

Lankan rebels vow fierce resistance

AP, Kilinochchi

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels will fight back with "full capacity" if government forces try to take their northern strongholds, their political chief said Thursday.

Five years after a cease-fire offered a respite from decades of violence, Sri Lanka's ferocious ethnic war is raging again. Fighter jets roared over the town of Kilinochchi on Thursday for a third straight day, pounding nearby rebel positions.

Last week, Sri Lanka's top defence official said the cease-fire had "no meaning" and the military would soon go after the rebels' northern heartland, where they run a mini-state complete with border guards, courts and even traffic police.

It's the centre of the homeland the Tigers are fighting to create

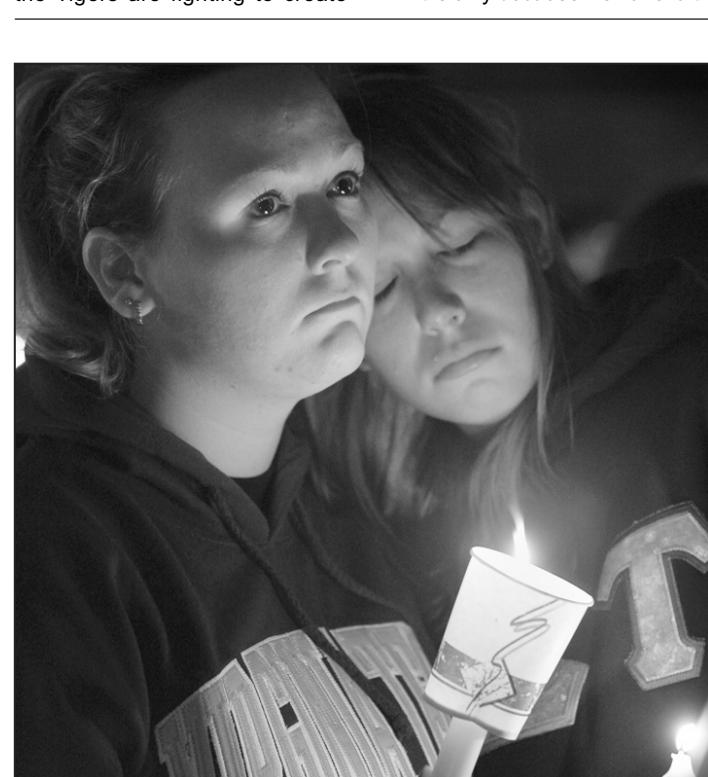


PHOTO: AFP

Radford University students hold a candlelight vigil in memory of the students and staff who were killed at nearby Virginia Tech in Monday's shootings on Thursday in Radford, Virginia. Cho Seung-Hui, a 23-year-old South Korean undergraduate student in his senior year at Virginia Tech, went on a shooting rampage with two handguns in a dormitory building and at Norris Hall killing 32 people before killing himself.

for Sri Lanka's ethnic Tamil minority.

"If the worst thing comes, of course then Colombo and its chauvinistic forces will realize what the full capacity of the LTTE is, and the impact would be very serious," he said.

The Tigers have been fighting since 1983 for a separate homeland for Sri Lanka's 3.1 million mostly Hindu Tamils, concentrated in eastern and northern Sri Lanka.

The Tamils have faced decades of discrimination from the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese, who make up a majority of the Indian Ocean island nation's 19 million people.

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But the council also charged Solana with contacting Iranian officials about the possibility of renewed talks.

These days in rebel territory, the onset of dusk is often accompanied by the steady thump of artillery fire in the distance as the two sides skirmish along the front lines.

"It is only because we have faith

Iran, EU to resume N-talks on April 25

AFP, Tehran

Iran's lead nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani agreed in a telephone call with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana Thursday to resume their talks on April 25, state television said.

"In accepting the convening of a new round of negotiations, Ali Larijani told Mr Solana that, while insisting on its absolute rights regarding its nuclear programme, Iran is ready to negotiate with the concerned parties," the television said.

