



In this photo released by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence yesterday, Sri Lankan Army personnel inspect what are said to be underwater "scooters" in Mullaitivu, after they were captured from Tamil Tiger guerrillas following heavy fighting.

PHOTO: AFP

## Lanka troops capture another Tiger village

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan security forces seized another village from Tamil Tiger rebels, the government said yesterday, as international concern mounted about the plight of civilians caught in the shrinking warzone.

Government forces established control over the village of Ampalavanpokkai in the district of Mullaitivu on Thursday afternoon following heavy fighting, the defence ministry said.

The bodies of seven guerrillas were recovered, but a search operation was still underway. The ministry did not say if troops suffered any casualties.

In the same area, soldiers found diving equipment and underwater "scooters" used

by suicide bombers, the ministry said.

Government forces are keeping up a major offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas who have been hemmed into a narrow strip of coastal jungle area in Mullaitivu.

The fighting has stoked concern about tens of thousands of civilians trapped in the conflict zone.

The LTTE in a statement Friday accused the military of killing 34 civilians in shelling on Thursday. Sri Lanka's military has denied targeting civilians.

Independent verification of claims is impossible as authorities have restricted access to the region by relief agencies, diplomats and journalists.

Speaking in a tougher tone than usual after talks with her South Korean counterpart Yu Myung-Hwan, Clinton urged the North to live up to its previous commitments and dismantle its nuclear weapons programme.

## Hillary asks N Korea to stop provocations

AFP, Seoul

A frank US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned North Korea Friday to stop being provocative, saying its "war of words" with the South would not help it forge a new relationship with Washington.

Hillary Clinton, who suggested the North's bellicose rhetoric stems from a possible struggle for power, told reporters in Seoul that any ballistic missile launch by the communist state would be in breach of UN resolutions.

She also named Stephen Bosworth, a former career diplomat, to oversee Washington's North Korea policy -- a new high-level post designed to pressure Pyongyang on disarmament and human rights.

"We are calling on the government of North Korea to refrain from being provocative and unhelpful in a war of words that it has been engaged in, because that is not very fruitful," Hillary Clinton added.

She said the development of democracy and prosperity in South Korea was "in stark contrast to the tyranny and poverty across the border to the North."

On her first foreign trip as chief US diplomat, she hailed Seoul's resolve and determination "in face of the provocative and unhelpful statements and actions by the North."

"North Korea is not going to get a different relationship with the United States while insulting and refusing dialogue with the Republic of Korea," she told a press conference, using the official name for the South.

Several political analysts suspect Pyongyang is taking a tougher stance as it competes for US President Barack Obama's attention with other hotspots such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and the Middle East.

"We are calling on the government of North Korea to refrain from being provocative and unhelpful in a war of words that it has been engaged in, because that is not very fruitful," Hillary Clinton added.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (L) holds talks with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak at the presidential Blue House in Seoul yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama (C) walks with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper (R) through the Hall of Honour at Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada on Thursday.

## Kyrgyzstan issues eviction notice to US

AP, Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan ordered US forces yesterday to depart within six months from an air base key to military operations in Afghanistan, a move complicating plans to send more troops to battle rising Taliban and al-Qaeda violence.

A top US military official said, however, that neighbouring Uzbekistan had granted permission for the transit of non-lethal cargo to Afghanistan, a small victory in the hunt for new supply routes.

The US has had a fraught relationship with Uzbekistan, one of the most politically repressive of the former Soviet states. Most of President Islam Karimov's opponents have been sent to jail or into exile. US-based Human Rights Watch has said that Uzbek prison authorities routinely abuse and torture prisoners.

Anger over Western criticism of a crackdown on an uprising in eastern Uzbekistan prompted

the government to evict US troops from an air base near the Afghan border in 2005, leaving the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan as the only US base in Central Asia.

In recent months, militants have stepped up attacks on convoys travelling through the primary route Pakistan pushing US officials to secure alternative, northern routes for Afghan cargo through Central Asia.

The Kyrgyz move to close Manas a transit point for 15,000 troops and 500 tons of cargo each month heading to Afghanistan caught the United States by surprise and made the search more urgent.

US officials have said they consider the future of Manas still open for negotiations, indicating there could be talks about the amount paid for maintaining the base.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said Thursday that the United States would consider paying more in rent but would not "be ridiculous about it."

## Mulayam refutes alliance with BJP

PTI, Lucknow

Refuting reports of an alliance with BJP, Samajwadi Party supremo Mulayam Singh Yadav yesterday said that his party was against BJP and there was not even a remote chance of an alliance.

"There is no question of an alliance between SP and BJP. We even did not want to see them (BJP)...SP was always two steps ahead of other parties whenever there is a need to protest against BJP...We will continue doing so," Yadav told reporters at party headquarters in Lucknow.

"Those who have raised this issue are either ignorant or do not understand character of our party (SP)", he said.

He said that SP workers had faced atrocities in BJP regime.

