Hospital kept at bay

FROM PAGE 1

Media firms, BNP leaders and former lawmakers Nasiruddin Ahmed Pintu, Ali Asghar Lobi and Major (retd) Hafiz Ibrahim have been occupying the land in Tejgaon Industrial Zone. A number of them developed establishments on the land but many removed their signboards to hide identity.

Ignoring the original plan for the 150-bed Tejgaon Health Complex, the BNP-Jamaat alliance government distributed the plots on 99 years' lease.

"We have asked the housing and public works ministry to take necessary steps in this regard but we are yet to get any response," said an official of the health and family welfare ministry.

Deputy Secretary of the housing ministry Md Abdul Malek said records and files are being scrutinised for taking action as per rules.

According to the probe report submitted on June 18 last year, the housing and public works ministry illegally leased the land out to BNP-Jamaat loyalists taking advantage of the health ministry's indifference to the land.

The plots were allotted at Tk 30 lakh per bigha between 2002 and 2006 while the market price was around Tk 50 lakh to Tk 1 crore per katha.

Health ministry sources said the 25 bighas of land was acquired in 1973 to construct the health complex and a rehab centre and the land was under the ministry's possession. The hospital, an administrative building, residential buildings for doctors and class III-IV employees, water pumps, roads, gardens and open space for amusement were supposed to be constructed on the land.

The probe body headed by the then health ministry deputy secretary Kazi Meraz Hossain said the public works ministry acquired the land in 1973 for the health ministry and a clinic was constructed on a section of it. However, the health ministry did not feel the necessity to take the land under its possession in writing.

The health ministry did not even record it in RS records and Metropolitan Survey, the probe report added.

However, the holding number of the land is 66 and different estimates (prakkolon) of Public Works Department (PWD) prove the land belongs to the health ministry. Different structures were built on the land and registered with Tejgaon land office over the years.

No allotment letter was prepared during construction of the clinic in 1973 for unknown reasons, the report adds.

The report made six recommendations that include requesting the public works ministry to issue allotment letter to the health ministry, giving order to the Dhaka civil surgeon to take necessary steps to amend the RS and Metropolitan Survey records, requesting PWD for steps to oust illegal occupiers (lease holders of the so-called Media Palli), and taking legal action against officials concerned of the health ministry for their negligence in discharging duty.

An inter-ministerial meeting made four specific decisions on July 8 last year which include the public works ministry to cancel the lease according to rules and take necessary steps to hand over the land's possession to the health department, and the civil surgeon of Dhaka and officials of the health and family welfare ministry at Tejgaon to keep their possession of the land.

"We have taken all necessary steps as per the decisions of the meeting to cancel the lease. But the public works ministry has not yet responded to our move," said a health ministry official asking not to be named.

PLOT ALLOTTEES

The people who got the plots are Shafiq Rehman, editor of Jay Jay Din Publication Ltd (three bigha), M Enayetur Rahman, International Channel Ltd (owner of nTV) (one bigha), Md Hashmat Ali, managing director, Dainik Amar Desh, (one bigha, 15 katha), Aminul Islam, chairman, Brothers Garments Ltd (one bigha), Md Lutfur Rahman Badal, managing director, Diper Ltd (19.82 katha), Shahid Uddin Chowdhury Anne, BNP lawmaker, BU Chowdhury of Auto Flour Mills (five katha), Nasiruddin Ahmed Pintu, proprietor of Asha Poly and Packaging (five katha), Shah Alam, managing director of M/S Shemtex Ltd (6.23 katha), Jahid Traders (four katha), Tipu Alam, director, Baishakhi Media Ltd/daily Purbabhash (21.5 katha), KM Shahid Ullah, editor and publisher of daily Pathajatra (one bigha), Mohammad Atiq Ullah, managing director, Rupali Sweater (Pvt) Ltd (36.7 katha, addition 1.37 katha), former lawmaker Hafiz Ibrahim, publisher, daily Khabar Patra (0.75 bigha), M Shahjad Ali, director, Bangladesh Telecom Ltd (0.79 bigha), Mashfiqul Haque, managing director, Royal Filling Station (11.6 katha), Azam J Chowdhury, managing director, Greenways Industries (BD) Ltd (9.75 katha), Md Giyasuddin Al Mamun, managing director, Channel 1 (17.5 katha), Fasrobe Garments (10 katha), Abdul Haque, chairman, Bangla Vision/Shyamol Bangla Media (17.5 katha), Shaju Hossain, wife of Barrister Mainul Hussein, publisher, Robbar Publications Ltd of daily Ittefaq (12 katha, they took possession of 9.76 katha and want to take back money for the rest), Umme J Khan, wife of Major General (retd) ZA Khan, Earn Drying and Sweater Knitting Ltd of Khan Fashion Chaloman Group (five katha), Begum Tahmina Shawkat, wife of Mir Shawkat, owner, daily Shokaler Khobor, (12.8 katha), Tanvir Islam, director of Focus Fashions Ltd, (21.04 katha), AYM Kamal, managing director, daily Purbabhash (21.5 katha), Jahir Uddin Mahmud, director, Impress Telefilm Ltd (Channel i) (9.5 katha), Hotel Sugandha (3.65 katha), Md Iub Hossain, managing director, Bangladesh Auto Corporation (14 katha), Kazi Izabul Khalid, managing partner of Loma Engineering Ltd (0.75 katha), Pacific Chemicals Ltd of former lawmaker Ali Asgar Lobby (19.44 katha), Md Nabi Soleman, managing director of Dhaka Fibres Industries Ltd (0.97 bigha), M/S City Wears Ltd (3.69 katha), Sony Chocolate Industry Ltd (three katha), Padma Poly Cotton Knit Fabrics Ltd (additional) (10.70 katha), Tejgaon Re-rolling Company (additional 7.8 katha), Bangladesh Auto Service Ltd, (10 katha), Aziz and Company Ltd (three katha, nine chhatak), Standard Chemical Industries (3.79 katha), Motijheel Ideal School and College (12 decimal/shatangsha), Hazaribagh Aziz Tannery Ltd (additional 14.83 katha), Protibeshi Samaj Kalyan Parishad, located at Shahjahanpur, area of former housing minister Mirza Abbas (three katha), Purbanchal Bahumukhi Shomobay Samity (1.5 acre).

Books on '71

FROM PAGE 16

popular writers as they sell well," renowned writer Muntasir Mamun said yesterday at the fair.

Muntasir's 'Joy Bangla', a novel on the liberation war for young readers, was brought out at the fair yesterday. Another new title -- Kishore Muktijuddho Kosh from Somoy publication ill arrive today.

Meanwhile, organisers said that the crowd at the fair yesterday was the biggest since it began. More people are expected to visit the fair over the weekend.

A total of 88 new books came out at the fair yesterday. These include 16 novels, 10 essay collections, 13 poetry collections, 15 story collections, five children's books, two autobiographies, one on liberation war, five on science, one on politics and six on others.

New books from popular writers that arrived at the fair yesterday include -- Chakkhe Amar Trishna by Humayun Ahmed, Srijonshil Ganotantrater Akangkhay by Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Joy Bangla by Muntasir Mamun, Muktijuddhey Bilat Probashider Abadan by Dr Khandakar Mosharraf Hossain, Sareng Bou by Shahidullah Kayser, Antoranga Dhirghoshash by Rafiq Azad, Je Rohossher Samadhan Hoyni by Ali Imam and Meyeti Fire Ashechhilo by Imdadul Haq Milon.

Today the fair will be open for four hours, especially children. The children's hours will last from 11:00am to 3:00pm. An art competition for children will be held at the fair in the morning on the occasion.

Authorities have taken all essential preparation to ensure extra security as larger crowds are expected on the firs day of the weekend today.

