

International

Tigers shell army positions

Colombo renews military operations against LTTE

COLOMBO, Apr 20: Sri Lanka's military said today it has renewed military operations against Tamil rebels following a guerrilla suicide squad attack which sank two naval boats and shattered a 14-week truce, reports Reuter.

On Wednesday, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) broke the truce with the government by blasting apart two navy gunboats and killing 12 sailors.

The rebels today claimed responsibility for sinking the two navy gunboats, using a four person suicide squad comprising two men and two women, northern residents said.

The residents quoted the rebels as saying, in a statement published in morning newspapers and broadcast over rebel radio, that they were responsible for the attack in the eastern port of Trincomalee.

Residents in the north said the army fired shells from its camp in Mandaitivu in the rebel-held Jaffna peninsula towards Jaffna town on Wednesday.

"There were no casualties but there was some damage," a resident in Vavuniya town said, quoting travellers from the peninsula.

The military denied the charge. "We did not fire a single shell," a military officer said.

The resident said troops had intensified checks on civilians in Vavuniya town and had re-imposed the economic embargo at Thandikkulam, the last point between government-controlled and rebel territory.

A spokesman for the US State Department condemned the Tigers for breaking the truce. "The United States deplores this attack. The LTTE must bear the responsibility if the peace process ultimately breaks down," a statement said.

It called on the government to persevere in its efforts to find a political solution and urged the LTTE to join.

AFP adds: Tamil Tiger guerrillas shelled army positions in northern Sri Lanka today, a day after blasting two navy gunboats to mark their pullout from a three-month-old truce, the Military said.

The LTTE launched the long-range pre-dawn attacks using rockets and mortar bombs against at least three military positions, leaving three soldiers wounded, a mil-

itary spokesman said. "We have not retaliated using artillery guns yet because the rockets and mortars did not cause much damage to US. But we will take defensive action," the spokesman said. He said the rebels had also fired automatic rifles early today at a few army bunkers outside the sprawling northern Palky Military Complex located within the LTTE-held Jaffna peninsula.

US, DPRK talks on N-issue fail

SEOUL, Apr 20: South Korea said on Thursday the United States and North Korea had failed to make headway in talks aimed at rescuing a landmark accord designed to allay concern that Pyongyang is trying to build nuclear bombs, reports Reuter.

"The two sides failed to narrow differences in Wednesday's talks in Berlin," Foreign Ministry spokesman Ryu Kwang-sok said.

Indian troops quitting BSF

NEW DELHI, Apr 20: Hundreds of troops are quitting India's largest paramilitary force because of long hours of duty are leaving them with little time for sleep or sex, a newspaper reported today, says AFP.

The Border Security Force (BSF), one of the world's largest paramilitary forces with some 180,000 combat troops, is losing eight personnel a day because of the hardship, the pioneer quoted a government study as saying.

Georgia denies jet sale plan to Iran

TBILISI, Georgia, Apr 20: Georgia's prime minister on Thursday denied reports that Georgia was planning to sell Iran 24 military jet fighters to renovate its aging fleet of Soviet-built aircraft, reports AP.

Iranian President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, currently on an official visit to the former Soviet republic, was scheduled to tour an aircraft factory near Tbilisi before returning to Teheran Friday.

The Iranian president's visit coincided with a stopover by William White, a deputy US energy secretary.

Georgian Prime Minister Otar Patsatsia, at a joint news conference with White said there were no plans to sell military technology or aircraft to Iran.

"I would like to stress that Rafsanjani will just visit our aircraft plant and that does not in any way mean Georgia will be making (military) aircraft sales to Iran," Patsatsia said.

White, on a visit to the Transcaucasus to study oil pipeline routes, said his presence in Georgia at the same time as Rafsanjani was "an accident."

Russians forced out of Chechen bastion

MOSCOW, Apr 20: Russian troops, forced under shellfire to abandon a captured Chechen bastion after holding it for just a day, still seem far from outright victory in the breakaway region, reports Reuter.

