

Gordon Brown in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown flew into Islamabad yesterday for talks with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, an AFP reporter said.

The British Prime Minister's plane landed at a Pakistani air force base near Islamabad airport.

Brown, who arrived after a brief visit to Afghanistan, told reporters in Kabul that he would hold talks with President Zardari later on Monday.

'Pak nukes in safe hands'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari said yesterday that Pakistan's nuclear installations are in safe hands.

"All Pakistani nuclear installations are under extra security," he told foreign media in an interview.

"I want to assure the world that nuclear capabilities in Pakistan are in safe hands," he said.

SE Asia will be worst-hit by climate change

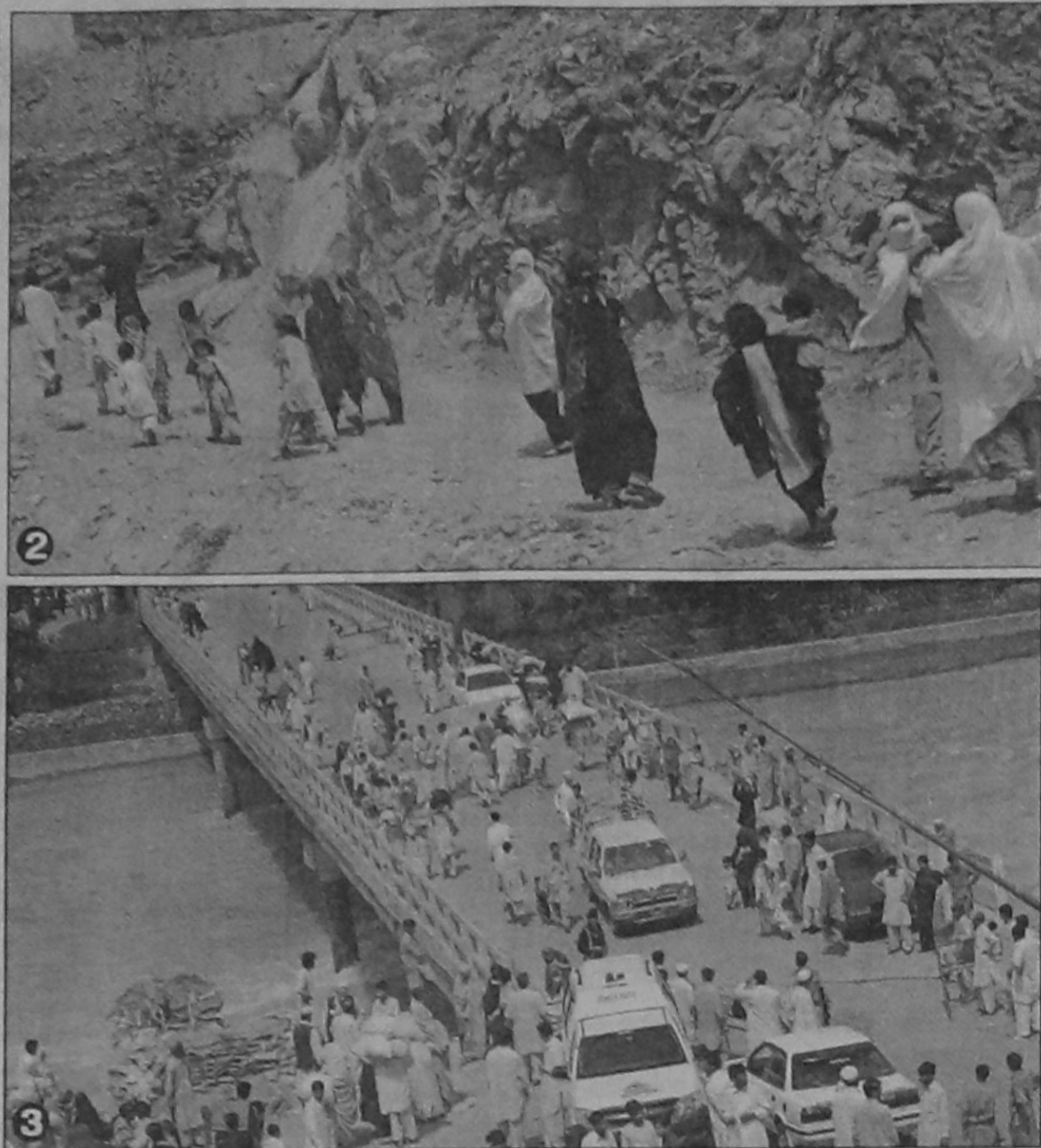
AP, Bangkok

Southeast Asia will be hit particularly hard by climate change, causing the region's agriculture-dependent economies to contract by as much as 6.7 percent annually by the end of the century, according to a study released yesterday.

