

Tamil infighting escalates

7 people killed in clash

AFP, AP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger guerrillas and a break-away faction have clashed again in Sri Lanka's embattled east leaving at least seven people dead, residents and military sources said yesterday.

At least six rebels from the main Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed in the overnight clash in Batticaloa district where a civilian died in cross-fire, residents said.

There was no confirmation of the rebel casualties in an area held by the Tigers.

The latest fighting came three days after a similar confrontation in which at least another six people from the main rebel group were reported to have been killed.

Meanwhile, the LTTE's political wing leader, S. P. Thamilselvan, was due to lead a delegation to Europe on Wednesday for talks with experts who helped draft self-rule proposals, the pro-rebel Tamilnet website said.

It said the delegation would travel to Switzerland, Denmark, Norway and Ireland during a three-week tour.

The fighting among Tigers has caused concern among diplomats and the Sri Lankan government as efforts to restart talks to end three decades of ethnic bloodshed have been set back by the internecine warfare.

Last week, a top leader of the breakaway faction together with two senior aides was killed in the east by the main rebel group.

A Norwegian-arranged ceasefire was put in place in February 2002 but the Tigers, who want a separate homeland for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, have since been accused of killing more than 250 of their rivals.

The clashes erupted after an unprecedented split led by break-away LTTE leader, V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna.

He went underground in April after failing to resist an onslaught from the main Tiger movement in

the island's east.

AP adds: Tamil Tiger rebel leaders were set to travel to Europe on Wednesday for talks on Sri Lanka's stalled peace process, as fears that the island nation could slide back into war fester, a senior guerrilla official said.

As the rebel delegation left their northern stronghold, heavy shelling in the country's volatile east left one civilian dead and another seriously wounded, a military official.

The Tigers' political chief, S.P. Thamilselvan, will lead a 14-member team to Geneva where they will hold talks with legal experts

mostly overseas Tamils about the deadlock with the government, a senior rebel delegate said on condition of anonymity Tuesday.

Chief rebel negotiator Anton Balasingham, who is based in London, will join the talks, he said. Swiss foreign ministry officials were expected to participate in the opening session Friday.

Trial ordered in Florida e-ballot lawsuit

AP, Tallahassee

Just five weeks before Election Day, a federal appeals court Monday revived a lawsuit demanding that all Florida voters who use touchscreen machines receive a paper receipt, in case a recount becomes necessary.

The 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals told a federal judge in Fort Lauderdale to reopen the case, which could affect 15 Florida counties whose electronic voting terminals do not issue paper records.

It was not immediately clear if the case could be decided before the Nov. 2 presidential election.

The three-judge panel in Atlanta wrote that Judge James Cohn misapplied a 35-year legal doctrine when he threw out the lawsuit filed by Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Fla.

"What's known for certain is we have won the battle in the long term," Wexler said. "There will be a paper trail in Florida. The only question is when."

A spokeswoman for Secretary of State Glenda Hood, however, dismissed the decision as procedural. "We have full confidence in the process we have in place," said spokeswoman Alia Faraj.



PHOTO: AFP
A Nepalese soldier walks past a huge image of Akash Bhairav, the God of war, in Kathmandu yesterday on the first day of a two-day general strike called by Maoist rebels in six eastern and central zones of Nepal.

US wants more Pak action against al-Qaeda

Musharraf in Italy for terror talks

AFP, Rome

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf began a three-day visit to Italy yesterday during which he was expected to discuss global terrorism and meet Pope John Paul II.

His visit follows the death on Monday of a top Al-Qaeda militant, Amjad Farooqi, said to have masterminded attempts on Musharraf's life and to have been behind the murder of US reporter Daniel Pearl.

Italy, which backed the US-led invasion of Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein and is a staunch ally of Washington, is currently engaged in efforts to secure the release of two Italian female aid workers kidnapped by militants there.

Musharraf arrived in Italy from the Netherlands, where he spent two days.

Earlier the United States hailed Monday Pakistan's killing of a top al-Qaeda militant and capture of three accomplices but said Islamabad should do more to flush out militants hiding in that country.

"It's an important step. It's an important development. But there's

clearly more to do," State Department deputy spokesman Adam Ereli told reporters.

Amjad Farooqi, Pakistan's most wanted militant, was shot dead during a two-hour gunbattle at his rural hideout north of Karachi on Sunday morning, Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid announced Monday.

He was also one of four men who reportedly kidnapped US reporter Daniel Pearl in Karachi in January 2002 and recruited the trio arrested with him to slit Pearl's throat. He had been indicted over Pearl's murder.

In addition, Farooqi has been named the mastermind of attempts to kill Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf last December.

The militant had evaded a massive nationwide manhunt for nine months.

"We welcome the news over the weekend that Pakistan apprehended several suspects who may have links to al-Qaeda, including a suspect in the Daniel Pearl case," Ereli said.

