

EU pushes for end to fighting in Lanka

Army jets drop 48 bombs on Tamil village

AFP, Helsinki

The European Union yesterday urged Sri Lanka's leaders and the Tamil Tiger rebels to end fierce fighting which threatens peace talks due this month, after a week of raging violence there.

Finland, speaking as holder of the rotating presidency of the European political bloc, said it "urges both sides to cease all hostilities immediately and create an environment for constructive discussion".

The EU presidency "is concerned that the recent escalation of violence can endanger the positive step taken by the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to resume peace talks in Switzerland" due on October 28 and 29, the Finnish statement said.

Sri Lankan jets bombed territory controlled by the Tigers on Friday, on the third day of an offensive provoked by a flare-up of violence in which 130 government troops were killed and hundreds wounded in fighting with rebels.

The EU presidency stressed its support for mediation efforts by Norway, which has been working to restore a 2002 ceasefire and end spiralling violence that has claimed more than 2,200 lives since December, according to an official tally.

More than 60,000 people have been killed overall in three decades of conflict as the Tigers have fought for an independent Tamil homeland on the Sinhalese-majority island.

The Finnish EU presidency added that it was "deeply concerned about the increasing violations of human rights and international humanitarian law" in the Sri Lankan fighting.

"The presidency urges the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to ensure that humanitarian aid deliveries be granted free access to conflict-affected areas and that the security of humanitarian workers will be guaranteed."

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan army jets dropped 48 bombs on a village in Tamil Tiger-controlled territory on Friday, a pro-rebel website said, amid ongoing violence in the troubled northeast.

The attack on Muttayankattu

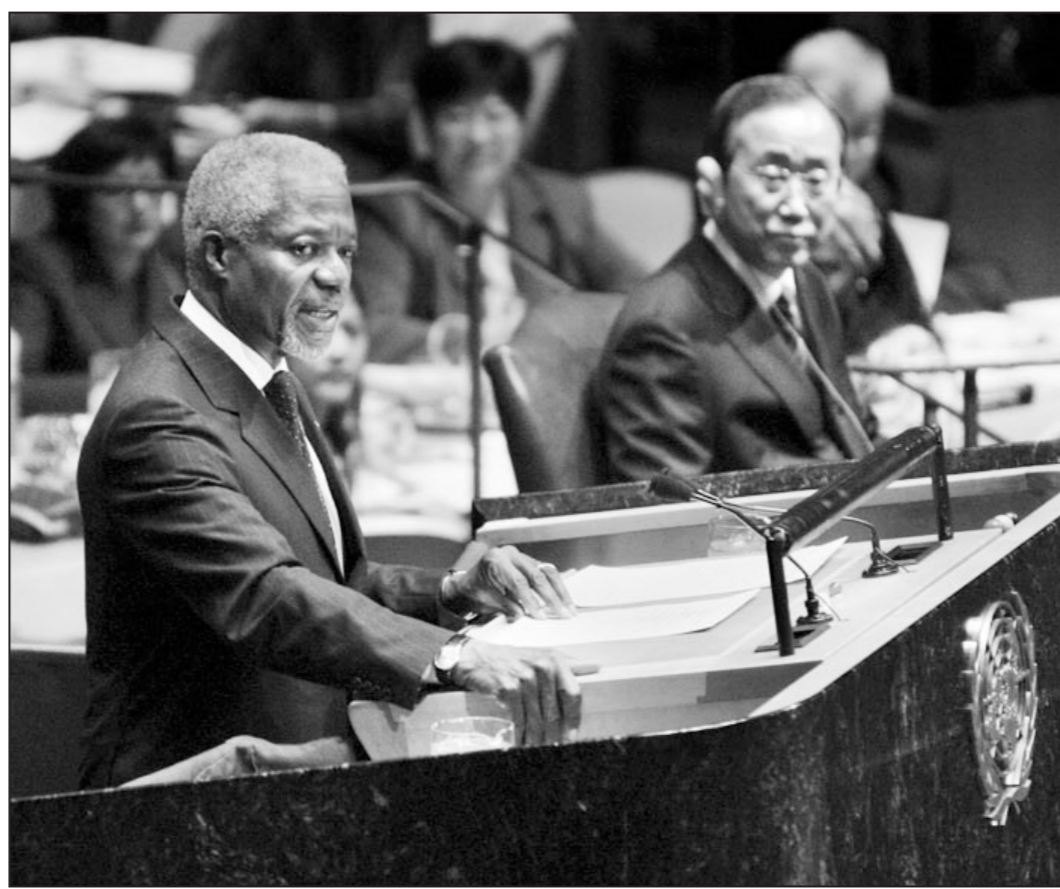
village in Mullaivu district killed 10 cows and devastated a large swath of farmland, the TamilNet website said, adding the jets carried out six bombing raids over a two-hour period Friday morning.

