

Troops kill 30 Tigers in fresh offensive

AFP, Batticaloa

Sri Lankan troops backed by war-planes launched a fresh offensive against Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday, killing at least 30 guerrillas for the loss of one soldier, the defence ministry said.

Troops, supported by air force fighter planes, destroyed three Tiger mortar positions in the eastern district of Batticaloa, the ministry said in a statement.

"In the confrontation one soldier died and 15 were injured," it said, adding that over 30 rebel bodies

were found in the area.

Troops also recovered a haul of arms and ammunition from the battle zone.

However, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) dismissed military claims and said they beat back an army ground offensive, placing their losses at seven cadres wounded during a five-hour battle.

"We successfully beat back the military offensive and suffered only seven cadres from our side wounded," Tiger military spokesman Rasiah Ilanthiriyar told AFP by telephone from his base in the

island's north.

"We are not sure of the casualties on the government side," he added.

Earlier in the day, Tigers set off a powerful mine at a government office in northern Sri Lanka, killing two constables, police said.

The LTTE planted the claymore device on a motorcycle parked at the district secretariat in the town of Vavuniya, 260 kilometres (160 miles) north of Colombo, police said.

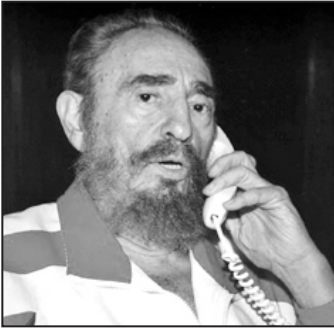
"An investigation is underway to find out how the motorcycle was

taken into the car park of the building without being checked," a police official in Vavuniya said by telephone.

The attack came despite tight security in the region, where several similar bomb attacks have recently taken place against police and security forces.

Asailor was wounded Tuesday in a separate mine attack in the north-west of the island, police said.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist conflict in the past 35 years.



Castro in grave condition

El Pais reports

AFP, Madrid

Ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro is in "very serious" condition after three failed operations for mounting intestinal problems, the Spanish newspaper El Pais reported.

The El Pais website quoted medical sources at the Gregorio Maranon hospital in Madrid, from where a doctor traveled to Havana last month to examine the 80-year-old revolutionary. Castro has not been seen in public since being taken ill in July.

The communist government in Havana treats the leader's health like a state secret and the hospital would not comment on the new report.

But there has been mounting speculation in recent weeks over the condition of Castro. Last week, the office of John Negroponte, the outgoing director of US intelligence, said Castro was "terminally ill" and may have only days to live.

El Pais said the Cuban leader is suffering from a "serious infection of the large intestine following three failed operations and various complications that have degenerated into peritonitis."

Peritonitis is a potentially fatal inflammation of the lining of the abdominal cavity. It is often caused by an infection of an organ and often leads to organ failure unless treated.

Pakistan buys 700 missiles

AFP, Tucson, Arizona

Pakistan is buying 700 air-to-air missiles made by US defense group Raytheon for 284 million dollars, the company said Monday.

Pakistan is purchasing 500 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM), the largest international order for this weapon, and 200 short-range AIM-9M Sidewinder missiles, Raytheon said in a statement.

Delivery of the AMRAAM arsenal will start in 2008 and continue through 2011, it said.

AMRAAM, from a joint US Air Force and Navy program, are used by the armed forces of 32 countries, while 20 countries have AIM-9M Sidewinder missiles, the statement said.

Pakistan has signed a letter of offer and acceptance for the 700 missiles, it said.

Trial of 6 alleged London bombers resumes

AFP, London

The trial resumed yesterday of six Muslims accused of plotting to commit mass murder in London, after prosecutors said only luck stopped them unleashing a second wave of carnage in days in the city.

Prosecutors began to lay out the second day of their case against the men, whom they allege formed a terrorist cell which planned to carry out synchronised attacks on three London Underground trains and a bus.

Britain's highest-security court continued to hear details of the alleged plot to commit mass murder on July 21, 2005, exactly two weeks on from the first suicide attacks in Britain on July 7 which killed 56 people.

Judge Adrian Fulford opened Tuesday's proceedings by warning the jury that they should ignore coverage of the high-profile trial.

"You must close your minds completely to the media and focus solely on what happens in the court room," he told the nine women and three men.

On the opening day, the group were alleged to have made bombs out of chapati flour, hydrogen peroxide, acetone and acid and packed with nails and screws to maximise "devastation", Woolwich Crown Court in southeast London heard.

In what is likely to become one of the most high-profile cases involving alleged terrorism seen in Britain, the accused deny charges of con-



AFP file photos show six Muslims accused of plotting to emulate the July 7 attacks on London's transport network. (Top Row L-R) Manfo Asiedu, Muktar Said Ibrahim and Ramzi Mohammed. (Bottom Row L-R) Yassin Omar, Hussain Osman and Adel Yahya.

spiracy to murder and conspiracy to cause explosions likely to endanger life.

The trial of Muktar Said Ibrahim, 28, Manfo Kwaku Asiedu, 32, Hussain Osman, 28, Yassin Omar, 26, Ramzi Mohammed, 25, and Adel Yahya, 24, all originally from Africa, is expected to take up to four months.

