

Troops halt advance amid fierce LTTE resistance

Dozens killed in fighting as India warns against war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops facing heavy resistance halted an advance yesterday into territory held by the rebel Tamil Tigers, as the death toll from recent fighting hit 119, officials and guerrillas said.

The drive to nullify rebel artillery guns in Sampur town, which threaten the strategically important naval port of Trincomalee about 10km away, stalled because of rebel resistance, a military officer said.

He said artillery duels had died down Tuesday, but war planes bombed suspected Tamil Tiger bases north of Trincomalee in a bid to knock out guerrilla supplies.

The battle for Sampur included air, artillery and ground attacks over late Sunday and Monday.

Military sources said 15 soldiers were killed and another 92 wounded.

It is the latest bloody clash in Sri Lanka's three-decade-old ethnic conflict, which has escalated since December after a February 2002 ceasefire began unravelling.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also shelled an army camp at Batticaloa and troops retaliated in kind," the military officer told AFP by phone from the region. "We have no details of casualties there yet."

Meanwhile troops killed at least 16 Tiger guerrillas in the northern town of Vavuniya after they attempted to attack a military

bunker line early Tuesday, the defence ministry said in a statement.

It said two civilians were also gunned down by unidentified gunmen in Vavuniya.

The LTTE, which wants to carve out a homeland for Sri Lanka's minority Tamils, complaining they are discriminated against, said 20 civilians were killed and 26 injured in air and artillery attacks late Monday.

The rebel group did not list any casualties it may have suffered in the Sampur fighting. The defence ministry said at least 66 rebels were killed on Monday by security forces in and around Sampur.

It was not possible to get independent verification of the casualty figures.

The ministry said the Sampur

offensive was launched after the rebels fired mortar bombs and small arms at security forces from their positions in the town.

Meanwhile, India Monday warned Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels that a return to civil war would not resolve the country's decades-old ethnic conflict.

Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran also repeated India's position that it did not support the creation of a separate state for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority.

"We do not believe that war is the way out," Saran told reporters here.

"We do not think violence, whether from LTTE's (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam rebels) side or an armed conflict can resolve any issue," he said.

Nepali king to be questioned over crackdown

REUTERS, Kathmandu

An inquiry panel will question Nepal's king about his role in the killing of pro-democracy activists in April, an official said yesterday, an unprecedented move in a nation which once revered its monarch.

The panel has already grilled dozens of officials, including ministers in the royalist cabinet headed by King Gyanendra, who was forced to step down after he failed to quell weeks of often violent demonstrations in the Himalayan nation.

At least 22 people were killed and more than 5,000 wounded as troops shot and beat protesters who brought Nepal to a standstill for three weeks before the king handed power back to political parties and restored parliament.

Many officials questioned so far had blamed the government of the day for the crackdown, said Harihar Birahi, a member of the panel appointed by the interim government in response to calls for action against those responsible for the violence.



PHOTO: AFP

A combo shows New Orleans on July 12, 2006, (L) almost one year after Hurricane Katrina flooded this area while residents attempt to escape floodwaters on August 31, 2005 from the same area of the city in the aftermath of the hurricane horror.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani policemen patrol a street littered with debris and burning items in Quetta yesterday during a demonstration staged following the funeral of rebel tribal chief Nawab Akbar Bugti, who was killed in a military operation last week.

1,500 rebels surrender in Baluchistan

Unrest erupts after Bugti's funeral

AFP, Quetta

Some 1,500 Pakistani tribal militants and their commanders surrendered to authorities in the southwestern province of Baluchistan yesterday, three days after the military killed a rebel chief, state media reported. The militants and three commanders from Marri tribe laid down their arms citing poverty and unemployment as reasons for the surrender, the Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) said.

They had been "misguided" by tribal leader Khair Bukhsh Marri to take up arms against security forces and attack government installations, APP said.

Surrendering in Thardari town in Kohlu district, they promised to now support the government, the report said.

Weapons handed over included

rocket launchers, machine guns, Kalashnikov rifles, missile and explosives, the news agency said.

The surrender follows the killing of the chief of rebel Bugti tribe, Nawab Akbar Bugti in a military strike on Saturday.

Meanwhile, a mob set buildings ablaze and set off homemade bombs yesterday in a third day of unrest in Pakistan after the army's killing of a popular rebel tribal chief, police and witnesses said.

The crowd started rampaging through the streets in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan province, after funeral prayers for Nawab Akbar Bugti, who was killed on Saturday.

