

Tigers trashes Lankan call to disarm

23 killed in fresh fighting

AP, Colombo

A sea battle, a bomb blast and gunfire killed at least 23 people in war-torn Sri Lanka Saturday, government officials said, a day after the rebels denounced a government call to disarm as a joke.

Sri Lanka's military said it destroyed three Tamil Tiger gunboats Saturday, killing at least 15 rebels. The Tigers countered that they sank two navy boats, leaving 10 sailors dead. Both sides denied any deaths on their own side.

Fighting since last December which has included air strikes, mine attacks, assassinations and regular exchanges of heavy arms fire has killed more than 3,200 combatants and civilians, but both sides maintain they have not withdrawn from a 2002 cease-fire between the government and rebels.

The sea battle started just after dawn Saturday off the island nation's northwest coast, said Commander DKP Dassanayake, a navy spokesman.

"Our radar detected two Tiger boats approaching our shores, and

we dispatched navy boats to confront them," he said.

As the navy boats drew closer, seven more boats from the rebels' naval wing, the Sea Tigers, entered the fray, he said.

"Our sailors managed to completely destroy two Tiger boats, and we estimate that 15 men would have been on board and killed," he said.

He said four Sri Lankan sailors were wounded, and that air force planes destroyed a third boat. Dassanayake had no details about casualties in the third attack.

The Tigers' military spokesman, Rasiyah Ilanthirayan, said the Sea Tigers destroyed two of the navy's fast attack craft, killing 10 sailors, after the navy attacked their training boats.

He denied military claims of heavy rebel casualties, saying only three guerrillas were wounded.

"Our boats are safe, and the training is continuing," Ilanthirayan said.

It is impossible to reconcile the death toll or independently verify the two sides' claims.

India's Muslims poor, and marginalised

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's Muslims are lagging behind and face more poverty, illiteracy and unemployment than any other community in the country, a report said on Friday.

The report, based on research by a high level committee appointed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, is part of a campaign aimed at bridging the gap between the country's majority Hindus and its minority Muslim population.

"The community is relatively poor, more illiterate, has lower access to education, lower representation in public and private sector jobs, and lower availability of bank credit for self-employment," said a statement issued by the Prime Minister's office after receiving the report.

"In urban areas, the community mostly lives in slums characterised by poor municipal infrastructure. However, there is considerable variation in the condition of the Muslim community across states and regions."

The committee stressed the need for programmes to address the educational and economic backwardness of the community.

2 killed in Gaza after UN urges end to violence

AFP, United Nations/ Gaza City

Two Palestinians were killed yesterday as Israel pressed on with air and ground offensives against militants in the Gaza Strip, a day after the UN General Assembly urged an end to the violence.

Israeli leaders also issued more calls to step up efforts to stop rocket attacks on the Jewish state, with far-right cabinet minister Avigdor Lieberman calling for Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniya and other militant leaders to be sent to "paradise."

Israeli ground forces operating in the northern Gaza Strip shot dead two Palestinians and wounded three others on Saturday, medical sources said, after a third straight night of air strikes against militant targets.

Said Hahjji, 20, a member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), was shot dead in Umm Nasser, a Bedouin village on Gaza's northernmost border, according to a DFLP statement.

Thaer al-Masry, 16, was later also shot dead in the same village,

medical sources said. Three other Palestinians were wounded, two of them critically.

The Israeli army, which has been operating in northern Gaza since Friday as part of a campaign to halt daily rocket salvos against the Jewish state, confirmed both shootings, and said both victims were armed.

Overnight, Israeli aircraft carried out three raids in northern Gaza targeting Hamas buildings "used to store weapons, meeting places and operation rooms," the army said in a statement.

The latest violence comes a day after Israel spurned a joint Spanish-French-Italian peace initiative and the UN General Assembly passed a resolution urging an immediate end to all acts of violence by Israelis and Palestinians, including Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip.

The European peace plan calls for an international conference, a ceasefire, an exchange of Israeli and Palestinian prisoners, a Palestinian national unity government and the dispatch of a fact-finding mission to the Palestinian territories.

The initiative was welcomed by the Palestinian Authority and Haniya of the ruling Islamist movement Hamas said he saw "positive points" in the initiative.

