

Fighting grips Lanka as troops up offensive

34 combatants killed in clashes, Tamil civilians asked to cross over to govt controlled areas

AFP, PTI, Colombo

Government forces and Tamil Tiger separatists fought heavy battles in northern Sri Lanka with another 34 combatants killed in fresh clashes, the defence ministry said Friday.

Troops encountered stiff resistance from the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as troops tried to move deeper into rebel territory, defence officials said.

The ministry said 30 rebels were killed and another 27 wounded in fighting since Thursday, while security forces lost four soldiers killed and another 14 wounded.

The latest casualty figures raise the number of rebels reported killed by troops since January to 6,363. The ministry says 613 soldiers were killed during the same period.

The figures cannot be independently verified.

The military wants to dismantle the Tigers' de facto mini-state by capturing the town of Kilinochchi, 330 kilometres (200 miles) north of Colombo. Government troops were said to be within striking distance.

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The military on Wednesday evening accepted the bodies of 19 soldiers killed by the Tigers during this week's fighting that saw security forces capture the strategic town of Mallavai from the rebels.

The defence ministry described the capture of Mallavai as "one more decisive and impressive phase" in its campaign to defeat the Tigers, who have fought for decades for a homeland for minority Tamils in

island's north and east.

However, the state-run Daily News said Friday the guerrillas offered stiff resistance and both troops and the Tigers suffered damages on "equal terms".

"More fierce battles are expected as troops close in on Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu," the paper said, adding the Tigers could offer stiff resistance "for weeks, but not for months".

He told the Tamil population that the army would ensure their safe passage. Rajapaksa's offer came as his military continued its push to the LTTEs headquarters of Kilinochchi and nearby Mullaitivu.

The government forces are encountering stiff resistance from the Tigers who have deployed all their resources to guard their political capital of Kilinochchi, further north.

The ethnic Sinhalese-dominated government has asked tens of thousands of Tamil civilians

living in rebel territory to cross over to government-held areas in the island's north to avoid getting caught up in the crossfire.

As the Lankan forces moved deeper into the rebel Tamil Tigers stronghold of Kilinochchi, the Country's President Mahinda Rajapaksa has asked civilians in LTTE controlled areas to cross-over to government controlled areas.

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"The recovery of the domestic economy and clearing the unease of the people, these are the things we have to address in the election," Aso told reporters Friday.

Aso's candidacy for the Sept. 22 election in the Liberal Democratic Party was widely expected.

Aso announces bid to lead Japan's ruling party

AP, Tokyo

Japan's brash, right-leaning former foreign minister announced Friday that he would run for ruling party president in a move that would put him on track to take over as Japan's next prime minister.

Taro Aso, 67, is widely considered the front-runner to replace struggling Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, who announced Monday that he would step down amid sagging poll numbers and troubles with the split parliament.

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PHOTO: AFP

Georgian Tariel Basishvili, who claims to be the last Georgian in South Ossetia, walks past Russian troops on an armoured personnel carrier (APC) and destroyed buildings in Kurta, 20km north of Tskhinvali yesterday. Russian soldiers transported Basishvili to Gori upon his request so he could make his way to his son in Tbilisi.

EU ministers in show of unity over Georgia conflict

US draws Russian flak over aid ship

AFP, Avignon/ Tbilisi

EU foreign ministers travelled together via high-speed train from Paris to Avignon yesterday in a show of unity over the Georgia crisis ahead of crucial trip to Moscow by French president Nicolas Sarkozy.

Twenty-six of the 27 European

Union foreign ministers were to arrive in Avignon, southern France, via rail from the French capital with only their Italian counterpart Franco Frattini deciding to travel separately.

"Unity is not a question," French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency, told reporters on the train.

"But you can't expect that I would be surprised about attacks from Republicans."

Obama also made clear that despite declaring Palin's family and her 17-year-old daughter's pregnancy off limits, he would not hesitate to pick over her record as Alaska governor and a small town mayor.

"The notion that any questions

about her work in Alaska is somehow relevant to her potentially being vice president of the United States doesn't make too much sense to me," Obama said.

Democrats who criticized Palin have already been accused of sexism by the McCain camp, and the Obama campaign is familiar with the perils of gender in politics following the bruising primary duel with Hillary Clinton.

"I anticipated this last Thursday in my acceptance speech," Obama said in York, Pennsylvania, when asked if he had been surprised at the vehemence of Palin's broadsides.

"They don't have an agenda to run on. They haven't offered a single concrete idea so far in two nights about how they would make the lives of middle class Americans better."

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personal attacks on Palin, who was basking in rockstar treatment in the US media, trying instead to turn the focus onto her political record and Republican policies.

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