



Sri Lankan soldiers enter a house as they conduct a door-to-door search for snipers following the assassination of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in Colombo yesterday. The assassination of Sri Lanka's foreign minister is a major blow to the faltering peace process with Tamil Tiger rebels and could re-ignite the island's three decade-old civil war, analysts said.

EU raps Nepali rebels for using child soldiers

20 Maoists killed, private radio stations resume broadcasts

REUTERS, PTI, Kathmandu

The European Union condemned Nepal's Maoist rebels for using children as soldiers in a civil war in which thousands have died since 1996 and urged the government to ensure those affected by the conflict were.

Stepping up their anti-insurge-ncy operation, Nepalese security forces have gunned down 20 Maoists after a rebel attack left one soldier dead and five injured in the southwest Nawalparasi district.

The incident occurred on Friday when the security forces were clearing obstacles placed by the Maoists in Chormara and Arunkhola areas along the highway in Nawalparasi, state-run The Rising Nepal reported, quoting security sources.

The troops were first attacked by the rebels who killed one soldier and injured five others. Retaliating, the security forces shot dead 20 rebels, the report said.

Meanwhile, 5,000 students have been deprived of their studies after the closure of 35 schools following the Maoist attack in Pili area of Kalikot district, where 43 security personnel and 26 rebels were killed last week.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has been fighting to overthrow Nepal's monarchy and set up a communist republic in the world's only Hindu kingdom. The conflict has cost more than 12,500 lives, more than 400 of them children.

"The EU strongly condemns the CPN (M)'s systematic and continued human rights violations especially in respect to the use of child soldiers

which runs contrary to their claims that they respect human rights and adhere to the standards of the Geneva Conventions," EU said in a statement issued by the British Embassy late on Friday.

Britain currently holds the EU presidency.

Earlier more than a dozen private radio stations in Nepal resumed broadcasts of news bulletins on Friday, six months after King Gyanendra seized direct power and banned news on independent radio.

The move came after Nepal's Supreme Court issued an interim order on Wednesday asking the royalist government not to go ahead with its decision to close down a private radio station -- Nepal FM -- that had ignored the official ban.

ANNAN CONCEDES UNSC reform unlikely before year's end

AFP, United Nations

Faced with an impasse over a proposed expansion of the UN Security Council, UN chief Kofi Annan was this week forced to concede that the contentious issue is unlikely to be settled before a summit of world leaders here in September.

Annan had made Security Council expansion a key plank of a sweeping UN reform package being ready for consideration by world leaders at a September 14-16 summit ahead of the General Assembly session. He had set a September deadline for agreement by member states.

"I'm one of those who believe that the reform of the United Nations will not be complete without the reform of the Security Council," the UN chief said Wednesday. "So I would urge the member states to find a solution to this issue as soon as possible."

But a day later, Annan appeared to bow to the political reality.

"Ideally, it should be done by September. That was my own initial recommendation," he said. "But if that were to slip, I think the member states should remain focused, determined, and engaged, and try and do it by the end of the year because it is urgent."

Bush refuses to rule out force against Iran

AFP, Jerusalem

US President George W. Bush refused to rule out the use of force against Iran over the Islamic Republic's resumption of nuclear activities, in an interview with Israeli television aired Friday.

When asked if the use of force was an alternative to faltering diplomatic efforts, Bush said: "All options are on the table."

"The use of force is the last option for any president. You know we have used force in the recent past to secure our country," he said in a clear reference to Iraq, which the United States invaded in March 2003.

"I have been willing to do so as a last resort in order to secure the country and provide the opportunity for people to live in free societies," he added.

Bush was speaking from his ranch in Crawford, Texas to a reporter from Israeli public television. The Jewish state has accused Iran of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons and believes it is the prime target of the alleged arms programme.

US forces open fire on Iraqi mosque: 15 killed

REUTERS, AP, Ramadi

An attack on a US military patrol followed by heavy US gunfire left 15 Iraqis dead and 17 wounded in a town west of Baghdad, residents said yesterday.

Residents of Nasaf, a town just outside Ramadi, west of Baghdad, said a roadside bomb exploded next to a US armoured patrol as it passed near the Ibn al-Jawzi mosque shortly after prayers on Friday.

Following the explosion, US troops opened fire, the residents said, shooting toward those emerging from the mosque.

