

Tigers kill 22 soldiers in Lankan firefight

France asks warring parties to resume talks

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels said yesterday they killed 22 soldiers in a firefight in potentially the worst military clash since a 2002 truce, but the army said the number of fatalities would be far lower.

Kayal Viliyan, a senior rebel in the Tigers' eastern political office in the district of Batticaloa, told Reuters around 60 troops entered Tiger territory in an area the military say is government-held, and were surrounded by about 200 rebels.

"We have found 22 bodies, and we are still searching," he said by telephone from Batticaloa. "They came into our area and we retaliated. We have also captured some military personnel."

The military confirmed there had been a clash in Batticaloa, where the dividing line between government and rebel-held areas is often porous and ill-defined, but said four troops were injured and some were

unaccounted for.

"Our patrol was fired upon with heavy weapons and mortars, close to an army camp. Additional troops were rushed to the area, and when they arrived, the Tigers surrounded them," said military spokesman Brig. Prasad Samarasinghe.

"I presume some soldiers have been killed, but it is not 22. It is very much less. A few are missing."

The incident came as Sri Lanka's navy rained mortar shells on Tamil rebel positions in the neighbouring northern district of Trincomalee in a separate incident after suspected snipers killed one sailor and injured another.

The violence also comes after suspected Tiger rebels shot dead three soldiers and a political rival in northern Sri Lanka on Thursday. The ambushes and military clashes have killed more than 700 people so far this year and strained a 2002 truce to the breaking point.

Meanwhile, France yesterday asked Sri Lanka's warring parties

to resume peace negotiations amid an escalation of fighting and said a peace deal was still possible in the embattled South Asian nation.

The outgoing French ambassador Jean Bernard de Vaivre said the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) must stop using violence and enter negotiations with the government to end decades of ethnic bloodshed.

"I believe a solution is still possible," the ambassador said in a message marking the French national day. "It is high time that pretexts sought in order to put off dialogue or to reject it are renounced."

His remarks came as 12 soldiers and four Tiger rebels were killed in an exchange of long-range mortar bomb attacks in the island's restive eastern province.

"Violence and terrorism cannot solve anything. Those in favour of such an approach will never be supported and will never receive the backing either of France or the

international community," the ambassador said.

He said the LTTE was eventually added to the list of terrorist organisations because it consistently refused to change its behaviour despite repeated appeals over the years.

"Equally, however, the state should not tolerate any reprehensible actions from any members of its representatives," the ambassador said in a reference to allegations of human rights abuses by security forces.

"Sri Lanka possesses so much potential talent, so many skills within each of its large communities that it is high time that they put an end to the quarrels of the past and turn towards the future," he said.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in the island's drawn out Tamil separatist conflict. Tiger rebels have been fighting for independence from the majority Sinhalese nation of 19.5 million people.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian boy watches others walking on the remains of a destroyed bridge following overnight shelling from an Israeli air strike near the Gaza Strip Nusseirat refugee camp yesterday. Israel pressed on with its air assault on Gaza in a bid to retrieve a soldier abducted nearly three weeks ago and stop rocket attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan nationalists demonstrate outside the private Apollo hospital in Colombo yesterday where Tamil Tiger spokesman Velayudam Dayanidi, better known as Daya Master, was admitted on July 13 after suffering a heart attack.

Nepali Maoists to hold talks with top leaders of 8 parties next week

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels are slated to meet the country's prime minister next week for a second round of high-level peace talks aimed at ending a decade-long bloody insurgency, their leader said yesterday.

"We have agreed to hold high-level talks between the top leaders of eight parties next Friday," Prachanda told journalists as he left a talks session near the capital.

The rebels and new government have been observing a ceasefire for over two months and have agreed to draft a temporary constitution that will allow the rebels to join an interim government.

Prachanda, whose given name is Pushpa Kamal Dahal, and his second-in-command Baburam Bhattarai met with leaders Nepal's

two largest parties, the Nepali Congress party and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) for seven hours on Friday.

"There had been crisis of confidence among the seven-party government and the Maoists in the effective implementation of the eight-point agreement. Today's meeting sorted out the differences that had cropped up and rebuilt confidence," Bhattarai said as he left the meeting.

The leader of the NCP (UML), Nepal's second largest party, was equally upbeat about Friday's meeting.

"The meeting has created a favourable environment for putting the Maoist-seven parties deal in action without any disputes," said Madhav Kumar Nepal, general secretary of the CPN (UML).

