

Turkey presses offensive in northern Iraq

US asks Ankara to wrap up military incursion, rebels claim downing Turkish attack helicopter

AFP, AP, Cizre, Turkey

Fighting intensified Sunday between Turkish troops and Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq, amid US calls for Turkey to wrap up its military incursion in the region as swiftly as possible.

Explosions and gunfire were reported in and around Hakurk, a stronghold of the rebel Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), some 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the Turkish border.

More than a dozen Turkish warplanes could be seen heading for the area.

The PKK said Sunday it had shot down a Turkish attack helicopter, but there was no independent confirmation.

Turkish troops, backed by air support, moved into northern Iraq on Thursday evening in the largest cross-border offensive in years against PKK hideouts.

The United States cautioned its NATO ally that military measures

alone could not resolve the Kurdish problem and stressed that the incursion needed to be completed as quickly as possible.

"The shorter the better," US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said Sunday.

Gates, who is due in Ankara next week, also urged Turkey to pursue political and economic measures that would win over its sizeable Kurdish community and erode popular support for the rebels.

"Just using the military techniques are not going to be sufficient to solve the problems," Gates said during a visit to Canberra.

The United States is providing its NATO ally with real-time intelligence on PKK movements.

At least 79 PKK fighters and seven soldiers have been killed and many rebel hideouts destroyed since Thursday, according to the Turkish military.

The PKK said 45 soldiers had been killed.

The Firat news agency, considered to be a PKK mouthpiece,

reported air raids and fighting Sunday in the Zap area to the west and said about 5,000 Turkish soldiers and 60 tanks were advancing in nearby Haftanin, close to the border town of Zaho.

The Turkish army released pictures from the offensive, showing soldiers in white camouflage cloaks taking aim at unseen targets in snow-covered hills.

A senior PKK leader, Bahoz Erdal, called on Kurds across Turkey, especially those living in urban areas, to rise up in response to the offensive.

"If they want to wipe us out, our youths should make life in the cities unbearable," Firat quoted Erdal as saying. "Kurdish youths should unite... and burn hundreds of cars every night."

Erdal also slammed the United States and Iraqi Kurds for helping Turkey.

"US reconnaissance planes are overflying the region. They instantly convey to the Turkish army information about the position of our

forces and then Turkish warplanes come and bomb," he said.