Interfax news agency quoted Colonel-General Mikhail Yegorov, acting Russian commander in the region, as saying on Wednesday that Moscow troops had retreated from the village of Bamut in western Chechnya following heavy rebel shelling from nearby hills.

Yegorov said the troops had on Tuesday forced out rebel fighters, who resisted Russian attacks on the village for three months.

But he added: "Russian troops were later forced to leave the village to avoid casualties."

Yegorov is temporarily standing in for Colonel-General Anatoly Kulikov as head of the joint army and interior ministry operation.

Kulikov told a news conference earlier on Wednesday that 15 Russian soldiers and about 400 rebels were killed in the latest series of attacks on Bamut, which began last Friday.

Yegorov said that, with

Bamut still holding, his troops were increasingly engaged in heavy fighting with rebels for another separatist stronghold in the southeastern district of the war-devastated north Caucasian territory.

He said Russian troops suffered losses trying to seize the village of Serzhen-Yurt, 40 km (25 miles) southeast of the Chechen capital Grozny, but he gave no death toll.

The seizure of Serzhen-Yurt would give Russian troops access to southern mountainous areas, where most of the rebels, fighting for independence from Moscow, have based.

Bamut, 50 km (30 miles) southwest of Grozny, is another gateway to south Chechnya.

Yegorov said Russians could expect strong resistance in the villages of Orekhovo and Valerik near Bamut. He estimated about 500 fighters were holed up in each of the two villages.

The failure in Bamut and the growing number of new points of rebel resistance contrasted with Kulikov's statement on Wednesday that Russia had achieved most of its aims in the Chechen campaign.

Iraq urges UN to allow Hajj flights

BAGHDAD, Apr 20: Iraq said on Wednesday the United Nations should allow Iraqi Muslims to fly to Makkah after giving the go-ahead for pilgrimage flights to leave Libya, reports Reuter.

"We demand from this (UN sanctions) committee to immediately allow Iraqi pilgrims to fly from Baghdad to Makkah," a spokesman for the Culture and Information Ministry said.

He told reporters, Iraq had asked the committee several times in past years but "this notorious commission turned down Iraqi requests."

The spokesman said he learned on Wednesday that the committee had agreed to a Libyan request to transport Arabian pilgrims by air to Saudi Arabia to perform this year's Hajj.

He said Iraq held the committee responsible for preventing Iraqis from travelling to Makkah for the Hajj. He accused it of "double standards" in its dealings with Iraq.

Iraq's airspace, like Libya's is sealed by UN trade sanctions. The UN imposed a blanket embargo on Iraq, including international flights, as punishment for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Washington for tighter sanctions on Belgrade

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 20: The United States wants to tighten sanctions on Yugoslavia and shorten the time between reviews of the few bans eased against Belgrade to date, diplomats said on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

Sanctions on air travel, sporting and cultural ties against the former Yugoslav republics of Serbia and Montenegro were relaxed in October for 100 days and again in January for another 100 days. They lapse on Friday.

The United States and Germany have proposed easing these bans for only another 30 days. Britain, France and Italy prefer 100 days, while Russia would like an indefinite extension.

In addition, diplomats said US Ambassador Madeleine Albright has proposed that telecommunications be cut to Yugoslavia and that more stringent controls be imposed on helicopter flights and transshipments of goods across Bosnia.

But German and British envoys said there was little chance of agreement on cutting telephones and other communications since peace negotiators need to be in touch with Belgrade.

Trade sanctions are still in effect but the travel, sports and cultural bans were relaxed to reward Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic for promising to stop military supplies to his fellow Serbs in Bosnia.

The council hoped to lure Milosevic into recognising Bosnia and Croatia by promising to ease more sanctions. But the Serbian leader has repeatedly rebuffed that offer.

But the contact group is showing increasing signs of disarray in the past few weeks.

