

Five killed in Lanka air attack: Tigers

AFP, Kilinochchi

At least five people were killed yesterday when Sri Lankan war planes bombed a house near the main hospital inside rebel-held territory in Kilinochchi, Tiger guerrillas said.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said Israeli-built jets carried out two sorties over the town of Kilinochchi and the blasts smashed windows of the main hospital.

"Four people were killed on the spot and another died later," LTTE spokesman Rasiyah Ilanthiriyani told AFP by telephone from Kilinochchi, 330km north of the capital.

"We see this as state terrorism and urge the international community to condemn it."

The defence ministry said the airforce had carried out two separate air attacks inside rebel-held territory, but could not say if there was an

attack just outside the Kilinochchi hospital.

"We have bombed a Sea Tiger base at Mannar (southwest of Kilinochchi) and a location about 10 kilometres southeast of Kilinochchi," defence ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said.

He said there were no details of casualties.

Asked if the airforce had bombed a location near the Kilinochchi hospital, Samarasinghe said he had no information about it.

"We have no presence there, so we don't know about it. But, what the airforce told us is that they have bombed areas away from Kilinochchi," Samarasinghe said.

The LTTE said it had lodged a formal complaint with the Nordic Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which has an office about two kilometres away from the Kilinochchi hospital.

India, UK join hands to fight terrorism and climate change

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

India and Britain yesterday took their multifaceted ties to a new level by stepping up cooperation in the crucial areas of counter-terrorism and climate change.

External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and his British counterpart Margaret Beckett held "constructive discussions" on a wide range of bilateral and global issues, including counter-terrorism, climate change and enhancement of the already robust economic ties between the two countries.

"Bilateral relationship has never been better. Our relationship has

been underpinned by strong business ties," Beckett, who is currently on a six-day visit to India, told reporters at a joint press interaction with Mukherjee.

This is Beckett's first visit to India and her first to Asia after becoming the first woman foreign minister of the UK following a cabinet reshuffle in May this year.

It is also her longest overseas trip as foreign minister, a measure of India's importance in British foreign policy. Before leaving London, Beckett said relations between the countries had never been better.

Beckett will call on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and

meet Finance Minister P Chidambaram and Home Minister Shivraj Patil later in the day.

Describing India and Britain as "natural partners," she stressed on new steps taken by the two countries in sharing information to avert terrorist attacks on mass transit system.

Stressing on "historical strong relations" between India and Britain, Mukherjee said as both countries were "victims of terrorism," they would further enhance their ongoing cooperation in countering terrorism - "the biggest menace to world peace in post Cold War world".



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) talks with Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs of United Kingdom Margaret Beckett during a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Beckett is in India for a eight-day official visit.

Asia turns hotspots for arms sellers

REUTERS, Washington

Asia has shot past the Middle East as the world's largest arms market, with India concluding \$5.4 billion in deals in 2005, the most of any developing nation, a new report for the US Congress has found.

Weapons orders worldwide rose sharply in 2005, according to an annual study by the Congressional Research Service - one of the most authoritative, unclassified, reports of its kind.

The total, \$44.2 billion in arms deals, was the largest for any year in the period reviewed, which began in 1998. The next highest was \$29.3 billion in 2003.

Asia has long been the develop-

ing world's No. 2 market after the Middle East, where arms buying was fuelled by Saudi Arabian and United Arab Emirates' concerns over Iraq and Iran.

The report, dated October 23 and made available this week, defines the developing world as all nations except the United States, Russia, European states, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

In 2002 to 2005, Asia ranked higher than the Middle East, accounting for 48.4 percent of the value of all arms transfer agreements with developing nations, said the survey, titled Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1998-2005.

Car bomb kills 3 near Pak police chief's office in Quetta

AFP, Quetta

A car bomb exploded yesterday in front of a provincial police chief's office in Pakistan's southwestern city of Quetta, killing three people including a policeman, officials said.

Several other people were injured when the moving car blew up outside the office of the police inspector general of Baluchistan province, of which Quetta is the capital, city police chief Suleman Sayed said.

Witnesses said the powerful blast destroyed the car and scattered human limbs across the tarmac.

