

Lankan jets bomb LTTE bases: 7 killed

REUTERS, Colombo

The Sri Lankan air force bombarded Tamil Tiger rebel positions in the country's northern Jaffna peninsula yesterday, killing seven guerrillas, military officials said.

Israeli-built Kfir jets pounded Jaffna's Nagar Kovil area for the second time this week despite an unprecedented rebel warning that their latest unilateral month-long truce would be called off if military attacks did not stop.

"We took out one target. We have the names of the seven dead from enemy radio transmissions," military spokesman Brigadier Sanath Karunaratne told Reuters. Nagar Kovil was also bombed on Wednesday, a day before the rebels said they beat back a major ground offensive in the area.

The military said no offensive had been launched and accused the rebels of looking for an excuse to call off their truce.

Yugoslav army obstructs Milosevic arrest: Minister

AFP, Belgrade

The Yugoslav army obstructed an attempt to arrest former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic early yesterday, effectively obeying Milosevic's allies, Serbian Interior Minister Dusan Mihajlovic said.

The statement came after a night of confusion during which armed police at one point stormed into Milosevic's residence, amid pressure for the government to meet a Saturday deadline set by the United States for action on alleged war crimes.

The minister also said Milosevic had informed a police official that he would not be taken alive.

Mihajlovic said the soldiers "did not want to allow" police officials into the former leader's residence, and instead handed over the keys of the house to Milosevic loyalists, who were armed with automatic weapons.

"The army effectively listened to unauthorised personnel in the service of Milosevic," Mihajlovic said.

He explained that an agreement to exchange army units guarding Milosevic with police officers "was not carried out due to obstruction by the Yugoslav army."

"The army did not let us exchange people in charge of security, but it allowed Milosevic to maintain his personal guards," Mihajlovic said.

Elite Yugoslav army units have so far been in charge of guarding the presidential residence, where Milosevic has continued to live despite his ouster as president last October.

"After several attempts to enter the residence by authorised police officials and the investigating judge, special units of the Serbian police were engaged," Mihajlovic said.

He insisted that the special police forces had come under fire coming from Milosevic's house and two policemen were lightly injured.

"Faced with fire coming from the house, the police halted the operation and Milosevic informed a police official that he would not go to jail alive," Mihajlovic said.

He explained that all but one of Milosevic's guards had been taken out from the residence, in which "numerous automatic weapons, two machine guns, two rocket launchers and many hand grenades" were spotted.

Instead, the army officer in charge had given the keys of the residence to Milosevic's loyalists, "armed with automatic weapons," Mihajlovic said.

Earlier Saturday, the Belgrade daily Politika reported that Yugoslav army Chief of Staff General Nebojsa Pavkovic had prevented Milosevic's arrest.

"The order for Milosevic's arrest was issued by the authorised body, but (the arrest) was prevented at the last moment" by Pavkovic, the daily said, quoting a Serbian justice ministry source.

The Politika report said that the army chief of staff could not have taken a decision to prevent Milosevic's arrest on his own initiative.

"He would have no right to take it. Someone else, more powerful than him, must have issued such an order," the daily said.

Pavkovic's ultimate superior is President Vojislav Kostunica, who is supreme commander of the Yugoslav army.



Members of media (R) take cover as armed and masked special police emerge from their vehicles to storm the Belgrade residence of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic (Inset), early yesterday. Dozens of riot police held a rowdy crowd of Milosevic loyalists at bay while special police burst into the grounds of his house, with shots apparently coming from both the security forces and Milosevic loyalists who had gathered to prevent Milosevic's arrest.

US debt to UN piles up as Congress delays payment

REUTERS, United Nations

Washington's debt to the United Nations, now \$1.7 billion, is mounting as Congress delays payments following a historic deal to lower US dues to the world body, a senior UN official said on Friday.

At a meeting of a key UN financial committee, several nations criticized the United States for the delay in promised funds, prompting Washington to issue a statement explaining the American legislative process.

Without the US contribution, the United Nations cannot pay countries who contribute troops and equipment to peacekeeping operations, now costing \$900 million.

Peacekeeping expenses are threatening to reach more than \$3.4 billion this year, according to Joseph Connor, the UN undersecretary-general for administration and management.

By August, the United Nations expects to borrow monies paid into the peacekeeping account to meet its regular payments, thereby letting troops contributors, many of them from poor nations, wait even longer

for a refund, Connor said.

The US Senate in February unanimously approved a payment of \$582 million, the bulk of \$986 million earmarked for the past debts to the world body. This followed a December deal brokered by Richard Holbrooke, the former US ambassador to the United Nations under the Clinton administration.