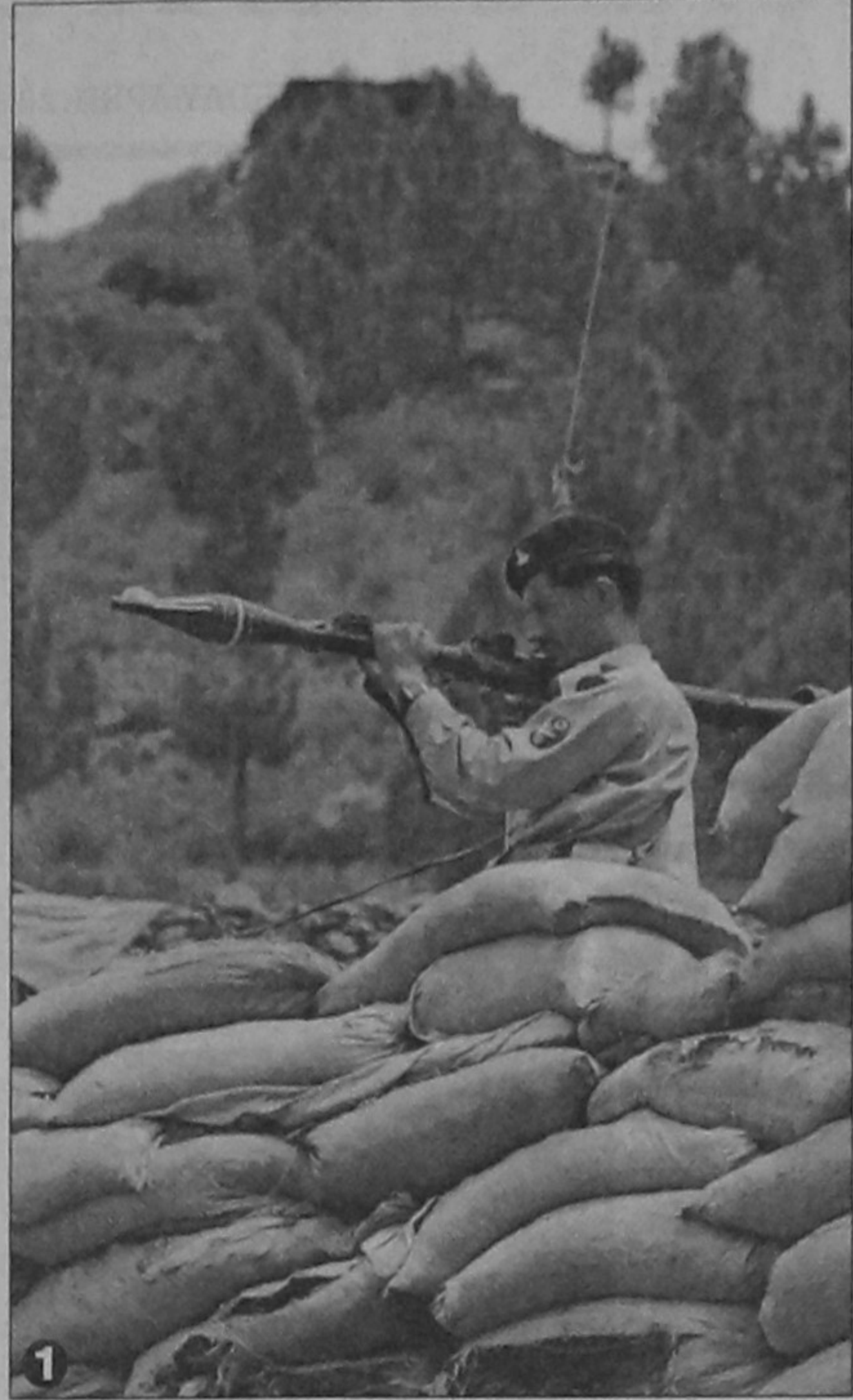
The Asian Development Bank study focused on Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Those countries are especially vulnerable because they have large coastal populations facing rising sea levels and rely heavily on rice and other agriculture products which could suffer from water shortages as well as floods. Vietnam was found to be the most vulnerable.