It was one of the biggest bombing raids to hit the region, TamilNet said, and followed a flare-up in violence that saw the government suffer record losses with 130 troops killed in clashes earlier in the week.

The fighting has cast doubt over peace talks scheduled for later this month.

But despite the continued violence, diplomats said Norway, the top peace broker in Sri Lanka, was planning to dispatch special envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer Tuesday to work out details for the peace talks set for October 28 and 29.

Norway has been working to restore the 2002 ceasefire and end spiralling violence, which has claimed more than 2,200 lives since December, according to an official tally.



United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (L) speaks beside South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon (R) after the UN General Assembly voted to confirm Ban's nomination to succeed Annan as the next Secretary General on Friday night at UN headquarters in New York.

UNGA endorses Ban as new secy general

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN General Assembly appointed South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon by acclamation on Friday as the next UN secretary-general, a post he will assume on January 1.

Ban, 62, is the first Asian leader since Burma's U Thant led the United Nations from 1961 to 1971. Asian nations had insisted it was their turn for the job to succeed Kofi Annan, a Ghanaian who has led the world body for the past decade.

The approval of Ban as the eighth secretary-general of the United Nations since 1946 was welcomed by applause from diplomats and hundreds of UN staff.

The 15-member UN Security Council recommended Ban to the General Assembly as the next secretary-general after he comfortably beat six rivals in informal council polls. The General Assembly formally appointed him for a five-year term.

"I will work diligently to materialize our responsibility to protect the most vulnerable members of humanity and for the peaceful resolution of threats to international security and regional stability," Ban told the Assembly.

"The true measure of success for the UN is not how much we promise, but how much we deliver for those who need us most," he said.

He said he was committed to reforming the United Nations, meeting UN Millennium Development Goals, expanding peace operations and dealing with threats posed by terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, HIV/AIDS and other pandemics, environmental degradation and the imperatives of human rights.

"We believe he is the right person to lead the United Nations at this decisive moment in its history, particularly as the UN struggles to fulfil the terms of the reform agenda that world leaders agreed to last fall," US Ambassador John Bolton told the Assembly.

Annan described Ban as "a future secretary-general who is exceptionally attuned to the sensitivities of countries and constituencies in every continent."

"A man with a truly global mind at the helm of the world's only universal organisation," he said, adding that he wished Ban strength and courage as he readied to take over the job and to "have fun along the way."



Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (3R) talks with family members while paying his respects at a funeral of a soldier in Anamadua yesterday after the soldier's death in recent fighting against LTTE rebels. The soldier was among 130 killed during a fierce fighting with Tamil Tiger rebels in the island's north.

Iraq war worsening terrorism: Kerry

REUTERS, Manchester

Democratic Sen John Kerry, a potential White House candidate in 2008, said on Friday the Iraq war had worsened terrorism and that the Bush administration had squandered the nation's moral authority.

"They tell us we're making progress in Iraq and that there is no civil war. That is a lie. There is a civil war and it is costing American and Iraqi lives every single day and we must change course in Iraq," said Kerry, who lost to President George W. Bush in the 2004 election.

His remarks came at a fundraising dinner for about 650 New Hampshire Democrats. The state holds the first presidential primary and Kerry's scathing criticism of Bush and senior Republicans underlined growing speculation he would take another shot at the White House.

Kerry and other top Democrats are crisscrossing the country to boost Democratic congressional

candidates in tight races less than four weeks before the November 7 elections in which Democrats hope to regain control of Congress.