400,000-yr-old DNA found in bear tooth

AFP, Stockholm

A Swedish-led team of scientists has discovered 400,000-year-old DNA in bear teeth, the Uppsala University in Sweden said yesterday.

The team, made up of Swedish, Spanish and German researchers, discovered the remains of the bear in a cave in Atapuerca, northern Spain.

"It is usually hard to find DNA that is older than 100,000 years, and work on fossilized DNA mostly focuses on material that is a few tens of thousands of years old, at most," team leader Anders Goetherstroem said in a statement.

He said the find "pushed back the frontier" concerning the age of DNA that scientists could work with. "It means that it will be possible to subject a large number of extinct animals to DNA analysis," he said.

Quiet fear hangs over Mumbai Muslims

REUTERS, Mumbai

It appears like any other day in Bhandi Bazaar, one of Mumbai's predominately Muslim quarters.

But three days after a series of bomb attacks in Mumbai that left more than 150 dead and over 700 wounded, all is not quite as normal as it seems.

The narrow streets, lined with tea shops, sweet stalls and stores selling everything from second-hand electronics to mangoes, are bustling, but an underlying sense of tension prevails because Muslim militant are prime suspects.

"I'd rather not get involved," says one trader, when asked about his feelings on the Tuesday evening rush hour blasts which hit seven stations along the city's lifeline railway system.

"Please go and ask someone

else," he says.

Others, who cautiously begin to speak, are quickly told by fellow merchants to hush up and keep quiet about the bombings -- fearing that sharing the same religion with those suspected of the attacks will spell trouble.

Indian officials on Thursday named Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) as the prime suspect behind the coordinated bombings.

LeT has long operated in Indian-ruled Kashmir, but is believed to have expanded its area of operations recently.

It is blamed for bombings in New Delhi's markets in October that killed more than 60 people, as well as blasts in Varanasi in March, which killed 15.

Lashkar has denied any role in what it called "inhuman and barbaric acts".

Iran warns Israel against extending conflict

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad boasted yesterday that Israel is not powerful enough to take on Iran after warning the Jewish state not to attack regional ally Syria.

"Thanks be to God, despite its criminal and savage nature, the Zionist regime and its supporters in the West do not have the power to look in the same way towards Iran," the ultra-conservative president said in a speech in the provinces.

He was speaking as Israel continued its offensive in Lebanon sparked by the capture Wednesday by Iran- and Syria-backed Hezbollah militiamen of

two Israeli soldiers and the killing of eight others.

"Attacks by the Zionist regime against its neighbours, notably Lebanon, Syria, and its threats against other countries in the region are due to the fact that this puppet regime cannot live normally," IRNA quoted Ahmadinejad as saying.

"This situation cannot last, and one day the protectors of the Zionist regime -- the US in particular -- will have to explain themselves and be judged by the conscience of humanity," he added.

His comments came after he warned Israel against conducting any attack against Syria -- the Islamic republic's only ally in the

region.

"If Israel commits another act of idiocy and aggresses Syria, this will be the same as an aggression against the entire Islamic world and it will receive a stinging response," he said in a telephone conversation with his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad.

"The Israeli aggressions are a result of the weakness of a puppet regime that is on its way towards disappearing," state television quoted him as saying.

The hardline president, famed for calling for Israel to be "wiped off the map", also said the "Zionists and their protectors are the people held in most contempt by humanity" and promised their "rapid downfall".



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of Pakistan's six-party Islamic alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) carry placards and shout slogans in Islamabad yesterday during a protest against the Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon and Palestine. Pakistan has strongly condemned the Israeli bombardment of Beirut airport describing the attack as a "dangerous escalation."

Ex-CIA officer sues Cheney over leak

AP, Washington

Former CIA officer Valerie Plame is suing Vice President Dick Cheney, presidential adviser Karl Rove and other White House officials, saying they orchestrated a "whispering campaign" to destroy her career.

In a lawsuit filed Thursday in US District Court, Plame and her husband, Joseph Wilson, a former US ambassador, said Cheney, Rove and Cheney's former chief of staff, I. Lewis Libby, leaked her CIA status to reporters to punish Wilson for criticizing the Bush administration's motives in Iraq.

Plame's identity as a CIA officer was revealed in a July 14, 2003, article by syndicated columnist Robert Novak. At the time, Plame's job as an operations officer was classified information. Novak's column appeared eight days after Wilson alleged in an opinion piece in The New York Times that the Bush administration had twisted prewar intelligence on Iraq to justify going to war.

