

Thousands flee homes as troops,Tigers clash

AFP, Colombo

More than 40,000 civilians have fled their homes in eastern Sri Lanka amid renewed clashes between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels that have left 12 dead, both sides said yesterday.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said two of those killed were civilians during military shelling in the Batticaloa district.

"More than 40,000 civilians were displaced within two days due to the heavy artillery and multi-barrel rocket firing," an LTTE statement

said, adding that it threatened a massive refugee crisis.

Sri Lanka's defence ministry acknowledged that thousands of Tamil refugees were being accommodated at welfare centres or with friends and relatives in a government-held area.

"A total of 42,027 civilians have in the last few days arrived from the uncleared (rebel-held) areas of Batticaloa to the government controlled areas," it said in a statement.

The ministry said eight Tigers were killed in three separate clashes in the island's northeast on Saturday and two police commandos

were killed Sunday by a roadside mine in the east.

The Batticaloa district in the eastern province had been swamped with more than 76,000 refugees before the fresh fighting erupted last week as part of a government push to clear rebel bases, according to international aid agencies operating in the area.

Security forces on Thursday began a new push to advance deep into a Tiger stronghold known as the Thoppigala jungle, which stretches from the Batticaloa district to neighbouring Ampara district in the northeast of the island.

Nine police commandos from the Special Task Force were killed Friday in clashes with the LTTE, the Tigers said, adding they had retrieved six of the bodies and returned four of them to the military Saturday.

Fighting raged in the area Sunday, but there were no immediate reports of casualties.

More than 4,000 people have been killed amid an upsurge in fighting since December 2005, despite the two sides agreeing to a truce in their decades-old ethnic war five years ago.

Five Buddhists killed in restive Thai south

AFP, Yala

Five Buddhists have been killed in shootings throughout Thailand's Muslim-majority south, where Islamic separatists have battled the government for three years, police said yesterday.

A Buddhist couple was killed late Saturday in a drive-by shooting as they returned home from market in Yala province, police said.

A brother and a sister, both rubber tappers, were also killed early Sunday in Yala as they headed home from morning work on a rubber plantation, police said.

Another rubber tapper, a 60-year-old man was also killed early Sunday after suspected militants shot him five times as he rode to a plantation in Narathiwat province.

Some 2,000 people have been killed in restive south since the violence erupted in 2004 along this mainly Buddhist country's southern border with Malaysia.

Violence has recently escalated in the region despite a raft of peace-building measures proposed by Thailand's military-backed government.

Abe denies any plan for cabinet reshuffle

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe promised yesterday to keep his current cabinet despite wide-spread predictions of a reshuffle, as he struggles to overturn his sagging popularity ahead of national elections.

He also softened his push for a national referendum bill as part of a move towards revising the Pacifist constitution, one of the core projects of his administration.

Since taking office in September, Abe has so far focused on major, long-term issues, such as North Korean policies, regional security, the constitutional amendment, and educational reform.

In a televised interview with national network Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) aired on Sunday, Abe once again criticised North Korea over the kidnapping of Japanese nationals and its nuclear and missile crisis.

However, opinion polls have



shown that Japanese voters are more interested in economic measures and rebuilding the ill-managed public pension system.

The Abe cabinet has seen its popularity plummet in recent months in part due to a series of domestic scandals involving ministers, with Abe seen as having a weak control over his ruling party.

"I have absolutely no plan to reshuffle the cabinet. I want to go into the elections with the current cabinet," he said, referring to the upper house

elections to be held in the summer.

"I don't want to worry over near-sighted things. I want to keep my strong determination to attain long-term goals," Abe said in the interview.

"When you have high public support rates, you worry that the numbers might fall. When they are low, you are lured into grandeur projects."

Abe emphasised that the Japanese economy has steadily improved and characterised his policies as "Chinese medicine", saying their benefits are kicking in at a slow and gradual pace, but should last for a long time.

He had earlier said the parliament should approve the national referendum legislation by the May 3 national holiday, which commemorates the current post-war Pacifist constitution.

Eight Afghan cops killed in ambush

AFP, Kandahar

Taliban insurgents ambushed a police patrol in southern Afghanistan killing eight officers, a police commander told AFP Sunday, in one of the bloodiest such attacks in weeks.

The patrol was ambushed in the southern province of Kandahar late Saturday, the commander of border police in the province, General Raziq, told AFP, adding "eight policemen were killed."

The rebels were able to flee following a "brief" gun battle after the attack in Arghistan district, said the commander, who uses only one name. They appeared not to have suffered any casualties, he said.

"We've launched an operation against the Taliban, who were behind this attack. So far we have had no success," he said.

Berlin reviewing Islamist group's video threat

AFP, Berlin

The German foreign ministry said yesterday it was reviewing a new video in which Islamist militants threaten to attack Germany and Austria if they do not pull their troops out of Afghanistan.

