

Tigers take key town from renegades

Unicef asks warring LTTE to free child soldiers

AFP, Trincoma

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels readied a fresh offensive against renegades yesterday after capturing a key town in fighting that has jeopardised the new government's call to revive peace talks, officials and rebels said.

Military sources said the main Tamil Tiger force took complete control over the town of Vakarai Saturday, but even before that the breakaway faction had withdrawn from the area.

Tiger columns have been pushing southwards on positions of V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, who broke from the rebels accusing them of ignoring the interests of Tamils in eastern Sri Lanka.

Karuna's faction said nine of its fighters were killed and 10 wounded while another 300 surrendered or were captured by the main Tiger group.

Military sources, however, placed the number of fatalities on both sides at about 20. At least two civilians -- an ambulance driver and a paramedic -- were also killed in the crossfire.

In its first statement since launching the offensive Friday, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said it was seeking to "expel" Karuna for actions against the movement and Sri Lanka's Tamil minority.

"We have begun a coordinated operation to expel Karuna from the Tamil homeland," the LTTE statement said. "Several fighters under Karuna's command have deserted their posts and are returning to join us."

"To prevent unnecessary bloodshed, we urge other fighters also to leave Karuna to join with us. We also urge the parents of fighters still under control of Karuna to obtain their children's release without allowing them to be used

by Karuna for his traitorous acts."

Karuna broke away on March 3, taking with him about 5,000 to 6,000 cadres who made up about a third of the fighters of the Tigers, who have been waging a three-decade campaign for a separate Tamil homeland.

Government military sources said the Tigers were consolidating possibly to launch a fresh drive against Karuna who has retreated to his jungle bases in the Batticaloa district, just south of Trincomalee.

Meanwhile, the United Nations agency for children Sunday asked Sri Lanka's warring Tiger rebels to free child soldiers amid reports that young boys and girls had been killed and wounded in the fighting.

Unicef said it was investigating reports that child combatants had been deployed in the factional fighting which erupted in eastern Sri Lanka Friday between the main Tiger forces and a breakaway group.



Two Indian boys carry flags of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) during an election campaign rally in Kolkata yesterday. Activists of all political parties started canvassing for their respective candidates in West Bengal, one of the communist ruled states of India, for the forthcoming elections which are scheduled for May 10 in the state.

Pre-Sept 11 memo to Bush warned al-Qaeda active in US

AFP, Washington

A security memo sent to President George W. Bush about one month before the September 11 attacks warned that al-Qaeda had penetrated the United States and of possible plane hijackings, the White House said Saturday.

The Bush administration released the memorandum under pressure from the official inquiry into the 2001 strikes by Osama bin Laden's group as the president's counter-terrorism strategy before September 11 faces growing scrutiny.

The memo, entitled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the US", said that in mid-2001 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents suspected al-Qaeda was preparing air hijackings and had been studying federal buildings in New York.

Al-Qaeda members hijacked planes and slammed them into the New York World Trade Center's twin towers and the Pentagon in Washington. A fourth hijacked plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people died in the attacks.

The memo has been widely debated at the public hearings of the independent September 11 com-

mission but details had not been given as it was a classified Presidential Daily Briefing (PDB).

The commission had strenuously called for the White House to release the memo, featured strongly in questioning on Thursday Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice.

"We have not been able to corroborate some of the more sensational threat reporting, such as that from a (-censored-) service in 1998 saying that bin Ladin wanted to hijack a US aircraft to gain the release of 'Blind Shaykh,' 'Umar' Abd al-Rahman and other US-held extremists," said the memo.

"Nevertheless," it went on, "FBI information since that time indicates patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York."

The memo said bin Laden's "attacks against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 demonstrated he prepared operations years in advance, and is not deterred by setbacks."

'Zero speed on Kashmir won't help Indo-Pak ties'

PTI, Beijing

Pakistan has cautioned India that "zero" speed on resolving the Kashmir issue and "supersonic" speed on tackling other issues like trade would not lead to progress in Indo-Pak rapprochement.

"It is not possible to go on super-sonic speed on trade and zero speed on Kashmir. The principle of simultaneity mean that you have to talk on all issues with an open mind and open heart. Then it is possible that you can go at 100 miles an hour on trade and 80, 70 or 60 miles an hour on Kashmir," Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri said.

"It can't be at zero miles an hour on Kashmir," Kasuri told the State-run China Central Television (CCTV) in an interview aired today (Apr 11, 2004).

Commenting on the Indo-Pak peace moves, Kasuri, who was in Beijing this week on his first official

visit to China, noted that both countries have taken a number of confidence building measures to ease ties.

"We have started a large number of confidence building measures but in order that they be sustained, the requirement is that there be a genuine dialogue on all the issues some of which have been identified by the two parties," he said.

"We didn't go to war for the resumption of air links, resumption of rail links. Why did we go to war, three major wars, three minor wars and a near war last year, why? It was over Kashmir and not over railway link resumption. So we have to talk on real issues," Kasuri said.

"In order that the confidence building measures are sustained, there have to be progress on all issues...Pakistan is willing to show flexibility, we also hope India will also show similar flexibility," he added.

