

Tigers accuse troops of killing 39 civilians

UK offers talks to rebels, war planes bomb targets

AFP, REUTERS, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels on Friday accused Sri Lankan security forces of killing 39 civilians and blamed them for the disappearance of 39 others in the last two weeks.

The Tamil Tigers said the killings and abductions had occurred during government military attacks in the island's embattled northeast and elsewhere.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) said the highest number of killings was in the northern town of Jaffna, where 18 civilians died.

Sri Lankan troops and the Tigers have traded attacks in their drawn-out ethnic conflict, with nearly 4,000

people killed in the past year alone, despite a Norwegian-backed February 2002 truce.

The charge came as Sri Lanka's air force bombed suspected rebel targets in the Jaffna peninsula, the defence ministry said.

Sri Lanka's air force bombed suspected Tamil Tiger rebel targets in the northern Jaffna peninsula on Friday, the defence ministry said.

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But the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com said the military targeted civilian settlements in the north in land and aerial attacks.

On Thursday warplanes bombed

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) maritime bases in Chenmalai along the northern coast of the island, the defence ministry said.

"The Sea Tiger bases were completely destroyed," it added.

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During a visit here earlier this week, Britain's junior foreign minister said he was concerned about renewed violence, abductions, disappearances and extra-judicial killings in the island.

Britain on Thursday offered to play a bigger role in Sri Lanka's moribund peace process, including talking directly to Tamil Tiger rebels it has outlawed as terrorists, as part of efforts to end a two-decade civil war.

Wrapping up a three-day visit to assess the impact of renewed war on thousands of displaced families in the island's restive east, a senior British envoy said Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse had given the green light to the idea of talks.

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (2nd R) speaks with Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh (2nd L) during a press conference in Gaza City, while MP's Mohammed Dahlan (R) and Ziad Abu Amr (L) clap, late Thursday. The Hamas-led government resigned Thursday after 11 months of unprecedented Palestinian crisis, allowing the creation of a unity government that is intended to end deadly violence and a Western boycott.

Pak police detains 3 would-be bombers

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistani police arrested three al-Qaeda-linked would-be suicide bombers following a shootout in the southern city of Karachi on Friday, a senior police official said.

"We have recovered a jacket used in suicide bomb attacks, hand grenades and pistols from them," Fayyaz Khan, a senior official in the Crime Investigation Department (CID), told Reuters.

"Now we are carrying out raids to arrest 10 more members of this group," he said.

Khan said the three militants had been trained in Wana in South Waziristan, a restive tribal region on the border with Afghanistan, and a hotbed of support for the Taliban.

"They have admitted getting training in Wana, and we have also recovered a list of potential targets from them," Khan said.



PHOTO: AFP



Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri (R) shakes hands with his Sri Lankan counterpart Rohitha Bogollagama prior to their meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Bogollagama arrived in Islamabad on a two-day official visit to hold talks with Pakistani leaders on bilateral and international issues.

One million Iraqis may flee violence this year

GIs sweep Baghdad

AP, Geneva/Baghdad

Unrelenting violence and insecurity in Iraq could cause as many as 1 million Iraqis to flee their homes this year, the world's migration body said Friday.

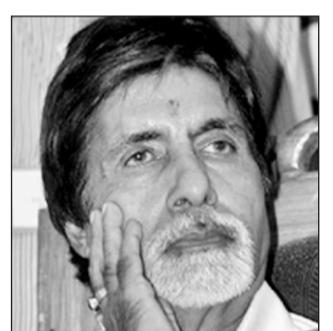
"The numbers of people that are being displaced are increasing every day," said Jemini Pandya, spokeswoman for the International Organisation for Migration. "The security situation is not improving. It's not changing."

Pandya said the organisation's estimate was made "on the assumption that security conditions will continue much as they are."

The possibility of neighbouring countries, such as Syria, closing their borders would mean even more of the displaced would only be able to get as far as other parts of Iraq.

On Thursday, the UN refugee agency appealed to the European Union to do more to protect refugees fleeing Iraq, saying the war was the cause of the biggest displacement of people in the Middle East in recent history.

