

Tigers warn of bloodbath

3 soldiers among 7 people killed in fighting

AP, AFP, Colombo

The Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday warned of a "bloodbath" if the international community fails to stop the Sri Lankan military's offensive into rebel-held areas.

The warning was the strongest since the two sides signed a cease-fire five years ago and came during a meeting between Norwegian ambassador Hans Brattskar and SP Thamilselvan, the Tamil rebel political chief, the rebels said in an e-mailed statement.

Accusing the military of amassing weapons and fighters, Thamilselvan told Brattskar that the Tamil Tigers also were ready for combat.

"Thamilselvan said he emphasized to the ambassador that the present soft approach of the interna-

tional community toward the GoSL (Sri Lankan government) is not going change its plans and will only contribute to a worsening situation leading to bloodbath in the island," the rebels' statement said.

The statement went on to accuse the government of making movements of personnel and equipment closer to the rebels' territory and stated that the rebels were expecting a large-scale attack against them soon.

No comment was immediately available from the Sri Lankan government, whose military in the past five months has driven rebels from many of their bases, mainly in eastern Sri Lanka.

Hours before the rebel warning, the insurgents killed three Sri Lankan soldiers in the island's north

early Monday.

The rebels attacked a military camp in the northern Jaffna peninsula just after midnight, and the ensuing battle lasted for an hour, said Lt. Col Upali Rajapakse, a senior official at the information unit of the Ministry of Defence.

Seven people have been killed in Sri Lanka's restive northern and eastern regions in clashes between security forces and Tamil Tiger rebels, the defence ministry said Monday.

Three soldiers were killed in the northern district of Jaffna early Monday when troops traded fire with Tiger rebels, the military said, adding that security forces had also inflicted heavy damage on the guerrillas. It gave no further details.

In the eastern district of Ampara, a police commando was killed on Sunday when forces encountered a rebel group during a foot patrol.

Meanwhile, police said late Sunday they had found the bodies of two civilians shot dead by unidentified gunmen in the eastern district of Batticaloa.

Elsewhere in the north, police found the body of a Tamil youth who had been shot dead tied to a lamp post.

There was no immediate word from the Tamil Tigers.

Escalating violence in the past year has all but destroyed a Norway-brokered 2002 cease-fire agreement. European peace monitors say the fighting has killed at least 4,000 civilians and combatants since December 2005.



PHOTO: AFP

Family members of slain Indian politician Sunil Mahto grieve after seeing his body in the mortuary of the Tata Main Hospital in Jamshedpur yesterday after the death of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (Liberation Front) politician.

Strike hits Jharkhand after killing of MP

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A dawn-to-dusk general strike hit normal life across the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand yesterday, a day after a tribal parliamentarian was shot dead by suspected Naxalites when he was watching a football match at a village near the steel city of Jamshedpur.

Activists of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) imposed the shutdown protesting the assassination of the party lawmaker Sunil Mahato in the tribal-dominated state whose large parts are hit by Naxal activities.

Mahato, 38-year-old member of Lok Sabha, was gunned down along with two of his bodyguards and a party colleague when he was watching the football match organised at Bakuria, 40km from Jamshedpur, on the occasion of the Holi (festival of colours) Sunday.

Officials said about 15 Naxals reached the venue of the match ten minutes before its end and moved near Mahato, who was the chief guest, on the pretext of garlanding him before opening gunfire at him from close range.

While Mahato, who represented Jamshedpur constituency and was also the general secretary of JMM, and his two bodyguards were killed on the spot, his party colleague Prabhakar Mahato succumbed to injuries on way to hospital.

Mahato's party is one of the constituents of Jharkhand's ruling coalition headed by Chief Minister Madhu Koda. The lawmaker is survived by his wife and two daughters.

Koda ordered a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation into the killing of Mahato who had been elected to Lok Sabha for the first time.

On probable reasons behind the killing, Koda told reporters in Ranchi, capital of Jharkhand, late last night that only a probe will establish that but indicated the act was the handiwork of Naxalites.

The assassination of Mahato drew condemnation from President APJ Abdul Kalam, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee and Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil who described the killing of the tribal parliamentarian as an "act of cowardice" by the Naxals.

Patil said Indian government would not be cowed down by such incidents and would continue to pursue multi-pronged strategy to fight the Naxals.

Koda said about 200 paramilitary personnel would be dispatched to conduct combing operations to track the assailants of Mahato.



PHOTO: AFP

US chairman of the Council of Foreign Relations Peter Peterson (L) gestures as he holds talks with Indian Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee(L) and other officials in New Delhi yesterday.

China slams talk of Taiwan's independence

REUTERS, Beijing/Taipei

China slammed Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's intensified talk of independence yesterday, saying anyone who sought a split from China would be a "criminal in history."

Chen said on Sunday the self-ruled island should pursue independence and change its official title, the "Republic of China" -- moves that are also certain to worry its key ally, the United States, which seeks to maintain the status quo between the two sides.

"Don't listen to local leaders," Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing told Taiwan reporters in Beijing,

Nato airstrike kills 9 in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

A Nato airstrike hit a house during a firefight between Western troops and militants, killing nine Afghans who lived there, Afghan officials said yesterday.

Militants overnight fired on a Nato base in Kapisa province, just north of Kabul, said Deputy Governor Sayad Mohammad Dawood Hashimmi. When soldiers returned fire, they hit a home, killing five women, three boys and a man, he said.

A deputy Interior Ministry spokesman also said nine civilians had been killed. He asked not to be

identified because the ministry hadn't yet prepared a statement.

Maj William Mitchell, a US military spokesman, said officials were looking into the incident. The Nato base in Kapisa is staffed by US forces.