Speaking to Reuters after the speech, he said he would make a decision on a 2008 White House bid after November elections. "I want to help elect a Democratic congress," he said.

The Massachusetts senator said Republicans could no longer preach moral values after a Capitol Hill cybersex scandal involving lurid e-mails sent by former Republican lawmaker Mark Foley to teenage congressional assistants.

"Those from the party that preaches moral values that covered this up, have no right to preach moral values any more," said Kerry. "What we have in Washington is a house of lies and in November we need to clean house."

House Speaker Dennis Hastert, facing calls by Democrats and some Republicans to resign, said this week his staff should be fired "if

there was a cover-up" in the handling of complaints about Foley's behaviour toward teenagers.

In recent speeches, Kerry has positioned himself to the left of New York Sen Hillary Rodham Clinton, the widely considered Democratic front-runner in 2008, by calling for a near-withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by year end.

He now says his 2002 vote to authorize the Iraq invasion was a mistake and has taken stands on hot-button policy issues, such as proposing in August that all Americans be required to have health insurance by 2012.

Although Kerry has visited New Hampshire nine times since the 2004 election - more than any other putative Democratic White House candidate - a poll by the University of New Hampshire Survey Centre this week showed voters ranked him fourth among possible Democrat presidential candidates.

It's not too late to avoid sanctions

Germany to Iran

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany's foreign minister told Iran yesterday it was not too late to avoid sanctions and urged the Islamic republic to return to negotiations over its nuclear programme.

Barring a change of heart by Iran, the European Union's 25 foreign ministers want to agree at a meeting on Tuesday to ask the UN Security Council to impose sanctions, Frank-Walter Steinmeier said.

"We have made it extremely clear that our offer for cooperation with Iran remains on the table," Steinmeier said in an interview on RBB-Inforadio.

"We are prepared at any time to return to the negotiating table if Iran says it is ready to accept the conditions for negotiations."

Iran rejects Western allegations it wants to produce highly-enriched uranium fuel for weapons and insists it wants low-grade fuel for nuclear power stations.

"At the moment there is no way to

successfully negotiate (with Iran)," Steinmeier said.

In June, Germany and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council - the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China - offered Iran a package of incentives in exchange for a suspension of its uranium enrichment programme.

Although the six powers have yet to reach an agreement on what specific sanctions should be imposed on Iran, Steinmeier said he was confident they would reach a deal.

A list of possible sanctions had been agreed, he said.

The list includes proposals such as travel bans on officials, diplomats and scientists, freezing assets of persons and firms, and embargoes on the sale of items that could be used in Iran's nuclear and missile programmes.

Israel keeps up Gaza offensive

7 more Palestinians killed

AFP, Gaza City

Seven Palestinians were killed and 18 wounded in an Israeli air raid on a Gaza refugee camp overnight, as an Israeli offensive in the territory gathered pace, Palestinian officials said Saturday.

At least six of those who died in the attack on the Jabalya refugee camp were members of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of ruling Palestinian movement Hamas.

Security officials said Israeli ground forces also raided the Jabalya area.

Since Thursday, 20 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli attacks in the Gaza Strip aimed at rescuing a captured soldier and at putting an end to rocket fire from the territory on southern Israel.

Israeli public radio said Defence Minister Amir Peretz had ordered the army to "step up the offensive" after three Israelis were slightly wounded Friday night when a homemade

Palestinian rocket hit the town of Sderot, near the Gaza border.

Since the September 2000 start of the Palestinian intifada, or uprising, more than 1,000 rockets have hit the Negev Desert town of 24,000 people. Five people, including three children, have been killed and dozens hurt.

An army spokeswoman said the military had been responding overnight to the firing of anti-tank rockets from the Jabalya area and had hit "a certain number of terrorists."

She added that a house "that hid a tunnel used for arms smuggling" had been destroyed in an air raid in the southern town of Rafah, on the border with Egypt.

The Palestinian government headed by the radical Islamist movement Hamas issued a statement Saturday denouncing the "odious crimes perpetrated against civilians," which it said showed the intention of Israel to ratchet up its offensive.

