

Fresh fighting erupts as Lanka peace bid stalls

22 Tigers killed in battle

AFP, Colombo

Heavy fighting erupted Friday in Sri Lanka with the military reporting the recovery of 22 bodies of Tamil rebels after a Norwegian envoy failed to secure a deal to re-launch peace talks.

Government forces repulsed a major Tamil separatist offensive against defence lines in Mankerni in the coastal district of Batticaloa, the defence ministry said.

However, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) denied launching any offensive and in turn accused the military of starting a fresh push into guerrilla territory.

"Sri Lankan troops are advancing into our territory and they have moved about one and a half kilometres," LTTE spokesman Rasiyah Ilanthiriyani said by telephone from

the rebel-held northern town of Kilinochchi.

He said he had no immediate details of the casualties, but added that the LTTE had already lodged protests with Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway and complained to the Scandinavian truce monitors.

"Our defence council is going to take a decision on this situation," he said.

The defence ministry said ground forces in the northern peninsula of Jaffna had also on Friday destroyed a rebel fuel depot located at a small islet off the northern mainland.

The ministry said fighting in the eastern region was sparked by the Tigers.

"We have recovered the bodies of 22 Tiger cadres and they may have suffered more casualties," a

military official in the east said by telephone. "We have about five soldiers seriously wounded."

The flare-up came a day after Norway's peace envoy, Jon Hanssen-Bauer, left the island after failing to seal an agreement on a venue to resume peace negotiations between the two sides.

However, the government did announce it was "accommodating" the LTTE to advance the suggested date for talks to October 28.

Israeli-built Kfir jets hit suspected Tiger locations at Kathiraveli, just north of the Mankerni army defences in the Batticaloa district, on Thursday night, the defence ministry said.

The LTTE had moved long-range artillery away from the neighbouring Trincomalee district following a major military offensive there last month

and was now targeting army positions in Batticaloa, it said.

The government's top official coordinating with Norway, Palitha Kohona, said he expected the Norwegians to return shortly to carry to the Tigers the government's message of agreeing to talks on October 28.

The Norwegians were expected to try to finalise a venue after Colombo called for talks in Switzerland while the guerrillas demanded Oslo.

Sri Lanka's ruling party allies have accused Norway of siding with the Tigers and opposed any discussions in Oslo, demanding a "neutral" venue.

Even if the two sides agree on a date and a location, there are no guarantees that the talks will take off.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters demonstrate against the policies of US President George W Bush Thursday in New York. One month ahead of mid-term elections, hundreds gathered as part of "The World Can't Wait" rally to drive out the Bush administration.

Hundreds protest Bush policies

AP, Washington

Hundreds of people called the Bush administration's policies a crime and held up yellow police tape in front of the White House on Thursday amid a nationwide day of protest against the president.

The 500 demonstrators were among many who gathered for similar events in more than 200 cities to protest Bush on issues ranging from global warming to the war in Iraq.

"We are turning the corner in bringing forward a mass movement of resistance to drive out the Bush regime," said organiser Travis Morales with the activist group World Can't Wait.

Some dressed in costume, including a hooded prisoner in an orange jumpsuit, a devilish rendition of President Bush and two grim reapers. One man wore a red cheerleader outfit with "Radical" emblazoned on the jersey.

The demonstrators held up yellow police tape along a three-block stretch in front of the White House.



PHOTO: AFP

Nobel Peace Prize 2005 nominee Irom Chanu Sharmila (C) is attended by her supporters at a hunger strike protest in New Delhi yesterday. Sharmila arrived in New Delhi to continue her six-year hunger strike demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, and alleged lawlessness, rape, murder, army excess, arbitrary detention, torture and repression in Manipur, a north-eastern state of India.

Democrats poised for Senate gains: Polls Iraq still issue number one

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

Democrats are poised for US Senate gains in the November 7 election, but face an uphill battle to pick up the six seats they need for control, according to Reuters/Zogby polls released on Thursday.

Democrats lead in five of 10 crucial Senate battlegrounds, including three Republican-held seats in Pennsylvania, Montana and Rhode Island and an Democratic-held Maryland and New Jersey.

