

Lanka bombs hideout of Tiger leadership

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military said yesterday its war planes had Thursday "completely destroyed" a hideout where Tamil Tiger leaders were meeting, a day after its truce with the rebels officially ended.

The air strike on the northern rebel centre of Kilinochchi also came after suspected rebels killed 27 people in an attack on a public bus in the south.

"Sri Lanka Air Force fighter jets targeted an LTTE (Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam) senior leaders' gathering at Jayapoor in Kilinochchi," the defence ministry said in a statement. "Pilots confirmed that the location was completely destroyed."

The pro-rebel TamilNet website however said the bombs hit a

civilian area in Kilinochchi, the main town in the rebels' northern mini-state, wounding seven people and damaging nine houses.

It said the planes "bombed a civilian area with a mechanic workshop," and that the Tamil Tigers responded with anti-aircraft fire.

No independent confirmation of the conflicting accounts of the raid was available. The Sri Lankan government has barred journalists from visiting the rebel-held north.

The air strike came hours after a truce, signed by the LTTE and the government in 2002, officially ended at midnight on Wednesday.

It also came the day after the Tigers were blamed for bombing and shooting at a public bus, killing 27 civilians and wounding

more than 60 others, according to a new toll issued by authorities.

Six farmers were also reported to have been shot dead by an LTTE unit in the same area.

The Sri Lankan government pulled out of the ceasefire arguing that the Tigers, who want to carve out an independent state in the north and east of the island, had only used the truce to re-arm.

Fighting has been escalating over the past year, and Nordic peace monitors said late last year that they had lost count of the number of violations of the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire.

The truce monitors pulled out of Sri Lanka on Wednesday, with a warning to both sides that the long-running war cannot be won. Defence officials in Colombo

have spelled out their determination to kill LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, who has been leading a rebellion against the island's ethnic Sinhalese majority since 1972.

In November, Sri Lankan forces killed LTTE political chief S.P. Thamilselvan in an air bombing raid, and the island's military began the New Year with a vow to kill 3,000 guerrillas in the first six months of the year.

Meanwhile the defence ministry said fighting was continuing across front lines in the north, with the military claiming to have killed six more rebels.

Colombo claims it has killed 429 rebels since the start of the year against 20 soldiers killed. The figures cannot be independently verified.



Sri Lankan men read newspapers carrying reports of the end of a ceasefire agreement in Colombo yesterday, a day after suspected Tamil Tiger rebels set off a roadside bomb killing at least 27 people. Sri Lanka began a new chapter in its decades-old war with Tamil Tigers having tossed aside a tattered 2002 truce with the rebels in its unquestionable belief it can defeat them.

Israel tests ballistic missile successfully

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel successfully test-fired a ballistic missile yesterday, army radio said, two days after warning that all options were on the table to prevent archfoe Iran from obtaining atomic weapons.

"There was an important test, which was carried out successfully, of a ballistic missile," the radio said, without providing any further details.

The test was "part of a future multi-layered defence system designed to counter various aerial threats against the Jewish state," the YNet website said.

Israel has in recent years concentrated efforts on countering the threat of missile attacks from neighbouring Arab states and Iran, which has itself conducted several long-range missile tests.

Israel is currently thought to be developing the Jericho-3 ground-to-ground missile that can be equipped with a nuclear, chemical or biological warhead and could have a range of up to 4,500 kilometres (2,800 miles).



Palestinian mourners carry the bodies of Islamic Jihad militant Mohammed al-Safadi and Wael Ahel during their funeral in Gaza City yesterday. The two militants were killed during an Israeli air strike on Wednesday night near the Bureij refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.

UN blasts 'indiscriminate' attacks in Lanka

AFP, United Nations/ Geneva

UN chief Ban Ki-moon strongly condemned the "indiscriminate attacks" which left dozens of people dead or injured in southern Sri Lanka and urged the rival sides to strive for a peaceful negotiated settlement.