UN urges Nepali rebels to stop torture

AFP, Kathmandu

A United Nations rights group has urged Nepal's Maoist rebels to stop detaining and torturing suspected criminals throughout the country, the group said Wednesday.

"The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal calls again on the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist rebels) to stop all parallel 'law enforcement' activities, especially incidents of torture and ill treatment," said Sandra Beidas, the Kathmandu-based officer-in-charge of the group.

Last month, the rebels announced they were starting "security patrols" around the capital

Kathmandu, citing police failure to curb crime.

They detained more than 190 people, with all except 10 released after investigations. However some of those had been tortured, the rights group said.

"OHCHR staff have witnessed serious injuries among those held captive ... consistent with claims of ill treatment and torture," the group said in a statement.

The group noted the rebels had repeatedly made commitments to halt abductions but "OHCHR Nepal ... confirmed abductions of 39 individuals in the districts of Bhaktapur, Lalitpur and Kathmandu in October alone."

Ulfa opposes oil drilling in Brahmaputra River

AFP Guwahati

A separatist group that has previously destroyed petroleum works in India's resource-rich northeast Assam state said yesterday it opposed a plan to search for oil under the Brahmaputra River.

"The Indian government has for long been exploiting Assam's natural resources and now it plans to extract oil from the Brahmaputra River. This is nothing but another clever attempt to take away local resources at the cost of our people," the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), said in a statement.

The Ulfa is an outlawed separatist group fighting for an independent homeland in Assam since 1979.

"We shall not allow such a thing to take place," the rebel group warned.

Ulfa's warning follows a 22 million dollar agreement by Oil India with Kazakhstan Caspi Shelf for a seismic survey along a 175-kilometer stretch of the Brahmaputra in Assam.

The 2,906-kilometer (1,816-mile) river - one of the longest in Asia - traverses Tibet, India and Bangladesh before emptying into the Bay of Bengal.

The survey is slated to begin later November and was expected

to take two years. Oil India officials refused to comment on the rebel threat, but said the idea to scout for crude under the Brahmaputra's riverbed was not based on assumptions.

"This is a proven oil rich zone and we are confident of striking crude along the Brahmaputra once exploration work begins after the survey," a senior Oil India official, who requested anonymity, said.

India produces about 30 million tonnes of crude oil annually, with Assam accounting for about five million tonnes.



A Sri Lankan postal employee (R) inspects a parcel at a post office in Colombo yesterday to be delivered to the northern peninsula of Jaffna. Virtual siege conditions in Jaffna since mid August has slowed the flow of supplies to the region and some half a million people are unable to travel freely because of continuing clashes between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels.

Nepal court orders 'living goddess' probe

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Supreme Court has ordered a probe into whether a centuries-old practice of worshipping a "living goddess" violates the rights of young girls, court officials said yesterday.

The Nepalese tradition involves pre-pubescent girls from the Shakya caste of the Newari community undergoing rigorous tantric rituals to be designated as a Kumari - or a living Hindu virgin goddess until puberty is reached.

The chosen girl is then whisked away for a new life in a temple - with limited contacts with family members and missing out regular school life.

There are several Kumaris in Nepal, although the best known is the royal Kumari, who lives near Kathmandu's temple-studded Basantapur Durbar Square and blesses the king during the annual Indrajaatra festival.

Myanmar threatens political crackdown

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government threatened yesterday to crack down on activists who have been campaigning for the release of political prisoners.

"If their movement harms the peace and tranquility of the state and leads towards unrest in the country, we will take action -- not only prevention, but detention and questioning," Information Minister Brigadier General Kyaw Hsann said at a press conference.

"We have to prevent a fire hazard. It's the duty of the government to protect the state and the people from the danger of terrorist acts by destructive elements," Kyaw Hsann said.

More than 100 pro-democracy activists are holding a week-long prayer vigil at Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon, calling for peace in a rare public protest.

The vigil follows a petition drive that organizers say collected 530,000 signatures, calling for the release of the nation's estimated 1,100 political prisoners, including detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

The campaign began one month ago, after six pro-democracy activists were arrested in late September, including five former student leaders who participated in a pro-democracy uprising in 1988.

The junta has dismissed the petition, and accused organisers of faking the signatures.



Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) welcomes former Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad yesterday. Kumaratunga arrived in Pakistan for a week long visit.