

Lankan military chases routed rebels

Some Tigers escape hunt, foreign ship attacked

REUTERS, AFP, Valachennai

Sri Lankan troops chased small groups of fleeing Tamil Tigers yesterday after routing an eastern stronghold held by the rebels for 11 years, but the military said some fighters were escaping.

Security forces confronted a group of 75 members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fleeing their Vakarai base on Saturday evening and killed 18 of them, the defence ministry said in a statement.

Tamil Tiger rebels rammed an explosives-laden boat against a foreign-owned merchant vessel off Sri Lanka's northern waters Sunday, military officials said.

The fate of the ship's crew, comprising Indonesians, Indians and Sri Lankans, was not immediately known, but the navy sent gunboats to engage a flotilla of boats crewed by suspected members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an official said.

Troops found 18 T-56 rifles along with the bodies as well as other military hardware, suggesting many other fleeing Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters fleeing the enclave had managed to get away.

"Some are trying to escape, some are managing to escape. The security forces are trying to capture them," said military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe. "In small numbers they will have

crossed towards Toppigala," he added referring to a swathe of rebel-held jungle inland.

The military said it was clearing fields of landmines laid by the Tigers and aimed to resettle civilians in the newly captured area as soon as possible.

But with the Tigers evicted from their eastern stronghold -- which belongs to them under the terms of a now tattered 2002 truce which holds only on paper -- and the government vowing to evict them from the east altogether, many fear fighting could spread elsewhere.

The captured coastal stretch spanning the districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa around 240 km northeast of Colombo was an important maritime supply line for the Tigers and

is a major strategic loss.

The Tigers remain defiant. "The location (of our fighters) may have changed, but we still have our fighting capacity," Tiger military spokesman Rasiah Ilangithiraiyan said by telephone from the northern stronghold of Kilinochchi.

"It doesn't mean the LTTE has gone nil in Trincomalee," he added, refusing to comment further.

As the Tigers fled, so too did more than 10,000 refugees trapped for weeks in artillery crossfire.

They joined tens of thousands more who managed to escape in recent weeks by trekking through jungle, swimming across lagoons and by sea and now live in crowded emergency camps in Batticaloa.

