

Lankan troop shortages hit push against rebels

12 killed in fresh violence

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military has been unable to push into Tamil Tiger strongholds in the north due to the threat of monsoon rains and a lack of manpower, defence officials and analysts say.

The government had hoped to build on recent territorial gains in the east of the troubled island by going after guerrilla bases in the northern Wanni region, where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) run a mini-state.

"Inter-monsoon rains start in October and it will be difficult to move tanks and heavy guns in boggy conditions," said one field commander who asked not to be named.

"But in the run-up to the monsoon, there could be smaller-scale operations."

The LTTE last month admitted losing its final bastion in the jungles of Sri Lanka's Eastern province, but vowed to keep up hit-and-run attacks in the area.

One senior officer attributed the victory last month to a combination of superior tactics, firepower and guerrilla-style attacks behind enemy lines.

"What they used to do is send small groups to harass us. We had to tie up a

large force to hold our static positions," he said, requesting anonymity. "This time, we infiltrated their lines and kept them on their toes."

But for defence analyst Namal Perera, that success may require the deployment of a huge number of troops if the military wants to maintain control over the areas wrested from the rebels.

"With the manpower commitment in the east expected to be very heavy, it will be a challenge to deploy more men for a new offensive in the north," Perera said. "It will be difficult at this time."

"As long as the army is tied down in the east, the LTTE knows the military will not make a new push in the north."

LTTE spokesman Rasiyah Ilanthiriyar admitted the rebels had suffered a setback with the loss of territory in the east, but said the Tigers were bolstering their defences in the north.

"Militarily you can't call this an advantageous situation," Ilanthiriyar said. "Because, if you want to control one region, you may have to lose control over another region."

The Rivira newspaper reported that the Tigers had withdrawn cadres from the eastern front and sent them to

the north.

"The next battle which will start in the Wanni will be decisive for both parties," the paper's defence analyst Tissa Ravindra Perera said.

The military has suffered heavy losses trying to break into rebel territory in the north of the island in recent weeks, while the Tigers have experienced similar setbacks trying to gain a foothold in the army-held Jaffna peninsula.

A recently retired senior military officer predicted that government forces might not be able to replicate in the north the tactics used in the east because the terrain was different.

"In the east, there are no clearly demarcated areas of control and that helped us to sneak into areas dominated by the Tigers," said the retired officer, declining to be named.

"In the north, there is a physical boundary and getting through that is not going to be easy. We have already lost a few groups that tried."

Meanwhile at least 12 people have been killed in fresh violence across Sri Lanka's northern and eastern regions where a bitter ethnic war has raged for decades, military and Tamil rebel sources said Sunday.

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels set

off a powerful land mine against a military patrol in the Jaffna peninsula Sunday, killing four soldiers and wounding at least 13 others, military officials said.

The defence ministry said a civilian was also among the wounded.

The guerrillas also shot dead a Tamil civilian in the market place in Jaffna Sunday, the defence ministry said in a statement.

Another civilian was killed and four others were injured when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired mortars at a village in Welioya, in the island's northeast on Sunday, the ministry said.

The wounded included a two-year-old child.

In the same area, security forces shot dead five suspected LTTE cadres as they tried to lay landmines on Saturday, the ministry said in a statement.

There was no immediate reaction from the guerrillas.

Rebels gun down 4 more migrants in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Suspected separatists in northeastern Assam state shot dead four migrants early yesterday raising the toll from a string of such attacks ahead of India's Independence Day this week to 34, police said.

Six armed militants attacked sleeping villagers in an eastern district of restive Assam, where as many as 30 rebel groups have been fighting for demands ranging from secession to greater autonomy for decades.

"The militants dragged out members of two families and shot at them from close range using automatic weapons," said police official Lajja Ram Bishnoi in Karbi Anglong district, 270km east of Assam's main city Guwahati.



PHOTO: AFP
New York Police officers use a radiation detection device to monitor traffic following a 'dirty bomb' threat on Saturday in New York City. New York police have increased security in Manhattan after a website carried reports that Islamic militants intended to attack the city with a radiological device, police said Saturday.

