

Lankan navy sinks 12 rebel boats

100 Tigers killed, more supplies sent to Jaffna

AP, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's navy said yesterday it sank 12 Tamil rebel boats, including five suicide craft, and killed as many as 100 rebel fighters during a fierce six-hour sea battle off the country's northern coast.

The fighting broke out late Friday when about 20 boats belonging to the rebel Tamil Tigers' fierce sea wing attacked a navy patrol near Kankasanthurai harbor, to the east of the northern Jaffna peninsula, navy spokesman Commander DKP Dassanayake said.

The Tigers have been battling the government for over 20 years for a separate homeland for the coun-

try's ethnic Tamil minority, claiming discrimination by the majority Sinhalese, but in recent months the fighting has escalated, endangering a 2002 cease-fire.

About 220,000 people have fled their homes because of near-daily shelling, airstrikes and artillery fire since April, according to the United Nations.

Dassanayake said two navy boats were slightly damaged, and two sailors wounded, but the rebel Web site TamilNet said two navy vessels were sunk and a third damaged. It said about 30 sailors were missing.

The Roman Catholic priest, P Iruthayathas, said about 500 fami-

lies in the area took refuge in nearby churches and schools while the fighting was going on.

"People are suffering. They are unable to properly carry out their livelihood, fishing, and so they don't have money. Even the dry rations given free by the government are not sufficient."

In recent months, Sri Lanka has returned to the brink of full-scale civil war with hundreds of fighters and civilians killed in major offensives. However, neither side has officially withdrawn from the 2002 Norway-brokered ceasefire.

Meanwhile, a second cargo ship was loaded here yesterday with supplies for desperate residents of

Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula.

The vessel containing food, drugs and other essential goods was slated to leave Sunday on a two-day journey to reach Jaffna's main port of Kankasanthurai, military officials said.

The first cargo ship was sent there last week following the ending of the two-week siege imposed by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Plans for the vessel's dispatch came as aid agencies pressed for better access to conflict-affected areas to distribute relief supplies among the needy population.

Arabs call for new ME peace move

REUTERS, United Nations

Arab countries have formally asked the UN Security Council to acknowledge that efforts to end the Arab-Israeli conflict have failed and to resuscitate and reshape the peace process.

The 22-nation Arab League called on the council to formally recognise "the need to reactivate the Middle Eastern peace process and establish a mechanism for us to proceed on all tracks" -- in the Palestinian territories, Syria and Lebanon, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in Damascus on Friday.

A letter, sent to the Security Council this week by Arab League UN Observer Yahya Mahmassani but not yet made public, showed that concrete steps were underway to resume peace efforts, Annan said.

The letter called on foreign ministers from the council's 15 members to meet this month in New York to discuss its plea.

Council diplomats said the request was under study and no date had been set.

John Bolton, the US ambassador to the United Nations, denied the peace process had failed. He said not every country in the region supported the Arab League idea, and he wanted to know whether Israel would be invited to the proposed ministerial meeting.

"One always wants to know what the outcome is going to be when you ask your foreign minister to come to a meeting," he told reporters. "The question of diplomatic activity should always be whether it is going to contribute to a solution to the existing problems or not."



PHOTO: AFP
UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (L) speaks during a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki (R) in Tehran yesterday. His visit comes as the United States leads a drive for UN sanctions against Tehran after it refused to pay heed to a Security Council deadline to halt sensitive nuclear operations.

Arab League foreign ministers agreed on the proposal at an August 20 meeting in Cairo.

The group said on its Web site that the plan for ending the conflict should be based on past UN resolutions as well as "on the basis of land for peace, and through establishment of effective and specific mechanisms for the swift resumption of direct talks between the parties."

The group wants the Security Council to supervise negotiations and set a target date for their completion, according to the Web site. Since the outbreak in July of the month-long war between

Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, Annan has been pushing hard for international acknowledgment that a lasting peace would come in the region only if a comprehensive approach were taken. All parties agree the Israeli-Palestinian issue remains the core of the conflict.

Ibrahim Gambari, the UN political affairs chief, told the council last week it should transform the tragedy of the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict into "an opportunity ... to resolve the problems and issues in the region, which have confronted us, without resolution, for far too long."

Events over the past year had led to a "woeful decline" in confidence in the peace process, he said, expressing concern this trend could fuel support for "violence and terror" on the Palestinian side and for "harsh and excessive military actions and unilateral measures" on the Israeli side.

"Positions may be hardening and could harden further unless a credible political process is somehow revived," he warned.

Anti-Taliban drive launched 28 killed in attacks

AFP, Kandahar

Afghan and Nato troops kicked off a major anti-Taliban offensive in southern Afghanistan Saturday, as 28 people including a British soldier were killed in a new wave of attacks.

Operation Medusa was launched in Panjwayi district of southern Kandahar province -- the spiritual and symbolic heartland of the Taliban movement -- after residents had been warned for days to leave the area, officials said.

It involved "hundreds" of Nato troops and a similar number of Afghan police and army soldiers, a spokesman for Nato's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said.

Isaf only deployed to southern Afghanistan a month ago and this operation is its biggest against the insurgents.