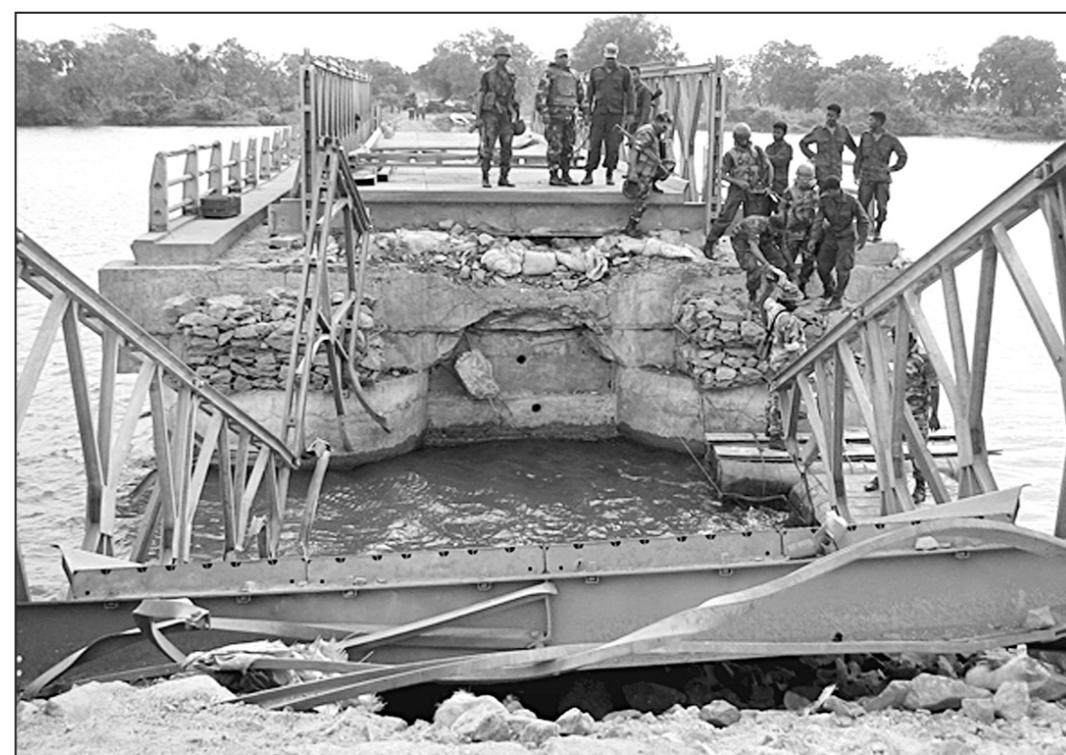


PHOTO: AFP
This handout picture from Sri Lanka's Defence Ministry shows the Panichchankeni bridge near the former Tamil Tiger stronghold of Vakarai which was said to have been blasted by Tamil Tiger rebels to stall a military advance into the town.

'Pakistani circles' behind Afghan violence: Karzai

REUTERS, AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said yesterday "certain Pakistani circles" were protecting insurgents fighting in Afghanistan, and added drugs and corruption in his government were contributing to the

violence.

Karzai, speaking at the opening of a new session of the Afghan parliament, said the danger from the insurgency and drugs would intensify in the coming year, and he called on people to rally to the defence of the nation.

"The enemies of Afghanistan's freedom and independence very disgracefully continued their intervention and meddling in our internal affairs," Karzai said, referring to last year which was the bloodiest since US-led forces defeated the Taliban in 2001.

"They formed terrorist groups consisting of international terrorist networks under the protection of some certain Pakistani circles for martyring mercilessly our children, teachers and clerics," he said. He did not elaborate.

More than 4,000 people were killed in Afghan violence last year and Western forces expect the level of attacks to pick up when warmer weather arrives in the spring.

Pakistan was the main supporter of the Taliban until the September 11 attacks on the United States, when it joined the US-led war on terrorism.

But Afghan anger at Taliban infiltration from Pakistan has seriously strained relations between the US allies.

The US military has reported a sharp increase in the number of Taliban attacks from Pakistan, where US military officials say the Taliban's command and control is based in lawless tribal areas.

Pakistan, which has been battling militants in its tribal lands on the border, acknowledges that some militants are slipping into Afghanistan, but says the Taliban are an Afghan problem, feeding on poverty and anger with the government over corruption.

Karzai highlighted the danger of corruption.

China's weapons test a threat to India

Warn experts

AFP, New Delhi

China's shooting down of a satellite is a threat to India's space programme which plans unmanned missions to the moon and Mars, defence experts and the media said Saturday.

"It threatens our own expanding civilian space assets, undermines the credibility of our nuclear deterrent, and exposes New Delhi's lack of a military space strategy," the Indian Express newspaper said in an editorial.

"India can either respond with a robust military space effort in collaboration with the US or consign itself to the status of a second-rate power in Asia," the daily said under the headline "Spaced Out?"

India's foreign ministry did not comment on China becoming only the third country after the former Soviet Union and the United States to shoot down an object in space.

But M Natarajan, scientific advisor to India's defence minister said it was a matter of concern if such missiles could "disable" satellites, particularly those with navigation and military applications.

"We are looking into it. We will

make our own assessment (to see) what steps we need to initiate in this direction," the Press Trust of India quoted Natarajan as telling reporters in the southern IT city of Bangalore.

The shooting of its weather satellite was reported by US spy agencies on Thursday, drawing condemnation from Washington and its Asian allies amid concerns about China's growing military might.

If confirmed, the test would mean China could now theoretically shoot down spy satellites operated by other nations.

