

Lankan troops mount fresh offensive amid truce offer

Fresh fighting kills 52 as Britain hails Tigers' unilateral move

COLOMBO, Dec 22: Heavy fighting killed at least 52 combatants in Sri Lanka today, shortly after Tamil Tiger rebels offered a Christmas truce aimed at reviving a Norwegian-backed peace effort, officials said, reports AFP.

Hundreds of troops launched the latest drive at dawn today and captured an eight-square km area from the Tiger rebels in the Jaffna Peninsula for the loss of 22 soldiers, defence ministry spokesman Sanath Karunaratne said.

He said another 47 soldiers were wounded in heavy fighting while the military placed casualties among the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at more than 30 killed.

"We are now in total control over the entire Kaithady area of the Jaffna peninsula," Karunaratne said. "We have also taken the Kaithady bridge that links the area to the rest of the peninsula."

The offensive came just hours after the LTTE said it would observe a one-month unilateral ceasefire from Sunday to try to salvage a faltering peace process "facilitated" by Norway.

Norwegian peace envoy, Erik Solheim, told the BBC that there had been positive developments on both sides, but there was "still a gap to be bridged."

Britain reacted swiftly to the LTTE ceasefire offer and said it hoped the truce will be "genuine. Britain also expected both sides to honour the ceasefire in the interest of peace for the 19 million Sri Lankans."

"Let us hope that this will be the first step in the process towards creating the right environment for peace negotiations without preconditions," Britain's junior foreign Minister Peter Hain said in a statement sent here.

While welcoming the rebel offer, Hain asked the Sri Lankan government to reciprocate and pave the way for negotiations which are yet to commence despite Norway taking over the role of a facilitator more than a year ago.

Agriculture Minister D.M. Jayaratne was quoted as saying in the Island newspaper that the government welcomed the truce, but its reaction would be decided after consulting "as many opinions as possible, including the army."

Britain has said it was considering a Sri Lankan request to outlaw the LTTE in line with new anti-terrorism laws early next year. The LTTE maintains its international secretariat in London.

Earlier this week, Sri Lanka's donor community at a meeting in Paris refrained from announcing how much aid would go to the island, urging the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga instead to open peace talks.

Meanwhile, Britain today welcomed a unilateral Christmas ceasefire offered by Tamil Tiger rebels and asked the Sri Lankan government to reciprocate and pave the way for peace negotiations.

Britain's junior foreign minister Peter Hain said in a statement sent here that he welcomed Thursday's announcement by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas that they would observe a month-long truce.

Israeli, Palestinian media highlights progress in US

People won't accept peace accord now: Netanyahu

JERUSALEM, Dec 22: The Israeli and Palestinian media highlighted today what they said was substantial progress in a new round of peace talks in Washington, but a Palestinian official said the negotiations had not made progress on any issue, reports AFP.

Israeli newspapers reported that the Jewish state has agreed to negotiate on the basis of the June 1967 borders, a consistent Palestinian demand.

In the June 1967 Middle East War -- also known as the Six Day War -- Israel captured the Gaza Strip and the West Bank among other territories, including the eastern sector of Jerusalem.

"Israel accepted the principle that the border between Israel and the future Palestinian state should be based on the line of June 4, 1967, with some adjustments and land exchanges," the Hebrew-language daily Haaretz newspaper reported.

Israel's top-selling Yedioth Aharonot newspaper reported that Israel has "so far agreed to withdraw from all of the West

Bank except for five percent of its settlement blocs, which would be swapped with the Palestinians for territory behind the 1967 line."

The newspaper also said Israel has agreed to Palestinian control over "all of Arab East Jerusalem."

Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo was quoted in the Palestinian press as saying that, at one point during the day, Israeli and Palestinian delegations in Washington had "come closer to an agreement on Jerusalem."

But Abed Rabbo, quoted in a section of daily Al-Ayyam dedicated to late-breaking news, said the talks had entered a "hard crisis and there has not been progress on any issue."

The Israeli media also reported that deep differences remained over the right of some 3.7 million Palestinian refugees to return to lands now inside Israel where their families lived before Israel's 1948 war of independence.

The Palestinians insist that all refugees should have the right to return, while Israel hopes the Palestinians will offer concessions in exchange for flexibility over Jerusalem.

East Jerusalem houses the walled Old City, home to shrines sacred to Christians, Muslims and Jews, including the hilltop Jews call the Temple Mount and known to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif, or Noble Sanctuary.