"The humanitarian situation is grave and deteriorating. States should respond to the protection needs of Iraqi asylum seekers on their territory," said Madeline Garlick, a spokeswoman for the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Brussels.



Political parties for picking Bachchan for presidency

REUTERS, Mumbai

Four political parties are considering nominating Amitabh Bachchan to run for the country's largely ceremonial post of president, media reports said yesterday.

But the 64-year-old superstar, who made an unhappy foray into politics two decades ago, so far seems unmoved by the proposal, they said.

Parliamentarians are due to elect a new president -- a post mostly held by veteran politicians in the past -- before President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's five-year term ends in July.

The president is elected by an electoral college made of central and state lawmakers.

The Times Now television channel said some political parties were discussing four names for the contest, one of them being Bachchan and the rest seasoned politicians.

'EU mulls nuclear energy cooperation with India'

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The European Union yesterday said India will have to take a "few steps" like associating with NPT and CTBT before the 25-nation grouping can decide on cooperating with it in civil nuclear energy.

EU Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner told reporters here that EU was ready to discuss these steps with India as it understands its need for civil nuclear energy because of its rapidly growing requirements.

"We acknowledge India's energy needs and are committed to support its energy components, of which civil nuclear energy is an important part," she said after meeting Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Ferrero-Waldner, who arrived here Friday on a five-day visit, however, said the EU can venture

into this only within the non-proliferation regime's framework.

"A few steps are still needed before such a cooperation is made possible. We hope India will take these steps towards international non-proliferation mechanism and mainstream, and then swiftly conclude safeguards agreement with the IAEA," she said.

Refusing to go into specific details, she said the steps expected to be taken include those which help India enter the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty), CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) and FMCT (Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty).

Making it clear that these were "not conditions", she said EU is ready to discuss these issues with India with an "open mind" to see "how far we go and how far India can go. We have to see how far we can engage."

More than 200 people, but which still remain much rarer than in Iraq. The Taliban say they have 2,000 suicide bombers ready and another 3,000 in training.

Rahim said the focus of attacks will be southern areas, where the Taliban was born.

In Kandahar Taliban militants hanged three Afghans after accusing them of informing US and Nato military forces about rebel bases and hideouts, police and the extremist movement said Friday.

The men hanged in the Gereshk area of the southern province of Helmand on Thursday were two "ordinary villagers" and a former policeman who had surrendered to the rebels, a police officer said on condition of anonymity.

The officer rejected the charge that they had been spying.

'Taliban deploy 10,000 fighters for attack'

Militants hang three 'spies'

REUTERS, AFP, Spin Boldak

The Taliban have deployed 10,000 fighters for a spring offensive of "bloody attacks" against foreign troops in Afghanistan, a rebel commander said yesterday.

More than 4,000 people, a quarter of them civilians, were killed in fighting last year, the most violent year since the Taliban were ousted in 2001. Nato commanders and analysts warn this year could be just as bad or worse.

As the harsh winter snows melt, the insurgents have resumed their attacks, mostly in the south, where they have captured a major town and have threatened a key hydroelectric dam.

Mullah Abdul Rahim, the Taliban's operational commander for southern Helmand province -- the opium centre of the world's

major producer -- said militants would step up attacks in spring.

"As the weather becomes warm and leaves turn green, we will unleash bloody attacks on the US-led foreign troops," Rahim told reporters by satellite phone from a secret location.

"Our war preparations, especially in southern Afghanistan and in Helmand province, are complete and for this our 10,000 fighters are ready to take up arms the moment they are ordered."

After attempts at conventional pitched battles failed last year, the Taliban are expected to return to more conventional guerrilla tactics against government forces and the roughly 45,000 foreign soldiers in the country.

