

Lanka's warring parties lock in fierce fighting

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's troops and Tamil rebels were locked in fierce fighting yesterday in the island's north, the two sides said as the top military chief vowed to kill 3,000 guerrillas by June.

Both the military and the Tiger guerrillas claimed to have inflicted heavy losses against the other in the latest weekend fighting along the de facto border separating the mini-state run by the Tigers.

The defence ministry said troops killed at least 33 members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and wounded another 38 in the latest battles in the district of Mannar.

The ministry placed its own losses at six soldiers wounded, but the Tigers said they killed at least 20 government soldiers and wounded another 40. The rebels placed their own losses at three guerrillas killed.

The Sri Lanka armed forces fighting units are already beaten back in two of the three fronts,"

Tiger spokesman Rasiah Ilanthyrian said in a statement.

"Both sides use heavy artillery, multi-barrel rocket launchers and small mortars to provide tactical support fire to respective troops. The shelling duel and firefights still continue in those areas," the statement said.

Both sides regularly make sharply differing claims about casualties and independent verification is rarely possible. Journalists are not allowed into rebel-held areas in the north.

The state-run Sunday Observer reported that the military planned to "eliminate" the separatist Tamil Tigers in the next six months with stepped up military action in the New Year.

"There are around 3,000 LTTE terrorists remaining and the military targets to annihilate them within the first six months of the next year," the newspaper quoted army chief Sarath Fonseka as saying.

Earlier Sri Lanka's defence

secretary said the government should formally pull out of a ceasefire with Tamil Tiger rebels amid escalating fighting in the island, a state-run daily reported Saturday.

A 2002 Norwegian-brokered truce began to unravel in December 2005 and both sides have blamed each other for the mounting violence, which has claimed over 6,000 lives since then, according to government figures.

The ceasefire agreement exists only on paper. Obviously we can see there is no ceasefire," Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, who is President Mahinda Rajapakse's younger brother, told the Daily News.

"It has become a joke," the defence secretary said.

Sri Lanka is pressing for a military victory over the rebels, fighting for a separate state for the ethnic Tamil minority in the Sinhalese-majority nation. Tens of thousands have died on both sides since the conflict erupted in 1972.

Hundreds in shelter after religious unrest in India

AFP, Bhubaneswar

Nearly 500 Hindus and Christians were being housed in relief centres after clashes between the communities left at least five dead since Christmas, a government official said yesterday.

Nearly a dozen churches were damaged and a man killed on Christmas night in eastern Orissa state during a protest backed by a right-wing Hindu group.

Subsequent clashes between Hindus and Christians left four more dead.

"We have around 500 people, both Christians and Hindus, in our four major shelter camps. They will return to their homes soon," senior administrative official Suresh Mohapatra told AFP.

He said some 30 people had been arrested as a curfew stayed in place for a fifth straight day Sunday in four towns in Kandhamal district, 300km southwest of the state capital Bhubaneswar.

Two police officials were suspended and others transferred.



'Long live Bhutto' were Benazir's last words

AFP, London

Benazir Bhutto's last words were "Long live Bhutto", the chief political adviser with the former Pakistani prime minister as she was killed told the British newspaper The Sunday Telegraph.

Benazir shouted the words from her car just before she was killed at a campaign rally in the northern city of Rawalpindi on Thursday, said Saffar Abbasi, who said he was sitting behind her in the vehicle.

"She did not say anything more," he recalled, in what the weekly broadsheet said was the first account of Benazir's death from inside her car.

Reacting to the incident, Abbasi said: "All of a sudden there was the sound of firing. I heard the sound of a bullet."

"I saw her: she looked as though she ducked in when she heard the firing. We did not realise that she had been hit by a bullet."

He said he looked up to see Benazir sliding back through the sunroof, just before it was rocked by a huge explosion.

India restores train service to Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday decided to restore a train service to Pakistan two days after suspending it over security concerns in the wake of violence over Benazir Bhutto's killing, the railways ministry said.

"The situation has improved. So, the government has allowed the services to be resumed," said Anil Saxena, a spokesman for the railways ministry.

The "Samjhauta (friendship) Express" that runs between New Delhi and the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore will leave the Indian capital late Sunday for the border town of Attari from where it would cross the border.