The news of the airstrike came one day after wounded Afghans and witnesses said US Marines fired on civilian cars and pedestrians after a frenzied escape from a suicide bomb and gunfire attack in eastern Afghanistan. The violence sparked angry anti-US demonstrations by hundreds of Afghan men.

Asia winning some battles in terror war

AP, Jakarta

Indonesian prisons are a weak link in the country's fight against terrorism, with militants often emerging more organised and committed to violence than before they were jailed, a top anti-terror official said Monday.

Gen. Ansyad Mbai made the remarks on the sidelines of a six-nation conference aimed at strengthening cooperation in the fight against terrorism in Southeast Asia.

"The prisoners should be treated specially; they should be split up from one another," Mbai told reporters. "We must not allow them to become united, stronger and more radical while they are in jail."

He noted a recent case in which Indonesian police seized a laptop from a notorious militant who they said used it to communicate with sympathisers outside the prison.

Israel, Iran have most negative influence on world: Poll

AFP, London

Israel and Iran are perceived as having the most negative influence on the world, followed closely by North Korea and the United States, according to a poll to be released Tuesday.

At the other end of the scale, Japan, France, the European Union and Canada are seen as most positive, according to the survey by BBC World Service radio of 28,000 people in 27 countries.

Respondents were given a list of 12 countries and asked if they had a "mostly positive or mostly negative influence in the world."

The country with the highest negative response was Israel with 56 percent negative and 17 percent positive, followed by Iran on 54 percent negative and 18 positive.

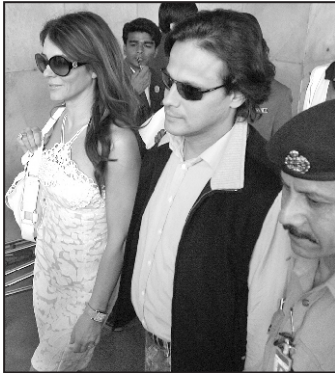


PHOTO: AFP

British model and actress Elizabeth Hurley (L) and her husband Indian businessman Arun Nayar (C) are accompanied by security personnel as they leave Chattrapati Shivaji International Airport in Mumbai yesterday.

Hurley, new hubby in India for celebration

AFP, Mumbai

British star Elizabeth Hurley and new Indian husband Arun Nayar set off a paparazzi frenzy Monday as they arrived here for a week of festivities to end with a traditional wedding in a palace city.

The newlyweds walked hand-in-hand after landing at Mumbai's international airport for the second leg of celebrations.

Hurley and Nayar wed in a civil service Friday at Sudeley Castle in southwest England, followed by a lavish star-studded party at a country castle the next day.

Hurley in a laced white dress and Nayar sporting a blue shirt, jeans and a dark jacket, were accompanied by a bevy of bodyguards and airport security who struggled to keep frenzied news photographers at bay.

'Air strikes on Iran could backfire'

REUTERS, London

Military strikes to destroy Iran's nuclear ambitions could backfire, increasing Tehran's determination to obtain atomic weapons and bolstering hostility toward the West, a report said on Monday.

The report "Would air strikes work?," written by a leading British weapons scientist, said strikes would probably be unable to hit enough targets to cause serious damage to Iran's nuclear facilities.

"With inadequate intelligence, it is unlikely it would be possible to identify and subsequently destroy the number of targets needed to set back Iran's nuclear programme for a significant period," said the report.

"In the aftermath of a military strike, if Iran devoted maximum effort and resources to building one

nuclear bomb, it could achieve this in a relatively short amount of time."

Such a weapon would then be wielded in "an environment of incalculably greater hostility," said the report, which was published by the Oxford Research Group and written by Dr Frank Barnaby, a nuclear physicist and weapons expert.

Barnaby, one of the few remaining people in the world to have witnessed an above ground nuclear test, urged greater diplomatic efforts to end a standoff with Tehran.

Iran refused to meet a United Nations deadline last week for halting uranium enrichment -- a process that can produce nuclear fuel for use in power plants or weapons.

IAEA opens talks on Iran, North Korea

AFP, Vienna

UN atomic watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei said yesterday his agency was still unable to verify that Iran was not seeking nuclear weapons but that negotiation remained the key to resolving the crisis.

ElBaradei was reporting to the International Atomic Energy Agency's governing board about Iran's defiance of UN demands to rein in its nuclear programme. He also asked for approval of deep cuts in technical aid to Tehran.

Iranian ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanish however greeted ElBaradei's comments as proof that Iran had not diverted nuclear materials for "military purposes."

"This is the best documentation to prove our assertion that our activities are exclusively for peaceful purposes," Soltanish told reporters.

"Iran will never give up its inalienable right for peaceful uses of nuclear energy... but Iran is fully prepared to sit down at the negotiating table in order to remove any ambiguities about our nuclear activities," Soltanish said.

ElBaradei said the problems in verifying Iran's work were "sui

generis," of its own kind, due to "two decades of undeclared activities."

He said the lack of Iranian cooperation with a four-year-old IAEA investigation "renders the agency unable to provide the required assurance about the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme."

This means "the international community will continue to express concern," he said.

The IAEA has "been able to verify the non-diversion (for military purposes) of declared nuclear material in Iran" but is "unable to reconstruct fully the history of Iran's nuclear programme and some of its components, because we have not been provided with the necessary level of transparency and cooperation on the part of Iran," ElBaradei said.

This leaves the IAEA's investigation into US charges that Iran is secretly developing nuclear weapons in "somewhat of a stalemate," ElBaradei said.

The regular session of the IAEA's 35-nation board of governors comes as diplomacy accelerates to win guarantees Tehran does not seek the bomb.