

Lanka steps up attacks amid fears for truce

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday intensified artillery and mortar bomb attacks against Tamil Tigers after declaring that four days of air strikes that killed at least 15 rebels was not a return to full-scale war.

Military officials said security forces stepped up artillery attacks against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the northeast district of Trincomalee where the rebels have blocked an irrigation canal.

"There have been no air attacks so far today, but artillery and mortar bombs have been directed at identified LTTE targets," a military official in the area said by telephone.

The defence ministry said the attacks were aimed at ending a Tiger blockade of the canal that had deprived thousands of farmers of

water.

"The security forces are currently engaged in a limited operation with a clearly defined objective of securing water supplies to the civilian population," the ministry said in a statement.

Sri Lankan warplanes bombed Tamil Tiger positions for four straight days Wednesday through Saturday, despite a ceasefire since February 2002.

The violence, part of an escalation between the rebels and the government that erupted after presidential elections in November 2005, has led some of the Nordic countries monitoring the ceasefire to withdraw from the Swedish-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM).

The LTTE has demanded that observers from European Union members Finland, Denmark and Sweden leave the island after the EU added it to a list of "terrorist"

organisations in May. That would leave only Norwegian and Icelandic monitors.

Finland and Denmark announced on Friday they would pull out by the end of August. Sweden has yet to announce its position.

Meanwhile, a regional Tamil Tiger leader asked the monitors Sunday to declare the troubled truce was officially over following the aerial bombing campaign.

"It is now appropriate for the SLMM to declare publicly that the ceasefire agreement is not holding anymore on the ground," S. Elilan told the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website.

He said the rebels had also written to the LTTE requesting the move.

Under the February 2002 deal brokered by Norway, the truce can be terminated by the Tigers or the

Sri Lankan government with a written declaration to quit in two weeks.

Neither have officially said they want out of the truce although both have repeatedly accused the other of violations.

Two policemen were shot dead in Trincomalee on Friday by suspected Tiger gunmen, police said, pushing the death toll since violence flared in December to at least 910.

Peacebroker Norway is to send special envoy Jon Hanss-Bauer to Colombo next month to try to salvage the ceasefire, diplomats said.

Britain's deputy high commissioner Lesley Craig met the Tiger leadership in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi on Friday and asked them to honour the ceasefire and move towards negotiations, the high commission (embassy) said.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistan residents carry their belongings as they cross a flooded area in Charsada District some 40 km from Peshawar Saturday. At least 30 people were feared dead after flash floods swept them away overnight in northern Pakistan.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian security officer stands alert at a busy book market in New Delhi yesterday as part of the increased security for the Independence Day celebrations due to be held at the Red Fort on August 15.

20 Taliban killed ahead of Nato's expansion in south

AFP, Kabul

US-led coalition troops and Afghan security forces killed 20 militants and foiled a Taliban-led ambush in southern Afghanistan ahead of the scheduled expansion of Nato's presence in the restive region, the US military said yesterday.

The fighting erupted after a group of Taliban militants attempted an ambush in the Shahidi Assees district of Uruzgan province late Saturday, it said.

"Afghan National Army and coalition forces killed 20 Taliban extremists ... after they attempted an ambush from a compound," a military statement said, without giving details about the compound.

The coalition forces responded with artillery and air strikes, the statement said.

The clash was the latest in a spate of violence in the south, where a Nato force will take over from the US-led coalition on Monday. The military reported no casualties among coalition forces or Afghan troops.

Uruzgan, one of the four southern provinces where Nato will take charge on Monday, has seen much activity by the Taliban and other Islamic militants. Kandahar and neighbouring Helmand and Zabul provinces also see almost daily Taliban attacks mainly targeting Afghan and foreign troops.

On Friday 18 Taliban fighters -- 14 of them in Helmand -- and four Afghan policemen were killed in fighting with Afghan and coalition troops.

Thousands of US-led troops and Nato peacekeeping forces remain in Afghanistan following the toppling of the fundamentalist Taliban regime in late 2001.

Nato, which took command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) almost three years ago, will take charge of security in the south from the US-led coalition.

With the move the number of troops in six southern provinces will double to 8,000.

By expanding its presence to the restive south, Nato knows that it is putting not only its credibility but probably also its future on the line.

"It is the toughest ground mission, if not the toughest mission overall, the alliance with other partners has ever embarked on," ISAF spokesman Major Luke Knittig said last week.

16 Indian workers die in Bahrain fire

PTI, Manama

At least 16 Indians, all from Tamil Nadu, died of suffocation and seven others injured when a fire broke out in a three-storey building, housing over 200 expatriates, in Manama, capital city of Bahrain, on Sunday.

The fire, apparently caused by a short circuit, broke out at around 2.30 am (5 am IST) in the second floor of the building used as a residence for workers in the Gudabiya area, officials said.

"Nearly 16 suffocated to death due to heavy smoke, seven injured and 196 have been rescued," the Interior Ministry said.

Indian Ambassador to Manama Balakrishna Shetty, who along with Bahrain Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa visited the site

of the accident, said the seven injured suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning and were on oxygen support in hospital.

One of the injured also suffered a fracture in his hand as he tried to jump from a window after breaking its glass to escape the fire, he said. However, all the injured were out of danger, Shetty, who visited them in hospital, said.