But Republican incumbents lead in Virginia and Missouri, and Senate contests in Republican-held Ohio and Tennessee are deadlocked, the polls showed.

Connecticut Sen Joseph Lieberman, running as an independent, has a big lead over Democrat Ned Lamont.

To gain a Senate majority, Democrats must hold their own vulnerable seats and sweep six of the seven at-risk Republican seats, including knocking off five Republican incumbents -- a tough but not impossible task.

"It looks like Democrats will make gains, but it will be very difficult for them to take control," pollster John Zogby said. "It is going to take

an awful lot of work for them to pick up six seats."

The polls show Lieberman, the 2000 Democratic vice presidential nominee who lost an August primary fight to Lamont, with a 20-point lead over his rival.

Other polls have given Lieberman a smaller lead in the high-profile race, which will not have a bearing on the Senate balance of power. Lieberman has promised to vote with Democrats if he wins his race as an independent.

Meanwhile, Iraq remains the top issue for US voters ahead of next month's crucial midterm elections according to a national poll released Thursday, which also found Americans surprisingly unmoved by the congressional sex scandal currently dominating Washington.

"Iraq has become the central issue of the midterm elections," said researchers with the Pew Research Centre, in a statement that accompanied the survey.

"There is more dismay about how the US military effort in Iraq is going than at any point since the war began more than three years ago," the statement read.

Straw dislikes all Muslim veils

BBC ONLINE

Cabinet Minister Jack Straw has said he would prefer Muslim women not to wear veils at all.

The Commons leader said he did not want to be "prescriptive" but he believed that covering people's faces could make community relations more difficult.

Straw has said he asks Muslim women at his Blackburn constituency surgeries if they would mind removing veils.

Some Muslim women called his remarks insulting, but other Muslims said they understood his concerns.

Straw has dismissed suggestions that his remarks are designed to raise his profile ahead of Labour's deputy leadership election.

He has yet to confirm whether he will join the race to succeed John Prescott but is widely expected to do so.

Straw is Labour MP for Blackburn, where about 30% of residents are Muslim.

He sparked controversy when he told his local paper he asked female constituents visiting his surgery if they would uncover their faces.

World powers warn North Korea against nuke test

REUTERS, Tokyo

World powers neared consensus on a statement warning North Korea against a nuclear test yesterday amid speculation that the secretive state might detonate a device deep inside an abandoned mine as early as this weekend.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, making his first reported public appearance since the Stalinist state vowed on Tuesday to conduct a nuclear test, held a meeting to rally army commanders.

But the country's official KCNA news agency did not mention preparations for a nuclear test in its dispatch, which said Kim was welcomed "with stormy cheers of hurrah."

At the United Nations late on Thursday, Security Council members reached broad agreement on a statement warning Pyongyang of unspecified consequences if it exploded a nuclear device.

The text, which was sent to governments for possible changes before further discussions on Friday, urges Pyongyang to cancel its planned test and return immediately to six-country talks aimed at persuading it to abandon nuclear arms.

"I think it is important for the

international community, through the council, to let North Korea understand that non-compliance would involve some consequences," said Japan's UN ambassador, Kenzo Oshima.

The test does not include a US proposal to refer to Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which lists actions such as sanctions and could ultimately lead to a military strike.

Diplomats said officials in China, North Korea's closest ally, and Russia may try to change the text. Beijing has insisted that the now-dormant six-party talks -- and not the Security Council -- should be the main forum for resolving the crisis.

Pyongyang walked out of the talks with China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States last year and has refused to return until Washington ends a squeeze on its offshore finances.

The US point man on North Korea, Chris Hill, told CNN that predictions were difficult, but a test "could come very soon."

Three senior US officials with access to intelligence told Reuters that US speculation about a possible test centred on Sunday, the anniversary of when Kim became head of the national defence commission in 1997.

"We're looking at this weekend,"

said one administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The officials said Pyongyang, which has in the past timed bold actions and announcements to coincide with significant dates, could choose Monday, North Korea Worker's Party Day as well as the US holiday for explorer Christopher Columbus.

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso was circumspect on the timing, however, saying he did not sense tension was mounting.

