

EU ban may derail Lankan peace move: Tigers

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels warned on Saturday an impending European Union ban on the group may keep them away from any future peace talks as low intensity clashes with the military continued in the island's north.

The 25-nation bloc agreed in principle this week to blacklist the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a terrorist organisation after a wave of deadly attacks on the military.

The military said the Tigers fired rocket propelled grenades and mortars across no-man's-land in the far north on Saturday in the latest in a series of skirmishes across forward defence lines. The military reported no casualties.

"The European Union is set to blacklist the LTTE as a terrorist organisation hoping such a punitive

action will force the LTTE to the negotiating table, irrespective of the ground reality," London-based chief rebel negotiator Anton Balasingham told pro-rebel Web site www.tamilnet.com.

"I gravely doubt that the LTTE leadership will bow down to pressure and humiliation. As such, this move will be counter-productive. Faced with global isolation and humiliation, the LTTE may be compelled to stay away from further talks."

The Tigers have pulled out of peace talks indefinitely and say they will not return until soldiers are confined to barracks and the government reins in armed groups, including former comrades turned renegades they say are receiving military help.

Balasingham had previously warned the impending ban - which diplomats say is agreed in principle but still needs to be rubberstamped

-- would "exacerbate the conditions of war".

An EU ban would be a diplomatic slap in the face for the Tigers, who have long sought to project an image on the world stage as viable leaders of a de facto state they want recognised as a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils in the north and east.

The Tigers, already outlawed as a terrorist group by the United States, Britain, Canada and India, depend heavily on raising funds from expatriate Tamil communities - some of which rights groups say is done under duress.

However, diplomats said there would be no immediate move to freeze Tiger assets. EU member states stopped officially receiving Tiger delegations in October after suspected rebels assassinated the then foreign minister.

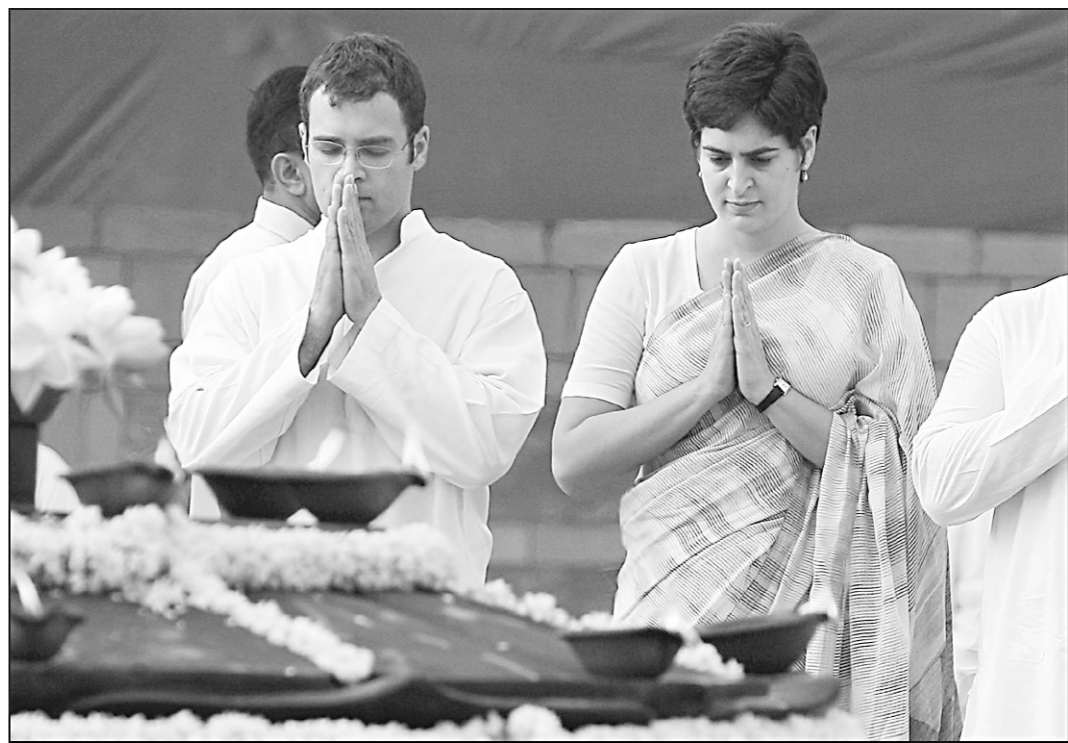
The planned ban on the group comes after a series of attacks and

military clashes that have killed more than 270 troops and civilians since early April, including a fierce naval battle and aerial bombing raids just last week.

