

52 civilians killed in Mogadishu clashes

AFP, Mogadishu

Clashes between Ethiopian troops and Islamist troops in the Somali capital yesterday left at least 52 civilians dead, and brought the death toll to 165 from four days of fighting, a human rights group said.

Sudan Ali Ahmed, chairman of the Elman Peace and Human Rights Organisation, told AFP his group had collated figures from hospitals, other humanitarian groups and counting bodies abandoned in the streets.

"At least 52 civilians have been killed in today's fighting alone, but we are yet to account for the number of those wounded," Ahmed said.

"This brings the death toll to 165 people killed in four days of fighting here."

Today, the Ethiopian forces are using tanks and heavy mortars to fight, they are shooting people

house to house," he said.

"I do not know why the international community and the United Nations are keeping quiet yet civilians are being slaughtered in Mogadishu," Ahmed said.

Ahmed said hundreds of thousands of displaced did not have water, food or medicine. "We are appealing to the international community to come and rescue our people from this suffering."

"We have sent a message to both sides to stop fighting, but we have not got any reply. We are requesting them to stop fighting as soon as possible so that civilians can be helped," he added.

The UN refugee agency said more than 321,000 people have fled Mogadishu since February 1.

The UN said Somali government forces were blocking relief supplies and that UN aircraft were being shot at.

Islamist insurgents and some of

Mogadishu's clan warlords have vowed to oust the Ethiopians who helped Somalia's UN-backed transitional government in January to expel the Somali Council of Islamic Courts from the city.

The rivals exchanged heavy machinegun fire in the northern Fagah, Ex-Control and Sanaa districts as well as areas around the main Bakara market, where columns of the insurgents' modified pick-up trucks and Ethiopian tanks raced around the city.

There was sporadic shelling in several districts overnight, but casualty figures from the numerous battlefields could not be established, residents said.

"The Ethiopian forces are shelling Bakara market, mortars are landing everywhere and at this moment, we do not know what to do," said Hashim Ali Mohamed, who lives in southern Mogadishu.

Gunman kills hostage, self at Nasa building

AFP, Houston

A Nasa contractor took two co-workers hostage at Johnson Space Centre, killing one of them before turning the revolver on himself, officials said, just days after the bloodiest school shooting in US history.

Bill Phillips, an engineer with Jacobs Engineering who has worked for Nasa for about 12 years, barricaded himself inside the building Friday, after managing to sneak a revolver past security at the sprawling space centre campus, police and Nasa officials said.

Phillips shot David Beverly in the chest, killing the Nasa employee, and later shot himself in the head inside Building 44, a communications and engineering facility, officials said.

The second hostage, Fran Crenshaw, another Nasa contract worker, was found duct-taped to a chair a few hours after the standoff began. She was treated at a hospital and released.



PHOTO: AFP

French socialist candidate for the upcoming 2007 presidential election Segolene Royal receives flowers from supporters Friday in Poitiers, central France, two days before the presidential first round vote.

Sarkozy leads the race as French start choosing president

AFP, Paris

Voting started in overseas territories Saturday for France's hotly contested presidential election that heralds the transfer of power to a new generation of political leaders.

With right winger Nicolas Sarkozy still leading socialist Segolene Royal in final opinion polls before a campaign ban came into effect, all 12 candidates are nervously waiting to see how the millions of undecided voters cast their polls.

A day ahead of the vote in mainland France, the tiny islands of Saint Pierre and Miquelon off Canada's Atlantic coast -- home to just 5,000 registered voters -- kicked off the election in bright sunshine and freezing temperatures.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2L) presents The Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Public Administration to IAS Officer Rajiv Chawla (R) as Minister of State for Administrative Reforms and Personnel Suresh Pachouri (L) during a ceremony to mark Indian Civil Service Day in New Delhi yesterday.

