

Food running out in parts of Lanka: UN

Aid ship arrives in besieged Jaffna

AFP, REUTERS, Colombo

The United Nations said Friday food was running out in strife-torn parts of Sri Lanka with the government stalling the entry of the organisation's aid convoys into rebel-held areas.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) said it was unable to get to northern parts of the country held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and warned the food situation there was becoming critical.

In some areas fuel was being sold at 400 percent the normal price and piped water was available only four hours a day, the group said.

It added that 204,000 people had left their homes since May 2004 across northeastern Sri Lanka, where rebels are battling

government forces to set up a homeland for the country's Tamil minority.

"Without better access, WFP will not be able to continue feeding displaced persons living in areas outside of government control," said Jeff Taft-Dick, WFP country director, in a statement.

"In spite of high-level negotiations between the United Nations and the government of Sri Lanka the issue of humanitarian access to areas not under government control has not been resolved," the statement added.

He told reporters the situation was "extremely frustrating" with staff in the northern Jaffna peninsula and other rebel-held areas reporting food, water, and medical shortages.

In parts of Sri Lanka checkpoints

prevent passage between government and rebel-held territory.

An aid shipment to the Jaffna peninsula arrived late Thursday and the process of unloading 1,500 tonnes of food has started.

But other areas of the country remained cut off, said Taft-Dick.

The LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka signed a ceasefire in 2002 but a resurgence in fighting has left some 1,500 dead since December.

Earlier the first aid ship to break a two week siege of Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula prepared to unload yesterday, while another Red Cross-flagged vessel left port to evacuate foreign nationals.

More than three weeks of fighting between the army and Tamil Tiger rebels has created a humanitarian crisis in north and east Sri

Lanka and some 180,000 people have fled their homes. With road, air and sea links to Jaffna cut, shortages are rife.

Air strikes and artillery continued in parts of the region on Friday. Diplomats say Sri Lanka's two decade civil war between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has now effectively resumed, and returning to a 2002 ceasefire seems unlikely unless both make concessions.

The aid ship is carrying over 1,000 tonnes of rice, lentils and some tinned food from the government and the United Nations World Food Programme.



Int'l force possible for Gaza too: Italy

REUTERS, Jerusalem

International troops could be sent to the Gaza Strip if the force being deployed in Lebanon proves successful, Italian foreign minister Massimo D'Alema said in remarks published yesterday.

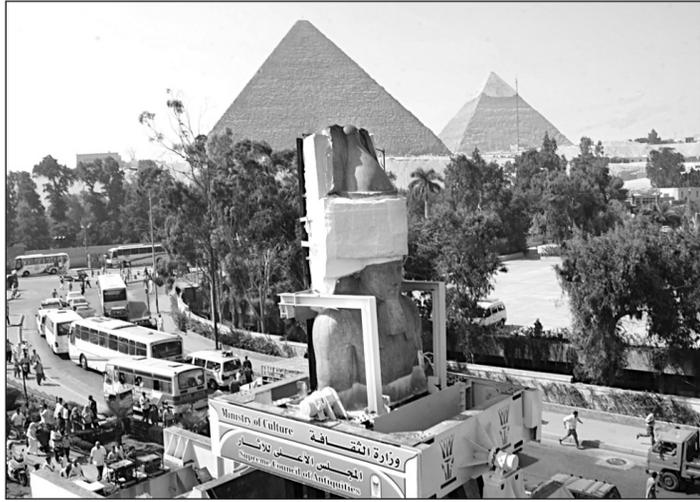
"The idea of sending UN troops to the Gaza Strip is currently being aired. But I think that if things go well in Lebanon, a similar process could also begin in the Gaza Strip," D'Alema told Israel's left-leaning Haaretz newspaper.

Italy plans to send up to 3,000 troops to the international force in Lebanon following the 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah.

Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip one year ago, but launched a major ground offensive in the coastal territory after Palestinian militants kidnapped an Israeli soldier in a cross-border raid on June 25.

The Israeli offensive has killed more than 165 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them civilians.

Indian anti-quota demonstrators with stickers on their mouth take part in a silent protest march in Kolkata yesterday. Indian medical students protested in various Indian cities against government plans to reserve more university seats for low-caste students.



