

Last rites read over Lanka peace move

AFP, Colombo

As thousands flee for their lives amid heavy weekend artillery fire in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, analysts say the government, Tamil rebels and Norway are clinging to a truce that is dead.

The Oslo-backed peace process suffered yet another blow last week when the rebels vowed to resume their campaign for independence and statehood, scrapping a 2002 pledge to agree to a federal solution to end decades of ethnic conflict.

"I don't think there is any possibility to revive the (Norway-backed) peace process," said Sunanda Deshapriya, director of the private Centre for Policy Alternatives think-tank.

"If at all, the parties will have to think of a fresh initiative."

Amid the spiralling violence, which has claimed 4,000 lives since December 2005, Norway's top peace broker Erik Solheim made a fresh call for the two sides to return to the negotiating table.

"Norway is willing to go the extra mile to assist their peace endeavours at their request," he said. "As soon as the parties renew their peace efforts, we will be ready to do all we can to help."

Solheim said Oslo remained in regular contact with Colombo and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) despite the collapse of the last talks between the two in October.

But veteran Sri Lankan diplomat Nanda Godage expressed pessimism that those contacts would ever yield results.

"I don't think Norway has a role in Sri Lanka anymore," Godage told AFP. "They, will, however, continue to ask both sides to re-commit to the peace process."

Godage said neither the government nor the Tamil Tigers would want to attract international condemnation by being the first to declare the process over, but said it was for all practical purposes.

Western diplomats said reading between the lines in Norway's latest call for peace underscored Oslo's frustration at the escalating violence and the moribund state of the peace process.

In June 2003, Sri Lanka's key foreign backers -- Japan, the United States and the European Union -- hailed reconciliation efforts, pledged 4.5 billion dollars in aid to rebuild war-hit areas and described the island as a beacon of hope.

The euphoria has long since evaporated.

Last month, the donors warned of foreign aid cuts unless the south Asian island country showed signs of moving towards a peaceful end to the bloodshed.

Both government officials and diplomats here agreed that neither the Tigers nor the administration of President Mahinda Rajapakse would formally withdraw from the peace process or the truce even though they were all but dead.

"It is not a responsibility that the government or the Tigers would want to take," said a diplomat close to the peace efforts. "Both know that they will antagonise the international community if they do that."

However, both sides have made a mockery of the truce which was the centrepiece of the drive to secure a settlement to Sri Lanka's separatist conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives since 1972.

"We were on a path of appeasement earlier," defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said, referring to the previous administration which did not retaliate against rebel attacks.

Troops take Tiger bases

Fresh offensive goes on

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops seized at least four bases from Tamil Tiger strongholds in the northeast in the past week, the defence ministry said Sunday, in fighting that has forced thousands to flee.

The ministry said troops, backed by artillery and multi-barrel rocket launchers, captured four bases of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in the Trincomalee district following the offensive launched on Thursday.

"The LTTE terrorists have now withdrawn further north of Trincomalee," the ministry said in a statement. "Search operations and the consolidation of positions by the army are still continuing."

A Tiger spokeswoman said thousands of Tamil civilians living in the area -- afraid of being caught in the crossfire between rebels and military -- have fled in droves.

In the past week, security forces advanced from their bases in the coastal district of Trincomalee, 260km northeast of the capital, the ministry said.

The fresh violence coincided with the fifth anniversary of a Norwegian-arranged truce that is holding only on paper with nearly 4,000 killed in the past year in tit-for-tat attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (C) addresses the delegates as Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu (L), and Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri (R) look on during an Islamic Ministers' Conference in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told foreign ministers from seven key Muslim states meeting here that a joint push by the Islamic world is needed to end the turmoil in the Middle East.

Pak power plant bombed

AFP, Quetta

Suspected insurgents bombed a main railway track and fired a rocket at an electricity station in the restive southwestern Pakistani province of Baluchistan, but there were no casualties, officials said Sunday.

Part the railway track was blown up early Sunday in the Dasht area, some 22km south of provincial capital Quetta, police official Mohammad Khan told AFP.

A patrol party found four home-

made bombs attached to the track and called the bomb disposal squad but in the meantime one of the bombs went off, Khan said. No-one was hurt.

The track was immediately repaired and the incident caused no disruption to the train service, he added.

Separately, a rocket exploded at an electricity station located in the Quetta garrison, which suspended electricity supply to several parts of the city but caused no casualties, power company officials said.

A fire erupted after the blast, which was put out by local firefighters, they said.

Insurgents linked to certain ethnic Baluch chieftains have waged a two-year campaign to win more political rights and a greater share of profits from the region's vast natural resources.

They also oppose President Pervez Musharraf's plan to build several military cantonments in the province, which borders Afghanistan and Iran.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Defence Ministry released photo shows a trench at a base allegedly captured from Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels during an offensive in the country's north-eastern district of Trincomalee. The defence ministry said yesterday that it captured four LTTE bases together with a large haul of weapons and other items.

Breath test sniffs out lung cancer

AFP, Paris

A breath test based on coloured dots can give doctors a good fix on whether a patient has lung cancer, a study published on Monday in the British specialist journal Thorax says.

Individuals with lung cancer exhale a unique signature of so-called volatile organic compounds, which can be captured and analysed by a chemical colour sensor.

Researchers led by Peter Mazzone at The Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, tested the gadget on 122 people with different types of respiratory disease -- 49 of whom had small-cell lung cancer at various stages of development -- and on 21 healthy people.

They used the results from tests on 70 percent of the study participants to finetune the sensor and then used it on the remaining 30 percent of the volunteers.

It was able to accurately predict the presence of cancer in 73.3 percent of the people who had lung cancer.

Cancer often shows no symptoms in its early stages, so it is essential to diagnose the disease as soon as possible.



Devyani Rana

Woman linked to Nepal royal massacre weds in India

AFP, New Delhi

Devyani Rana, once the girlfriend of Nepal's crown prince Dipendra who killed himself and nine relatives in a 2001 palace bloodbath, wed an Indian politician's son in New Delhi, reports said Sunday.

Rana, 34, who is related on her mother's side to India's aristocratic Scindia family, fled Nepal after an intoxicated Dipendra shot his parents, King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, and seven other royals, before killing himself.

Unofficial reports said the crown prince's shooting spree was probably triggered by his parents' opposition to his plans to marry Rana, whose family had been at loggerheads with the kingdom's monarchs.

Devyani, who belongs to the Rana clan that ruled Nepal until 1951, married Aishwarya Singh, grandson of India's human resources development minister, senior Congress party politician Arjun Singh, according to media reports.