US asks Taiwan not to fuel tensions with China

AFP, Washington

The United States delivered a soft rebuke to Taiwan on Monday, telling it and China not to fuel cross-strait tension after Taiwanese Premier Yu Shyi-kun threatened massive retaliation for any Chinese attack on the island.

"We would prefer to see comments that focus on dialogue as opposed to references to the use of force or other unilateral moves," deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said when asked about Yu's weekend comments.

He said Washington opposed any action — by either Taipei or Beijing — that could heighten such tensions and urged both sides to resolve their dispute through dialogue and not force.

"Our position is that we oppose moves by either side that would increase tensions across the Taiwan Strait," Ereli said.

"It is our view that the issues relating to the Taiwan Strait should be solved through dialogue, and not by unilateral actions by either side."

N Korea has nuclear deterrent: Minister

AP, United Nations

North Korea says it has turned the plutonium from 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods into nuclear weapons to serve as a deterrent against increasing US nuclear threats and to prevent a nuclear war in northeast Asia.

Warning that the danger of war on the Korean peninsula "is snowballing," Vice Foreign Minister Choe Su Hon provided details Monday of the nuclear deterrent that he said North Korea has developed for self-organisation.

He told the UN General Assembly's annual ministerial meeting that Pyongyang had "no other option but to possess a nuclear deterrent" because of US policies that he claimed were designed to "eliminate" North Korea and make it "a target of preemptive nuclear strikes."

"Our deterrent is, in all its intents and purposes, the self-defensive means to cope with the ever increasing US nuclear threats and further, prevent a nuclear war in northeast Asia," he told a news

conference after his speech. In Washington, a State Department official noted that Secretary of State Colin Powell has said repeatedly that the United States has no plans to attack the communist country.

But in his General Assembly speech and at the press conference with a small group of reporters, Choe blamed the United States for intensifying threats to attack the communist nation and destroying the basis for negotiations to resolve the dispute over Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

Nonetheless, he said, North Korea is still ready to dismantle its nuclear program if Washington abandons its "hostile policy" and is prepared to coexist peacefully.

At the moment, however, he said "the ever intensifying US hostile policy and the clandestine nuclear-related experiments recently revealed in South Korea are constituting big stumbling blocks" and make it impossible for North Korea to participate in the continuation of six-nation talks on its nuclear programme.

Bush sharpens jabs against Kerry

AFP, Spring Green

President George W. Bush sharpened his jabs against Democratic challenger John Kerry, who has called for an end to the nasty advertising war which he said was scaring off voters three days before the rivals' first televised debate.

A new poll showed Bush had a slightly smaller lead over Kerry compared to 10 days ago, with the president eight percentage points ahead of the Massachusetts senator among likely voters.

The USA Today/CNN/Gallup survey gave Bush 52 percent, against 44 for Kerry.

Campaigning in the crucial battleground state of Ohio, Bush on Monday mocked his rival as fickle on national security issues like the war to oust Saddam Hussein, saying Kerry shifts so much on Iraq he "could spend 90 minutes debating himself."

"Later this week I'll get the chance of debating my opponent. It's a little tough to prepare because he keeps changing positions on the war on terror," Bush told supporters at the Midwest Livestock and Expo Center in Springfield, Ohio.

'Progress on rebuilding Iraq discouraging'

Jordan king doubts Iraq polls

AFP, BBC ONLINE, Amman/ Paris

Iraq's interim planning minister Mehdi Hafez said yesterday that an international drive to rebuild his war-shattered country has been discouraging because billions of dollars pledged in October have not been spent.

"The international community pledged at the Madrid conference to give generous donations but what has been accomplished so far did not match our expectations," Hafez told a UN symposium in Jordan on the reconstruction of Iraq.

"New mistakes have been made adding to the ones made by the former regime," Hafez said at the opening session of the conference organised by the United Nations Human Settlement Programme, UN-Habitat.

Hafez charged that there was a

"lack of transparency" in the way contracts were being handed out by the US-led coalition and complained that Iraq was not getting a share of the deals.

"This outcome has not been encouraging," he said.

Hafez also took a swipe at the United States, saying Washington promised to spend seven billion dollars on Iraq's reconstruction in 2004 but has so far used only around one billion dollars.

He also spoke of "corruption" and "flagrant" mistakes in allocating funds for various contracts.

Meanwhile, Jordan's King Abdullah has said it will be impossible to hold fair elections in Iraq in the current state of chaos.

He told the French newspaper Le Figaro that only extremists would gain if the elections went ahead in January without the security situa-

tion improving.

Correspondents say these were remarkably frank comments from a man Washington regards as one of its key allies in the Middle East.

US and interim Iraqi leaders both insist that elections will go ahead.

However, last week US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told senators it might not be possible to conduct voting in some places targeted by militants.

King Abdullah was in Paris on Tuesday where he spent an hour with President Jacques Chirac discussing a US proposal for an international conference on Iraq, as well as the planned elections.