"The Secretary General strongly condemns the indiscriminate attacks in the southeast of Sri Lanka today which left dozens of dead and injured, including children," his spokeswoman Michele Montas said in a statement.

Reiterating his belief that the only way to stop further violence in Sri Lanka was through dialogue, Ban urged the parties concerned "to undertake genuine efforts to achieve a peaceful negotiated settlement."

At least 24 civilians were killed and scores wounded in Wednesday's suspected Tamil Tiger bomb attack on a crowded bus in southern Sri Lanka coinciding with the end of the island's ceasefire.

The Sri Lankan defence ministry said the bus packed with schoolchildren was hit by a powerful Claymore-type mine -- a bomb

packed with explosives and ball-bearings.

With the Indian Ocean island sliding back into all-out war, Scandinavian truce monitors packed their bags and made a renewed appeal for the government and the Tamil Tigers to return to talks -- arguing that neither can win the decades-old war.

Meanwhile Sri Lanka on Wednesday launched a fierce attack on the top United Nations human rights official, accusing her of bias and incompetence following recent comments on the end of a ceasefire on the island.

Louise Arbour, the UN high commissioner for human rights, had urged all parties in the island's conflict to abide by their obligations under humanitarian law, as a Norwegian-brokered truce came to an end.

The government pulled out of the ceasefire two weeks ago, saying there was no point attempting to negotiate with "terrorists."

"An intensification of hostilities will likely have a devastating effect on the human rights of many Sri Lankans from all communities," Arbour said in a statement.

Effectiveness of Iran sanctions in doubt

Reveals US Congress report

AFP, Washington

The US administration on Wednesday faced calls for a broad review of sanctions it has imposed on Iran over the last two decades, after a congressional audit questioned their impact.

The audit by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) was published before a new US diplomatic push in Berlin next week for a third round of UN sanctions on Iran, which top the US agenda.

The report by the GAO, the investigative arm of the US Congress, questioned the effectiveness of sanctions imposed since 1987 by Washington on Iran for Tehran's alleged involvement in terrorism. The report was presented to a congressional subcommittee in December.

"US officials and experts report that US sanctions have specific impacts on Iran. However, the extent of such impacts is difficult to

determine," the GAO said in a summary accompanying the report now published on its website.

"First, according to US officials and experts, US sanctions may have slowed foreign investment in Iran's petroleum sector, which hinders Iran's ability to fund its acquisition of prohibited items and terrorism-related activities," it said.

"Second, US officials state that financial sanctions deny parties involved in Iran's proliferation and terrorism activities access to the US financial system and complicate their support for such activities," it said.

It cited a case in January 2007 when the US government imposed sanctions on Bank Sepah for allegedly supporting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The move barred its access to US financial institutions and undercut its ability to make dollar transactions.

"Third, US officials have identified broad impacts of sanctions,

such as providing a clear statement of US concerns about Iran," it added.

But it said there was separate evidence that raised doubts about the reported economic impacts.

Tehran, for example, has signed energy exploration contracts with foreign companies totalling an estimated 20 billion dollars, "even though it is uncertain these contracts will be carried out," the GAO said.

It is also possible, investigators at the GAO wrote, that punished banks may use other financial institutions, or opt for currencies other than the dollar to fund their operations.

Iran is also still procuring advanced weapons components, enriching uranium, and supporting terrorism, it said.

Concluding, the GAO urged Congress to consider requiring the White House National Security Council, along with key agencies, to assess data on Iran sanctions and conduct a broad review.

US congress calls for shift in US policy towards Pakistan

AFP, Washington

The US Congress on Wednesday passed its first 2008 legislation by condemning the murder of Pakistan's ex-premier Benazir Bhutto amid a call for a shift in US policy towards Islamabad.

"What is clear is that before Pakistan devolves any further in chaos and violence, US policy has to change," Democratic lawmaker Gary Ackerman said after his resolution, which "condemns in the strongest terms" Benazir Bhutto's assassination, "was approved by a vote of 413 to 0 in the house of Representatives."

