

India deflects Tamil calls to mediate

REUTERS, Chennai

Their black gowns flapping in the traffic, scores of Indian lawyers form a "human chain" around the red-brick court building while other protesters burn Sri Lankan flags or stage symbolic fasts.

"Don't kill innocents," reads one banner held by a middle-aged woman in a lawyer's black waistcoat. "Sinhala government, racist government," she chants.

The escalating conflict in Sri Lanka between the Buddhist Sinhala majority and the Hindu Tamil minority has prompted daily protests in Chennai for the past two weeks, with ethnic Indian Tamils coming out in support of their "brethren" across the seas.

The focus of their anger – allegations that the Sri Lankan government bombed an orphanage in the rebel-held north of the country earlier this month, killing 61 Tamil schoolgirls.

The outrage is fuelled by a sense that their own government is siding with the Sri Lankan authorities against the Tamils.

Sporadic fighting goes on as aid ship nears Jaffna

Departing truce monitor slams EU ban on LTTE

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sporadic artillery fire and airstrikes continued along Sri Lanka's Jaffna peninsula yesterday as an aid ship approached the besieged city for the first time in nearly two weeks, residents and officials said.

The army said the peninsula was "calm and quiet", but admitted some exchange of gunfire, which was confirmed by residents.

The military also said jets struck a rebel Sea Tiger base near their de facto capital of Kilinochchi on Thursday.

No supplies have reached Jaffna since Tamil Tiger rebels and government troops began heavy fighting along the front line on August 11, but relief looked at hand later on Thursday.

A Red Cross-flagged cargo ship has sailed almost all the way around the island from the capital with security guarantees from both sides, while a second ship is preparing to sail from Trincomalee to begin the evacuation of some 500 foreigners.

What started as a fight over a disputed water source escalated into the first ground fighting since a 2002 truce, killing hundreds, sending tens of thousands fleeing and cutting off half a million Jaffna residents without food or supplies.

Diplomats mainly blame the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the violence. More fighting is usually seen as pushing minority Tamils towards the Tiger cause.

The outgoing chief monitor of Sri Lanka's crumbling ceasefire yesterday criticised the EU for banning the Tamil Tiger rebels and said his warnings of a violent "worst case scenario" had come true.

Brigadier General Ulf Henricsson wrote a memo to the European Union more than a month before May's ban was imposed warning of a rise in violence and attacks in the capital Colombo if the EU carried out its threat.

He said the seven-point memo was "not read very carefully" and the decision was finally made in the "cafes of Brussels" to ban the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a terrorist organisation despite a troubled ceasefire in place.

The outgoing and incoming heads of the unarmed Nordic ceasefire monitoring mission will meet on Friday in Kilinochchi to discuss the situation.

"The LTTE is always committed to the ceasefire," said head of the Tiger peace secretariat S Puleedevan. "But when the Sri Lankan military launches an offensive we have to neutralise their offensive capabilities."

The government says almost the same thing – although is also seen as keen to take over rebel territory overlooking the strategic Trincomalee harbour, a stumbling block for peace.

"The government is prepared for a negotiated settlement," Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake told Parliament late on Wednesday. "The doors are not closed. If they stop violence against us and if they stop disrupting normalcy of life then the situation will change."

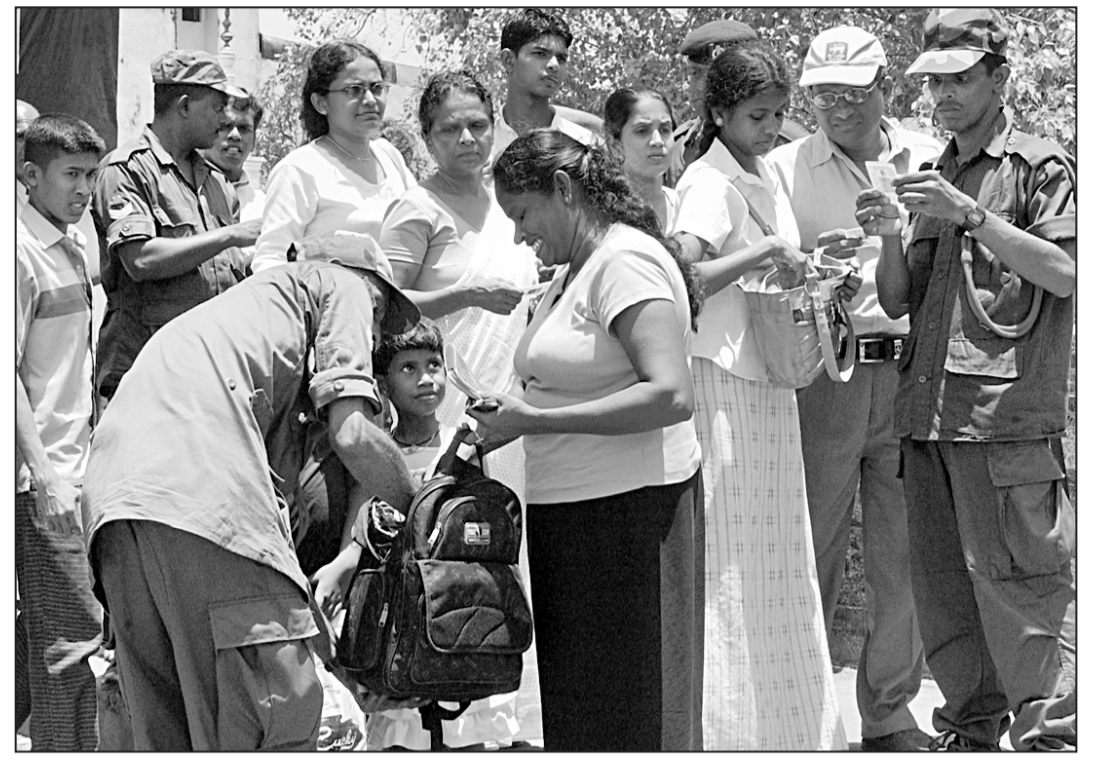


PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan Army soldiers check the bags and official documents of bus passengers arriving in Colombo at Dehiwala, the main entrance point yesterday. A policeman was killed in a mine attack in northeastern Sri Lanka amid a continuing lull in fighting in the disputed peninsula of Jaffna.

