

International

# Civilians flee as Tamil Tigers prepare for 'final assault'

LONDON, May 13: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas said today they were preparing a 'final assault' on the heart of the key northern town of Jaffna after weeks of intense fighting, reports AFP.

Civilians were fleeing the town as the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas said they were consolidating gains along the coast before making another stab toward Jaffna town.

"Combat units of the LTTE are consolidating their newly secured positions along the coastal belt of the Jaffna city preparing for the final assault on the heart of the capital," the LTTE's London office said in a statement.

Tamil civilians were seen carrying their belongings and fleeing to the north, officials from humanitarian operations in the island said.

"People are leaving Jaffna in large numbers," said one. The rebels accused the Sri

Lankan airforce of using Israeli-built Kfir jets and bombing a fishing village, leaving five civilians, including two children, dead on Friday.

The Sri Lankan government has said it bombed a vital jetty and destroyed rebel communication links.

Colombo also said its forces shot dead 12 Tiger guerrillas who had tried to break into the main civil administration office in Jaffna on Thursday night.

As fighting raged in Sri Lanka, human rights watchdog Amnesty International appealed to both sides to respect civilians.

"Previous escalations in this long conflict have brought widespread violations and abuses to the civilian population," Amnesty said in a statement issued here.

"Half a million civilians live in this contested area. Every effort must be made to respect their security."

Despite the flow of refugees, the aid agencies, including the International Red Cross, Medecins Sans Frontieres, Save the Children and Forut had about 25 expatriate staff in Jaffna and had no immediate plans to leave.

The United Nations had earlier pulled out its non-essential staff and those involved in a demining program.

"There is no need for us to pull out because our people have clearly given maps of their locations both to the government military and Tamil Tigers and expect them not to fire at our compounds," an official said.

An aide official said the civilian exodus had left only 30 patients at a 1,000-bed hospital in Jaffna.

The reports of the civilian movement came as the Sri Lankan government said security forces had readjusted their defence lines at Ariyalai near Jaffna after a five-hour battle.

The Sri Lankan military

said it was resisting rebel attacks near Jaffna town.

There was a lull in fighting on Friday afternoon, with the rebels a kilometre (less than a mile) from the main district secretariat.

In an earlier statement, Colombo admitted pulling back defences around Jaffna amid a ferocious Tiger offensive and President Chandrika Kumaratunga pledged more weapons for the military.

The government said troops "re-adjusted their defences temporarily" and pulled back to Colombuthurai from Ariyalai, within the municipal council limits of Jaffna.

Another nine soldiers were killed and 86 wounded in overnight fighting near Jaffna, raising to 42 the number of government casualties in the area in the past two days.

In the same period, Colombo said 167 Tiger guerrillas were killed. There was no immediate reaction from the rebels to the claims.

## Philippine rebels take 65 families hostage: Army

MANILA, May 13: Islamic rebels took 65 families hostage today in a raid on a village in the southern Philippines, an army spokesman said, reports Reuters.

The raid was carried out by guerrillas of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the bigger or two groups fighting for a separate Muslim homeland in the south of this largely Roman Catholic country, army spokesman Captain Noel Detoayo said.

The raid occurred in a village of Esperanza municipality in Sultan Kudarat province, about 390 km (240 miles) northeast of Jolo island, where another separatist group has been holding 21 mostly foreign hostages for three weeks.

"The MILF terrorists held hostage an estimated 65 families inside the (village) at around 5:30 this morning," Detoayo told DZRH radio. "We have sent troops to the area... at 2 p.m. there was gunfire."

He did not say who was involved in the shooting or if there had been clashes between soldiers and the rebels. "Our troops are holding back to avoid casualties," he said.



Miss Universe India's Lara Dutta, 21, (C), first runner-up Venezuela's Claudia Moreno, 22, (L) and second runner-up Spain's Helen Lindes, 18, (R) pose just after the coronation at the 49th Miss Universe Pageant in Nicosia, Cyprus, yesterday. — AFP photo

## India fetes Lara Dutta as she wears Miss Universe crown

BANGALORE, May 13: A proud India today feted Lara Dutta, 21, Miss Universe 2000, saying it was more than just looks that earned the woman from Bangalore with a master's degree the dazzling crown in Nicosia, reports AFP.

