

Tigers vow retaliation in Lanka's east

AFP, Colombo

The Tamil Tigers vowed yesterday to hit back against an advance by government troops in the east of Sri Lanka, accusing the military of "genocidal activities" there.

The rebels denied military claims they were retreating in the face of an onslaught in the Eastern Province, where they were ejected from a coastal stronghold in January, and said they would retaliate "very soon."

"As far as the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) is concerned we have adjusted our tactics according to the needs and we have not withdrawn from the east," LTTE's political wing leader SP Thamilselvan said.

"I believe only our actions in the coming period will answer the propaganda (of the government) whether the Sri Lankan military has won a stable victory," he said in an e-mail interview with AFP.

With the escalation of fighting in April last year and the collapse of a 2002 Norwegian-brokered ceasefire agreement, the government has blocked journalists travelling to rebel-held areas in the island's north, where the LTTE has its military and political headquarters.

The LTTE's Thamilselvan, who is also the group's top peace negotiator, said the military was "behaving like an occupational force that has let loose its genocidal activities against the Tamil people" in the east.

He said the Tigers had turned the tables on government forces in the past and inflicted heavy losses, adding, "I believe similar instances will be repeated in the east very soon."

Defence ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said here Thursday that the Tigers were on the run in the coastal province, where they have been restricted to a jungle area just outside the lagoon town of Batticaloa.

UN envoy calls for Talks with Taliban

AFP, Berlin

The UN envoy in Afghanistan, Tom Koenigs, urged talks with all the forces in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, to stanch the bloodshed in the country, in an interview published Friday.

"If there is to be a chance for peace, we must talk to everyone, including alleged war criminals. The aim is to stabilise Afghanistan," Koenigs told the German daily Berliner Zeitung.

He said this included the Taliban, which he described as "a movement that includes terrorists and uses terrorist methods but that also has a political foundation."

Koenigs said the hardline Islamist movement also comprised "young fighters who often just need money" and "people who feel discriminated against by corrupt or partisan government officials" as well as drug dealers and Muslim fundamentalists.

"The idea that you have to kill all of them to win the conflict is nonsense," he said.

Only about 140 square kilometres (56 square miles) of jungle land in the Thoppigala area (near Batticaloa) still remain under LTTE control and we believe around 300 to 350 rebels are in the jungles," Samarasinghe told reporters.

The Sri Lankan military says its operations against the Tigers in the east are a "defensive humanitarian operation."

President Mahinda Rajapakse visited the former rebel bastion of Vakarai in January and shortly after he left the area gunmen shot dead the Hindu priest who had welcomed him to the tense region.

The government accused the Tigers of the slaying, which underscored the threat faced by hundreds of troops and police deployed in the area despite the military's dismantling of civil administrative structures set up by the rebels since 1990.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani lawyers torch an effigy of President Pervez Musharraf during a demonstration in Lahore yesterday. More than 3,000 flag-waving protesters defied a massive security crackdown held fresh rallies against the dismissal of the country's top judge Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry by President Pervez Musharraf on March 9.

Iran's nuke plan limited: IAEA

AP, Riyadh

The head of the UN nuclear watchdog said Thursday Iran is operating only several hundred centrifuges at its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, despite its claims to have activated 3,000.

Mohamed ElBaradei said Iran's nuclear programme was a concern, but he discounted Tehran's claims of a major advance in uranium enrichment, a process the United Nations demands Iran suspend or else be hit by increasing sanctions.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced Monday that the Natanz facility had begun "industrial-scale" production of nuclear fuel. Iran's top nuclear negotiator said workers had begun injecting uranium gas into a new array of 3,000 centrifuges, many more than the 328 centrifuges known to be operating at Natanz.

Experts say that 3,000 centrifuges would be enough in theory to develop a nuclear warhead in about a year, but they doubt Iran really had that many devices successfully running.

ElBaradei, head of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency, said "Iran is still just at the beginning stages in setting up its Natanz enrichment facility."

Quake kills coral reefs

AP, Bangkok

A 2005 earthquake off the coast of Indonesia raised an island nearly four feet out of the water, causing one of the biggest coral die-offs recorded, scientists said Friday.

Researchers who surveyed the island of Simeulue in recent weeks found that the March 2005 quake had exposed most of the coral along its 190-mile-long coast.

"The scale of it was quite extraordinary," said Andrew Baird, who took part in the survey with scientists from the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society. "Exposed corals were everywhere."

At some points along the coast, coral was visible from a few feet from the shore to a third of a mile out to sea. Coral reefs host many species of marine life.

"Some species suffered up to 100 percent loss at some sites," said Baird, of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef.

More than 900 people were killed and tens of thousands left homeless by the 8.7-magnitude earthquake, which also struck two other islands off Sumatra Nias and Banyak. The quake came three months after the 2004 tsunami that left 230,000 people in a dozen Indian Ocean countries dead or missing.

Australian reef expert Clive Wilkinson, who did not take part in the survey, said the damage to the Simeuleu reefs was to be expected, given the uplift that occurred and the severity of the quake.

"This has been going on for million of years," Wilkinson said. "It's part of natural reef evolution. There are many islands in the Pacific that are actually uplifted coral reefs. It's just what happens to reefs."

N Korea unlikely to meet nuke deadline

AP, Beijing

North Korea said yesterday it was still confirming the release of frozen funds that had been its key condition for dismantling its nuclear programmes, making it unlikely it would meet a weekend deadline for shutting down its bomb-making reactor.