The CIA had sent Wilson to Niger in early 2002 to determine whether there was any truth to reports that Iraq had made a deal to acquire yellowcake, uranium from the government of Niger to make a nuclear weapon.



PHOTO: AFP

In this file photo, former CIA agent Valerie Plame (R) and her husband Joseph Wilson chat with guests before taking their seats at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner on April 29, 2006, at the Washington Hilton Hotel in Washington, DC.

Japan hangs tough for UN sanctions on North Korea

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan held out yesterday for a UN resolution that would impose sanctions on North Korea for its missile tests, and said an alternative resolution proposed by China and Russia did not go far enough.

It was unclear, however, whether Japan and its close security ally, the United States, were set for a showdown or a compromise with Beijing and Moscow over the missile launches, which in one short week have split regional powers over how to respond.

Foreign Minister Tarō Aso talked of giving ground.

"It is common sense that both sides cannot achieve a perfect grade so both sides have to compromise so they can be satisfied," Aso told a news conference.

However, he said reports that negotiations were moving toward the China-Russia proposal were "totally wrong."

He said Japan still wanted the Security Council to adopt its resolution, which has been sponsored by

seven other countries, including the United States. That resolution would impose sanctions on Pyongyang for its salvo of missile tests last week.

The alternative Chinese-Russian text calls on UN members to exercise vigilance rather than insisting they prevent the supply of materials and technologies to North Korea's missile programme.

"China and Russia have come closer, but it is far from sufficient," Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe told Reuters in an interview.

"We will continue to insist on a binding resolution with sanctions," added Abe, who is in charge of coordinating government policy and is also Japan's top government spokesman.

Abe said later that Tokyo and Washington agreed on the need for the Security Council to vote soon. "Japan and the United States agreed a binding resolution including sanctions should be put to the vote promptly," he told a news conference.

F-16 sale to Pakistan hits snag in Congress

REUTERS, Washington

US lawmakers, fearful of any warplane-technology leakage to China, are demanding more safeguards for a potential \$5 billion sale to Pakistan of F-16 fighter jets and weapons systems, a key congressman said on Thursday.

"We have reason to be concerned that all security conditions be in place before we approve the sale," Rep. Tom Lantos, the top Democrat on the House International Relations Committee, said in a telephone interview with Reuters.

On June 28, the Bush administration formally notified Congress of plans to sell Pakistan up to 36 F-16C/D Block 50/52 Falcon fighters built by Lockheed Martin Corp. in a deal worth up to \$5 billion if all options are exercised.

Congress has the power to block such a sale by enacting a resolution of disapproval in both houses within 30 days of the notification date.

"We are dealing with a country that gave us A.Q. Khan," said Lantos, referring to a Pakistani scientist who confessed in 2004 to peddling banned nuclear wares around the world for years despite international safeguards.

Bush, Cong struggle with terror issues

AP, Washington

The Bush administration and Congress are struggling to resolve three election-year issues that colour US and international perceptions of the war on terror: detainee treatment, military tribunals and government eavesdropping.

The biggest progress Thursday came with word that President Bush agreed, conditionally, to support legislation that would open a special court review of the administration's most controversial terrorist surveillance programme.

Bush has faced unyielding questions about his 2001 directive authorising the National Security Agency to monitor without court warrants the international communications of people on US soil when terrorism is suspected.

The deal with Senate Judiciary Chairman Arlen Specter, R-Pa., signaled the White House was trying to find a way to reach some closure on the debate over the programme. "The president and Congress are coming together," White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said.

Specter called the agreement, which faces a lengthy congressional

nal battle, a balance between security and privacy. "The president does not have a blank check," he said Thursday.

The administration also is working on a second front created by a June 29 Supreme Court decision that rebuked the administration's policies governing the detention and military tribunals of suspected extremists captured during the war on terror.

The court ruled that the Pentagon's tribunal system was not authorized by Congress and violates international law. It also added a new wrinkle to the US war effort by finding the most basic of the Geneva Conventions protections should extend to al-Qaeda.

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, meeting with reporters on Thursday, offered the clearest statement yet from the administration that the decision will apply to any radical Jihadis in American custody, even beyond those being held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"The court made a ruling that Common Article 3 applies to our conflict with al-Qaeda," Gonzales said, referring to an article of the Geneva Conventions dealing with the treatment of prisoners of war.