"Even Shivpal had to remain absconding for over six months in BJP regime. We were fearing that he would be killed in that regime," Yadav said, adding that no one could raise fingers on the party as far as its stand against BJP was concerned.

About Kalyan Singh's friendship with SP, Yadav said "Kalyan has agreed to support Samajwadi Party as he considered that only his party could raise issues of farmers and downtrodden in effective manner."

## 'Regional' solution needed for Myanmar migrants Says Thai PM

PTI, Jakarta

Thailand's prime minister reaffirmed yesterday the need for a "regional" solution to the fate of hundreds of Muslim boatpeople from Myanmar who have washed up in neighbouring nations in recent months.

"Essentially, it is a regional problem and must be dealt at a regional level," Abhisit Vejjajiva told reporters after meeting Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono here.

Regional governments would discuss the issue at a March meeting of the Bali Process, a ministerial-level forum co-chaired by Indonesia and Australia on people-smuggling and human trafficking, he said.

"All affected countries must work together to make sure that our national security is protected and at the same time that these people are treated in a humane way with their rights and their dignity respected," he added.

Thailand has faced criticism over claims that its security forces abused migrants from the Rohingya minority, hundreds of whom have been rescued in Indian and Indonesian waters in recent weeks.

## Iran slowing uranium enrichment: IAEA

AFP, Vienna

Iran is continuing to enrich uranium, a process potentially used to make an atom bomb, but has slowed down the expansion of its enrichment activities, the UN's atomic watchdog said Thursday.

"Contrary to the decisions of the (United Nations) Security Council, Iran has not suspended its enrichment related activities," the International Atomic Energy Agency wrote in its latest report on Tehran's contested nuclear drive.

Enriched uranium is used to make both nuclear fuel and fissile material for an atom bomb.

But a senior official close to the agency said that Iran's expansion of its enrichment plant in Natanz had slowed "considerably."

"As we've seen, the pace has slowed down considerably since the time of the last report," the official said. "They haven't given any reason or explanation for that."

According to the IAEA's report, there are

3,964 centrifuges actively enriching uranium in Natanz, just 164 more than in November.

On top of those, a further 1,476 centrifuges were undergoing vacuum or dry run tests without nuclear material and an additional 125 had been installed but remained stationary.

In all, IAEA inspectors had been able to verify that Iran has accumulated 839 kilogrammes of low-enriched uranium. And Iran had told the IAEA that it had added another 171 kilogrammes this month.

Estimates vary, but analysts calculate that anywhere between 1,000-1,700 kilogrammes would be needed to convert into high-enriched uranium suitable for one bomb.

Iran's ambassador to Vienna Ali Asghar Soltanieh told state news agency IRNA that the "latest report had nothing new. Iran will fully cooperate with the IAEA but within the NPT (Non-proliferation Treaty) and its legal commitments."

## Advani kickstarts polls campaign from Gandhinagar

PTI, Ahmedabad

With Lok Sabha elections round the corner, BJP's prime ministerial candidate L K Advani on Friday kickstarted the poll campaign from his Gandhinagar constituency, from where he has won four times.

"You have assessed it right. I am kickstarting my election campaign from today from my Gandhinagar constituency," Advani said in a reply to a question whether he is starting his campaign from the Gandhinagar seat.

Advani is scheduled to attend six functions on Friday

in his Lok Sabha constituency, which includes a portion of Ahmedabad. He is also going to address a public rally in Gandhinagar later in the day.

"Now, I will be coming here again and again," Advani told reporters on the sidelines of a function to inaugurate a gymnasium complex build by Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation in Vadaj area of the city.

The senior BJP leader is also scheduled to meet party functionaries in his constituency later in the day, to finalise the poll strategy for this seat after delimitation.



PHOTO: AFP

This Nasa handout image merges the view through Swift's UltraViolet and Optical Telescope, which shows bright stars, and its X-ray Telescope, which captures the gamma ray burst (orange and yellow).

Huge gamma-ray blast spotted 12.2 bln light-yrs from earth

AFP, Washington

The US space agency's Fermi telescope has detected a massive explosion in space which scientists say is the biggest-ever gamma-ray burst, a report published Thursday in *Science Express* said.

The spectacular blast, which occurred in September in the Carina constellation, produced energies ranging from 3,000 to more than five billion times that of visible light, astrophysicists said.

"Visible light has an energy range of between two and three electron volts and these were in the millions to billions of electron volts," astrophysicist Frank Reddy of US space agency Nasa told AFP.

## Netanyahu tasked to form Israel govt

AFP, Jerusalem

hawkish Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu was tasked on Friday with forming a new Israeli government, fuelling concerns that a right-wing coalition could torpedo the Middle East peace process.

President Shimon Peres made the request in a letter he handed to Netanyahu, who accepted, also in writing, at a ceremony in the president's residence.

Peres reached the decision based on a two-state solution, he said in reference to the concept of a viable Palestinian state being formed alongside Israel.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian slum dwellers shout slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday against slum demolitions. The slum dwellers also demanded legislation guaranteeing right to housing and basic services.