Off the Record

Babes in suitcase

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police said on Thursday they had found the bodies of a toddler and his baby brother stuffed in a suitcase after their father jumped from the fourth floor window of their flat, reports Reuter.

Police investigating the man's fall found the bodies of the boy, aged one, and his two-month-old brother inside the suitcase in the flat's bathroom early on Wednesday, a spokeswoman said.

The elder boy had been strangled and both children had been dead for one or more days, she said.

Their 25-year-old father had tried to stab and later tied up a welfare worker who arrived at the flat Tuesday night to discuss the care of the children.

He then jumped out of the window of the flat.

The police spokesman said the children's mother is in police custody on theft charges. The father, whom she identified only by his surname Cheng, is hospitalised in critical condition, she said.

Fossilised foetus found

BEIJING: Chinese scientists announced yesterday the discovery of a foetus inside a fossilised dinosaur egg unearthed in the central province of Henan, reports AFP.

The discovery came just weeks after scientists said they had managed to extract DNA from a similar 70-million-year-old egg, giving rise to speculation as to whether gene fragments could be cloned to bring dinosaurs back to life as portrayed in the US movie "Jurassic Park."

The image of a dinosaur foetus appeared when the fossilised egg was examined by X-ray, the Xinhua news agency quoted the scientists as saying.

The skull, backbone, forelegs and backlegs were all clearly identifiable, they said, adding that the discovery of an intact foetus was extremely rare.

Despite the excitement that followed the DNA extraction last month, Chinese experts and scientists have poured cold water on the "Jurassic Park" concept.



NPT conference

Malaysia, Egypt reject indefinite extension

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 20: Malaysia rejected on Wednesday an indefinite extension of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and backed extension of either in a single fixed period or a series of periods, reports AFP.

Hasmy Agam, the head of the Malaysian delegation at the International NPT Renewal Conference in United Nations, said that Malaysia "finds it difficult to support an indefinite extension of the treaty."

Calling nuclear weapons "immoral," he urged accelerating the pace of disarmament and setting a legally binding timeframe for their elimination.

AP adds: A senior Egyptian diplomat held out the possibility that Egypt will agree to a limited extension of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, now the subject of a United Nations review conference in New York.

"I find it difficult to accept an indefinite extension without the regional dimension (of the treaty) being addressed," before the vote on May 12 on the indefinite extension of the international accord, said Ramzy Ramzy, the deputy chief of mission at the Embassy of Egypt.

Ramzy was not categorical in his April 19 remarks at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), an influential think tank here.

Other speakers included Shai Feldman, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, and Ahmed Hashim, a senior associate in political military studies at CSIS.

There are possibilities for a definite extension," Ramzy emphasized, suggesting a five-year period as one possibility in order to see whether the more than 170 signatories are "true to their commitments."

He cited, for example, the promise of the nuclear powers to pass on nuclear technology to the non-nuclear members, indicating that he did not think this was fully implemented.

The United States has been campaigning for an "indefinite and unconditional" extension of the treaty.

United States Vice President Al Gore addresses the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty conference at the United Nations on Wednesday. Gore's address was the keynote speech in a US campaign to win permanent and unconditional extension of the 25-year-old treaty. — AFP/UNB photo

Asia's booming economic power may boost its military strength

SYDNEY, Apr 20: Asia's growing economic power will boost China, India and Japan their military strength substantially by 2010, and China's nuclear strike capabilities will span Asia and reach the US east coast, a top Australian defence expert says, reports Reuter.

much more capable strategic nuclear force... Dobb wrote in the current May edition of Jane's Intelligence Review magazine.

"They will be capable of targeting all of Asia, western Russia and the east coast of the United States," said Dobb, head of strategic and defence studies at the Australian National University.

China can be expected to have 50 to 70 intercontinental ballistic missiles in mobile launchers with a range of up to 12,000 km (7,460 miles), Dobb said, basing his assessments on Asia's military trends of the past 15 years and each nation's

stated intentions and economic strength.