Israeli Communications Minister Benjamin Ben Eliezer, while saying serious negotiations were being conducted in Washington, said no accord has been reached and that nothing has been presented to the Israeli cabinet.

Meanwhile, former right-wing Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Friday that the Israeli people "will not accept" a peace deal with the Palestinians if concessions are made in the current Washington talks.

"On paper, any agreement can be concluded but as soon as elections are held in Israel, not only those for premier but also general elections, the Israeli people will not accept an accord concluded in such a way," he said cited by ITAR-TASS.

Sydney Airport closed by fire on eve of holidays

SYDNEY, Dec 22: The holiday travel plans of thousands of Australians and tourists were disrupted today after a fire in the control tower closed Sydney Airport on one of its busiest days, officials said, reports AFP.

A fire brigade spokesman said the fire, caused by an electrical fault, was comparatively minor and quickly extinguished without causing significant damage.

But staff had to be evacuated and bussed to the old control tower nearby while fire crews ventilated the area.

A number of flights to and from Sydney had to be suspended at the start of the Christmas holiday fortnight as the airport built up to the busiest period in its 80-year history.

A spokesman for Air Services Australia, which manages the control tower, said flights to and from Sydney were delayed as the airport was temporarily closed.



This picture dated February 1998 shows government troops firing mortars near the town of Mankulam in northern Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Defence Ministry said yesterday that government troops launched a fresh offensive against Tamil Tiger rebels just as the guerrillas offered a unilateral ceasefire aimed at kick starting peace talks. AFP photo

'Any attempt to build temple on ruins of Babri Mosque will tear apart India's secular fabric'

Top Muslim cleric calls for HR probe in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Dec 22: India's top Muslim cleric today warned that any attempt to build a temple on the ruins of Babri Mosque razed by Hindu zealots in 1992 would tear apart the country's secular fabric, reports AFP.

"The day on which the attempt is made to construct the temple on the site of the Babri Mosque would prove to be the last nail in the coffin of communal harmony and the unity of India," Maulana Syed Ahmed Bukhari said.

The demolition of the 16th century Babri Mosque by thousands of Hindu fanatics in the northern town of Ayodhya eight years ago sparked nationwide Hindu-Muslim riots in which 2,000 people were killed.

The controversy over plans to build a Hindu temple on the Babri Mosque ruins was revived earlier this month when Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said the campaign was an expression of "national sentiment and an unfinished task."

mosque is the exposure of national sentiments, we consider such sentiments as a national curse," Bukhari said.

Vajpayee had to face a censure motion in parliament last week over his remarks, but his ruling BJP party managed to secure the support of its more secular coalition allies to easily win the day in the lower house.

However, the controversy over the issue has not died down as religious leaders have flayed the prime minister for disregarding the sentiments of minority communities.

Bukhari said secular parties were partially responsible for the rise of the communal forces in the country. "These parties have to prove their sincerity in protecting secularism by parting with communal forces and getting united," he said.

Meanwhile, India's top Muslim cleric today welcomed a ceasefire extension by the army in Kashmir, but called for an independent

ent inquiry into human rights violations in the region.

"If the government is honest about solving the Kashmir issue, it is necessary to hold an independent inquiry and to release Kashmiri youths now in jails," Maulana Syed Ahmed Bukhari said during Friday prayers at the Jama Masjid -- Delhi's largest mosque.

International human rights groups have accused the Indian security forces of persistent human rights abuses in Kashmir, including arbitrary arrests and custodial killings.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Wednesday extended India's one-month unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir by a further four weeks.

Pakistan reciprocated by announcing a partial troop withdrawal along the disputed Kashmir border.

Bukhari said the two governments had acted "positively" but added that further steps were needed.

Chinese plane heads for Iraq

BEIJING, Dec 22: A Chinese government delegation left here for Baghdad on an Air China plane today carrying a load of humanitarian aid, the state-run Xinhua news agency said, reports AFP.

The official delegation is led by Ismail Amat, who holds the rank of state councillor, and includes officials from the foreign ministry, health ministry and ministry of foreign trade and economic cooperation, it added.

The delegation is to spend three days in Baghdad at the invitation of the Iraqi government.

The flight follows a visit to China last month by Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, who received reassurances from President Jiang Zemin of China's opposition to UN sanctions on Iraq.