"The video is currently being evaluated by government experts," a ministry spokesman told AFP.

A foreign ministry crisis team handling the case of two German hostages seized in Iraq was also studying the message, he added.

The video message is read out by a masked man on an Al-Qaeda linked website, Voice of the Caliphate.

The crisis group was meeting today and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was closely monitoring developments, the spokesman said.

On Saturday, a militant Islamist group in Iraq posted a videotape on the Internet that purported to show two German hostages. The masked man threatened to execute the hostages if Germany kept its troops in Afghanistan.

Germany has almost 3,000 troops in the relatively stable north of Afghanistan, where it commands the International Security Assistance Force.



PHOTO: AFP

Sand sculptor Katsuhiko Chaen yesterday put finishing touches on his sculpture based on a scene of the Wagner's Opera Tannhauser as part of the upcoming Tokyo Opera Nomori 2007 at Tokyo's Ueno Park.

Converts in Malaysian state can now retain surnames

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Muslim converts in the northern state of Perlis will now be allowed to retain their family names, instead of changing it to "Abdullah" following a state religious edict, reports yesterday said.

The fatwa, or religious edict, issued by the Perlis Fatwa Council said converts must retain their family or father's name to avoid confusion in their family history or lineage, the News Straits Times

reported.

"It's time that we correct society's misconception that converts must assign the bin or binti, which stood for "son of" or "daughter of" to "Abdullah", said state mufti Mohamad Asri Zainul Abidin.

"From now on, the council has decided that it is haram, or forbidden, for them to do so," Mohamad Asri said according to the newspaper.

Mohamad Asri said changing a convert's family or father's name to "Abdullah" was commonly practised

in Malaysia as most thought it was required by Islam.

He said the practice was actually contrary to the teachings of Islam, which stresses fairness, equality and respect for one's parents.

He was quoted by state Bernama news agency as saying that changing ethnic Chinese or Indian surnames to a Muslim name was "awkward" and a mere tradition. He said it was unfair on the converts and their families.

"This should not be the case because they are actually being denied justice and their right," Mohamad Asri said, according to Bernama.

Multicultural Malaysia's almost 27 million population is made up of 60 percent Muslim Malays, 26 percent ethnic Chinese and 8 percent ethnic Indians.

AFP, London

Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon insisted the organisation has a crucial role to play in bolstering democracy and development across the globe, as members mark Commonwealth Day today.

McKinnon said that the Commonwealth was using its shared language, institutions and history to push through important changes that would improve the lives of its two billion people.

Established in 1926 and reformed in 1949, the Commonwealth of Nations is a successor to the British Empire and brings together some 53 widely diverse nations – around a third of the world's countries and a quarter of its population.

The Commonwealth does not have the military ties of NATO or the political and economic bonds of the European Union to lock its members together.

But McKinnon said the organisation instead drew strength from being a voluntary grouping of states worldwide tackling current issues concerning its members.

"You must always be relevant to your membership to survive as an international organisation," he told AFP at the Commonwealth's Marlborough House headquarters in London.

"No one's interested in what you did yesterday; people want to know what you're going to do today and tomorrow.

"This is what our prime ministers want us to do: let's get on and do it.

"Through the Commonwealth linkages we can advance countries' external relationships in a way which no other organisation can do.

"Democracy, human rights, social and economic development are the focuses now. In five years' time, we might find that climate change is dominating everything."

He added: "We are the only international organisation that has the capacity to expel or suspend a member. When we do suspend, countries feel very aggrieved and work very hard to get back in.

"That to me is very relevant to our existing membership because they know they belong to an organisation which doesn't allow those who breach the principles to stay there."

Rather than see its importance wane as memories of Britain's colonial past dim, McKinnon, 68, a former deputy prime minister and foreign minister of New Zealand, said the organisation's power and influence was quietly growing.

"You can be a force for good. We were the ones that began the debt write-off that started in the 1990s -- we have a pretty good record of

McKinnon insists in interview

starting things that then get picked up by the rest of the international community," he said.

"This is because we are global, not just regional. If you can sell a good idea and make it work in the Commonwealth then you can do it globally.

"If you can, as diverse as we are, get agreement, then people will say if they can do it, why can't the rest of the world?"

Indeed, countries from outside

the Commonwealth fold are making enquiries about joining.

Marlborough House sources said Algeria, Israel, Palestine, Rwanda, Sudan and Yemen were interested.

A committee on membership is due to report on whether the Commonwealth should open its doors further.

"I think it's a very good sign when people want to join and people don't like leaving," said McKinnon, who

has been Commonwealth secretary-general since 1999. His second and final term expires next year.

The theme of this year's annual Commonwealth Day, marked across the globe, is respecting difference and promoting understanding, an idea born out of the tensions felt between communities worldwide in the years following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.