

SENIOR REBEL SAYS

Lankan war inevitable if no progress made

REUTERS, Sampoor

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels will return to war unless progress is made soon in the island's deadlocked peace process, a senior rebel said just days ahead of a visit by Norwegian peace broker Erik Solheim.

Solheim has warned the island not to expect too much from a visit aimed at rebuilding an almost-destroyed 2002 ceasefire. But, like the rebels, government soldiers in the minority Tamil-dominated north and east say they believe war could come in days if he cannot at least get the sides to agree a venue for new talks.

"If nothing happens in the peace talks, war will start," S.S. Eelilan, Trincomalee district political leader for the Tamil Tiger rebels, told Reuters through a translator late on Friday.

"If there is no solution, we cannot stay in this situation for long," he said, sitting under a tree in his headquarters in Sampoor, near army lines.

Rising violence has led to international truce monitors questioning whether the Norwegian-brokered truce is holding at all. Each side says the other is trying to provoke them into restarting the two-decade-old conflict that

killed more than 64,000 -- this in a region that suffered huge casualties in the 2004 tsunami.

The rebels deny responsibility for a string of lethal strikes on military personnel patrolling areas adjacent to a de facto Tiger state across a large swathe of the north and east, but few believe them. Eelilan said the attacks had been conducted by a civilian "third force" angry at alleged mounting army abuses.

He said the government had begun attacking the rebels first through its own third force, a breakaway eastern Tiger faction they say is now government-backed and led by former rebel

commander Karuna Amman.

"The peace has gone," Eelilan said. "We are ready at any time to start the war."

If it comes, military sources predict an offensive towards the army-held Tamil city of Jaffna, but with other guerrilla actions elsewhere and suicide speedboat attacks on naval shipping from the key Trincomalee base. Eelilan would not comment on what could happen.

"You will have to wait and see," he said, switching easily between the Tamil words for "if" and "when" as he discussed possible future conflict.



Indian northeast rebels call for Republic Day boycott

REUTERS, Agartala

Armed separatist groups in the restive northeastern region on Friday called for the boycott of next week's Republic Day celebrations and authorities said security in the area will be tightened.

Four outlawed groups issued a "solidarity statement" criticising Indian authorities for exploiting the remoteness of the region.

"This day the constitution of India was imposed on us legalising colonial occupation on us," the statement said.

India celebrates Republic Day on Jan. 26 every year, marking its founding as a republic in 1950, with parades in major cities showcasing its military might and cultural diversity.

"In connection with the boycott, a general strike will be observed on 26 January 2006 ... throughout the region", the rebels said in the statement.

Political activists shout anti-king slogans from the back of a police truck after they were arrested during the anti-king demonstration in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepalese police rounded up hundreds of protesters and fired tear gas during pitched battle on Kathmandu streets.



PHOTO: AFP

Edwin Timewell chases a whale away from the banks of the River Thames in London Friday. The northern bottle-nosed whale was swimming up the river sparking bemusement from onlookers as it made its way past several London landmarks. Marine wildlife experts moved Saturday in a risky operation to try to save the rare whale.

EGYPT SAYS

Hamas will hold talks with Israel

REUTERS, Cairo

The Palestinian militant group Hamas recognises the existence of Israel and will go along with negotiations with the Jewish state, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said in an interview published yesterday.

Aboul Gheit, whose government has had close contacts with Hamas and other Palestinian militants over the past year, also said that joining the political process would lead to fundamental changes in the thinking of Hamas.

Hamas, which advocates replacing Israel with an Islamic state throughout historical Palestine, is taking part in Palestinian parliamentary elections for the first time on January 25. It poses a strong challenge to the ruling Fatah movement.

The United States and the

European Union want Hamas to disarm and renounce armed struggle against Israel.

Aboul Gheit, interviewed in the London-based newspaper Asharq al-Awsat, said: "I am confident that Hamas recognises the existence of Israel and I am confident that it is able to coexist with the idea of negotiations with Israel."

"There's no need to keep equivocating on this matter, especially since Hamas has already accepted a truce with Israel for the sake of negotiations. I wonder whether this truce was with a ghost," he added.

In March Egypt helped persuade Hamas and the militant Islamic Jihad group to accept a conditional halt to attacks on Israelis until the end of 2005. Hamas has shown more respect for the truce than many other factions.

UN warns of landslides in Pak quake zone

AP, Islamabad

The harsh winter in Pakistan's northern mountains has been a major burden for millions recovering from a major earthquake victims. Now authorities are worrying about more destruction this time from the inevitable spring thaw.

The warmer weather in the icy highlands will unleash landslides and floods that will only add to the widespread suffering, UN officials said Friday.

A two-month UN survey of the quake-wracked Kashmir region shows it will take up to five years to restore roads to remote areas and landslides triggered by snow melt could cut off more villages already struggling to survive.

"We know that when spring arrives, it's not the end of the troubles," said Caroline Chaumont, a spokeswoman for the UN World Food Programme, which coordinates aid to many of the 3.5 million people who lost their homes in the Oct. 8 quake.

"The needs and duration of assistance could be greater and longer than originally anticipated, and helicopter operations should be maintained to supply tools, equipment, chemical fertilizer, seed and food," the WFP said in an operational update.

It will take several months after the April thaw to clear main roads for four-wheel-drive vehicles, while smaller roads could take up to five years to repair, it added.

Iraq braces for tough talks on future govt

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi parties yesterday geared up for the start of tough negotiations on forming a national unity government after rebels launched concerted attacks in western Iraq to coincide with the release of election results.

Initial reports suggest the negotiations for the new government will revolve around how broadly-based the conservative Shia United Iraqi Alliance, which holds the largest bloc of seats in the new parliament, want the government to be.

parties have already indicated they will take advantage of the mandated 48-hour period to appeal the results of the December elections, with many saying their party was not awarded sufficient seats in the new parliament.

The elections were marked by voting along ethnic and sectarian lines, with the ruling Shia religious-based United Iraqi Alliance, which includes Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari's Dawa Party and Abdel Aziz Hakim's Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, winning 128 of parliament's 275 seats.

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