

## International

# 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 Kaitthady area of the Jaffna peninsula," Karunaratne said. "We have also taken the Kaitthady 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 precon-

ditions," 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 along with 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 *Yediot Ahronot* 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 Arafat 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 Arafat 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 Israeli 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.

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.

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