

# 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 Eelam (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.

Warplanes pounded the towns of Sorampattu and Palai, destroying mortar positions, the statement said.

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 Eelam (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.

War planes pounded the towns of Sorampattu and Palai, destroying mortar positions, a day after bombers "completely destroyed" the LTTE's maritime bases in Chenmalai along the northern coast, the defence ministry said.

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

During a visit here earlier this week, Britain's junior foreign minis-

ter 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 Mahmoud Abbas (2nd R) speaks with Prime Minister Ismail Haniya (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.



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.

## '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 Beneta 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."

## '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 hydro-electric 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 Reuters 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

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 handed 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 Gereshek 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.

## One million Iraqis may flee violence this year

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 Pandaya, spokeswoman for the International Organisation for Migration. "The security situation is not improving. It's not changing."

Pandaya 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.

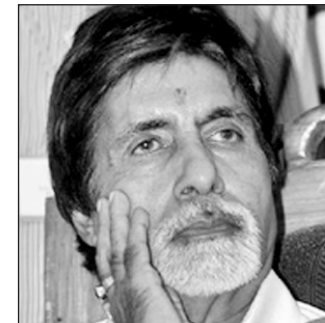
That appeal came a day after Washington announced it will allow about 7,000 Iraqis into the United States this year up from 202 in 2006 and will pay more to help Iraq's neighbours cope with the surge of refugees.

As the bloodshed in Iraq has increased, European governments have come under increasing pressure to open their doors to asylum-seekers. Many are worried that an escalation in violence in 2007 could generate a fresh wave of refugees.

The UN appeal came as the EU announced it would contribute \$13 million more for Iraqi refugees. About 60 percent will go to help those who have fled to Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

Meanwhile US and Iraqi forces pushed deeper Thursday into Sunni militant strongholds in Baghdad where cars rigged with explosives greeted their advance while British-led teams in southern Iraq used shipping containers to block suspected weapon smuggling routes from Iran.

Early Friday, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry said the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Ayub al-Masri, was wounded and an aide was killed in a clash the previous day with Iraqi forces north of Baghdad.



## 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.

Helicopters and electronic

## Gulf states plan arms buying binge

AP, Dubai

Deep fears about the war in Iraq and growing tension between the United States and Iran are driving the wealthy oil states of the Persian Gulf to go on shopping sprees for helicopters, ships and tanks, officials say.

Some 900 weapons makers and security firms from around the world, including the US and Russia, will compete for those military buys at the IDEX military show that opens Sunday in Abu Dhabi. At stake are contracts predicted to soar past the \$2 billion signed at the last such show two years ago.

"The shopping lists are directly correlated to the threat perception," said military analyst Mustafa Alani of the Dubai-based Gulf Research Center. "For the past 15 years, these countries didn't invest a lot in rearming."

But now they're rushing to upgrade.

The biggest fear in the region is that Iraq will collapse into civil war and its violence will spill into nearby Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, Alani said.

Those countries want to protect critical sites such as oil installations, ports and US military bases that house tens of thousands of American troops. Of those five nations, only Saudi Arabia has no American bases.

Helicopters and electronic

warning sensors are expected to be hot sellers. For example, seaborne early warning radar can detect rogue vessels approaching ports or oil terminals, said Robin Hughes, a Mideast military analyst at the London-based agency Jane's, a sponsor of the show.

If Iran were threatened or attacked by the United States or Israel, its ballistic missiles could hit land targets or ships, and its mines could block the narrow shipping lanes that carry oil from the Gulf.

That scenario is pushing Gulf defence ministers to consider missile defence systems like the Patriot, sold by US manufacturer Raytheon Co. They also are eyeing warships, including mine sweepers, and early-warning radar, Hughes said.

In particular, the Saudi military is looking for air defences and helicopters and perhaps naval frigates, Hughes said. Eurocopter, a French and German consortium, is working to sell its Tiger helicopter gunships to the Saudi military, he said.

The Emirates' shopping list includes ship-to-ship missiles, Hughes said.

Iran isn't believed to be sending an official delegation to the show. But military officials from Iran, who just took delivery of Russian-made TOR-1 air defence systems, are certain to be roaming the show and studying the weapons.

## More evidence of water on Mars

AP, Washington

An orbiting spacecraft has sent back new evidence for the presence of water on Mars. Scientists long have debated whether water flowed on the red planet, with evidence increasing in recent years. The presence of water would raise the possibility of at least primitive life forms existing there.

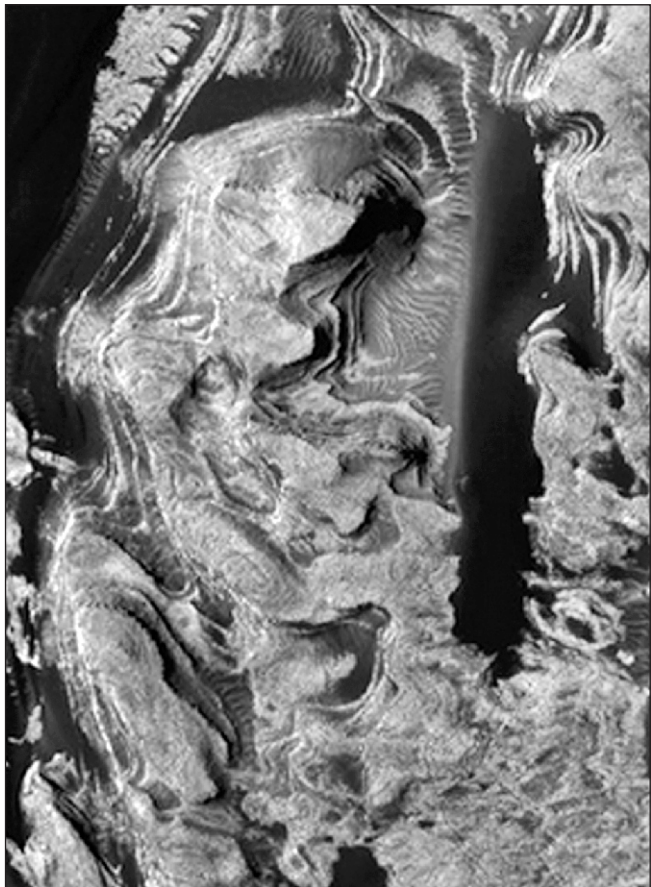
Images from a camera aboard Nasa's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter show alternating layers of dark- and light-toned rock in a giant rift valley.

