

35 inmates slain in Sri Lanka jail

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (UPI) — Hundreds of inmates at Sri Lanka's maximum security prison rioted and slaughtered 35 jailed Tamils in apparent rage over their demands for a separate state, the government said yesterday.

The massacre on Monday in Colombo's Welikada jail pushed the death toll from four days of ethnic violence to 68.

The unrest spread across the Indian Ocean island formerly known as Ceylon.

Fresh columns of black smoke were seen rising from homes, factories and shops along the 30-km route from the airport to the capital, and air service was limited.

But the government of President Junius Jayewardene announced it would suspend an island-wide curfew today in hopes of restoring normalcy.

The bloodshed began Saturday when

Tamil separatists killed 13 soldiers in an ambush in the northern province of Jaffna, a Tamil stronghold.

The Tamils, mostly ancient residents of Sri Lanka though of southern Indian Hindu origin, have long complained of discrimination by Sinhalese Buddhists. The Sinhalese comprise 70 per cent of Sri Lanka's 15 million people, the Tamils account for about 20 per cent.

The Sri Lanka information ministry's official statement on the jail killings said:

"Several hundred prisoners in the Welikada jail, including re-convicted criminals, defying orders from prison officials, broke into the wards of the detainees, including those convicted under the Prevention of Terrorist Act, and attacked them."

Revising an earlier statement that said 37 Tamils were killed, the ministry said 35 died in the massacre.

The slain inmates included several leaders of the Tamil Tigers, a group battling for a separate Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka.

The dead included Selva Rahagh Yogachandran, nominated to be a member of parliament by the Tamil United Liberation Front, but under death sentence for killing a policeman.

In Colombo, where entire city blocks were in flames Monday, people risked a newly-imposed death penalty for looting to carry away television sets and fans.

Firemen brought a blaze at the State Bank of India under control and said India's diplomatic mission, located on an upper floor, was not seriously damaged.

Army troops and security police turned a blind eye as a few grocery shop owners unlocked their doors to allow frightened citizens to buy provisions.

Most streets, lined with the still-smoldering remains of shops, houses and burned out hulks of cars and buses, remained deserted except for heavily armed troops who took up posts at every intersection.

Sri Lanka's Security Council met and officials said refugee camps would be established for 20,000 Tamil families left homeless by the violence.

The government appealed for calm in radio broadcasts and urged officials to return to their respective districts to help maintain order.

A visit by Bangladesh ruler Hossain Mohammad Ershad was postponed.

In New Delhi, the Indian government said some of its diplomats had been moved out of areas of violence in Colombo after attacks on diplomatic staff resulted in injuries to one person.