

International

# Forces advancing deep into LTTE-held areas Lankan troops kill 40 more Tigers in latest offensive

COLOMBO, Apr 26: Sri Lankan troops killed 40 Tamil guerrillas, bringing the number of rebels killed in the military's latest offensive launched a week ago to 200, the Defence Ministry said today, reports Reuter.

The rebels were killed on Thursday during a clash which left four soldiers dead and 11 wounded, the ministry said in a statement.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels are fighting for independence in the island's north and east.

Thousands of Tamil civilians, who were forced to flee their homes before a military offensive in Jaffna's Valikamam district last December, were returning to their homes, the military said.

The military launched Operation Riviresa II last Friday in an attempt to drive the rebels from their northern Jaffna Peninsula stronghold.

Troops backed by tanks, artillery and air support have been advancing on the districts of Vadamaratchi and Temmaratchi on the peninsula.

Troops having resumed their advance across enemy resistance around noon on April 25, the statement said.

Troops, backed by MI-24 helicopter gunships, overcame the resistance and went on to clear a large rebel camp complete with firing range, grenade factory and small arms repair workshop, it said.

More than 50,000 people have died in the rebels' 13-year war.

Earlier report says, Sri Lankan troops pushed deep into territory held by Tamil guerrillas in northern Sri Lanka today amid rebel renewed resistance that left three soldiers killed and 20 wounded, defence sources said, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) put up a token fight as infantry troops captured more strategically important towns in the Thenamarchichi sector of the Jaffna Peninsula, the sources said.

The advance was resumed on Thursday even as tens of thousands of people poured into areas security forces captured from the Tamil Tigers in the peninsula.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has confirmed that about 250,000 people have already crossed rebel lines and returned to their homes in areas now controlled by security forces in Jaffna.

The LTTE is leading a protracted campaign to establish an independent homeland in the northern and eastern regions where the two million Tamil minority is concentrated.

## BRIEFLY

**Chirac praises PNC decision:** President Jacques Chirac Thursday called the Palestine National Council's decision to revoke clauses from its charter calling for the elimination of Israel an act of historic importance, AP reports from Paris.

In a letter to Yasser Arafat, the French president congratulated the Palestinian leader for his courage in convincing the Palestinian's Parliament-in-exile to adopt the decision.

**Chernobyl disaster day marked:** Holding candles up to a warm spring night, tearful mourners gathered near the Chernobyl nuclear plant to mark the 10th anniversary of the world's worst nuclear disaster on Friday, AP reports from Slavutich, Ukraine.

Chernobyl's reactor No 4 exploded on April 26, 1986, releasing 200 times as much radiation as the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. It sent a radioactive cloud across Europe and contaminated millions of people.

**Zhirinovskiy turns 50:** Vladimir Zhirinovskiy celebrated his 50th birthday Thursday by playing hockey from parliament and staging a lavish buffet of Caviar, Sturgeon and, of course, Zhirinovskiy champagne. Zhirinovskiy Vodka and Zhirinovskiy mineral water, AP reports from Moscow.

The celebrations began with the ultranationalist lawmaker and his Liberal Democratic Party faction staying away from Thursday's parliament session to wine and dine at party's offices in the State Duma building.

**Kim Jong Il visits military unit:** Reclusive North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, keeping up his increased visibility, visited a front-line military unit, the communist country's official media reported Friday, AP reports from Seoul.

The visit Thursday came at a time of increased tension along the heavily fortified Korean border where nearly 2 million troops of both Koreas remain on heightened alert.

**6 killed in Japanese plane crash:** A small aircraft crashed and burst into flames at an airport in northern Japan Friday, killing all six people aboard, police said, AP reports from Tokyo.

The aircraft crashed at the northern end of the Kushiro airport and burst into flames, which were extinguished by airport fire trucks about 15 minutes later, a local police spokesman said.



A Shi'ite refugee woman and her children sit in the UN base in Tyre on Thursday. Israel stepped-up air and artillery attacks on the 15th day of its war against Hezbollah. At least nine civilians were wounded in the attacks. — AFP/UNB photo

## China, Russia pledge to raise military exchanges

BEIJING, Apr 26: China and Russia pledged on Thursday to increase military exchanges but shrugged off fears of a renewed alliance, saying their cooperation was not directed against other countries, reports Reuter.

