

Lankan troops take key highway from Tigers

Fighting leaves 9 soldiers, 184 Tigers dead

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan forces have captured a strategic highway in the island's restive eastern province, which was under Tamil Tiger control for 15 years, the defence ministry said yesterday.

Troops took control Wednesday of the A-5 road linking the town of Chenkaladi and Badulla in the central part of the island, defence ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said.

"Only about 140 square kilometres (54 square miles) of jungle land in the Thoppigala area still remain under LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) control and we believe around

300 to 350 rebels are in the jungles," Samarasinghe said.

The latest military advance, which began late February, has left nine soldiers and 184 Tiger rebels dead, he said.

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels shot dead seven villagers of the majority Sinhalese community in northern Sri Lanka on Thursday, police said.

Gunmen from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out the massacre in the Avarantalawa village in the district of Vavuniya where heavy fighting raged between troops and Tamil Tigers, police said.

Six women and a man were shot dead by the gunmen who escaped

before constables reached the area, a police official said from Vavuniya, 260km north of here.

Military action to wrestle the eastern region from the Tigers began last July when the rebels shut an irrigation canal and blocked water to around 15,000 residents in a farming village.

"The Tigers have lost 1,175 cadres, we lost 98 security forces personnel, while two other government soldiers still remain missing (since July)," he said adding around 138,000 people had been displaced since.

Elsewhere in the north, fighting between security forces and Tiger rebels continued for a third straight day across a front line at Omanthai,

the main crossing point between government and Tiger-held territory, officials said.

The clashes erupted when rebels fired mortars at military positions late Tuesday.

There were no details of any military casualties or any immediate word from the LTTE.

The military said the rebels were shelling government positions to obstruct the transport of supplies across the frontline.

Residents in the northern district of Vavuniya said three people were killed late Tuesday when government troops opened fire, accusing them of being suspected Tamil Tigers. However, residents later identified them as civilians.

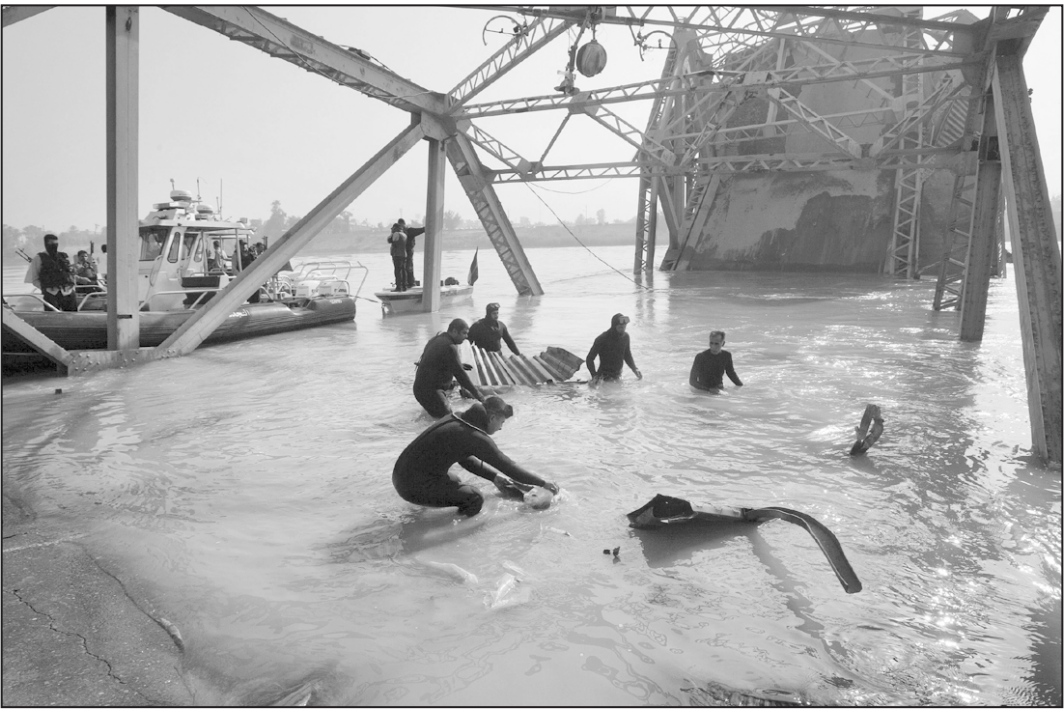


PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi Fire Department divers search for survivors in the waters of the Tigris River under Baghdad's collapsed al-Sarrafyah bridge where a suicide truck bomber blew himself up yesterday partially destroying the bridge and killing 10 people and sending cars plunging into the waters below.