China will modernise its 48-strong submarine force, buying 24 or more Russian kilo-class submarines and building six ballistic missile submarines, enabling it to target all of Asia from submerged positions close to China, he said.

It will also probably have an aircraft carrier by 2010, two or three carriers in service by 2015, and a large number of surface-to-surface missiles with ranges of up to 900 km (560 miles), equipped with nuclear and chemical war-

Given sustained economic growth the military capabilities of the great powers in Asia (China, India and Japan) will be substantially greater by 2010... Dobb said.

"Armies will reduce in size but they will have greater and more accurate firepower, while mobility will be greatly improved. There will also be a greater emphasis on rapid deployment forces and special forces."

Better technology will enable Asian countries, especially East Asian nations like South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, to develop local defence industries and boost their capability.

The real danger is not the export of finished weapons to East Asia but the transfer of technology that enhances the ability of the region's status to build the next generation of weapons themselves," Dobb said.

Japan's military will focus on quality rather than quantity to increase its potency, he said.

"Japan's highly advanced technological base by 2010 will mean that it could expand its military capabilities very rapidly indeed and with little warning...," Dobb said.

would press ahead with its nuclear capabilities, targeting China and Pakistan, Dobb said. India's military development depends on whether it finds itself at war with Pakistan, he added.

The United States was likely to reduce its nuclear force in the Pacific and focus on home-based forces, pulling troops back to Hawaii, Guam, the US west coast and Alaska.

Despite Washington's recent comments that US forces in the Pacific will stabilise at the current level of 100,000, Dobb believes the level could drop to around 50,000 by 2010.



File photo dated March 19, 1995 of Queen Elizabeth II who is due to celebrate her 69th birthday today. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

3 killed in Delhi blast: At least three people were killed and three injured when a bomb exploded in a metal factory in the Indian capital yesterday, police said. AFP reports from New Delhi.

The explosion occurred in a factory dealing in aluminium products in New Delhi's Najafgarh industrial district, police said.

Malawi's army chief shot dead: Malawi's armed forces Chief General Manken Chigawa was shot dead on Wednesday night when armed thieves attempted to steal his car, police said yesterday. Reuter reports from Blantyre.

The police said Chigawa ran towards the car after it was stolen when he and several bodyguards stopped at the roadside to buy vegetables in Ntcheu district, 160 km (100 miles) south of the administrative capital Lilongwe. Chigawa and one of the thieves were killed in an exchange of gunfire, the police said.

1 held in Taipei nightclub fire: A father turned his teenage son over to Taiwanese police Thursday for starting a fire in a nightclub Monday that killed 12 people in Taiwan's second deadly club blaze this year, AP reports from Taipei, Taiwan.

The 17-year-old, surnamed Tai, told police he tossed a plastic bag filled with gasoline into the lobby of the building housing the club and ignited the liquid before fleeing. Police are not releasing the first names of the suspect or his father.

Troops control La Paz: An army-enforced calm returned to the capital and other cities Wednesday after the government declared a state of siege and arrested dozens of labour leaders to end weeks of violent protests by strikers, AP reports from La Paz, Bolivia.

Soldiers patrolled the streets of La Paz and other cities, and hundreds more were mobilised in country, coca leaf producing region.

1 arrested with dinosaur eggs: A Japanese man has been arrested in the central Chinese city of Xian for attempting to smuggle valuable fossilised dinosaur eggs out of the country, a local report said, AFP says from Beijing.

The man was stopped from boarding a flight on April 5 to Nagoya after customs officers found four eggs hidden in his suitcase, the Shaanxi Legal Daily said in a report seen here yesterday.

Kohl's Bonn office sealed off: Police sealed off German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's Bonn office on Thursday after finding a suspect package outside. The package, destroyed in a controlled explosion, turned out to contain nothing but a break cylinder, Reuter reports from Bonn.