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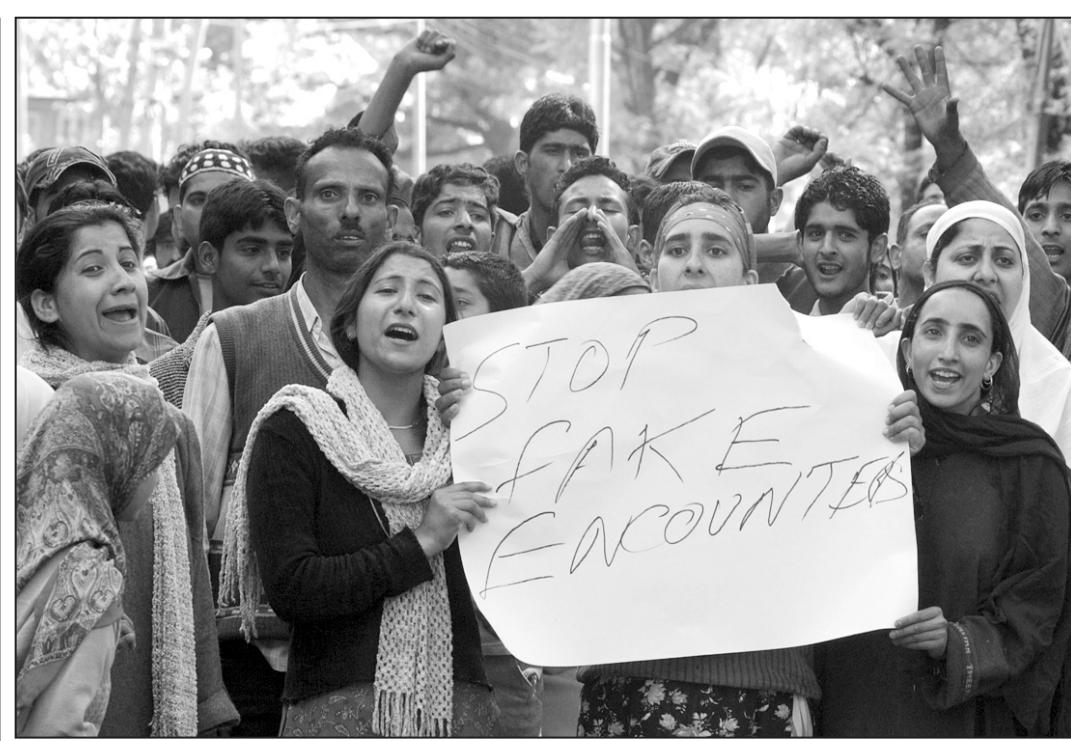


PHOTO: AFP
Indian Kashmiri Muslims shout anti-police slogans as they stage a protest, on the outskirts of Srinagar yesterday. Fresh gunbattles between militants and government troops in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir left two dead and sparked a noisy demonstration, police and residents said.

US will not stay in Iraq for ever, says Gates

AFP, Baghdad

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates yesterday urged Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to seek national reconciliation, and warned that American troops would not fight on in the country indefinitely.

"Our commitment to Iraq is long-term, but it is not a commitment to have our young men and women patrolling Iraqi streets indefinitely," Gates told reporters after meeting Maliki in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone.

Gates said that he had spoken to the Shiite premier about "reaching out to the Sunnis," and told him that recent US troop reinforcements were designed to create space for political progress, not just to end the conflict.

"The surge is a strategy for buying time for progress towards justice and reconciliation in Iraq," he said, while acknowledging that a recent spate of insurgent bomb attacks had been a setback.

Pro-Pak govt tribal leader offers 'shelter' to Laden

AFP, Wana

A pro-government tribal leader hailed by Pakistan for expelling foreign militants from a troubled frontier region said yesterday he would protect Osama bin Laden if he sought shelter with him.