Indo-Pak talks likely on Nov 10

PTI, Islamabad

The Indo-Pak Foreign Secretary level talks to review the third round of Composite Dialogue process may be resumed on November 10 during which Islamabad expects New Delhi to forward the evidence to back its allegations over Pakistan's involvement in the Mumbai train blasts.

The foreign secretaries of both the countries have agreed to hold a two-day review meeting in the second week of November and the talks could begin on November 10, local daily Dawn quoted Pakistani officials as saying.

The upcoming meeting acquires special significance as India is expected to put on the table evidence of Pakistan's purported involvement in the Mumbai blasts, it said.

The two foreign secretaries also were expected to formulate the modalities for the new joint mechanism to curb terrorism agreed during last month's Havana meeting between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf.

Blair announces basis for N Ireland accord

AFP, St Andrews

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said Friday that the parties at Northern Ireland talks here have reached "the basis" for an agreement to be implemented in the coming months.

The restoration of power sharing between Protestant and Catholic political parties, which has been suspended for four years, could take place by March 26, Blair said at a press conference with his Irish counterpart Bertie Ahern.

"I think there is a basis for moving forward. It is very difficult. People have to overcome very, very entrenched positions over a number of years," Blair said.

"No one will find it easy or comfortable sitting in the executive with people with whom they'd once been deeply hostile," he said.

"On the basis of the text we will ask the parties to come back to us

by the 10th of November," Blair said.

"What essentially is happening here is that we are ensuring that before the 24th of November we have a fully worked out agreement, that is that is enshrined in legislation," he said.

Also by that date, there should be "the nomination of the first minister and deputy first minister in order to give everyone confidence that power sharing is to go ahead," he said.

He said there will then be a period until March in which the parties will prepare for government.

Ahern said: "I believe we have all the elements that can bring satisfaction to all the issues. If not perfect by everybody's agenda it's a fair and sustainable balance."

Afghan governor survives attempt

7 killed in violence

AFP, Kandahar

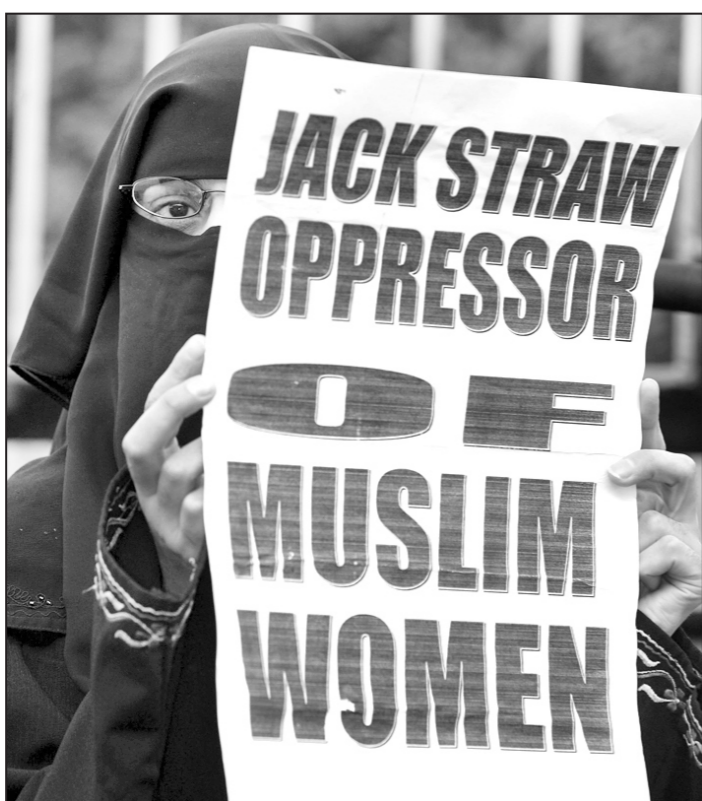
Taliban militants planted a mine that hit an Afghan governor's convoy yesterday and then opened fire on the stricken group in an assassination bid that killed a government official.

A road side bomb also killed six Afghan militiamen hired by US-led forces in eastern Paktia province Friday.

