

Lanka troops close in on rebel town

44 combatants killed in fighting

AP, Colombo

Fighting raged across Sri Lanka's embattled north killing 44 combatants as government troops closed in on a strategic rebel-held town, the military said yesterday.

The latest gunbattles that erupted along the front lines in the northern districts of Jaffna, Mannar and Vavuniya killed 41 Tamil Tiger rebels and three soldiers on Friday, military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said.

Soldiers were just a short distance from the rebel-held town of Adampan, said Nanayakkara. Capturing Adampan would be a crucial step in the military's campaign to dismantle the rebels' de facto administration in the country's north.

Nanayakkara said 12 guerrillas and two soldiers were killed in the battle. Separate fighting across the north killed 29 guerrillas and one soldier Friday, he said.

Tamil Tiger spokesman Rasiyah Ilanthirayan could not be contacted for comment.

On Thursday, government troops attacked rebel bunkers along the northern front lines, triggering gunbattles that killed 34 rebels and one soldier, the military said.

It was not possible to independently verify the reports because of limited access to the northern jungles where the fighting took place. Both sides often inflate their opponents' casualty figures and lower their own.

Violence has spiked in this

Indian Ocean island in the past two years since a 2002 cease-fire broke down. Government troops last year drove the guerrillas from their eastern strongholds and in recent months fighting has raged around the rebels' de facto state in the north.

More than 800 people have been killed since the government announced last month that it was quitting the cease-fire, according to the military.

The Tamil Tigers have been fighting since 1983 for an independent state in the north and east for the country's ethnic Tamil minority after decades of being marginalized by Sinhalese-dominated governments. The fighting has killed more than 70,000 people.

Turkish MPs vote to ease head scarf ban

AP, Ankara

Turkey's parliament yesterday approved the first of two constitutional amendments that would lift a decades-old ban on Islamic head scarves in universities despite the fierce opposition of the secular establishment.

Parliament voted 403-107 in favor of the amendment that would insert a paragraph into the Constitution stating that everyone has the right to equal treatment from state institutions, Parliament Speaker Koksal Toptan said. Parliament planned to vote on the second and final amendment, which says "no one can be deprived of (his or her) right to higher education," later Saturday.

In predominantly Muslim Turkey, which seeks European Union membership, Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's Justice and Development Party has channeled the frustration of devout masses, who feel excluded from the establishment, into political action.



Supporters of slain Pakistani former prime minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party arrive at the party election rally in the southern coastal town of Thatta, some 110km south of Karachi yesterday.

Zardari kicks off Pak election campaign

AFP, Thatta

The widower of slain Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto hit the campaign trail Saturday for the first major party rally since the former prime minister's assassination in December.

Thousands of people were gathering at Thatta, a rural town in Benazir Bhutto's home province of Sindh, amid tight security following 40 days of mourning since she was killed in Rawalpindi.

Her successor Asif Ali Zardari vowed to complete her mission to establish democracy when mourning ended Thursday with large crowds at a ceremony around Benazir Bhutto's grave in the ancestral village of Khari Khuda Baksh.

On Saturday, more than 2,000 police deployed around the public meeting venue at Thatta following repeated warnings by the government that terrorists could target main political leaders to derail the democratic process.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) guards were also on hand to protect

the gathering to be followed by similar public meetings attended by Zardari across the country including the most populous central Punjab province.

"There is no specific militant threat for this meeting but we are not taking any chances," Thatta police chief Daud Junejo told AFP.

Banners proclaiming "long live Bhutto, democracy is the best revenge," and the tri-colour PPP flags were festooned all around the spacious ground as caravans of party supporters continued to arrive from afar.

Life-size portraits of Benazir Bhutto, who was killed on December 27 in a gun and suicide attack after an election rally in Rawalpindi city near the capital Islamabad, hung around the ground.

The meeting takes place just little more than a week before the nation goes to polls to elect a parliament and four provincial assemblies. The vote is seen as crucial to political stability in the key US ally in the war against terror.