"Climate change seriously threatens Southeast Asia's families' food supplies and financial prosperity," said Ursula Schaefer-Press, the ADB's vice president for knowledge management and sustainable development. "If Southeast Asian nations delay action on climate change, their economies and people will ultimately suffer."

If nothing is done to combat global warming, the report said that by 2100 the four Asian countries would see temperatures rise an average of 8.6 Fahrenheit (4.8 Celsius) from the 1990 level.



Counter-clockwise (1) A Pakistani soldier poses with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher from a bunker at a troubled area in Lower Dir yesterday as (2 & 3) thousands of residents flee from a troubled Lower Dir as troops killed 20 militants in a ground and air operation against Taliban. The Pakistan Taliban has suspended talks with the government.



Pact with Pakistan is 'worthless'

Says Taliban

AP, Islamabad

The Associated Press.

Taliban militants said yesterday their peace deal with the Pakistani government was "worthless" after authorities deployed helicopters and artillery against hide-outs of Islamist guerrillas seeking to extend their grip along the Afghan border.

A collapse of the pact would likely please Obama administration officials pressing Islamabad hard for more robust action against extremists threatening Pakistan's stability and US and Nato troops in neighboring Afghanistan.

A spokesman for the Taliban in their Swat Valley stronghold denounced the operation as a violation of the pact and said their fighters were on alert and waiting to see if a hard-line cleric who mediated the deal pronounced it dead.

"The agreements with the Pakistan government are worthless because Pakistani rulers are acting to please Americans," Muslim Khan, spokesman for Taliban militants in the Swat Valley, told

President Asif Ali Zardari called for more foreign support for cash-strapped Pakistan to prevent any danger of its nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of al-Qaida and its allies.

In another sign of mounting Western concern, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown was due in Pakistan for talks on topics including cooperating against international terrorism, the British Embassy said.

Zardari also said Pakistani intelligence thought Osama bin Laden recently offered sanctuary by militants in the area covered by the peace pact might be dead, but said there was no evidence of the al-Qaida chief's demise.

"He may be dead. But that's been said before," Zardari told a group of reporters. "It's still between fiction and fact."

The government agreed in February to impose Islamic law in Swat and surrounding districts that make up Malakand Division if the Taliban there would end their violent campaign in the one-time tourist haven.

Sri Lankan army 'to stop shelling' on rebel bases

BBC ONLINE, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops will no longer use heavy weapons or air strikes in fighting against Tamil Tiger rebels in the northeast, the government says.

The statement said the army would focus on trying to rescue civilians. Concern has been rising over civilian deaths.

The rebels are boxed in to a shrinking patch of land which they share with thousands of civilians.

On Sunday the government dismissed a Tamil Tiger ceasefire offer as a "joke," and said the rebels were near defeat.

The statement from the office of the president said combat operations in the civil war between the military and Tamil Tiger rebels had "reached their conclusion."

"Our security forces have been instructed to end the use of heavy calibre guns, combat aircraft and aerial weapons which could cause civilian casualties," the statement said.

"Our security forces will confine their attempts to

rescuing civilians who are held hostage and give foremost priority to saving civilians."

However, the pro-rebel TamilNet web site reports that air strikes have continued since the announcement.

It quoted the head of the Tigers Peace Secretariat, Seevaratnam Puleethevan, as saying that bombers had targeted civilians in Mullivaaykkaal.

No confirmation of the reports is possible as independent journalists are not allowed into the war zone.

An undated photo released by pro-Tamil media yesterday reportedly showed a government air strike inside a no-fire zone and civilians fleeing.