Indian missile test fire successful

AP, New Delhi

India successfully test fired a new missile capable of carrying nuclear warheads across much of Asia and the Middle East, a defence ministry spokesman said yesterday.

"The entire test had text book precision," ministry spokesman Sitanshu Kar said. A test firing of the Agni III missile last July failed when it plunged into the Bay of Bengal short of its target.

India's current crop of missiles are mostly intended for confronting neighbouring archrival Pakistan. The Agni III, in contrast, is India's longest-range missile, designed to reach 1,900 miles putting China's major cities well into range, as well as targets deep in the Middle East.

India's Defence Minister AK Anthony congratulated defence scientists on the successful launch of the missile, a ministry press statement said.

"India has matured in the missile technology area and was definitely at par with many other developed countries," the release added.

Chinese PM offers friendship to Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao offered Japan the hand of friendship Thursday in a call to put aside bitter memories of the past that have hobbled relations between the two Asian giants.

In the first address for 22 years by a Chinese leader to the parliament in Tokyo, Wen urged Japan not to forget its past but acknowledged its people had also been the victims of war.

Earlier, he took his fence-mending visit to Japan to the streets, going for a jog around a Tokyo park and chatting with members of the public.

In parliament, the flags of the two countries mounted on the podium behind, Wen called on the two powers to look to the future.

"The Chinese public must foster friendship with Japanese people," he said, and laid the blame for Japan's invasion and 1931-1945 occupation of China -- a running sore for many Chinese -- on a "limited number" of wartime leaders.



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (L) shakes hands with his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe prior to a high-level economic dialogue between the two nations in Tokyo yesterday. Wei, who is in the Japanese capital as part of his fence-mending visit, urged the Asian powers to resolve their disputes peacefully.

Two Canadians, 35 Taliban killed in Afghan violence

AFP, Kandahar

Two Canadian soldiers and 35 Taliban militants were killed in the latest violence to rock insurgency-hit southern Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

The Islamist Taliban fighters were killed late Wednesday in fierce fighting with Afghan and US-led troops in troubled Zabul province, provincial governor's spokesman Gulab Shah Alikhil told AFP.

"Initially our troops came under attack. They called for support from the coalition troops, who responded with ground troops and air support. Thirty-five Taliban were killed in the subsequent fighting," Alikhil said.

The US-led coalition headquarters said it had no immediate information on the incident, while the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) said it was not involved.

Zabul is one of Afghanistan's most violent regions. Taliban rebels seized control of a remote district there last week, the latest of several rebel attempts to exert control in southern and western parts of the country.

Separately, two Canadian soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb near their vehicle on Wednesday, as the bodies of six of their comrades who died days earlier in a similar attack were returning home for burial, officials said.

The latest blast about 38km west of the southern city of Kandahar -- the birthplace of the Taliban -- also wounded two soldiers, one seriously, Canadian National Defence spokesman John Knoll said in Ottawa.

A third soldier was also wounded in an earlier bomb attack in the same area, he added.

Pak tribesmen kill 300 foreign militants

Says Musharraf

AP, AFP, Islamabad

President Gen Pervez Musharraf said yesterday that tribesmen have killed about 300 foreign militants during a weeklong offensive near the Afghan border and acknowledged for first time that they received military support.

The fighting that began last month in South Waziristan has targeted mainly Uzbek militants with links to al-Qaeda who have sheltered in the tribal region since escaping the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

"The people of South Waziristan now have risen against the foreigners. They have killed about 300 of them, and they got support from the Pakistan army. They asked for support," Musharraf said in a speech at a military conference in Islamabad.

"We are demanding the same in North Waziristan, and there are indications the same may happen there also," he said, referring to the adjoining border region in north-western Pakistan.

Musharraf's numbers were far higher than those given by Pakistani army officials to journalists on a trip to South Waziristan on Wednesday. They said that between 150 and 230 militants had died in the fighting, along with about 40 tribesmen.

Previously army officials had denied any direct involvement in the fighting, although they said that troops had moved into positions vacated by the foreigners.

The offensive has improved security around the main town in South Waziristan, Wana, but concerns remain that it could empower local pro-Taliban mili-

tants in the tribal militia who support the jihad, or holy war, against Nato and US forces in Afghanistan.

The tribesmen hoisted white flags, pounded war drums and proclaimed victory earlier this week, saying that the foreigners had been driven out of their bunkers, a claim backed by the army.

But the regional army commander told reporters Wednesday that Uzbek commander Tahir Yuldashev, who has a five-million-dollar US bounty on his head and alleged links to Osama Bin Laden, had not been caught.

When he spoke at the defence conference on Wednesday, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz urged the US not to belittle Islamabad's anti-terror efforts or to introduce legislation linking aid to its success against militants.

al-Qaeda bombings kill 33 in Algeria

AP, Algiers

The death toll from al-Qaeda-claimed suicide bombings in Algeria rose Thursday to 33, the government said, as police rolled out in force in the shaken capital, establishing highway checkpoints to reinforce security.

Another 57 people remained hospitalised from injuries suffered in Wednesday's blasts that struck the prime minister's office and a police station, said Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni, who made his comments to the official APS news agency after visiting hospitals.

Algeria's Prime Minister vowed that national elections will go ahead next month despite suicide bombing attacks.

"The objective was a media provocation shortly before the election," scheduled for May 17, Algerian Prime Minister Abdelaziz

Belkhadem told Al-Arabiya television late Wednesday.

"Those who resort to violence exclude themselves from the political process and elections form part of that political process."

The bombings, which followed closely after suicide blasts in neighbouring Morocco, were claimed by al-Qaeda's branch in North Africa, which published photographs of what it said were the three Algiers suicide bombers in an Internet statement.

The statement on an Islamist website often used by the al-Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden said the car bombings killed at least 53 people.

The first of Wednesday's attacks was carried out by a bomber who drove an explosives-laden car into a guard post outside the government headquarters in central Algiers, police said.

Lanka uses anti-terror laws to crush media

Says rights group

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is using tough anti-terror laws to suppress democratic dissent and journalists who expose human rights abuses, the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) charged yesterday.

New measures introduced in December were being deployed against those who question the government's handling of the separatist war with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the group said in a statement.

It said the Sri Lankan Standard Newspapers, which published a leading Sinhalese-language weekly and an English-language weekly, stopped operations after the government froze their assets, citing suspected links to the LTTE.

An accountant of the company was arrested under the tough Prevention of Terrorism Act, which

allows detention up to a year without formal charges being brought.

"The government is using anti-terrorism legislation to silence the press," said HRW Asia research director Sam Zarifi said. "As the war heats up, the government is clamping down on criticism and dissent."

Tamil-language media have often come under pressure from the Sinhalese-dominated government, but it is the first time in three decades that Sri Lankan authorities shut down a Sinhalese language paper.

The newspaper had been accused of siding with the Tamil rebels.

"The newspaper's journalists had questioned the government's role in the spiralling number of abductions and enforced disappearances as fighting between the government and LTTE escalated," HRW said.