The two countries would step up friendly exchanges between their armed forces and increase cooperation on the development of military technology, Xinhua news agency said.

Liu Huaqing, vice-chairman of China's Central Military Commission, and Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets emphasised that increased military cooperation was not directed against a third nation or group of nations, Xinhua said.

China is negotiating with Russia to cut troops along both sides of their border and hopes to reach an agreement as soon as possible, Xinhua quoted Chinese President Jiang Zemin as saying.

In talks with visiting Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Beijing, Jiang said: "China is not posing, and will not pose in the future, any threat to Russia," Xinhua reported.

China and Russia also agreed to settle any dispute over their 4,300-km (2,700-mile) border, according to a joint statement signed by Jiang and Yeltsin.

The two sides agree to continue their negotiations to resolve in a fair and equitable manner the remaining boundary issues on which the two sides are yet to reach agreement," the document said.

Yeltsin, Jiang and leaders of the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are to sign a treaty in Shanghai on Friday.

AFP adds: US officials frowned Thursday the significance of a strategic partnership between China and Russia.

# Poor countries taking major brunt of natural disasters

BONN, Apr 26: Developing nations took the brunt of 30 out of the 50 worst natural disasters recorded worldwide last year, and many of the victims were the poorest people in poor countries, reports IPS.

More than 90 per cent of victims of cyclones, earthquakes and floods that ravaged Africa and Asia were the poor of the developing world who are most vulnerable to natural disasters who hardly get any compensation, according to the German journal Akzent.

In a special issue on emergency aid, the journal published every second month by the autonomous German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), based in Eschborn near Frankfurt Am Main-said insurance companies increasingly were considering the limits of insurability of risks such as disasters.

The reason: The number of natural disasters increased four times in the decade 1985-95 in comparison to the 1960s. The damage they cau-

## US closer to agreement to end Israel-Hezbollah fighting

JERUSALEM, Apr 26: The United States appears to be nearing an agreement to end more than two weeks of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon but some tough issues remain to be resolved, reports Reuter.

US Secretary of State Warren Christopher flew to Israel early today from Damascus after what his spokesman Nicholas Burns called a "very productive meeting" with Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad.

"We believe that we are making steady progress in these negotiations. However, there are some issues that still remain," Burns told reporters on the plane bringing Christopher to Israel.

Burns said Assad had made several suggestions about a US drafted ceasefire accord which would be put to Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres at a meeting in Jerusalem this morning.

"I don't know what the next steps are," said Burns.

He described the unresolved problems as "challenging issues" which were "more than just negligible" but did not spell out what they were.

On Thursday, Israeli peace negotiator Uri Savir said efforts to end the fighting were nearing an end.

Another report says, Israeli jets, guns and warships

pounded south Lebanon for the 16th day today UN officials and security sources said.

Warplanes fired rockets into the villages of Aytet and Khirbet Silim near the southern port of Tyre. In the first raids since daybreak, the sources said.

Warships fired 18 shells in three hours since 6.00 am (0300 GMT) at the coast road from Beirut to the south.

UN spokesman Timur Goksel said Israeli gunners opened fire at dawn and poured scores of shells into south Lebanon.

They had fired 1,200 artillery rounds in the 24 hours up to 6.00 am on Friday, Goksel said.

## Israel extends closure of WB, Gaza for 3 days Labour Party drops opposition to Palestinian state

TEL AVIV, Apr 26: Swiftly answering the PLO's decision to end its call for Israel's destruction, the governing Labour Party has abandoned its long-standing opposition to a Palestinian state, reports AP.

With its landmark vote, Labour discarded what was once a bedrock tenet and became the first major party in Israel to at least tacitly accept the idea of an independent Palestinian state, once unthinkable for most Israelis.

The move came a day after the Palestine National Council annulled clauses in the PLO charter that called for Israel's destruction.

The momentous exchange of gestures is expected to bolster the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, frozen since a series of suicide bombings by Islamic militants in February and March killed 59 victims in Israel.