Munem Aftan, the director of Ramadi General Hospital, said 15 people were killed, including eight children, and 17 wounded.

The US military denied troops had opened fire indiscriminately.

"Indiscriminate US fire on civilians? No, nothing even resembling this occurred," Captain Jeffrey Pool,

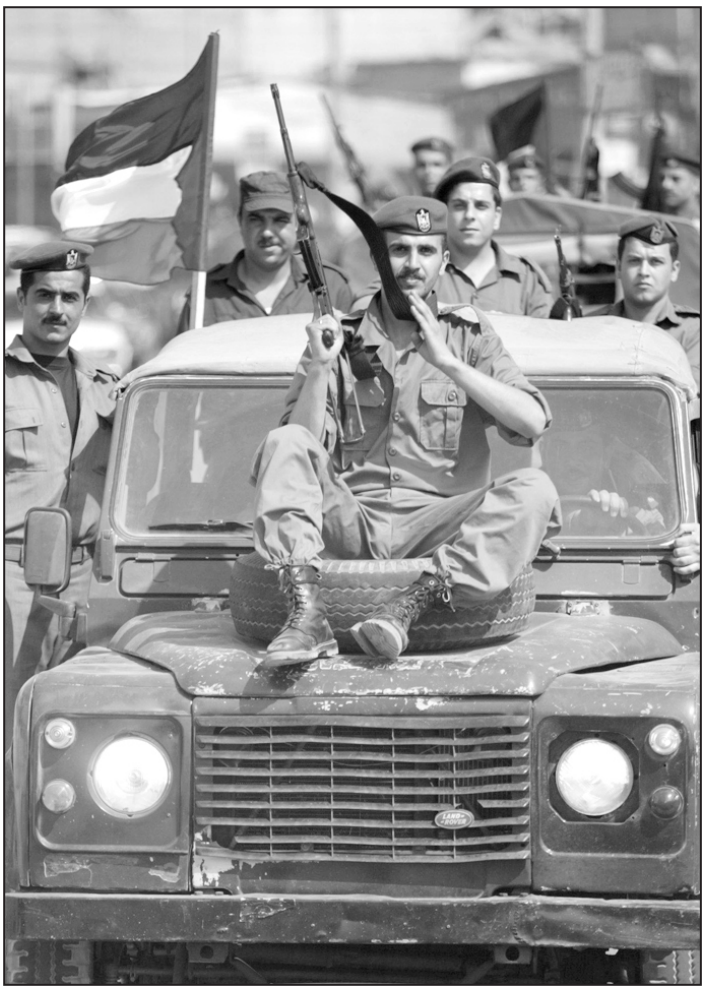
a Marines spokesman in Ramadi, said in an e-mailed reply to questions.

He did not say whether an attack on a US patrol had occurred or whether any US troops were wounded.

The death toll was initially reported as two dead, but doctors said it had risen sharply overnight, with several of the severely wounded succumbing to their injuries.

Iraqi civilians frequently complain that US troops open fire indiscriminately after they are attacked. The US military says it does everything possible to avoid civilian casualties and is careful to respond to attacks in a measured fashion.

Human rights groups have documented scores of cases in which civilians have been shot and killed after approaching US military road-blocks too quickly, or not following instructions to keep away from US military convoys as they pass.



Palestinian security forces patrol along the border with Egypt in the southern Gaza Strip refugee camp of Rafah yesterday. Palestinian security forces deployed in the Gaza Strip as part of Israel's pullout operation, taking up positions they had been forced to abandon almost five years ago at the start of the Intifada.

World outraged at insane killing of Kadirgamar

AFP, Oslo

World leaders yesterday strongly condemned the assassination of Sri Lanka's foreign minister, blamed on Tamil rebels, and expressed fears for the island's shaky Norwegian-led peace process.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was "shocked and saddened" by Lakshman Kadirgamar's murder while peace sponsor Norway described it as "completely insane."

Erik Solheim, a leading Norwegian mediator trying to engineer a lasting peace between the government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), said: "It is completely insane, it is a major setback for the peace process."

The 73-year-old foreign minister, a leading critic of the Tamil rebels, was shot at his private residence in Colombo on Friday evening and

died later in hospital.

The government blamed rebels but they later denied carrying out the attack.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described the killing, which prompted a state of emergency in Sri Lanka, as a terrorist act.

