

Troops hunt for 18 missing commandos Tigers ambush army patrol, kill 14 troops in E Lanka

COLOMBO, June 16: Tamil Tiger separatists said today that they ambushed a military patrol in Sri Lanka's eastern Ampara district and killed 14 troops, reports Reuters.

The clandestine Voice of Tigers radio, monitored in the northern government-held town of Vavuniya, said the patrol was ambushed on Sunday.

Military officials in the east earlier said the patrol, which included special commandos, police and homeguards, had been ambushed, and at least 14 people were missing.

A Defence Ministry statement said today that one police constable and a homeguard were wounded in the ambush.

"A group of 18 Special Task Force (commandos) and police personnel are reported to be out of radio contact at present", the statement said. The search operation was continuing in the area, it added.

Meanwhile, police and resident Sin Vavuniya, some 220 kms north of the capital Colombo, said 26 people, mostly civilians, were wounded when a bomb attached to a bicycle exploded in the town centre this morning.

They said one civilian had died and nine others were in serious condition at the Vavuniya Hospital. One police constable and two officers were among those wounded in the blast.

Schools and shops in the town closed after the attack and security forces launched a search for rebel infiltrators, they said.

Residents earlier said the army had fired artillery overnight at areas north of the town, which had come under heavy attack by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels last week.

They said security in the town had been stepped up after last week's attack, and reinforcements had been called in to guard Vavuniya's army camp, police stations and other key economic and government installations.

The Sri Lankan military launched a major offensive called operation "Jaya Sikuri" (Sure of Victory) against the LTTE through the brush jungles of the northern Wanni region last month. It is aimed at opening a key highway linking Vavuniya to Jaffna Peninsula, 100 kms further north.

The LTTE struck back in a daring attack on military positions last week at Thandikulam and Neechchimdai, immediate north of Vavuniya.

The Defence Ministry said that troops manning forward defences near Periyamadai, north of Vavuniya had been attacked by a group of rebels using small arms today. One soldier was wounded in the attack, it said.

It said troops controlling northern areas ahead of Vavuniya were otherwise consolidating and flushing out the remaining rebels still believed to be hiding near Vavuniya.

AP adds: Helicopters dropped paratroopers in the jungles of eastern Sri Lanka Monday to look for 18 police commandos who disappeared while on a mission to hunt for Tamil Tiger guerrillas, the military said.

The Special Task Force commandos lost radio contact several hours after they left Thampitiya police base in Batticaloa district on Sunday afternoon, said military officials, who asked not to be identified by name.

It was not clear if the commandos had been ambushed by the rebels or their radio had stopped working, the officials said.

Although fighting in the 14-year-old civil war has shifted to the north in the last two years, hundreds of rebels still organise attacks from the eastern jungles, ambushing patrols and raiding small police and army bases in the area.



De La Vega (C) waves to photographers after winning the Queen of the Year International Pageant 1997 in Kuala Lumpur Monday. At left is first-runner-up Syvertsen Silje Seaug of Norway and right is second-runner-up Precious Valencia of the Philippines.

World community urged to break 'silence' over Tamils

Ashok Easwaran writes from Chicago

A survivor of the Jewish Holocaust during World War-II has appealed to the world community "To break its silence" over the atrocities committed on innocent Tamil men, women and children in Sri Lanka.

Erna Gans, president of the Holocaust Foundation of Illinois, compared the sufferings of Sri Lankan Tamils with those of victims of the Holocaust.

Lighting two Tamil traditional lamps, Gans inaugurated a public meeting in a Chicago suburb on the theme: "Plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka - a silent tragedy." Several scholars, human rights advocates and representatives of non-governmental agencies participated in the meeting.

Wasantha Raju, former chairman of the Sri Lanka State Television and former head of the Sinhalese service of the BBC, laid part of the blame for the Tamil-Sinhalese strife at what he called the invalidity of the 1972 and 1978 constitutions. He claimed most Sinhalese had a "Sinhala-Buddhist psyche," which made them "believe that the island belongs only to the Sinhala-Buddhist."

Prof Peter Schalk of the University of Uppsala, Sweden, said that Sinhala Buddhist fundamentalism did not recognise the human and political rights of others. "The Tamils had been wrongfully denied recognition as a people with a right to self-determination. The Sinhalese can only think of a unitary state under one umbrella," he said.