Even the radical group Islamic Jihad said Friday it would cease firing rockets at Israel if the Jewish state halted attacks on the Palestinians.

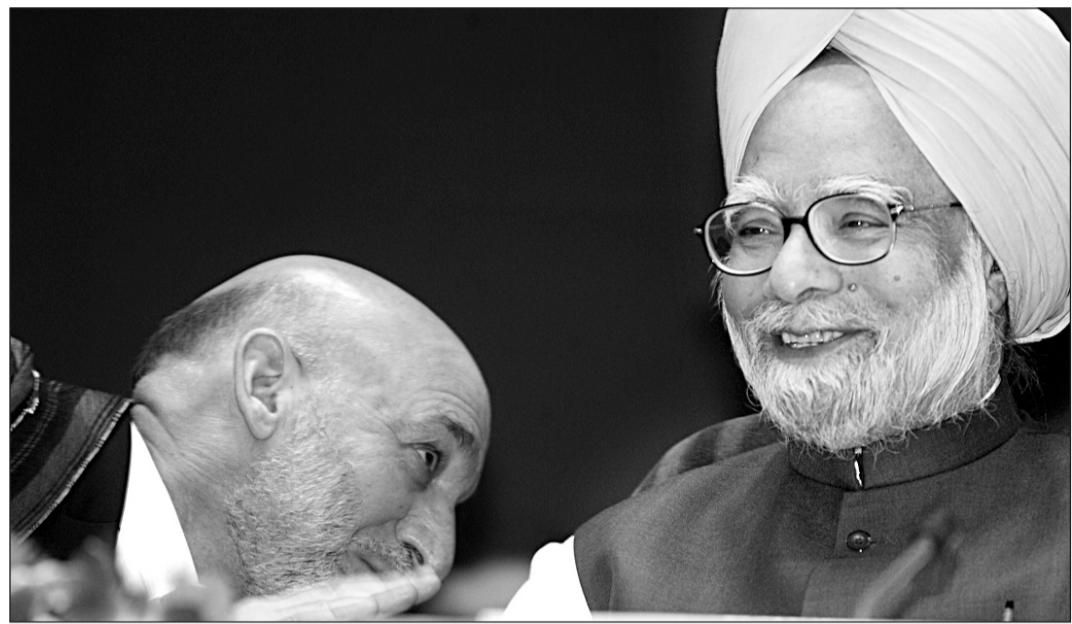
Israel, however, has said the initiative would deprive it of the ability "to strike terrorist infrastructure" in the Gaza Strip and allow militants "to capitalise on the calm to launch an armaments drive," according to the head of parliament's foreign affairs committee Tzahi Hanegbi.

At the United Nations, 156 countries, including the 25-member European Union, voted in favour of the non-binding resolution, introduced by Qatar on behalf of Arab states. Seven — including the United States, Israel and Australia — voted against while six abstained.

Despite the UN vote, Israeli leaders continued calls to step up the offensive.



A Palestinian walks on the collapsed metal roof of the Al-Salah mosque library in Gaza City yesterday following Israeli overnight shelling. Israeli ground forces operating in the northern Gaza Strip shot dead two Palestinians and wounded two others, just a day after the UN General Assembly urged an end to the violence.



Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai (L) speaks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during a Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan in New Delhi yesterday. An international conference to boost regional economic cooperation to help stabilise insurgency-hit Afghanistan has opened with Afghanistan and hosts India calling for a workable blueprint for development.

Afghanistan seeks regional front against militants

REUTERS, New Delhi

Afghan President Hamid Karzai yesterday urged the nations of central and south Asia to forge a united front against militant groups he said posed the greatest danger to the region's future.

Afghanistan's stability was critical to security and prosperity in a region, which contained major energy reserves and the booming Indian economy, Karzai told the opening of a conference on rebuilding his shattered country.

"We also recognise that Afghanistan's stability is an asset for the region, whereas an unstable Afghanistan will undoubtedly put the vision of a peaceful and prosperous region in jeopardy," he told the gathering in the Indian capital New Delhi.

"To win this war, we need the enduring partnership of solid and unwavering allies," Karzai said.

Afghanistan has repeatedly accused Pakistan of not doing enough to stop the Taliban and other armed groups sheltering and training in its borderlands.