It was the first piece of legislation to be taken up and passed by Congress this year.

Ackerman said that the reliance by President George W. Bush's administration on "war on terror" ally Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to restore democracy while fighting against extremism had not worked.

"There has been neither success against terrorism nor a return to democracy," he said, as he chaired

a separate House hearing on US-Pakistan relations.

The United States, he said, needs a new approach to Pakistan that puts as much emphasis on building stable, free and moderate institutions as it has on fighting terrorists.

Ackerman, a senior member of the influential House committee on foreign affairs, cited a recent survey by the United States Institute for Peace and World Public Opinion, which showed that Pakistanis overwhelmingly view having elected leadership as important.

"The Bush Administration needs to build on the Pakistani view of the importance of democracy and needs to start by insisting that the elections on February 18 are free and fair," Ackerman said.

He also called for "a fundamental reappraisal" of US assistance to Pakistan, saying Washington has for too long provided the country's military with the bulk of its aid and "neglected" those aimed at building and strengthening democratic institutions.

The House resolution reaffirmed the US commitment to help Pakistan battle terrorism and promote democracy and backed efforts to "expeditiously bring to justice" those behind Benazir Bhutto's assassination at an election rally in Rawalpindi on December 27.

The resolution also expressed support for the freedom of the media, the ability of political parties to express their views without restriction, and the independence of the judiciary in Pakistan.

South Asian security expert Ashley Tellis cautioned at the House hearing that any post-election violence with significant fatalities as a result of military action could force Musharraf's exit.

"The potential for civil unrest and instability emerging from a flawed election in Pakistan, therefore, ought to remain the most problematic contingency from the viewpoint of the Bush administration," said Tellis from the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