A key tactic is expected to be suicide bombings, which rose dramatically last year, killing more

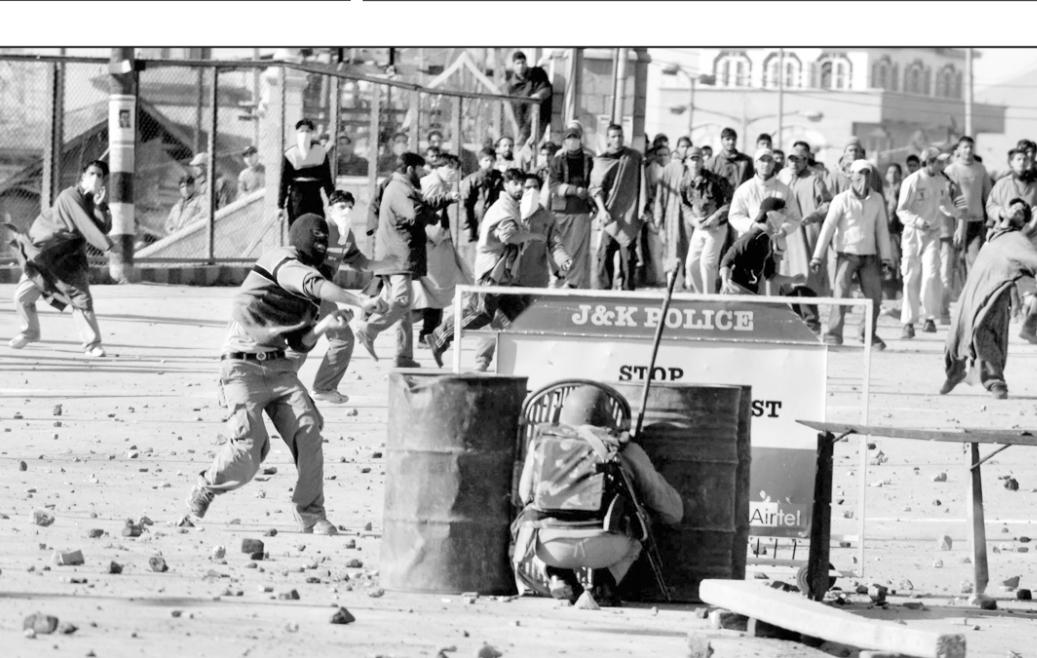
Billions squandered in Iraq: Auditors

AP, Washington

About \$10 billion has been squandered by the US government on Iraq reconstruction aid because of contractor overcharges and unsupported expenses, and federal investigators warned Thursday that significantly more taxpayer money is at risk.

The three top auditors overseeing work in Iraq told a House committee their review of \$57 billion in Iraq contracts found that Defence and State department officials condoned or allowed repeated work delays, bloated expenses and payments for shoddy work or work never done.

More than one in six dollars charged by US contractors were questionable or unsupported, nearly triple the amount of waste the Government Accountability Office estimated last fall.



An Indian policeman shelters behind a barricade as Kashmiri Muslim demonstrators throw stones during an anti-Israeli demonstration in Srinagar yesterday. Police fired teargas shells to quell protests by Muslims in Indian Kashmir against archaeological excavations by Israel near one of Islam's holiest sites.

S Korea worried about North backtracking

AP, Seoul

South Korea's president said he is worried that North Korea might backtrack on its pledge to dismantle its nuclear capability because the communist regime is "unpredictable."

North Korea agreed earlier this week to shutter its main nuclear complex within 60 days and then disable all its nuclear facilities in exchange for receiving the equivalent of up to 1 million tons of heavy fuel oil and political incentives from the United States and other regional powers.

It was the first time that North Korea agreed to take specific disarmament steps since six-nation talks began in 2003 among China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States.

Pyongyang agreed in principle to disarm in exchange for aid and security guarantees, but it backtracked on that pledge a day later.

Still, Roh said he was "optimistic" about the accord's implementation and that South Korea would try to make sure the deal is carried out by taking advantage of Seoul's economic "leverage" over Pyongyang.

Roh also said he felt this week's deal is so crucial that the South should have paid for the whole thing.

Four of the five countries in continuing disarmament talks China, South Korea, Russia and the United States have agreed to share the aid costs for the impoverished North. Japan refused unless the issue of its citizens abducted by North Korea is resolved.