

Lanka to face backlash for crackdown: Tigers

School shelled as 9 dead in fresh violence

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankans will suffer and the government will face a backlash for reinstating the island's Prevention of Terrorism Act to crack down on the Tamil Tigers and their supporters, the rebels said yesterday.

The act, which has been dormant since a 2002 ceasefire, gives police and the security forces wide powers to arrest, search and interrogate.

It has been re-imposed after a surge in suicide attacks and clashes with the Tigers that have left the truce in tatters.

"The ceasefire agreement put this draconian act to sleep for a while. Now the dragon is given life," Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) media coordinator Daya Master told Reuters by telephone from the rebels' northern stronghold.

"It is nothing but natural that Tamil youths, not necessarily the LTTE alone, would resort to armed defence again," he added. "What the government has actually done is restart a vicious cycle. It is the nation and the people who are going to suffer."

The government held back from

an outright ban on the Tigers, but on Wednesday it unveiled new emergency regulations prohibiting supporting or assisting the rebels or giving information detrimental to national security. Those found guilty faced up to 20 years' jail.

Nordic truce monitors said reinstating the act went against the terms of the truce.

"Just by implementing the Prevention of Terrorism Act is a violation of the ceasefire agreement," said Thorfinnur Omarsson, spokesman for the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, which oversees a truce that now holds only on paper.

"We worry that this might distance the parties even more," he added. "But then both sides have been violating the ceasefire agreement nearly every day, so it begs the question: where does the agreement stand?"

At least seven civilians and two soldiers were killed in fresh violence in Sri Lanka hours after the government announced tough anti-terror laws to battle Tamil Tiger rebels, officials said.

Three civilians were killed and 10 students were wounded when Tamil Tiger rebels shelled a school

in the northeastern district of Trincomalee, the defence ministry said.

The ministry said four more civilians were killed by a mine in the northern peninsula of Jaffna on Wednesday, while the two troopers were also killed by a mine blast on Wednesday night in the northern district of Vavuniya.

The main pipeline bringing water to the capital was also bombed by unidentified attackers on Wednesday night, police said, adding efforts were underway to restore supplies to thousands of homes.

The latest violence came as the government brought in tough anti-terror laws aimed at strengthening its battle against the rebels.

The government and the Tigers say they continue to honour the pact and each accuses the other of trying to trigger a return to all-out war.

But on the ground, more than 3,000 civilians, troops and rebel fighters have been killed so far this year. Air strikes, suicide attacks and major artillery battles are increasingly commonplace, and few are in any doubt the island's two-decade civil war has already

resumed.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, whose brother Gotabhaya narrowly escaped injury in a suicide attack in the capital last week, vowed to eradicate terrorism but said the door remained open to peace talks if the Tigers come in earnest.

"Our government decided to reactivate provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act to face this cruel and senseless terrorism," Rajapakse said in a televised national address late on Wednesday. "We have no path left but its total defeat."

"I ask this of all political parties, all media, and all people's organisations. You decide whether you should be with a handful of terrorists or with the common man who is in the majority. You must clearly choose between these two sides. No one can represent both these sides at any one time."

Rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran last week declared the Tigers were resuming their independence struggle. Analysts say this means the island's long-running conflict, which has killed more than 67,000 people since 1983, will likely escalate.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan police commandos inspect the damage triggered by a blast on a pipeline at Boralessgamuwa, near the capital Colombo yesterday. A powerful explosion blew up a pipeline supplying water to parts of the capital and immediate suburbs.

Iran cautious over US report seeking engagement

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran has responded cautiously to proposals for the United States to engage its foe directly, as analysts say Tehran waits to see whether President George W Bush embraces the idea and what concessions it can win.

The US bipartisan Iraq Study Group called on Wednesday for a new diplomatic push by Washington, including urging the United States to deal directly with Iraq's neighbours, Iran and Syria.

Bush said he would take the report "very seriously." But the White House also said the president would not be bound by the report's ideas and rejected one-on-one talks with Iran for now.

"Any decision by the United States to withdraw from Iraq does not require any negotiations with Iran or any other country in the region," Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki told the satellite channel Al Jazeera television.

"(The) report has some important points ... There seems to be at least some aspects of the U.S. administration's policy in Iraq which are considered to have been mistaken," he said.

Analysts say Iran is in no hurry to respond more positively at this

stage, although some say Tehran would like to talk if it felt it could win security assurances and other concessions.

Washington broke ties with Tehran shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution and past efforts at talks were abortive.

"The Iranians feel confident at the moment that the Americans are really not in a position to impose anything on Iran and also not in a position to solve any issues in Iraq without the help of Iran," said one Iranian political analyst, who asked not be identified.

Iran, the world's fourth largest oil exporter enjoying an oil windfall, feels it has a strong hand to make demands as US troops battle rising violence in Iraq and the UN Security Council is deadlocked over Iran's atomic plans.