The men, part of a militia force which patrols eastern Afghanistan along with US-led forces, were killed when their car, part of a US-led military convoy, hit the remote-controlled device in Aryoob Zazi district, police said.

Other fighters with the extremist outfit meanwhile detonated a bomb against Afghan soldiers in the south of the country that wounded six, in the latest in a campaign of Taliban attacks on security forces.

Police announced they had killed three Taliban in a gunfight Friday that repelled an attack on a police patrol in the east, while Nato said two of its soldiers were wounded in an attack in the north.



A Muslim woman protests outside Bangor Street Community centre in Blackburn, northwest England yesterday where Leader of the House of Commons Jack Straw was holding a meeting.

US gives assurances on Indian nuke deal

AFP, New Delhi

A top US official has given assurances that the United States wants to go ahead with a key civilian nuclear deal with India, easing fears for the agreement raised by North Korea's atomic test.

US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns said in an interview broadcast Thursday that Washington was "determined" to implement the deal.

"We are determined to fulfil the commitments we made to the Indian government," Burns told NDTV.

Burns said he had been in touch with Indian officials to "assure that the US wants to go forward on all of the definite initiatives that President (George) Bush and Prime Minister (Manmohan) Singh talked in March."

The accord - reached during Bush's March visit - aims to give New Delhi access to previously forbidden nuclear technology to generate electricity to fuel its rapid economic growth.

Under the terms of the deal, India - which conducted nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998 and has not signed

the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) - will separate its civilian and military plants and put the former under international safeguards.

Washington for its part agreed to amend its 1954 Atomic Energy Act to allow nuclear commerce and trade in technology with a non-NPT signatory.

The US Congress gave its thumbs-up to the deal in July but a vote has been delayed in the Republican-controlled Senate that would allow it to go through.

North Korea's announcement earlier this week that it had conducted a nuclear test had however given rise to doubts about whether US lawmakers opposed to the deal would allow it to go through.

Burns however said Congressmen and Senators were aware of the "world of difference between India and North Korea."

"India is a peaceful, democratic, law-abiding leader of the international community. North Korea is the reverse of all that," he told NDTV.

Dengue fever outbreak in Pakistani city kills 17

REUTERS, Karachi

Mosquito-borne dengue fever has killed at least 17 people in Pakistan's biggest city, Karachi, in the past four months, five of them since the beginning of October, health officials said on Saturday.

Health officials have declared a high alert in the city's hospitals after about 250 people tested positive for the disease, they said.

"We have had 17 reported deaths from the virus in various hospitals," Abdul Majid, additional secretary for health in the southern province of Sindh, told Reuters. Karachi is the provincial capital.

"It is not a panic-like situation but yes, in the last few weeks cases have been increasing on a daily basis," he said.

Opposition politicians, some aid workers and the media have criticised the city government for not anticipating the disease after the rainy season and for not carrying out proper fumigation drives.

US wasted chance to improve the world

Says Gorbachev

REUTERS, Berlin

Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who played a key role in ending the Cold War, said the United States had squandered an opportunity to improve global politics after the Cold War, a paper said on Friday.

In comments that were among the harshest he has made about the United States, Gorbachev compared US foreign policy to one of the deadliest diseases on the planet - AIDS.

"Today our American friends are suffering from an illness worse than AIDS. And I would say this is the victor's complex," Gorbachev was quoted as saying in an interview with the Netzzeitung.

Unable to extricate itself from its Cold War mentality, the United States was playing a dwindling role in world politics, while Russia, China, Brazil, Europe, India and Japan were becoming stronger, Gorbachev said.

North Korea, which said on Monday it

had successfully completed a nuclear test, was an example. Only China and Russia were in a position to handle Pyongyang, he said.

Washington will in future have to act less on its own and get used to a position of diminished importance, he said.

"The Americans will have to understand that in future they will have to cooperate and make decisions jointly, instead of just always wanting to give orders," Gorbachev said.

He said the United States and other Western countries had missed an opportunity to make the world a better place after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 ushered in the end of communism.

"At that point, the West focused more on its geopolitical interests," Gorbachev said, adding that Western countries had been more interested in cashing in on the "unbridled burst of globalisation" that followed the end of the Cold War than in improving the international political climate.