The mob torched a local bank and set a district government building alight, setting off plumes of thick black smoke, an AFP reporter said. Four makeshift bombs exploded in shops near the venue of the prayers.

Ahmadinejad challenges Bush to TV debate

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Tuesday offered his US counterpart George W. Bush a live television debate as he shrugged off the threat of sanctions ahead of a looming UN deadline for Iran to halt sensitive atomic work.

"I suggest we talk with Mr Bush, the president of the United States, in a live television debate about world issues and ways out of these standoffs. We would voice our opinions and they would too," he told a news conference.

The debate "should be uncensored, above all for the American public," said Ahmadinejad, who earlier this year sent Bush a letter in the first contact in decades between leaders of the two arch-foes.

But the outspoken president said that such a debate would not necessarily mean reopening dialogue with the United States, which froze diplomatic relations with Iran after the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979.

"Debate is different from dialogue, dialogue has other conditions we have said our position on that before."

But he added that dialogue was also possible with "the ones who show a frown to our nations if the conditions are fulfilled".

A YEAR AFTER HURRICANE HORROR Katrina rebuilding 'long way off'

REUTERS, Gulfport

One year after Hurricane Katrina battered the US Gulf Coast and his political standing, President George W. Bush acknowledged on Monday that a complete recovery was still a long way off.

"There is hope down here, there is still a lot of work to be done," Bush said. "This is an anniversary but it doesn't mean it's an end. Frankly it's just the beginning of what is going to be a long recovery."

The August 29 anniversary of Katrina, which killed about 1,500 people and devastated New Orleans, holds perils for Bush as it rekindles memories of government missteps in the initial response to one of the worst US natural disasters.

As the midterm election approaches in November, Bush's approval ratings are near 40 percent, never having fully recovered from the damage they suffered in Katrina's aftermath.

Listing progress on the Gulf Coast, Bush said Mississippi beaches, once littered with debris, were now "pristine" and school districts across the area had reopened, though many had to hold classes in trailers.

Stopping at a shipbuilding company where employees wiped gray boats with cloths, Bush told reporters that the company, United States Marine Inc., was hiring and noted there was a worker shortage, but housing also was scarce.

Pressed for a time frame for the rebuilding, Bush said: "Well it's hard for me to say. I would say years, not

months."

Bush flew later to New Orleans, where his motorcade passed neighbourhoods with some newly built homes and others with tattered roofs. He rode past the Convention Centre, where many flood victims fled only to become stranded in stifling heat.

A sign on the Superdome said, "Reopening 9-25-2006, Go Saints," and a sign on a pole said, "We tear down houses," with a phone number on it.

Bush was to dine with New Orleans officials, including Mayor Ray Nagin, who said he wanted to see a faster flow of resources to the local level.

The horrors experienced at the Superdome and elsewhere in New Orleans stoked concern about racial and economic divisions because blacks and the poor bore the brunt of the suffering.

Asked if he believed race was a factor in the slow federal response to Katrina, Nagin said: "If it would have been a bunch of rich people in New Orleans, I think there would have been a different response. I really do."

Bush rejected the idea that race influenced the response.

"Whoever says that is trying to politicise a very difficult situation," Bush told American Urban Radio Network in an interview. But he acknowledged the hurricane had exposed a racial divide in the United States and said he hoped the rebuilding could heal it.

Time for Israel to lift Lebanon blockade

Says Annan

AFP, Naqura

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said Tuesday it was time for Israel to lift a "humiliating" blockade on Lebanon and for the Lebanese to better secure their borders.

"We need to deal with the lifting of the embargo -- sea, land and air -- which for the Lebanese is a humiliation, and infringement on their sovereignty," Annan said before ending his visit and flying to Israel.

"And of course the (Lebanese) government needs measures to assure, ensure that the entrances

(to) the country -- sea, land and air -- are secure," he said during a ceremony at the UN headquarters in the southern port of Naqura.

"I think the time has come for the siege to be lifted, the Lebanese have shown they are serious about the implementation of (UN Security Council Resolution) 1701 in all the deployments and efforts they have made."

Annan hailed the Lebanese government for having already "taken very serious steps" in deploying thousands of soldiers along the country's borders with Israel and Syria.

"They are also in serious consultation with the German government, to give them expertise and equipment in order to protect their land border, the airports and the sea," he said.