Musharraf offers to visit Israel to help resolve ME crisis

AP, Cairo

Pakistan's President Gen Pervez Musharraf made a surprise offer Friday to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in an interview with the pan-Arab satellite Television Al-Arabya.

Musharraf told the Dubai-based television that he would be willing to visit the Jewish state in order to help bring peace to the troubled Middle East.

Pakistan - a Muslim country that is a key ally in the US-led war against terrorism - has no formal

diplomatic ties with Israel and supports a separate state for Palestinians with Jerusalem as its capital.

In the interview aired late Friday, Musharraf said he was "enthusiastic" to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and would go to Israel if his offer to be involved in a mediation process was accepted.

Musharraf said he could also start his talks first with the Palestinians, or "maybe in some third country ... going to Israel is also a possibility."

Manmohan slams use of religion in politics

South Asian Inter-Faith meet opens

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday said any political group trying to incite people in the name of religion is "betrayal" of both religion and civilisation.

Inaugurating the South Asian Inter-Faith meet here, he said the conference is taking place at a time when "forces of bigotry and communalism are trying to tear apart this fine fabric of our composite culture".

"Attempts to divide society along

religious lines deserve to be condemned with contempt. What is worse than religious intolerance is the deployment of such intolerance for narrow political gain", Singh said adding "any political formation trying to incite people in the name of any religion is in fact betraying both religion and our civilisation."

The prime minister said countries, big or small, "would have to come to terms with their internal diversity as no modern and open society can be a monolith".

"Nations and societies that seek to impose uniformity will give way to

those who embrace and celebrate diversity. Every nation will have to learn to deal with the political, cultural and social consequences and implications of growing phenomenon of diversity", he said.

Quoting Swami Vivekananda's famous speech at the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in September 1893 in which he had spoken about Indian civilisational tradition of accepting greatness of all religions, Singh said "we believe not only in universal tolerance but we accept all religions as true".

No deal with Benazir, says Musharraf

PTI, Islamabad

Playing down reports of political rapprochement with former premier Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said there was "no deal at all" and insisted that he would not quit as Army Chief till the general elections, which he promised to hold as scheduled later this year.

"There's no deal at all, no alliance, no deal" with Benazir, Musharraf told Al-Arabia television in an interview.

He said the general elections would be held by the end of the year in a fair and transparent manner, and any political action could be considered after viewing their outcome.

Musharraf also said he was legally entitled to continue to hold the dual authority of President and Army Chief.

INDO-AMERICAN NUKE DEAL

High-level talks set amid US frustration

AFP, Washington

Senior US and Indian officials will meet here next week to "energise" stalled negotiations on a landmark deal to give India access to US nuclear technology, a US spokesman said Friday.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shanker Menon will be in Washington Monday and Tuesday and will meet with Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns to discuss the negotiations, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack

said.

McCormack said there was "some frustration on the part of the administration as well as Congress on the pace of these negotiations."

"We still have faith that we're going to be able to get this agreement done, but we're at a stage in these particular negotiations where we think we need to raise the level of dialogue to a political level," he said.

"They're going to explore ways that we can energise the discussions so that we can get this done,"

he said.

The talks concern how to implement an agreement initially reached in July 2005 to India unprecedented access to US nuclear fuel and technology for its civilian power sector without requiring New Delhi to sign a nuclear weapons non-proliferation treaty as normally required by US law.

The deal has drawn fire from some US lawmakers and non-proliferation advocates who argue that it undermines efforts to halt the spread of nuclear weapons.

7 killed in separate Lankan attacks

AFP, Colombo

Seven people were killed and five others were wounded in separate attacks in Sri Lanka's restive northern and eastern regions, the defence ministry said yesterday.

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels set off a landmine targeting troops on patrol early Saturday in Batticaloa, 300km east of Colombo, the military said.

A civilian was killed in the attack, which also injured three others, including a police commando, the military said, adding that investigations were underway.