The murder of the country's main leader stunned electioneer-

ing and sparked widespread unrest after which the elections were delayed and rescheduled for February 18.

The PPP has rejected a report released Friday by Britain's Scotland Yard police that Benazir Bhutto was killed by the force of a suicide bomb and not gunfire. The British report backed the Pakistan government's account of how she died.

Benazir Bhutto's party insists that the two-time former premier was slain by a bullet and reiterated calls for a United Nations inquiry into her murder.

Emotions have run high in Sindh, the second largest province after Punjab, since the killing of the charismatic party leader. The sentiments were echoed in Thatta by party loyalists.

"We reject this Scotland Yard report. It is influenced by Musharraf who wants to mislead the world," 32-year old labourer Maula Buksh told AFP.

A retired school teacher Jaffar Johkio said the West just wanted to save Musharraf and would go to any lengths to do so.

Scotland Yard conclusion on Benazir death 'credible', says US

AFP, Washington

The United States on Friday deemed the conclusions of Britain's Scotland Yard on the assassination of Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto "credible" and will not demand an independent inquiry.

"Certainly I understand that this is an emotional issue, both for members of her family, as well as for the many people in Pakistan who supported Benazir Bhutto," State Department spokesman Tom Casey said.

"In terms of the investigation itself by Scotland Yard, we view this as a credible investigation by independent, outside experts. ... We don't have any reason why we would question the validity of their assessment."

The British team of forensics and other experts spent two and a half weeks in Pakistan in January at the invitation of President Pervez Musharraf, following the killing of the high-profile opposition leader and former prime minister.

Scotland Yard said a lone assassin shot at Benazir Bhutto as she waved to supporters at an election rally in Rawalpindi on December 27 -- but he missed and then detonated explosives, which fatally smashed her skull against her car.

US citizenship on hold for many immigrants

AP, Washington

President Bush is asking Congress to spend money to help businesses root out illegal workers but he did not request additional funds to help legal immigrants become American citizens more quickly.

In his budget proposal issued this week, Bush asked for \$100 million to expand E-Verify, the system employers use to check whether they are hiring documented workers. He didn't ask Congress to allocate money to chip away at millions of citizenship and other immigration applications that flooded the government last summer, before an increase in the agency's filing fees.

Instead, Citizenship and Immigration Services will rely on \$468 million in fees to pay for reducing the backlog by 2010. Those funds are a portion of the total fees that came in with the applications this summer. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said the summer's fee increases will give the agency the money it needs to get back on track.

Key Lankan dissident dies in road crash

AFP, Colombo

A leading Sri Lankan dissident was killed on Saturday with two other passengers in a car crash in north-central Sri Lanka, police said.

Former minister Sripathi Sooriyarachchi died when his vehicle crashed into a tree at Thambuttegame, a police official said, adding two other passengers were also killed.

Two passengers were injured but their condition was not immediately known, police added.

"An investigation is under way and we have no reason to suspect foul play," a police official said by telephone from the area.

Sooriyarachchi along with former foreign minister Mangala Samaraweera led a breakaway faction of the ruling coalition and became one of the most vociferous critics of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

He has also accused the government of cutting a secret deal with Tamil Tiger guerrillas before the November 2005 presidential elections.

Secret evidence bogs down Guantanamo Bay hearings

AP, Guantanamo Bay Naval Base

The secrecy shrouding government files on terror suspects is bogging down the Pentagon's effort to hold trials at Guantanamo Bay, with defence attorneys accusing the government of withholding potential evidence.

At pretrial hearings this week, attorneys for two al-Qaeda suspects captured in Afghanistan said they need more access to interrogators, witnesses and records. Prosecutors objected, citing a need to protect the identities of US service members and other security concerns.

The hearings did not resolve the disputes, which appear likely to further delay the launch of first US war-crime tribunals since the World War II era. The first detainees were charged more than three years ago, but repeated legal challenges have kept any from going to trial.

