

# Heavy fighting in Lanka ahead of Japanese peace move

10 troops, 2 Red Cross workers killed

AFP, Colombo

The Tamil Tiger rebels said yesterday they had killed at least 10 Sri Lankan army troops in attacks on military defences and materiel, as Japan readied a fresh bid to quell the spiralling violence.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they had launched a "commando style" attack against military defences in the northern district of Vavuniya on Saturday night, destroying artillery posts and ammunition dumps.

"The Tigers have destroyed a Sri Lanka army artillery launch pad, seized military hardware, including ... armoured personnel carriers," rebel spokesman Rasiiah Ilanthiriyar said.

Another 35 army troops were wounded by the offensive, the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website reported.

The Sri Lankan defence ministry

said three soldiers were killed and 20 others wounded, raising an earlier tally of one killed and seven wounded.

Neither side's casualty claims could be independently verified and both are believed to inflate the figures.

Ilanthiriyar said that the guerrillas had established a forward defence line near areas previously held by the military following the attack, Tamilnet.com reported.

Sporadic artillery exchanges continued in Vavuniya district, which borders rebel territory, the military and rebels said Sunday. Residents and officials said they had heard heavy shelling since Saturday night.

Japan's special peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Yasushi Akashi, is due to head to the conflict zone during a four-day visit to the tropical island beginning Tuesday, officials and diplomats said.

They said Akashi was hoping to

jump start Sri Lanka's now moribund peace process. The envoy, seen as a key figure, in 2003 helped to raise 4.5 billion dollars in pledges to support a Norwegian-backed bid to resolve the conflict.

President Mahinda Rajapakse on Friday said he was willing to resume talks with the rebels even as fighting continued in the troubled northern and eastern regions, where deaths are reported daily.

In more tragedy Sunday two Red Cross workers were found shot dead in central Sri Lanka, a day after they were abducted by men claiming to be from the police, the charity said.

The defence ministry said an investigation was under way into the worst attack against aid workers since the August massacre of 17 local employees of Action Against Hunger, a French charity.

The latest fighting in northern Sri Lanka came as police ordered the

eviction of hundreds of ethnic Tamils who have been sheltering in the capital, Colombo, for long periods.

Police Inspector-General Victor Perera announced Friday that Tamils from the embattled northern and eastern provinces were a threat to national security when they spent a long time in Colombo without employment.

The authorities also banned trucks and vans leaving Tamil-dominated regions and travelling to the rest of the country after police said they had discovered a truck packed with over a tonne of explosives.

The government blamed the Tamil Tigers for two bomb attacks in and around the capital last week, which killed nine people and wounded 44. The latest crackdown followed the blasts.

## Quake in southwest China kills 3

AP, Beijing

A strong earthquake shook southwest China's Yunnan province early yesterday, killing at least three and injuring hundreds and forcing the evacuation of 120,000 people, state media reported.

The US Geological Survey said the quake had a preliminary magnitude of 6.2 and hit about 1,470 miles southwest of Beijing.

At least three people died and more than 290 were injured, 15 seriously, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. One of the dead was a 5-year-old boy, who was crushed by debris, state television reported. The boy's parents were also trapped but were rescued by locals.

The local seismological bureau had recorded 233 aftershocks by 2 pm, the strongest with a magnitude of 5.1, said an official with the bureau, who gave only his surname, Ma.

The earthquake caused several houses to collapse and damaged the communications network in the area, making it difficult for residents to make phone calls, Xinhua reported. Roads, water and power supplies were also affected.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani activists from political parties march as they chant anti-government slogans upon the arrival of suspended chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in Abbottabad Saturday. Pakistan's top judge, suspended by President Pervez Musharraf, told thousands of supporters that the country's people back the struggle for the independence of the judiciary.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters from India's ethnic Gujar community shout slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday. Attacks and rioting left at least 28 people dead in a week of ethnic clashes in the northwestern state of Rajasthan as a protest campaign by the Gujar community to demand more government benefits has degenerated into bloodshed and lawlessness.

## Militants planned Sept 11-style Lebanon attack

AFP, Beirut

A mass-circulation Beirut daily reported on Sunday that Fatah al-Islam, whose fighters are under siege at a refugee camp in the north of the country, had planned a September 11-style attack on Lebanon.

"This information was obtained by questioning arrested Fatah al-Islam members" detained by the Lebanese military since the outbreak of fighting on May 20, An-Nahar said without identifying its sources.

No officials were immediately available to comment on the report.

The paper also said that explosives seized in the country's second largest city Tripoli, south of the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp where militants were being besieged by the army for the 15th day, came from Syria.

"Fatah al-Islam planned to attack a large hotel in the capital using four suicide truck bombs at the same time as launching suicide attacks on embassies in east and west Beirut," the paper said.

An-Nahar also said the al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist group "planned to launch attacks on the Shekka tunnel linking Beirut to Tripoli with the aim of cutting off the north and proclaiming an Islamic state there."

It said the attacks would be "a Lebanese September 11," in reference to the 2001 attacks on the United States by al-Qaeda.

On May 22 Fatah al-Islam denied planting two bombs that rocked Beirut on consecutive nights after the siege began, killing a woman and wounding a total of 20 people.

The group had earlier denied charges by the authorities that it carried out bus bombings in a Christian mountain village in February that left three people dead.

Fatah al-Islam has also denied any links to al-Qaeda, although it has admitted having ideological ties with the worldwide terror movement headed by Osama bin Laden.

