

LTTE accuses Lanka of scuttling peace move

Fighting leaves 7 dead

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka has effectively ended a Norwegian-led peace process with the Tamil Tigers, a pro-rebel website reported, as fresh fighting yesterday killed seven people on both sides.

The defence ministry said the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) attacked police commandos in the island's east, wounding four. One of them died in hospital, the ministry said.

It added six guerrillas were also killed by commandos in the firefight in the district of Ampara. Both sides also traded long-range attacks in the neighbouring district of Batticaloa, but there were no immediate reports of casualties.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet website said the Sri Lankan government had scuttled the peace initiative by asking Oslo to suspend its contacts with the rebels, which prompted the Norwegians to call off a planned meeting.

"Analysts view the move as a step to effectively nullify the already defunct Ceasefire Agreement," Tamilnet commented, the day after Colombo asked Norway to scrap a meeting set for Tuesday with guerrilla leaders.

The government is also considering reactivating the tough Prevention of Terrorism Act after Friday's suicide bombing against Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, the younger brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

There has not yet been any

official comment from the LTTE, although last week Tiger supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran wrote off four years of peace talks by saying the Oslo-brokered truce was "defunct".

Norwegian envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer was told his planned visit to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi Tuesday would not meet with Colombo's approval, the top government official dealing with Norway, Palitha Kohona, said Sunday.

"The cabinet of ministers will review the government's relations with the Tigers on Wednesday," Kohona told AFP. "Until then, we don't want the Norwegians to have any contacts with them."

The toughened government stand comes after months of

worsening violence and growing pressure from nationalists and key allies of the government to declare the Tamil Tiger rebels a terrorist group.

Groups opposed to the rebels held rallies on Sunday and put up posters across the capital at the weekend demanding that a ban on the LTTE, lifted in 2002 when the peace initiative kicked off, be reinstated.

The Tamil Tigers have been campaigning for independence for the island's minority 2.5 million Tamil community in the majority Sinhalese nation of 19.5 million people.

More than 3,400 people have been killed by the conflict in Sri Lanka in the past year, and the bitter ethnic conflict has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.



A Sri Lankan woman offers flowers at a Buddhist temple in Colombo yesterday as the country marked the Induwap Poya, or full moon day.

De facto partition takes hold in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

For months, the Waheed brothers steadfastly endured the killings raging around them in their mainly Sunni district, staying put as fellow Shias packed up and left.

Finally, a death threat persuaded Majed and Mondhir Hatem Waheed to leave the neighbourhood of Dora where they grew up and, together with their wives and children, join 24 relatives in an uncle's house in Baghdad's Shia Sadr city district.

"At least, we are safe," 25-year-old Mondhir Hatem Waheed said.

In the 43 months since Saddam Hussein's ouster, entire Iraqi provinces have become virtually off-limits to one or another sect, mixed Sunni-Shia neighbourhoods are slowly disappearing, and a Kurdish region in the north appears to have all but seceded.

In many ways, Iraq is breaking up, though not in a way in which a well-defined boundary could be established to ensure peace. It is happening amid a debate on whether partitioning this ethnically and religiously diverse nation could provide a way out of the growing

sectarian violence tearing it apart.

The debate on partitioning Iraq has touched on such sensitive issues as the distribution of the country's oil wealth and how far plans for a federal system of government should go. Also at the forefront is the likely influence of neighbouring powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria should the country be carved into Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Shia Arab mini-states.

Embittered by the loss of their dominance under Saddam and worried they may be left isolated and bereft of resources in Iraq's mostly arid central and western parts, Sunni Arabs have warned that federalism will lead to the breakup of the country.

"I believe some Kurds and some (Shia) Arabs in the south have been promoting federalism to pave the way for the larger goal of dividing Iraq," said Hamid al-Mutlaq, a senior member of the National Dialogue Front, a Sunni Arab political party.

"This catastrophic sectarian tension is only a step to justify partition," he added.



A soldier (L) carries rifles for loading into the back of an army truck in Suva yesterday as troops seized weapons from Fiji's only armed police unit sparking fears the military may have launched the Pacific island nation's fourth coup in two decades.

Military tightens grip on Fiji as police, PM's bodyguards disarmed

AFP, Suva

Fijian troops locked down the Pacific island nation's capital Monday, disarming police and government bodyguards and setting up roadblocks as the nation faced its fourth coup in two decades.

Heavily-armed soldiers entered two police stations and seized weapons, and later also took those of bodyguards to Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and his ministers after threatening to force them from office in a "peaceful transition" unless they agreed to step down.

But rebellious military commander Voreqe Bainimarama declined to say if the actions marked the launch of a long-feared putsch to topple the government that he has branded corrupt, and against which he has waged a weeks-long stand-off.