UN chief lauds reduction in Iraq attacks

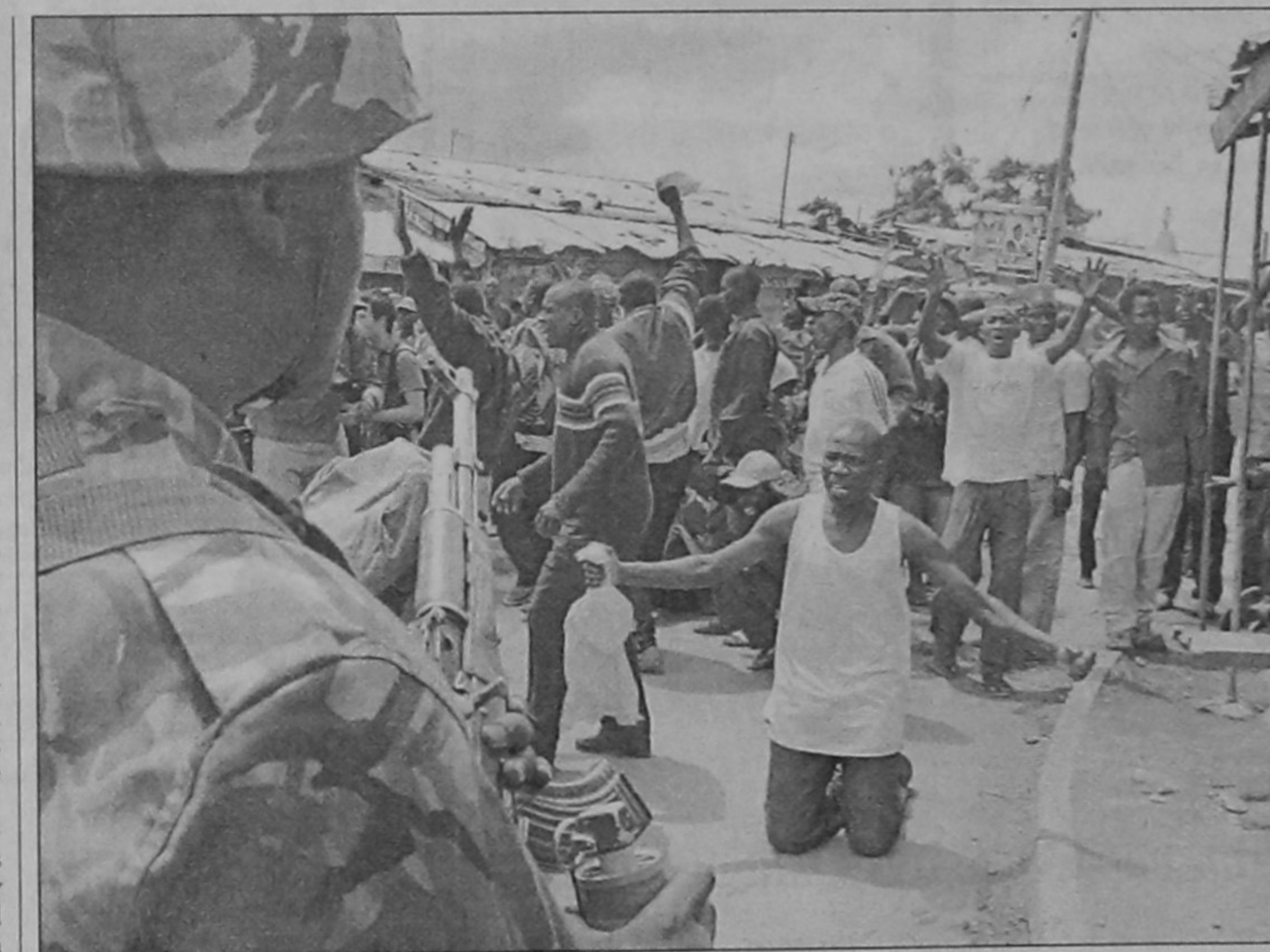
AP, United Nations

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Wednesday welcomed the reduction in attacks across Iraq and called for similar improvements in the political arena.

His report to the UN Security Council echoed the message that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice brought Iraq's leader during a visit Tuesday, warning that the cut in violence could be fleeting if the country's main groups did not reach an agreement on the future of the country.

Ban, who wrote his report prior to Rice's visit, said "the reduction in the overall number of attacks reported across Iraq is a welcome development."

But he said continued improvement in the security situation is likely to depend on engagement by Iraqi security forces and the US-led multinational force, an extension of a temporary cease-fire by radical Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, and developments related to the Awakening Councils, Sunni Arab groups that switched sides to join US forces against al-Qaeda in Iraq.



Residents of the Mathare slum of Nairobi plead for peace with Kenyan police after a lull in the clashes between supporters of Kenya's opposition leader Raila Odinga yesterday. Kenyan police shot seven people dead in a Nairobi slum Thursday in a second straight day of battles with opposition supporters protesting the re-election of President Mwai Kibaki.



Indian villagers watch as Indian health workers burn culled birds at a ground in the village of Margram, some 240 km north of Kolkata yesterday. Health officials in eastern India began the slaughter of tens of thousands of chickens, a day after New Delhi confirmed an outbreak of the deadly avian flu in the region.

India says bird flu spreading

AFP, Kolkata

India said yesterday an outbreak of bird flu was spreading in the east of the country, with the World Health Organisation warning the situation was serious.

Anisur Rahman, animal resources minister in West Bengal state, said the virus had spread to settlements around the village where the first poultry deaths came to light.

"Reports have reached (us) that hens have started dropping dead in several villages surrounding Margram. We are worried over the situation. We have sought more help from the federal government," Rahman told AFP.

Health officials are engaged in culling 400,000 birds in several districts of India's heavily populated West Bengal state bordering Bangladesh, which is also struggling with the virus.

The slaughter began after India's agriculture ministry confirmed that the deaths of an estimated 35,000 birds in West Bengal

were due to the deadly H5N1 strain. About 8,000 birds were killed Wednesday, the first day of the cull, Rahman said, adding that officials were facing resistance from bird owners.