The Tigers and the military accuse each other of killing ethnic Tamil civilians, and the violence is reminiscent of the two-decade civil war in which more than 64,000 people died.

At least five people drowned and four were missing on Saturday after a boat carrying ethnic Tamils fleeing north Sri Lanka capsized on its way to Tamil Nadu, Indian police said.

Truce monitors and the Tigers have both started referring to a "low intensity war". The government disagrees, saying the ceasefire holds and that it will limit itself to tactical bursts of retaliation if attacked.



Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi's daughter Priyanka (L) and son Rahul Gandhi pray at the cremation site and memorial to their father and slain former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi yesterday marking the 15th death anniversary of the assassinated leader. Rajiv was assassinated during electoral campaigning, allegedly by Sri Lankan separatists, in the town of Sriperumpudur in the southern state of Tamil Nadu on May 21, 1991.

Naga rebels to hold more talks with govt

AFP, Guwahati

Separatist rebels in India's north-east and New Delhi agreed to meet for fresh negotiations after the latest round of peace talks in Amsterdam at the weekend, a militant leader said yesterday.

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM), led by self-exiled guerrilla leaders Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, has struggled for nearly six decades to create a "Greater Nagaland" by slicing off parts of three neighbouring states to add to the mountainous Nagaland state.

"The talks were very positive and the two sides agreed to meet for another round of negotiations within a month," NSCN-IM spokesman Kraibho Chawang told AFP by telephone from Nagaland's commercial hub, Dimapur.

The two-day talks ended in Amsterdam late Saturday with the Indian side represented by federal minister Oscar Fernandes and New Delhi chief peace interlocutor K. Padmanabhaiah.

The seven-member rebel delegation was led by general secretary Muivah.

Kashmir rebels threaten to disrupt peace meet

REUTERS, Srinagar

Kashmiri militants threatened on Saturday to disrupt a Kashmir peace conference in the disputed Himalayan region next week that will be chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The meeting is the second such gathering since February. It has been called by New Delhi to widen the dialogue process in Jammu and Kashmir, where a separatist revolt against Indian rule by Muslim militants since 1989 has killed more than 45,000 people.

Singh is scheduled to attend the meeting in Srinagar on the opening day, May 24.

"We have made all arrangements to disrupt the round table conference. Kashmir is a disputed territory, the Prime Minister of India cannot hold such conferences here," four groups said in a media release.

"All the separatist political leadership should stay away from the conference. It is aimed at misleading the international community," Al Nasireen, Save Kashmir Movement, Al Arifeen and Farzandan-e-Milat said in a fax to newspaper offices in Srinagar.

Intelligence officials said the groups were likely to be a front for bigger organisations such as the Pakistan-based Islamist outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Pure)

and Hizbul Mujahideen.

Separatist political groups boycotted the first round in New Delhi and it was unclear whether they would take part this time.

Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a senior separatist leader backed by most of the militant groups, rejected an invitation by the prime minister to attend.

"We consider the conference a futile exercise, so we have rejected the invitation," he told a news conference on Saturday.

Kashmir's main separatist alliance, All Parties Hurriyat Conference, said it would decide on Monday whether to participate.

Violence involving separatist guerrillas and soldiers continues in the region despite a peace process between India and Pakistan, who have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since they won freedom from Britain in 1947.

Two suspected Muslim militants were killed in a clash with soldiers on Saturday while trying to cross over to Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani side, an army spokesman said.

India accuses Pakistan of training, arming and sending militants into its part of Kashmir while Islamabad says it is curbing the incursions.



A woman checks her belongings after she and 119 other refugees arrived in the rebel-controlled town of Kilinochchi yesterday after fleeing their homes in the northern Kays Islet following an alleged Sri Lanka military massacre. The group of 120 people from 27 families were among about 300 families who fled their homes in Allaipiddy on the navy-controlled islet of Kays after the May 13 killings in which thirteen of the victims were gunned down in separate incidents.

Military distrust dogs Indo-Pak glacier talks

REUTERS, New Delhi

India and Pakistan hold a new round of talks this week to try and end their bitter conflict over the Siachen glacier in the Himalayas, but lingering distrust between their militaries may stall a breakthrough.