Millions still depend on aid

South Asian floodwaters recede

AFP, New Delhi

The millions of people hit by some of the worst flooding in South Asia for decades continued to depend on aid supplies of food and clean water on Sunday as the inundation slowly receded.

The heavy rains and flooding have affected nearly 30 million people and killed around 2,200

across India, Bangladesh and Nepal since the start of the monsoon in June.

"The toll is 1,668," in India said S.S. Singh, from the national disaster management division in the country's home ministry.

Twenty-one new deaths were reported in the state of Bihar by Saturday afternoon, he added, but the figure does not include some

flood-related deaths such as capsized boats last week that claimed dozens of lives.

Some 15 million people were affected by flood waters in northern India, with the worst-off losing their homes and crops, officials have said.

Approximately 1.1 million hectares (2.7 million acres) of farmland were swamped with water, mainly in

the northern belt of Bihar.

Almost seven million people were displaced in India's Uttar Pradesh and Assam, but many of these have now returned home.

In Bihar, many roads were still submerged Sunday, including a major highway connecting the state to India's northeast, the Press Trust of India news agency said.



PHOTO: AFP
Residents pray during a candlelight vigil on Saturday in Huntington, Utah, for six coal miners trapped at the Crandall Canyon Mine. Rescuers do not know if the miners are still alive following the August 6 cave-in as they drill bore holes and dig through the mine round the clock to reach them.

Fresh hopes for Korean hostage release

Fresh talks underway

AFP, Ghazni

Two of the South Korean aid workers held hostage in Afghanistan were to be released within hours, a Taliban commander said yesterday, as new talks began over the three-week crisis.

Commander Abdullah Jal said the two women were still in the hands of the militants, but would be released Sunday as a goodwill gesture from the Islamist hardliners.

"God willing, they will be freed this afternoon as a gesture of good intention from the Taliban leading

council," said Jal, the commander for the Ghazni region where 23 South Koreans were abducted July 19.

Two of the hostages have since been murdered by the Taliban, which has threatened to kill the remaining 21 unless the Afghan government meets their demands to release a similar number of key Taliban prisoners.

A Taliban delegation and a South Korean team meanwhile began a third day of talks at the offices of the Afghan Red Crescent Society in Ghazni, a small town about 140km

south of Kabul.

"The third round of talks started between the Taliban and South Koreans," Ghazni province intelligence chief Mohammad Jaseem Khan told AFP.

The talks, which began on Friday, were being held behind closed doors. Journalist on Sunday were barred from even assembling outside the venue.

Intelligence agents had warned photographers against taking any pictures in the town, an AFP photographer said.

Thai junta's popularity put to test in referendum

AFP, Bangkok

In Bangkok's downtown night market, Ratporn Supsong sells wooden statues of Buddha that the faithful believe will bring them good fortune and protect them from harm.

But the 44-year-old says she is pinning her hopes for a peaceful future on Thailand's first-ever referendum next weekend, when the military-backed government will ask voters to approve a new constitution.

"I will go to vote and I will vote yes, because I don't want the political situation to get worse," she says.

The August 19 referendum only asks voters to approve or reject the charter, but the military sees it as much more – a vote on the legitimacy of the coup that ousted elected premier Thaksin Shinawatra last September.

Hackers protest US, Israeli actions on UN website

AFP, United Nations

The official website of the United Nations appeared to have been hacked early Sunday, and was displaying a message protesting US and Israeli policies in the Middle East.

The section of the site reserved to statements by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon showed a message, repeated several times, that read: "Hacked By kerem125 M0sted and Gsy That is CyberProtest Hey Ysrail and Usa dont kill children and other people Peace for ever No war."

The message also appeared on other web pages that usually display quotes and speeches from the secretary general.



PHOTO: AFP
North Korean people walk down a flooded street in Pyongyang Saturday. North Korea has reported yesterday widespread damage to homes, railways and roads following heavy rains that battered the nation last week, in a rare admission of problems within the reclusive country.