

Meanwhile...

For weeks we have been swamped by news of Lebanon, Israel and the liquid bomb plot, crises that have drowned out other reports from around the world. Yet events elsewhere have been scarcely less alarming. Here are some of the things that have happened while we were looking the other way

SRI LANKA

Slipping into all-out war

Meenakshi Ganguly

The half-million residents of the Jaffna peninsula are stranded and their supplies of food, water and medicine are dwindling. According to the UN Refugee Agency at least 170,000 others have been displaced and thousands of them lack food and shelter. A humanitarian disaster, the familiar handmaid of conflict, is in the making.

Just a week after Israel and Hezbollah went to war, a four-year-old ceasefire in Sri Lanka collapsed almost unnoticed. There were air strikes, shelling, ground combat and murders. Many believe that a return to the all-out war between the government and Tamil Tigers that blighted Sri Lanka for 20 years is inevitable.

The conflict flared when the Tigers closed a reservoir sluice gate, cutting off water supplies in a government area. The government reacted with air attacks and an artillery exchange followed. At the same time, government forces have been implicated in massacres, while the Tigers are once again committing suicide bombings in the capital, Colombo.

As the numbers of desperate refugees grew, the bodies of 17 staff members of the international aid organisation Action contre la Faim were found in Muttur, most of them apparently shot execution-style. The identity of the killers remains unknown, but circumstantial evidence points to government soldiers.

On 12 August Kethesh Loganathan, a Tamil human-rights activist, was murdered in an attack that bore the hallmarks of a Tamil Tiger operation – the Tigers do not tolerate moderate Tamil leadership. When I spoke to Loganathan in June, he was depressed about the peace process. “There was a policy of pacification and appeasement of the LTTE [Tamil Tigers] by both the government and the international community which has only encouraged human-rights

violations. It has got to the point where we will end up with multiple sources of violence, including, I fear, sections of the defence establishment running amok,” he said.

Now, while the world gears up for the deployment of 15,000 peacekeepers in Lebanon, most of the tiny contingent of 57 ceasefire monitors in Sri Lanka has simply withdrawn.

What could be done? The EU, the US and India are trying to restore the ceasefire, but that is not enough: we need to disrupt the cycle of abuses that feeds the conflict. The UN could dispatch a team to Sri Lanka to investigate ceasefire violations, and it could approve a strong human-rights monitoring and protection mission that would operate in government and Tiger-held areas alike and would be separate from peace talks. This would not end human-rights abuses but it would deter them. Crucially, it could also help create the space for independent Tamil voices. ● *Meenakshi Ganguly is south Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch*



Under fire: Muslim brothers flee from Muttur, where government forces have clashed with Tamil Tigers

SOMALIA

Courts open old wounds

Rageh Omaar

The past few months have witnessed the most dramatic and profound developments in Somalia since the collapse of the US military intervention 13 years ago, a mission that failed when what should have been a humanitarian project became a “counter-terrorism” operation. The changes emphasise the position of the Horn of Africa at the very heart of the so-called “war on terror” – and yet you could be forgiven for not having spotted a thing about it in the media.

After the withdrawal of US forces, Somalia and its capital were in effect abandoned to the warlords who had driven them out. There was no government, no rule of law. Somalia was a textbook failed state, similar in some ways to Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, though even more chaotic, if that were possible. The warlords plundered the country, did whatever they wanted, and their militias helped themselves to whatever took their fancy.

Earlier this year, however, the warlords were driven out of Mogadishu by a puritanical and radical Islamist movement, the Union of Islamic Courts. Again the parallels with Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban movement and the overthrow of the mujahedin are obvious. As with the Taliban, the Union of Islamic Courts came from the grass roots. Ordinary people had had enough of the warlords and their militias and their failure to provide basic services and the rule of law. The Union’s court system, based on sharia law, began as a way for ordinary people, businessmen and clan leaders to provide local governance and assert some control over the militiamen. Soon it was hugely popular.

Since capturing Mogadishu the Union of the Islamic Courts has pulled the rug from beneath an internationally backed transitional federal government, made up of former warlords and



Local laws rule: Mohamed Shegow, a 19-year-old drug user from Mogadishu, receives 17 slashes from a Muslim cleric in front of a public audience

political leaders. This body had little support and had been unable to set foot in Somalia until recently. There is now a stand-off.

The new regime, if it can be called that, includes a number of openly jihadist and militant Islamists, and this has alarmed other countries, especially neighbouring Ethiopia and its ally the United States. Both have suggested that members of the Union of Islamic Courts are at the very least sympathetic to al-Qaeda and could even be linked to the organisation.

Ethiopia appears unwilling to contemplate leaving the Union of Islamic Courts alone and is making threats and demands. The Union in turn is warning Ethiopia not to meddle in Somalia's domestic affairs. Ethiopia and Somalia have been to war before, and there are already reports (denied in Addis Ababa) of Ethiopian military incursions. The region appears to be drifting towards conflict, and once again foreign powers, including the US, are entertaining the idea of supporting military intervention. ●

IRAQ

US offensive repulsed

Brian Cathcart

After three bloody years and countless deaths, parcelled out daily in the tolls of bombs and gun-fights and the tallies of throats slit in the night, it can be hard to argue that anything much is changing in Iraq. And yet, while world attention has been on other things, important developments have happened, for the worse. This was to be the summer when the Americans finally got a grip on the insurgency in Baghdad, and also on the sectarian war under way there. With US midterm elections due in late autumn, a success of this kind was badly needed, and so in June

US troops were transferred to the city from garrisons across the country to bolster the effort.

The results? July alone brought an astonishing 2,625 bomb attacks or attempted bomb attacks in Iraq – a record. Almost three-quarters of these were aimed against US forces, and though American deaths were slightly down, more than 500 US soldiers were wounded, twice the figure in January. This month there has been a steady flow of mayhem, and it is clear that the US offensive has failed. Worse still for the Americans, according to a recent *New York Times* report, the Pentagon accepts that the insurgents are now stronger in numbers and enjoy wider support than at any time since the invasion in 2003.

Meanwhile, the sectarian slaughter continues and the “low-intensity civil war” between Shias and Sunnis of which Britain’s outgoing ambassador to Iraq, William Patey, warned just weeks ago, appears under way. One hundred people a day are dying by violence in Iraq, according to the country’s health ministry, and most ▶

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