The United States and European nations, who accuse Iran of trying to make nuclear bombs despite Tehran's denials, want to impose sanctions but Russia has sought to reduce any penalties.

Iran is wary Washington could drag it into helping calm Iraq "without giving any concession," the analyst said, adding that talks could happen but "it will be a long process."



PHOTO: AFP

Secretary General of Amnesty International Irene Khan talks to Arab and Israeli schoolchildren at the bilingual school in Jerusalem yesterday during her visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories.

UNGA takes initial step for conventional arms treaty

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly on Wednesday overwhelmingly adopted a resolution launching a process that could lead to a treaty to prevent arms transfers that fuel conflicts and serious human rights violations around the world.

Some 153 members backed the resolution, with only the United States voting against it, while 24 governments abstained.

Outgoing UN chief Kofi Annan immediately welcomed the adoption of the text that launches "a process that could lead to a treaty regulating international trade in conventional weapons," according to a statement issued by his press office.

"Unregulated trade in these weapons currently contributes to conflict, crime and terrorism, and undermines international efforts for peace and development," Annan stressed.

Indian arms for Myanmar fuels abuses: HR group

REUTERS, New Delhi

An Indian offer of military equipment, including helicopters, to the reclusive military regime in Myanmar could be used against civilians and rebels, and fuel abuses, Human Rights Watch said yesterday.

"It is shocking a democracy like India would offer military assistance to Burma's brutal military dictatorship, which is likely to use that assistance against the civilian population," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

New Delhi, which is jockeying with Beijing for strategic influence in Myanmar, made an offer to sell its indigenously made advanced light helicopters -- that can be used as gunships -- during a visit by Indian Air Force chief SP Tyagi last month.

India's air force also offered avionics while the army has said it

was ready to provide training for Myanmar troops.

"The Burmese government's record shows that these weapons and special training are used as tools of repression, not of defence," Adams said in a statement.

"India may think it has to compete with China to cultivate good relations in the region, but this is going too far."

India, which shares a 1,600 km border with Myanmar, already provided islander transport and surveillance aircraft in August, despite objections from Britain, which manufactured the planes.

Britain is part of a European Union arms embargo on the junta in Myanmar.

New Delhi has also supplied artillery to the regime, which Washington calls an "outpost of tyranny".

An Indian official said India was

trying to boost its ties with Myanmar as part of its "Look East" strategy and that it did not foresee military supplies to its neighbour being used for "offensive" purposes.

Human Rights Watch said it was "particularly alarmed" that India was offering military supplies to Myanmar's military which is fighting separatist rebels of the Karen community, the country's largest ethnic minority.

India's engagement with Myanmar attracts little criticism at home, and is defended by strategic affairs experts as necessary given the perceived threat from China.

Western democracies such as the United States also make tactical alliances with military leaders like Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, analysts in New Delhi said.

India, Pakistan near, yet so far on Kashmir

REUTERS, New Delhi

For nearly six decades it has been one of the most intractable disputes on the planet, but these days India and Pakistan are finally talking similar language on Kashmir.

Both sides talk about self-rule and soft borders, supported by some kind of common system to liaise over the disputed region, plans which seem to offer the nuclear-armed neighbours the chance to link hands across this sensitive border.

Is this, as optimists suggest, a historic opportunity to bury the hatchet and forge a new South Asia? Or is it just a mirage?

A gulf of trust continues to divide both sides, nationalist pressures limit politicians' freedom to compro-

mise and militant violence hangs over the whole process.

The devil lies in not just in the detail but also in the journey.

"We are talking about some kind of Holy Grail, and to reach there you will have to address the trust deficit," said C Uday Bhaskar of New Delhi's Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

"In principle it is not an impossible goal, but traversing this is a minefield."

Since he first signalled a willingness to give up Pakistan's claim to the whole of Kashmir r in 2003, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has repeatedly offered India the chance to compromise.

His proposals, repeated in an interview to an Indian news channel this week, offer a phased solution to the dispute.

Indo-US nuclear deal hits snag in Cong

REUTERS, Washington

Plans for the US Congress to approve a landmark deal that would allow India to buy US nuclear fuel and reactors hit a snag on Wednesday when Republican leaders in the House of Representatives halted action on the legislation, congressional sources said.

The sources, who support the deal and spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, said they still hoped the bill could be approved. But time was running out because Congress plans to adjourn this week for the year.

The legislation would make changes in US law to allow nuclear-armed India to buy US nuclear fuel and reactors for the first time in 30 years.

The House and the Senate adopted competing versions of the bill so congressional negotiators worked through the night to reconcile differences to reach a compromise, which has not been made public.

Plans were to have both chambers give final approval to the legislation on Wednesday. But then House Republican Majority leader John Boehner of Ohio halted action, the sources said.