Jubilant selectors and Lara's groomer said a combination of "looks and brains" earned her the coveted title.

Prasad Bidappa of the Design and Print Group, who groomed Lara said he had no doubt she would take the crown from outgoing Mpule Kwelagobe of Botswana and become the first Miss Universe of the new millennium.

"Nobody doubted that Lara would not win. Her family supported her through thick and thin. The family also gave her the confidence to speak so well."

"Lara is too confident and too perfect. This is Lara's moment in time. She was a picture of total confidence and poise which is incredible," Bidappa told AFP.

"She has that energy and zing to dominate the world... We are proud. India is proud today."

"We thought she would win and she has won. She has got the combination of looks and brains," said Satya Saran, editor of the Times of India group's Femina magazine which has been organising Miss India contests since 1964.

"Lara is exactly what Miss Universe is looking for... The way she conducts herself and talks, she is in control of herself," Saran told AFP from Bombay.

"We knew Lara was in when we saw her in round one. She is an absolutely focussed person who has worked very hard for this," she said of Lara, daughter of a former Miss Madras, Jennifer Dutta, and an Indian airforce pilot, Wing Commander Lalit Dutta.

"We are very excited. It's tremendous. We were confident of her chances," said her father in Nicosia.

Sabrina Dutta, 32, the eldest sister of Lara said: "We are on cloud nine."

Lara's youngest sister, Cheryl, a military helicopter pilot, was unavailable for comment.

Bidappa, who put in hundreds of hours to train Lara said

Indian women held an edge over other contestants in global pageants.

"Indian women have the best of both the world, the white and the black. Indian women in the future will be the epicentre of beauty. In the next 20 years the wins will keep on happening. This habit of winning will be furthered by India in this new millennium."

Lara's mother, Jennifer Dutta, in comments published in newspapers Saturday said she encouraged her daughter, who holds a master's degree in communications, to enter the 49th Miss Universe contest five years ago.

"Lara has taken after me," said Jennifer, who was Miss Madras in 1961 and one of the finalists in a Miss India pageant in 1967.

Aruna Mookhey, mother of reigning Miss World Yookta Mookhey, also said it was a proud moment for India.

"It is like a repeat of 1994," she said in a reference to Sushmita Sen, who was crowned Miss Universe six years ago, the same year Aishwarya Rai bagged the Miss World crown.

## India closely watching situation in Sri Lanka

NEW DELHI, May 13: India's military is closely watching the situation in war-torn Sri Lanka, army chief General Ved Prakash Malik said today, reports AFP.

"We are monitoring the whole situation there, and all concerned people are being consulted," Malik said at a military academy in Dehradun town and added the army was also keeping an eye on possible Pakistani arms supplies to the island.

"India would like to see peace in the area," the Press Trust of India quoted General Malik as saying at an annual parade.

The comments of the chief of the Indian army, the world's fourth largest, came as Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Tuesday said it was poised for a final assault on the northern Jaffna peninsula of Sri Lanka.

Indian air force chief Amal Jaswant Tiplis returned Friday after a five-day visit to Sri Lanka and briefed Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh on the situation in the island nation.

## Myanmar students urge reopening of universities

BANGKOK, May 13: Exiled Myanmar students urged the ruling military today to allow equal access to education by reopening universities stifled for more than three years for fear of unrest, a statement said, reports AFP.

The All Burma Federation of Student Unions, following a meeting on the Thai-Myanmar border, said in a statement that the educational situation was becoming desperate and pledged to continue fighting military rule.

The group called for the "abolishment of the military dictatorship in Burma" and urged "international governments and organisations to stop any supporting or encouragement of (the) Burmese regime."

It demanded "the reopening of all universities equally and at the same time" as well as the release of imprisoned student leaders.

Exiled students complain that although some universities have been partially reopened, classes have been moved outside metropolitan areas and those with military connections are given priority.

