

Red Cross ferries 150 foreigners to safety

12 Tigers killed in fresh Lankan fighting

AFP, Colombo

The Red Cross ferried 150 foreigners to safety from the besieged Jaffna peninsula Sunday as the Sri Lankan military claimed it killed 12 Tamil Tigers when repulsing a rebel attack on an army position.

The ferry arrived at the port of Trincomalee in the country's northeast in the early hours after many aid agencies pulled out foreign staff amid ongoing clashes between rebels and security forces.

The 152 passengers included two locals needing medical care and people visiting families in the disputed northeast and aid workers on tsunami-related projects.

Charity workers said it was unclear when they could return to

help tens of thousands who have fled fierce fighting between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the security forces.

More than 40,000 have fled their homes in the Jaffna peninsula alone where 650 people died in 11 days of fierce fighting this month that the military claimed was a rebel push to take control of the area.

"We have to watch the situation because there are big problems. We don't know how long this will go on for," said Kanagaratnam Theiva, tsunami manager for Caritas Sri Lanka, which has pulled out foreign workers from most of the northeast.

"Unfortunately most of the tsunami victims are in the northeast and now they're becoming victims again of this recent violence. We're

going through the disaster cycle again and we'll have to go back to relief work."

The peninsula is blocked by road from the rest of the island by Tiger-held territory and supplies for the population have to be brought in by boat.

The Red Cross said negotiations were continuing to try to send more boats to take the rest of the estimated 500 foreigners out of the area where food, water and medical supplies were running low.

"We're still in discussions... but so far we cannot confirm any further operations," said Red Cross spokesman Davide Vignati.

An aid ship arrived at the peninsula last week with 1,500 tonnes of food to ease the crisis, but clashes

continued on the frontlines with six soldiers killed Saturday by a device left behind by rebels.

Sporadic fighting continued elsewhere on the island. Twelve rebels were killed during a battle between the two sides in the north-eastern Batticaloa district, said a defence ministry spokesman, who declined to be named.

The military fired back after a group of about 25 rebels fired mortars, injuring seven soldiers, as they tried to break into government-held territory.

"They were trying to encroach into our area. They fired mortars and we countered with heavy weapons," the spokesman said.



Pakistani anti-terror force soldiers walk past burning tyres after they were set on fire by angry protesters in Quetta yesterday following the killing of tribal rebel chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti. Pakistan was on high alert after security forces killed the prominent tribal leader on Saturday in gas-rich Baluchistan province in a major operation that left scores of others dead.

Indian floods kill 93 in desert state

AFP, Barmer

At least 93 people were killed and dozens more are missing in massive floods caused by monsoon rains that have swamped the normally drought-prone desert state of Rajasthan, reports said yesterday.

Eight more bodies were recovered Sunday in the state's Barmer district, where the majority of the flood-related deaths have occurred, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

The district is near the border with Pakistan, or about 887km west of the Indian capital New Delhi.

State officials, citing the numbers of people still missing, said Sunday that the death toll could reach as high as 300, the report said.

Government officials had announced Saturday that 51 bodies had been recovered from Barmer, where vast swathes of land remained under water according to aerial footage shown on Indian television.

No change to Indo-US nuke deal: Manmohan Scientists call on PM

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh assured top Indian nuclear scientists on Saturday that the country would not accept any significant changes to a landmark civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States.

Emerging from a 90-minute meeting with the prime minister on Saturday, the scientists have welcomed his statement made recently in Parliament that India's strategic programme would in no case be compromised while clinching the deal with the US.

The seven scientists, some of them former heads of India's Atomic Energy Commission, had written to Singh voicing their concern over the deal infringing on India's "independence" to carry out indigenous research and development in

nuclear science and technology.

But Saturday, at the outset of the meeting, Singh reiterated the government's stand on the nuclear deal as articulated in Parliament.

An official statement issued by the prime minister's office after the meeting said the scientists reiterated their concerns over the changes being sought by members of the US Congress to the July 18, 2005 Joint Statement issued by US President George W Bush and the Indian prime minister on civilian nuclear cooperation.

"The prime minister reiterated the assurances he had given to Parliament in this regard", it said.

The prime minister invited the nuclear scientists to "help outline a path to take advantage of this new opportunity (provided by the nuclear deal) to end nuclear apartheid against India", said the statement.

'Indians prefer Sonia as PM over Singh'

AFP, New Delhi

Indians would prefer ruling Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi as the prime minister to incumbent Manmohan Singh, who took up the job she refused, a poll published over the weekend said.