Kenyan rivals set sights on deal in coming days

AFP, Nairobi

Kenya's feuding factions on Saturday prepared for crucial negotiations to hammer out details of a deal that Kofi Annan said could be achieved in the coming days, bringing an end to weeks of bloodshed.

Annan raised hopes of a breakthrough in the dispute over who won the presidential election in December when he announced on Friday that a political settlement could emerge "by early next week."

Negotiators for President Mwai Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga on Saturday met separately to finetune their positions before talks resume under former UN chief Annan on Monday, said Mutula Kilonzo, a government negotiator.

"What we need is what one can call a political arrangement. We need transitional mechanisms which include constitutional, legal and institutional reforms," Kilonzo told AFP.

Obama leads Hillary by only 2 delegates

AP, Washington

Three days after the voting ended, the race for Democratic delegates in Super Tuesday's contests was still too close to call.

With nearly 1,600 delegates from Tuesday contests awarded, Sen Barack Obama led by two delegates Friday night, with 91 delegates still to be awarded. Obama won 796 delegates in Tuesday's contests, to 794 for Sen Hillary Rodham Clinton, according to an analysis of voting results by The Associated Press.

In the Republican contest, Sen John McCain had a commanding lead in the race for delegates.

Nearly a third of the outstanding delegates are from Colorado, a state where Obama won the popular vote. California, a state that Clinton carried, had 20 Democratic delegates still to be awarded. Neither state expected to have complete results before next week.

Obama won the popular vote in 13 states Tuesday, while Clinton won in eight states and American Samoa.

In the overall race for the nomination, Clinton has 1,055 delegates, including separately chosen party and elected officials known as superdelegates. Obama has 998.

A total of 2,025 delegates are needed to secure the Democratic

nomination.

Many delegates were outstanding because some states have been unable to provide all the votes in some congressional districts. The problems arose in states with counties that are split into multiple congressional districts.

The states have provided results in each county. But in some cases, they are still working to assign the votes in the appropriate congressional district.

Those votes are important because both parties award delegates based on statewide votes and on results in individual congressional districts. Democrats award them proportionally, meaning precise counts can be necessary, even when the vote is overwhelmingly in favour of one candidate.

In California, officials were still counting absentee ballots Friday. Officials had estimated that more than 1 million absentee ballots may have been submitted.

In Tuesday's Republican contests, McCain won 617 delegates to 205 for former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, who suspended his campaign on Thursday. Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee won 155 and Rep. Ron Paul won 10. There are still 36 Republican delegates to be awarded from Tuesday's contests.



Supporters listen as Illinois Senator and Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama addresses a crowd of more than 18,000 during a rally at the Key Arena on Friday in Seattle, Washington.

Iran to hold talks with US on Iraq next week

AFP, Tehran

Iran and the United States are to launch a new round of talks on the future of war-ravaged Iraq next week in Baghdad, an Iranian official told student news agency ISNA yesterday.

"These discussions will take place by the end of next week," said the official who requested anonymity.

"The structure of these discussions has been finalised but the level of participation has not yet been agreed," he said.

Iran wants the meeting to be held between ambassadors but the US prefers it to be a meeting of experts, the official added.

On Friday, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said new talks between the two countries would be held after February 11, the anniversary of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution.

There was no immediate confirmation from Baghdad or Washington.

Tehran had requested a meeting with Washington to discuss Iraq's security but the talks, scheduled for December 18, were postponed, without a new date being set.

The next meeting aims to explore ways of reducing violence in Iraq, and is expected to bring together diplomats, security experts and the military.

US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and his Iranian counterpart Hassan Kazemi Qomi previously met in Baghdad last May and July.

Washington, which broke off diplomatic relations with Tehran after the 1979 revolution, accuses Iran of sending weapons to Iraq and funding Iraqi Shia extremist groups.

Iran denies any involvement in violence in Iraq and believes that the withdrawal of American troops is the first step to a restoration of security in the country.

Relations between the two countries hit a low in January after a standoff in the Strait of Hormuz between US warships and Iranian gunboats.