Thousands of soldiers on both sides have died on the icy battlefield in the mountains of disputed Kashmir over the last two decades - more due to altitude sickness, freezing temperatures, accidents and avalanches than to enemy fire.

The guns fell silent after the rivals agreed to a truce in 2003 along their frontier in Kashmir and began peace talks the next year to resolve a range of disputes, including Kashmir and Siachen, and bury nearly 60 years of enmity.

Officials have so far held two rounds of talks over Siachen and a third round of two-day talks is due to begin in the Indian capital on

Tuesday.

Domestic media reports in the past few months in both countries have said that the two sides are inching towards a formula to withdraw troops from the disputed glacier.

Although bilateral ties have since warmed, the Indian army, which has fought three wars with Pakistan, is apparently resisting.

"You know the history between us," an Indian defence official told Reuters. He said the army had made its concerns over Siachen clear to Singh's government.

Siachen was an icy wasteland so desolate that the two countries had not even bothered to mark their frontier there. But in the early 1980s India grew worried over what it said was a new Pakistani interest in the area and occupied it.

It has since held the upper reaches of the region while Pakistani troops are lower down.

While some analysts say that

the region has strategic significance, others dismiss it as of no consequence and not worth the colossal amounts of money spent to hold it.

New Delhi and Islamabad have often said that they want to end the conflict and pull troops back.

But a key sticking point has been India's insistence that troop positions be marked on a map and on the ground as evidence in case the area is reoccupied after a deal.

"Given Pakistan's track record in Kashmir, the army is unwilling to give up its positions," said Bharat Karnad, a security expert at New Delhi's Centre For Policy Research.

Karnad was referring to a near-war between the two sides in 1999 when Islamist infiltrators backed by the Pakistani army occupied the Himalayan heights in Kargil in Indian Kashmir and had to be pushed back.

China mine flooding traps 44 miners

AFP, Beijing

Forty-four coal miners were trapped in a flooded pit in north China and several managerial staff had been arrested for trying to cover up the disaster, state media said yesterday.

The flooding at the Xinjing Coal Mine, in Shanxi province's Zuoyun county, happened Thursday night while 145 miners were at work, Xinhua news agency said, quoting rescuers.

A total of 101 miners escaped, leaving the other 44 trapped, but management of the mine initially said only five were missing, Xinhua said.

"In this sense, the actual situation of the accident was covered up," it quoted Gong Anku, head of the Shanxi Provincial Bureau of Work Safety, as saying.

Managerial staff tried to ship out relatives of the trapped miners in rented taxis, hoping to send them to the nearby region of Inner Mongolia to prevent them talking to media or rioting, it said.

India angered, split by university affirmative action plan

AFP, New Delhi

An affirmative action plan by India's government to force top universities to select half their students from disadvantaged groups has stirred a storm of protest and polarised the nation.

The government announced last month it would more than double "reservation quotas" in professional medical, engineering and management colleges to nearly 50 percent to fulfil its election manifesto to help the poor.

But the declaration has triggered massive protests that have crippled state-run medical services and revived memories of a similar bitter row 16 years ago that led to violence, student suicides and the fall of a government.

The protesters, under the banner of "Youth for Equality," are calling for a total "rollback" of the plan.



Afghan policemen watch a shop and a truck on fire after a suicide car bomb attack on a main road about 100 meters from a coalition military base in Kabul yesterday. The blast killed at least two civilians and wounded two others, police and witnesses at the scene said.

Manmohan govt to walk tightrope in 3rd year

PTI, New Delhi

As his government enters its third year in office on Monday, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh may be bracing himself up for more tight-rope walking with a rejuvenated Left clamouring for a brake on reform policies and the reservation issue stalking the coalition.

For a man who gave himself six out of 10 marks for the first year in office, the 73-year-old Singh has had a longer honeymoon than any other incumbent has had in recent years.

A redeeming feature, though, for the UPA coalition, headed by Sonia Gandhi, is that the main opposition BJP still remained embroiled in internal problems while the Congress has managed to be on the winning in three states in Assam, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry in the

Assembly elections.

But the Left parties more than filled up for the opposition and has threatened to play a more aggressive role in Parliament and outside on any violation by the government of the Common Minimum Programme.

Soon after the completion of one year, the relations between the UPA and the Left witnessed a major rupture with Prakash Karat, who was just elected CPI(M) General Secretary, announcing suspension of the Left's participation in the UPA-Left Coordination Committee.