Mullah Mohammad Nazir told a press conference in Wana, the main town in South Waziristan tribal district, that he had never met the al-Qaeda chief but would help him in line with local traditions.

"Bin Laden has never come to this area but if he comes here and seeks our protection then according to tribal laws and customs we will protect him," the 32-year-old former Taliban commander said.

"Our traditions and customs demand that we support the oppressed," Nazir said.

Bin Laden carries a 25-million-dollar US bounty on his head and is accused of masterminding the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, which killed nearly

3,000 people. US officials have repeatedly said they believe that the Saudi is hiding in the rugged tribal belt straddling the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, where conservative ethnic Pashtun tribes hold sway.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said on April 12 that tribal fighters commanded by Nazir and backed by the army had killed 300 Uzbek and other foreign al-Qaeda-linked militants in the past month.

The Pakistani tribesmen had sheltered the Uzbeks after the fall of Afghanistan's Taliban regime in 2001 but fell out violently with them in mid-March and launched a bid to drive them out.

Musharraf said Nazir's actions vindicated Islamabad's policy of signing peace deals with formerly Taliban-supporting tribesmen, including a pact inked in South Waziristan in 2005.

"We are disappointed with the pace and seriousness of the civil nuclear negotiations with India," Burns said in an interview published in the Financial times.

"It is time to accelerate our efforts to achieve a final deal," he said.

The agreement, initially reached

US takes firm line in nuke talks with India

AFP, Washington

The United States on Thursday ruled out bending its laws to allow India to retain the right to resume nuclear weapons testing under a civilian nuclear energy deal being negotiated by the two governments.

"It's an issue that's covered by our law and ... in as much as it is affected by it, it bumps up against US law, we're not going to change our laws," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said when asked about India's stance on nuclear testing.

He was speaking after the State Department's number three official, Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns, expressed frustration at India's demands in talks on the landmark agreement.

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"It is time to accelerate our efforts to achieve a final deal," he said.

Both elements would contravene US laws.

"We have conveyed to the Indian government that there are certain issues that they might like to raise concerning issues that are covered by our national laws, and those are issues we're not going to go back and re-legislate," McCormack said.

'Bomb, bomb, bomb' Iran, US senator sings

AFP, Washington

Republican US presidential contender John McCain turned to popular music to illuminate the debate on the Middle East, singing at the suggestion that the United States "bomb, bomb, bomb" Iran.

"That old Beach Boys song, 'Bomb Iran'?" McCain said in response to a question about US policy on its diplomatic pariah at an electoral campaign meeting in the state of North Carolina.

His questioner had struck an anti-Iran tone, asking him when the United States was going to "send an air mail message to Tehran," drawing cheers from the crowd.

McCain then briefly sang "Bomb, bomb, bomb" -- an adapted snippet of the rock 'n' roll band's refrain "Ba-ba-ba, Ba-Barbara Ann" -- winning laughter from the audience.

2 NATO soldiers, 3 rebels killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Two NATO soldiers were killed yesterday in separate blasts in southern Afghanistan, while three Taliban rebels died when a bomb they were planting exploded prematurely, officials said.

The Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), which has around 37,000 troops in Afghanistan fighting the resurgent Taliban movement, gave no further details about the dead soldiers.

"Earlier today, two Isaf soldiers died as the result of explosions in two separate incidents in southern Afghanistan," an Isaf statement said.

Isaf said it would not release the victims' nationalities before the relevant national authorities.

However the Netherlands said earlier Friday that a 21-year-old Dutch corporal became the first Dutch soldier to be killed in action in Afghanistan on Friday when he stepped on a landmine during a foot patrol.

Dutch chief of defence staff General Dick Berlijn confirmed the soldier was part of Nato's Operation Achilles against the Taliban in southwestern Helmand province, according to the ANP news agency.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani human rights activists march during a demonstration against Islamic extremism in Karachi Thursday. Hundreds of rights activists rallied in the Pakistani against a fundamentalist mosque, which is trying to impose a Taliban-style justice system.