Shooting of Chen 'not self-inflicted': US expert

AFP, Taipei

US forensic expert Henry Lee yesterday ruled out one of the more outlandish theories in the election-eve shooting of President Chen Shui-bian when he said it was not self-inflicted.

Various allegations have been made about the mysterious March 19 incident -- all of which Chen has denied -- among them that he shot himself before starting a campaign trip to southern Tainan city in order to win voters' sympathy.

Lee, speaking to reporters at the end of a two-day visit during which he examined physical evidence and the wound on Chen's belly, said the president had been shot and that "the shooting is not self-inflicted."

Congress, BJP trade charges on Bofors

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Reeling under the BJP's Bofors assault on Sonia Gandhi and the questions posed by M Venkaiah Naidu and Arun Jaitley, the Congress today hit back, posing three questions to the Prime Minister on the issue.

The Congress has asked Atal Behari Vajpayee to come clean over why, in his capacity as the opposition leader, he had written to the then PM PV Narasimha Rao "pleading on behalf of the Hinduja brothers."

The party has sought Vajpayee's explanation on why he failed to extradite Ottavio Quattrocchi from Malaysia during his six-year tenure. "New Delhi could have used its economic leverage over Malaysia to realise this objective", said Ramesh.

The Congress has also asked Vajpayee why as the opposition leader he had "bombarded the then United Front Government in 1996-97 with letters against Snamp-rogetti's involvement in the Indo-Oman urea joint venture project, but then reversed his position completely after becoming the PM."

Sonia Gandhi also broke her silence over Bofors while addressing an election rally in Chhattisgarh. She attacked the BJP for habitually raking up the Bofors issue on the eve of polls.

In Amethi, Rahul Gandhi dismissed the BJP's bid to raise Bofors and foreign-origin issues as "signs of its frustration." "After finding that its feel-good claims are not cutting much ice with the people, the BJP is trying to grab power by diverting the attention of the people by raking up these issues".

Break-in at Tagore's nest yet again

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, Santiniketan

Security measures continue to be honoured in the breach at Uttarayan and its vicinity with a second break-in taking place a fortnight after the Nobel burglary at Rabindra Bhavan. Fortunately, nothing has been stolen this time.

Locks of Udayan Vivaga, just 200 metres from Uttarayan's main entrance, were found broken this morning. 'Security beef-up be damned' seems to be the message driven home by those who broke open the locks of the garden office, so what if CBI and CID sleuths with their sniffer dogs et al scan the area round-the-clock.

Visva-Bharati officials sought to play down the incident. Nothing was stolen, they said. Incidentally, there was not much to steal, apart from some gardening material and office furniture.

American opposition to Iraq war gets growing

AFP, Los Angeles

A year after Baghdad fell to jubilant US forces, American public support for the occupation appears to be waning fast following a week of unparalleled anti-US violence in Iraq.

On the traditionally liberal West Coast, there is growing anger among ordinary citizens over the direction of the war and the policy of US President George W. Bush, as newspaper editorials lash the campaign as a disaster spiralling out of control.

"In the beginning, I was pro-Bush; now I am more pro-(Democratic presidential hopeful John) Kerry," 25-year-old Los Angeles traffic warden Eric Garcia told AFP after four Americans were dismembered by an Iraqi mob last week and dozens of soldiers were killed in a Shia uprising.

"(Bush) is letting his representatives do whatever they want. The war sucks. If our troops stopped dying and came home, I wouldn't mind the war going on, but I think too much of our taxes are wasted over there."

A CNN/Time poll showed Friday that US public approval for Bush's handling of Iraq had slipped to 44 percent, with 51 percent opposed to it, as horrifying pictures of unrest flicker across television screens.

The telephone poll of 1,005 adults conducted Thursday said Bush's overall approval rating had sunk to a record low of 49 percent. It has sunk to just 38 percent in California, according to a San Jose State University survey.

Hollywood advertising executive Andrew Chase said he had been against the US invasion of Iraq from the start but that his opposition had surged because of the violence in

recent days.

"This military action seems to be getting us more terrorist activity, and as the military activity has become stronger, so has my opposition," he told AFP as he sipped coffee in a Tinseltown coffee shop.

Movie theatre employee Greg Herger, 39, was equally depressed at the turn of events in Iraq 12 months after many Americans celebrated what they had thought was the end of a quick war against Saddam Hussein.

"We shouldn't have gone there in the first place; we shouldn't be there now. The whole thing is a mistake. I hope Bush is out of there this year," he said.

The anti-war protest group Answer Coalition, which organised rallies in 50 US cities Saturday, claimed US grassroots opposition to the war was growing as reality sinks in.



PHOTO: AFP

People cry during the rescue operation for victims of a landslide in the town of Aguas Calientes, in Machu Picchu, Peru on Saturday. At least six people died Saturday after a landslide hit the community of Aguas Caliente near the famed Inca ruins of Machu Picchu, a local official said. The victims died when a mud and rock avalanche destroyed their homes in the southeastern town of Aguas Calientes.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat is photographed with children in scout uniforms during a reception to mark Easter Sunday festivities at his compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah.