

Lanka war spreads to northwest

33 Tigers, 4 soldiers killed in fresh fighting

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

At least 33 Tamil Tiger rebels and four soldiers were killed in a battle in northwestern Sri Lanka on Friday, the military said, as analysts sounded a warning that renewed civil war is spreading.

The army confirmed troops were trying to neutralise heavy rebel guns in Mannar district, but refused to say whether they had entered terrain the rebels control under the terms of a now-battered 2002 truce as the Tigers claim.

"The LTTE is attacking with mortars ... without considering the safety of the civilians in the area. Three soldiers were killed and 4 injured," military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe said.

Military sources said that four soldiers and 20 guerrillas were killed in fresh fighting Friday morning while security forces said they killed 11 more rebels in the same area on

Thursday.

At least 19 soldiers were also wounded when the Tigers fired mortars and resisted the military push, military sources said.

Another two Tigers were reported killed further north in the Jaffna peninsula where sporadic fire fights raged Friday, the military said.

The heavy fighting forced the closure of the de facto border crossing point at Omanthai, local officials said.

The Tigers said earlier they were fighting fierce artillery battles with hundreds of troops who had crossed into their territory in Mannar. They were not immediately available for comment on the death toll.

The clash, some 1.2 miles (2 km) inside rebel lines, came as sporadic fighting continued in the east -- where troops have evicted the Tigers from around 600 square km (230 square miles) of land amid a declared drive to destroy them

ilitarily.

"This morning a contingent of army troops intruded into our parts of Mannar district ... and are holding 120 families in a village as human shields while they are firing at us," Tiger military spokesman Rasiiah Ilanthiraiyan said earlier from the rebels' northern stronghold of Kilinochchi.

Samarasinghe said troops had killed 13 rebels on Thursday on forward defence lines in the northern districts of Vavuniya and Jaffna.

He said some of those slain were wearing their characteristic Tiger-striped uniforms, and that troops had also recovered a stash of rebel equipment including a suicide bomber jacket and cyanide capsules in a lorry in the army-held Jaffna peninsula.

The Tigers denied that any of their fighters had been killed on Thursday, saying the dead must be civilians.

Israel releases son of jailed Intifada leader

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday released the oldest son of jailed Intifada leader Marwan Barghout from prison after he had served 39 months for participating in the uprising and belonging to a banned group, his lawyers said.

Qassam Barghout, 23, was freed from a prison in the southern Israeli city of Ashkelon and returned to his family home in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

Upon his arrival in Ramallah, he visited the tomb of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat accompanied by his mother, Fadwa.

He was detained by Israeli security forces on December 24, 2003 as he tried to cross into the occupied West Bank from Jordan.

An Israeli military tribunal later convicted him of belonging to a banned group and participating in the second Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, that erupted in September 2000.

His father, Marwan, is the charismatic West Bank leader of president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party and was a key player during the early days of the second Intifada.



PHOTO: AFP

A Maputo resident looks at his home, which was destroyed in a blast at an arms depot near Maputo yesterday. An explosion at the arms depot near the international airport in Mozambique's capital has left around 80 people dead and more than 100 injured, many of them children, government and emergency services said.

N Korea still willing to disarm: US

AFP, Beijing

The chief US envoy to North Korean nuclear talks insisted yesterday the Stalinist regime was committed to ending its atomic programme, despite a dramatic breakdown in negotiations on disarmament.

North Korea walked out of the six-nation talks on Thursday after four days of deadlock because 25 million dollars in frozen funds had not been returned, despite pledges from the other parties that it would soon get the money.

With three weeks to go before North Korea is due to close its main nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and allow United Nations inspectors back into the country, US envoy Christopher Hill insisted the deadline could be met.

"I don't think there is a broader point here about whether they are committed to the nuclear deal. I think they are. Throughout the week, they reiterated that," Hill told reporters before flying back to Washington.



PHOTO: AFP

Maoist Chairman Prachanda (L) drapes the Communist flag onto coffins of slain Maoist activists during a condolence meeting where the bodies were displayed for a last tribute by the family members and cadres at the Open Air Theatre in Kathmandu yesterday.

Maoists threaten revenge after south Nepali bloodbath

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists placed 25 bloodied corpses on display in the capital yesterday and warned of possible retaliation for the killings of their comrades by an ethnic group earlier this week.

"If the government does not ban the MJF (Mahadhesi People's Rights Forum) and take action against its leaders we will be compelled to start retaliatory action," Maoist number two Baburam Bhattarai told thousands of supporters.

Maoist leader Prachanda placed orange flower garlands and draped communist flags on the stinking corpses in an open air theatre in the heart of Kathmandu after the bodies were airlifted from southern Nepal.

The leftists were apparently killed by ethnic activists in clashes Wednesday that have cast a cloud over the nation's peace deal, which officially brought an end to ten years of civil war between Maoist rebels

and the government.

"We have not lost our patience at this critical moment, but if the government stays quiet on this matter it will have to bear the responsibility of the consequences," Bhattarai told the crowd.

Following the mourning rally, the former rebels led a silent procession through Kathmandu to take some of the victims for cremation at Pashupatinath temple, and others for funerals in the capital's main mosque.

At least 29 people were killed and dozens injured in the violence in the town of Gaur, situated 90 kilometres (57 miles) south of Kathmandu and near the border with India.

Journalists and human rights workers said local residents told them of horrific scenes earlier this week of rape, burnings and stabbings during what the local media has dubbed a "bloodbath."

Fragile truce after 160 killed in Pak clashes

AFP, AP, Wana

Warring tribesmen and foreign al-Qaeda militants have agreed to a ceasefire after four days of bloodshed in a Pakistani border region that left up to 160 people dead, officials said yesterday.

Islamic religious leaders mediated the ceasefire overnight in mountainous South Waziristan, where Uzbek and Chechen insurgents fought mortar and rocket battles with Taliban-sympathising local tribes, they said.

"There has been no fighting since last night in South Waziristan but fighters loyal to the rival factions are maintaining their positions on hilltops," a local government source said.

"The ceasefire has been achieved because of the efforts of local mullahs," he said.

Taliban militants, including one wanted for a series of deadly suicide bombings in Pakistani cities, had brought the two sides for negotiations on Thursday in the rugged

region bordering Afghanistan.

Fierce fighting broke out on Monday after ex-Taliban commander Mullah Nazir, whom the government says has come over to its side, ordered followers of Uzbek militant Tahir Yuldashev to disarm.

The battles killed 130 Uzbek and Chechen militants and between 25 to 30 tribesmen, the governor of North West Frontier Province told a news conference in the provincial capital Peshawar.

Another 62 foreign fighters were arrested during the clashes, including Chechens, Uzbeks and other foreigners, Ali Muhammad Jan Aurakzai said.

But the local government source said the talks to return peace to the area went into a second session after Friday prayers for Nazir refused to withdraw his fighters unless foreign militants handover their weaponry.

"Nazir has taken a strong line and he is adamant that Uzbeks disarm and hand over their weapons to the local tribal elders," the

source said.

Pakistani officials have said the battles show the success of Islamabad's policy of encouraging conservative tribesmen in its border areas to drive out the militants themselves, instead of using the army.

The United States and other Western allies have repeatedly urged Pakistan to crack down on Islamic extremists in the mountainous tribal belt, saying that al-Qaeda and the Taliban were regrouping and building training camps there.

Governor Aurakzai said this week's fighting had spread to a large area of South Waziristan and tribesmen were chasing foreigners who were hiding in the region.

"Local Waziristan people have risen against the foreigners in the region on their own. They have realised that their presence was causing trouble for the local population," Aurakzai said.

69 Taliban killed in Afghan operation

AFP, Kandahar

Afghan-led forces killed 69 Taliban in a major operation against rebel strongholds in southern Afghanistan, while seven police also died, the defence ministry said yesterday.

Thursday's push through part of the southern province of Helmand was the first "where foreign forces have not participated," defence ministry spokesman Mohammad Zahir Azimi said.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) said it provided "flank protection, close air support and medical support."

Azimi said the operation cleared three villages near the town of Gereshk. The fighting was over Thursday and troops were Friday involved in a "clean-up" which included assessing damage and looking for weapons.

"Sixty-nine enemy elements

were killed, 49 bodies of the enemy were left at the battleground. Seventeen enemy elements were arrested, including three wounded," Azimi told reporters in Kabul.

"Seven police were martyred," and 19 men from the police force, army and the intelligence service were wounded, he added.

Azimi said the operation showed the increasing capacity of the Afghan security forces, which were in tatters by the time the extremist Taliban was driven from power in late 2001 in an US-led offensive.

"We began last year with 16,000 Afghan troops. This year we have 46,000 Afghan soldiers," he said.

"We are better equipped, better trained and are in a much better coordination and understanding with international community and foreign troops about the common enemy," he said.

Iran sanctions vote likely today

REUTERS, United Nations

Security Council members yesterday was set to review a revised draft of a UN resolution to impose new sanctions against Iran over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment, with a view to voting over the weekend.

While major powers said their proposed text was a final version, changes are still likely before a vote that British Ambassador Emyr Jones Parry said was planned for Saturday.

The draft resolution, obtained by Reuters, rejects nearly all the amendments from South Africa that that would have stripped the text of most provisions on weapons and financial bans.

But the negotiators provided a requested explanation of why each name on a list of 28 Iranian individuals, companies and institutions should be subject to an assets freeze.

In response, South Africa's ambassador, Dumisani Kumalo, this month's council president, expressed dismay.

"They told us we would be negotiating a give and take," he told reporters on Thursday. "They are doing exactly what they said they weren't going to do."

South Africa's main objection is that the new text would impose penalties outside of the nuclear sphere.

Pretoria also proposed a 90-day "time out" in imposing the sanctions, which Jones Parry said would have rewarded "noncompliance by actually lifting the obligation and that would have been totally perverse."

