

# Lankan rebels encircled in fierce fighting

Key Tiger supply route closed

AP, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops have surrounded dozens of Tamil Tiger separatist rebels during fierce fighting in the island's north in a drive to end a 25-year civil war, the military said yesterday.

The rebels who once commanded a de facto state across a large swath of the island's north and east have been pushed into a small sliver of coastal land measuring just 8.4 square miles (21 square kilometres), on the northeast coast.

Sri Lankan government forces have cut off an essential supply route to Tamil Tiger rebels trapped in the jungle, the defence ministry said yesterday.

"With the fall of Pachchapalmudai (village), the LTTE lost their last supply route used for reinforcement and logistic transportation to Puthukkudirippu junction," the ministry said.

In the latest fighting, the military said government troops had surrounded a

group of rebels in an area less than half a square mile (1 square kilometre). A statement on the Defence Ministry's Web site also said its forces had cut a supply route to the rebels in the Puthukkudirippu area.

It said the bodies of 13 rebels had also been recovered.

Accounts of the battles cannot be verified because independent journalists are barred from the war zone.

Although there has been heavy fighting in the same area for weeks, the government says it is close to crushing the rebels, formally known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa said earlier this week the military was exercising restraint due to concerns about civilian casualties.

Tens of thousands of civilians are trapped in the war zone. The military says the rebels are holding them as human shields in a desperate attempt to avoid

defeat. But the rebels say the people do not want to leave and have asked for their protection.

More than 23,000 civilians escaped last month, and the government estimates there are 30,000 to 40,000 still trapped.

A UN human rights official will visit Sri Lanka starting Thursday to discuss the welfare of those who have fled the war zone and are living in government-run camps.

Walter Kaelin, the representative for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on the rights of internally displaced people, will meet government and aid officials and visit camps during his five-day visit, according to a UN statement.

The Tamil Tiger rebels have fought since 1983 to create an independent homeland for ethnic minority Tamils, who have faced decades of marginalisation by successive governments controlled by ethnic Sinhalese. More than 70,000 people have been killed in the violence.



Conservative activists are burning a paper missile during a rally by about 100 people in Seoul yesterday. About 100 activists called for strong UN sanctions over North Korea's rocket launch and urged the international community to cut aid to the hardline communist country.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of Thailand's ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra wave hand-clappers during a protest at the finance ministry in Bangkok yesterday. Supporters of Thaksin extended their protest to the finance ministry as mass rallies against the government entered second week.

## 20 insurgents killed in Afghanistan: US

'Taliban' abduct 16 Afghan workers

AP, AFP, Kabul/Herat

Afghan and US coalition troops battled a large group of militants in southern Afghanistan before calling in an airstrike that killed 20 insurgents, the coalition said in a statement yesterday.

Dozens of insurgents attacked the joint foot patrol in Helmand province's Kajaki district Wednesday, the state-

ment said.

Following a firefight, the militants were forced into "secondary fighting position" before the combined patrol called in an airstrike that hit the militants, the statement said.

"Twenty militants were killed in the engagement," the statement said.

A series of clashes in the same region on Tuesday killed 31 militants.

Earlier Taliban militants kidnapped 16 Afghans working for a private road construction company in remote western Afghanistan, authorities said Thursday.

The men -- who included engineers, labourers and cleaners -- were abducted on Wednesday as they were travelling in a district of the western province of Badghis that borders Turkmenistan, they said.

## Japan warns N Korea of tighter sanctions

AFP, Tokyo

Japan threatened yesterday to toughen its own sanctions against North Korea if the communist regime goes ahead with a rocket launch as early as the weekend.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Takeo Kawamura said Japan -- which already bans North Korean imports and ship visits -- may also halt all exports and tighten restrictions on financial transactions from Japan to the North.

The top government spokesman said existing six-month sanctions, which expire on April 13, would be extended regard-

less of a launch, to push for progress on the issue of North Korea's past abductions of Japanese nationals.

"Regardless of whether the missile launch is carried out or not, our review has been in the direction of an extension," he said.

Kawamura said rolling six-month sanctions would be extended by a year as Tokyo had seen "no progress" on the issue of Japanese kidnapped by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s in order to train its spies.

"I think we have no option but to extend them," he told a media briefing.

## 800 rebel BDR men

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others who appeared before the courts yesterday for different purposes.

Court sources said a total of 386 mutineers were brought from the Dhaka Central Jail while the rest from Kashimpur Jail under tight security.

Additional police forces were deployed inside and outside of the CMM Court to avoid any untoward incident on the court premises since morning. All the gates used by lawyers, litigants and others to enter the new building of the CMM Court were cordoned off.

No one, including lawyers and journalists, were permitted to enter the court considering the security matter. As a result, most of the lawyers could not collect information about the cases, scheduled for hearing yesterday, and failed to inform their clients of the court proceedings.

Meantime, trial proceedings of some cases at several other courts situated at the old building were held. But the accused on bail could not appear before the courts in due time while the accused in jail custody could not be produced before the courts due to tight security.

Sources said the CMM by his executive power at 9:00am directed the authorities concerned to hang notices on the walls of the courts asking all lawyers and litigants that trial proceedings of all the cases of

nine metropolitan courts at the new court building would not be held.

The notice says the trial proceedings of all of those cases would be held at the old buildings. But lawyers could not enter the courts to collect the information about the cases.

Mohammad Jaidul Islam, an accused in a criminal case, of city's Badda area told The Daily Star that he and eight others appeared before the court at 10:00am but they could not give their hazira (appearance) before the trial court.