The Holbrooke agreement lowered US dues for the \$1 billion a year administrative budget from 25 per cent to 22 per cent. For the larger \$2 billion to \$3 billion annual peacekeeping budget, the US share will gradually be reduced to from 31 per cent to close to 25 per cent over several years.

The US House of Representatives has not yet approved the so-called Halm-Biden bill adopted by the Senate. And neither chamber has lifted a cap that forbids Washington to pay more than 25 per cent of the peacekeeping budget.

"If that cap is not removed during the next three or four years, the amount of arrears will increase," Connor said.

UN sends team to help Afghan refugees

AP, Jalozai Camp

The United Nations sent a team to a mud swamped Jalozai Camp in northwestern Pakistan yesterday to try to determine how to improve life for more than 80,000 exiled Afghans living here in squalor and hunger.

Throughout the night Rasul Bibi moved from place to place with her four children searching for a dry patch of land.

Heavy rains in recent days have swamped the makeshift camp, where exiled Afghans have established a tent village made of plastic sheets, many of them old garbage bags stitched together and slung over a wooden pole.

Huddled by a fire Bibi said her children howled most of the night.

"There is nothing left that is dry. Our blankets everything is wet. They can't keep warm," she said.

Nearby children filled wheelbarrows with water in an attempt to drain the camp, which just last weekend had been a giant dust-bowl.

Myanmar junta frees 16 members of NLD

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar's ruling military government has released 16 detained members of the opposition National League for Democracy Party (NLD), signalling further improvement in relations with the party.

"Some 13 NLD members were released in Mandalay and three in Paga," a senior NLD leader, who declined to be identified, told Reuters today. He said all of them were sent back home.

The two sides have been at loggerheads since a 1990 general election. The NLD swept to victory but was not allowed to rule by the military.

Asked whether the release could be interpreted as a sign of improving relations between the two sides, the NLD official said: "I think so."

Myanmar's military government marked a key national anniversary on March 27 with cautious praise for democracy, with some senior officials saying secret talks with the opposition were going well.

Diplomats believe Suu Kyi has talked to the powerful Secretary One of the ruling State Peace and Development Council, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, as well as other military intelligence officials.

UN increases peacekeepers for Sierra Leone mission

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN Security Council demanded on Friday that Sierra Leone's rebels allow UN peacekeepers into diamond-mine areas they control and authorised an increase of UN troops to 17,500 from 10,350.

In a resolution adopted by a 15-0 vote, the Council extended the mandate of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone, known as UNAMSIL, for six more months, a period Britain called crucial in the West African country's 10-year-old civil war.

"This could well be the make or break period," British Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock told reporters after the Council's unanimous decision.

"The priority is there-establishment of the government throughout the country," he said. "I hope that that will lay the basis of the beginning of the end of the rebellion in Sierra Leone over the next six months."

Set up in October 1999 to support a peace agreement that was supposed to end a nine-year civil war, UNAMSIL is currently below its authorised strength of 12,500 following the withdrawal of Indian and Jordanian troops late last year.

Forces from Bangladesh as well as air support units from Ukraine are expected to bring UNAMSIL up to 12,500 shortly. The United Nations then hopes for several thousand more troops to boost the mission to the West African nation.

The resolution demanded that the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels fulfill obligations under an agreement signed in Abuja, Nigeria, in November to ensure UN troops can be deployed throughout the country, which includes areas rich in diamonds.

It said the Sierra Leone government should prepare "for the restoration of civil authority" throughout its territory, especially where peacekeepers are expected to be stationed.

Cheered by crowds, some 100 peacekeepers from Nigeria on Wednesday moved to the RUF-controlled town of Mange, some 65 km from the capital, Freetown, and began patrols near their key regional town of Kambia, about 10 km from the Guinean border.

Leadership race heats up in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

The race to succeed Japan's unpopular Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori heated up yesterday as a power broker in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) received a major boost.

LDP secretary general Makoto Koga broke from his neutral stance to express support for Hiromu Nonaka, one of his predecessors, who has built up a reputation for his backroom dealings.

"I wish Mr. Hiromu Nonaka will stand at the top and stay at the centre of Japan's government," Koga told a meeting in Sapporo, northern Japan, with local LDP deputies, according to press reports.

"I wish he will work to the full to reform the party and guide the course of national politics," said Koga, the second most senior member of the LDP after Mori, who is party president.

Citing his age, the 75-year-old Nonaka has repeatedly denied he would run for the top party post.

Blair to delay vote for foot-and-mouth crisis

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair is set to postpone his planned May 3 general election because of the foot-and-mouth crisis ravaging Britain, according to newspaper reports yesterday.

