



Residents of Padang village in Legaspi, in Bicol region move their belongings yesterday in an attempt to evacuate all civilians in or around the slopes of Mayon Volcano fearing more casualties as another storm is imminent near the region.

45 killed in Lanka fighting

Refugee camp bombed

AFP, Colombo

At least 45 people, including 15 civilians, were killed in heavy fighting between government troops and Tamil Tigers in north-eastern Sri Lanka on Saturday, the guerrillas said.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they killed at least 30 Sri Lankan troops and recovered the bodies of five during heavy fighting in Trincomalee district.

"We have killed 30 Sri Lankan soldiers, including two officers and recovered five bodies," LTTE spokesman Rasiyah Ilanthiriyar told AFP. "Shelling by security forces have also killed 15 civilians. Many more are injured."

He said seven Tiger rebels were wounded in the long-range attacks.

There was no immediate reaction from the military to the rebel claims, but the defence ministry said six security personnel were wounded in the clashes.

The casualty figures cannot be independently verified as authorities have not allowed journalists to the embattled regions. International aid agencies have also had access seriously curtailed.

Earlier the LTTE said seven civilians were killed and another 20 wounded in military attacks on the rebel-held Vakarai area.

"Sri Lankan military fired artillery shells that fell in front of the Pammivedduvan school refugee camp, killing four civilians and injuring more than 10," the Tigers said in a statement.

Three more civilians were killed elsewhere in the region, while another 10 civilians were wounded in a separate attack on the Patchenai school, which had been converted into refugee camp, the rebels said.

The defence ministry said in a statement villages held by government forces were under a barrage of Tiger artillery fire.

"Some villagers who had left

their homes in the wee hours of today (Saturday) on reaching the hospital area were faced with a barrage of Tiger artillery fire," the defence ministry said in a statement.

Local officials said 17 soldiers were injured while many more civilians were wounded in government-held areas.

Hundreds of civilians were unable to leave the area because of the sporadic artillery attacks, a military official in the area said by telephone.

The two sides were exchanging long-range attacks along the district borders of Trincomalee and Batticaloa, local officials said.

The renewed attacks came after peacebroker Norway failed on Friday to secure an agreement to end a blockade on the Jaffna peninsula, where nearly half a million people are trapped by fighting.

The LTTE said they told Oslo's envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer to

persuade the government to open the land access to the embattled north without conditions.

The government had asked Hanssen-Bauer to secure a deal with the Tigers to allow a convoy of some 400 trucks to travel through rebel-held territory, but the Tigers rejected a one-off convoy.

Instead, the LTTE political wing leader SP Thamilselvan told Hanssen-Bauer the government must open a disputed highway to Jaffna, as well as another highway to the island's east.

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 in Sri Lanka in the past year in the bitter ethnic conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.



Rep Cynthia McKinney

McKinney introduces bill to impeach Bush

AP, Washington

In what was likely her final legislative act in Congress, outgoing Georgia Rep Cynthia McKinney introduced a bill Friday to impeach President Bush.

The legislation has no chance of passing and serves as a symbolic parting shot not only at Bush but also at Democratic leaders. Incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California, has made clear that she will not entertain proposals to sanction Bush and has warned the liberal wing of her party against making political hay of impeachment.

McKinney, a Democrat who drew national headlines in March when she struck a Capitol police officer, has long insisted that Bush was never legitimately elected. In introducing her legislation in the final hours of the current Congress, she said Bush had violated his oath of office to defend the Constitution and the nation's laws.

In the bill, she accused Bush of misleading Congress on the war in Iraq and violating privacy laws with his domestic spying programme.

McKinney has made no secret of her frustration with Democratic leaders since voters ousted her from office in the Democratic primary this summer. In a speech Monday at George Washington University, she accused party leaders of kowtowing to Republicans on the war in Iraq and on military mistreatment of prisoners.

Iran sets conditions for Iraq talks with US

REUTERS, AFP, Manama

Iran will only hold direct talks with the United States on Iraq if Washington announces plans to pull its troops out, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said yesterday.

Iran is ready under certain circumstances to help the United States withdraw its troops from neighbouring Iraq, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said yesterday.

"If the United States changes its attitude, the Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to help this administration" to withdraw its troops from Iraq, Mottaki told a Gulf security conference in Bahrain, the home base of the US Fifth Fleet.

"The key to solve Iraq's problems is the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq," he said, adding that "the United States should help themselves before anybody else."

Mottaki was responding to a US Iraq Study Group report, which recommended Washington should directly engage with Iran and Syria over Iraq, where violence is threatening to turn into civil war.

On the question of direct talks between Iran and the United States, "the first and most essential step ... is the United States announce they have decided to withdraw from Iraq," Mottaki told reporters at a security conference in Bahrain.