However Beijing has played down fears of a military space race while refusing to confirm the shootdown had occurred.

The test is "definitely a concern for all countries with satellite capabilities," K Santhanam, former chief adviser to the state-funded Defence Research and Development Organisation told the Times of India.

"Satellites, after all, form an important part of communications, command, control and intelligence systems," Santhanam said.

Work begins on Tata car project despite protests

AFP, Kolkata

India's Tata Motors said it broke ground for a new car plant under tight security after months of bitter protests against the project by farmers in communist-ruled West Bengal state.

"Tata Motors today initiated preliminary steps for the construction of its small car plant at Singur," the company said in a statement, referring to the site about 40km north of the state capital Kolkata.

Witnesses said police had cordoned off the area, as company officials started the day by offering prayers.

"We have deployed more than 500 policemen in and around the site," said West Bengal police chief Raj Kanjola.

Activists and landowners have protested against the project, saying the government acquired prime fertile land for the 220-million-dollar plant to build small cars for Tata, a leading Indian car and truck maker.



PHOTO: AFP
Speaker in the Afghan Parliament Mohammad Younus Qanooni (L) speaks as Afghan President Hamid Karzai (R) looks on in Kabul yesterday during the opening of the second year of work for Afghanistan's new parliament.

Taliban rebels to open Afghan schools

AP, Kandahar

The Taliban's governing body decided to open schools in the areas controlled by the militants in Afghanistan, the purported chief spokesman for the hardline militia told the Associated Press.

Abdul Hai Muthmahi said that Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders decided that from March, Islamic education will be provided in at least six southern provinces first for boys and later for girls.

"The US and its allies are doing propaganda against the Taliban," Muthmahi said in a phone call to an AP reporter from an undisclosed location late Saturday. "Taliban are not against education. The Taliban want Shariah (Islamic) education."

During its six years of fundamentalist rule, the former Taliban regime barred girls from class, and it has since waged a campaign of violence against state schools. Since its ouster by US-led forces in late 2001, millions of Afghan children including girls have gone back to school, many for the first

time.

The Taliban's announcement appears aimed at undermining the standing of the democratically elected government of President Hamid Karzai and challenging its writ over southern regions where insurgents have a foothold. It's the first sign since the militia's ouster that it wants to provide social services.

The Taliban last year carried out about 200 arson attacks on state schools and killed some 20 teachers, as its insurgency has gathered strength.

That's been a setback to a massive foreign-backed education campaign over the past five years to get Afghan children back to school regarded as one of the successes in efforts to rebuild the war-battered country.

Since the Taliban's ouster, there has been a five-fold increase in the number of children attending school, according to a report by the development agency Oxfam, published late last year.



PHOTO: AFP
Myanmar Prime Minister General Soe Win (L) receives Indian Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee prior to their talks in the new administrative capital Naypyidaw Saturday.

BIG BROTHER SHOW
Goody admits she was a racist bully

AFP, London

The woman evicted from a British reality television show tearfully admitted yesterday that she had behaved as a racist bully toward an Indian actress, letting down many people and her country.

In an anguished interview with the News of the World newspaper, Jade Goody, 25, said her behaviour towards Bollywood star Shilpa Shetty in the "Celebrity Big Brother" show had been the biggest mistake of her life.

"She (Shetty) was a victim of bullying and racism, yes. I can understand why she would have said that," said Goody, her face contorted and hands clasped to her head in accompanying photographs.

5 Maoists killed in clash with Indian cops

REUTERS, Raipur

Police killed at least five Maoists in Chhattisgarh, a senior police officer said yesterday.

Three were killed in a gun battle with police late on Saturday in the forests of Timarpur in Bastar region, 520 km south of the state capital Raipur, said police inspector-general for Bastar, RK Vij.

In a separate incident on Saturday, two rebels and a police constable were killed in Dantewada district of the same region, Vij said. Two female Maoists were arrested but dozens of their male colleagues escaped.