Meanwhile, a team of Bangla Academy officials has been going around the stalls to identify publishers and stalls who are not maintaining the rules of fair.

Minister Latif

FROM PAGE 1

Latifa Shahjahan Girls High School polling centre at around 10:00am.

Later, he and his personal secretary went to Shohagpur Natunpara Government Primary School centre, and intruded into the restricted area at around 10:30am.

As he meddled in the balloting and intimidated voters, law and order there spun out of control.

Failing to control the situation, the presiding officer contacted the assistant returning officer and district returning officer.

On orders from the Election Commission (EC), the district returning officer suspended voting at the centre immediately.

Soon, the news spread and disrupted balloting in the other centres as well. Disorder throughout the centres prompted the authorities to suspend the election to Belkuchi upazila.

Earlier at around 9:00am, Shoma Biswas and a group of ruling party activists entered the voting booth at Shohagpur Natunpara Primary School. They manhandled Presiding Officer Masud Karim and took away ballot papers.

Chairman candidate Fazlul Haque and his followers swooped on Belkuchi Upazila Election Officer Mosharraf Hossain and other staff who were packing election materials and equipment at Belkuchi upazila parishad office.

Contacted, Nitish Chandra said the election process was hampered severely as interference by the minister and his men led to chaos at the polling centres in Belkuchi upazila.

He said he has filed the case on behalf of the EC.

On the election day, another case was lodged with the Sirajganj Judicial Magistrate's Court in connection with the incident.

Public fund

FROM PAGE 16

against the demand for 4,000 to 5200 MW, he told a questioner.

The government plans to increase power generation to 5,000 MW by 2011 and 7,000 MW by 2013 as per its electoral manifesto.

The national power grid will have another 700 MW electricity by June, he said.

The state minister also informed the House that 45 percent of the total population are now getting electricity.

The government has plans to bring all villages under power supply system by 2020, he said.

No begging

FROM PAGE 1

total number of beggars in the country adding six to seven years back country's total number of beggars was about 6 lakh but this number may have increased now.

Muhith said it is possible to eliminate begging from the country if we make a determination.

The finance minister said now there are many foundations working in the country with huge investment but there is no scope for investment in the country and added that insurance companies have also a huge amount of money but they could not invest the money for lack of scope for investment. "It is one kind of crisis in the economy," he observes.

He urged the companies for keeping five per cent quota for the country's various foundations in the Initial Public Offer (IPO).

Muhith said the NGOs are giving loan in the agriculture sector but they do not provide loan in crop sector. He urged the NGOs to increase loan disbursement in the crop sector.

NGO Foundation disbursed cheques worth Tk 73.50 lakh among 50 associate NGOs.

NGO Foundation chairman and former adviser of caretaker government M Hafizuddin Khan also spoke on the occasion.

RTI soon

FROM PAGE 16

He said a number of applications for satellite TV channel licences have already been submitted to the government.

"We are thinking about giving permission to some satellite TV channels and newspapers to ensure free flow of information and competition," the information minister said.

He said the government is also considering bringing amendments to the policy of 1998 on setting up and operating satellite television channel to make it more appropriate for the time and the channels more people-oriented.

DCC hospitals

FROM PAGE 16

from Mahanagar Shishu Hospital to conduct surgeries here twice a week, but that is obviously not enough," he said.

Out of the 29 medical posts at the hospital, at least nine posts--including that of consultant surgeon, consultant medicine, anaesthetist, pathologist, resident physician, resident surgeon--have been vacant since last year.

Established in 1989, the hospital has been running mostly with the doctors on deputation but over the last two and half years even that has lapsed.

At present there are only 18 nurses working at the hospital against 30 posts.

"When my first child was born here a few years ago, I found a large number of patients coming here. The numbers have dropped significantly now," said Komol Rani, a patient who gave birth to her second child at Nazirabazar Maternity Hospital.