Within those deposits are a series of linear fractures, called joints, that are surrounded by "halos" of light-toned bedrock, according to researchers from the University of Arizona.

Their findings, published in Friday's edition of the journal Science, were being presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in San Francisco.

Lead author Chris H Okubo said the "halos" indicate areas where fluids, probably water, passed through the bedrock. Minerals in the fluid strengthen and bleach the rock, he said, making it more resistant to erosion than other areas.

"On Earth, bleaching of rock surrounding a fracture is a clear indication of chemical interactions between fluids circulating within the fracture and the host rock," Okubo and co-author Alfred S. McEwen reported in the paper.



This image provided by Science shows light-toned layered rock in Becquerel Crater on Mars as photographed by the HiRISE (High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment) camera on board Nasa's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter. The orbiter images show alternating layers of dark and light-toned rock within which are a series of fractures, surrounded by what researchers call 'halos' of light-toned bedrock. These halos are believed to indicate where fluids, probably water, passed through the bedrock.

## 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.

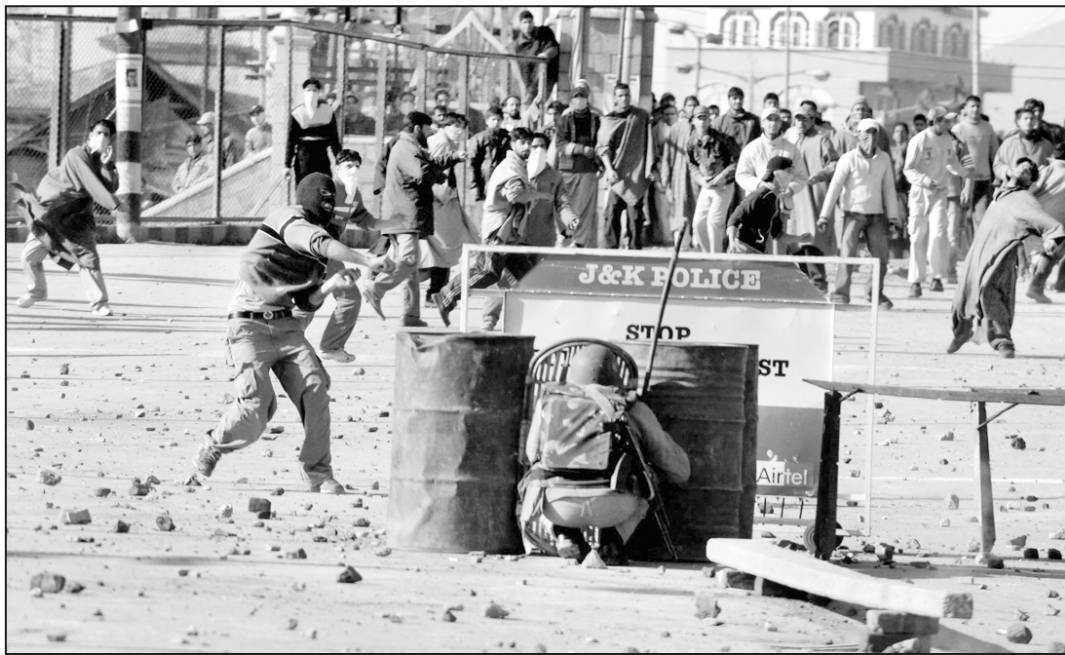
More than one in six dollars charged by US contractors were questionable or unsupported, nearly triple the amount of waste the Government Accountability Office estimated last fall.

"There is no accountability," said David M Walker, who heads the auditing arm of Congress. "Organisations charged with overseeing contracts are not held accountable. Contractors are not held accountable. The individuals responsible are not held accountable."

"People should be rewarded when they do a good job. But when things don't go right, there have to be consequences," he said.

Also testifying Thursday were Stuart Bowen, the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, and William H Reed, director of the Defence Contract Audit Agency.

The appearance before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee came as Congress prepares for a showdown with President Bush next month over his budget request of nearly \$100 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.



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.

"What I'm most concerned about is North Korea. It's true that North Koreans are a bit unpredictable," South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun told a meeting of South Korean expatriates in Rome on Thursday, according to a transcript of his comments provided by his office in Seoul.

North Korea's main nuclear envoy, Kim Kye Gwan, said Thursday his nation would honor the deal, according to Japan's Kyodo news agency.

But on Friday, Pyongyang gave no word on the landmark deal, as it celebrated leader Kim Jong Il's birthday, one of the country's biggest national holidays.

North Korea has long been known for its unpredictability and has a track record of violating agreements. In September, 2005,

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 would 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.