"This senseless murder was a vicious act of terror, which the United States strongly condemns. Those responsible must be brought to justice," Rice said.

The assassination of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister was a brutal and senseless terrorist act, the European Union's foreign affairs commissioner said.

Neighbouring India also condemned the "terrorist crime," but expressed hope that Sri Lanka would maintain political stability.

"We have every confidence the government and the friendly people of Sri Lanka will rise to the challenge

and defeat the forces which seek to undermine Sri Lanka's unity and political stability," the foreign ministry said.

Many countries including Australia paid tribute to Kadirgamar's efforts to bring peace to Sri Lanka.

Maldives, the Indian Ocean atoll nation which lies south-west of Sri Lanka, described the killing as a "senseless, barbaric act" and Canada also expressed outrage.

"Canada urges restraint by all parties. The perpetrators of this terrible act must be brought to justice," said Canadian Foreign Minister Pierre Pettigrew.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said that Paris strongly condemned the assassination of his Sri Lankan counterpart Lakshman Kadirgamar, and called for the continuation of the country's peace process.

British Foreign Secretary Jack

Straw condemned the assassination of Kadirgamar, calling his death "a great loss" for his country and the international community.

Sri Lanka has lost a national hero with the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said Saturday.

South African Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma condemned the "callous murder" of her Sri Lankan counterpart and said the government joined the international community in expressing its "shock and outrage."

"Quite clearly the objective of this assassination was to derail the current peace process between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers," she said in a communique.

Lanka probes intelligence failure

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan authorities were yesterday probing an embarrassing intelligence failure that led to the killing of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar despite tight security, a top police officer said.

Two suspected Tamil rebel snipers gunned down Kadirgamar, 73, after he emerged from the swimming pool at his private residence in Colombo's fashionable residential quarter of Cinnamon Gardens.

"The security was mainly focused on protecting the minister when he was travelling," said a senior police officer who declined to be named. "Three days ago there was a move to increase the number of vehicles in his motorcade."

The officer said questions were being raised about intelligence gathering and screening of the ministers' neighbours as evidence suggested the snipers had set up just two doors away from his home.

"Obviously they had not checked the neighbours as thoroughly as they should have," the officer said.

ANALYSTS SAY Killing may push Lanka back towards war

AFP, Colombo

The assassination of Sri Lanka's foreign minister is a major blow to the faltering peace process with Tamil Tiger rebels and could re-ignite the island's three decade-old civil war, analysts said yesterday.

Lakshman Kadirgamar, a vociferous critic of the Tamil Tiger movement, was shot dead outside his home late Friday, prompting the government to clamp a state of emergency on the Indian Ocean island nation.

Sunanda Deshapriya, director of the Colombo-based Centre for Policy Alternatives, said he feared a Norwegian-brokered between the government and the rebels that has been in place since February 2002 could collapse.

Deshapriya said pressure needed to be placed on the government and rebels to preserve peace

between the two sides has been escalating in recent months.

"There should be both local and international pressure on the parties to hold the course, build confidence and maintain the ceasefire," he told AFP. "Otherwise, there's a chance we will go back to war."

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who have been waging a campaign for a separate homeland for the minority Tamil community for over 30 years, were the prime suspects for the killing, military spokesman Daya Ratnayake said.

But the rebels, who have previously called ethnic Tamil Kadirgamar a traitor to their cause, denied involvement in the assassination and suggested elements in the government could be responsible.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan led international concern for the troubled peace process, saying

he hoped the killing would not weaken resolve to end the conflict between the Singhalese majority and the Tamils.

Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim said the assassination complicated the already difficult task of trying to engineer a lasting peace deal in a country where over 60,000 people have been killed in three decades of conflict.

"It's completely insane, it's a major setback for the peace process," Solheim told AFP in Oslo. "The identity (of the assassin) is not clear, but it is evident that suspicion will fall first on the Tamil Tigers."

An Asian diplomat said the government could now ask Western nations to mount pressure on the Tigers to uphold the ceasefire and pursue the peace process.

Kadirgamar took hardline on LTTE



REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, who was assassinated late on Friday, was a hardliner who helped outlaw the Tamil Tiger rebels and was long seen as a prime target for attack.