The pathology department is yet to run even after 8 years of its establishment at the 31-bed Nazirabazar Maternity Hospital. Only three nurses work here against 11 posts. Five posts of doctors and pathologists lie vacant while the in-charge of the hospital works here on deputation.

The family planning support also has been stopped for the last six months due to lack of Family Welfare Visitors (FWVs).

The quality of health service at another DCC-run hospital--the Mahanagar Shishu Hospital--is not much different.

The hospital situated at Gour Sundar Roy lane at Lalbagh has only 16 nurses against 34 posts while six posts for doctors lie vacant.

Established in 1990, the 100-bed hospital could not provide indoor support to even ten patients at a time before 2006.

Though that situation has improved, the hospital cannot provide all pathological support to patients and though the number of patients has increased several times, the manpower has not increased at all.

While talking to The Daily Star Chief Health Officer of DCC Dr Col Showkat Ali said one main reason why doctors and nurses are reluctant to work in these hospitals is because there is no scope for promotions here.

"However, we have already taken up a project to turn the Mahanagar General Hospital into a 250-bed medical college. It will create scope of promotion for the medical professionals here and concurrently those who are working in other DCC-run hospitals will be incorporated with the medical college and hospital according to their qualification and skill," he said. Until then the hospitals will continue as it is, he added.

The medical college already got the LGRD ministry nod for accommodation and manpower. "Now we are waiting for the ministry's approval of the manpower organogram," he added.

But the fact is, the approval for the medical college and hospital came from the LGRD ministry in October, 2006, and the manpower organogram approval is still pending. Nobody knows how much more time it will take to make new the Mahanagar General Hospital and Medical College functional.

Passengers held

FROM PAGE 1

Activists of Mahiuddin staged demonstrations blocking the roads causing untold sufferings to hundreds of people. They neither let the water vessels to land at the terminal nor allow them to leave it from 1 pm.

As passengers tried to board the launches or get down from them by using boats or other means of transports they were also prevented from doing so.

According to sources the lease taken out by Mahiuddin expired six months ago. But the BIWTA authority could not invite tenders in time as Mahiuddin had filed a writ with the High Court (HC) and the HC had issued an injunction over the tender invitation.

As the HC injunction was vacated last month, the BIWTA authorities invited tender. But Mahiuddin had been demanding the continuation of the lease without any tender.

Talking to The Daily Star, he said, "I have demanded the authorities come to a negotiation over the issue of lease but they did not do so, rather they invited tender to lease it out to another contractor."

BIWTA Director (Port) Mahbubul Alam told The Daily Star, "A group of contractors have been putting pressure to take out the lease without maintaining any procedure."

"As some quarters are trying to create chaos, I have brought it to the notice of the higher authorities to take steps in this regard", he said.

Contacted, BIWTA Chairman Abdul Mannan Hawlader said, "There is nothing we can do violating the normal procedures. The highest bidder will get the lease," he added.

Badiuzzaman Badal, acting chairman of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport (Passengers Carriers) Owners' Association, said a group of people did not let over 200 launches to anchor and leave the terminal for five hours.

He alleged they also did not let the passengers to get off the vessels and also prevented them from boarding.

Kotwali police station officer-in-charge Abdul Hannan said some workers staged demonstration following a feud over a tender. We tried out best to bring the mayhem under control so that people can reach and leave the terminal, he added.

Expert bodies

FROM PAGE 1

status of the two crucial matters and submit reports with recommendations to the prime minister soon, a cabinet minister told The Daily Star.

At the meeting, the prime minister directed her cabinet colleagues not to waste time and make all-out efforts. She also instructed them to scrutinise every document and discharge duties properly.

Bangladesh has long been facing difficulties with India and Myanmar, as neither of the issues could be resolved although the matters are being discussed in bilateral meetings with the neighbouring countries.

Disputes with Myanmar escalated when four drilling ships from Myanmar launched exploration for oil and gas reserves within 50 nautical miles southwest of the St Martin's island in Bangladesh on November 1 last year. They had to withdraw in the face of strong protest by the then Bangladesh authority.