Dozens of flights have landed in Baghdad since its airport reopened in August despite an air embargo which forms part of UN sanctions imposed on Iraq for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Thousands at risk of starvation in Sudan

KHARTOUM, Dec 22: Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese will starve due to a severe drought in many parts of war-torn Sudan if sufficient food aid fails to reach them, the United Nations is warning.

The earth is so dry it is cracking up, livestock are getting thin and people are searching for water in areas where famine killed hundreds of thousands in the eighties and nineties, UN officials told AFP.

"The drought is here right now. It's a fact. Now we're just waiting to see the effects," said Maxwell Gaylard, chief of the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) in Khartoum.

Starvation will set in by April when local food supplies run out unless aid reaches them, Gaylard said, adding that the amounts pledged so far by donor countries would not be enough to feed everyone.

The Sudanese government acknowledged this week for the first time that the country was suffering from a drought and food shortages and urged the international community to assist in averting famine.

One reservoir that serves around 100 villages south of al-Fasher in western Sudan has run dry for the first time since 1972, Gumaa Sayeed Gumaa, of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), told AFP after a visit there.

Madonna's wedding

DORNOCH, Scotland, Dec 22: Reversing a formula which made her an international star, Madonna commanded maximum attention with the most minimal exposure on her wedding day, reports AFP.

It was only Friday morning that a waiting word got a first hint of the dress Madonna would wear when she marries British film director Guy Ritchie in a strictly private ceremony.

London jeweller Susy Lauder disclosed that the singer had chosen an antique French bracelet studded with 19 carats of diamonds because it was "in keeping with the gothic style wedding dress Madonna is going to wear."

It wasn't clear whether the bracelet was something old or merely something borrowed from Molra, the Bond Street Jewellers.

Lauder, who family runs the business, did disclose that the 49,000 pounds (72,000 dollar) bracelet was actually selected by Stella McCartney, daughter of ex-Beatle Sir Paul McCartney and reportedly the designer of Madonna's wedding dress, who accompanied Madonna on the shopping trip.

The Alfred Dunhill company announced that Ritchie would wear a lovet green jacket of Shetland tweed with matching tie and socks, and a plain white cotton shirt with a 1930s-style straight collar.

Presumably the ensemble will include a Mackintosh tartan kilt, the garment which has fascinated the tabloids and caused fevered speculation about whether he would follow the Scots tradition of spurning underpants.

The wedding came a day after Madonna, 42, and Ritchie, 32, brought their 4-month-old son Rocco to Dornoch Cathedral to be baptized, to the delight of several hundred local people who joined the media crush outside.

Private security men made sure that no one got close to the happy couple, or to celebrity guests including Gwyneth Paltrow, Sting and Rupert Everett.

But something went awry with the security inside the church. Police said an unemployed 51-year-old man from southern England was discovered in the building after the ceremony, and he was arrested. Police said the man did not disturb the christening and was not considered to be a stalker.

A 33-year-old man was arrested early Friday morning, but police again gave no details of the charges. Neither suspect was working for the media, police said.

Friday's wedding was expected to be held inside Skibo Castle, steel baron Andrew Carnegie's imposing vacation home.



Pop star Madonna and partner Guy Ritchie leave Dornoch Cathedral after having their baby Rocco christened on Thursday, just one day ahead of their marriage in nearby Skibo Cathedral. She was wearing a cream full length coat while her husband-to-be British film director Guy Ritchie, 32, was carrying the four-month-old child, who was wrapped in a white christening gown. --AFP photo

Opposition figures arrested in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 22: Malaysian police today arrested two senior opposition officials over an incident during a by-election last month which the ruling coalition lost, an opposition party leader said, reports AFP.

Police said Tian Chua, vice president of the National Justice Party (Keadilan), was detained at 2.40am under a law dealing with rioting.

Keadilan information chief Ruslan Kassim was also detained under the same section, according to the party's deputy president Chandra Muzaffar. There was no immediate confirmation from police of Ruslan's arrest.

Kuala Lumpur police chief Kamaruddin Mohamed Ali, quoted by the Bernama news agency, said police had the power to detain Tian Chua for 24 hours during which they would decide on further action.

The arrests apparently relate to an incident on the morning of polling day on November 29 in the Lunas constituency, when opposition officials blocked bus-loads of government supporters from entering the town.

Keadilan claimed they were "phantom" voters bussed in from out of state to vote fraudulently.