## 12 Islamists killed in US attack in Somalia

AFP, Mogadishu

At least 12 Islamist fighters, including foreigners were killed in US naval shelling and fighting with forces from the Somali semi-autonomous region of Puntland, officials said yesterday.

Puntland Finance Minister Mohamed Ali Yusuf said the region's forces crushed the Islamist fighters in mountainous ranges around Bargal town, about 1,250 kilometres (780 miles) northeast of the Somali capital Mogadishu, before a US Navy warship fired into the area.

"Their bodies are lying in the mountainous area and we hope to show them to the media. They (Islamists) have lost in the battle and we killed 12 of them," said a Puntland military commander who requested anonymity.

"We surrounded the whole area and we expected that none of them would flee," the commander added by satellite phone.

Yusuf meanwhile told reporters in the northern Somali town of Bosasso: "Our forces defeated the Islamist fighters consisting of Somali and foreign fighters, most of them are dead now and some of them have fled the area. Our forces are fully controlling Bargal."

# Fresh wave of military drives against Taliban

AFP, Kabul

Afghan security forces supported by Nato-led and US-led troops have launched a wave of operations against Taliban militants in insurgency-hit southern Afghanistan, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The insurgents meanwhile warned civilians to stay away from foreign forces, saying they were planning their own new campaign of ambushes, suicide attacks and roadside bombings.

A defence ministry spokesman told reporters in Kabul the operations launched last week were in the southern provinces of Ghazni, Helmand and Kandahar. All have seen intense Taliban activity in the past weeks.

"These operations are aimed at providing security in the area so the reconstruction can take place," General Mohammad Zahir told a news conference.

Operation "Kulang" (pickaxe), involving hundreds of Afghan troops and British forces operating under

the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), was underway in districts of Helmand, Azimi said.

The offensive caused 60 Taliban fighters to flee across the Helmand River Friday, he said. Their boat sank and they were all killed, he said.

Two Afghan soldiers also died, Azimi said.

A similar offensive code-named "Hadalat," meaning justice, was launched in neighbouring Kandahar - the former stronghold of the Taliban, Azimi said.

It involved Afghan and Canadian troops and US Special Forces.

In Ghazni province, hundreds of other Afghan and Isaf troops unleashed Operation Maiwand - named after a troubled Kandahar district where the British were defeated by an Afghan army in 1880.

Four rebels have been captured since the launch of the offensive on Saturday, the general said.

The province has seen a spike in violence in the past few months, with a suicide bombing last month which

killed 10 Afghans while militants killed five relatives of a policeman in an attack late Thursday.

A spokesman for the Taliban meanwhile called on Afghans Sunday to stay away from foreign military bases and convoys, warning of a wave of attacks on the troops.

"We call on Afghans to stay away from foreign forces because a big (Taliban) operation is due to be launched. This will include ambushes, suicide attacks and roadside explosions," Zabihullah Mujahed said.

"If any civilian gets hurt, it'll be their responsibility," he told AFP by telephone from an unknown location.

The Taliban insurgency was launched soon after the headline, Islamic movement was driven from government in late 2001. It is said to have been joined by other Islamist militias, foreign fighters and opium traders.

## Arsenic can prolong life of leukaemia patients

AFP, Chicago

Well known as a poison that can kill, arsenic also can prolong the lives of patients with a rare form of leukaemia, a new study out Saturday found.

"This study shows that even more patients will benefit if we give (arsenic) earlier in the course of treatment," said Dr. Bayard Powell, haematology professor at Wake Forest medical centre in North Carolina, and the lead author of the research delivered at the meeting of the American Society of Oncology (ASCO) which brought together 25,000 experts in Chicago.

"The difference in survival rates and relapse rates are great enough to justify including arsenic trioxide in standard first-line treatment" of acute promyelocytic leukaemia (APL) a rare form of acute myeloid leukaemia (AML), Powell argued.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Army soldiers search the destroyed house after a nightlong encounter at Wuyan Pampore, some 22km south of Kashmir's summer-capital Srinagar yesterday. Two suspected militants were killed and three residential houses were gutted during the gun-battle with Indian Army soldiers.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates (R) greets Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama prior to their bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the 6th International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Asian Security Summit, Shangri-la Dialogue, in Singapore yesterday. This was the final day of the three-day gathering of defence and security officials.

## Britain planning Iraq pullout within a year

AFP, London

British military chiefs are preparing to withdraw troops from Iraq within 12 months in order to concentrate on Afghanistan. The Sunday Telegraph said citing a senior military official.

A new timetable that would see a complete unilateral British withdrawal from Iraq by next May will be presented to incoming prime minister Gordon Brown within weeks of him taking over from Tony Blair on June 27, said the newspaper.

Under Blair, Britain has consistently maintained that any pullout of troops in Iraq should be dictated by events on the ground, not a timetable.

But the broadsheet said Brown will be told by defence chiefs that Britain should withdraw from Iraq in "quick order" so as to bolster efforts to beat Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan.

"Britain is not physically capable of fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq at the same time," the unnamed senior military official told the weekly.

"The question is: which do we give up? The government and the defence chiefs have decided that we should give up Iraq."

"There is an agreed timetable, a glide path, which will see a complete unilateral withdrawal in 12 months."

However, many senior officers believe Iraq is strategically more important to Britain's interests than Afghanistan and the plan has not met with their approval, said the newspaper.

"There is a belief within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and government that success is easier to measure in Afghanistan and that makes it more attractive," the official said.