## Musharraf faces challenge from judiciary

ISLAMABAD, May 13: Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf faces an unexpected challenge from his own judiciary to rebuild Pakistan in three years — a time frame he has staunchly avoided since he came to power in an October 12 coup, reports Reuters.

The 12-judge Supreme Court on Friday unanimously endorsed the coup as a necessary expedient to spare Pakistan from chaos and bankruptcy, but unexpectedly gave him three years from the coup to complete his vision and return the country to civilian rule.

The judgement pits the 55-year-old chief executive against the very judiciary whose independence he has sought to champion as proof of his commitment to restore democracy in Pakistan when his "last-chance" government has completed its clean-up operation.

There was no immediate comment from Musharraf, who has rejected calls by the United States and the West to put any time limit at all on what he has called a reluctant takeover to spare Pakistan from ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif's ruinous rule.



General Pervez Musharraf

But army spokesman Major-General Rashid Qureshi said in remarks published in the local media that the ruling had set Pakistan on the right path, endorsed the coup and its plan to root out corruption and get Pakistan functioning again.

"We do not claim to make things 100 per cent better, but we will give our best to root out corruption, loot and plunder and restore the economy," he told the English-language The News.

The media, whose independence Musharraf has also undermined as proof that his takeover does not constitute wholesale martial law, said the

ruling was a wake-up call for a government which has failed so far to deliver on its many promises.

"The Musharraf government now has to get down to business and start delivering on its declared objectives of accountability and economic revival, neither of which has seen any signal success so far," the National newspaper said in an editorial.

"It is possible to argue about whether the Supreme Court has given the Musharraf government too little time or too much, and it is our belief that it is too much, but now the government is faced with the very time frame it has tried its best to avoid."

Reaction from key political parties was predictably mixed — disappointment that the court endorsed the takeover and guarded relief that a Pakistani institution has succeeded in setting a time limit where they and foreign governments had failed.

"The onus is now on General Pervez Musharraf to restore real democracy as early as possible," said Ijazul Haq, senior vice president of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League.

## Sierra Leone forces repel rebel attacks

FREETOWN, May 13: Pro-government forces in Sierra Leone repelled two rebel attacks on Port Loko, 40 km northeast of Freetown, late Friday and are advancing east, Saturday's official briefing broadcast on national radio said, reports AFP.

Armed rebels attacked Port Loko twice last night at 5 p.m. and at 10 p.m. The attacks were repelled by loyal government troops," according to the daily "Security update."

"The area is still firmly under government control," the communique said.

The update gave no casualty figures and said that government forces had advanced beyond Waterloo as far as Mile 38, 50 km as the crow flies from Freetown.

"Government forces have advanced from the Waterloo area as far as Mile 38, Mile 38 is now firmly under government control," said the statement.

No indication was given as to whether this advance involved fighting.

It was along this road to the east that the Revolutionary United Front rebel had advanced towards Freetown at the beginning of the week, before being checked at Waterloo.

Britain's Guardian newspaper reported today British forces in Sierra Leone have assumed command of the UN military operation and pro-government troops there for an offensive against the rebels' heartland.

Citing "informed sources," it said that, having secured the Sierra Leonean capital Freetown against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), plans were now being made for an assault.

Meanwhile a public relations "campaign" is to be launched to show a unified front of Sierra Leonean, UN and British forces which the rebels would not be able to resist.

And rebel commanders would be urged to break with RUF leader Foday Sankoh in an attempt to exploit what British forces believe are growing divisions in rebel ranks. The Guardian said.

Kamajor militia, are being blended into a single fighting force, the report said.

The plan then is for the Sierra Leonean forces to go on the attack, while UN troops secure strategic points and captured territory.

British forces would provide strategy and logistics, although they will — at least officially — steer clear of combat, the paper said.

The initial targets of the offensive are the RUF headquarters in the city of Makeni and the diamond-rich regions of Kono and Koidu, which provide vital funds for weapons.

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## BRIEFLY

**Storms kill 8 in N-India:** Eight people were killed when a powerful storm hit the northern Indian city of Ambala, police said yesterday, AFP reports from New Delhi.

