

Tigers flee to jungle as troops advance

Many civilians killed in Lanka clashes: UN

AFP, AP, Colombo

Sri Lankan government troops yesterday pushed into the last pockets of jungle still held by the Tamil Tigers after capturing the rebels' last urban stronghold and military headquarters.

Soldiers overran Mullaitivu, a north-eastern coastal town held by the Tigers for a decade, on Sunday -- three weeks after taking Kilinochchi, where the rebels had their own courts, police force and a bank.

Army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) now controlled just a "small strip" of land in the northeast and were completely cornered.

"We have cleared 95 percent of the work (to defeat the Tigers)," Fonseka said, as the island's government expressed confidence it would soon win one of Asia's longest-running civil wars after a massive military offensive.

"The end of terrorism is near and we will definitely win," Fonseka said.

Helicopter gunships attacked Tiger positions outside Mullaitivu after troops had taken control of the town, the defence ministry said in its latest update.

There has been no comment from the rebels, and the battlefield claims cannot be verified as independent journalists are barred from travelling to the conflict zone. The United Nations said Monday that

"many" civilians have been killed in recent fighting in Sri Lanka's civil war and said the situation for thousands of displaced people trapped in the northern conflict zone had become a crisis.

With the war zone shrinking and a huge population of civilians in the area, the situation has grown desperate in recent days, UN resident coordinator Neil Bhune told The Associated Press on Monday.

"There have been many civilians killed over the last two days," he said. "It's really a crisis now."

Bhune said that until recently both sides have worked hard to avoid civilian casualties.

Bicycle bomb kills 5 in northwest Pakistan

AP, Dera Ismail Khan

A bomb rigged to a bicycle exploded in a northwest Pakistani city yesterday, killing at least five people and wounding 20 others in the latest attack to rattle the volatile region, police said.

The explosion occurred on a major road in Dera Ismail Khan, and most of the victims were either walking by the parked bicycle or travelling in nearby vehicles, area police chief Saeed Ullah said.

Dera Ismail Khan lies in a region that neighbours the Waziristan tribal areas, where Taliban and al-Qaeda militants have strong sway and where the US frequently strikes with missiles from across the border in Afghanistan.



Members of the non-governmental organization Oxfam protest outside the venue of the High Level Conference on World Food Security in Madrid yesterday. Representatives from 95 countries are taking part in this two-day meeting hosted in Madrid and co-sponsored by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and Spain.

Israel vows to back soldiers accused of war crimes

AP, Jerusalem

Special legal teams will defend Israeli soldiers against potential war crimes charges stemming from civilian deaths in the Gaza Strip, the prime minister said Sunday, promising the country would fully back those who fought in the three-week offensive.

The move reflected growing concerns by Israel that officers could be subject to international prosecution, despite the army's claims that Hamas militants caused the civilian casualties by staging attacks from residential areas.

"The state of Israel will fully back those who acted on its behalf," Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said. "The soldiers and commanders who were sent on missions in Gaza must know that they are safe from various tribunals."

Speaking at the weekly Cabinet meeting, Olmert said Israel's justice minister would lead a team of senior officials to coordinate the legal defence of anyone involved in the offensive.

"That decision is not going to prevent all these organisations and countries to pursue their efforts through legal means," Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki said at talks with European Union foreign ministers in Brussels. "So there is no immunity even if the decision was taken by the Israeli government."

Malki is a member of moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' government, whose authority extends only to the West Bank after rival Hamas violently took over Gaza in 2007.

Israel launched its 22-day offensive to try to halt Hamas rocket fire on southern Israel. The assault killed 1,285 Palestinians, more than half of them civilians, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights counted. Thirteen Israelis, including three civilians, were also killed.

At talks Sunday in Cairo aimed at solidifying the truce, Hamas official Ayman Taha said the Islamic group offered a one-year truce to Israel, including the reopening of border crossings to allow vital supplies into Gaza. He said

Israel offered an 18-month truce, which Hamas rejected. Israeli officials refused to comment.

A low-level delegation from Abbas' West Bank government was also in Cairo for talks, but was not expected to meet with Hamas.

The European Union, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey appealed to Hamas and the Palestinian Authority to form a unity government.

Israel and Hamas are bitter enemies and do not talk to each other, relying instead on Egyptian mediation.

In addition to the civilian death toll, Israel has faced international criticism for its use of white phosphorus, and for shelling attacks that struck United Nations schools and installations that were serving as shelters.

Although the use of phosphorous weapons to light up the night or to create smoke screens masking troops is permitted by international law, Amnesty International has accused Israel of committing a war crime by firing the munitions in densely populated areas.

Ill-gotten wealth

FROM PAGE 1

Jesmin Anwar found Babu guilty of amassing Tk 13.85 crore through illegal means and concealing information of wealth worth Tk 1.2 crore to Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC).

Of the total ill-gotten wealth, Babu accumulated wealth worth over Tk 6.24,61,292 illegally and amassed Tk 7,60,31,000 beyond his real source of income. He had also concealed wealth information of Tk 1,27,94,453 to the ACC.

Babu was also fined Tk 15 lakh in default of which he will have to serve two and a half years' jail term more. The court also ordered the illegally amassed wealth to be confiscated.

He was jailed for three years

and fined Tk five lakh for hiding wealth information and another 10 years with a fine of Tk 10 lakh for amassing illegal wealth. The punishment would run consecutively.

The ACC served a notice upon Babu to submit his wealth statement on October 18, 2007, but he sent a letter by post from Malaysia instead.

The court earlier recorded statements of 21 prosecution witnesses, including complainant of the case.

An advertisement was also published asking Babu to surrender before the court to face trial, but he did not comply with the court order.

Earlier, the court had also issued an arrest warrant against Babu and ordered to

attach his properties.

The court handed down the sentence in his absence and his punishment would take effect from the day he is arrested or surrenders to the court.

ACC Assistant Director Farid Ahmed Patwary, also the investigation officer (IO) of the case, submitted the charge sheet before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka, showing 39 people as prosecution witnesses November 2 last year.

ACC Deputy Director Sharmin Ferdousy filed the case against Babu with Ramna Police Station on April 29 last year. Special Public Prosecutor Syed Mizanur Rahman represented the state before the court.

Nepal bans dowry system

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist Prime Minister Prachanda on Sunday banned the dowry system and criminalised caste-based discrimination in a bid to win public support for his faltering government.

In a thirty-minute national televised address, the prime minister expressed dissatisfaction over his government's performance and called on all parties to forge a new political understanding.

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