A large number of lawyers expressed their resentment for not being permitted to enter the courts.

Meanwhile, Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) members yesterday arrested eight more members of BDR at the BDR headquarters at Pilkhana in connection with the February carnage.

With these, the total number of people arrested in the case is now 830.

The arrested BDR jawans are nayek subedar Idris Miah, habilder Shahjalal, habilder Didar Ali Mandal, lance nayek Delwar Hossain, sepoy Saiful Islam, sepoy Kamal Hossain, sepoy Rowshan Ali and sepoy Zakir Hossain.

Rab sources said they arrested the BDR men examining the footage of the carnage and also on information from various sources.

## Fears for peace process as Israel's new govt takes over

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's new government has set a hawkish tone in its first days in office, with statements by its top diplomat setting off warnings that Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet risked burying the troubled peace talks.

A day after he sparked criticism by saying Israel was not bound by a US-backed 2007 agreement to restart peace talks with the Palestinians, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman on Thursday refused any withdrawal from the Golan Heights in exchange for peace with

Syria.

"There is no cabinet resolution regarding negotiations with Syria, and we have already said that we will not agree to withdraw from the Golan Heights," Lieberman told the Haaretz daily.

The Golan is a strategic plateau that Israel captured from Syria in 1967 and annexed in 1981, which Damascus wants back as part of any peace treaty.

It marked the second day running of controversial statements by firebrand Lieberman, which have sparked furious reactions by Palestinians already worried

about a cabinet led by Netanyahu, who opposes giving them a state.

"This minister is an obstacle to peace. He will cause harm to Israel first," Yasser Abed Rabbo, an aide to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, told AFP.

"Nothing obliges us to deal with a racist person hostile to peace such as Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister Lieberman," he added.

Opposition MPs in Israel were as harsh in their criticism of a man whom critics have branded a "racist" and "fascist" for his regular diatribes against Israeli Arabs.

## Helicopter with 16 people down in North Sea

AP, Edinburgh, Scotland

Police said yesterday that 16 people were killed when a helicopter went down off Scotland's northeast coast, announcing that the search for eight people still missing was now a recovery rather than a rescue operation.

Eight bodies recovered from the sea were brought ashore Thursday morning.

"The grim reality is that the crew of 16 on board has been lost," said Colin Menzies, assistant chief constable of Grampian Police.

## 14 terrorists in Lahore in guise of preachers

Warns Pak intelligence

PTI, Islamabad


An estimated 14 terrorists, in the guise of preachers, have sneaked into the federal capital and Lahore to carry out strikes on state targets, Pakistani intelligence agencies have warned authorities.

The warnings come just days after Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud said his group planned to carry out more attacks across the country.

Intelligence officials have asked law enforcement agencies

to beef up security at important government and private buildings, hotels and other public places to avert attacks by the terrorists disguised as preachers, a TV channel reported.

Officials in Peshawar told the Daily Times newspaper that security agencies had been warned that seven suicide bombers were planning to carry out an attack on government installations in the North West Frontier Province on the lines of the terrorist siege of a police training centre near Lahore on Monday.



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## No risk allowance

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and colleagues came to my aid," Fazlur said.

Most firemen are forced to work unprotected during fire fighting missions, as there is also a shortage of necessary protective gears like fireproof suits, breathing apparatus and masks. This increases the risk of injuries.

In 2008, three firefighters died on duty while 25 were seriously injured -- many with third degree burns and major fractures. There were also countless numbers of minor injuries.

There are only 5,715 firefighters in the country for its population of 14 crore. They fought 9,310 fire incidents last year. In Dhaka mega city, there are only 579 firemen for its 1.5 crore residents. As a result they have to work under tremendous pressure all year round.

Former deputy director of the fire service's Dhaka division Selim Newaz said, "Firefighters and rescue workers around the world are respected for their bravery. They are also highly educated and trained. However, in our part of the world the picture is quite different."

He said the Fire Service and Civil Defence personnel are responsible for multiple crucial tasks, including firefighting, rescue work during building collapses, launch capsize incidents and also other accidents. They also work as 'Medical First Respondent' (MFR) during these emergency situations, he pointed out.

The former official, who himself was injured many times while on duty -- including fracture of his ribs during the Nv building fire incident in 2007 -- said that the salary scale for

the fire department is the lowest compared to other government services.

"If we cannot provide these men with economic security then how can we expect them to find motivation for the work they do?" Newaz said.

The current salary scale of a fireman is only Tk 2,600 with a yearly increment of Tk 120. After adding house rent and other benefits the total monthly salary for a fire fighter stands at Tk 4,500. This includes a monthly medical allowance of Tk 500.

The last pay raise the fire department saw was in 2006.

Newaz also pointed out that firefighters and rescue workers also do not have adequate training for their duties. This increases the risk of accidents during their work. He suggested that actual firefighters are sent abroad for training sessions, when opportunities arise, instead of higher officials.

Officials from the department say a proposal to create provisions for risk allowance has been gathering dust since 2006. The proposal was sent to the Home Ministry requesting around 30 percent risk allowance against the basic salary of firemen and rescue workers.

Brig Gen Abu Nayeem Md Shahidullah, director general of Fire Service and Civil Defence, told The Daily Star that firemen and rescue workers should get proper incentives for their bravery.

"Plans to provide a risk allowance to these workers now remain in the final stages. The proposal was approved by the home ministry and now is under consideration at the finance ministry," he said.

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Fax: 880-2-8823959, 8850226  
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