

Many fear Lanka on path to war

Fresh fighting leaves 30 dead

AP, AFP, Colombo

Renewed fighting in Sri Lanka's embattled northern and eastern regions has left at least 30 people dead, where many fear escalating violence will lead the country back to full-scale war.

The Sri Lankan military sent tanks and warplanes into eastern Batticaloa district on Thursday after the rebels attacked government troops, the defence department said on its Web site Friday. Fifteen rebels were killed in artillery and airstrikes, while another four rebels died in a separate encounter with security forces in the district, the military said.

It said the guerrillas had also shot dead two civilians in the east on the same day and five Tiger guerrillas

were shot dead in a confrontation in the northern Vavuniya district.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, however, said only one of their fighters died, and claimed to have killed seven government commandoes. They also accused the government of launching an offensive to seize control of their territory in Batticaloa.

No independent verification of casualty claims was possible amid ongoing clashes between the two sides.

Maj Upali Rajapakse, a military spokesman, said only seven soldiers had been wounded. However, he said seven security personnel were killed in separate incidents, away from the main battlefield, that he blamed on the rebels.

The Tigers have been fighting for

over two decades for a separate homeland for the country's ethnic Tamil minority, citing discrimination by the Sinhalese majority.

A 2002 ceasefire temporarily took the steam out of the bloody civil war, but the conflict has killed more than 3,200 people since last December.

Earlier Sri Lanka's president asked foreign relief agencies to help supply food and other essentials to half a million civilians trapped in the embattled northern Jaffna peninsula.

President Mahinda Rajapakse said essentials had been shipped to the peninsula, 400km north of the capital, but distribution had hit serious snags because retailers had closed most of their outlets.

80pc of Israelis want defence minister out

AFP, Jerusalem

Around 80 percent of Israelis want Defence Minister Amir Peretz to resign over failings from the war in Lebanon and unceasing Palestinian rocket attacks, surveys revealed yesterday.

According to a poll published in the Maariv daily, 78 percent of respondents believe Peretz should resign, compared to only 17 percent who said "no" when asked whether he should step down.

A similar poll in the mass-selling Yediot Aharonot newspaper claimed that 80 percent of respondents thought Peretz should resign while 18 percent thought not. Another 72 percent thought Prime Minister Ehud Olmert should sack him.

The surveys were published with Peretz -- a trade unionist whose previous military experience was limited to national service -- under increasing pressure to resign the defence portfolio.



PHOTO: AFP
Visiting Chinese President Hu Jintao talks with his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf (R) during a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Hu Jintao and Musharraf oversaw the signing of a landmark free trade deal and vowed to take the allies' "evergreen" relationship to new heights.

Rwanda recalls its ambassador to France

AFP, Kigali

Rwanda yesterday recalled its ambassador to France and hinted it might break diplomatic relations with Paris in a row over arrest warrants issued by a French judge related to the 1994 genocide.

A day after more than 25,000 people rallied in Kigali to denounce France, alleged French complicity in the genocide and the judge who issued warrants, Rwanda's foreign minister accused Paris of trying to destroy his government.

"We have recalled our ambassador to Paris, we don't see why he should be there at this point," Foreign Minister Charles Murigande said, adding that Kigali had not yet decided whether to send the envoy back.

"We want some consultations with him and we'll see what happens later," he told AFP. "France is intent on destroying our government, we do not see any need for keeping any relationship with a hostile country."

Murigande added that his ministry had summoned the French ambassador to Rwanda on Thursday to demand an explanation of the legal proceedings underway in Paris.



PHOTO: AFP
Bhutan Crown Prince, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (R) is seen during a visit at the Royal flora Expo 2006 in Chiang Mai province northern of Thailand yesterday.

Earth hit by 'mass extinction' 250 million years ago

AFP, Washington

About 95 percent of the Earth's marine species and 70 percent of its land species were wiped out during a "mass extinction" about 250 million years ago, according to Australian and US researchers.

The phenomenon fundamentally changed which species survived in the world's oceans. And the experts at James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland and the Field Museum in Chicago warned that modern human-induced changes to the ecosystem could have a similar impact.

The experts told in the latest edition of the journal Science how they came across the culling of species while examining figures on the numbers of marine life forms in communities over the past 540 million years.

Simple species that did not move or search for food were largely wiped out, they concluded. More complex life forms such as crabs and snails that went looking for food took over.

Lanka seeks Indian help to patrol maritime border

AFP, REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka will seek India's help to step up patrols of their common maritime border to prevent drug and arms smuggling and cross-border terrorism, President Mahinda Rajapakse said yesterday.

Rajapakse, who begins a five-day "working visit" to India Saturday, said he was keen to have greater cooperation to tackle illegal traffic across the Palk Straits, the narrow strip of sea dividing the two nations.

"Increased patrolling will also help ensure the safety of fishermen of both countries," the president said adding that Tamil Tiger rebels were targeting Indian fishermen to hijack their trawlers for smuggling in supplies.

Fishermen from both countries have repeatedly charged that they are attacked by security forces or Tamil Tiger rebels in the rich fishing grounds between the two countries.