Israel has maintained its blockade on Lebanon despite a ceasefire that took effect on August 14, ending a month-long offensive in the country.

Last week, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert conditioned the lifting of the blockade on the deployment of international troops at Beirut's airport and along the border with Syria.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad warned that such a deployment would be viewed as a hostile act and threatened to close the border with Lebanon if it happened.

Annan said the detention of two Israeli soldiers seized by Hezbollah on July 12 had to be resolved "very quickly".

The capture prompted Israel to launch a 34-day onslaught in Lebanon.

Annan also said that during his tour of Beirut's southern suburbs he found that "the destruction was quite shocking actually."

The UN chief was booed by

Hezbollah supporters as he viewed the rubble of dozens of flattened buildings in the suburbs.

"But, what happened yesterday was really a little side show put on to impress me," he said, adding: "I think some of the young ones got a bit over zealous, so that, that was fine."

Annan urged Israel and Hezbollah to respect the ceasefire.

"Parties with complaints on the ground should come to (UNIFIL chief) General (Alain) Pellegrini, not take matters into their own hands," he said.

France ready to talk to Iran to end nuke crisis

AFP, Paris

Two days before a UN deadline for Iran to halt uranium enrichment, France offered on Tuesday to renew talks with Tehran to end the stand-off while still insisting it freeze sensitive nuclear work.

"The Iranian authorities say they are open to dialogue and ready to resume discussions," Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy told a meeting of French ambassadors in Paris.

"Without abandoning the demand to suspend sensitive activities, France is also ready to renew dialogue. But it must be a clear, concrete and responsible dialogue," he said.

Doust-Blazy said he wanted the talks to take place "quickly" but would not be pinned down on a timeframe, while a French diplomat said the offer was for dialogue, not the resumption of full-blown negotiations Tehran is seeking.

In Brussels, a diplomat said that EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana was trying to set up a meeting with Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani, somewhere in Europe and hopefully "before the end of the month".

He said the meeting would also involve "diplomats" from the so-called EU-3 powers of Britain, France and Germany, which have been leading negotiations with Tehran also involving the United

States, Russia and China.

The UN Security Council has given Iran until Thursday to suspend uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities -- which Tehran says is part of a civilian nuclear programme -- or face the threat of sanctions.

An impasse is looming as Iran insists that it has no intention of abandoning such work -- though it says it is ready to hold "serious talks".

Western countries, led by the US, believe Iran wants to build nuclear weapons, but the Islamic republic insists it only wants to develop civilian nuclear power and has the right to master the required technology.

Israeli PM under fire for 'fig-leaf' Lebanon war probe

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert came under heavy criticism yesterday for announcing the creation of a committee of inquiry to examine the failures of the Lebanon war rather than a powerful independent commission.

Acknowledging a wave of discontent for a war that failed to achieve its main objectives and which left 162 Israelis dead, the increasingly unpopular Olmert said Monday the committee of inquiry would be chaired by a former Mossad head.

"The committee will be charged

with the task of examining the functioning of the government, its proceedings and decision making and anything else it sees fit to examine," he said in a televised speech.

But he rejected the establishment of a state commission -- the most powerful type of inquiry in Israel -- which he said would "completely paralyse" the leadership when warfare was not yet fully over and Iran posed a threat.

Politicians on both the left and right-wing united in a maelstrom of criticism that Olmert, whose approval ratings have sunk to an all-time low since taking office in May, had backed a toothless inquiry.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers wait for a helicopter evacuation from their flooded house during an Indian Army's rescue operation Monday in the Barmer district of India's desert state of Rajasthan, near the border with Pakistan.

Floods, landslides kill 31 in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Helicopters ferried people to higher ground in flood-devastated western Nepal after rains left at least 31 people dead, 63 missing and displaced tens of thousands, officials and media said yesterday.

The government ordered local officials to accelerate rescue operations after the rains triggered massive landslides in the mountainous regions and flooding on the plains of west Nepal.

Army helicopters flying rescue missions carried stranded people away from fast-flowing floodwaters to safer areas, state-run television

showed.

Government spokesman Baman Prasad Neupane said Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula, who made an aerial tour of the area Monday, had "directed the local administration in the flood- and landslide-affected areas to speed up rescue efforts".

He said rescuers were urgently trying to discover the fate of 63 people in a village in badly-hit Banke area in mid-western Nepal that has been cut off by floods.

He said the village inhabitants were missing but could not confirm the overall death tally of 31 reported in the media.