Some senior officials in Kabul go as far as accusing the Pakistani government of continuing to sponsor the Taliban.

Pakistan denies any involvement and says it is doing all it can to stop cross-border incursions, as it does with Kashmiri separatists trying to cross the frontier into Indian Kashmir.

After being quickly toppled from power by US-led forces in 2001, the Taliban has regrouped, bolstered by money from the illegal opium trade and the ability to shelter in Pakistan, the United States and its allies say.

About 3,700 people have been killed so far this year, 1,000 of them civilians and more than 150 of them foreign soldiers.

Islamic militancy could yield world war: US general

REUTERS, Cambridge

The top US general in the Middle East said on Friday that if the world does not find a way to stem the rise of Islamic militancy, it will face a third world war.

Army Gen John Abizaid compared the rise of militant ideologies, such as the force driving al-Qaeda, to the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s that set the stage for World War Two.

"If we don't have guts enough to confront this ideology today, we'll go through World War Three tomorrow," Abizaid said in a speech titled "The Long War," at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, outside Boston.

No future for Iraq if sectarianism rules

Says Rice

REUTERS, Hanoi

Iraqis "don't have a future" if they give in to the sectarian tensions tearing at their society, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said yesterday.

"They (only) have one future and that is a future together. They don't have a future if they try to stay apart," Rice said in a speech on the sidelines of an Asia Pacific summit.

Iraq has been riven by sectarian violence for months and its prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, has been unable to disband militias and death squads who appear to operate with impunity.

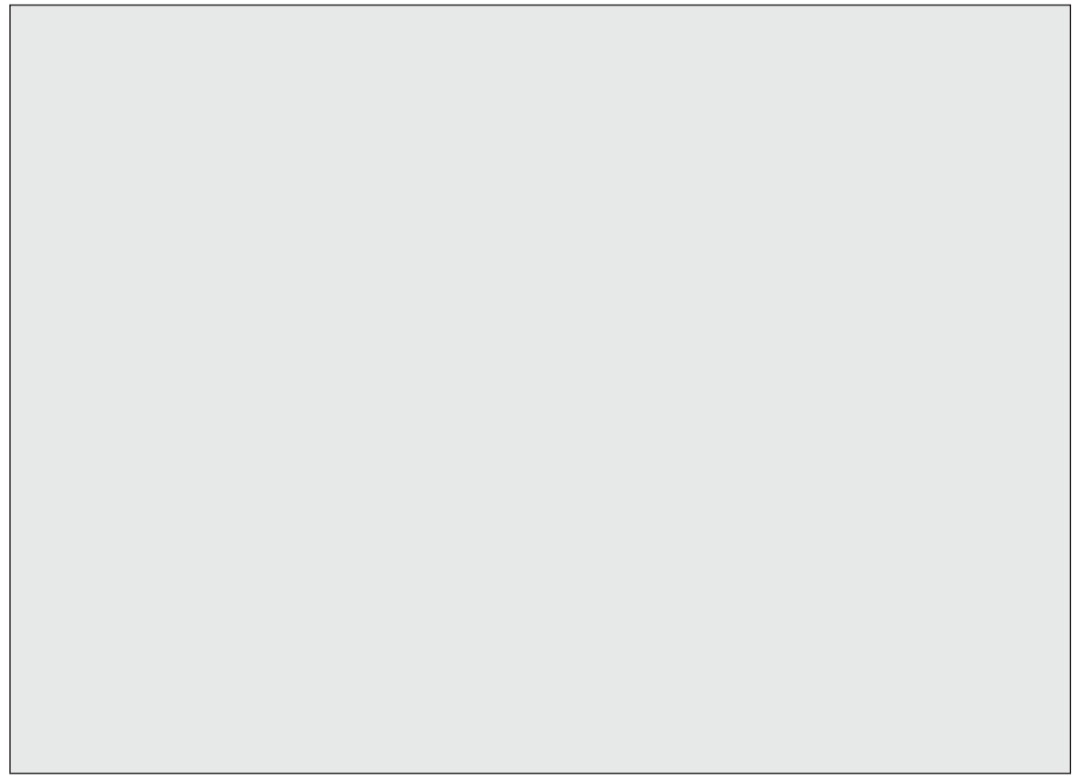
While acknowledging the bloodshed, Rice said she believed the Iraqis were headed toward a better

future and disputed that the United States was stuck in a "quagmire."