Prof Schalk claimed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was not averse to peace talks and none of the talks collapsed because of the intransigence of the rebels. The Swedish government's offer in 1995 to mediate was accepted immediately by the LTTE but turned down by the Sri Lankan government.

According to Prof Schalk, who is a scholar in Tamil, several Buddhist organisations have altered the vows monks take to stress on "One state based on Sinhala language only, one religion - Buddhism - and one country for the Sinhalese alone. This corrupts the Buddhist ideals and brings ominous human rights implications to the non-Sinhalese."

Katie Hope of the US Committee for Refugees (USCR), who co-authored the USCR report titled "Conflict and displacement in Sri Lanka," spoke about the "terrible conditions" of refugee camps in Sri Lanka and India.

She said that the strife had left more than 50,000 Tamil dead, over 1.2 million uprooted from their homes and 900,000 "internally displaced." Many refugees had suffered multiple displacements and this had a traumatic effect on the psychology and education of their children.

"Questioning of refugees in India revealed that they had gone because of fear for their security, lack of food, and that they were not forced to flee by the LTTE, as claimed by the Sri Lankan government," she said.

A resolution passed at the meeting urged world governments and the world community to "proactively engage and pressurise" the Sri Lankan government to stop the "indiscriminate bombing and strafing of Tamil areas, arrests, torture, rape and killing of innocent Tamil civilians, lift the embargo on food, medicine and other necessities of life to Tamil areas, allow journalists - both local and foreign - to visit the Tamil areas, withdraw the Prevention of Terrorism Act and solve the national problem politically rather than pursue a military solution."

The meeting was organised by the Midwest Tamizh Sangam, the International Tamil Language Foundation, Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America and the World Tamil Organisation.

— India Abroad News Service

BRIEFLY

Kashmiri rebels kill 3 Hindus: Suspected Muslim rebels stopped a passenger bus on a remote highway in the northern state of Jammu-Kashmir, dragged three Hindu passengers out and shot and killed them, police said Monday, AP reports from Jammu.

The victims of Sunday night's shooting were school teachers travelling to work in Gool Gulabgarh village in Udhampur district, 30 kilometres (19 miles) northeast of Jammu, the state's winter capital, where they had boarded. They were dragged out of the bus just five kilometres (3 miles) short of their destination, police said.

Palestinians hurl stones at troops: Dozens of Palestinians threw stones at Israeli soldiers Monday in a third day of clashes sparked by the prolonged deadlock in Mideast peace talks, AP reports from Hebron.

Israeli soldiers responded with rubber bullets. Israel has accused the Palestinian Authority of organising the riots to force Israel to stop building a housing project in disputed Jerusalem and expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The Palestinians have said they will not resume peace talks, suspended in mid-March, until the construction stops.

Father commits suicide in India: Benoy Mandal, who killed his four minor daughters at Kabirajpara village in Maldah district on Friday, committed suicide Sunday, the superintendent of police (Maldah), RD Mukherjee, said late Sunday night, PTI reports from Maldah.

His body was found hanging from a tree near his house in the afternoon Sunday, Mukherjee added. Mandal, a widower, poisoned his daughters, aged between 10 and four, when they asked for food in a fit of pique and hanged the bodies with rope before escaping.

Volcanic clouds kill 3 in Indonesia: Hot clouds and lava spewed from Mount Karangetang on an island off the eastern coast of Indonesia, killing three people who were overwhelmed by the scorching smoke, the official Antara news agency said Monday, AP reports from Jakarta.

Nearly 400 villagers fled their homes, the report said. Two were killed last week while the third died over the weekend. A fourth person was hospitalised for burns, it said. The volcano on the island of Sangir Talaud, north Sulawesi, has been active since mid-April. Freddy Manahamp, a village chief, said six people in a nearby village were killed by hot clouds from the 1,784-metre (5,958-foot) volcano in 1992.

5 killed in Manila road mishap: A passenger bus and a tourist bus collided on a highway north of Manila, killing five people and injuring more than 20, police said Monday, AP reports from Manila.

Police said the passenger bus, carrying about 50 people to Manila, swerved to avoid a car emerging from a toll gate and collided with the tourist bus in Pampanga province Sunday. They said seven of the injured were seriously hurt. The passenger bus driver, a mechanic and three passengers were killed.