"I understand the weapons belonging to the bodyguards of the ministers and prime minister have been returned," Bainimarama told a press conference. He made no mention of whether he had taken control of government.

He warned his forces would not tolerate any unrest.

Israel moves to bolster truce with Palestinians

Tel Aviv ready to release jailed Marwan Barghouti

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel moved to bolster a fragile ceasefire with Palestinian militants yesterday by ordering its troops in the occupied West Bank to avoid "unnecessary friction" as the truce entered its ninth day.

"Instructions have been issued to avoid unnecessary frictions and to abstain from actions that could serve as a pretext" for Palestinian militants to break the tentative ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh told army radio.

The truce took effect at dawn on November 26 amid hopes that the measure could help jumpstart the dormant Middle East peace process.

Although Israel has so far refused to extend the truce to the West Bank as called for by the Palestinians, and said it will continue to operate in the territory with the aim of preventing suicide attacks, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert held out the possibility that the measure could be expanded.

"We're putting a lot of effort into trying to reach a ceasefire in the West Bank," a senior government official

quoted Olmert as telling parliament's powerful foreign affairs and defence committee on Monday.

Meanwhile, an Israeli minister said Monday he would consider releasing Marwan Barghouti, the charismatic Palestinian militant leader serving five life sentences in an Israeli jail for planning suicide attacks.

"I will agree to such a release if it leads the Palestinian Authority to be truly opposed to terrorism and to prevent the smuggling of weapons from Egypt into Gaza," Environment Minister Gideon Ezra told public radio.

Lebanese army boosts forces in tense Beirut

REUTERS, Beirut

Lebanon's army deployed more soldiers in Beirut on Monday after the killing of a pro-Syrian Shia Muslim demonstrator raised fears anti-government protests could turn into sectarian violence.

Security sources said the military increased its forces in the Sunni districts that Shia protesters drive through to get to central Beirut where the Hezbollah-led opposition is holding a sit-in to topple the Western-backed government.

These districts witnessed several clashes between residents and protesters on Sunday -- from stone-throwing incidents to fights with sticks and knives.

In the most serious incident, gunmen fired from assault rifles at a group of protesters in the Sunni Qasqas neighbourhood, a stronghold for the anti-Syrian majority coalition, killing one young man and wounding others.

The opposition said the incidents would not drive it to abandon

plans for toppling the government.

The Shia group Hezbollah, which is backed by Syria and Iran, and its allies in the opposition had taken to the streets and were holding an indefinite sit-in to force the resignation of Western-backed Sunni Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

Many politicians and observers had said the crisis could spill over into sectarian strife in a country that had gone through two civil wars in the last century.

India, Naga rebels hold peace talks

Rivals threaten war

REUTERS, Imphal

Leaders of a powerful separatist group in India's northeast will hold a new round of talks with government negotiators in Amsterdam on Monday with threats of violence from a rival group hanging over the meeting.

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Issac-Muivah) (NSCN-IM) and officials have met more than 50 times over the past nine years to try to forge an end to the country's longest-running insurgency.

But little progress has been made on the group's key demands for the right to self-rule and the creation of a new state containing all Naga dominated areas, which is opposed by other tribes living amongst them.

Leaders of the Kuki community recently warned they would go on the war path if areas they inhabit

were handed to the Nagas.

"Let the government of India give the Nagas what they have been demanding, but they can't touch an inch of Kuki land to please the Nagas," Satkhokai Chongloi, a senior Kuki leader told Reuters in Imphal, capital of neighbouring Manipur state.

The Kukis live across five north-eastern states - Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura - three of which are also home to mainly Christian Nagas the NSCN says must be included in any territorial deal.

"We urge the Indian government to stop grabbing land belonging to others for the NSCN-IM, or civil war is inevitable," Chongloi said.

The NSCN-IM said after the last round of talks in October the stalemate was due to insincerity on the part of the government.

India eyes dilution of tough US nuclear deal terms

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is keeping its fingers crossed over the fate of a landmark civilian nuclear pact with the United States, hoping that binding and deal-breaking conditions are not included.

The US House of Representatives and Senate are expected to meet in a conference this week to reconcile separate bills they have

approved to allow nuclear trade between the two countries for the first time in over three decades.

The two versions, however, have several amendments -- introduced mostly by opponents of the controversial deal -- which India has said are unacceptable and were not part of the original agreement reached by the two governments.

New Delhi's concerns were taken up last week by Secretary of

State Condoleezza Rice, who wrote to heads of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House International Relations Committee, a senior Indian official told Reuters.

"Her letter reflects our worries," said the official, close to the negotiations over the deal. "She has expressed those concerns because we have raised them in the first place."



Protesters shout slogans outside a local court in Manila yesterday, where US Marine Lance Corporal Daniel Smith found guilty of raping a young woman and jailed for 40 years, while three fellow US Marines were acquitted.