Until now the military and the government have said that they were not using any heavy weapons in this current stage of the fighting and had caused no civilian casualties.

This new statement, however, does appear to acknowledge that civilians have been harmed as aid agencies and the UN have been saying, our correspondent says.

The declaration may signal a radical change of tactics by

government forces in the small war zone to try to avoid such casualties. It may also mean that they feel their final military victory has been achieved, or nearly achieved.

Earlier yesterday, Sri Lankan troops launched a pre-dawn attack on Tamil Tiger-held areas in the north-east, a pro-rebel website reported.

Troops were firing from all sides and more than 10,000 civilians were at immediate risk, TamilNet said.

A military spokesman confirmed that troops were firing, but said they were doing so in self-defence.

The Chief Minister of India's Tamil Nadu state, M Karunanidhi, 85, went on indefinite hunger strike to demand a ceasefire in Sri Lanka. He called it off after the latest news from Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's minority Tamil community has close cultural, religious and business ties with more than 50m Tamils in Tamil Nadu.

Meanwhile, the UN's top humanitarian official, John Holmes, who is in Sri Lanka, wants more access to civilians affected by the fighting.

NEWS ANALYSIS

No clear winner in India polls

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

With nearly half of the 543 seats of Lok Sabha having already been decided, Congress and BJP, the two main contenders for power in the general elections, are tense and appear reconciled to the fact that none of them will win enough seats to rule on their own.

And at the end of the two of the five-phased elections already over, the two parties are also busy reworking their campaign strategies as a fractured mandate is emerging an increasingly distinct possibility.

Elections to 265 parliamentary seats are over in the first two phases of the five-round polling and results will be out on May 16. With the Election But leaders of Congress and BJP are privately edgy about their prospects and the shape of realignment of political forces to come.

Sending a hung Parliament more than ever before, both Congress and BJP are sending stronger signals that they are ready for alliance with "like-minded" parties.

Congress is on record as saying that it is not ruling out post-poll tie-up with Left parties which had withdrawn support to the Congress-led UPA government in July last year. On the other hand, Left parties, particularly CPI(M) leaders, are sending contradictory signals about doing business with Congress.

While West Bengal Chief Minister

Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, a member of CPI(M) politburo, kept ajar the door for working with Congress again, his party general secretary Prakash Karat ruled out supporting a Congress-led government. Karat, however, said Congress should back a "Third Front" government in the event of the latter's having a chance to come to power.

Interestingly, three key constituents of UPANationalist Congress Party led by Sharad Pawar, Rashtriya Janata Dal headed by Lalu Prasad and Lok Janashakti Party led by Ram Vilas Paswan have suddenly started reaching out to Left parties.

Congress is assessing the possible performance by it and its allies in eight key states, which account for more than 250 seats. These states are Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. The CPI (M) is also trying to come constituents of BJP-led NDA.

In the flux of coalition politics, what clearly emerges is that Congress' lead role in heading an alliance is being questioned by some of its own allies in UPA which say that the shape and leadership of a post-poll coalition can be decided only after the election results come out.

The discomfort of Congress, NCP Chief Sharad Pawar has already said that the issue of prime ministerial candidate can be settled only after the elections and

that the electoral arithmetic in terms of number of seats will decide who gets to head the government.

Adding to the discomfiture of Congress, Lalu Prasad did a U-turn on April 21 and said UPA is a confederation of "secular parties" and does not belong to Congress alone. "We will sit together to select a leader who will be the prime minister."

It was the same Lalu Prasad who had said on April 3 that Manmohan Singh will be "our prime minister if the UPA forms the next government after the elections."

The posturings by the Left and Congress' allies have brought into question Congress' attempts to position itself as the undisputed leader of a new anti-BJP coalition after the elections.

On the other hand, in the event of a hung parliament, the regional outfits are certain to raise their own bargaining power.

Congress, however, is hoping that the compulsion to keep BJP from power would come into play after the polls and prompt Left parties and "secular" regional parties to align with it.

However, the question remains: will the old logic of keeping BJP at bay will be enough of a glue to bind all anti-BJP parties in one cohesive unit? Amidst indications that the space for national parties is going to shrink in the elections, regional parties are going to be increasingly assertive and demanding.

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