Gunmen kidnap 4 in Philippines: Armed men killed a government engineer and seized four of his companions, including a Japanese businessman, at a southern Philippine beach resort, police said Monday, reports AP.

Police said they suspect either bandits or Muslim guerrillas from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which controls many areas of the Sarangani province, where the attack took place. Police said the group was staying Sunday afternoon at a resort in Taluya village when six armed men arrived on a motor boat and tried to rob them.

2 Israeli soldiers hurt in Lebanon: Hezbollah guerrillas ambushed an Israeli patrol with a roadside bomb in southern Lebanon Sunday night, wounding two soldiers, security officials said, AP reports from Marjayoun, Lebanon.

They said the remote-controlled bomb was detonated as the armored Israeli patrol drove in the village of Beit Yahoun inside an Israeli-held border enclave in south Lebanon. Beit Yahoun is about 10 kilometres (six miles) from the Lebanese-Israeli border.

Fire in oil tanker kills 1 in Japan: A fire broke out yesterday in an oil tanker anchored in Yokohama port, south of Tokyo killing one of the seven crew members on board, the Maritime Safety Agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The fire occurred around 1.00 am (1600 GMT Sunday) on the 695 tonne Okishimaru, and was put out in some four hours. Natsuo Fukui, a 23-year-old cook, died of serious burns, but the six others were rescued without injury, an agency official said.

26 held after rioting in Indonesia

JAKARTA, June 16: Police have made 26 arrests after rioting on the island of Madura, an official said Monday, reports AP.

Lt. Col. Sofwat Hadi, spokesman of the East Java police, said mobs burned a church, a Buddhist temple, a cinema, three shops and several government vehicles in the Madura town of Bangkalan, 650 kilometres (406 miles) east of Jakarta on Saturday.

A police officer was knifed by a rioter while trying to protect an official from the rioters, he told the Associated Press by phone.

Witnesses said the mobs rampaged through the town until they were finally dispersed by the police at midnight. They said the situation has returned to normal with shops opened and traffic back on the streets.

Maskhadov orders Chechen commander to disband his private army

GROZNY, Russia, June 16: Chechnya's president ordered one of the separatist republic's most notorious guerrilla commanders Sunday to disband his private army, a news agency reported, reports AP.

Salman Raduyev, who claimed responsibility for a series of railway bombings this spring, agreed to comply with the order, the Interfax news agency reported, citing unidentified Chechen leaders.

Under the decree signed by President Aslan Maskhadov, Raduyev will be able to retain a personal guard. But the rest of his forces will join either the republic's national guard, or the ceremonial presidential guard.

Pol Pot will be captured or killed in 2 days: Ranariddh

PHNOM PENH, June 16: Notorious Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot could be captured or killed within two days by armed rivals who have him surrounded, one of Cambodia's two premiers said Monday, reports AP.

Speculation has been mounting over the fate of Pol Pot, who led the ruthless Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979 that caused the deaths of as many as 2 million Cambodians.

Government officials say Pol Pot, 69, is being defended by 200 loyalists. Some 1,000 fighters have turned against him after he ordered the execution of Son Sen, his one-time defence minister.

"I hope to take Pol Pot, alive or not, I do not know, because the military situation is very tense, by today or the next day,"

Colombian rebels set free 70 captive soldiers

CARTAGENA DEL CHAIRA, Colombia, June 16: Colombia's main rebel group attempted to gain respect and maximise a military victory by releasing 70 captive soldiers in front of reporters, international observers and thousands of townspeople, reports AP.

As part of the release deal, President Ernesto Samper agreed to temporarily demilitarise a 5,000-square-mile (13,000-square-kilometre) jungle zone, including this remote southern town on the Caguan River.

For Sunday's carefully orchestrated handover — a rebel publicity coup — the men arrived aboard Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters provided by the government. They were accompanied by their captors and Red Cross workers.

Waiting relatives tearfully embraced the freed soldiers, some mothers shrieking and wailing. One soldier, Nelson Nunez, grabbed his mother by the shoulder.

"Listen mother! Nothing happened to me, everything's fine," he assured her.

Said another soldier: "It went well because I came out alive."

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC — Latin America's oldest active rebel group — captured 60 of the soldiers on August 30 when insurgents overran a remote military outpost in nearby Las Delicias.



A De Havilland Dash 8 plane is pulled through the crowd at the Paris Show in Le Bourget Sunday. Some 240 planes are featured at the show which 300,000 people are expected to visit before it closes June 22.