The North's Foreign Ministry said its intention to implement a February agreement with the US and regional powers on initial steps to disarm "remains unchanged" and that the country "will also move when the lifting of the sanction is proved to be a reality."

The North has not yet withdrawn some \$25 million that was unfrozen this week at the Banco Delta Asia bank in the Chinese territory of Macau, which was blacklisted by Washington in September 2005 for allegedly helping the North launder money and pass counterfeit \$100 bills.

The North pledged in February to take initial steps to disarm including shutting down its main reactor by a Saturday deadline, in exchange for energy aid and political concessions along with a US promise to resolve the bank issue. The move came following a 13-month boycott of nuclear talks, during which the North conducted its first-ever underground nuclear test in October.

North Korea gave no timeline Friday for when it would confirm the release of the money.

A North Korean "financial institution concerned will confirm soon whether the measure is valid," the North's Foreign Ministry said in the statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency.

Macau's Monetary Authority, which has taken control of the bank, has been tightlipped about the process of releasing the frozen funds. Wendy Au, a spokeswoman for the authority, said Friday she had no instructions from her superiors to provide any updates about the case.

Iraq MPs vow to defy bloodshed

AFP, Baghdad/ Dubai

al-Qaeda group claims parliament bombing responsibility

apostates of the parliament. Allah used his hand to destroy the group of infidels," the self-styled Islamic Nation of Iraq said in the Internet statement.

Thursday's bombing killed one parliamentarian and wounded 22 other people in the legislature's cafeteria, the US military said on Friday, revising the previous day's toll down from eight reported dead and 23 wounded.

The US military on Friday lowered the number of deaths it could confirm to only one from an earlier estimate of eight dead announced a few hours after the attack, while an Iraqi security official said three people died.

The stench of burnt flesh still lingered in the air, with body parts still scattered across the cafeteria hall, said an AFP reporter who visited the scene 24 hours after the blast.

In one corner lay what was believed to be a leg of the bomber as blood-splattered walls bore testimony to Thursday's horror and windows smashed by the explosion looked as if "an earthquake" had hit the hall.

"Yesterday we said eight killed. That was from multiple sources. What we're saying is, we can only confirm one was killed," a US military official quoted spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Garver as saying.

"We're going from what was reported to what was confirmed today," he added.

The military said 22 people were wounded in the attack and that 14 had since been discharged after treatment at a US-run combat hospital.

Indian missile test forces jet to turn back

AP, Jakarta

An Indonesian passenger jet was forced to turn around over Indian airspace after a nuclear-capable ballistic missile streaked across the sky, the Foreign Ministry said yesterday, demanding an explanation from New Delhi.

"We will summon India's diplomat here soon to seek official clarification," Ministry spokesman Kristiarto Legowo said following India's test-launch on Thursday. "We have to make sure this does not happen in the future."

The Garuda Indonesia plane was carrying 413 people from the capital, Jakarta, to Saudi Arabia, when the Indian control tower told pilots the missile had been launched, said Ari Sapari, the national carrier's director.

"We were not given any advance warning about this missile test," he said. "This was obviously confusing and worrying. It also caused us to disrupt an international flight schedule a great financial expense."



PHOTO: AFP
This handout picture taken in March this year shows Andrew Baird (L) and Stuart Campbell examining uplifted coral in the west coast of Simeulue. Large areas of ocean floor bed have been thrust more than one metre above the sea surface after an 8.7 magnitude earthquake struck the area in 2005, which has caused massive death to coral reefs in Indonesia's Nias region, scientists said yesterday.

Europe to give \$5m in aid to Palestinians

Olmert, Abbas plan Sunday talks

AFP, AP, Ramallah/ Jerusalem

Five European countries and the European Commission signed an accord yesterday under which they will give 5.2 million dollars for administrative reforms within the Palestinian presidency.

The agreement was signed at president Mahmud Abbas's office by his chief of staff, Rafiq al-Husseini, and representatives from Britain, Denmark, Italy, Norway and Sweden.

"This aid will allow us to improve the work, the performance and the running of the presidency," Husseini said after the signing.

The European Union, the biggest aid donor to the Palestinians, imposed an embargo on direct aid to the Palestinian Authority last year along with the United States after the Islamist movement Hamas formed a cabinet alone.

The EU and the US, which consider Hamas a terror group, have declined to lift the embargo following the formation of a national unity government on March 17 between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah.

Meanwhile, a meeting Sunday between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will include a general discussion of a future Palestinian state, Palestinian and Israeli officials said Friday, but is not expected to yield dramatic results.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the two leaders would discuss the "political horizon" at the Sunday meeting, the first in a series of biweekly meetings that Olmert and Abbas agreed to hold at the prodding of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

T-rex fossil yields clues to evolutionary puzzle: Study

AFP, Chicago

US researchers have identified microscopic traces of soft tissue taken from a 68 million-year-old T-rex fossil in a startling discovery that is yielding clues to evolutionary links between dinosaurs and birds, a study released Thursday said.

The tiny protein fragments were extracted from the leg bone of a Tyrannosaurus rex that was discovered in the western state of Montana in 2003, but it wasn't until recently that scientists were able to definitively identify them as traces of prehistoric dinosaur collagen.

The collagen should have degraded millions of years before according to conventional wisdom, but paleontologists at North Carolina State University were fairly confident that what they had was the "barely detectable" remains of dinosaur soft tissue based on their chemical and molecular analyses.

However, they could not definitively say that, so they turned to biochemist John Asara at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical School in Boston to make that determination.