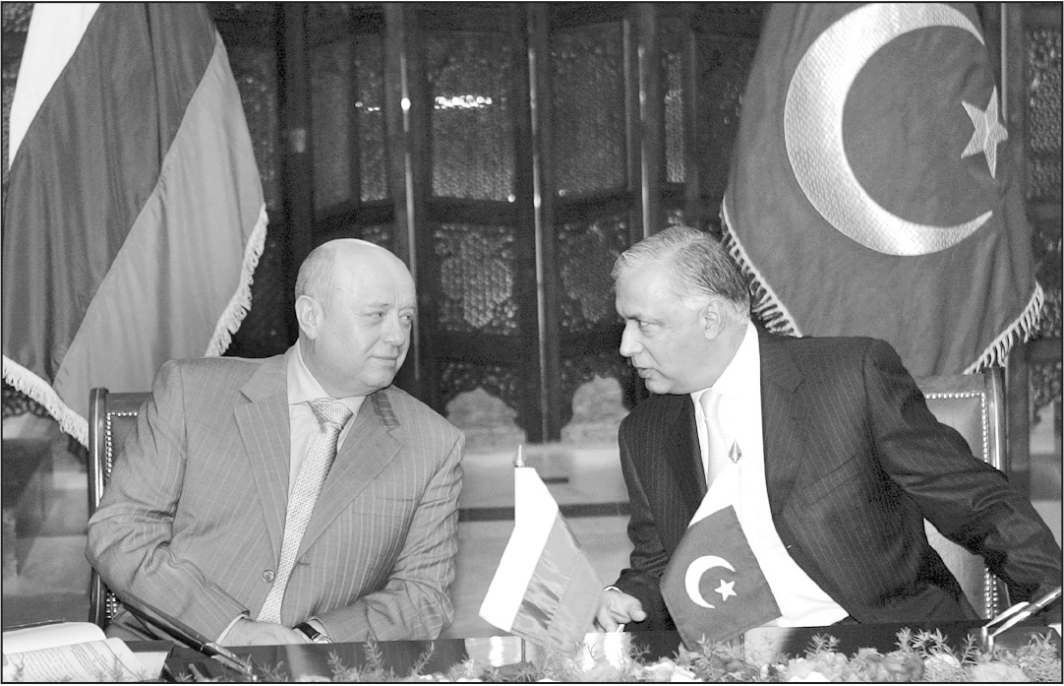


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) speaks with his Russian counterpart Mikhail Fradkov during a documents signing ceremony at Prime Minister's House in Islamabad yesterday. Fradkov held talks with Aziz on promoting trade and economic relations between the two countries.

Pakistan, Russia agree to combat drug trafficking

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and Russia agreed yesterday to combat drug trafficking and boost cooperation in the fields of science, education and culture, officials said.

The agreements were signed after visiting Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov held talks with his Pakistani counterpart Shaukat Aziz aimed at enhancing economic ties between the two countries.

The two countries signed an agreement for cooperation in "combating illicit trafficking of narcotics and psychotropic substances," an official statement said.

They also agreed to increase cooperation and exchanges of experts in culture, science and education, especially between women's organisations in both countries, it said.

Pak sectarian clashes leave dozens dead

AP, Peshawar

Gunfights erupted again yesterday in villages near the Afghan border where clashes between Sunni and Shia Muslims have killed at least 55 people over the past week, an official said.

A local lawmaker said the sectarian fighting was likely the worst ever in the Kurram tribal region, and that nearly 100 people may have died so far.

Rival groups clashed in two villages near the curfew-bound tribal town of Parachinar, leaving

twelve people dead, security officials said.

Residents said at least 40 houses were torched in Jalime and Char Dewar villages on the outskirts of Parachinar. Women and children fled to the nearby town of Alizai, they said.

The government is moving security forces to the area, said Arbab Mohammed Arif Khan, secretary for law and order in Pakistan's semiautonomous tribal regions. It also has sent a 40-member delegation of tribal elders to broker a peace.

'N Korea now ready to close N-plants'

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

After weeks of stalemate over a financial dispute, North Korea is now ready to shut down its main nuclear facilities and accept UN nuclear inspectors, US officials who visited Pyongyang said Wednesday.

"Within a day after receiving the funds North Korea says it will invite the International Atomic Energy Agency to Pyongyang and inspectors to draw up the terms for shutting down the Yongbyon reactor," New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson said in a news conference in Seoul.

But South Korean government

officials advised against jumping to conclusions and said North Korea is yet to react to the latest decision by the Macau bank to unfreeze the US\$25 million-worth of North Korean funds.

"It remains to be seen what North Korea will choose to do," a high-ranking government official told The Korea Herald on condition of anonymity.

By Thursday morning, the Macau authorities are expected to inform North Korea of its decision to lift its freeze on the 52 North Korean accounts, which will enable each holder to individually handle the money.