



Relatives weep after receiving news of the killing of their loved ones in the northern Sri Lankan town of Vavuniya yesterday. Unidentified gunmen shot dead four civilians in northern Sri Lanka, police said, amid heavy fighting elsewhere in the island.

Pakistani forces shot at BSF, says India

Islamabad trashes truce violation charge

AP, AFP, Srinagar/ Islamabad

Pakistani forces opened fire on Indian border guards before dawn yesterday, according to an Indian official who said it was the first violation of a 2003 ceasefire along the frontier of divided Kashmir.

A spokesman for Pakistan's military said he had no immediate information on the incident.

Prem Singh, a spokesman for India's Border Security Force, said Pakistani forces opened fire to provide cover for Islamic militants trying to cross into India's part of divided Kashmir, where the

insurgents are battling New Delhi's rule.

He said it was the first violation of the 2003 ceasefire along the frontier dividing New Delhi's and Islamabad's portions of Kashmir, a Himalayan region split between India and Pakistan and claimed by both.

"It was an infiltration attempt that was thwarted," Singh said. "Two of our men, including an officer, were wounded. The officer is critical."

Pakistan angrily rejected Wednesday's allegation that its border troops fired at Indian

forces in the disputed Kashmir region, allegedly to provide cover for infiltrating militants.

"The allegation is totally baseless, false and ludicrous," Pakistan army spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan said.

India, an overwhelmingly Hindu country, has long accused Muslim Pakistan of supporting the more than a dozen Islamic militant groups fighting to wrest predominantly Muslim Kashmir from New Delhi. Pakistan insists it provides the militants only diplomatic and moral support.

India, China optimistic as border talks begin

Reuters, New Delhi

India and China began yesterday a new round of border talks aimed at resolving a long-running Himalayan frontier dispute at the centre of lingering mistrust between the two Asian giants.

The Indian team for the two-day talks will be led by MK Narayanan, the country's national security adviser, while the Chinese side is headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo, India's foreign ministry said.

Any progress in the dialogue will be announced on Thursday after talks end, a foreign ministry official said.

Helped by growing trade links, ties between the Asian powers have improved in the last few years after decades of frosty relations following a brief border war in 1962, which India lost.

"Our relations with our neighbours, including China ... are poised for a positive transformation," Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee told foreign policy experts on Tuesday.

In Beijing, foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao told a regular news briefing China hoped progress would be made.



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese Vice-Premier Dai Bingguo (L) shakes hands with Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee during a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Indian and Chinese officials started a fresh round of talks aimed at working to resolve a decades-old border dispute.

PM asks Ulfa rebels to shun violence for talks

Reuters, Dibrugarh

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said on Tuesday his government was willing to talk to rebels in the northeast blamed for killing more than 70 people this month, but only if the group rejected violence.

Authorities say the United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) -- which has been fighting for independence for decades for independence for Assam -- killed 72 migrants from other parts of India in a string of attacks earlier this month.

It was the group's biggest strike in recent years.

"Doors for dialogue are open to all disaffected groups -- including Ulfa, who are willing to abjure violence," Singh told a news conference in Assam's Dibrugarh district, where many of the killings took place.

"But I would like to make it clear that there is no room for violence and it will not be tolerated."

Thousands of troops have

fanned out through the jungles of eastern Assam in counter-insurgency operations against Ulfa since the killings took place.

Singh said his willingness to talk should not be seen as a "sign of weakness".

Indian officials and civilian representatives of Ulfa held talks last year to bring the rebels into direct negotiations with New Delhi.

But the talks failed to make headway, after which violence resurfaced and security forces launched fresh operations against the rebels.

The army says it has caught 13 alleged Ulfa guerrillas and destroyed several rebel camps since then. But it says most of the rebels have fled to neighbouring Myanmar.

Singh said he had urged the government of Myanmar to crack down on Ulfa rebels hiding there, and said the Myanmarese prime minister had assured him action would be taken if India gave adequate information about the rebels.

Tuesday's talks.

"That is something that we are all concerned about. We would like the neighbouring countries to work together for peace and stability in Iraq," he said.

Thousands of troops have

Lanka jets bomb Tigers as fighting flares up

Reuters, Colombo

Sri Lankan air force jets pounded a suspected Tamil Tiger base in the island's northeast yesterday, the military said, as troops sought to wrest control of a rebel-held area.

Witnesses saw jets roar from their base north of the capital, Colombo, to attack the suspected base near the village of Verugal where rebels control a dwindling pocket of land in the far northeastern districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa.

The Tigers were not available for comment and there were no immediate details of any damage or casualties.

"To neutralise the attacks against the army, the air force this morning ... took selected targets

west of Verugal," said air force spokesman Group Captain Ajantha de Silva.

The military also paraded five Tamil youths in front of the media, saying they were Tigers who had surrendered, but there was no independent confirmation of their identities.