They said two women and a child were among those killed late Friday night when the storm hit Ambala, some 220 kilometres (136 miles) north of New Delhi. The victims took shelter inside a factory which collapsed during the storm, officials added.

**Cuban dissident freed:** Cuba on Friday unexpectedly freed from jail one of the communist-run island's best-known jailed dissidents, academic Felix Bonne, opposition and family sources said, Reuters reports from Havana.

The relatives and fellow activists told the agency that Bonne, a member of the so-called Group of Four dissidents whose imprisonment since 1997 has brought appeals from around the world, had been taken home after lunch time and formally granted "conditional liberty." "It's confirmed. He has conditional liberty. This is very good news," one of Cuba's leading dissident human rights activists, Elizardo Sanchez told the agency. "I just hope now that they free the other three."

**Opium seized in Pakistan:** The Anti-narcotics Force seized a large quantity of Charas and Opium by surrounding the mountains near Gwadar and Pasni, AP reports from Turbat, Pakistan.

According to the details, ANF received an information that drug traffickers have dumped a large quantity of drugs in the mountains of Gwadar and Pasni some 25 kilometers from Turbat. ANF constituted a special team which surrounded the mountains and seized 100 kg Charas and 100 kg Opium worth millions of rupees in the international market. Chagai militia seized sixteen kilograms of heroin in Karwan area of Dalbandin in Balochistan Province Friday.

**US detains 27 immigrants:** The US Border Patrol said Friday that it had detained 27 Chinese would-be illegal immigrants, all of them men, who were set down on Highland Beach by smugglers who had brought them from China, AFP reports from Miami.

The 27 men said they were all from China's Fujian province, opposite Taiwan. Border Patrol spokesman Joe Mellia said. He said investigations are being carried out into the group which smuggled them via Hong Kong, which they left 45 days ago, and Freeport, the northernmost tip of the Bahamas, which they left Thursday night.



Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad winds up his party's annual meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. The veteran prime minister said he has been in power long enough but refused to set a date for his retirement. — AFP photo

## Minor planet rediscovered

WASHINGTON, May 13: Astronomers said Friday they had rediscovered a "lost" minor planet, named 719 Albert, which was last seen in 1911, reports Reuters.

The minor planet, actually an asteroid, orbits the sun at a distance of 300 million miles, making a complete orbit every 4.28 years, the team at the Minor Planet Centre at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said.

It swings closest to the earth every 30 years — in 1911, 1941, 1971 and 2001.

Asteroid 719 Albert has long eluded astronomers. It was last seen by Johann Palisa of the Imperial Observatory in Vienna, in what was then the Austro-Hungarian empire.

On May 1, Jeff Larsen of the University of Arizona's SpaceWatch team detected asteroid 200 JWS.

"This object was very faint, almost at the limits of what SpaceWatch can do, and it wasn't moving all that fast," Larsen said in a statement. "But it caught my eye because it was moving differently from its neighbours. It moved like a near-earth object."

It is such an object. "It's never going to hit earth," SpaceWatch director Robert McMillan said. The closest it gets is about 19 million miles.

Gareth Williams, associate director of the Minor Planet Centre, did the orbital calculations that showed 2000 JWS was the long-lost 719 Albert.

Because it is so faint, the astronomers can only guess at how big the asteroid is. They reckon it is between 1.24 miles and 2.5 miles in diameter.

## Police detain 50 Falun Gong members

BEIJING, May 13: Chinese police detained at least 50 Falun Gong members in Tiananmen Square today as the banned group staged a series of protests to mark world Falun Dafa (Great Wheel of Law) day, reports AFP.

Several groups of practitioners tried to raise red and yellow banners in the middle of vast square in central Beijing, but they were quickly surrounded by dozens of plainclothes police who hauled them into a waiting police van.

Uniform and undercover officers could be seen patrolling the square asking people mixing with the crowds of tourists if they were members of the Falun Gong, and then leading people away to police vans parked around the central esplanade.

Falun Gong practitioners, who have flocked to the square in their thousands to protest since it was outlawed in July, tend to admit they are group members when asked.