Left parties have raised their voice against any rise in prices of petrol and petroleum products in spite of the crude oil prices internationally touching the roof and have warned against any move to bring down the EPF interest rate.

Singh has been lucky to build bridges with leaders like Buddhadev Bhattacharya, who led the Left win in West Bengal and is also talking the language of ushering in industry and investment in the eastern state, lagging behind in development.

The Indo-US nuclear cooperation agreement was the feather in the cap of the economist-turned-politician as US President George W. Bush, in search of friends, visited India and walked the extra mile for providing energy security. That the agreement has not yet been approved by the US Congress was another story.

The Bush visit, however, came at a worse time politically for the ruling dispensation as it came against the backdrop of the Iran nuclear issue, Iraq and the cartoon controversy.

India to brief 45 NSG countries on nuke deal

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

As the India-US civil nuclear deal makes it to the top of the agenda at the plenary meeting of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in Brazil on May 29, New Delhi plans to brief each of the 45 NSG countries on multiple advantages of allowing nuclear trade with one of the world's fastest growing economies.

India will initially focus on the countries that gave up their strategic nuclear options like Brazil and South Africa and further activate ongoing dialogue with powerful countries like Japan and Germany where nuclear energy continues to be a divisive issue, official sources said.

New Delhi will then move on to small and middle countries, some of whom, like the Scandinavian countries, are known for their extreme non-proliferation sensitivities, the official added.

New Delhi also plans to focus more on winning the support of Beijing which has been making critical noises but has given enough signals that if it comes to the crunch it will not endanger the deal.

Typhoon kills 37 Vietnamese sailors

China rescues 330

AFP, Hanoi

Typhoon Chanchu killed at least 37 Vietnamese fishermen in the South China Sea but Chinese rescue ships have saved 330 sailors, state media in the communist countries reported yesterday.

The Chinese rescue vessels had picked up the crews of 22 ships and given them water, food and fuel in "the largest international rescue operation at sea ever conducted by China," official Chinese television reported.

In Vietnam's central city of Danang, the port where many of the ships came from, government officials held an emergency meeting while anxious relatives of more than 230 sailors listed as missing awaited news on their loved ones.

"We still don't know who survived," said Le Minh A, deputy chairman of the Quang Nam people's committee. "Local people are in real panic."

Deputy Fisheries Minister Nguyen Viet Thang said: "This is a big loss for the fishermen, and for Vietnam's fishing industry. We are making the greatest efforts to deal with the dead and the survivors."

9 Afghan soldiers killed in Taliban territory

Suicide blast near coalition base in Kabul

AFP, Kandahar/Kabul

Nine Afghan soldiers who were trapped in Taliban-held territory following an ambush were killed after holding out against the rebels for nearly a day, an army commander said yesterday.

A suicide car bomber struck near a coalition military base in Kabul yesterday, killing at least two civilians and wounding two others, police and witnesses said.

The car bomb exploded on a main road about 100 metres (yards) from a coalition military base used to train Afghan security forces.

"Today at 11:20 am (0550 GMT) a Corolla taxi driven by a suicide bomber exploded ... near Camp Phoenix," interior ministry spokesman Yousef Stanizal said.

"As a result the bomber himself, a driver of a truck nearby and a civilian passer-by were killed."

The army has already reported that four other soldiers were killed, 24 wounded and several missing after the Taliban ambush in volatile Helmand province early Saturday.

Nine of those missing were later found to have been killed in fierce fighting in the restive province's Sangin district, said a military commander from the region.

"Nine soldiers were trapped in the area. They resisted until about four o'clock in the afternoon but finally they were killed by the Taliban," the commander said on condition of anonymity.

Afghan and coalition forces killed 20 "enemy fighters" in a battle in southern Afghanistan last week in

which a US soldier also died and seven others were wounded, the US-led coalition said Sunday.

The coalition announced the death of the soldier on Saturday but did not say how many militants were killed in the battle in Uruzgan province on Friday.

The fighting erupted when about 50 fighters attempted to ambush a joint patrol. "Afghan and coalition forces repelled the attack with small arms, killing 20 extremists," a coalition statement said.

About 20 Taliban fighters were killed or wounded in the fighting, defence ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi told AFP Sunday, refusing to immediately comment on the Afghan army casualties.