The army said it captured a stretch of the Tigers' defences along a battlefield in the east on Tuesday and killed around 30 rebels, but the Tigers denied it and said 12 of their own fighters died and that they killed 45 army troops.

The military said four soldiers were killed during Tuesday's fighting, which came as the government sought to evict the Tigers from territory they control in the east under the terms of a tattered 2002 truce.

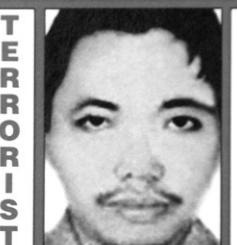
"I stress the need for the government to investigate immediately

allegations that certain elements of the Sri Lanka security forces are involved in aiding the recruitment and/or abduction of children by the Karuna faction in the east," Ban said in the report published on Web site www.un.org.

"I call on the government of Sri Lanka and all relevant parties to ensure open and safe access by humanitarian actors in Sri Lanka to affected areas," he added.

The Tigers resumed their fight for an independent state for minority Tamils in the north and east after the government rejected their demands for a separate homeland.

Analysts fear this new chapter in a war that has killed more than 67,000 people since 1983 could escalate.

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Abu Sayyaf leader killed in clash

Reuters, Manila

The Philippines said on Wednesday that troops had killed the top planner of the country's most deadly Islamic militant group in a clash at a rebel jungle camp in the southwest.

Abu Sulaiman, one of the top five leaders of the Abu Sayyaf militant group and who is believed to have links with al-Qaeda, was killed in a gunbattle on Tuesday on the island of Jolo, military chief Gen. Hermogenes Esperon told reporters.

"We are confident that with the death of Sulaiman, who is actually the number one planner, most of the activities of the Abu Sayyaf will continue to go down," Esperon said.

Late last month, the military said Abu Sayyaf chief Khaddafy Janjalani might have been killed in a clash and sent tissue from a decomposing body found on Jolo island, Esperon said.

"The DNA tests results are not yet with us," Esperon said. "We are told they should be coming in within the week."

If both have been killed, it will be a significant success for the Philippines. The Abu Sayyaf has only 400 or so members, most of them trapped on Jolo island, but it has been held responsible for a series of attacks, kidnapping and piracy in recent years.



PHOTO: AFP
Nepalese Maoists help unload material as they set up a camp for weapons registration along with UN officials in Chitwan, some 200km southwest of the capital Kathmandu on Jan 15. Nepal's Maoist forces began putting their weapons under United Nations supervision yesterday, a key part of the peace deal in the Himalayan country.

Omar in Pakistan Says captured Taliban leader

AFP, Kabul

Afghan intelligence officials said yesterday a captured Taliban spokesman had said the extremist movement's fugitive leader is hiding out in Pakistan with the protection of that country's spy agency.

Abul Haq Haqqi, who was known to the media as Mohammad Hanif, was arrested in the eastern province of Nangarhar late Monday.

During interrogation he said fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, who has a multi-million-dollar bounty on his head, was in the western Pakistani city of Quetta, the Afghan intelligence agency said in a statement.

"He is under the protection of the ISI in Quetta," it quoted Hanif as saying. ISI is Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

Haqqi was not presented to the media for questioning and the authenticity of the claims could not be verified.

The Afghan intelligence agency, called the National Directorate of Security, said the 26-year-old Haqqi had also said the regular suicide attacks in Afghanistan were plotted in a madrasa (religious school) in Pakistan's Bajaur tribal area.

It was expected to be set up in the next 10 days and would operate from the Isaf headquarters in the city centre.

US wins firm Arab backing against Iran's meddling in Iraq

AFP, Kuwait City

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice ended a regional tour yesterday after gaining a firm Arab stance calling on Iran not to meddle in Iraq and support for the Bush administration's new Iraq strategy.

Rice concluded her tour by meeting the foreign ministers of the "GCC+2" group of US allies -- the six members of Gulf Cooperation Council with Egypt and Jordan -- who called on Iraq's neighbours to respect its sovereignty.

"With respect to US policy towards Iran... the US and the Gulf (States) expressed in (a) joint communiqué that we call to all countries to refrain from interfering in Iraqi internal affairs," Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammad al-Sabah told a joint news conference with Rice after Tuesday's talks.

"That is something that we are all concerned about. We would like the neighbouring countries to work together for peace and stability in Iraq," he said.

She was also seeking financial aid from the oil-rich Gulf countries for the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, chiefly by writing off debts.



Shah Rukh Khan to star at London's Tussauds

Reuters, New Delhi

Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan will become the third Indian actor to feature in London's Madame Tussauds, with the wax museum likely to unveil his statue in April, a newspaper reported on Wednesday.

"Khan will take part in a sitting with Tussauds... sculptors in February," the Indian Express daily reported out of London, citing a museum announcement.

Khan's agent could not immediately be reached for confirmation.

Khan is one of Bollywood's biggest names and a heart-throb among scores of Indian teenagers. His waxwork would be the third of an Indian film star after Amitabh Bachchan and former Miss World Aishwarya Rai.