India suspends train court service with Pakistan

AFP, Karachi

India has suspended a cross-border rail service with Pakistan for a month after monsoon rains disturbed the track linking the two countries, officials yesterday said.

The Thar Express had resumed its historic journey between Karachi in southern Pakistan and the Indian frontier town of Munabao in January after a 41-year hiatus.

"Indian authorities have informed us that they are closing the

operation for four weeks because of some problems on the tracks because of rains," Pakistani Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid told AFP.

The train, named after a desert in the region, runs once a week.

Majority Hindu India and mainly Muslim Pakistan, who have fought three wars, agreed in January to restart the service as part of a slow-moving peace process launched in early 2004.

Dutch cops net 12 on US plane bound for Mumbai

REUTERS, Amsterdam

Dutch police arrested 12 passengers behaving suspiciously on a US Northwest Airlines plane bound for Mumbai that was forced to turn back to Amsterdam's Schiphol airport on Wednesday.

Police arrested 12 of the 149 passengers on flight 42, which turned back to Amsterdam due to security concerns after the crew reported suspicious behaviour, officials said. Two Dutch fighter jets accompanied the plane back to Schiphol.

"They will be interrogated in the coming hours by police investigators," a police spokesman said.

Asked whether a suspected terrorist plot could be ruled out, he said: "We don't want to get ahead of ourselves."

Dutch police can hold suspects for three days without charge, extended by another three days in special circumstances, news agency ANP said. The authorities expect to provide more information on Thursday.

7 al-Qaeda members killed in Afghan clash

REUTERS, Asadabad

Seven suspected al-Qaeda members were killed in a clash in Afghanistan yesterday, the US military said, although Afghan officials said those killed were civilians.

"Seven suspected al-Qaeda facilitators were killed today when Afghan and coalition forces conducted an operation on a compound housing suspected terrorists," the US military said in a statement.

It did not identify any of those killed in the clash in the eastern province of Kunar.

A US military spokesman, asked what was meant by "facilitators," said: "They are al-Qaeda members. We do not know their nationalities."

The US and Afghan troops were on an operation to capture "a known al-Qaeda facilitator" linked to attacks on Afghan and coalition troops, the US military said.

"Afghan and coalition forces came under direct fire when approaching the compound and defended themselves with return fire," the US military said. A child

was also killed and a woman wounded, it said.

Afghan officials said the seven killed in the pre-dawn attack on a house in the Shegal district, to the east of the provincial capital, Asadabad, were civilians.

"These were civilians that were shot dead," said senior provincial police official Abdul Saboor Allahyar.

Provincial officials had earlier said seven civilians, including some village elders, were killed in an air strike but Allahyar said they were killed in ground fire.

The US and Afghan troops captured four males from the compound while other "enemy fighters" fled, the military statement said. An investigation had been launched to determine the identity of the seven dead, it said.

Kunar is near the border with Pakistan and the Taliban and their Islamic allies, including members of the al-Qaeda network, have been active there since US-led troops overthrew the Taliban in 2001.

Pak opposition unites to challenge PM

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani opposition parties united on Wednesday to lodge a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, accusing him of neglecting the poor and corruption.

The motion, which is due to be debated within the next week, is not expected to succeed as pro-government members hold a majority in parliament.

But it could prove an embarrassment for Aziz, a former banker and finance minister picked to head the government in 2004 by President Pervez Musharraf.

It could also give heart to those opposed to Musharraf, the army chief who seized power in a bloodless military coup in 1999, in the run-up to a general election next year, analysts said.

Conservative religious parties and liberal supporters of former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif joined forces to submit the motion.

Nepali Maoists to voluntarily confine soldiers, arms

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels said Wednesday they are pressing on with a plan to confine their fighters and weapons in countryside camps, a key part of a peace agreement with the government.

The guerrillas, who waged a decade-long insurgency in which 12,500 people died, said they would decide on the sites within the next three days.

"Once our armies are confined to cantonments, the government should give an assurance that its Nepal Army also remains within their barracks," Krishna Bahadur Mahara, Maoist spokesman and head of the rebel negotiating team, told AFP.

In early August the two sides reached a deal to allow the United Nations to monitor each other's fighters and weapons, breaking a

deadlock in peace talks.

Wednesday's statement by Mahara was the first indication that the plan to monitor the 10,000-strong rebel militia and the 90,000-member army is going ahead.

Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula, also the government's top peace negotiator, confirmed the Maoist offer and said once the camps are in place, the government would respond in kind.

"The government will assure that the Nepal Army will stay in the barracks while the Maoist People's Liberation Army will be kept in specific areas before the arrival of another United Nations team," he said.

UN officials are expected to arrive in mid-September to review progress in the four-month-old ceasefire.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian medical students attempt to take cover from a barrage of water dispersed by security forces using a water cannon outside the Supreme Court in New Delhi yesterday during a rally protesting government plans to reserve more university places for low-caste students.