The Italian-born Gandhi, however, lost to former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the top choice by a huge margin, according to the poll results published by weekly news magazine India Today.

Nearly a quarter of 14,351 people interviewed in 19 states voted for Vajpayee. Gandhi bagged 17 percent of votes, while Singh got only 15 percent in the poll conducted by research agency AC Nielson ORG-MARG.

Gandhi steered her party to a surprise win in 2004, but turned down the premier's job after opposition parties criticised her over her foreign birth.

US cities deploy fish to ward off terrorists

AFP, Washington

It's no bait-and-switch scam: a California company has deployed a crack team of Bluegill fish to guard America's drinking water from potential terrorist attacks.

Intelligent Automation Corp. says its "IAC 1090 Intelligent Aquatic BioMonitoring System" has already been bought by New York and San Francisco city authorities to monitor water supplies to their populations.

It works by diverting water samples from a river or reservoir through a small aquarium containing eight Bluegill fish, which patrol round the clock for potentially lethal water-borne dangers.

The system, developed in partnership with US Army scientists at Fort Detrick in Maryland, is about the size of a large suitcase and can be set up on a table.

Fears of potential terror attacks

against critical US infrastructure, including water supplies, have risen since the September 11, 2001 attacks, spawning a boom for the US security industry.

Animals have long been used in times of conflict. The US Navy trains dolphins to detect sea mines and help divers underwater. But records show few if any instances where fish have been deployed to the front lines of defence.

The small, brownish-coloured Bluegills, or "Lepomis macrochirus", are not demanding security guards, but IAC vice president Bill Lawler says the tiny sentinels are still well looked after when they are on duty.

"The idea is to keep the fish very happy. They're enclosed in the aquarium with a light on inside and the temperature of the water is controlled so it's always constant," Lawler told AFP by telephone from IAC's headquarters in Poway, California.

Coalition soldier, 10 Taliban killed

AP, Kabul

Insurgent attacks in southern Afghanistan left one Nato-led coalition soldier dead and seven wounded yesterday, while police killed 10 suspected Taliban militants who struck a government compound, officials said.

The soldier was killed in the southern Helmand province, a Nato statement said. It did not provide the soldier's nationality or details on the clash.

Another Nato soldier and six Afghan troops were wounded when mortars hit their base in neighboring Kandahar province early Sunday, the statement said. The soldiers were evacuated to a military medical facility for treatment.

On Saturday, a large number of militants attacked the Musa Qala district government compound in

Helmand, provoking a clash with police that left 10 insurgents dead, said Ghulam Nabi Malakheil, provincial police chief.

The militants left the dead bodies alongside seven AK-47 assault rifles, five rocket-propelled grenades and two heavy machine guns, he said. There were no police casualties.

Four rockets slammed into west Kabul on Sunday, one landing near a district police station and another damaging a house, said district police chief Gen. Zalmay Orykail. Nobody was injured.

Kabul has been spared most of the violence that has engulfed Afghanistan's south and east, but a series of bombings and attacks on Nato-led peacekeepers has rattled the nerves of its citizens.

Afghanistan is experiencing its worst violence since the 2001 ouster of the Taliban regime for hosting

Osama bin Laden. More than 1,600 people, mostly militants, have died in the past four months, according to an Associated Press tally of violent incidents reported by US, Nato and Afghan officials.

On Saturday, Gen. John Abizaid, the commander of the US Central Command, said "it is clear" that militants are using Pakistan to infiltrate Afghanistan. But he added he "absolutely does not believe" accusations of collusion between Pakistan's government and the resurgent Taliban rebels or other extremists.

"I think that Pakistan has done an awful lot in going after al-Qaeda, and it's important that they don't let the Taliban groups be organised in the Pakistani side of the border," Abizaid told reporters in Bagram, site of the main US military base in Afghanistan.



Former Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) and leader of opposition LK Advani (L) light a lamp besides a symbolic photo of motherland 'India', during a ceremony to release the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) magazine Rashtradharm and a book at BJP headquarters in New Delhi yesterday.

LANKAN TRUCE MONITORING New head prepares for mission impossible

AFP, Colombo

The new head of Sri Lanka's truce monitors takes over a team cut by nearly half this week amid warnings by his predecessor of "mission impossible" to satisfy both sides in the vicious separatist conflict.

Former Norwegian army chief Lars Solvberg will run a 30-strong group after members from the European Union were ordered to quit by the end of the month by Tamil Tiger rebels.