Yet Israel still faces the threat of attack from Muslim extremist groups such as Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres told about 1,000 Labour Party delegates who had assembled in Tel Aviv to vote on the new platform that it would help him "achieve a comprehensive peace in the Middle East" if he is re-elected in May 29 balloting.

The new platform also abandons another major Labour

Party position: that the Golan Heights, captured from Syria in 1967 and annexed in 1981, are essential to Israel's security. It says only that the strategic plateau, which Syria wants in exchange for peace, "has political importance."

Reuter says Palestinian President Yasser Arafat praised Israel's ruling Labour Party for adopting a campaign platform on Thursday that did not rule out a Palestinian state.

Another Reuter report says, the Israeli army said on Thursday it had extended for three days the full closure it imposed on the West Bank and Gaza Strip for two Israeli holidays.



This 1962 file photo shows John F. Kennedy, Jr. playing with his mother's necklace at the White House. The simulated Pearl Necklace worn by Jacqueline Kennedy while in residence at the White House sold for USD 190,000 during the Sotheby's auction of the estate of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis on Thursday in New York. The auction is scheduled to take place over a period of four days with nine separate sessions to accommodate 1,100 lots. — AFP/UNB photo

## Pre-polls violence claims 7 in Assam

NEW DELHI, Apr 26: Seven people were killed in election-related violence during the final thrust of campaigning as India prepared to vote in a general election, news reports said Friday, reports AP.

Separatist rebels shot and killed a candidate of the governing Congress Party on Thursday contesting a seat in the state assembly in the northeastern state of Assam. Four of his bodyguards also were killed by the rebels who ambushed the candidate's car, police said.

The rebels of the United Liberation Front of Assam want independence for their remote tea-growing state and are opposed to Indian elections.

In Bihar, a northern state which has a reputation for political lawlessness, two politicians were assassinated in separate attacks Thursday.

The victims were activists of the communist party and the socialist Janata Dal party that heads the Bihar state government.

Officials blamed the Bihar killings on the Ranvir Sena, a private army identified with upper-caste landlords. The militia was formed two years ago as part of a longstanding war between upper and lower castes in India's poorest and most underdeveloped state.

The deaths raised to 19 the number of people killed in recent weeks in political violence. The casualty toll in previous campaigns has been far higher.

## Off the Record



US actress Sharon Stone arrives to a movie theatre in Beverly Hills, California on Wednesday for the premier of the movie "The Last Dance." Stone plays a convicted felon about to be executed in the movie. — AFP/UNB photo

## 2 policemen shot dead in Karachi

KARACHI, Pakistan, Apr 26: Two policemen were shot dead in an attack by gunmen in the troubled Malir district of the port city of Karachi today, ambulance officials said, reports Reuter.

They said ambulance volunteers picked up bodies of police constables Ishaq and Zafar Hussain near a petrol pump in Malir district, both were in civilian clothes.

Police confirmed the incident but gave no details.

It was the first major violent incident in Karachi after a period of relative calm in the past few weeks.

The government blames the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) for most of the violence in Karachi, where more than 200 people have been killed this year in political and sectarian violence compared to 2,000 in 1995.

## Grand diamond for grand celebrations

BRUSSELS: The world's largest diamond, polished by Belgian Gabi Tolkowsky and weighing 545.7 carats, will be offered to the king of Thailand to mark his 50 years on the throne, Tolkowsky said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world's longest serving monarch, will receive the "golden jubilee" as a present from a consortium of Thai business people who bought it from Diamond Giant De Beers (Dbrj Pb. J) early this year, Tolkowsky said.

"They will offer the stone to the king and afterwards place it in the royal sceptre," he told Reuters.

It took Tolkowsky and his team of experts more than three years to cut and polish the 755.5-carat rough gem which was discovered in the premier mine in South Africa.

It was baptised "unnamed brown" but renamed after becoming the king's present.

The golden jubilee surpasses the weight of the second biggest diamond, the Cullinan (the great star of Africa), by 15 carats.