"Unlike a rocket, we can't see it, so there is nothing we can say," Aso told reporters in Tokyo.

Missile tests by North Korea in July were widely anticipated because satellite pictures showed them being prepared for launch.

A Chinese source briefed by Pyongyang said North Korea planned to conduct its test about 2,000 meters (6,562 feet) under the ground in an abandoned coal mine in the north of the country.

"They are more or less ready," the source told Reuters after speaking to North Korea officials. He did not give a timetable.

EU urges India to sign non-proliferation pact

AFP, New Delhi

The president of the European Parliament yesterday urged India to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, a move he said would make it easier for trade with Europe in civil nuclear technology.

The president's call came as key European powers -- Britain, France and Germany -- are trying to reach an agreement with Iran to persuade it to stop nuclear enrichment.

"We are quite concerned about proliferation," Josep Borrell told reporters in New Delhi at the end of a seven-day visit to India.

"Of course, India and Iran are completely apart" but the European Parliament has passed a resolution asking New Delhi to sign the non-proliferation treaty, he added.

"If India had signed the non-proliferation treaty cooperation would have a better framework ... our civil cooperation will be much more efficient," he said.

"Everything would be easier if India were part of this treaty."

India, which conducted nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998, has consis-

tently refused to sign the treaty, calling it discriminatory.

In March, India and the United States clinched an agreement under which New Delhi would get access to previously forbidden civilian nuclear technology.

India, in return, has agreed to separate its civilian and military nuclear facilities and put the former under international safeguards.

The US House of Representatives gave its go-ahead to the deal in July, but it must still be approved by the Senate before being implemented.

Some US critics have said the agreement would not only make it harder to enforce rules against nuclear renegades Iran and North Korea, but also set a dangerous precedent for other countries with nuclear ambitions.

Tehran says its nuclear programme is aimed at generating electricity and has sought talks on Western concerns but ruled out a formal enrichment moratorium.

Russia deports 'illegal' Georgians

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia deported a planeload of Georgians accused of immigration offences yesterday, the latest retaliation by Moscow intended to bring its small southern neighbour to heel.

Georgia enraged Moscow by arresting four Russian army officers last week on spying charges. The men were later released but their arrest ignited smouldering tensions between the two nations over Georgia's wish to move closer to the West.

The Georgian deportees were rounded up in police raids over the past few days, taken to a military airport outside Moscow and put on a plane bound for Tbilisi. Many were frightened.

"It is terrible, we feel like Jews during World War Two, not like humans," one of the deportees, who gave her name as Irina, told Reuters by mobile telephone from a bus at the airport.

"Last night they told us we would be deported today and advised us to call relatives so they could bring us some essential things."

Russia has severed all transport and postal links with its ex-Soviet

neighbour, stopped issuing visas to Georgians, banned key Georgian exports to Russia and raided Georgian businesses in Moscow.

Friday's deportations followed President Vladimir Putin's order on Wednesday to tighten up controls on illegal migrants. Up to a million Georgians live and work in Russia, many without permits, and their remittances are an important contribution to a Georgian economy suffering serious unemployment.

Russia's Interfax news agency quoted an unnamed source as saying 143 Georgians were on board the plane. In Tbilisi, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said it would arrive in Georgia at 1600 local time (1200 GMT).

The Kremlin wants Tbilisi to show a "more constructive attitude" before it will consider abandoning sanctions.

Russia's Prosecutor-General Yuri Chaika insisted its retaliatory measures were "being carried out within the framework of the law." Selective law enforcement is a long-standing Kremlin tactic against opponents.



PHOTO: AFP

People stand in line near the Russian consulate in Tbilisi yesterday. Two airplanes belonging to Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry are to evacuate 180 Russian citizens from Georgia on Friday, Russian Charge d' Affaires to Georgia Ivan Volynkin told Interfax.



PHOTO: REUTERS

An artist's impression of a 'Monster' fish-like reptile (bottom), whose fossil was found on the Arctic island of Spitsbergen, off Norway, catching a smaller plesiosaur, in this image from the Natural History Museum, University of Oslo.