"We have asked health workers to step up culling... The government has a target to cull 350,000 chickens in the next 10 days," he added.

The outbreak is the third in India, home to 1.1 billion people, since 2006.

But the WHO warned that this time the situation appeared more alarming.

"More serious risk factors are associated with this current outbreak than previously encountered, including that the affected areas are more widespread and because of proximity to extended border areas," the organisation said.

Still, locals in the area have said dead birds were being sold as meat. Pradip Roy, a railway employee working at Birbhum station near Margram, said villagers were crowding local markets "to buy chickens at low prices."

Kenya police kill 7 on 2nd day of clashes

AFP, Nairobi

Seven demonstrators were killed in Nairobi slums yesterday in the second day of protests against the re-election of President Mwai Kibaki, opposition leader Raila Odinga said.

Odinga said the dead included a driver for a Kenyan opposition member of parliament who was shot by police as he attempted to leave his house in the Kasarani district which includes the sprawling Mathare slum, an opposition stronghold.

Kenyan police confirmed that two people had been shot dead in Mathare and witnesses said police fired tear gas and live shots into the air to disperse hundreds of protesters in Nairobi's slums, and in the western cities of Kisumu and Eldoret.

More than 700 people have been killed in nationwide unrest since the December 27 election and the Commonwealth stepped up international pressure on Kibaki, with the group's chief Don McKinnon saying that procedures after the

vote "did not meet international standards."

Odinga, who charges that Kibaki rigged the count, called three days of demonstrations after attempts to get the two to enter talks to find a political solution failed to make headway.

Two people were killed on the first day of the protests Wednesday.

Police cracked down on protesters with guns and sticks, in a grim echo of a week of severe clashes and tribal killings sparked by the presidential poll. On top of the dead, more than a quarter of a million people have been displaced.

The opposition said it would ignore a nationwide police ban on rallies.

"The demonstrations are going on and we are neither going to be cowed or stop at anything until all our aims are achieved," opposition Orange Democratic Movement secretary general Anyang Nyong'o told AFP.

Police later fired tear gas in front of a Nairobi hotel, near a group of opposition officials.

Machines keep Suharto alive

AP, Jakarta

Former Indonesian dictator Suharto's care during his two-week hospitalisation has sparked quiet debate on end-of-life issues in this predominantly Muslim nation.

Doctors said the 86-year-old suffers from multiple organ failure, pneumonia and sepsis, a potentially lethal blood infection.

When Suharto began struggling to breathe last week, his doctors asked Health Minister Siti Fadilah Supari if he should be placed on a ventilator, to which she responded "no," let him die naturally advice the family ignored.

By early Wednesday, Suharto was starting to breathe on his own prompting doctors to decrease dependence on the machine, said Dr. Mardjo Soebandono.

When it comes to end-of-life issues in Indonesia, a country that provides no legal guidelines for doctors, religion plays a role.

Islam says all possible steps should be taken to save a dying patient, unless the risks outweigh the benefits, said Dr. Rusdy Maluoka, an Islamic ethics specialist.

US ex-congressman indicted in terror funding case

AFP, Washington

A federal grand jury on Wednesday indicted a former US lawmaker for his links to a charity that sent funds to an Afghanistan-based supporter of al-Qaeda through banks in Pakistan.

Former Republican representative Mark Delo Siljander was named in a 42-count indictment against the Missouri-based Islamic American Relief Agency (IARA), charged with "engaging in prohibited financial transactions for the benefit of US-designated terrorist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar," the US Department of Justice said in a statement.

Siljander, 57, faces money laundering, conspiracy and obstruction of justice charges in the case.

Hekmatyar is an Islamist rebel leader who received US aid in the 1980s to resist the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. He briefly served as Afghan prime minister in the 1990s and initially opposed the Taliban regime, but then switched sides after the October 2001 US-led invasion.