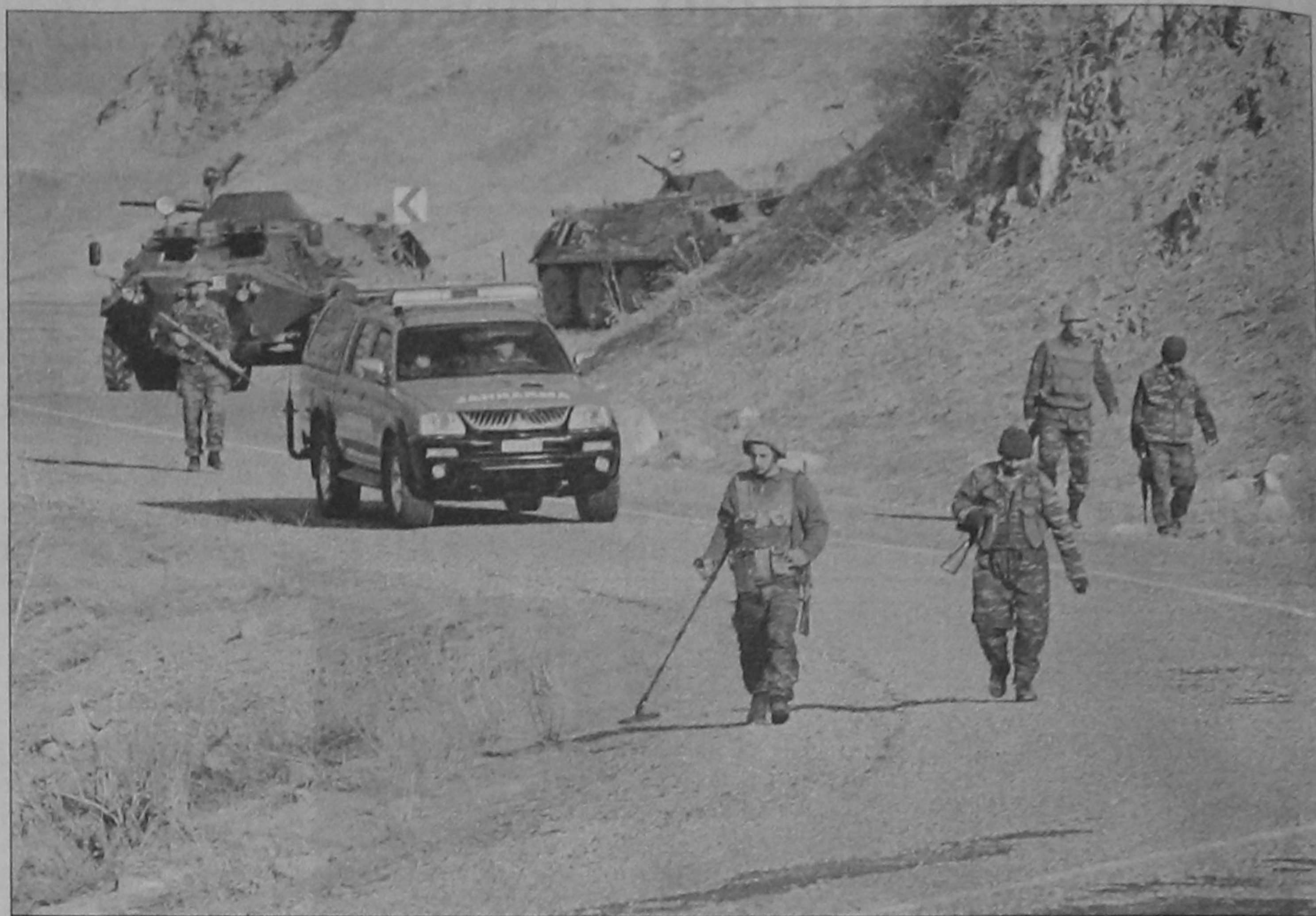
He accused Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, also a Kurd, of having "invited" the Turkish army to the Qandil mountains along the Iraqi-Iranian border, where some of PKK's main camps are located.

The Qandil mountains were among the targets of air raids Saturday, according to Turkey's semi-official Anatolia news agency.

Despite earlier protests, Iraq's government spokesman said Sunday that Baghdad accepted the Turkish offensive posed no threat to its territorial integrity.

"We do not find these operations as an attack on Iraq's sovereignty... But we have told Turkey that the operation should not destabilise Iraq and the region," Ali al-Dabbagh told AFP.

Gates urged Ankara to be more open with Baghdad and Kurdish regional authorities about its plans after Iraq complained that it had only been informed of the operation "at the last minute".



Turkish soldiers patrol a road near the Turkey-Iraq border in the mainly Kurdish southeastern province of Sirnak yesterday. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) slammed Sunday the United States and Iraqi Kurds for helping Turkey in a major offensive against the separatist group in northern Iraq.



Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) president and Chief Minister of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh Mayawati (C) waves as she is garlanded by party officials during a rally in New Delhi yesterday.

Hitler, Frankenstein fight it out in Indian state polls

AFP, Shillong

When politician Adolf Lu Hitler-Marak stands for election in an Indian hill state next month, even he may have a tough time standing out in a field of the most unusually named candidates.

Politician and school teacher Frankenstein Momin is also hoping not to scare away the voters in Meghalaya, especially when faced with competition from more benign-sounding candidates such as Hilarious Pochen and Billykid Sangma.

The state in India's remote northeast goes to the polls on March 3, with more than 331 candidates jostling for around 60 seats in the assembly in the state capital Shillong.

