

58 Aceh rebels killed: Army

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launched its biggest offensive since the 1975 invasion of East Timor following the collapse of last-ditch talks in Tokyo last Sunday aimed at saving a five-month-old peace pact.

Fear of military campaign forces thousands of civilians to flee

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Banda Aceh, May 23 (Reuters): Indonesia today said that 58 separatist rebels in Aceh province have been killed, and 23,000 civilians have fled their homes, since the military began its biggest offensive in years.

An Indonesian military document, seen by reporters today afternoon, listed 58 rebels killed, up from a figure of 38 given in the morning.

Aceh deputy governor Aswar Abubakar said that since Monday when the campaign began — during which the military said rebels had melted into the civilian population — thousands of civilians had fled their homes in Indonesia's western-most province.

"There have been 23,000

the provincial capital Banda Aceh, with rocket fire from helicopters and machinegun and cannon fire from patrol boats.

"We are trying to eliminate the rebels from the air, land and sea. We are trying to prevent them from escaping," Maj. Gen. Endang Suwarya said.

Island resident Leila, who like many Indonesians uses one name, said the military campaign was frightening. "We are scared. Our economic life is very bad and we need aid."

Jakarta declared martial law in Aceh and the military

refugees. Some of them are in North Aceh, Bireun, West Aceh and a few in other places. They won't be evacuated to Banda Aceh," Abubakar said. "Some fear their areas will become operation areas."

Aceh's military commander visited an island off the north Aceh coast today to deliver humanitarian aid to an isolated community that has seen several clashes in recent days with entrenched Free Aceh Movement (GAM) forces.

The military has pounded the island, a half-hour by boat from

GAM has held out for independence instead of the special autonomy Jakarta is offering Aceh, whose four million people practice a stricter kind of Islam than in the rest of Indonesia. The province is rich in oil and gas. The US, Japan and Europe have all urged a resumption of negotiations. Battleground claims could not be easily verified, but there were reports of disrupted transportation, hundreds of burned schools, and growing numbers of refugees and civilian casualties.

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U.N. is still relevant, says Goh

By P. S. Suryanarayana S

SINGAPORE, APRIL 6. Singapore believes that "the U.N. is still relevant", despite the ongoing United States-led war in Iraq without the Security Council's sanction of "a second resolution" which was intended as a sequel to Resolution 1441, which had in the first place spelt out the need to disarm Baghdad of its suspected weapons of mass destruction.

The Singapore Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, will discuss the Iraq situation, among other subjects, with the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, during a three-day state visit to India, beginning on Monday. Mr. Goh's affirmation of the continued relevance of the United Nations, as outlined in an exclusive interview to *The Hindu* here, acquires importance in the context of Singapore's U.S.-friendly stance on the war and the nuances in India's own position.

Mr. Goh pointed out that Sin-

gapore, which had voted for Resolution 1441 as an elected member of the Security Council last year, later hoped to "avert a war" in Iraq through efforts at the U.N. and elsewhere.

The U.S. "would probably look for ways to... re-configure the international security architecture to suit its national interests" in the context of the outcome of the Iraq war. Asked whether the U.N. would then become irrelevant to the international community, Mr. Goh said: "No. I hope not. Because, all countries need the U.N. and the small countries (such as Singapore) in particular. Without the U.N., how do we resolve international issues?... Including Singapore's strategic calculus of the political kind, with reference to the Iraq issue and its perceived relevance to the North Korean nuclear question in East Asia, Mr. Goh said: "You have the U.S. on one side, trying to disarm Saddam Hussein and, on the other

side, Saddam Hussein refusing to disarm... So, we decided to choose a side that wants to disarm another country of its weapons of mass destruction. Why do we do that? Because, if the U.S. fails in its task, I don't think

U.S. can defeat terrorism. Its international prestige would have collapsed (in the event of failure to disarm Iraq). Its (Washington's) credibility would have gone. And, who is going to persuade North Korea, later on, not to proceed with its plan to build nuclear weapons".

For Singapore, which has scored a major scoop in identifying the terror cells of the Jaish Islamiyah (JI) network in South East Asia, a prime concern was that any move by North Korea to "proceed with its nuclear armaments" might create a situation that "would destabilise South East Asia for terrorism".

The key subjects on Mr. Goh's agenda for talks with the Indian leaders may range from

the possibility of launching negotiations on a comprehensive bilateral economic partnership to the idea of a "New Silicon Valley" as also the question of Singapore being able to play a "bridge" between India and China on matters of mutual economic cooperation.

Mr. Goh himself did not spell out the political basis of his vision of a possible trilateral economic linkage among Singapore as also India and China. However, the underlying strategic assumption at this stage appears to be the unspoken expectation that India may not really get sucked into the vortex of a plan, if any at all, by the U.S. to contain China in the foreseeable future, according to observers.

Announcing Mr. Goh's visit, the Singapore authorities said India had been alerted about the current prevalence of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in the city-state and that the Indian authorities wanted the visit to take place as scheduled.

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