"It's an amazing diamond. It gives a 72 per cent yield which is very unusual. A diamond usually gives a yield of maximum 40, 45 per cent from rough to polished but this was an exceptional, stone, both in shape as in colour," Tolkowsky said.

He said he believed King Bhumibol knew of the present and had already taken the diamond in his hand to bless it while some Thai religious leaders had also blessed the stone.

## Japan approves closer military ties with US

TOKYO, Apr 26: Japan's Cabinet Friday approved measures to strengthen military ties with US troops, 11 days after Japan and the United States signed a military cooperation agreement, reports AP.

The two nations concluded a deal on April 15 calling for Japan's military to provide transportation and other logistical support for US forces in peacekeeping and training operations.

The so-called Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, will cover 15 items Japan would offer the US military, such as food, water, fuel, clothing, spare parts and components, transportation, repair work and maintenance.

The government will soon submit to Parliament bills revising the Self-Defense Forces law that will enable stepped-up Japanese military cooperation with the US military, and an approval of the ACSA, for final approval, a Defence Agency official said.

## Rebels attack Russian convoy, 2 killed New Chechen leader vows to avenge Dudayev's death

MOSCOW, Apr 26: The war in Chechnya ground relentlessly on Thursday as the Chechens separatists' new leader vowed to avenge the death of Dzhokhar Dudayev and fight on for Chechnya's independence, reports AP.

Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev ruled out peace talks with Moscow until Dudayev's death was avenged and the culprits found, Russian television said. He said the rebels were "prepared to continue the war until Chechnya gains its freedom."

Russian warplanes, meanwhile continued their assault on Shali, 25 kilometers (16 miles) southeast of the Chechen capital Grozny. Television said Russian troops in the mountains were fortifying their positions and security was being beefed up in the capital.

Russian forces claim to have surrounded Chechen guerrillas in Shali. The Interfax news agency said at least one woman was killed and 29 people — including two children — were injured in the air raid.

Chechen fighters also kept up their hit-and-run attacks against Russian troops in Grozny, news agencies said, and there were reports of scattered fighting elsewhere.

The death of Dudayev, the guiding force of the separatist movement, has created new uncertainty in the 16-month war.

One likely intermediary in peace talks between the Kremlin and Chechen rebels was wondering with whom he should talk.

Reuter adds: Rebel fighters attacked a Russian military convoy in Chechnya, killing two servicemen, wounding seven and burning an armoured vehicle, ITAR-Tass news agency said today.

## BJP to be asked to apologise for Babri Mosque demolition

NEW DELHI, Apr 26: The External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, today said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) should be asked to apologise for demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya because its geological experts have the act, reports AP.

Reacting to reports attributing to him statement that the Congress might have committed some omissions with regard to the demolition and was not apologising, Mukherjee said the Congress has more than once condemned the act.

## Tribunal won't release Bosnian Croat general Muslim-Croat Federation to create jt police force

BONN, Apr 26: Leaders of Bosnia's Muslim-Croat Federation agreed on Thursday to create a joint police force and set up a network of human rights monitors in a deal they said boosted the credibility of their shaky alliance, reports Reuter.

"I think we have moved a good way forward down a difficult road," German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel, who hosted talks between the leaders in Bonn, said after the meeting held at the Peterberg Government Guest House.

Senior officials from the United States, the United Nations, Croatia and Bosnia were also present.

The agreement covered a range of subjects, but officials highlighted decisions to launch a sweeping organisation of the federation's police force and to put human rights monitors in each canton.

The accord seeks to overhaul the federation's police by merging rival units, putting them in neutral grey uniforms and cut their overall number by around half, officials said.

Michael Steiner, a German diplomat helping oversee the reconstruction of Bosnia's civilian society, said the concept lets NATO-led peace-keeping troops working with international police arrest anyone who violates the police accord.

Federation leaders vowed to make the accord stick, unlike other agreements that have quickly broken.

AP adds: The Yugoslav war crimes tribunal Thursday refused to release a top Bosnian Croat general, saying he might never return for trial and could threaten witnesses if freed.

Gen. Thomir Blaskic, who had turned himself in to the UN court to clear his name, had appealed to be freed from pretrial detention so he could return to his sick wife.