Looking for re-election in his seat is Zenith Sangma, and also trying to outshine their rivals are Celestine Lyngdoh, Starling Jove Langpen Pdhakaseij, Edstar Lyngdoh Nongbri and Moonlight Pariat.

Romeo Phira Rani and Darling Wavel Lamare are also

busy trying to seduce the electorate, while Bison Paslen is locking horns with his rivals in Sutnga Shangpung constituency.

Forward Lyngdoh Mawlong is leading the charge in his constituency, while Admiral K Sangma is also setting sail for battle -- as are H Britainwar Dan and Bombersingh.

Meghalaya is one of three northeastern Indian states voting over the next fortnight.

With a population of 2.3 million, the state is a predominantly Christian area with Khasi as the main language.

English is spoken, but not very fluently -- so people often name their children after words and famous people they have little familiarity with or understanding about.

"Often they don't know the background of the names. They get attracted to exquisite names," said the conservatively named David Reid Syiemlieh, a professor of history at the North Eastern Hill University in Shillong.

Fate of ousted judges hangs over Pakistan

Pak coalition may woo Musharraf allies

AP, AFP, Islamabad

Days after opposition parties triumphed in elections, lawyers chanting for President Pervez Musharraf's resignation were tugging at the barricades around the home of the judge whose ouster and house arrest helped trigger Pakistan's political crisis.

The newly elected leaders are already under pressure to reinstate Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry and his fellow sacked judges on the Supreme Court. It's one of several urgent issues that will determine the future not only of the US-backed president, but also of a new government's effort to rebuild the country's battered democracy.

"Restoring the judges would put a bomb under Musharraf," said Nazir Naji, a commentator for Jang, Pakistan's top-selling newspaper. "He cannot afford to let this happen."

Voters delivered a thumping defeat to Musharraf's allies in Monday's parliamentary election, and enabled the victorious parties of slain opposition leader Benazir Bhutto and another former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, to announce that they would work together in a new government.

They owe much of their success to public anger at Musharraf's crackdown on the judiciary. But they are divided on whether to reseat the judges. Sharif wants it to happen quickly. Asif Ali Zardari, Benazir's widower and political successor, sounds cautious.

"Serious disagreement on this would be a real danger to the coalition," said political commentator Shafiqat Mahmood. "It is a make-or-break issue."

Yet bringing back axed judges would set up an ugly confrontation with Musharraf and plunge the country back into political turmoil. The former army strongman,

who has resisted calls to resign as president, suspended the independent-minded Chaudhry on March 9 last year on charges of misconduct.

Meanwhile the party of Pakistan's slain former premier Benazir Bhutto said yesterday it may woo President Pervez Musharraf's allies to join a coalition government that could drive the former general from power.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which won the most seats in last week's election and has teamed up with the party of ex-premier Nawaz Sharif, say they are considering working with the Karachi-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM).

If a PPP-led coalition manages to muster a two-thirds majority in parliament, it could seek to remove Musharraf, either by impeaching him or having his election as president last year declared illegal.

3 killed in Lankan suicide blast

AFP, Colombo

Three people were killed in an apparent suicide attack in Sri Lanka's restive east yesterday while security forces threw a blanket of security over the capital to prevent new attacks, officials said.

A suspected Tiger suicide bomber riding a motorcycle crashed into another motorbike carrying two rival militants in Batticaloa district 300km east of Colombo.

"One man detonated the explosive immediately after crashing into the other bike, killing all three of them," a local military official told AFP by telephone.

The two victims were from a Tamil Tiger breakaway faction that is contesting local polls on March 10.

In Colombo on Sunday, police and other security forces launched a major security sweep a day after a parcel bomb aboard a private bus exploded, leaving at least 18 people wounded.

Ten men, seven women and a child were admitted to hospital after suffering minor injuries in the blast in Mount Lavinia, 10km south of Colombo, police said.