The government was also likely to resume the second train, the Thar Express, named after India's western desert, to leave the city of Jodhpur for the Pakistani town of Khokpuri next week.

More than 400 passengers, mostly Pakistani nationals, were stranded in Jodhpur at the weekend because of the cancellation of the train that runs every Friday, the Press Trust of India reported.

Hamas raids Fatah offices in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Armed men from the Islamist Hamas movement raided the Gaza Strip since Hamas seized power in June -- also raided Al-Azhar University, the university's president said, arresting dozens of students.

A spokesman for the Executive Force said the students were arrested for "illegal" activities.

The incidents come two days before a key anniversary of the secular Fatah party founded by the late Palestinian iconic leader Yasser Arafat. On January 1, 1965 Fatah for the first time declared itself as an armed Palestinian resistance group.

Long a dominant force in Palestinian politics, Fatah was crushed in parliamentary elections in January 2006 by the Islamist Hamas.

"The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) seized control

of the Gaza Strip in June, routing forces loyal to Fatah after a week of deadly street fighting.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will from now on decide on any new tenders for Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, a government official said on Sunday.

The move was announced a little over a week before a visit to the region by US President George W. Bush, whose administration has criticised its close ally Israel over settlement activity.

Last week Prime Minister Olmert had a meeting with Housing Minister Zeev Boim at which it was decided that the prime minister from now on will give the final authorisation for any new construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem," the official told reporters on condition of anonymity.

Iran's nuke plant to start in summer of 2008: FM

AFP, Tehran

Iran on Sunday insisted its first nuclear power station would be launched in the summer of 2008, despite statements by the plant's Russian constructors it will not go online until the end of the year.

"The Bushehr nuclear power station will launch at a capacity of 50 percent next summer," said Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, quoted by the state news agency IRNA.

A Russian contractor is finishing the construction of the much-delayed 1,000 megawatt plant in the southern city of Bushehr. Moscow has also agreed to deliver the nuclear fuel required by the facility.

A spokeswoman for the Russian contractor Atomstroyexport said earlier this month that it would take at least a year to launch the power station.



Smoke rises from a military garrison after an explosion in the Bombona Battalion of Medellin in Colombia Saturday. The explosion has left at least two dead and seven injured.

3 pro-Thaksin election winners disqualified: Thai election body

AFP, Bangkok

Three politicians linked to ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra who won seats in Thailand's recent election have been disqualified for vote buying, the Election Commission said yesterday.

The candidates from northeastern Buriram province are members of the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP), which gained the most seats in December 23 elections, the first since a military coup last year.

"They were accused of paying voters," Election Commission (EC) secretary general Suthiphon Thaveehachaiyagarn told reporters.

The commissioners have decided to withdraw those three candidates' election rights for one year, and will organise a re-run of the election," he added.

Suthiphon said the three disqualified candidates will likely face legal action and would have to pay for the by-elections in their province, which authorities have 30

days to organise.

PPP will not be able to field any candidates in the three by-elections, reducing their overall number of parliamentary seats.

Three other PPP lawmakers will have to re-stand for their seats in northeast Nakhon Ratchasima province, after the EC ruled that there was possible electoral fraud, but not enough evidence to disqualify the candidates.

PPP won 23 of the 180 seats up for grabs in Thailand's lower house, just short of the majority needed to form a government alone. They are expected to announce details of a coalition government on Friday.

Their win was a blow to the junta, which had sought to rid Thailand of Thaksin's political influence.

A slate of electoral fraud claims were filed with the EC after the poll, and the commission is still investigating the cases. Consequently more candidates could yet be disqualified, shuffling the balance of power among the parties.

Fukuda, however, had accentuated the positive during his trip, his first to China since becoming prime minister in September and the latest step forward in a relationship marred by decades of distrust.

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Tokyo, Beijing must work together

Says Japan PM

AFP, Beijing

Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda called for closer cooperation with China yesterday as he wrapped up a four-day visit in which the two sides pledged to build on a recent thaw in relations.

"This trip to China has been very meaningful," Fukuda told reporters after visiting a shrine in eastern China to the ancient philosopher Confucius.

"I have talked with Chinese leaders and agreed that Japan and China can do more if they cooperate than each can do single-handedly."

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