



Handout picture shows US President Barack Obama and his Venezuelan counterpart Hugo Chavez (R) chatting before the opening of the 5th Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain on Friday. Obama pledged to open a new era of equal partnership with the Americas as he addressed the opening of the summit in Trinidad and Tobago.

Lanka keeps up offensive despite calls for truce

UN discusses fate of trapped civilians with Colombo

AFP, AP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops yesterday kept up their offensive against Tamil Tiger rebels cornered in the northeast, the defence ministry said, ignoring mounting international appeals for a ceasefire.

The island's government accused the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of firing heavy artillery and mortars from an area it has designated as a civilian "safe zone," and that its troops were retaliating.

The United Nations says up to 100,000 civilians are trapped in the area in "dire humanitarian conditions."

A top UN official met with Sri Lankan leaders Friday to discuss efforts to free tens of thousands of people trapped by the raging civil war amid reports that 4,500 civilians have been killed in fighting over the past three months.

But concerns have grown about the escalating toll the war is taking on the estimated 100,000 ethnic Tamil civilians crowded into what remains of rebel-controlled territory.

A government health official in the war zone said Friday that at least five children were dying every day from diarrhoea and malnutrition, and many mothers are too emaciated to nurse their babies. The fighting has made the delivery of food aid nearly impossible, and food stocks have dwindled as the war zone was virtually cut off from the rest of the country over the past months.

"The LTTE terrorists continued mounting heavy artillery and mortar attacks from the no-fire zone at troops now advancing towards the general area of Vellamullivaikkal," the defence ministry said.

It said at least eight rebels were killed and another nine wounded in fighting on Friday, but did not say if its troops suffered any casualties.

The latest fighting came as the UN renewed its call for a fresh ceasefire to

allow civilians trapped in the conflict zone to get to safety.

"Unicef is calling for a ceasefire and for a humanitarian pause which allows humanitarian workers to access the conflict zone and for civilians who are trapped in this zone ... to be allowed to seek refuge in secured zones," said Veronique Taveau, spokeswoman for the UN's agency for children.

Ron Redmond, spokesman for the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, also called on the Tamil Tigers to "immediately allow" civilians to move to safe areas.

"Those fleeing into government-controlled areas provide similar accounts of the dire humanitarian conditions prevalent inside the area."

"The situation has worsened due to the ongoing heavy rains and winds, with most families living in flooded areas under damaged tarpaulin tents and beneath trees," he added.

The offensive is aimed at finishing off the last of the Tigers, who are facing defeat after 37 years of fighting for an independent Tamil homeland.

Israel preparing for aerial strikes on Iran's N-sites

AFP, London

Israel's military is preparing so it could launch major aerial attacks on Iranian nuclear sites if ordered to by the new government, a British newspaper said Saturday, quoting Israeli defence and intelligence sources.

"Israel wants to know that if its forces were given the green light, they could strike at Iran in a matter of days, even hours," an unnamed senior defence official told The Times.

"They are making preparations on every level for this eventuality. The message to Iran is that the threat is not just words."

Among preparatory steps being taken are the acquisition of three Airborne Warning and Control (AWAC) aircraft and regional missions to simulate the attack, the paper said.

Israel, widely considered to be the Middle East's sole nuclear armed power, suspects the Islamic Republic of using the programme to develop atomic weapons, a charge that Tehran has repeatedly denied.

The Jewish state considers Tehran to be its arch-enemy because of repeated calls by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for Israel to be wiped off the map.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who took power on April 1 at the helm of a right-wing government, has repeatedly made clear that his priority is confronting Iran.

In his inaugural address, Netanyahu said the biggest threat Israel faced was the possibility of "a radical regime armed with nuclear weapons" -- an apparent reference to Iran.

Israeli officials quoted by The Times said more than a dozen targets could be envisaged, including Tehran's main nuclear sites at Natanz, Isfahan and Arak.

"We would not make the threat without the force to back it," an official from Israel's intelligence community said.

"There has been a recent move, a number of on-the-ground preparations, that indicate Israel's willingness to act," the official said.

He added it was unlikely Israel would strike without at least tacit approval from the US.