Officially, according to Downing Street, the prime minister's mind remains focused on how to contain the disease, which has left swathes of countryside out of bounds and is ruining farmers and tourist chiefs alike.

A Downing Street spokesman said Blair would take a meeting in London early Saturday of a crisis committee set up to deal with the outbreak.

He would then go to Chequers, the prime minister's country residence, for the weekend.

It is there that he must make up his mind this weekend.

Blair has given himself until Monday to decide whether to press ahead with May 3, his preferred date, coinciding with local council polls.

According to the Sun tabloid, usually well informed on political matters, he has already decided to delay in order to be seen fighting round-the-clock against the live-stock virus.

Other newspapers, notably The Times and the Mirror, were less certain but carried the same message, that Blair was on the verge of announcing a delay.

Downing Street insisted the reports were speculation. "The media are focusing on elections," a spokeswoman retorted. "The prime minister is 100 percent focused on foot-and-mouth."

According to the press reports, he will announce on Monday that the local council vote should be postponed until June 7, and by implication the general election too.

"In the end, the prime minister has to put country before party," a senior minister told the Sun. The unidentified source said Blair realised "the need for sensitivity towards those most badly affected."



Palestinian protesters throw steel barricades during clashes with Israeli policemen in Jerusalem's Old City on Friday as Palestinians mark Land Day commemorating the 1976 killings of six Arab Israelis in northern Israel during protests over land confiscation.

West Bank, Gaza under heavy Israeli fire

AFP, Hebron

A Palestinian man died early yesterday from injuries he sustained during an Israeli helicopter in Ramallah earlier this week, as tensions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip came under heavy fire from the Israeli army overnight.

Wahid Nsri al-Dik, 54, was wounded Wednesday while posted at the Palestine Technical College, when a neighbouring base of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's elite personal guard Force 17 was attacked by Israeli army gunships, Voice of Palestine radio reported.

Dik's death in a Ramallah hospital brings to 463 the number of people killed since the start of a Palestinian uprising six months ago: 380 Palestinians, 13 Israeli Arabs, 69 other Israelis and a German.

The southern West Bank town of Hebron, meanwhile, came under heavy Israeli army artillery and

machine-gun fire overnight, in what witnesses described Saturday as the worst shelling in six months of violence.

A total of 28 people were injured and dozens of houses were damaged in the shooting, which ran almost 12 hours from 4:30 pm (20:30 BST) Friday until 4:00 am (8:00 BST) the following morning, Palestinian police said.

One of those injured was in serious condition, while the others were moderately to lightly wounded, police said.

For most of the week, Israeli tanks have been lobbing shells into the Arab neighborhood of Abu Snein, which overlooks a Jewish enclave in the divided city where a 10-month-old Israeli baby was killed on Monday.

The situation in Hebron has been tense since the baby, Shalevet Pass, was shot dead by a sniper on Monday.

But the overnight attacks on Hebron targeted various parts of the West Bank town in an "almost random way," one witness said, describing the attacks as the worst since the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation broke out late last September.

Electricity was also cut for around three hours during the attack, witnesses said.

In the southern Gaza Strip, Palestinian gunmen in the town of Khan Yunis exchanged fire throughout the night with Israeli troops stationed at the neighbouring Gush Katif Jewish settlement, but no one was reported injured.

Another firefight took place after Palestinian gunmen shot at an Israeli army camp east of Beit Sahur, near the West Bank town of Bethlehem, Saturday morning. No one was injured, but several Palestinian houses were hit by bullets.



Swedish environment minister Kjell Larsson receives a bucket of water symbolising global warming as EU environment ministers, angered at Washington's abrupt pull-out from the Kyoto protocol on global warming, meet in Kiruna this week end to take stock of the battered treaty and consider alternatives.

EU ministers blast pullout of US from Kyoto pact

AFP, Skiruna

EU environment ministers, angered at the abrupt US pull-out from the Kyoto protocol on global warming, were meeting here Saturday and Sunday to take stock of the battered treaty and map an action plan.

Dutch Environment Minister Jan Pronk was cautiously optimistic on his arrival, saying, "The last word has not yet been spoken."

Pronk said he hoped for a concerted "political pressure" on the US to rethink its decision.

"We need (the US) in the Kyoto protocol," he told reporters. "We are doing our very best. I went (to Washington) the last couple of days in order to try to convince the administration."

"We have to ... work together with all the umbrella countries, including the United States," he said in a reference to the Kyoto signatories.

Pronk said the US decision not to ratify the treaty was: "I think, a premature decision...based on a perception of a domestic energy crisis."