A police spokesman said traffic on a main route through the city was halted for an hour in the early morning while police bomb experts set to work on the package, which was addressed to Kohl's office. The Chancellor was on holiday in Austria.

Ghali postpones talks on E Timor: UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali has postponed talks over East Timor due to be held next month between the Portuguese and Indonesian foreign ministers, officials said yesterday. Reuter reports from Jakarta.

The official, who declined to be identified, said the talks had been postponed until after a UN sponsored gathering of East Timor's figures in Salzburg, Austria, which itself has been postponed from next week until June.

Quake jolts S Philippines: A moderate earthquake with a magnitude of 5.5 shook the southern Philippines Thursday, causing panic and traffic jams in at least one city, but there were no reports of damage or casualties, AP reports from Manila.

The quake at 4:45 pm (0845 GMT) was centred in the Philippine Sea about 990 kilometres (620 miles) southeast of Manila, said Aimee Guanilo, a spokeswoman of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology.

Myanmar, S Africa set up ties: Myanmar established diplomatic relations with South Africa on Thursday, the state-owned New Light of Myanmar reported, AP says from Yangon.

The newspaper quoted an official statement in reporting that the decision conformed with the interests and desires of the two countries.

Blast kills cop in Spain: A powerful bomb blast killed a Spanish police officer and damaged an abandoned barracks of the paramilitary civil guard on Wednesday, Navarre government officials said, Reuter reports from Enderlatza.

The officials said Eduardo Lopez, 38, was killed as the five-kg (11-lb) bomb exploded in his hands. His car was parked nearby.

Gadhafi, Zeroual begin talks: Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi on Wednesday evening started a summit meeting with Algerian President Liamine Zeroual, Algeria's state-run radio said, Reuter reports from Tunis.

The two North African leaders started the two-day meeting in the southeastern town of Ain Amenas near the Libyan border with the aim of strengthening cooperation, the radio said.

10 hurt in Haitian polls violence: Right-wing extremists brandishing stones, clubs and machetes wounded 10 people in an attack on a rural election bureau, the Haiti News Agency reported Wednesday. AP says from Port-au-Prince.

The assailants were identified as members of the extremist Front for the Advance and Progress of Haiti, known by its initials as FRAPH. It was the fourth FRAPH attack in less than a month on electoral offices in the Artibonite Valley.

20 more militants freed in Gaza: Palestinian police released about 20 more Muslim fundamentalists on Wednesday, taking to 90 numbers freed since a crackdown after the murder of eight Jews, the authorities said, AFP reports from Gaza City.

The militants from the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and the Islamic Jihad were among scores detained in the aftermath of two suicide bombings on April 9.

Iraq denies access to Americans: Iraqi authorities refused on Wednesday for a second consecutive day to let a Polish diplomat visit two Americans jailed for crossing the border from Kuwait, US State Department Spokesman Nicholas Burns said, AP reports from Washington.

The United States and Iraq have no diplomatic relations. American interests in Baghdad are represented by Ryszard Krysoski of the Polish Embassy.

Prison abuse claims Tibetan nun: A 24-year-old Tibetan nun who was beaten in prison died while on medical parole, a report said on Thursday, AP says from Beijing.

Gyaltsen Keisang was beaten after she was arrested with 11 other nuns for a pro-independence demonstration in June 1993, according to a report from the Tibet Information Network, a London-based group that monitors Tibet. The report said her death on February 20 apparently was caused by kidney problems due to beatings or by diseases such as tuberculosis that can result from poor living conditions in prison.

1700 kids in S African jails: Up to 1,700 children aged under 17 are being held in South Africa's overcrowded prisons the chairman of the Parliamentary Correctional Services Committee Carl Niehaus said Wednesday, AFP reports from Cape Town.

The jailing of children in adult prisons violated the human rights clauses in the country's constitution, Niehaus told a media conference.