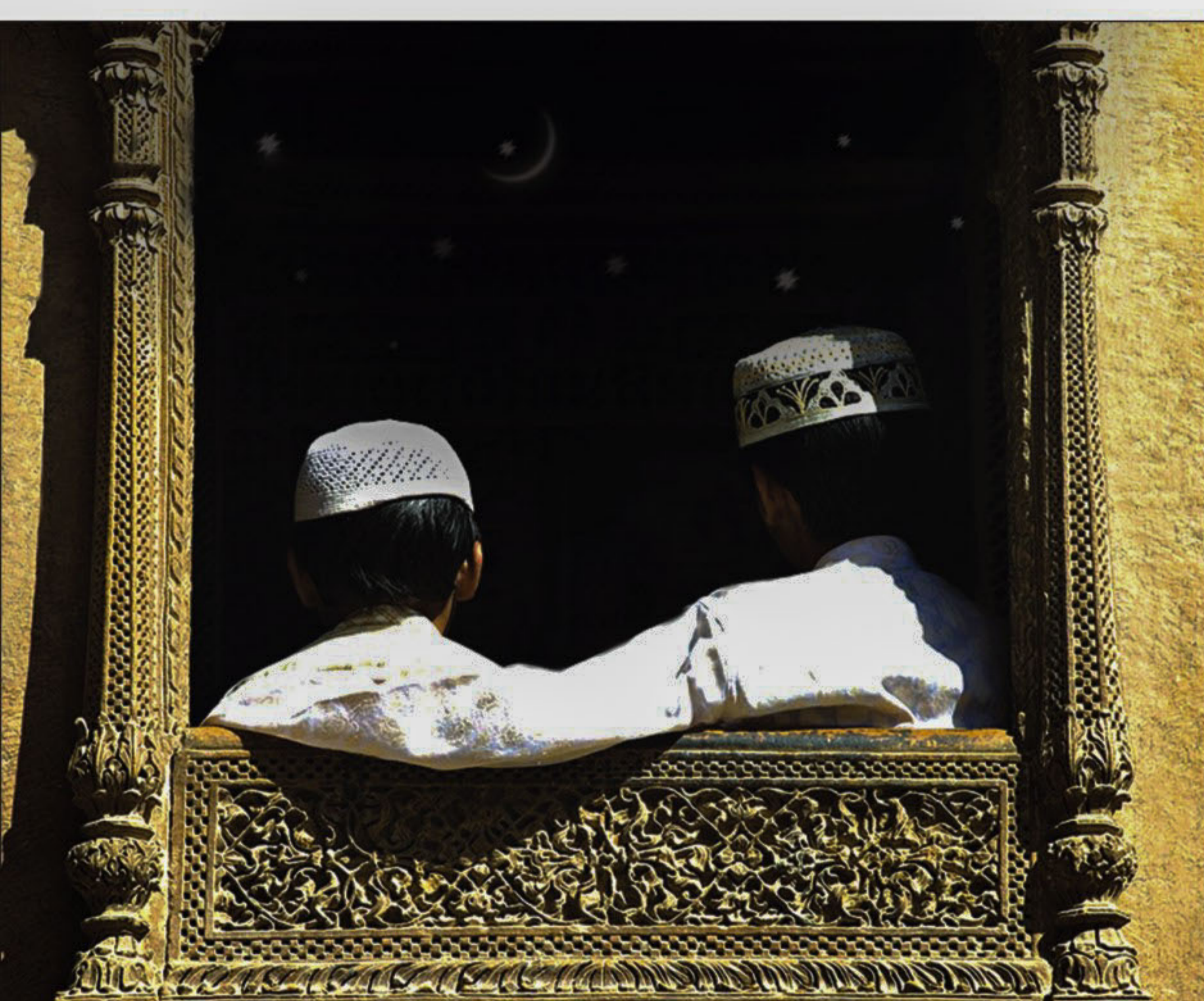
## Pakistan bans five militant groups

AFP, Quetta

Pakistan announced a ban on five militant groups operating in the restive southwest and froze their assets yesterday, the country's interior minister Rehman Malik said. Violence has surged this year in southwestern Baluchistan province, which borders Afghanistan and Iran and is rife with separatist unrest as well as Islamist militancy and sectarian violence. "Today five of them have been proscribed. They will not be allowed to undertake any activity, their offices will be closed and action will be taken against their office bearers," Malik told reporters. "Their bank accounts have also been seized," said Malik, speaking in Quetta, the main town of Baluchistan, where a suicide bomber killed 59 people on Friday at a Shia Muslim rally.

An helicopter drops water on a fire burning in Carcaixent, near Valencia, yesterday. Police have detained a man whom they suspect set one of the wildfires raging in eastern Spain that have ravaged more than 2,500 hectares (6,000 acres), a police spokeswoman said.

PHOTO: AFP



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