Security forces have denied attacking fishermen, but have accused the Tigers of taking the cover of fishermen to launch attacks against the navy.

Rajapakse said he was also keen to boost bilateral trade with India, currently running at an annual two billion dollars, and explore the possibility of buying electricity.

Earlier India has voiced concern to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse about the plight of hundreds of thousands of people affected by fighting with the Tamil Tigers, government and diplomatic sources said yesterday.

Visiting Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon told Rajapakse late on Thursday India was worried about the humanitarian situation, amid complaints from aid groups that efforts to deliver food and aid to the displaced were being hampered.

In the eastern district of Batticaloa, tens of thousands of

minority Tamils are in camps in rebel and government-controlled territory.

At least 23 civilians were killed when army shells hit their camp in the east earlier this month. Each side accuses the other of using civilians as human shields.

In the remote northern Jaffna peninsula, cut off from the rest of the island by rebel lines, the 500,000-strong almost-entirely Tamil population are living on rations shipped in by sea and are unable to leave due to fighting.

Abductions and murders are now commonplace in the north and east, and Nordic truce monitors say some elements of the military have been involved.

"They are concerned about the humanitarian situation, certainly," said one government source on condition of anonymity. "The concern is about humanitarian relief and safety of IDPs (internally displaced persons)."



Russian 'evil forces' blamed for ex-spy's death

REUTERS, London

Friends of former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko accused "evil forces" in Russia on Friday of being responsible for his death in London and said the poisoning of the ex-colonel was an act of revenge.

Russia said it was "silly" to suggest the Kremlin had orchestrated a plot against 43-year-old Litvinenko, a critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

British doctors said Litvinenko had been poisoned but did not know with what.

Litvinenko died on Thursday, the eve of an EU-Russia summit in Helsinki at which Putin could face media questions about the former spy that could overshadow the main agenda.

"He was fighting against the evil forces in Russia, against the KGB, against the authorities which are suppressing democracy and liberal freedoms in Russia," Oleg Gordievsky, a friend of Litvinenko, told Sky television.

"He became a victim of ... revenge and malice of those forces in Russia," said Gordievsky, also a former Russian agent who defected to Britain.

Russian rocket deliveries to Iran started

AFP, Moscow

Russia has begun deliveries of the Tor-M1 air defence rocket system to Iran, Russian news agencies quoted military industry sources as saying yesterday.

"Deliveries of the Tor-M1 have begun. The first systems have already been delivered to Tehran," ITAR-TASS quoted an unnamed, high-ranking source as saying.

The news came as the UN Security Council continued to debate possible sanctions against Iran over the Islamic republic's controversial nuclear programme.

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov has defended the contract for 29 rocket systems signed in December last year, saying that the Tor-M1 serves purely defensive purposes.

ITAR-TASS reported that the rockets were to be deployed around Iran's nuclear sites, including the

still incomplete, Russian-built atomic power station at Bushehr.

The United States has pressed Russia to halt military sales to Iran.

In August, Washington announced sanctions against several companies, including Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport, for supplying technology to Iran that could allegedly be used to develop missile technology and weapons of mass destruction.

Under the sanctions no US company can deal with foreign companies on the sanctions list for two years.

A spokesman for Rosoboronexport contacted by AFP would not confirm or deny the reports, which were also issued by the Interfax news agency.

The Tor-M1 is a low to medium-altitude missile fired from a tracked vehicle against airplanes, helicopters and other airborne targets.

Pak Senate approves rape law reform bill

AFP, Islamabad

The upper house of Pakistan's parliament Thursday passed a bill to amend the country's Islamic rape laws, paving the way for President Pervez Musharraf to sign it into a law, officials said.

The bill which was hotly contested by the country's alliance of Islamic parties was adopted by the national assembly or the lower house last week and was approved by the Senate late Thursday.

"It is now ready to be signed by the president into a law," parliamentary official Mohammad Qasim said.

The bill places rape laws under Pakistan's British-influenced penal code and scraps harsh conditions such as producing four male-witnesses and exposing rape victims to prosecution for adultery if they cannot prove the crime.

The Islamic hardliners, who boycotted the national assembly's

passing of the bill, took part in the senate debate and presented amendments, which were all rejected by the government.

The Pakistani government had backed out of three previous attempts to push the bill through following an outcry from religious radicals in this deeply conservative Islamic republic.

Late military dictator General Ziaul Haq introduced the Hudood Laws 27 years ago as part of a sweeping Islamisation of Pakistan that coincided with the country's role in the anti-Soviet "jihad" in Afghanistan.

The maximum sentence for adultery by a man or a woman under the laws is death by stoning, although that has never been enforced and those convicted of the crime get jail or a fine instead.

Human rights groups who have long campaigned for a change in the law hailed the bill as a step forward for Pakistani women.

7 killed in Muslim south despite Thai peace bid

AFP, Yala

Seven people were killed in Thailand's Muslim-majority south, police said Friday, despite the post-coup government's promise to boost the local economy in hopes of ending three years of unrest.