One middle-aged woman put her hands above her head in the lotus position, a traditional Falun Gong protest, before she was quickly tackled and taken away.

## 21 Palestinians injured in clashes with Israeli troops

TULKARM, West Bank, May 13: At least 21 Palestinian youths were wounded, two of them by live rounds, in clashes with Israeli troops today following a demonstration demanding the release of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, a medical sources said, reports AFP.

The remainder were injured by rubber bullets, a source at the Palestinian Red Crescent organisation said. It brought the casualty toll in two days of similar clashes to at least 40.

The troops who also used tear gas fired on a group of students who threw stones at them at Tulkarm, west of Nabius, after the demonstration, one of a series in support of Palestinian prisoners.



Rioters throw rocks at policemen in Jakarta yesterday following police raid on shops selling pirated video compact discs. Rioting broke out in Jakarta's predominantly ethnic-Chinese business district of Glodok, with rioters hurling molotov cocktails and at least three policemen were injured during the clash. — AFP photo

## 8 missiles explode in Baghdad: Girl killed

BAGHDAD, May 13: Eight missiles exploded in the Iraqi capital early today killing a girl and wounding four other civilians, the official Iraqi News Agency reported, says AP.

The attack is the second bombardment of Baghdad this month and the third this year.

No group has claimed responsibility, but the agency quoted an unidentified Interior Ministry official who accused Iran. "Agents of the Iranian government have committed another vicious crime to be added to their criminal record," the official said.

The Iraqi government blamed the attacks of May 1 and March 22 on Iranian agents.

There was no immediate response from the Iranian government.

"Eight 122 mm missiles were fired from a rocket launcher from a distance to hit a residential area in Al-Karkh," the ministry official told the agency.

Al-Karkh is a district of Baghdad on the western bank of the Tigris River.

"Equipment used for the attack was found later," the official added. He did not say how far from Baghdad the missiles were launched.

The agency identified the dead girl as Zahra Mohammed Hammed.

holding a photograph of Hammed and the interior of one of the wrecked homes.

The Iraqi agency did not say how many buildings were hit in the attack, which occurred shortly after midnight.

On May 1, rockets exploded in the Baladiyat district of Baghdad, wounding eight people, at about the same time as a mortar attack on police headquarters in Tehran, Iran.

The Iran-based rebel group, Mujahideen Khalq, claimed responsibility for the Tehran attack that wounded six people.

On March 22, a mortar attack on Baladiyat killed four people and injured 38.

## 42 killed in Bosnia bus plunge

KAKANJ, Bosnia-Herzegovina, May 13: Forty-two people died and 12 were badly injured when a bus fell into a river early today in central Bosnia, police said.

Shortly before 6 a.m. (1000 BST), the bus carrying 54 passengers slipped off a bridge into the river Bosna near the town of Kakanj, 45 km northwest of Sarajevo, Kakanj police spokesman Saban Koblicica told AFP.

The bus fell from the bridge that stands some 30 metres above the river, according to an AFP reporter on the spot.

## Police clash with mob in Jakarta

JAKARTA, May 13: Police fired tear gas and warning shots at an angry mob of people in Chinatown on Saturday in a clash that began when officials tried to remove street vendors from the area's crowded sidewalks, authorities said, reports AP.

As the mob fled the police assault, it threw rocks that broke the windows of a McDonald's restaurant and a BMW dealership, and set fire to at least one police motorcycle, authorities said.

Dozens of people were arrested and taken away in police vans, said police officer Pramono, who like many Indonesians uses only one name.

Several policemen were seen being treated for minor injuries, and many of the shops in Chinatown closed to avoid the violence. Hundreds of police lined the streets after the mob fled.

By midday, the area's streets and sidewalks reopened to traffic and pedestrians, but police remained on the scene.

The attack occurred two years after a student-led, pro-democracy movement's mass protests and riots forced President Suharto to resign. Some of the violence targeted Indonesia's wealthy but small Chinese minority, especially in Chinatown, where a shopping mall was burned down.

But police said the dispute on Saturday morning did not seem to involve a clash between Indonesia's majority Muslims and minority Chinese.