

# 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 Rasiah Ilanthiriyam 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.

Ilanthiriyam 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.

## 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."

Under the deal India is to separate nuclear facilities for civilian and military use and set up a regime of international inspections in return for technology and nuclear fuel supplies.

But differences remain over New Delhi's demand for assurances that Washington would continue to supply fuel for its nuclear plants in the event of New Delhi conducting further nuclear weapons tests.

India also wants no curbs on the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel.

On Saturday, Menon confirmed that this was "one of the issues we are still discussing."

"We are optimistic that we will make the deal," he added.

Menon said Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh would follow up next week with US President George W Bush during a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the meeting of the G8 group of industrialised nations in Germany.

Secretary Rice would then visit New Delhi, Menon said. "The dates are towards the end of July, early August," he added.

Menon's optimism on bridging differences was shared by Indian

## India, US edge closer to nuclear deal

AFP, New Delhi

India and the United States have moved closer to finalising a key civilian nuclear deal but gaps persist ahead of talks between the two leaders in Germany next week, officials said Saturday.

"There were several issues still open when we started talks," Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon told reporters after three days of "intense" and "productive talks" with US chief negotiator Nicholas Burns.

"We have come much closer in our understanding of the issues that divide us. We have managed to remove most of the issues from the table," Menon said.

India and the United States are negotiating the fine print of a landmark atomic energy accord and the officials said a visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to New Delhi was also being worked out.

The accord is intended to reverse three decades of US sanctions on nuclear trade with India, even though New Delhi has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and tested nuclear weapons in 1998.

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

"There is no question of a deadlock," Mukherjee said. "Things will come through."

However, a statement from the US embassy in New Delhi said "more work remains to be done to complete arrangements that will permit a civil nuclear agreement to be finalised between the US and India.

"We look forward to a final agreement as it is indisputably in the interest of both governments."

Despite reporting "considerable progress," Menon admitted dates and a venue for the next meeting between the two sides had not been set.

In Delhi, Burns called on prime minister Singh, Mukherjee and National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan and exchanged views with senior opposition Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party leaders Jaswant Singh and Brajesh Mishra.

## Guantanamo trials loom for Laden's driver, teen soldier

AFP, Washington

Osama bin Laden's ex-driver and a Canadian child soldier captured in Afghanistan face arraignment today at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay under a US military process slammed by activists as a travesty of justice.

Salim Ahmed Hamdan, a Yemeni national born in 1970, is accused of serving both as an armed bodyguard and as bin Laden's personal chauffeur.

The government alleges that Toronto-born Omar Ahmed Khadr, who was 15 when he was seized in Afghanistan five years ago, murdered a US army sergeant with a hand grenade during a raid on an al-Qaeda hideout.

The only Guantanamo trial held so far has been that of David Hicks, a 31-year-old Australian who was jailed for nine months in March. He is now serving out his sentence at a maximum-security prison in Adelaide.

## 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.

## 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.



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.