The 25-nation bloc branded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) a terrorist group in May, prompting the rebels to retaliate by demanding the ouster of EU members Sweden, Finland and Denmark from the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission.

"It's a mission impossible to keep the parties satisfied," said retired Swedish general Ulf Henricsson who formally steps down this week.

Henricsson said the monitors had come under fire from both sides during his attempts to rule on violations.

"It's very easy just to realise that with 50 percent of the people (now),

you are doing 50 percent of the job. That's a concern," he added.

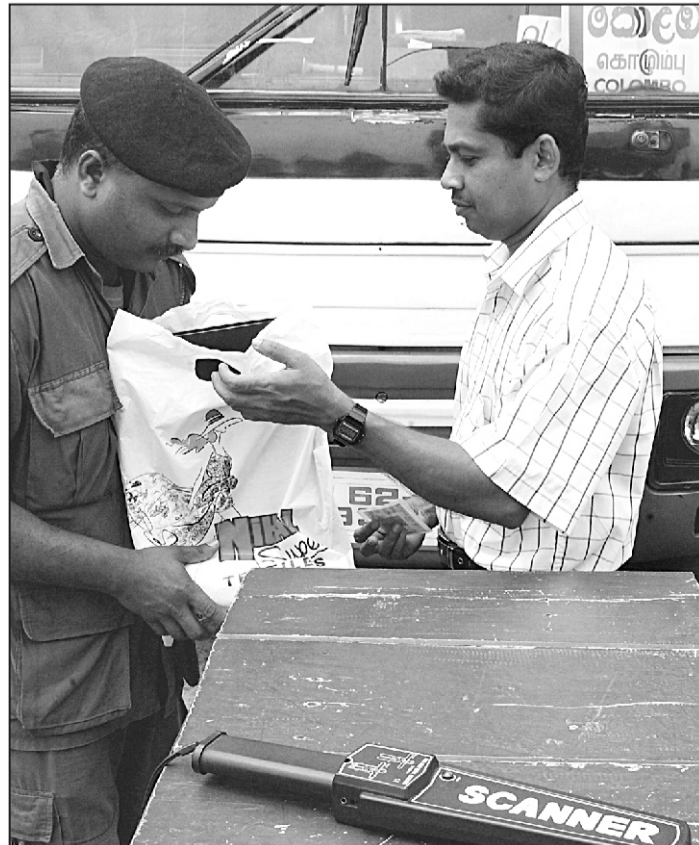
"It's much easier to hide the shit that both parties are doing," Henricsson said, highlighting extrajudicial killings and attacks using fragmentation mines blamed on both sides.

Solvberg, who arrived in Sri Lanka last week, joined Henricsson in meetings with senior figures from both sides before the Swede's departure.

As a "goodwill" gesture, according to a pro-rebel website Saturday, the rebels released a policeman held for nearly a year following a request by Henricsson.

But Henricsson warned peace hopes were not high even though the two sides are in a military stalemate.

He said there were few signs of a negotiated settlement and said the reduced monitoring force faced a tough task at a time of increasing violence with at least 1,500 people killed since December.



A Sri Lankan soldier checks the bag of a bus passenger arriving through a key entry point to Colombo at Kelaniya Saturday. Sri Lankan police arrested 18 people including two women and seized a cache of weapons including grenades and mines.

Pak rebels extend truce

REUTERS, Miranshah

Pro-Taliban militants have extended a ceasefire with Pakistani forces for two weeks in a restive tribal region on the Afghan border, officials said on Saturday.

The militants announced a month-long ceasefire in June to allow tribal elders to try to end the conflict in North Waziristan, where hundreds of people have been killed in battles between security forces and militants over the past year.

The truce was extended for another month in late July.

"The ceasefire has been extended

once again to give more time to tribal elders to broker a peace," said a provincial government official in North West Frontier Province. He declined to be identified.

The tribal elders held a jirga, or traditional council, on Friday at which the militants announced the two-week extension.

As part of the deal, 10 militants were released from prison, said another official, Muhammad Iqbal, an assistant administrator of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan region.

The militants are described as Pakistani Taliban after the headline

Afghan militia that is battling foreign troops and government forces across the border in Afghanistan.

The fiercely independent Pashtun tribes that inhabit both sides of the porous border have never been brought fully under the control of any government.

The militants promised to remain peaceful inside Pakistan. But they are also demanding free movement into Afghanistan to support the mostly Pashtun Taliban in their jihad, or Muslim holy war, there, the provincial official said.