Pak religious, political parties reject Gen Musharraf's speech

ISLAMABAD, Dec 22: Leaders of religio-political parties yesterday expressed disappointment over the speech of Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf justifying the exiling of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and rejected his views against political parties, another former Premier Benazir Bhutto and Sharif, reports PTI.

Reacting sharply over the language used by the chief executive against political parties, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) information secretary Taj Haider said after Musharraf's speech anarchy-like situation would prevail in the country.

It was a confused, disappointing and panic speech meant to cover up government's failure and secret deal to release Nawaz Sharif, said the PPP leader. Blaming Benazir Bhutto is in fact an attempt to destroy the historical facts, he said.

Benazir summons top PPP leaders to Dubai to discuss her possible return from exile

KARACHI, Dec 22: Former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto has summoned her party's top leaders to Dubai to discuss her possible return from exile, sources and reports said today, says AFP.

"We are going to discuss party matters including her possible return," said Nisar Khuro, Sindh provincial president of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

Khuro later left for Dubai with three other senior leaders from southern Karachi while others were due to leave for the Gulf state from central Punjab province.

"I will return very soon," the Urdu-language Jang daily quoted Bhutto, who has lived in exile in London since just before her conviction for corruption in 1998, as saying Friday.

PPP circles believe the time is ripe for Benazir to return to the political fray here after last week's dramatic exile of her arch foe, ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif, to Saudi Arabia.

Sharif's exile and pardon

from lengthy prison terms for hijacking and tax evasion have been heavily criticised but military ruler General Pervez Musharraf said the move was in the nation's best interests.

"In my view their coming to power will be against the interest of the nation," the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan quoted Musharraf as saying on Thursday.

Military chiefs are reportedly united in the view that both politicians should be kept out of national politics for their alleged involvement in large-scale corruption.

Analysts believe the regime is on edge after the PPP and Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) last month joined hands in a new multi-party opposition front, the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD).

PPP sources said Sharif's sudden exit under an arrangement brokered by Saudi royalty had dealt a blow to the ARD.

Bhutto has rejected a government offer to consider the release of her jailed husband, Asif Ali

Zardari, if he follows Sharif's example by surrendering his assets and appealing for a pardon.

"We are ready for arbitration to determine whether Asif has done any wrong or the government is keeping him in jail unlawfully," Bhutto said.

She said some government people had contacted Asif, a former senator, but he told them to talk to his lawyers.

Zardari has been in jail since 1996, after two-time prime minister Bhutto's second government was dismissed for alleged corruption.

He is charged with the murder of Bhutto's estranged brother Murtaza, who was killed in a police shootout in Karachi the same year.

Bhutto and Zardari were sentenced to five years jail during Sharif's government in 1998, in a case of kickbacks on government contracts.

Their appeals are pending at the Supreme Court.

Dialogue with India inevitable: Musharraf

ISLAMABAD, Dec 22: India will inevitably negotiate with Pakistan to resolve the festering 53-year-old dispute over Kashmir, Pakistani ruler General Pervez Musharraf has said, reports AFP.

The general said it was only a matter of time before India accepted his long-standing offers of dialogue "anywhere, anytime."

But he told newspaper editors at a dinner late Thursday that New Delhi's latest ceasefire initiatives were insincere half-measures which skirted the real issue of dialogue.

"Ultimately India will talk to Pakistan," he said, according to the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan.

"India is not sincere as it is not talking of the settlement of the Kashmir (issue), rather it wants to end tension."

He reiterated Pakistan's invitation to the All Party Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference (APHC), the main separatist umbrella group based on the Indian side of

Kashmir, to visit Pakistan for talks on how to organise a dialogue involving India, Pakistan and the Kashmiri leadership.

APHC leaders on Thursday said they were planning to visit Pakistan in mid-January for talks with Muslim militant groups and officials in Islamabad, implying approval by New Delhi.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir, which is divided between them and claimed by both in its entirety, since independence in 1947.

They have not formally spoken since early 1999, when tentative talks were scuppered by a bitter border conflict in the Kargil area of the mainly Muslim Himalayan state.

Musharraf said Pakistan's partial withdrawal of troops from along the disputed Kashmiri border this week did not represent a relaxation of security.

He said anyone trying to cross the border would still meet opposition from Pakistani troops.

Japan lifts sanctions against Y'slavia

TOKYO, Dec 22: Japan today announced it was lifting economic sanctions against Yugoslavia to support the post-Milosevic government of President Vojislav Kostunica, reports AFP.