Kadirgamar, 73, was an ethnic Tamil and a top adviser to President Chandrika Kumaratunga in a protracted effort to bring about a permanent peace with the Tigers, who have been fighting for a separate state in the north and east of the Indian Ocean island since 1983.

He was thought to have been shot twice in the head, once in the throat and once in the body while in a car near his Colombo home, which was normally surrounded by high security. He died soon after in the National Hospital in Colombo.

"The foreign minister passed away," Justice Minister John Seneviratne told reporters outside the hospital early on Saturday. "It is a great loss."

Government officials declined to comment on who was to blame for the shooting, but Inspector General of Police Chandra Fernando said it was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

"It's the Tigers," he told reporters.

The Tigers, who have repeatedly warned that Sri Lanka is on the brink of a return to the island's two-decade civil war following a rash of attacks in the restive east which the rebels and the military each blame on the other, were not immediately available for comment.

Pakistan steps up security for I-Day

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan tightened security yesterday amid fears that extremists and militants who have been under a stringent crackdown would try to disrupt Independence Day celebrations.

Security levels have been raised in all four provinces and the traditional flag-raising ceremony in Islamabad has been moved indoors, a security official said.

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz will raise the national flag celebrating the 58th anniversary of independence from Britain today in Islamabad's main Convention Centre rather than the usual venue, outside parliament, he said.

"The flag-hoisting venue has been shifted to Convention Centre partly due to security situation and also because of weather," the official told AFP requesting anonymity.



Indian Border Security Force soldiers (R) and their Pakistani counterparts, the Rangers, perform a flag ceremony at the international India-Pakistan Wagah border yesterday. Pakistan and India are set to celebrate their 58th Independence Day respectively today and tomorrow.

Pentagon blocks new Abu Ghraib photos fearing backlash

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon has moved forcefully to block the release of new video evidence of prisoner abuse at Iraq's ill-fated Abu Ghraib prison, arguing it would help recruit new Islamist insurgents and endanger American lives.

The request is contained in a motion filed in federal court by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Richard Myers in response to a plea by several human rights groups to make public 87 photographs and four videotapes made at Abu Ghraib by Specialist Joseph Darby that thus far have been kept under wraps.

Darby triggered the Abu Ghraib scandal last year when he turned over to military investigators extensive photographic and video evidence implicating his fellow military policemen in brutal abuse of prisoners.

BA's Heathrow services face days of disruption

AFP, London

British Airways was facing another day of chaos yesterday as it began to restore flights at London Heathrow airport following strike action which left tens of thousands of passengers stranded.

BA ran its first flight in over 24 hours from the world's busiest international airport late Friday after a wildcat strike paralysed services.

The airline said half its short-haul flights for Saturday in and out of Heathrow and a quarter of its long-haul flights had been scrapped as operations slowly returned to normal.

Flights from Australia, South Africa, India and the United States were due to arrive Saturday morning after being delayed from August 11.

BA geared up to clearing a massive backlog of flights that could take days to complete.

"The airline faces a complex logistical challenge with at least 100 aircraft and 1,000 flying crew out of position. As a result it will take some time to return to a normal flying programme," BA said in a statement.

"We plan to operate up to 50 percent of our short-haul and 75 percent of our long-haul services in to and out of London Heathrow on Saturday."

"We recognise how frustrating this must be but we are working as hard as we can to get customers

away."

A flight to Paris, the first of 31 departures the company pledged to operate late Friday, took off just before 9:00 pm (2000 GMT) with a full load, BA said.

Hordes of other passengers were left behind, queuing for food, drink and blankets at makeshift snack corners set up in the airport's departure lounges, and looked for ways to modify their flight arrangements.

More than 500 BA flights had to be scrapped from Thursday afternoon onwards after 1,000 baggage handlers, cargo loaders and drivers walked out in sympathy with sacked workers at the catering firm that prepares its in-flight meals.

The company's staff in the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) started to return to work on Friday after a walkout in support of sacked employees of Gate Gourmet, BA's catering supplier at Heathrow.

The breakthrough followed an agreement by Gate Gourmet managers to meet officials from the TGWU to try to resolve the row.

Talks between the union and Gate Gourmet were to resume Saturday at 10:30 am (0930 GMT). A TGWU spokesman said Friday's discussions had been "useful".

Across Heathrow departure lounges, thousands of passengers continued an unbroken vigil for alternative travel arrangements.