He said that if the United States did announce a withdrawal "Iran is ready to help the administration to withdraw its troops from Iraq."

But Iran did not "see such political will yet in the United States."

Washington blames Iran and Syria for stirring up conflict in Iraq nearly four years after the US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has suggested Tehran would demand some pay-back in return for any help on Iraq, probably over its nuclear program, which the West fears could include nuclear weapons. Iran denies the nuclear weapons accusation.

Asked if Iran would ask for concessions if it helped with Iraq, Mottaki said: "Let the United States withdraw from Iraq first and then we could talk about the details."

'Indo-US nuclear deal will improve ties'

AFP, New Delhi

Ties between New Delhi and Washington will get a new boost from their landmark civilian nuclear deal expected to be signed into law Monday by US President George Bush, Indian analysts and media said.

The US Congress gave final approval on Saturday to legislation allowing the export of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India for the first time in the more than 30 years since the Asian country first tested a nuclear device.

"This is a quantum leap in Indo-American relations and a quantum leap in how India is viewed among the larger powers," said analyst Prashant Dikshit, deputy director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies.

"This will open doors for the Nuclear Suppliers' Group and new relations with an emerging weaponised India."

Under the controversial deal, India, a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), agreed to place its civilian-use atomic reactors under global scrutiny.

The deal still required the endorsement of the influential 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

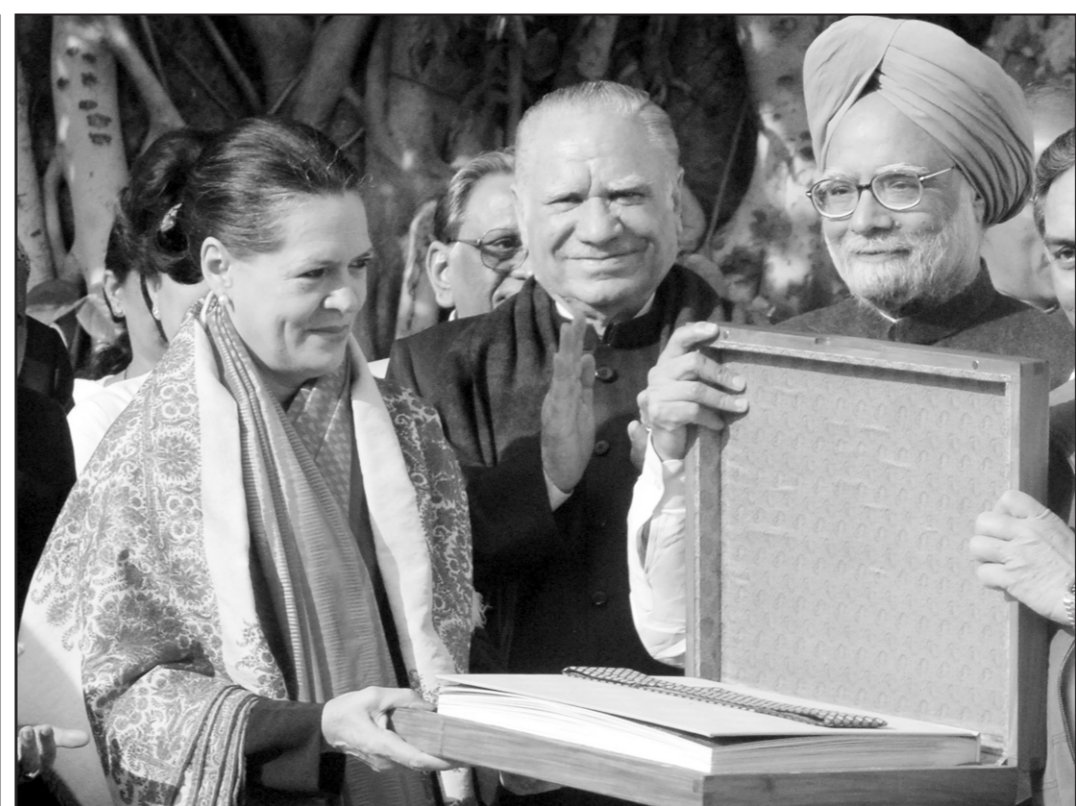
"This is a first step to ending the international isolation that India had faced on the nuclear front," Indian former career diplomat G. Parthasarathy told AFP.

"We'll have a clear picture about what form the end of nuclear sanctions will take only when the NSG agrees."