Failure in Afghanistan would threaten Europe: Gates

AFP, Munich

Failure in Afghanistan would directly threaten European security, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates warned Friday as he sought to mobilise NATO allies and more especially public opinion in Europe.

Gates, who arrived in this southern German city to attend an international security conference, said he would seek to convince reluctant Europeans of the need to send reinforcements to fight the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

"Afghanistan not only was the source of attacks against the United States in 2001, but it is clear that al-Qaeda and others in this area have played a role in these attacks that have taken place in Europe, so this is a direct security threat to Europe," said Gates.

"Part of my speech at the secu-

urity conference will be oriented at Europeans, not their governments, in an effort to try to explain why their security is tied to success in Afghanistan," where Nato has deployed some 40,000 men, Gates said.

Fresh from talks in Vilnius with fellow Nato defence ministers, he said he would also seek to convince Europeans that the Afghan threat was more serious than that from Iraq.

"I worry that for many Europeans the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan are confused. I think that they (the Europeans) combine the two, many of them have a problem with our involvement in Iraq and project that to Afghanistan and don't understand the very different kind of threat," he said.

The United States has deployed 160,000 soldiers in Iraq and 28,000 in Afghanistan.



Iranian opposition members hold a sign which reads "No Nuke To The Mullahs" take part in a protest at the international security conference taking place yesterday in Munich, southern Germany. The 44th Munich Conference on Security Policy running from February 8 to 10, 2008 is themed "The World in Disarray - Shifting Powers - Lack of Strategies".

Time running out for Indian nuclear deal

Says US envoy

AFP, New Delhi

The US ambassador to India has warned New Delhi it could be now or never for the controversial India-US nuclear technology deal, saying it was unlikely to be offered again.

US ambassador David Mulford's language was some of the toughest yet by a US representative about delays in India's clearance of the deal which would give New Delhi crucial access to civilian atomic technology.

In a television interview aired on Saturday, he called the agreement India's "passport to the world," adding its collapse would "affect the trust and discretion" in Indo-US relations.

"If this agreement is not processed in the present (US) Congress it is unlikely that this deal will be offered again to India," Mulford told CNN-IBN.

Asked whether it was "now or maybe never" for the deal, Mulford replied, "That's pretty close to it."

The deal -- first agreed by US President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005 -- is regarded by the governments of the two nations as

a cornerstone of new, warmer Indo-US ties.

But Indian communists have threatened to withdraw backing for the minority Congress government if it goes ahead with the pact without their approval.

They say the accord threatens India's nuclear weapons programme and could allow US intervention in its foreign policy. India's government rejects the claims and says the deal is needed to provide new fuel sources to keep energy-hungry India's economy growing strongly.

Under the accord, India will separate its civilian and military programmes and place 14 of its 22 nuclear plants under unprecedented international safeguards in return for civilian nuclear technology.

Washington, in return, has promised to amend the US Atomic Energy Act which prevents the United States from trading nuclear technology with nations such as India that have not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The deal will enable India to keep its military programme while still benefiting from international

civilian nuclear commerce.

India tested nuclear weapons in 1974 and 1998 and, as a result, is banned from buying fuel for atomic reactors and related equipment.

The pact still needs approval from the International Atomic Energy Agency to place India's civilian nuclear reactors under UN safeguards and the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, which regulates global civilian nuclear trade.

Afterwards the agreement requires final approval by the US Congress where it currently enjoys bipartisan support.

But Washington officials say the deal is running out of time with a tight 2008 legislative calendar ahead of November's US presidential elections and that the ball is in India's court to move it along.

"It certainly would not be revived and offered by any administration, Democratic or Republican before the year 2010," Mulford said. "If it were to be revived it would have to go through the Committee process and I think non-proliferation groups would insist on changes."



Residents of El Pantanal neighbourhood in Trinidad, province of Beni, some 1,300km northeast of La Paz, attempt to recover some of their belongings from their flooded houses on February 8, 2008. The death toll from heavy flooding that has inundated parts of Bolivia since November has risen to 49, with 42,000 families affected by the disaster.