Both the sides agreed to continue with the dialogue to reach a conclusion and refrain from intruding into the disputed area for exploration.

The Bay of Bengal has become a lucrative territory for the adjacent countries especially after India's discovery of 100 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of gas in 2005-06 and Myanmar's discovery of 7 TCF of gas. India has also discovered oil reserve.

None of the countries in this region claimed their marine boundaries before the United Nations (UN) so far.

India and Myanmar decided territory between themselves but they need to solve the maritime boundary issues with Bangladesh as they are set to file their claim to the United Nations respectively on June 29 and May 21, 2009. Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Bangladesh too has to file its claim within July 27, 2011.

Resolving water-sharing issue with India has also been crucial as Bangladesh frequently face difficulties.

Make draft Tifa

FROM PAGE 16

Leader of the Opposition and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia presided over the meeting at her Gulshan office.

Referring to the three-phase discussions on Tifa during the BNP-led government, Delwar said BNP did not sign the deal hastily considering national interest.

He said BNP will agree to the pact if the opportunity of Bangladeshi products in US market is not reduced, growing industries are not hampered and Bangladesh can be protected from the harmful influence of US investment.

Citing Tifa treaties signed between US and other countries, he said Bangladeshi goods' access to US market will be hampered if the conditions imposed by the US are fulfilled. "Garments, medicine and shrimp export will face strong resistance."

Muralidaran

FROM PAGE 16

the one-day feat in his 328th match, while Akram figured in 356 games before retiring in 2003.

Indian batsman Sachin Tendulkar is the only other player to hold two major world records -- highest scorer in Tests (12,429) and one-day internationals (16,440).

Bombing in Shia mosque kills 10 in Pakistan

AFP, *Multan*

A bomb exploded near a Shia mosque in the town of Dera Ghazi Khan in central Pakistan yesterday, killing at least 10 people, a police official said.

Police said the bomb was planted outside the mosque and exploded shortly before a religious gathering got under way.

"Ten people were killed and 20 wounded, including nine critically," said local police official Mohammed Ahsan.

Doctor Pervez Haider, the head of the local hospital, confirmed earlier that seven people had been killed.

"We have shifted 25 people to the local hospital, eight of them were in critical condition," local police chief Maqsoodul Hassan said.

The blast shattered windows in nearby buildings, local residents said.

The location of the explosion -- close to a Shia mosque -- raised fears that the bombing could be the latest episode in a wave of sectarian violence to rock Pakistan, an overwhelmingly majority Sunni Muslim country.

Shias account for about 20 percent of Pakistan's population of 160 million and although fellow Muslims usually coexist peacefully, more than 4,000 people have died in outbreaks of sectarian violence nationwide since the late 1980s.

Two days ago, an explosion ripped through a Sunni Muslim mosque in the northwest town of Dera Ismail Khan, killing one person and wounding 18 others.

2-yr CG rule

FROM PAGE 16

He said it did not suspend the constitution and tried to stay near the line of the constitution, but the present government would not give all its actions legitimacy since most ordinances promulgated during the rule of that caretaker government were not constitutional.

"Extra-constitutional actions were carried out in the country during 1975-1979 and 1982-1986. Martial law decrees were established in those periods and the constitution remained suspended. We could not settle those disputes," Shafique said.

He said parliament will decide on the fates of these ordinances but the government is sincere to legitimatise those related to public interest and welfare.

"If anybody is victimised because of any ordinance accepted in parliament, the law will deal with those matters," he said.

Asked if the government will form any committee to probe the allegations of harassment, tortures and arrests of politicians during the state of emergency, Shafique said parliament will take decision on these allegations if those are raised.

The laws concerned will be amended, if necessary, to strengthen the Anti-Corruption Commission, he said, adding that the law ministry is not informed if any legal procedure is going on against the commission's chairman on any charge.

In response to another query, Shafique said the government would reinstate the 10 judges in the High Court as per its directives if the Supreme Court grants the government's prayer to withdraw the appeals filed by the caretaker government.