Kevin Smith, Boehner's spokesman, said the bill was not formally scheduled for a vote on Wednesday but will be put before Congress when Boehner and other leaders "have some sort of a resolution."

He said he did not know what was holding up the legislation as lawmakers "are still working things out."

Warmed-up oceans reduce key food link

AP, Washington

In a "sneak peak" revealing a grim side effect of future warmer seas, new Nasa satellite data find that the vital base of the ocean food web shrinks when the world's seas get hotter.

And that discovery has scientists worried about how much food marine life will have as global warming progresses.

The data show a significant link between warmer water either from the El Nino weather phenomenon or global warming and reduced production of phytoplankton of the world's oceans, according to a study in Thursday's journal Nature.

Phytoplankton are the microscopic plant life that zooplankton and other marine animals eat, essentially the grain crop of the world's oceans.

Study lead author Michael Behrenfeld, a biological oceanographer at Oregon State University, said Wednesday that the recent dramatic drop in phytoplankton production in much of the world's oceans is a "sneak peak of how ocean biology" will respond later in the century with global warming.

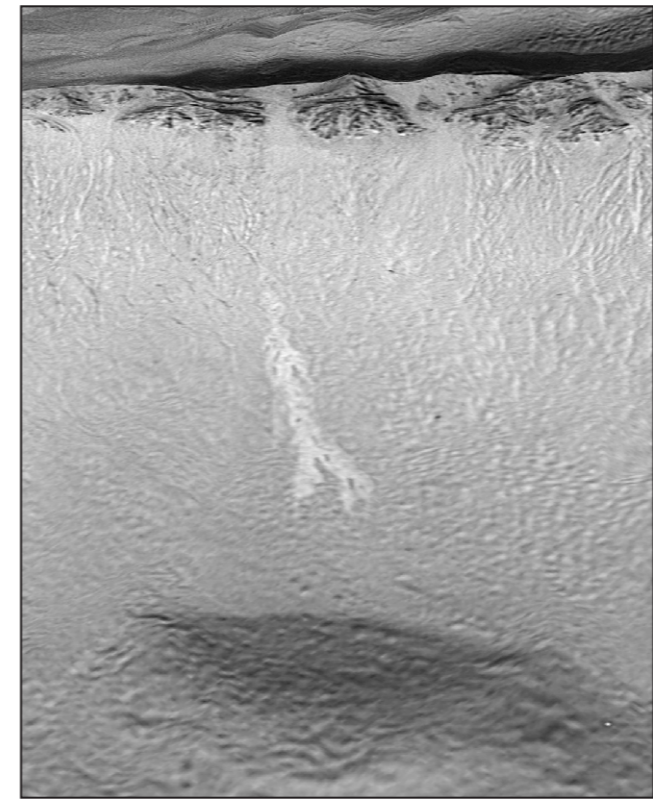


PHOTO: AFP

This handout image from Nasa shows light-toned deposits several hundred meters or yards long on a crater location where a gully flowed in the Centauri Montes Region in September, 2005. The picture was taken by Nasa's Mars Global Surveyor spacecraft.

Mars water evidence excites Nasa

AP, Los Angeles

After decades of scouring Mars in search of geologic evidence of past water activity, scientists believe they have found stunning evidence that water may even now be flowing through the Red Planet's frigid surface.

The news excited scientists who hunt for extraterrestrial life. If the finding is confirmed, they say, all the ingredients favourable for life on Mars would be in place: liquid water and a stable heat source.

"This is a squirting gun for water on Mars," said Kenneth Edgett, a scientist at San Diego-based Malin Space Science Systems, which operates a camera on Nasa's Mars Global Surveyor.

It was the Surveyor that prompted the announcement Wednesday by taking photographs of Mars before it lost contact with Earth last month. The latest findings will appear in Friday's issue of the journal Science.

The images do not actually show flowing water. Rather, they show changes in craters that provide the strongest evidence yet that water coursed through them as recently as several years ago, and is perhaps doing so even now.

In all of its Mars exploration mis-

sions, Nasa has pursued a "follow the water" strategy to determine if the planet once contained life or could support it now.

Scientists believe ancient Mars was awash with pools of water. And at present-day Mars' north pole, researchers have spotted evidence of water ice. But they have yet to actually see water in liquid form.

"This underscores the importance of searching for life on Mars, either present or past," said Bruce Jakosky, an astrobiologist at the University of Colorado at Boulder, who had no role in the study. "It's one more reason to think that life could be there."

Some researchers were sceptical that liquid water was responsible for the surface feature changes seen by the spacecraft. They said other materials such as sand or dust can flow like a liquid and produce similar results.

"Nothing in the images, no matter how cool they are, proves that the flows were wet, or that they were anything more exciting than avalanches of sand and dust," Allan Treiman, a geologist at the Lunar and Planetary Institute in Houston said in an e-mail.