

115 Tigers killed in battle

Claims Lankan military

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka said Sunday that its troops had killed scores of Tamil Tiger rebels in fierce weekend fighting in the northern Jaffna peninsula that also left 28 soldiers dead.

Mortar and artillery duels along a de facto frontline on the contested peninsula killed the 28 and left 125 wounded, a defence ministry spokesman said. The rebels suffered 115 dead and "many more wounded," he said.

Earlier, a ministry spokesman claimed that troops had killed 150 Tiger guerrillas during the long-range battles at the weekend.

Both sides are known to exaggerate the other's casualties in the absence of independent verification.

There was no immediate word from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website said there had been no rebel casualties except for four killed on Friday.

The government launched an offensive at the weekend including intense air attacks and shelling of Tamil Tiger positions south of the army's defence lines, military officials said.

The defence ministry spokesman said soldiers were consolidating an area they wrested from rebel control in Jaffna amid sporadic fighting on Sunday.

"Troops are digging in at their locations but there are sporadic mortar attacks this morning too," the spokesman said.

The rebels, who claim the Jaffna peninsula as a cultural capital in their fight for a separate Tamil homeland on the Indian Ocean island nation, offered stiff resistance including new artillery attacks Sunday, military sources said.

A new wave of fighting erupted in Jaffna last month when the Tamil Tigers staged a major artillery and mortar bomb attack against military positions within the peninsula, but most of the battles died down after two weeks.

Security forces staged the latest action to strengthen defences and push back Tiger artillery that targets the main airbase in Jaffna, military sources said.

The fighting has also effectively cut off the only road access to the peninsula where about 8,000 civilians, including a large number of foreign nationals of Sri Lankan origin, are

believed to be trapped.

The Sri Lankan navy on Saturday moved 795 civilians in a military ship to the northeastern port town of Trincomalee.

Sri Lanka and international aid agencies have used ships to bring supplies to Jaffna and evacuate civilians but food and fuel are reportedly scarce after weeks of fighting.

However, the government was arranging for more food and fuel to be sent to Jaffna this week, the essential services department said.

Sri Lanka has suffered an upsurge in bloodshed since December that has left more than 1,500 people dead by official count and a 2002 ceasefire in shreds.

The island's three-decade separatist ethnic conflict has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

Separately, police and troops maintained a high state of alert in the capital amid fears of rebel retaliatory attacks, a police official said Sunday. The rebels warned last week that they could strike in Colombo.

In attacks elsewhere, three soldiers were killed and two wounded Sunday when suspected Tamil Tiger guerrillas lobbed a grenade into the vehicle in the northern district of

Vavuniya, military officials said.

They also said two Tigers were killed elsewhere in the island's embattled northeast when they tried to attack an army foot patrol.

Diplomats say it is difficult to see how to rescue the peace process with both sides apparently more interested in fighting than in talking.

Tempers have risen further since the army captured a rebel stronghold on Monday near the strategic Trincomalee harbor in the northeast of the island after days of artillery battles.

The rebels demand that the army vacate the area of Sampur, the first major capture of territory by either side since the ceasefire was signed.

The government says it was forced to take Sampur because the rebels had been using it to shell a naval base in Trincomalee and disrupt a maritime supply route to the Jaffna peninsula.

"In the light of this, the question of withdrawal will never arise," said defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella. "We have to accept this challenge from Puleedevan."

The rebel enclave at Sampur was also threatening an important oil storage terminal, a flour mill and a cement factory, he said.



A Sri Lankan soldier stands alert at a checkpoint on a street of Colombo yesterday. Twenty-eight Sri Lankan soldiers were killed in the latest round of fighting against Tamil Tiger rebels at the weekend.

India, Pakistan invited to join Asem

EU urged to end China arms ban

AFP, AP, Helsinki

Asian and European leaders said yesterday they would invite India, Mongolia and Pakistan as well as Bulgaria and Romania to join future gatherings of Asem, a forum dedicated to dialogue between Europe and Asia.