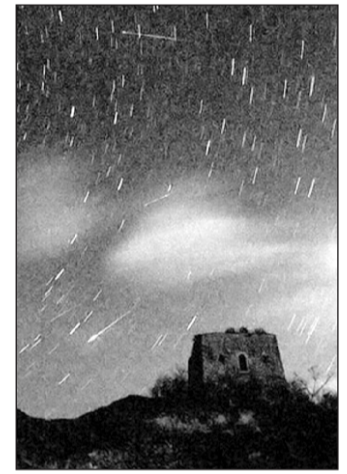
"I don't mean to diminish the difficulties that we have in Iraq and that the Iraqi people have in Iraq," Rice said. "This is difficult going."

As she has for months, Rice urged the Iraqi government to take tough decisions and the society as a whole to "face up to their differences."

"If they do that and if we support them and if we remain committed to them and if they realize that the stakes in Iraq are (really) the stakes for a different kind of Middle East that can form the centre of a more peaceful world -- they have a chance and (we also) have a chance," she added.



Colorful streaks of meteors are seen in the sky of the suburbs of Beijing in a file photo. The Leonids meteor shower occurred in Beijing, Nanjing and other places in the early morning of Nov 19, 2001.



Stargazers in New England, New York and Western Europe could see an "outburst" of hundreds of meteors this weekend during the annual Leonid meteor shower if the skies are clear enough.

'Outburst' of meteors for stargazers

AP, Boston

A typical Leonid shower in November brings 10 to 20 meteors an hour under ideal viewing conditions — a dark sky filled with stars and free of light pollution.

But this year, the Earth is passing through a denser trail of debris left by the Comet Tempel-Tuttle, causing a higher concentration of meteors, said Brian Marsden, a senior astronomer at the Harvard-Smithsonian Centre for Astrophysics in Cambridge.

Meteors are caused by bits of space debris, in this case debris left by the comet. Dust and debris from the comet burn up in the atmosphere and create the streaks of light.

The Comet Tempel-Tuttle passed through the inner solar system in 1998, and Marsden said the longer it's been since the comet passed, the fewer meteors are expected.

"The surprise is that we are already eight going on nine years after the comet was here," he said.

The rush of meteors was expected between 11:45 pm and 1:30 am EST Saturday and Sunday. Meteor forecasters predict 100 to 200 meteors an hour during the peak, said Alan MacRobert, the senior editor of Sky & Telescope magazine, based in Cambridge.

Maoists won't resort to violence

Says Nepali rebel leader

AFP, New Delhi

The leader of Nepal's Maoist rebels vowed yesterday his days as an insurgent were coming to an end as he made a confident debut on the international stage after a decade of jungle warfare.

Prachanda, whose name means "the fierce one", told reporters at a media conference in the Indian capital that his rebel army would not return to violence even if Nepal voted in an upcoming referendum to keep the king.

He also said a landmark peace deal between the Maoists and the impoverished Himalayan nation's government was on track to be signed on Tuesday.

"We will respect the verdict of the masses but we cannot support a monarchy even if the masses decide they want to keep a ceremonial monarchy," he said.

"We will not go to violence, we will try to convince the people in a peaceful way."

Prachanda made the comments when asked if his rebels, who are

fiercely anti-royal, would accept a referendum result that allowed King Gyanendra, already stripped of most of his powers, to keep a ceremonial role.

Prachanda led Maoist rebels in Nepal's decade-long "people's war" that claimed thousands of lives. The teacher-turned-revolutionary was invited by the Hindustan Times newspaper to India in his first high-profile foreign foray.

The rebels and the government had been poised to ink an historic peace deal Thursday, but both sides postponed signing the document that would formally end the bloody conflict.

They said they needed more time to finalise the accord.

"Due to some technical difficulties, we postponed that agreement but I am confident that on the 21st we will be signing (the) agreement," said Prachanda whose given name is Pushpa Kamal Dahal.



Nepalese Maoist Chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, popularly known as "Prachanda" addresses a gathering on the second day of a leadership summit in New Delhi yesterday. The summit, organised by the Hindustan Times newspaper, has brought political and industry leaders from across the world to India's capital.