

Rajapaksa brothers win big in Sri Lanka's poll

PM and president's party 150 seats in the 225-member parliament

● The 'super majority' will allow them to carry out constitutional changes

Reuters | Colombo

Sri Lanka's parliamentary Selections handed President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his brother an overwhelming majority, results showed yesterday, giving the family power to enact sweeping changes to the constitution of the island nation.

Rajapaksa had sought, and achieved, a two-thirds majority for his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party and its allies to be able to restore full executive powers to the presidency.

The ruling group won 150 seats in the 225-member parliament, according to a tally published by the election commission from Wednesday's vote.

The two-thirds majority will see Rajapaksa's older brother and former president Mahinda Rajapaksa taking over as prime



Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (R) and his Prime Minister brother Mahinda Rajapaksa, pose for a photograph (file photo)

minister as the tourism-dependent nation struggles to recover from last year's deadly Islamist militant attacks and, more recently, lockdowns to control the coronavirus pandemic.

Rajapaksa said the restoration of full executive powers was necessary to implement his agenda to make the country of 21 million economically and

militarily secure.

The brothers are best known for crushing the Tamil Tiger rebels fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils during the elder Rajapaksa's presidency in 2009, ending a 25-year civil war.

"We will ensure (Sri Lanka) will not stand disappointed during our tenure," Mahinda



Rajapaksa brothers needed to secure a super-majority to carry out their promised roll-back of constitutional changes

Rajapaksa said on Twitter.

Currently, significant power is bestowed on parliament and the prime minister after a previous government led by the opposition had amended the constitution and set up independent commissions to oversee the police and the judiciary among other arms of the government.

"We have seen in the past when governments have had a two-thirds majority it does not have to worry about checks and balances," said historian and political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda.

News in brief

Malaysia's ex-finance minister charged with corruption

◆ Malaysia charged former finance minister and senior opposition leader Lim Guan Eng with corruption for seeking a bribe on a



\$1.5 billion infrastructure project. Lim said the charge was "politically motivated". The charge against Lim, who was minister in the Mahathir Mohamad-led coalition that collapsed in February, comes amid speculation that elections could be imminent due to Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's slim majority in parliament.



◆ A melting glacier as large as a cathedral is at risk

Italian valley evacuated as cathedral-sized glacier slips

of breaking apart due to a heatwave, forcing the evacuation of part of an Italian alpine valley. The alarm was raised on Wednesday afternoon when experts in helicopters realised that the Planpincieux glacier, at an altitude of about 2,800 metres in the Ferret Valley in the Mont Blanc massif, was slipping dangerously. A heatwave has created a layer of water under the glacier, which is made up of about 500 cubic metres of ice - roughly the size of the Milan cathedral - making it more prone to a break.

Gunmen kill 21 villagers in northern Nigeria

◆ Gunmen have killed 21 villagers in northern Nigeria's Kaduna state, police said, in the latest deadly violence between ethnic Fulani herders and local farmers over grazing and water rights. Community leaders however

said a higher total of 33 people were killed in the assaults on the remote five villages which took place early on Thursday. Motorcycle-riding gunmen suspected to be Fulani herders stormed the villages in the predominantly Christian district of Zangon Kataf, shooting residents as they fled their homes, state police spokesman Mohammed Jalinge said.

◆ Thousands of Afghan elders, community leaders and politicians gathered to debate government efforts to make peace with the Taliban, in particular the fate of 400 hardcore Taliban prisoners whose release could clear the way for talks. Some 3,200 people have been invited to the grand assembly, known as a Loya Jirga, in Kabul amid tight security to debate for at least three days and then advise the government on whether the prisoners should be freed.



◆ A Chinese court sentenced a Canadian national to death in a ruling that could further inflame tensions between China and Canada. The Guangzhou Intermediate Court said in a statement it had handed Xu Weihong a death sentence for manufacturing drugs, and said all his personal property would be confiscated. According to China's state-run Global Times, Xu had bought raw materials and tools for drug production in October 2016 and worked with an accomplice, Wen Guanxiang, to make ketamine.



◆ Thousands of South Korean trainee doctors went on strike, protesting outside parliament against a government plan to boost the number of medical students in the country, arguing it would be a poor use of additional funding for the sector. The government said its goal to increase the number of medical students by 4,000 over the next 10 years was necessary to better prepare for public health crises like the coronavirus pandemic

India seizes 740 tonnes of chemical that caused Lebanon blast

Reuters | Chennai

Indian customs authorities have seized a container with 740 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, the chemical that caused this week's deadly blast in Lebanon's capital.

Nearly 150 people were killed

and more than 5,000 were injured when a large stock of the chemical exploded at Beirut's port on Tuesday. Dozens of people are missing and up to 250,000 are without habitable homes.

Customs authorities in the south Indian port city of Chen-

nai said a large consignment of the chemical had been stored at a site about 20 km from the city.

"The seized cargo is securely stored and safety of the cargo and public is ensured considering the hazardous nature of the cargo," they said in a statement

late on Thursday.

There was no residential area within 2 km of the freight station where the consignment has been stored, they said.

Ammonium nitrate is used to make fertilizers and explosives, mainly used by the quarrying industry in India.

Owner of cruise ship sunk by Lebanon blast sues

AFP | Beirut

The Lebanese owner of a cruise ship that was sunk by the huge explosion that destroyed the port of Beirut is filing a lawsuit, the National News Agency said.

Two crew members of the Orient Queen were killed and seven others wounded Tuesday when a huge shipment of ammonium nitrate caught fire and caused an explosion that levelled the port and gutted entire swathes of the city.

"Entrepreneur Merhi Abou Merhi, the owner of the Orient Queen cruise ship, has filed a lawsuit against all those responsible for this catastrophic blast," the agency said.

The state agency said the suit was the first of its kind and could pave the way for similar legal action in the coming days and weeks.

The large cruise ship, which can accommodate at least 300 guests and houses a casino, was docked in its home port when disaster struck.

Landslide kills 15 in Kerala, more than 50 feared trapped



Rescue workers look for survivors at the site of a landslide

Reuters | Kochi

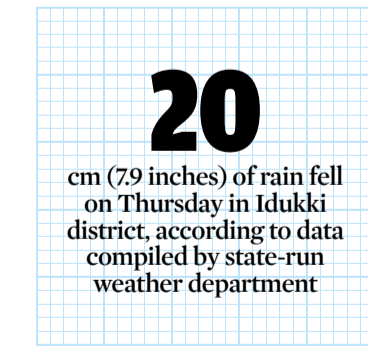
A landslide caused by torrential rains killed at least 15 tea garden workers in Kerala yesterday, and rescue workers were searching for more than 50 people thought to be trapped under soil and debris, officials said.

The landslide hit in the early hours as workers slept, in Idukki district, district collector H Dineshan told Reuters.

Fifteen bodies had been recovered so far and another 51 people were feared to be trapped, he said.

"One team of National Disaster Relief Force have reached the site. Helicopters cannot be deployed as the climate is very misty," he added.

Nearly 20 cm (7.9 inches) of rain fell on Thursday in Idukki district, according to data compiled by state-



run weather department. Idukki is about 240 km (150 miles) north of the state capital Thiruvananthapuram.

"The area has received heavy rains over the last two days and the landslides occurred after midnight. Those affected are mostly tea workers who were sleeping," said S Sureshkumar, the district's additional superintendent of police.