"This case is concerned with an

extremist Muslim plot, the ultimate objective of which was to carry out a number of murderous suicide bombings on the public transport system in London," prosecution lawyer Nigel Sweeney said Monday.

He said the conspiracy had been in existence long before the July 7 bombings and was not some "hastily arranged copycat".

Death toll could reach 40 in serial murder,says CBI

AFP, New Delhi

The death toll in a serial murder case that has shocked India may top 40 after detectives found over a dozen more skulls stashed in plastic bags, a report said yesterday.

"In the 40 bags, we have found more than a dozen skulls," an unnamed senior official of the federal Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) told the Hindustan Times newspaper.

"Apart from this, the other human remains found in the bags indicate that the death toll could cross 40," the official said.

The CBI declined to confirm the figures officially, but said in a statement that "biomaterials" in more than 40 polythene bags were recovered from the drain in front of the house of the two men accused of the lurid crimes.

"The seized materials have been sent to the laboratory for post mortem," the federal agency said in a statement posted on its website Monday.

Local police say at least 17

people, mostly children, have been confirmed murdered in the area outside New Delhi. The CBI said it had so far registered 19 various cases of kidnapping, rape and murder of children and women.

The new finds have been made in the past three days around a bungalow that the media has dubbed the "House of Horrors", where the main suspects -- affluent businessman Moninder Singh Pander and servant Surender Koli -- lived.

The gruesome details of the murders have shocked India.

Koli has reportedly admitted under interrogation that he raped children as young as three, had sex with the corpses of his victims and once tried to eat human organs, believing cannibalism cured impotency.

Local police were earlier investigating if the murders had been committed so that organs such as kidneys could be sold off, as the torsos of the victims appeared to be missing.

According to the media, the plastic bags contained torsos as well. The CBI, however, did not say whether it would continue probing

the organs trade angle.

The CBI official told the Hindustan Times that the latest discoveries had been made on the basis of information the suspects gave to their interrogators under the influence of sodium penthanol, or so-called "truth serum".

Most of the remains have been found in a sewage drain around the house. The CBI was using heavy machinery to clean up the area.

Agency detectives swooped down Tuesday at the businessman's sprawling warehouse in the industrial Noida district to search for more clues, witnesses said.

The detectives also dug up a section inside the businessman's house, police said.

Residents of the village of Nithari, where most of the victims came from, say up to 38 children went missing over the past three years, but their pleas were ignored by local police because they were poor.

Under fire from politicians and the media, six policemen were sacked, three suspended for neglect and the investigations transferred to the CBI.



PHOTO: AFP

Fog and mists surround buildings in Manhattan, New York, Monday. Five days of winter ice, snow and powerful winds in the US Midwest have claimed at least 31 lives.

31 killed as winter storms, snow, floods hit US

AFP, Chicago

A powerful winter storm killed at least 31 people as it swept east across the central United States carrying snow, sleet and ice.

Workers with the Federal Emergency Management Agency distributed generators and bottled water to communities in the state of Oklahoma hit by the ice storm, after President George W. Bush declared an emergency in the state on Sunday.

At least 14 people have been killed in weather-related road accidents across Oklahoma since Friday, including seven in a minivan crash Sunday. Some 103,000 people were also without power, the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management reported.

Officials in the nearby state of Missouri reported that bad weather had claimed eight lives, with traffic accidents caused by slick conditions killing seven and one dying from carbon monoxide poisoning, a common cause of death when people without electricity use fuel-burning stoves to heat their homes.

More than 300,000 people lost power in the state due to downed power lines, and a line worker was injured when he fell from a utility pole, state officials said.

In Kansas, five people were reported killed in weather-related road accidents and one person was poisoned by carbon monoxide exposure, state officials told the Kansas City Star newspaper.

One person also died in a weather-related traffic accident in New York state, according to WGY radio.

In Texas, Governor Rick Perry called out the National Guard after more than 15 centimeters (six inches) of rain caused flash flooding and dramatic high-water rescues in areas of central Texas.

Local media reported two killed in separate weekend accidents on icy roads in western Texas.

After a dangerous driving weekend, most of the ice on the roads in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area had melted by early Tuesday, local news media reported.

The National Weather Service issued flood warnings and advisories in several states, from Louisiana to Ohio and Illinois. An ice storm warning was posted for parts of the northeastern states of New Hampshire and Maine.

In California, where mild temperatures usually prevail all year, farmers and state officials in the agricultural Central Valley said that up to 70 percent of the oranges still

on trees had been destroyed by the freeze.

Icicles hung from tangerine trees in a Central Valley orchard near Fresno, a rare sight in the state.

In central Los Angeles, the thermometer dropped to 2.0 degrees Celsius (36 Fahrenheit) early Monday, a record-setting temperature not felt in the city for 75 years.

California's top state agricultural official, A.G. Kawamura, was in southern Ventura County inspecting freeze damage on citrus crops on Monday.

Kawamura's office estimates that damage from the freeze will surpass that from a three-day freeze in December 1998, when the state citrus industry lost 85 percent of its crop, valued at 700 million dollars.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger issued a state of emergency on Friday due to the low temperatures, which among other measures opened "heating centers" for people and their pets to take refuge.

The storm in central states was moving eastward and has already caused ice storms in western parts of New York state, forecasters said.