CCC

FROM PAGE 16

He claimed that the proposed design was for the infrastructural development of the two schools not for accommodating any commercial establishments.

He said he made the decision after discussing with the CCC Mayor ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury over telephone.

"We did not change the plan following any instruction from the Education Ministry," the acting mayor added.

Meanwhile, sources said the prime minister directed the education ministry to take measure in this regard after a strong protest from the citizens.

Iqbal termed the protest anti-educational, misleading, baseless and irrelevant.

CCC Chief Engineer Nizam Uddin, Chief Education Officer Prof Rawshan Akhter Hanif, Ward Councillors Jouharlal Hazari, Sabiha Musa, SM Zakaria, Monoara Begum Moni and Niaz Md Khan were also present at the meeting.

Progotishil Chhatra Jote, a left leaning student alliance, yesterday brought out a procession from Chittagong Shaheed Minar appreciating the CCC declaration of cancelling the project.

Somali pirates

FROM PAGE 16

than three million dollars in ransom were paid.

"The deal was 3.5 million dollars (2.7 million euros). The owners of the ship wanted to pay only one million but we resisted," said one pirate on condition of anonymity.

Sugule Ali confirmed a ransom was paid but would not reveal the amount, describing it only as "not huge... something to cover our expenses."

Fishermen and pirates in the Harardhere area told AFP they had spotted navy ships from an international anti-piracy coalition moving towards the freed Ukrainian vessel and transferring men onboard.

The Ukrainian presidency also confirmed the ship's release in a statement and said the vessel had resumed its journey to its initial destination, the Kenyan port of Mombasa, although sources close to the pirates believe that the Faina does not currently have enough fuel.

"On February 4, the ship was freed after a very difficult operation carried out by the Ukrainian special services in cooperation with foreign special services," the office of President Viktor Yushchenko said.

It was unclear what part the special services played but according to sources close to the pirates, the ransom money was flown from Nairobi and dropped to the pirates by parachute at approximately 1200 GMT on Wednesday.

The sources said the air-dropped capsule contained 3.2 million dollars.

"Somali pirates are very quick at counting money, they have equipment. Three million dollars is a matter of 15 minutes, but there can be disagreements between them," said one source close to the case, speaking on condition of anonymity.

In the final stages of the ransom negotiations, no fewer than 50 pirates were on board the ship and fishermen, elders and other witnesses in Haradhere said they saw the first groups return from the ship early Thursday.

The Faina's capture was one of the longest and most high-profile hijackings since Somali piracy surged in 2007.

The vessel's captain died, apparently of natural causes, two days after the ship was seized in the Indian Ocean.

Pirates had initially demanded 35 million dollars to release the ship but talks were slow to start in earnest with the Ukrainian ship owners, following threats of military action.

"We were fed up with the Faina," said Ahmed Mohamed Abdi, one of the pirates, shortly after receiving his share.

"There was a time we thought of releasing the ship without any payment on humanitarian grounds but we spent a lot of borrowed money on khat cigarettes, coca cola, mineral water and food," he told AFP.

Controversy still surrounds the intended recipient of the MV Faina's cargo, which includes 33 Soviet-era T-72 battle tanks and at least 14,000 rounds of different types of ammunition.

After the vessel's seizure in September, Kenya claimed the weaponry was for its armed forces but several sources have since revealed that the cargo was intended for the government of South Sudan.

According to organisations monitoring sea piracy, Somali pirates hijacked at least 49 foreign vessels in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean last year, raking in tens of millions of dollars in ransom money.

The release of the Faina brings to at least 13 the number of foreign ships still held by Somali pirates.

Climate change

FROM PAGE 16

achieve clarity on what mitigation actions developing countries will be prepared to make.

"In Copenhagen we must now bring all this all together in an ambitious, comprehensive and ratifiable agreement."