Islamic militia ready to talk with Malik Masood's forces pound Taliban positions at Pul-i-Matak

ISLAMABAD, June 16: Opposition forces launched a new attack against the Islamist Taliban militia north of Kabul today, a Pakistan-based news agency reported, says Reuters.

The Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said guerrillas loyal to former government Commander Ahmad Shah Masood had used artillery to pound Taliban positions at Pul-i-Matak, between the towns of Charikar and Jabal-Os-Siraj on the main highway to the north.

At least four fighters from both sides were killed in the fighting, which was still going on, AIP said.

Masood has been battling the Taliban in the Jabal-Os-Siraj area since he broke out of his Panjasher Valley more than two weeks ago to trap a Taliban force that had crossed the Hindu Kush range into the north via the Salang Pass.

Opposition forces drove that force out of Pul-i-Khumri, the Taliban's last stronghold in the north, last Wednesday.

The Taliban have suffered a series of military setbacks at the hands of opposition forces in the past few weeks.

Witnesses said the militia had been using night flight to send the bodies of killed fighters from Kabul to the eastern town of Jalalabad to be returned to their families.

They said at least 20 bodies had been flown to Jalalabad on Saturday and Sunday.

Another report from Mazar-i-Sharif says, the Taliban Islamic movement and Afghanistan's main northern opposition leader both said on Sunday they wanted to hold talks but the Taliban's precondition for the release of prisoners appeared a stumbling block.

Taliban spokesman Wakil Ahmed said by telephone from the southern town of Kandahar that his fundamentalist Islamic militia was prepared for peace talks with northern opposition leader General Abdul Malik.

Off the Record

What happened to Naomi?

LAS PALMAS, Spain: Supermodel Naomi Campbell has been released from a Canary Island hospital after undergoing treatment for several hours, says AP.

There were conflicting reports on why she was hospitalised Sunday. The Spanish news agency EFE said that the model was suffering from an overdose of barbiturates, but a Campbell spokesman said she was treated for an allergic reaction to antibiotics.

"She wishes to make it clear that there is absolutely no foundation whatsoever to the story that she had taken an overdose," said Campbell's spokesman in London, Jonathan Goldstein.

An Our Lady of the Pines Hospital spokeswoman, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said earlier Sunday that Campbell was in stable condition and undergoing treatment for a drug overdose.

EFB said Campbell left the hospital and travelled by private car to the airport where she was to board a flight to an undisclosed destination.

The 27-year-old model was taken to a hospital emergency room early Sunday after a heated late-night argument with her boyfriend, Spanish flamenco dancer Joaquin Cortes, EFE reported.

Landing in the wrong place

CASTAIC, California: A paraglider looking to get into the record books instead landed in prison, reports AP.

Thomas Truax lost altitude and aborted his attempt Friday to break a 200 kilometre (125-mile) distance record for the non-motorised, parachute-like glider. He touched down safely on a prison field only to find himself surrounded by 15 deputies who feared a jail break.

"It makes a good story: 'Pilot lands in jail or whatever,'" said Truax, 42, of Carpinteria.

Truax had been heading to the Mojave Desert, but after four hours began losing altitude and tried to find an updraft west of the Pitches Detention Center and a shooting range for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

A special weapons team trailed him in patrol cars until he finally landed in a prison field. After checking out his story, the deputies helped Truax move his glider to the car of a friend monitoring him.

"I didn't realise the jail was there. I thought it was a business centre," Truax said. "Once they found out it was a mistake we shook hands and parted."

Spain marks evolution from dictatorship to democracy

MADRID, June 16: Champagne flowed and politicians exchanged fond memories on Sunday as Spain celebrated the 20th anniversary of its first free elections after nearly 40 years of military dictatorship, reports Reuters.

Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar laughed and joked with past and present politicians and clapped along to songs in a Congress jubilee to mark Spain's dramatic evolution from dictatorship to full-fledged democracy in just two decades.

"The great historic achievement of transition exists as a point of reference so that we do not forget and we never again commit the errors that have been committed during our history," Aznar said.

Little more than 20 years ago, Spain was still stifled by the grip of general Francisco Franco's rightist dictatorship, when opposition leaders were frequently arrested and jailed and the press was monitored and controlled.

But after Franco's death in December 1975, his successor King Juan Carlos opted for free elections and Spain soon found itself steaming down the road to democracy, eagerly shaking off its isolated Iberian past.