Manmohan govt looks at April deadline for N-deal

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

As the clock ticks away for the nuclear deal with the US, the Indian government is planning to conclude a safeguards pact with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) latest by mid-March and has set itself an April-end deadline to force the issue with its Left allies which are determined to thwart the deal.

Top Indian nuclear officials will hold the fifth round of talks with the IAEA later this month with a view to wrapping up the India-specific safeguards pact. The pact aims at ensuring uninterrupted fuel supply for civilian reactors India will place under safeguards and the right to take corrective action in case the fuel supply is interrupted.

It is taking longer than expected

as the IAEA standard template does not apply to India, which has nuclear weapons but has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and yet desires to join global civil nuclear commerce.

Moreover, the IAEA is not a supplier of fuel and, therefore, cannot act as a guarantor of fuel supply. "The safeguards pact itself may take some more time, may be another couple of rounds, but it will eventually be done well in time by mid-March. The real point is when the government decides to take a political call on when to force the issue with the Left," a top government source told IANS.

"This has nothing to do with any deadline set by the US. If the Left issue is not resolved by April, then the deal is as good as gone," the source said, requesting anonymity because of the sensitivity involved.

In case of a continuing standoff, there are two options before the government: put the deal on hold and continue with the status quo or call the Left's bluff by seeking a confidence vote in parliament.

The first option, which means the suspension of the deal, is a more likely scenario with most political parties, including the constituents of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA), not in favour of early elections.

The latter option entails putting the very survival of the government on the line if the opposition to the deal expressed by an overwhelming number of MPs in parliament in the past two years is anything to go by.

What can, however, work in the government's favour are strategic abstentions by UPA constituents and even some of the main opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the source said.

ICC vows to bring Darfur war criminals to justice

AFP, The Hague

Nine months after the first arrest warrants were issued for those suspected of being behind atrocities in Sudan's Darfur region, the chief international prosecutor believes he has the masterminds in his sights.

International Criminal Court prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo has vowed to target the most senior people behind the violence and says that peace will only be possible in troubled Darfur if arrests are made and those responsible are brought to justice.

He issued a warrant last May for the arrest of Sudan's secretary of state for humanitarian affairs Ahmed Harun, but despite a UN resolution requiring Khartoum to comply with the court Harun is still at large.

EU pulls out of divided Kosovo city

AFP, Pristina

The European Union has withdrawn staff from a divided Kosovo city following violent protests by the Serb minority, an EU envoy said Saturday as Russia warned Kosovo's independence could increase terrorism.

The EU staff in the northern city of Mitrovica have been preparing a 2,000 strong EU police-judicial mission in Kosovo after its declaration of independence, which has been rejected by the Serbian government and Kosovo Serbs.

"We have temporarily brought back our personnel, but we will maintain our office in the north," EU envoy Peter Feith told reporters in the northern Kosovo town of Prizren.

He did not give details on the numbers involved but added: "We hope that conditions will soon allow us to resume our activities" in northern Kosovo.

Mitrovica, where there are 80,000 Albanians in the south of the city and 20,000 Serbs in the north, has become a symbol of Kosovo's ethnic tensions.

The Serbian government and the Serb minority that remains in Kosovo oppose the EU mission. Just before the independence proclamation, an explosion went off near the building housing the EU preparatory team in Mitrovica. Kosovo Serbs in the north have been protesting ever since Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia Sunday.

Russia has also strongly opposed Kosovo's independence and blamed the West's support to the breakaway province for violent unrest in Belgrade this week targeting the US and European embassies.

A top aide to Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday said that Kosovo's move would strengthen terrorist forces.

Castro rejects idea of political change

AP, Havana

Fidel Castro on Saturday rejected the idea of major political change after Cuba's parliament chooses a new president, his final published comments as the nation's longtime leader.

The article on the front page of the Communist Party newspaper Granma was one of a flurry of recent columns and announcements from Castro, who is retiring after 49 years as head of Cuba.

Writing under his new title, "Comrade Fidel," the 81-year-old Castro scoffed at suggestions in news reports that his retirement, announced Tuesday, would lead to political changes aided by Cuban exiles in the United States.