France has said a conference could be "useful", but only if the issue of a US troop withdrawal was on the agenda and if representatives of the armed opposition were allowed to take part.

US perception of terror threat down: Survey

REUTERS, Washington

Three years after the Sept. 11 attacks, Americans are feeling less vulnerable while remaining determined to fight terrorism, according to a survey released yesterday.

Perceptions of terrorist threats have dropped to pre-Sept. 11 levels though terrorism is still a big concern, according to the biennial survey by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations.

International terrorism, chemical and biological weapons, and unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers were the top concerns, just as they were in the 2002 study.

But the latest survey showed a 10 percentage point drop in the number of Americans who view international terrorism as a "critical threat."

Concerning foreign policy goals, 78 percent said the government should protect the jobs of American workers, making it the top objective even above preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and fighting terrorism.

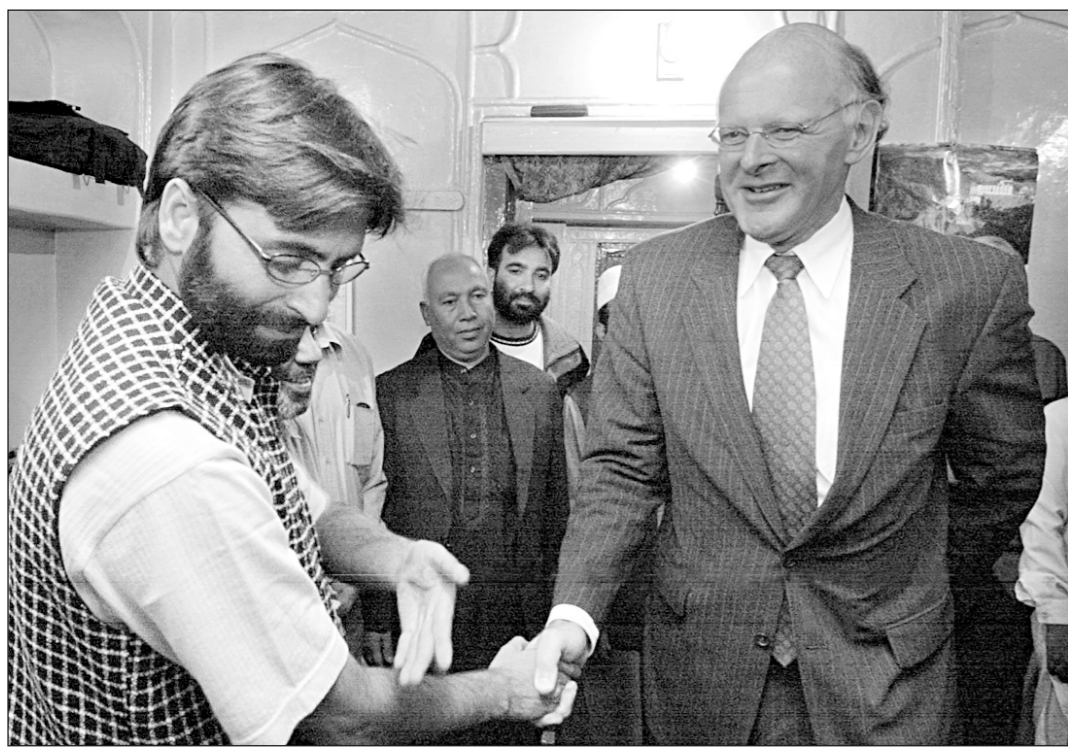


PHOTO: AFP
Chairman of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Yasin Malik (L) shakes hands with the head of the five member European Union delegation and Netherlands Ambassador to India Eric F. Ch. Niehe (R) in Srinagar yesterday.

Shah suggests Kashmir committee headed by Vajpayee

PTI, Srinagar

Senior separatist leader Shabir Ahmed Shah yesterday suggested setting up of a Kashmir committee headed by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to frame a policy and build consensus in the country to resolve the issue.

Formation of the Kashmir committee under the chairmanship of Vajpayee with all the former Prime Ministers as members is imperative to frame a policy and build consensus among all parties in India to resolve the Kashmir issue, Shah, who heads Democratic Freedom Party told reporters after a 90-minute meeting with the visiting European Union delegation in Srinagar.

He said VP Singh, IK Gujral, Chandrashekar and HD Deva Gowda, Railway Minister Lalu Prasad, Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar, former West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu and Samata

Party leader George Fernandes be made members of the committee and entrusted the job of mobilizing public opinion in the country to resolve the long standing Kashmir issue.

Welcoming the meeting between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in New York, Shah said the meeting has generated a ray of hope among the people here but the spirit should be maintained and the two countries should explore the possibilities to find an everlasting solution to the issue as decided in the joint declaration after the meeting.

"Kashmir is a political issue and needs a political solution to the entire satisfaction of the people of the state," Shah said and reiterated his demand for involvement of Kashmiris in the talks between India and Pakistan to speed up the process of its resolution.