

TIGERS ATTACK ARMY CAMPS, TOWN

Fierce fighting in Sri Lanka kills 47

AFP, Colombo

Tiger rebels attacked three army camps and a town in Sri Lanka Wednesday, sparking fierce fighting which killed at least 47 by official count and opened new fronts in a week-long battle over water.

The deaths -- which now total 118 since Monday -- have made a mockery of a truce in place since February 2002, although both the government and the Tigers have said they are still committed to it.

Top Norwegian peacebroker Erik Solheim urged Sri Lanka and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the fighting, which began on Wednesday last week after the military moved to open an irrigation canal blocked by the Tigers.

"We very strongly appeal to stop the offensive operations immediately," Solheim, who is also Norway's International Development minister, said in Oslo.

Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse telephoned Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Tuesday night to brief him on the fighting in the Trincomalee district where India has commercial interests, a spokesman for the president said, without giving details of the discussions.

The Tigers slammed the government for launching a military offensive on what they called the pretext of a dispute over water.

"There was an urgent humanitarian need to neutralise the Sri Lankan military attacks on civilian

targets," the LTTE's military spokesman I. lanthirayan said in remarks published on the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website.

He said the LTTE had targeted the military's artillery bases as well as the supply lines to troops massed in the Maavilaru area of Trincomalee district, where the canal sluice gates are located within a rebel-held area.

"Wednesday's operations against several Sri Lanka army bases along the A-15 main supply route from Muttur to Maavilaru were also essentially defensive actions," lanthirayan said.

Tuesday's shelling of the Trincomalee naval port was also part of that strategy, he said, denying military claims that the rebels targeted a navy troop carrier with

over 800 unarmed soldiers aboard.

"It was not a specific target, but entered the LTTE's theatre of defensive action," he said adding that two Black Tiger suicide bombers and seven others were killed outside Trincomalee harbour Tuesday.

The military said it destroyed at least four rebel boats outside the harbour, killing an unspecified number of rebels. The navy lost four sailors killed and 30 wounded in Tuesday's attacks.

The pre-dawn Tiger artillery barrages Wednesday targeted three army camps and the town of Muttur, a mainly Muslim fishing town which is supplied by water from the Maavilaru irrigation system 10 kilometres (six miles) away.

9 more Somali ministers resign

AFP, Mogadishu

Nine more Somali government ministers resigned on Tuesday, citing the 18-month-old administration's "unpopularity", while hardline Islamists widened their control in the centre of the war-shattered east African nation, officials said.

The resignations of Culture Minister Abdi Hashi Abdullahi, Water and Natural Resources Minister Muhamud Salat Nur, Fisheries Minister Hassan Abshir Farah, Ports Minister Ali Abdi Jir and five assistant ministers brought to 27 the number of ministers who have quit the 102-member cabinet.

The move came two days after Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi survived a motion of no confidence.

"Gedi's government is unpopular among most members of parliament, and its work plans will not be accepted by the national assembly," Nur told AFP.

Iran remains defiant in nuclear stand-off

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad vowed Tuesday that Iran would not bow to "the language of force and threats", a day after the UN Security Council ordered it to freeze sensitive nuclear work by the end of the month.

"Iranians consider it their right to exploit peaceful nuclear fuel cycle technology and insist on their undeniable right," the headline president said in a rally in the northeastern town of Bojnurd.

"If some people think they can talk to us with a language of force and threats, they are making a bad mistake. If they don't realise that now, one day they will learn it the hard way," he warned.

On Monday, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution that requires Iran to halt uranium enrichment and other sensitive nuclear fuel work by August 31 or face the prospect of sanctions.

Iran insists it wants to enrich uranium only to make reactor fuel and that this is a right enshrined in

the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Demands for a suspension stem from widespread suspicions the country wants the capacity to make weapons-grade uranium.

Ahmadinejad made no direct comment on the resolution but other senior officials dismissed it as "destructive" and "worthless".

"This resolution will definitely have no constructive results and could only worsen the situation," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said, quoted by the official IRNA news agency.

"It has only been designed to pressure Iran and to prematurely block the path of negotiations," he added.

Parliament Speaker Gholam-Ali Hadad-Adel was quoted by the ISNA news agency as saying: "While the Security Council does not dare to condemn the Qana massacre (in south Lebanon) ... it feels alarmed by Iran's nuclear activities and adopts a resolution that is worthless in the eyes of the people."

Iran's ambassador to the United Nations described the resolution as "destructive and totally unwarranted".

"I would suggest to you that this approach will not lead to any productive outcome. It can only exacerbate the situation," Javad Zarif told the Security Council in New York.

The Security Council charged International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Mohamed ElBaradei with reporting back on Iranian compliance.

The resolution was pushed through after Iran ignored a previous non-binding deadline and failed to respond to the offer of a package of incentives in exchange for a moratorium on nuclear fuel work.

But the text held off from an immediate threat of sanctions, which have been opposed by Russia and China, and said any punitive action would have to be the subject of further discussions.



The southern Lebanese town of Nabatiyeh which was hit by Israeli air strikes yesterday (left), and a Lebanese man stands next to empty coffins at a hospital in Tyre. The funerals of at least 95 civilians dead from the Qana bombing, due to take place yesterday in the port city, were postponed after the area remained heavily bombed by the Israeli army.



PHOTO: AFP

OIC chief for action against 'state terror'

AFP, Istanbul

The head of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Tuesday condemned Israel's deadly raids on Lebanon and the Gaza Strip as "state terror" and urged Muslim countries to take firmer action in the crisis, Anatolia news agency reported.

"Those offensives, which have claimed hundreds of civilian lives, destroyed the infrastructure of Lebanon and Palestine and violated all principles of international law ... qualify as war crimes," OIC Secretary-General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, a Turkish national, told reporters here.

"What is being done has reached the level of state terror. This is an obvious crime against humanity and a war crime," he was quoted as saying by Anatolia.

In comments on an upcoming emergency summit of the OIC executive committee in Malaysia, Ihsanoglu said the 57-member organization is not empowered to impose international sanctions on Israel, but stressed that Muslim countries should put up firmer efforts to defuse the crisis.

"I wish that a clearer stance is demonstrated on this issue and that Islamic countries consider a package of more effective policies and measures at the United Nations," he said.

Ihsanoglu also deplored what he called "the entire world's silence" over the killing of dozens of children in an Israeli strike on the Lebanese village of Qana on Sunday and the UN Security Council's failure to issue an explicit condemnation of the raid and call for a ceasefire.

US faces urgent task of revising Cuba policy after Castro

AFP, Washington

The United States for nearly half a century has enacted a crazy quilt of restrictions and sanctions to weaken the regime of Fidel Castro -- laws which likely will have to be urgently rewritten after the Cuban leader's demise.

As officials in Washington took in the news Tuesday that Castro had relinquished power temporarily due to surgery to stem intestinal bleeding, some began to examine how the US-Cuba relationship would need to be reshaped in a post-Fidel world.

Some said the current anti-Castro laws leave Washington ill-prepared to be a relevant player if the communist leader, nearly 80, leaves the stage after 47 years in power.

"Whether Castro is sick or dead or just testing the reaction in Cuba, the United States is in no position to help," said Republican Representative Jeff Flake, a long-time critic of the current administration's Cuba policy.

"We are more distant now than we ever have been from the Cubans, who could pursue the kind of change that we would like to see," Flake said.

US law states that Washington can provide support only to a transition government which does not include Fidel Castro or his brother Raul, Cuba's defense chief, who has provisionally taken power. Any

support also must meet conditions including holding free elections and releasing political prisoners.

While there is a large and vocal contingent in Congress which supports these and other restrictions, there is also growing support for liberalizing ties as the best way to support democracy.

"There is a widespread misconception that, as soon as Castro is gone, the US will be able to aid and assist a transition," Flake said.

"But with Castro's brother in place and several unreasonable conditions in US law to be met, the

US will be on the sidelines while the rest of the democratic world engages in reform efforts."

Supporters of reform say one law that will need almost immediate revision in Castro's wake is the US policy of granting immediate asylum to Cubans who reach American shores -- a law which has encouraged many Cubans to risk crossing the shark-infested waters of the Florida Straits in rickety boats and rafts.

The United States sends home Cubans picked up at sea, but continues to grant asylum to any Cuban who touches US soil, the so-called

"wet foot/dry foot" policy.

Yet another is the Treasury Department-administered trade embargo which prohibits the import of Cuban goods and enforces a ban preventing US tourists from traveling to Cuba.

"The best thing we can do right now, regardless of Castro's condition, is to let Americans travel to Cuba and begin laying the ground work for a positive transition," Flake said Tuesday.

Much of US policy toward Havana is governed by the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which allows revocation or denial of US visas to foreign executives doing business in Cuba.

In January 2002, President George W. Bush affirmed the continued enforcement of travel restrictions while calling for increased outreach to the Cuban people.

Five months later, Bush announced his Initiative for a New Cuba, easing restrictions on humanitarian assistance by legitimate US religious and non-governmental groups but keeping other sanctions in place.

And just a few weeks ago, the Bush administration released a 95-page report issued by an advisory panel on US Cuba policy, which urged a tightening of the embargo on Cuba and the establishment of a fund to bankroll Castro opponents.



AFP file photo of Cuban President Fidel Castro

Castro in stable condition and good spirits

AFP, Havana

Cuban President Fidel Castro, who relinquished power after an operation, is in stable condition and in good spirits, according to a statement from the leader read on Cuban television Tuesday.

Castro said he needed time to recover in the first public statement from the strongman since he announced late Monday that his brother Raul would take over as president temporarily.

"I can say the situation is stable, but a general recovery in health requires time," the statement said. "All I can say is that the situation will remain stable for several days before a verdict can be reached."

"I am in perfectly good spirits, and the important thing is that everything in the country function and function perfectly well," it said.

Castro survived hundreds of plots in five decades

AFP, Havana

President Fidel Castro, who ceded power temporarily for the first time in almost five decades, following intestinal surgery, has slipped out of the crosshairs of hundreds of plots on his life, authorities here say.

Security officials this month put the figure at more than 640.

But with protection and precaution, Castro had managed to stay on his feet, they say.

It has always been part of Castro's political strategy to underscore that Cuba -- and he -- were always at threat from the United States.

"The United States thinks that by killing leaders ... it can kill revolutions," he told a crowd of thousands in Holguin.

Cuba's fate, he has said, "does not depend on men, does not depend on individuals however

selfless they may be, nor how committed to a cause; it depends on the conscience of each one of the country's citizens."

In June, a Cuban exile acquitted of plotting to assassinate Castro admitted in an interview that he had indeed planned to kill the Cuban leader in 1997.

Jose Antonio Llama, the former head of the Cuban-American National Foundation (FNCA), told Miami's El Nuevo Herald newspaper that he had been frustrated with the Castro regime's resilience following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"We wanted to accelerate the democratization of Cuba using any means to get it," he was quoted as saying.

"That is the truth," he said. "The only thing I have at this point in life is the truth."

Llama said he decided to con-

cess because FNCA has failed to return more than a million dollars he loaned the organization for the purchase of military equipment to be used against Castro and his government.

FNCA rejected Llama's allegations and claimed it was part of a "defamation campaign orchestrated by the Castro regime" in a bid to infiltrate and divide the Cuban exile community in the United States. The group said it was "committed to a peaceful and non-violent democratic transition in Cuba."

Llama and four other Cuban exiles were arrested in Puerto Rico in 1997 while on a boat carrying weapons allegedly to be used to shoot down a plane carrying Castro to an Ibero-American summit on Venezuela's Margarita Island. They were all acquitted.

Philippine army hunts militants linked to al-Qaeda: 4 killed

AFP, Manila

The Philippine military said Wednesday four people were killed in a major operation aimed at capturing militants linked to Al-Qaeda including two suspected Bali bombers.

The operation on the southern island of Jolo is targeting Khaddafy Janjalani, leader of the Abu Sayyaf group, as well as Jemaah Islamiyah militants Umar Patek and Dulmatin who are wanted over the 2002 Bali nightclub attacks.

Colonel Mark Supnet, southern military command chief of staff, said field reports indicated the rebels had been contained near the town of Indanan.

"They could try to escape by boat from the island's southern coast, he added. Supnet said US soldiers stationed in Jolo to cooperate on anti-terror efforts were providing intelligence data and helping to evacuate the wounded.

"We are receiving support from the US in terms of intelligence information," Supnet said. "We are running after about 150 to 200 ASG (Abu Sayyaf) and JI (Jemaah Islamiyah) personalities. Friends from the US are helping us in this aspect," he added.