"The reality is otherwise," Castro wrote. He quoted approvingly from other articles that said his retirement showed the failure of US officials to affect Cuba's political transition.

Castro said he would now lay his

pen aside until lawmakers decide Sunday on his replacement as president of the island's supreme governing authority, the Council of State. Castro's 76-year-old brother Raul, the defence minister, is his constitutional designated successor as first vice president, and is widely expected to be named president.

The younger Castro has headed Cuba's caretaker government for 19 months, since Fidel announced he had undergone emergency intestinal surgery and was provisionally ceding his powers.

In a separate report, Granma said "all the conditions have been created" for Sunday's meeting of the 614-member parliament, whose members were elected on Jan. 20. Renewed every five years, the parliament known as the National Assembly is charged at its first gathering with selecting a new 31-member Council of State headed by the president.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Lankan war outcome appears as uncertain as ever

AFP, Colombo

The battle lines are clearly drawn in Sri Lanka with the government vowing to finish off the Tamil rebels, but after decades of bloodshed a final outcome appears as uncertain as ever.

While politicians from President Mahinda Rajapakse down have buried a truce deal and promised to wipe out the "terrorists," the military is now scaling down the rhetoric.

"Most definitely, we can say that we are winning," army spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara told AFP.

"But we have never said that we will finish them off. We have never set deadlines. We are fighting a terrorist organisation, not a conventional war."

The army has pushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) out of the east of the island and gone on the offensive in the north in the past year.

But military sources say that the attacks on three fronts against rebel-held territory have failed to produce a breakthrough.

"We can weaken them," the brigadier said. "The more we weaken them, then the more they will come into negotiations. It is not possible to wipe them out."

Army chief Sarath Fonseka renewed the rallying cry this month as the government ruled out any peace talks and offered instead a unilateral settlement, but he too sounded far less gung-ho than previously.

"I don't conduct the war looking at deadlines and timeframes," the

lieutenant general said. "Can a war that has been going on for more than 25 years be completed by March?"

But Fonseka had repeatedly given deadlines before, claiming the war would be won by mid-2008. Senior defence officials have also boasted that LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran will soon be dead, if he is not already.

And there is confusion over casualty figures. The defence ministry releases daily death tolls suggesting the army is on a victory march, although physical evidence of rebel corpses is usually missing.

The thousands of rebels declared dead in the past two years would amount to the total annihilation of the LTTE, according to the military's own intelligence estimates.

Fonseka corrected himself on the numbers of LTTE combatants on February 10, noting the LTTE had 5,000, or 2,000 more than he had announced in December.

Massaging the figures may just be part of the propaganda war targeting a domestic audience long since weary of the separatist conflict that has left tens of thousands dead since 1972.

Commentators certainly suspect that is so. The only picture of what happens on the battlefield comes from the government, which blocks non-military access to rebel territory.

Military sources note that while the army announces repeated offensives leaving high numbers of enemy dead, on the ground the rebels melt away under attack and the army pulls back when real resistance is encountered.



A Sri Lankan army soldier (R) checks the identity card of a bus passenger at a terminus in Colombo yesterday, the day after a bomb blast inside a bus on the outskirts of the capital as part of a tight security clampdown in anticipation of continued Tamil rebel attacks.

Uganda signs permanent truce with LRA rebels

AFP, Kampala

The Ugandan government said it had signed a permanent ceasefire accord with the Lord's Resistance Army rebel group on Saturday, a landmark step in efforts to end more than two decades of civil war.

Government delegation spokesman Captain Chris Magezi called the accord a "another major breakthrough" in effort to end conflict which has left tens of thousands dead and displace two million.

"This agreement is an important landmark and a turning point," Magezi told AFP. "This is a demonstration by both parties of their determination to work towards expeditious signing of the Final Peace Agreement," or the final overall accord.

The truce will take effect 24 hours after the signing of the final accord, which both sides hope will take place in the coming days.