"I am convinced that this enlargement will not only widen but also significantly deepen Asia-Europe relations," said Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen of Finland, which holds the EU's rotating presidency.

He made the invitation in a speech to leaders and top officials from 38 Asian and European nations gathered in Helsinki for two days of talks on trade and security issues.

The addition of the three Asian countries to the twice-yearly Asia Europe Meeting (Asem) will help lessen the imbalance in the forum, where the European Union's 25 members outweigh the 13 Asian countries currently in the club.

China, Korea, Japan and the 10 states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) are the current Asem members.

The EU will grow to 27 members

next year if Bulgaria and Romania join the bloc as scheduled.

Asem is widely seen as being long on talk and short on substance and is still trying to prove its relevance despite having 10 years of existence behind it.

The Helsinki summit marks the 10-year anniversary of Asem, which started with a meeting in 1996 in Bangkok.

Meanwhile, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao urged the European Union Saturday to lift its ban on arms sales to Beijing imposed after the 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square.

Beijing has lobbied repeatedly for lifting the ban, calling it a "Cold War relic." France is in favour, but others in the 25-nation EU have failed to reach agreement.

Wen told a news conference China has made significant progress in "protecting the human rights of Chinese people."

"No country can say they can resolve all the issues related to human rights perfectly," Wen said after a summit meeting with EU officials.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (R) take part in a Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting in New Delhi yesterday. The CWC meeting was held at Gandhi's residence to chalk out a strategy for the commemoration of the anniversary of the 'Satyagraha' which was launched by Mahatma Gandhi.

India police probe link between mosque and train bombings

REUTERS, Malegaon

Indian police said yesterday they were questioning several people in connection with blasts that killed 32 people in a western town and were investigating possible links with train bombings in Mumbai in July.

Three bombs went off in and around a mosque in the textile town of Malegaon on Friday, killing at least 32 people and wounding about 100, mostly Muslim worshippers who had gathered for weekly prayers.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks in the town that has a history of strife between Hindus and Muslims. Muslims make up about 70 percent of Malegaon's

700,000 population.

"No arrests have been made. No one has been detained. As part of investigations some people have been only questioned," Anil Kumbhare, additional police superintendent of Malegaon, told Reuters.

Investigators said although they had no evidence, they were exploring if the Malegaon explosions could be linked with the July 11 serial bombings on Mumbai's railway network that killed 186 people and wounded around 700.

The Mumbai carnage has been blamed on militant Indian Muslims backed by Pakistan-based Islamist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is fighting against New Delhi's rule in disputed Kashmir.

Pakistan to send demining contingent to Lebanon

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan will send a contingent of army engineers to Lebanon to undertake demining operations with the expanded United Nations peacekeeping force, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said Saturday.

Aziz told reporters in Islamabad that the decision to send the engineers was taken at the request of the Lebanese government, which was made during his visit to Beirut earlier this week.

He did not give the date of the deployment or the number of troops to be sent, but said the troops would go as soon as the logistical details were finalised with the Lebanese government.

Putin will step down in 2008

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday vowed to step down in 2008 and said he would recommend his successor fight poverty and ensure strong economic growth, said experts who attended a lunch with the president.

Putin spoke for nearly four hours to a group of about 50 foreign experts over lunch at his Novo-Ogaryovo residency outside Moscow, according to people who attended the meeting.

"The most interesting point was that he reiterated that he does not plan to run again for office in 2008 as he believes he has a moral duty not to break the constitution," said Angela Stent, director of the centre for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies at Georgetown University in Washington.

'Crocodile Hunter' gets private funeral

REUTERS, Sydney

A private funeral service was held for Australian TV naturalist Steve Irwin on Saturday and he will be buried at his family's zoo in the northern state of Queensland, local media reported.

Irwin's father, Bob Irwin, had declined a government offer for a state funeral for his son.

Irwin, known as the "Crocodile Hunter" after his popular TV documentaries which aired around the world, was killed six days ago by a stingray barb to the chest while diving on Australia's Great Barrier Reef.