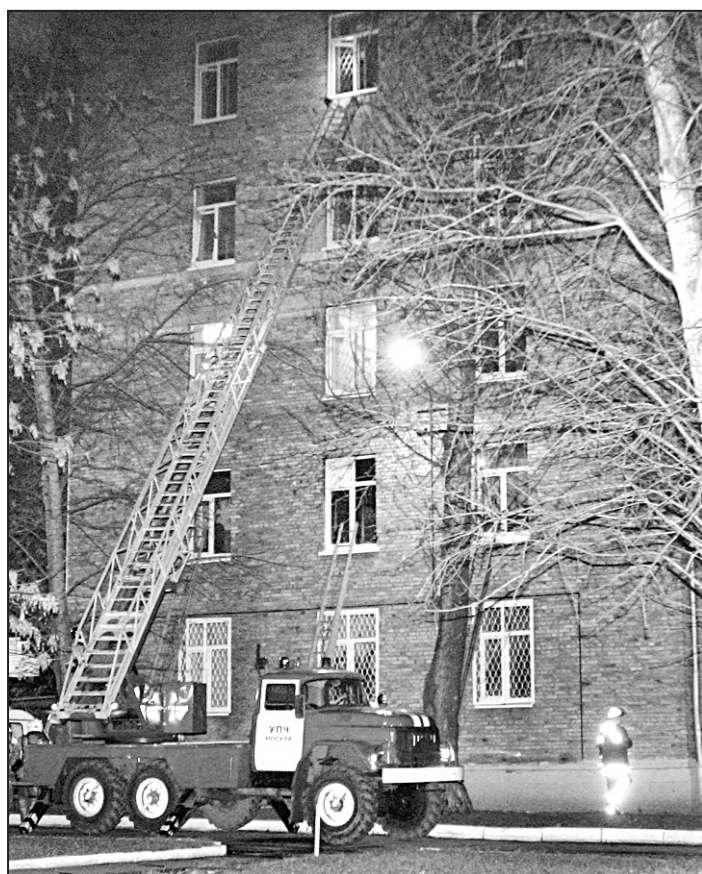
The United States and India will now have to frame a comprehensive agreement incorporating all technical elements of the deal and it has to be passed by the US Congress again.

A group representing Indian industry said Saturday the deal underscored the ever-closer ties between India and the United States, which sat on opposite sides of the fence during the Cold War.

"Apart from fueling India's nuclear energy program, the agreement is a powerful expression of the importance the US attaches to India," said Saroj K. Poddar, head of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry.



Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh (R) presents a birthday gift to prty President and Chairperson of India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Sonia Gandhi (L), during her 60th birthday celebrations at her residence in New Delhi yesterday.



A firetruck is seen parked in front of a drug rehabilitation hospital in Moscow's drug rehabilitation hospital, killing 45 people, emergency ministry and firefighter service officials said.

Amnesty warns of disaster in Palestinian territories

AFP, Gaza City

Mounting human rights violations in the Palestinian territories are sowing the seeds of a disaster with catastrophic consequences, Amnesty International's secretary general warned yesterday.

"We see a downward spiral of human rights abuses and entrenched impunity," Irene Khan wrote in an open letter to EU heads of state after a week-long trip to Israel and the Palestinian territories.

"The prognosis is of widespread violence, collapse of already failing Palestinian institutions and a worsening of the human rights and humanitarian crisis."

Khan slammed Israel's "deliberate and reckless shooting and artillery shelling or air strikes carried out in densely populated areas in the Gaza Strip."

She also criticized Palestinian militants for firing makeshift rockets at Israel, which "have created a climate of fear, which is leading

to a hardening of positions in favour of a harsh military response."

"Despair about the foreseeable future is fuelling violence and the radicalisation of a predominantly young Palestinian population who see no prospects of a normal life."

Khan recommended the establishment of a human rights monitoring mechanism, the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for crimes under international law, and the immediate halting of sales or transfer of weapons to all parties to the Middle East conflict.

She also called for the removal of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the dismantling of Israel's separation barrier, an end to the strict closure system in the West Bank and a fair solution to the Palestinian refugee question.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders were to meet Saturday to decide on how to resolve a political crisis sparked by a crippling EU and US aid boycott against the Islamist-led government.

Bush opposes 'precipitous' withdrawal from Iraq

3 GIs, 16 Iraqis killed in attacks

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush reaffirmed Saturday his opposition to what he called a "precipitous" US troop withdrawal from Iraq, arguing that victory in Iraq was still "possible."

Amid indications that changes in Iraq policy were under way, Bush said he was "encouraged" by a report issued Wednesday by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, which cautioned against a quick withdrawal from the country.

The group, which called for a radical change of strategy in Iraq, suggested pulling out combat units from Iraq by early 2008.

But in his weekly radio address, Bush pointed out that in its report, the group declared that such a withdrawal would "almost certainly produce greater sectarian violence" and lead to "a significant power vacuum, greater human suffering, regional destabilisation, and a threat to the global economy."

Elsewhere, sectarian and insurgent attacks claimed 10 more lives.