Iran urges regional peace at army parade

AFP, Tehran

Iran marked Army Day yesterday with a low-key military parade and a speech by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that contrasted sharply with his confrontational tirades of previous years.

He hailed the armed forces as the "guarantor" of regional security but refrained from making tub-thumping boasts about Iran's military might after Washington called for dialogue over Tehran's controversial nuclear drive.

Iran's military top brass also said Tehran sought only peace and stability in the region.

Ahmadinejad's more moderate comments came as the administration of US President Barack Obama called for talks over Iranian nuclear ambitions, which Western powers fear could be a cover for efforts to build an atomic bomb.

"Iran's armed forces are the guarantor of security in the region," the president said in an unusually short televised speech.

"Today the Iranian nation, with its religious armed forces, is ready to have a wide role in world management and to establish security based on justice across the world."

Ahmadinejad's remarks were echoed by armed forces chief General Hasan Firouzabadi, who said: "Our president has never challenged others and has only responded to the insults of others against the Islamic republic."



Female members of Iran's Basij militia carry national flags during the Army Day parade in Tehran yesterday. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hailed his country's armed forces as the "guarantor" of regional security during the low-profile parade in the capital.



Former US president George W Bush meets with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (R) on the sidelines of the Boao Forum yesterday in Boao in southern China's Hainan province. Under the theme "Asia: Managing Beyond Crisis", participants discussed how to cope with the international financial crisis at the annual conference, a Chinese version of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Nato nets 7 pirates, sets free 20 fishermen

AP, Nairobi

A Nato spokesman says pirates attacked a tanker in the Gulf of Aden. Nato forces then detained seven Somalis behind the assault and freed 20 Yemenese fishermen being held hostage by the pirates.

Nato spokesman Lt-Capt. Alexandre Santos Fernandes says a Marshall Islands-flagged tanker issued a distress call early Saturday after pirates attacked it with small arms and rockets.

He says a Dutch warship from the Nato force saw the pirates fleeing toward a Yemeni fishing trawler. Nato troops boarded the trawler, detained the pirates and freed the 20 Yemenese, who had been held hostage since Sunday.

He says the pirates were set free, however, because under Dutch law they could not be held at sea under the circumstances in which they were captured.

S Korea studying North's proposal for talks

AP, Seoul

South Korea said Saturday it is reviewing a North Korean proposal for talks on a key joint industrial complex where the North is holding a South Korean man, amid rising tensions over the North's recent rocket launch and its expulsion of nuclear monitors.

South Korean officials have repeatedly called on the North to grant access to the man detained last month in the complex in the North Korean border town of Kaesong for allegedly denouncing the North's political system. But the North has refused to do so, without providing any specific reason.

Unification Ministry spokesman Kim Honyeon told reporters that North Korea has proposed a meeting with South Korean officials at the complex on April 21, but that it was not clear exactly what it wanted to discuss. Kim said South Korean officials were reviewing the proposal.

South Korea's Dong-a Ilbo newspaper said the North proposed the talks to discuss the case of the South Korean man.

The Kaesong complex has been considered a promising example of inter-Korean cooperation, combining South Korean technology and

management expertise with cheap North Korean labor.

North Korea also has been holding two female American journalists since they allegedly crossed the border from China on March 17 while reporting on North Korean refugees. The North has said it will try the journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee of former Vice President Al Gore's Current TV media venture on charges of entering the country illegally and engaging in "hostile acts."

Tension on the Korean peninsula has heightened since North Korea launched a rocket on April 5 despite repeated international warnings. It insists it sent up a satellite into space, but regional powers say nothing reached orbit and the launch was actually a test of long-range missile technology.

North Korea reacted angrily to the UN Security Council's condemnation of the rocket launch, saying it would restart its nuclear programme, expel international monitors and quit six-nation disarmament talks.

UN and US monitors left the communist nation this past week. Their pullout leaves the international community with no onsite means to monitor North Korea's nuclear facilities, which can produce weapons-grade plutonium if restarted.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Week of change for Obama

AP, Washington

In a whirlwind week of change, President Barack Obama jettisoned Bush administration policy on greenhouse gases, shone an unforgiving light on its support for torture as an interrogation tactic and eased its restrictions on Cuba.