Since then, Spain has thrown open its doors to the outside world and staked a place among the first tier of European nations, political analysts say.

A far cry from Franco's strict autocracy, Spain has become one of Europe's most decentralised countries and boasts an enviable economy eager to claim a spot among the founders of a European single currency in 1999.

US shying away from backing cutbacks in greenhouse gases

UNITED NATIONS, June 16: Just a week before a UN "Earth Summit," the Clinton administration is shying away from backing any specific target for cutting back in carbon dioxide and other gases to combat global warming, reports AP.

Under mounting pressure from US industry, Washington is keeping its negotiating options open in the lead-up to a critical conference in Japan this December, when governments are to commit, by treaty, to rolling back "greenhouse gases."

American business, worried that stifling emissions will mean stifling the economy, is mobilising big names and money in a campaign focused on the Kyoto conference.

"It may be the most important economic decision of this century and the next as well," 130 industrialists, including the chief executives of Exxon, General Motors and General Electric, declared in a costly ad

spread over three pages — standard rate dlr 394,000 — of last Monday's Wall Street Journal.

They called for more debate on the treaty's environmental benefits and economic consequences, and urged the White House "Not to rush to policy commitments."

Commitments are what environmentalists have sought from President Bill Clinton and other leaders who will address next week's UN General Assembly special session.

The "green" campaigners want governments to close the negotiating gap and add detail now to the developing treaty, the Climate Change Convention. But they sound resigned to more difficult months ahead.

"Climate change is going to be our number one priority in New York," said Greenpeace's Cliff Curtis. "Despite that, we think the parties will remain at loggerheads over it."

The June 23-27 UN extravaganza, dubbed "Earth Summit Plus 5," will review progress since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, when governments agreed to pursue "sustainable development" — global economic growth tied to environmental protection.

Japan's Ryutaro Hashimoto, Russia's Boris Yeltsin, Cuba's Fidel Castro and Britain's new prime minister, Tony Blair, are scheduled to be among 70 world leaders joining the five-day speech marathon.

The session's lengthy final document is meant to boost the "Rio spirit." But text negotiators still disagree over global warming, forest protection, foreign aid and other issues.

"We hit the peak in '92, and since then we have been coming down from that peak," said the General Assembly president, Razali Ismail of Malaysia, who will preside over the summit.

"Now we are talking about specifics rather than the overall picture. The specifics of global

warming may dominate the session. After Rio, 166 governments ratified a "framework" treaty on climate change in which developed nations pledged to cut greenhouse-gas emissions — carbon dioxide from automobiles, for example — to 1990 levels by 2000.

But few countries are meeting that non-binding goal, and in 1995 governments decided to negotiate more demanding, legally binding reductions.

In that same year, 2,500 scientists, under UN auspices, concluded that "the balance of evidence suggests" man is changing the climate by adding to an atmospheric blanket of gases trapping Earth's heat.

If nothing is done, the scientists said, average temperatures worldwide might rise as much as 6 degrees Fahrenheit (about

3.3 degrees Celsius) by 2100.

The impact would be varied and unpredictable, but a key effect would be on the oceans, likely to rise 20 inches (50 centimeters) by 2100 because of heat expansion and melted glaciers. Encroaching seas might displace 80 million people from coastlines and islands.

Island nations have taken the toughest stance in negotiations, proposing that the summit document endorse a treaty that would cut carbon dioxide emissions by industrial nations to 20 per cent below 1990 levels, with a 2005 deadline.

The European Union proposes a 15 per cent cutback below 1990 levels of three greenhouse gases — carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide — by 2010.

A US proposal calls for legally binding goals — but offers no specifics — and "maximum flexibility." Washington is exploring ideas for allowing trading of emissions quotas:

Environmentalists complain that such added complexities would delay a treaty beyond December.

The US go-slow approach seems to have allies in Japan and oil-producing nations whose economies would suffer from fossil-fuel cutbacks. But some governments sound increasingly impatient.

"If the UK can set tough, demanding targets domestically to achieve carbon dioxide cutbacks... then why can't other countries take the lead?" David Prior, of Britain's Environment Ministry, said of the US position.

Britain's new Labour Party government has set a target of reducing national carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent below 1990 levels by 2010.

Britain's Blair may raise that point this week in Denver,