His Swedish counterpart, Kjell Larsson, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, said the EU was "continuing to lead and act against global warming."

Larsson was speaking to a handful of demonstrators from the Swedish ecology group Fallbiologerna in front of the Kiruna City Hall, where the ministerial meeting was taking place.

President George W. Bush irritated many countries this week when he abruptly announced that his country would not ratify the 1997 Kyoto treaty, calling it "deeply flawed" and contrary to US economic interests.

The EU reacted with alarm saying it would send a delegation to Washington next week for urgent talks with the US administration. "This is extremely worrying," EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallstrom said. "We don't like what we are hearing" from Washington.

The EU Commission president, Romano Prodi, was particularly harsh in his criticism, telling an Italian newspaper that "if one wants to be a world leader, one must know how to look after the entire earth and not only American industry."

"There are certain things one cannot go back on," he told the La Repubblica newspaper.

Troops, rebels trade fire in Macedonia

AFP, Skopje

Macedonian government troops exchanged sporadic fire with ethnic Albanian rebels in the Caska region north of Skopje overnight, an army spokesman said yesterday.

"There was shooting in the Caska zone," Colonel Blagoja Markovski told AFP.

The area includes the village of Gracani, the scene of violent clashes between the opposing sides on Thursday.

The shooting at around 04:00 am (8:00 BST) was "intermittent fire coming from Kosovo" which borders the region, Markovski said, describing the incidents as "provocation."

He added that the situation in the region early Saturday was calm.

Another Macedonian army source said that a rebel fighter from the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) had been killed in the confrontation, although the report was not confirmed by official army sources.

The Caska region lies about 12 km north of the Macedonian capital.

Mortar fire in the village of Krivenik in Kosovo, just over the border from Caska, killed three people including a British journalist on Thursday.

Dalai Lama begins visit to Taiwan

AFP, Taipei

The Tibetan exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama arrived here yesterday for a nine-day religious visit, which also includes political meetings certain to enrage Beijing.

He was warmly greeted upon his arrival at Chiang Kai-shek airport in Taoyuan, some 40 km, south of Taipei, on board a China Airlines flight from India.

As the Dalai Lama entered the lobby of the terminal, he was flanked by security guards and greeted by Master Chin Hsin, head of visit organiser the Buddhist Association.

Smiling and bowing, the Dalai Lama was given flowers and white scarf, used to show respect from the faithful to Buddhist masters.

He patted the cheek of a Tibetan man who knelt down to show his respect, one of around 100 Tibetans at the airport to greet their leader.

From the airport, the Dalai Lama was whisked away directly to the Howard Plaza Hotel Taipei, where he was to hold his first press conference in Taiwan to kick off his "compassion and wisdom" trip.

Hundreds of followers held aloft the Buddhist leader's portrait and waved the Taiwanese flag and the Tibet's snow lion flag when he arrived at the hotel at light security. Some followers were visibly moved to tears.

But the Dalai Lama also met with a minor protest from the right-wing Labor Party while the Chinese Reunification Alliance held a protest outside the hotel.

"The Dalai Lama is using religion as a pretext to engage in the practice of splitting China," a demonstrator said.

The Dalai Lama has adopted a conciliatory approach by dropping calls for Tibetan independence and instead demands large-scale autonomy, after the failure of an anti-China uprising in Tibet in 1959. He has since lived in exile in northern India.

But Beijing has insisted that his words are "insincere" and calls him a tool of anti-China forces in the West, especially the United States.

The Dalai Lama is scheduled to meet President Chen Shu-bian and Vice President Annette Lu, from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, as well as former president Lee Teng-hui.

Gujarat awaits Clinton's arrival

AP, New Delhi

When former US President Bill Clinton returns to India on a humanitarian mission next week, it will evoke warm memories of last year's historic visit, which provided a new dynamic to India-US relations.

Clinton's visit in March 2000, the first by a US president in 22 years, pushed aside decades of mutual distrust and kickstarted bilateral ties between the world's two largest democracies to a faster, more friendly track.

Clinton arrives on Tuesday and is headed for western India's Gujarat state, rocked on January 26 by a 7.7 magnitude earthquake that killed more than 20,000 people. An estimated 1 million were left homeless.

Clinton is scheduled to spend Wednesday in Ahmadabad, the state's main commercial centre, assessing damage, reviewing rehabilitation and offering assistance to victims on behalf of the American India Foundation, a voluntary body set up by wealthy Indians in the United States. Clinton is a foundation trustee and has given speeches for earthquake relief fund-raising in the United States.

On Thursday, Clinton is scheduled to travel to Bhuj, flattened by the earthquake, where he is expected to meet survivors.