But there are limits, even to this new president's power, and a campaign pledge to seek a ban on assault weapons is an early casualty as a result.

And while the promise of change was arguably Obama's single most powerful asset in last year's campaign, the week demonstrated anew how carefully he calibrates its impact.

"We have been through a dark and painful chapter in our history," the president said in a statement that accompanied the release of once-secret memos outlining torture techniques the Bush administration allowed.

"But at a time of great challenges and disturbing disunity, nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past."

That was designed as a reassurance to the CIA employees who carried out waterboarding, which simulates drowning, and the other harsh interrogation techniques that former President George W. Bush once sanctioned and that Obama has now banned much as his decision to leave combat troops in Iraq a few months longer than he once promised was a bow to the Pentagon.

"I will always do whatever is necessary to protect the national security of the United States," he said in a statement on the torture memos that could easily have been written about the troop withdrawal.

Attorney General Eric Holder added one more assurance, announcing the administration would pay legal expenses for anyone in the intelligence agency who needs a lawyer as a result of carrying out interrogations covered by the memos.

Holder also formally revoked every legal opinion or memo issued during Bush's presidency that justified interrogation programmes, a largely symbolic step since Obama had already said his administration would not rely on them.

The release of the documents had been the subject of a long, fierce debate, with a deadline looming as the result of a lawsuit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union.

No lawsuit drove the timing of the new Cuba policy, which was released in the run-up to Obama's first presidential trip to Central America. And here again, Obama went further than some wanted and not as far as others had hoped.

Under the new policy, the administration lifted restrictions on Cuban-Americans who want to travel and send money to their island homeland and freed US telecommunications companies to seek business there.

Some of the changes specifically undid what Bush had imposed: tightened travel restrictions on Americans wishing to visit

relatives in Cuba; limiting payments to immediate family, and bans on seeds, clothing, personal hygiene items, veterinary medicines and later cell phones from humanitarian parcels.

But the broader embargo remains in place as it has since the Kennedy administration, its existence meant now as then to prod the Cuban government into democratic reforms.

In response to the announcement, Cuban President Raul Castro said he is ready to put "everything" on the table in talks with Americans, including questions of human rights and political prisoners. If so, that would mark a change from decades of Cuban insistence that those issues were not subject for discussion.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton pronounced Castro's comments an overture, and said, "We are taking a very serious look at how we intend to respond."

Still, despite sentiment within the 15-member Caribbean Community to lift the US embargo, Jamaica's prime minister, Bruce Golding, said the organisation had agreed not to push Obama too hard on the issue.

By contrast, there was little that was nuanced about the Environmental Protection Agency's announcement Friday that carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gases emitted by cars and many industrial plants "endanger public health and welfare."



Unidentified relatives mourn over the body of Bassam Ibrahim, a Palestinian protester shot dead by Israeli forces, during his funeral in the West Bank village of Bilin, near Ramallah yesterday.

US pledges 'great energy' to two-state ME peace deal

AFP, Cairo

US envoy George Mitchell said yesterday that the new administration of President Barack Obama would exert "great energy" in pursuit of a two-state Middle East peace settlement.

"It has been the policy of the United States for many years that the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies in a two-state solution," he told reporters after meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo.

This is "the policy of President Obama and one that we will pursue with great energy," he said, adding that an end to the conflict was "also in the national interest of the United States."

Mitchell, who has been touring the Middle East, met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas earlier in the week.

His message of a two-state solution -- Israel living in security alongside a Palestinian state -- was met with scepticism by some in Netanyahu's hawkish cabinet.

"In the present circumstances, one has to work not for two states for two people, but for two economies for two people," Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai said on Thursday.

Washington has sent a string of envoys to Israel and the West Bank since the 1993 Oslo peace accords which gave the Palestinians limited self-rule but which broke down after an intifada started in 2000.

"We recognise the complexity and difficulties ... We are aware of a lot of history of expectations being raised and then not being met," Mitchell said.

"We will proceed as rationally as possible with a full commitment to our objective: to a comprehensive peace in the Middle East."