Cairo bids joyous farewell to giant Ramses statue

AFP, Cairo

Hundreds of thousands of people lined Cairo's streets yesterday to bid farewell to one of the metropolis's landmarks as the colossal statue of Ramses II completed its journey from the polluted city to a spot near the Pyramids.

"Ramses should be happy. He would have cursed us from his tomb if we hadn't got his statue out of this unimaginable chaos of pollution and ugliness," Egypt antiquities chief Zahi Hawass told AFP after the statue completed its odyssey.

After years of controversy and logistical headaches, the high-risk operation to move the 100-tonne, 11-metre (36 foot) high pink granite statue in one piece finally got underway at its scheduled time of 1:00 am.

The statue -- mounted on a huge mobile base and towed by a massive truck -- took 10 hours to complete its 35-kilometre (21 mile) journey.

Hawass hailed the task's completion, done at a cost of around one million euros (1.3 million dollars). "Today, we Egyptians have managed ourselves to transport the statue while in the past foreigners looked after our antiquities."

The massive statue of Ramses II passes close to the great pyramids in Giza during the end of its journey from the polluted city to a spot near the Pyramids and closer to its original site yesterday. After years of controversy, the high-risk operation to move the 100-tonne, 11-metre (36 feet) high pink granite statue in one piece finally got underway at its scheduled time.

Israeli leaders pounded by resignation calls

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's embattled leadership, discredited to an unprecedented extent by the Lebanon war and sex scandals, teetered yesterday under calls for the prime minister, defence minister and army chief to resign.

The increasing pressure on Israel's elected officials is linked to a series of separate events that all happened on the same day -- Wednesday, July 12:

- The Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah captured two soldiers, killed eight others and Israel went to war in Lebanon.

- The attorney general decided to open a police investigation into allegations that President Moshe Katsav sexually harassed a woman employee.

- Justice Minister Haim Ramon attended a Tel Aviv bash and allegedly kissed a woman soldier against her will, sparking fresh sex allegations and ultimately forcing his resignation this week.

After a month, the war failed to

achieve its aims of stopping Hezbollah rocket attacks, which killed 41 Israelis, or freeing the two soldiers.

Just 113 days since Prime Minister Ehud Olmert took office promising to redraw Israel's borders with the Palestinians amid the optimism of the Gaza Strip pullout, his government's approval ratings have sunk to an all-time low.

And never before have Israeli leaders been so discredited by failure and sexual impropriety, to an extent that Katsav reportedly faces even rape accusations.

"The crisis is so serious that the government seems ultimately doomed," political science professor Shlomo Avineri told AFP.

Although he believes the crisis is not just because of the war, it translates into "a lack of confidence in the entire political class" thanks to the accumulating scandals, the former director of the foreign ministry said.

Thaksin accuses army of plotting to kill him

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra yesterday accused a group of military officers of plotting to kill him with a powerful bomb that police discovered near his home.

Police defused a potent mix of TNT, plastic explosives, fertilizer and fuel oil found Thursday in the trunk of a car at an intersection near Thaksin's home, which they said was a foiled attempt to kill the prime minister.

An army officer was arrested shortly after the bomb was found and charged with illegal possession of explosives, prompting Thaksin to sack a top general.

"There are three to four military officers involved in the assassination plot. Some of them are retired," Thaksin said.

"We know which group made (the bomb) and more suspects will be arrested," he said.

"I never thought this kind of thing could happen in Thailand. I don't have wicked intentions towards anybody," Thaksin said.

The billionaire prime minister said that no link had been discovered between the plot and retired General Chamlong Srimuang, who helped spearhead months of anti-Thaksin protests that rattled Bangkok earlier this year.

Police said the suspect was a 43-year-old army lieutenant who most recently had been assigned to spy on Islamic militants in Thailand's deep south.

After initially denying the charges, on Friday he confessed to carrying explosives illegally, but not to plotting to kill Thaksin, police said.

The suspect was taken Friday to a military base in Bangkok to await a court martial.

But Thaksin and other top officials tried to quash speculation in the Thai media that the bomb scare might have been a political stunt. Such rumours were fuelled by the contradictory accounts police initially gave of how they found the bomb.