US deputy ambassador Alejandro Wolff said amendments had to be consistent with the "philosophy of this resolution," which was drafted by Germany and the five permanent council members with veto rights -- Russia, China, Britain, France and the United States.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami (R) shakes hands with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during the India Today Conclave 2007 titled "Challenges for the Brave New World", in New Delhi yesterday.

Pakistan to be 'fortress of democracy': Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf pledged yesterday to make Pakistan an "impregnable fortress of democracy" amid a crisis over his removal of the country's most senior judge.

Military ruler Musharraf made the comment in a message marking Pakistan Day, which celebrates a resolution signed in 1940 to create a separate homeland for Muslims on the Indian subcontinent.

"We will inshallah (God willing) make Pakistan an impregnable fortress of democracy, peace, progress and attain our rightful place in the comity of nations," he said in the message carried by the official Associated Press of Pakistan.

The general, a key US ally in the "war on terror", added that for Pakistan in recent years "the problems have indeed been many as well as complex" but said that it had managed to overcome them.

The president oversaw an armed forces parade at the Jinnah Stadium in Islamabad involving military jets, including the new JF-17 fighter jointly developed with China, helicopters, parachutists and soldiers.

A nuclear-capable cruise missile tested by Pakistan on Thursday was also displayed.

Musharraf, who also heads the country's powerful army, faces the biggest threat to his eight years in power as a result of his suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on March 9.

Lawyers and opposition parties have since held nationwide protests, claiming that Musharraf wants to weaken the judiciary ahead of potentially controversial presidential and parliamentary elections expected later this year.

Former prime minister Benazir Bhutto called on the United States in an opinion piece in the Washington Post Monday to push Musharraf to restore democracy, saying it was vital in rooting out terrorism.

Musharraf ousted a civilian government in a bloodless coup in 1999. He held general elections in 2002 but reneged on his promise to shed his military role in December 2004.

He changed the constitution with the backing of parliament, allowing him to hold the position of the president as well as chief of the army until 2007.

India mulls reducing army presence in Kashmir

REUTERS, New Delhi

The Indian government is considering some steps towards reducing the army's presence in Kashmir, after a fall in violence and as a gesture towards the region's people and politicians, officials said on Friday.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been under pressure from the leader of a Kashmir coalition ally who threatened to bring down the state government if some of the roughly 500,000 troops were not withdrawn.

Mufti Mohammad Syed, leader of the People's Democratic Party, which is part of the ruling coalition in Kashmir, met Singh on Thursday and said discussions would continue on his demands.

Syed said the level of violence in Kashmir had fallen since India and Pakistan launched a peace process over the disputed region in 2004, and therefore some troops should go back.

An official involved in the high-level talks said a package of measures was on the table and said an agreement was likely.

"I have a feeling that something tangible will come out," he told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

The official, who is among those mediating between Singh's office and Syed, said the prime minister was likely to offer to pull troops out of areas, which have been free of militant violence in the last five years and replace them with police.

India has around half a million troops in Kashmir battling an insurgency, which has cost at least 40,000 lives since 1989.

Also under consideration is a review of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, a controversial law which gives the army sweeping powers to arrest suspects without charge and also gives soldiers substantial immunity from prosecution, the official said.

Human rights groups have accused Indian soldiers of widespread rights violations.

Singh may also order the army to vacate schools, colleges and other government buildings, which they have been using as bases, the official said.

9 killed in Thai navy chopper crash

AFP, Bangkok

Nine navy officers were killed yesterday when their helicopter crashed into a rice field and burst into flames in northeast Thailand, officials said.

The Bell 214 helicopter was on a routine training flight when it crashed in Surin province, 455km northeast of the capital Bangkok.

"Nine navy officers are confirmed dead in this morning's crash, including the two pilots, one of whom was a vice admiral. The rest were mechanics who were on a training mission," navy spokesman Captain Korkiat Pundee told AFP.

Navy investigators were examining the crash site to determine the cause of the accident, which was believed to have resulted from a mechanical problem, he added.

'Truce deal reached in Mogadishu'

AFP, Mogadishu

The Ethiopian army has reached a truce agreement with Somalia's powerful Hawiye clan to end deadly clashes in the capital Mogadishu, clan elders said yesterday.

The truce comes a day after the government vowed to keep fighting until it defeats suspected Islamist insurgents -- largely drawn from the capital's dominant Hawiye clan -- who have been blamed for a string of attacks.

"After serious discussions on the current political situation and on the renewed violence, we agreed with the Ethiopian military officials to implement a ceasefire," said Ugas Abdi Dahir Mohamed, spokesman for Hawiye clan elders.

"The Ethiopians will remain in their military compound and will not militarily engage with Somalis. And for our part, the Hawiye will not fire any shot and will respect the ceasefire."

Mohamed said the deal also covered the Somali troops who rely on their well trained and equipped Ethiopian counterparts for the firepower against the insurgents.

"Somali troops will also cease operations," he added.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (R) salutes from a horse-drawn carriage as he arrives at the venue of the Pakistan Day parade in Islamabad yesterday. Musharraf pledged to make Pakistan an "impregnable fortress of democracy" amid a crisis over his removal of the country's most senior judge.