UN demands probe into Nepali ethnic massacre

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese police failed to stop the massacre of at least 27 Maoist supporters by ethnic activists last month, the United Nations human rights body said yesterday.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) also called for a government investigation into the violence in the south of the country, which has cast a shadow over the country's peace process.

Police "failed to stop the violence when it broke out. They failed to protect those who came under attack, and they failed to carry out any arrests," the UNOHCHR representative in Kathmandu, Lena Sundh, said.

The violence on March 21 broke out when supporters of both the Mahadhesi People's Rights Forum (MJP), an ethnic activist group, and Maoists tried to stage a rally in the southern town of Gaur.

Clashes broke out, and the outnumbered Maoists were attacked by mobs of people armed

with split bamboo poles and sticks. Most of the victims were beaten to death, and two Maoist supporters remain missing nearly a month after the attack, the UN report said.

The Maoists, who struck a peace deal with central government last year and ended their 10-year insurgency, have said that the attack on their supporters was premeditated, and involved armed groups from neighbouring India.

Maoists have also accused King Gyanendra and his supporters of backing the ethnic group in an effort to undermine the peace deal, which could see the country ditch the monarchy.

The UN found that hundreds of MJP supporters had armed themselves with lengths of split bamboo, prior to the clash with the former rebels.

The OHCHR was not able to substantiate allegations that the killings themselves were pre-planned but this cannot be ruled out," Sundh told reporters at the release of a UN report into the killings.

Iraq war 'lost', says top US Democrat

AFP, Washington

A top Democratic lawmaker declared on Thursday that the war in Iraq "is lost," pointing to the sustained bloodshed there even as President George W Bush urged patience with his strategy.

"This war is lost, and this surge is not accomplishing anything, as is shown by the extreme violence in Iraq this week," Senate Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid told reporters, referring to the US-led campaign in Tipp City, Ohio.

Reid did not directly address Reid's comments, but White House spokeswoman Dana Perino quickly fired back that they were at odds with US military assessments of the two-month-old effort to quell sectarian violence in Iraq.

"If this is his true feeling, then it makes one wonder if he has the courage of his convictions and therefore will decide to defund the war," Sundh told reporters at the release of a UN report into the killings.

The spokeswoman said as the president pleaded for time for his plan to work.

Locked in a bitter weeks-long feud with Democrats in Congress over emergency war funding, Bush said one day after a suicide blast that killed more than 200 people in Baghdad that no crackdown could ever fully banish such attacks.

"If the definition of success in Iraq -- or anywhere -- is 'no suicide bombers,' we'll never be successful," he told a friendly audience at a high school in Tipp City, Ohio.

"I'm optimistic we can succeed. I wouldn't ask families to have their troops there if I didn't think, one, it was necessary, and two, we can succeed," he said.

A top military commander, however, warned that al-Qaeda in Iraq would press ahead with its campaign of high-profile bombings to defeat US efforts to stabilise Baghdad.

"We should have realistic expectations. These high-profile attacks are going to continue," said Major General Michael Barbero, the Joint Staff's deputy director for regional operations.

Democrats, who owe their control of the US Congress to deep US public anger over the war, have tied timetables calling for a withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq in 2008 to a 100-billion-dollar emergency war funding measure.

Bush, who has vowed to veto any measure with a deadline, warned Thursday that "the very radicals and extremists who attack us would be emboldened" by a hasty US withdrawal, and violence could spread beyond Iraq's borders.

The US president met with Reid, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and other lawmakers at the White House on Wednesday as part of an effort to map their way past the stalemate over the Iraq war funding.

Reid said Thursday that he had delivered his bleak message to Bush during the hour-long conversation at the White House, which parties on both sides said yielded no breakthrough.