Salim Kadhim, spokesman for Karbala's health department, said that six men had been killed and 47

people wounded -- including two women and a child -- in the car bombing, according to an initial toll.

A security official confirmed the figures.

The blast erupted at 11:00 am (0800 GMT) in Al-Abbas street, a few hundred metres (yards) from the Imam al-Abbas mausoleum, the final resting place of the son of the founder of Shia Islam and one of the sect's early leaders.

Several civilian cars and a row of shops caught fire.

Earlier insurgents killed three US soldiers and wounded two others in separate roadside bomb attacks in and around the Iraqi capital, the US military reported Friday.

Two soldiers died and two others were wounded during a "dis-mounted patrol" Thursday when a roadside bomb exploded south of Baghdad, the military said.

Earlier Friday the military announced the death of another soldier killed during a combat patrol in Baghdad.

The gunman didn't work in the office but demanded to see one of the victims, police said.

"He was not employed there, but we feel he did have previous encounters with the individuals in that office," Cline said.

Neither the victims, all men, nor the gunman were identified. A fourth victim, a woman, was taken to the hospital with a gunshot wound to the foot, but was released Friday night, said Kim Waterman, a Rush University Medical Centre spokesman.

Wood Phillips specializes in patent and intellectual property law, according to its Web site.

A partner at the firm, Stephen D Geimer, declined comment when reached at home by telephone Friday night.

Fire officials said they received reports of shots fired on the 38th floor around 3:15 p.m. There were about 30 people on the floor, they said.

Gunman, 3 others killed in Chicago tower

AP, Chicago

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DNA tests indicate driver of Princess Diana's car was drunk: BBC

AFP, London

DNA tests on blood samples back up initial findings that the chauffeur of Princess Diana's car was drunk on the night she died in a Paris crash in 1997, the BBC reported late Friday.

The BBC said on its website that the tests indicate that the samples taken from driver Henri Paul just after his death were indeed his and show him accurately to have been three times over the French drunk-driving limit.

A source close to the French authorities said the DNA tests were done in France within the last year, adding that DNA taken from Paul's blood samples matched with that of his parents.

It said the information serves to refute conspiracy theories alleging that Paul's blood samples were switched in order to show that he was drunk and distract from a secret service plot to murder the princess.

Europeans circulate revised Iran draft

AP, United Nations

In a fresh bid to win Russian and Chinese support, key European nations circulated a revised UN resolution Friday narrowing sanctions on Iran for refusing to suspend uranium enrichment and urging negotiations to resolve the standoff over its nuclear ambitions.

The new draft still would ban the supply of materials and technology that could contribute to Iran's nuclear and missile programmes, but it spells out in much greater detail exactly what items are prohibited. Russia and China both veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council had complained that the proposed sanctions in the original draft were too broad.

But the new draft keeps a travel ban and asset freeze on companies, individuals and organisations involved in Iran's nuclear and missile programmes, which Russia

opposes. Britain, France and Germany who have led negotiations trying to rein in Iran's nuclear programme have been at odds with Russia and China for weeks over the scope of the sanctions. The United States has generally supported the Europeans, though it initially wanted a tougher text.

Russia proposed major changes to the original European text including limiting sanctions solely to measures that would keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons and missiles. Russia's proposed changes also eliminated any travel ban, asset freeze or mention of the nuclear facility being built by the Russians at Bushehr, Iran.

The new European draft drops all mention of Bushehr, which is projected to go on line in late 2007 and would be Iran's first atomic power plant.

Myanmar steps up pressure on aid agencies

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar is hampering humanitarian efforts by tightening restrictions on international aid agencies, further putting at risk the country's impoverished population, the International Crisis Group said.

The military-run nation is becoming increasingly aggressive and intrusive towards global aid agencies in a bid to control their activities, the independent organisation said in a report released on Friday.

Apart from the junta's pressure, overseas pro-democracy groups were also stepping up efforts to restrict and micro-manage humanitarian aid flows, it said.

"Aid agencies have come under renewed pressure from both the

military government and pro-democracy activists overseas who seek to curtail or control assistance programs," Robert Templer, the director of the group's Asian program, said in the report.

The United Nations estimates Myanmar has some 1,100 political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, the 61-year-old Nobel peace laureate, who has been under house arrest in Yangon for most of the past 17 years.

"Undermining of aid by protagonists on all sides not only goes against international humanitarian principles but could also rekindle a new cycle of conflict, making any prospect of positive political change even more remote," he said.



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (C) prays with Governor of Baluchistan province, Awais Ahmed Ghani (L) after inaugurating the Zarghun Gas Field project in Quetta on Friday. Musharraf's visit to the troubled province was his second after tensions soared in gas-rich Baluchistan since rebel tribal chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti died in his cave hideout during a military operation on August 26 this year.