"We decided to lift the sanctions against Yugoslavia that had been imposed since June 1998," Foreign Minister Yohei Kono told a news conference.

Yugoslavia has had a new government since October under President Kostunica. His government is steadily moving back towards the international community," Kono said.

"The decision to lift the sanctions aims to support Kostunica's democratisation efforts."

Japan froze financial support and banned Japanese investment in Yugoslavia in response to ousted president Slobodan Milosevic's bloody offensive against Kosovo Albanian separatists.

Japan's decision to lift the restrictions was in step with similar moves by the United States and the European Union, Kono said.

UN staff plan to return to Afghanistan today

ISLAMABAD, Dec 22: Foreign staff with United Nations relief operations plan to return to war-torn Afghanistan on Sunday after pulling out ahead of fresh sanctions announced this week, officials said, reports AFP.

Some 60 foreign staff withdrew in the days leading up to Tuesday's announcement by the UN Security Council, fearing violent reprisals.

But a senior UN official told AFP Friday the situation was calm and the first international staff were planning to return on Sunday.

"If the situation holds up and everything is calm that's the plan, starting Sunday in time for Christmas," the official said.

"I don't know how many will be going back, it depends on the flights, but the important thing is to re-engage."

Relief workers, including those with foreign non-governmental organisations, have complained the sanctions could have dire humanitarian consequences if their vital aid operations are interrupted.

With most state infrastructure destroyed by ongoing war or negligence and the worst drought in at least 30 years, hundreds of thousands of Afghans depend on foreign aid to survive.

An estimated 300,000 people are living through the bitter winter in makeshift shelters after fleeing their homes due to the civil war or drought in recent months.

The sanctions, designed to force the ruling Taliban Islamic militia to stop its support for alleged terrorism, have been tailored to avoid any humanitarian impact.

But UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Tuesday said the Security Council resolution "is not going to facilitate peace efforts, nor is it going to facilitate humanitarian work."

Taliban supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar called on Afghans to unite in the face of "enemies of our faith" but to "refrain from holding demonstrations."

UN property was ransacked by angry mobs after the first round of sanctions were imposed on the Taliban in November 1999.

The latest UN resolution gives the Taliban 30 days to comply before the sanctions take effect, and UN officials said security could again become a concern as the deadline approached.

Painstaking peace efforts by the UN Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNISMA) have also been thrown into doubt by the sanctions, with the Taliban withdrawing from UN-backed peace talks with the armed opposition.

The militia also vowed to close UNSMA's offices in Afghanistan in retaliation for the new sanctions, one of which calls for the Taliban's overseas offices to be

Passport of Suharto's son cancelled

JAKARTA, Dec 22: Indonesian authorities have cancelled the passport of the fugitive son of former President Suharto to stop him fleeing the country, officials said Friday, reports AFP.

A spokesman for state prosecutor's office, Moelyohardjo, said Attorney General Marzuki Darusman had ordered the immigration office to cancel the passport of Hutomo Mandala Putra, also known as "Tommy" Suharto, who has been on the run for almost two months evading an 18-month prison sentence for corruption.

Police claim they have launched an intensive manhunt but have failed to find any trace of Tommy. However, they maintain that one-time multimillionaire playboy is still in Indonesia.

The cancellation of Tommy's passport is a further dent in the battered image of the family of Suharto, who ruled Indonesia for three decades until his ouster in 1998.

Suharto's grand daughter-in-law, Maya, was convicted in October of possessing narcotics and is serving an eight-month prison term.

Also, Suharto's youngest daughter, Marnick, was sentenced last week to a 10-day suspended prison term for failing to report the loss of a pistol.

Suharto who, like many Indonesians, uses one name is himself accused of stealing millions of dollars in government money to bankroll businesses controlled by his allies and children.

Earlier this year a court abandoned his trial for corruption after doctors said he was too sick to face prosecution. An appeals court has ordered the trial resumed in the new year.

Toddler in court for power theft in West Bengal

BAJURGHAT, West Bengal, Dec 22: Sub divisional judicial magistrate, Bajurghat, Sabya Sachi Sengupta has reprimanded a police officer for producing a three and half year old boy in his court on the charge of illegal power tapping, reports PTI.

The toddler, who was brought by his father, was produced in the SDJM's court in South Dinajpur district on December 8.