The ambassador said all the victims - both dead and injured - were from Tamil Nadu and worked for Royal Towers Construction company. He said the people on the ground and first floors of the building escaped the fire and shifted to a neighbouring gym.

The company was warned in January over the poor safety of the workers but had not taken any safety measures and was flouting the labour laws, he said.

India seeks results from Pak peace moves

REUTERS, Kolkata

India remains committed to making peace with Pakistan but the effort would mean little if it does not help curb the movement of Kashmiri militants across the border, India's defence minister said yesterday.

Pranab Mukherjee's comments came just a day before top officials from the two old rivals hold talks in an effort to resume a peace process which has been put on ice by bomb blasts in Mumbai.

New Delhi called off talks scheduled for earlier this month after the July 11 bomb attacks, which it says could have been organised by a Pakistan-based radical Islamic group or by the country's Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency.

Both Pakistan and the militant group denied the charges but the decision sparked concerns that the nuclear-powered neighbours were once again set to go down a path of mutual recrimination and hostility

that have marked their ties for most of the last half a century.

"Every government of India is committed to peace with Pakistan, with everybody. Where is the question of wavering? It is not that it has been stopped permanently," Mukherjee, the number two in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's cabinet, told Reuters in an interview.

"The peace process is a continuing one...but peace for what? It is to ensure that there would be no terrorist infiltration, no terrorist activities aided and abetted by Pakistan," Mukherjee said on a flight from New Delhi to Kolkata.

"That is the objective of the peace process."

It was inevitable that India would take steps like putting off peace talks after terror attacks like the Mumbai blasts in which more than 180 people were killed, the minister said.

New Delhi has for long accused Islamabad of aiding Kashmiri

militants fighting Indian rule since 1989 in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Pakistan says it has done all it could to stop the insurgents in line with a pledge it made in 2004 when the two countries launched fresh moves to make peace and resolve their territorial claims over Kashmir.

With the peace process coming under severe strain after the Mumbai blasts, some Pakistani leaders have suggested that the Indian prime minister visit Pakistan under an invitation he has accepted but not set dates for a trip.

Such a visit would breathe fresh life into the peace process and improve the "atmospherics" between the neighbours, Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshed Mehmood Kasuri said in an interview to an Indian weekly published this weekend.

Kashmir militants planning to use mobile bombs

PTI, Jammu

As part of a new strategy, terrorists were planning to strike targets in Jammu and Kashmir using "mobile bombs," a Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist arrested recently has revealed.

The terrorists were collecting SIM cards to prepare the "mobile bombs" and many of them were already in possession of these, 16-year-old LeT terrorist Noor Illahi alias Tipu disclosed during interrogation at Mendhar police station in Poonch, official sources said on Sunday.

They said though mobile bombs were not used by terrorists in the state so far, such devices were used by al-Qaeda in the serial blasts in Malaysia in January this year.

Disclosing how mobile bombs are made, Tipu said a high quality one kg explosive, generally RDX mixed with TNT, is tied with an activated mobile handset.

The set is kept in vibrator mode and its frequency is matched with that of the explosive device. It will explode as soon as a ring is given on its number from another telephone.

Tipu and his associate Saddam Hussain, presently in custody, were asked by top LeT ultras Arbaaz and Abu Shaheen to plant first mobile bomb outside the house of Opposition National Conference leader and MLA Javed Rana in Mendhar after ensuring that Rana was present in the house.

Thailand confirms 2nd bird flu outbreak

AFP, Bangkok

Thai officials Sunday ordered the slaughter of 300,000 chickens after the second outbreak this year of the deadly H5N1 bird flu virus was discovered on a farm in the northeast.

"The H5N1 virus was found in chickens in a local farm," Charal Trinuthipong, assistant to the agricultural minister, told AFP.

The outbreak at a farm in Nakorn Phanom province, 740km northeast of Bangkok, follows the death on Wednesday of a boy from bird flu -- Thailand's first such death in seven months.

"It is the second outbreak (this year) following the one in Phichit province," Charal added.

He said more than one hundred volunteers had been deployed to

cull about 300,000 chickens near the affected area.

Authorities earlier threatened people with a 2,000 baht (52 dollar) fine for failing to report any sick or dead poultry.

Agriculture ministry officials said the measures, due to be officially announced Monday, would be enforced across the country.

"People will be guilty if they fail to report sick and dead poultry, with a maximum fine of 2,000 baht," an official told AFP, adding that the measures would come under existing legislation to counter animal-linked epidemics.

Health authorities have been on high alert since Wednesday's death. The victim, a 17-year-old boy, caught the virus from one of his fighting cocks in northern Thailand. He had not reported the death of his bird because he feared the rest would be culled.

Authorities moved quickly to contain the outbreak, banning all movement of poultry in Phichit province and deploying 20 veterinarians from Bangkok. Seven other provinces were put on high alert.

No further human cases have been reported but 88 people with flu-like symptoms from 14 provinces are currently under observation pending the results of blood tests, the health ministry said.

Officials have insisted that the latest death will not derail Thailand's plans to eradicate the disease within three years, which the government believes is essential to shore up confidence in its poultry industry.



PHOTO: AFP
Afghan President Hamid Karzai (R) talks with French Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie during a meeting in Kabul yesterday. Alliot-Marie is on a two-day trip in Afghanistan to show her support for French troops participating in Nato and coalition operations.