'Monster' fossil found in Jurassic graveyard

REUTERS, Oslo

Scientists have found a fossil of a "Monster" fish-like reptile in a 150 million-year-old Jurassic graveyard on an Arctic island off Norway.

The Norwegian researchers discovered remains of a total of 28 plesiosaurs and ichthyosaurs -- top marine predators when dinosaurs dominated on land -- at a site on the island of Spitsbergen, about 1,300 km (800 miles) from the North Pole.

"One of them was this gigantic monster, with vertebrae the size of dinner plates and teeth the size of cucumbers," Joern Hurum, an assistant professor at the University of Oslo, told Reuters on Thursday.

"We believe the skeleton is intact and that it's about 10 meters (33 feet) long," he told Reuters of

the pliosaur, a type of plesiosaur with a short neck and massive skull. The team dubbed the specimen "The Monster."

Such pliososaurs are known from remains in countries including Britain and Argentina but no complete skeleton has been found, he said. The skull of the pliosaur -- perhaps a distant relative to Scotland's mythical Loch Ness monster -- was among the biggest on record.

Scientists would return next year to try to excavate the entire fossil, buried on a hillside.

Plesiosaurs, which swam with two sets of flippers, often preyed on smaller dolphin-like ichthyosaurs. All went extinct when the dinosaurs vanished 65 million years ago.

Rice urges Kurds to work for peaceful, unified Iraq

AFP, Arbil

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met the leaders of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region yesterday, urging them to cooperate with Iraqi Arabs in building a peaceful and unified country.

Rice dropped in on Kurdish regional president Massud Barzani in Arbil, his northern capital, after an unannounced visit to the Iraqi capital Baghdad, which is in the grip of a brutal sectarian conflict.

"The Kurdish people will ... certainly be better served if Baghdad and its surrounding areas are stable and democratic," Rice told reporters at a joint press conference with Barzani.

"We had a very good discussion

about the national reconciliation process and the vision of unified democratic Iraq that is stable, that is at peace and at peace with its neighbours," she said.

Grateful for US support in throwing off the yoke of ousted dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraq's Kurds have put their long-cherished dreams of independence on hold while the Baghdad government struggles to rebuild the war-torn country.

But separatist tensions are never far from the surface, and fierce rows have recently erupted over the banning of Iraq's national flag in the north and the Kurdish government's determination to develop its own oil industry.

Washington fears a Kurdish declaration of independence would

accelerate the possible disintegration of Iraq and knows it would be bound to anger regional ally Turkey, which has a restive Kurdish minority of its own.

The sensitivity of the situation was on display even at the media conference, where Rice and Barzani stood in front of US and Kurdish flags, while the Iraqi national flag, which the Kurdish leader has banned, was nowhere to be seen.

"Kurdistan, as any other nation, has the right to self-determination," said Barzani, adding however that "the parliament of Kurdistan has adopted, within the framework of a democratic Iraq, the federal system."

'No' to more brides after tying the knot 201 times!

AFP, Sokoto

Sheltering from the scorching tropical heat in the cool shade of a mango tree, 68-year-old honeymooner Shehu Malami sat and pondered life with his four wives, after tying the knot 201 times.

"No more marriages for me, this is the end. I will retain my four wives to the end as long as another misfortune doesn't befall me", Malami, who recently solemnized his 201st marriage, said outside his old bungalow in the ancient city of Sokoto in northern Nigeria.

In June 2004, Malami married for the 200th time, vowing it would be his last wedding. But he found he just could not keep his pledge and last week married again to replace a 40-year-old spouse he divorced recently.



Space debris hit shuttle

REUTERS, Cape Canaveral

A piece of space debris punched a small hole in one of space shuttle Atlantis' radiator panels during its recent 12-day spaceflight, NASA said on Thursday.

Damage from debris has been NASA's top safety issue since the destruction of shuttle Columbia in February 2003, when insulating foam came off the ship's fuel tank during launch and punched a hole in the shuttle's protective heat shield.

The radiator damage, which measures slightly more than one-tenth of an inch in diameter, was found during routine post-landing inspections at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida, NASA spokeswoman Jessica Rye said.