In the northern district of Vavuniya, 260km from Colombo, troops on foot patrol fired at suspected Tamil Tigers killing four rebels late Friday.

Security forces did not suffer any casualties in the confrontation, the ministry said.

A powerful landmine explosion in the northeastern district of Polonnaruwa late Friday also killed two soldiers and wounded two others, the defence ministry said.

The victims were travelling in a tractor and trailer when their vehicle was hit by the blast, the ministry said and blamed the attack on the Tamil Tigers, saying they could have planted the landmine some time ago.

There was no immediate reaction about the attacks from the Tamil Tigers, who have been fighting for an independent homeland for minority Tamils from the majority Sinhalese island.

Taliban demand troop withdrawal in exchange for French hostages

AFP, Kabul

Taliban holding two French aid workers hostage in southern Afghanistan have called for the withdrawal of French Nato troops and the freeing of imprisoned militants in exchange for their release, in a statement on their website.

The statement, published Friday, demanded the "French government withdraw its soldiers from Afghanistan in one week" and called on the Kabul administration "for a rapid response with regard to an exchange of prisoners."

Around 1,000 French troops are deployed in the Kabul region as

part of the Nato force.

Paris said Friday night it was analysing the demands, the first to be made publicly.

"We have taken note of the instructions which figure in the Taliban website. We are analysing them," said French foreign ministry spokesman Jean-Baptiste Mattei.

"We will not make any other comments."

The statement, published in English, has not been authenticated.

Its release two days ahead of the first round of the French presidential election on Sunday sharply increases the pressure on Paris to find a solution to the hostage crisis.

US, Australia warn of fresh terrorist attacks in Philippines

AFP, Manila

Australia and the United States have warned of an impending major terrorist attack in the southern Philippines, where al-Qaeda-linked militants recently beheaded seven Christian hostages.

In an advisory to its citizens circulated late Friday, the US embassy said the attack could take place anywhere on Mindanao, the country's main southern island.

"The embassy has information that a terrorist group may be planning to carry out bombing attacks in central Mindanao over the next several days," the travel notice said.



PHOTO: AFP

Muslim women queue with their babies to vote for presidential election at a polling station in Katsina, Nigeria yesterday. Voting began in Nigeria's landmark presidential elections, hours after a failed attempt to blow up the electoral commission marred hopes of a trouble-free polls in the first post-colonial transfer of power between two civilian presidents.

Trouble mars Nigeria vote

AFP, Lagos

Voting began Saturday in Nigeria's landmark presidential elections, hours after a failed attempt to blow up the electoral commission marred hopes of a trouble-free poll in the first post-colonial transfer of power between two civilian presidents.

Private vehicles were warned to keep off roads in Lagos and elsewhere and heavily-armed troops threw up roadblocks on key thoroughfares, while fresh trouble erupted in the volatile oil-rich south.

It was also unclear whether 65 million ballot papers, ready for distribution only on the eve of the vote Friday, had arrived safely at the 120,000 polling stations of Africa's most populous nation.

In the capital Abuja, where polling stations opened as scheduled at 0900 GMT, police reported a pre-dawn attempt to raze the electoral commission (INEC).

"There was an attempt to burn

down the electoral commission's office this morning around 4:00 am (0300 GMT). A fuel tanker fully loaded with petrol was seen moving towards the office and there was no one inside", police spokesman Haz Iwendi told AFP.

Had the lorry hit its target "it would have been destruction on the highest scale", Iwendi said.

He said a stone had been wedged on the accelerator to keep it rolling.

In the southern Niger Delta home to the country's oil industry -- Nigeria is the world's sixth oil exporter -- assailants riding speed-boats shot at a military base as troops fanned out across Yenagoa, capital of the state of Bayelsa, following shootings and bombings the previous night.

"The soldiers have taken over the streets, they are heavily armed and they are checking every vehicle. They ask people to raise their hands and conduct body checks. They said they are looking for militants", a witness said.