Panjwayi, about 35km west of Kandahar city, has seen months of intense fighting, with ISAF officials saying it has one of the biggest concentrations of Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Seasoned Taliban fighters in the area had been "hardening their defence positions and sandbagging buildings and bringing in ammunition," spokesman Major Scott Lundy said.

"We have had indications that these Taliban fighters are of the hardcore variety as opposed to the soldiers-for-a-day we see some-

times," he told AFP.

The area, from where the extremist Taliban emerged and took up arms in the early 1990s to eventually control most of Afghanistan by 1996, is also near a key east-west route that has seen several deadly attacks on foreign forces.

"The goal is to remove the Taliban threat from Panjwayi and stabilise the situation so that much needed reconstruction and development projects can resume," Lundy said.

Isaf and Afghan officials had urged residents through the local media and meetings with area elders to leave before the offensive started, he said.

Abu Ghraib now under Iraqi control

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq has regained control of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, known for a prisoner abuse scandal involving US troops, government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said on Saturday.

"Yesterday, Abu Ghraib prison was handed over by US forces," al-Dabbagh told a news conference. "It is now empty of any detainee or prisoner."

"Now the prison is protected by Iraqi forces and the Iraqi government will look into how to benefit from it in the national interest," he added.

The prison in western Baghdad was a torture centre under former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Photographs of American soldiers abusing Iraqis there in 2003 gave it a new notoriety and made it a touchstone for Arab and Muslim rage over the US occupation.

UK cops net 16 in anti-terror raids

REUTERS, London

British police said yesterday they had arrested 16 men in two separate anti-terrorism operations just three weeks after uncovering a suspected plot to bring down US-bound airliners over the Atlantic.

Fourteen of the men were held in London in an operation that a police source said focused on suspected "training, recruitment and encouraging others to take part in terrorist activity."

Anti-terrorist police in Manchester arrested two men early on Saturday and were carrying out three searches but this was not linked to the London arrests, police there said.



PHOTO: AFP
An Italian Unifil helicopter drops off Italian soldiers near a beach at the southern Lebanese city of Tyre yesterday. Italian troops landed in Lebanon Saturday in the first major reinforcement of the United Nations mission monitoring a truce between Israel and Hezbollah.

Talks go on for Israeli prisoner swap

AFP, Gaza City

Three Palestinians were shot dead by Israeli troops in the Gaza Strip on Saturday, sources said, while talks were reportedly taking place to exchange an Israeli soldier for Palestinian women and children.

Medical and security sources said an unidentified Palestinian was killed at the Kissufim border crossing in the central Gaza Strip, a shooting later confirmed by the Israeli army.

"A unit noticed a suspect near the security barrier at the Kissufim crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip, and opened fire in his direction. He was hit," an army spokesman told AFP.

Earlier Saturday, two Palestinians were shot dead in Beit Hanun during an Israeli incursion into the north of the Gaza Strip, medical and security sources said.

The victims were named as Mohammed Abu Oda, 60, and his son Ismail, 28.

Nepali Maoists threaten protests for early polls

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels threatened yesterday to launch street protests to press the multiparty government for early elections to an assembly that would draw up a new constitution.

"The government is lingering. We cannot continue to remain in limbo like this," rebel spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told Reuters after a central committee meeting of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

The Maoists have fought since

1996 to topple the monarchy and establish a communist state, a conflict in which more than 13,000 people have died.

However, violent street protests in April organised by seven political parties and backed by the Maoists forced King Gyanendra to end his absolute rule and restore democracy.

In June, the Maoists agreed a power-sharing deal with the government to form an interim legislature to replace the existing parliament, which does not include the rebels.

US seeks UN actions against Myanmar

REUTERS, United Nations

The United States on Friday asked the UN Security Council to deal with Myanmar, whose junta government has jailed opponents, persecuted minorities and sent refugees fleeing into neighbouring states.

The United States, had sought to put Myanmar, formerly Burma, on the council's agenda in May. It backed off after opposition from several council members and settled for briefings from UN officials instead.

But US Ambassador John Bolton said he now was prepared to ask for a vote to place the issue on the agenda because "we think at this point that we would have a sufficient number of supporters." No resolution is planned yet.

In a letter to Greek Ambassador Adamantios Vassilakis, this month's Security Council president, Bolton said conditions in Burma have a "destabilizing impact on the region" and that the country's deteriorating situation was "likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security."



PHOTO: REUTERS
Pluto (L) and its satellite Charon are seen in this 1994 image taken by the European Space Agency's Faint Object Camera.

Scientists challenge Pluto's demotion

REUTERS, Washington

Hundreds of US scientists have challenged a recent decision by an international astronomy group to strip Pluto of its planetary status with a petition rejecting its definition of what constitutes a planet.

The astronomical insurrection shows that debate is likely to continue over the status of the icy rock at the edge of the solar system that was considered the ninth planet until a vote last week by the International Astronomical Union.

Petition organiser Alan Stern said the union's decision was driven by politics, not science.

"The IAU can say the sky is green all day long and that doesn't make it so," said Stern, a planetary scientist at the Southwest Research Institute in Boulder, Colorado.

"The IAU created a definition which is technically flawed, linguistically flawed and scientifically embarrassing," Stern said in a phone interview.