Much of the focus at this week's talks will be on the United States, which is set to lay out its new climate change policy under President Barack Obama, according to organisers.

John Kerry, chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is due to address the meeting via a video link.

The Obama administration has already begun shredding old climate policies formulated under ex-president George Bush and is vowing to lead the fight against climate change.

"Science has shown we are depleting the planet's natural assets at an unsustainable rate," Ban said.

"We all realise poverty cannot be overcome if we neglect the environment or deplete our natural capital," he said.

"We in India are extremely concerned about climate change," Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee told the meeting.

"Some of the worst impacts of climate change take place in developing countries which have had no share in having caused this problem," he said.

India, China and other emerging economies have long argued industrialised nations are historically responsible for greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere and so must do more to fix the problem.

Many developing nations have resisted targeted curbs on their own carbon emissions, claiming their ascent from poverty could be jeopardised by a straitjacket on their carbon emissions.

Developing countries were excluded from binding targets for greenhouse gases under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol -- the key reason the US refused to ratify the treaty.

However, activists say ensuring China and India take action now has become vital because their carbon output has risen dramatically with the booms in their fossil fuel-dependent economies.

China now outstrips the US as the world's biggest greenhouse gas polluter while India is poised to overtake Russia as the third biggest emitter, according to a report last September by the Global Carbon Project.

Lanka turns down

FROM PAGE 16

of arms and cadres could bring an end to the offensive," he said.

According to the newspaper, Rajapakse believes Tiger leaders must be "tried and hanged" but low level rebel cadres could be "rehabilitated".

There was also no immediate reaction from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Overall, the Tigers have lost over 98 percent of the territory that was under their control a year ago and Sri Lanka's army chief has said LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran may have already fled the island.

The defence ministry said that on Thursday, 700 more civilians had fled rebel-held areas, where it says 120,000 are still being held by the Tigers as "human shields."

The United Nations reported at least 52 non-combatants were killed in a single shelling earlier this week -- though it did not say who was responsible.

The pro-rebel tamilnet.com website said seven civilians were killed and another 27 wounded on Thursday in another alleged government attack on a hospital in the conflict zone.

In the latest fighting and in a fresh blow to the embattled rebels,

Sri Lankan government troops on Thursday captured the last known Tamil Tiger naval base in the northeast of the island, a military official said.

Government troops fought their way to the Chalai base of the Sea Tigers, the LTTE's naval unit.

In a fresh blow to the embattled ethnic rebels, troops fought their way to the Chalai base of the Sea Tigers, the naval unit of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The military said at least four senior Sea Tigers and eight other rebels were killed.

"The army has just moved into the Chalai base," a military official said. "Troops are now consolidating their hold in the coastal area."

With the fall of Chalai, the Tigers are left with just 20 kilometres (12 miles) of coastline in the northeastern district of Mullaittivu.

The defence ministry said that the Tigers tried to use suicide bombers to prevent the army from taking Chalai, but the attacks had been thwarted.

"As LTTE's heyday is nearing its Waterloo, (the) desperate Tiger leadership appears to be using its last trumpets by sending brainwashed teenagers for suicide missions," the ministry said.

Meanwhile, India yesterday expressed concern over civilian casualties in war-torn Sri Lanka and urged the island's government and Tamil Tiger rebels to negotiate an end to the fighting.

"We are deeply anguished at the loss of lives. We are not happy that the Sri Lankan government has resumed hostilities. It is for both sides to cease hostilities," said Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram.

Sri Lanka ruled out peace talks with the Tamil Tigers on Thursday, vowing instead to crush those rebels who fight on in their decades-long battle for an independent ethnic Tamil homeland.

Chidambaram said that the Sri Lankan government and rebels must "simultaneously" suspend hostilities.

"Unfortunately, we are not able to prevail over the LTTE (Tamil Tigers) to lay down arms and not able to prevail over the Sri Lankan government beyond a point. We once again appeal to both sides to give up hostilities and come to the negotiating table."