The soldiers are not engaged in combat, which the Philippine constitution bars.

Christians gather in Kabul for 'peace rally'

AFP, Kabul

More than 1,000 South Korean Christians are in Afghanistan for a "peace rally" in the capital, officials said Wednesday, raising concern in a strictly Islamic country where proselytizing is banned.

The South Koreans arrived ahead of the event this weekend on tourist visas despite their government's recommendation against their visit and some attempts to stop them at the borders, embassy and Western officials said.

The South Korean embassy in Kabul has suggested the roughly 200 South Koreans who live in Afghanistan, most of them in the capital, take their holidays abroad until the event is over, an embassy official told AFP.

"Most of them have followed our recommendation -- I've been getting reports that the majority have already left," the official said on condition of anonymity.

"We are very concerned about our own nationals' security. We have given so many warnings to the organisers but they have made their own decision."

10,000 dead or missing in N Korea flooding

AFP, Seoul

Up to 10,000 North Koreans were believed dead or missing in what Pyongyang's official media is describing as the worst flooding in a century, an independent South Korean humanitarian group said Wednesday.

"About 4,000 people are now listed as missing, and we expect the final toll of dead and missing to reach 10,000," said the independent aid group Good Friends.

North Korea's official media has admitted that hundreds of people were dead or missing after a severe typhoon followed by heavy rain hit the country on July 10.

Good Friends, a long-term aid partner for North Korea, declined to reveal the sources for its figures. Other international aid agencies have given lower numbers, based on official North Korean statistics.

Serious flooding helped trigger a famine in the mid-1990s in which aid groups claim some two million North Koreans died.

A decade later the country is still unable to feed its people and damage to farmland from the latest

flooding has sparked concerns that chronic food shortages may worsen again this year.

North Korea's bare hillsides, stripped of tree cover by impoverished residents looking for fuel, are particularly vulnerable to flooding and landslides caused by erosion.

Two weeks of heavy rainfall sent rainwater sweeping down deforested hillsides, unleashing rivers of mud on farms and villages.

A South Korean expert said energy and food shortages were behind the deforestation as North Koreans seek firewood and try to farm hillsides.

"North Korea began developing mountainside farming from the 1970s in an effort to boost food production," said Kwon Tae-Jin of the Korea Rural Economic Institute.

"But that just aggravated the food shortage and made the country very vulnerable to heavy rains."

Worst-hit areas include Sinyang and other counties along the upstream of the Taedong river which runs through the center of Pyongyang, leaving thousands of people dead or missing, the aid group said.

In Haeju, 105 kilometers (90 miles) south of Pyongyang, witnesses saw 200 bodies fished out of floodwaters, Good Friends said.

Malaria was now spreading in southern regions, the group added.

Though a massive relief operation was under way, Good Friends said that North Korea's army was confined to barracks because of tension with the outside world over its recent missile tests.

The missiles shot on July 5 triggered condemnation from the international community and weapons-related sanctions from the United Nations.

Angry South Korea suspended rice and other humanitarian aid to the communist North just days before the typhoon hit.

South Korea's former unification minister Jeong Se-Hyun, who is now leading the non-governmental Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation, said North Korea was in crisis but felt it was in no position to request aid after defying the international community over its missile launches.



PHOTO: AFP

Christies auction house employee, Leonie Ashfield looks up at a model spaceship called the Starship Enterprise from the 1960's US Science Fiction television drama, Star Trek, at Christies Auction house, in London, yesterday. The ship is part of a collection of 1000 lots of Star Trek memorabilia at the Auction house. The television show is celebrating its 40th anniversary.

Thaksin's rare meeting with Myanmar junta leader

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra flew Wednesday to neighboring military-ruled Myanmar where officials said he held a rare meeting with the junta's reclusive leader, Senior General Than Shwe.

"It's for bilateral talks between two leaders on a variety of issues," Thaksin told reporters before leaving.

Thai officials provided few details of the hastily arranged trip but said the two would meet Wednesday afternoon in Myanmar's new administrative capital, a place that few outsiders have seen.

Most of Myanmar's government and military offices moved in February to the new capital in a jungle compound, which Than Shwe has dubbed the "abode of the king," outside the central town of Pymmana.

An official at Myanmar's information ministry confirmed that Thaksin met Than Shwe, but neither side would give any indication as to what was discussed.