Finance Minister Pridiyathorn Devakula said the government would set up a special economic zone in the south to lure investment to the region, which lags far behind the rest of the nation.

"We are considering giving privileges to the private sector such as tax deductions and discount fees for land purchase as investors and businessmen have fled the area," Pridiyathorn told reporters.

The economic scheme, announced Thursday by army-

backed premier Surayud Chulanont after a special cabinet meeting on the insurgency, covers the three restive provinces of Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani on the border with Malaysia.

While Thailand has moved rapidly from an agricultural-based economy to an industrial one with robust exports of autos and hi-tech equipment, the restive south's main industry has remained rubber plantations.

The three provinces are among the nation's poorest, with high unemployment, and Pridiyathorn said the economic zone which also includes neighbouring Songkhla and Satun provinces would be set up next month.

Since taking office after the September coup, Surayud has

offered a number of olive branches, including a decision earlier this week to adopt the local dialect of Malay as a working language for local officials.

However, violence continues to rock the troubled region.

Two Muslim men in their 20s were shot dead in a drive-by shooting in Yala late Friday, while a 48-year-old Buddhist teacher was killed outside his school in neighbouring Pattani when militants riddled his car with bullets.

Police found his burned body inside the charred vehicle.

In Narathiwat Friday, two suspected Islamic militants shot dead a Muslim man at his house and a 40-year-old Buddhist teacher was shot dead in Pattani on Thursday.

Iraqi president to seek Iranian help

Insurgents bomb office of Sadr

AFP, Tehran/Baquba

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani visits Iran today for talks with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in a bid to secure the eastern neighbour's help in stabilising war-torn Iraq.

It is Talabani's second visit to the Islamic republic, which the United States accuses of meddling and inciting sectarian violence in Iraq -- a charge Washington also levels at Syria.

Seeking to assert itself as a regional power, Iran said on Tuesday it had also invited Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to join the summit.

But on Thursday, apparently after either Baghdad or Damascus had rejected the offer, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said a three-way meeting was "not on the agenda".

Shia-dominated Iran has extensive ties with Iraqi Shia parties and politicians -- many of whom took refuge in Iran during former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's rule.

Western powers are concerned about Iran's influence with Shia militia groups, the Badr Brigade -- linked with Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq -- and the Mahdi Army loyal to radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Washington demands that Iran

cut off materiel and other support to Shia militia who it says are involved in sectarian violence and attacks on US coalition troops.

It also insists that Syria stop the flow of anti-US insurgents over its border into Iraq.

But international and domestic pressure is mounting on the administration of US President George W. Bush to open dialogue with Syria and Iran to find a common approach to restoring stability in Iraq.

Washington's staunch ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, has called for greater involvement of Syria and Iran in efforts to secure peace in Iraq and the Middle East.

Meanwhile, insurgents yesterday bombed the office of the movement of radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in the restive Iraqi city of Baquba, police said.

"The insurgents first set the office on fire and then bombed it," a police officer from Baquba, north-east of Baghdad said.

A few hours earlier, US and Iraqi forces had raided the office and detained five guards.

Sunni Arab insurgents regularly target offices of Sadr, whose Mahdi Army militia is allegedly engaged in killing members of Iraq's minority Sunni community.

Former killer sparks mayhem at Northern Ireland Assembly

AFP, Belfast

A former paramilitary killer sparked chaos in Northern Ireland's Assembly yesterday by storming the building with a gun and throwing a device, protesting efforts to restore power-sharing in the province.

Michael Stone, a well-known Protestant militant during Northern Ireland's three decade-long Troubles, sparked the incident at Stormont Castle, as lamewakers met in a bid to restore self-rule for the first time in four years.

The assembly was suspended as television pictures showed Stone being pinned down by security guards at the entrance to the building, shrouded in rain for the historic occasion.

The incident came as parties in the province gathered to try to break a deadlock between Sinn Fein and pro-London protestant groups holding up the restoration of self-rule in the currently British-run province.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair broke off from his schedule to make a statement on the Belfast events, vowing that London and Dublin would not be diverted from their attempt to restore self-rule.

"The events at Stormont, instead of putting us off (making)

progress, it's precisely what should make us more resolute," he said in London.

In Belfast, a security official told AFP that Stone apparently had a gun after he stormed into the front doors of the building. He then took out an object, which was smoking, and threw it in the direction of security guards.

The device was seen to be making sparks. Another official told AFP that Stone was shouting about a blast as three guards leapt on him and pinned him against the inside of the doors.

"He was still shouting when they were on top of him 'incendiary blast, incendiary blast,'" said the official.

On the outside of the building the words "Sinn Fein murderers" could be seen in graffiti scrawl.

Sinn Fein is the main Republican group in Northern Ireland, which has long campaigned for the province to be united with Ireland. It was formerly the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

The incident came as parties in the province gathered to try to break a deadlock between Sinn Fein and pro-London protestant groups holding up the restoration of self-rule in the currently British-run province.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqis inspect the destruction at Shia firebrand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's office in the restive city of Baquba northeast of Baghdad yesterday. Insurgents bombed the office of the movement of the radical Shia cleric in Baquba Friday.