

'ME peace begins when Israeli occupation ends'

AFP, Washington

A top Syrian spokeswoman spurned US charges that her country has fomented terror, and insisted Thursday that a lasting Middle East peace can be won only by resolving the Palestinian question.

"The only solution to the Middle East is to end occupation and settlement," said Syrian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Bussaina Shaaban, during a speech in Washington sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations.

With respect to deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, Shaaban said Syria has never harbored affection for the Iraqi regime.

"They sent us explosives and they killed many of our civilian people," she said.

Nevertheless, Syria and other Middle East states have been made apprehensive by the outcome of the war

in Iraq, she said, and are troubled by US motives for undertaking the invasion.

"Where are the (weapons of mass destruction) that were such a big reason for launching this war?" she asked.

"What is going to happen to 170,000 pieces from the Baghdad Museum that constitutes Baghdad's identity and cultural heritage?"

More troubling still is the lack of clarity over US long-term intentions in the Middle East.

"In the minds of people of the region ... (the war in Iraq) is first step in an attempt to reshape the region," she said.

"They are going to take a right step to Damascus and a left step to Teheran, and they are going to reshape the region."

"In many Arab countries," the Syrian official added, (the US occupation) "means the undermining of our indigenous civilization, and the bringing in (of) another, Western civilization that is

not ours."

Shaaban, who shared the podium with US Senator Bob Graham, swept aside the senator's assertion that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization that must be rooted out before Washington and Damascus can enjoy improved relations.

"Hezbollah is a political party whose sole objective is to liberate its territory from the Israeli occupation," she said, noting that some half-million uprooted Palestinians currently live on Syrian territory.

Far from being a state which supports terrorism, the spokeswoman asserted: "Syria has always worked for peace."

With respect to Iraq, she added: "Syria wants a peace that is enduring," she added, "not a peace that comes out of humiliating people, out of defeating people," she told Graham, who until recently chaired the senate's intelligence committee.

Iraqis pick up pieces in quest to rebuild media

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi journalist Akram Kamir would like to finally report free from the all-powerful watch of Saddam Hussein's propaganda machine. But it's hard to broadcast from a studio that is now only a heap of rubble and ashes.

"Perhaps at last we're free to think, but it will take us years to rebuild," he said.

The former director of artistic programming, Kamir has become the self-appointed guardian of Iraqi television's former offices, coming in every day to save any working equipment from looters.

Inside the building, more than 70 percent destroyed in the US-British air campaign, Kamir sifted with his feet through videotapes and torn-up portraits of Saddam Hussein.

Terrorism fears make US scan Muslims closely

PTI, New York

American immigration officials have questioned, fingerprinted and registered in the last five months about 130,000 mostly Muslim men who are nationals of countries from which, the United States says, terrorists could come.

They were questioned at the airports as they entered the country or when they went to register.

The immigration officers were flooded during the last few days with dozens of immigrants from Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Indonesia as today is the last day for them to register. Pakistanis were registered in February.



On a section of a motorway near Hildesheim in the German state of Lower Saxony, German special police engage in talks with a gunman (standing in the open bus door, according to eye witnesses) who is holding bus passengers hostage on Friday. Fifteen passengers and the driver are onboard.

Armed man hijacks German bus carrying 15 people

REUTERS, Berlin

An armed man has hijacked a bus with 15 people on board in the northern German city of Bremen, police said on Friday.

The bus was driving on a motorway toward the city of Hanover, a spokesman for Bremen police said. Police were trying to make contact with the man, the spokesman said.

Police noticed there was something wrong when a man was spotted handling a weapon inside the bus at 9 a.m.

The police spokesman said the man was about 20 years old and of "southern appearance" -- a loose description German police often use for people from southern Mediterranean, Arab or Asian countries.

"We have no information on his motive and no indication that he has used any violence," the spokesman said. "We're trying to contact him."

Chaos as Greek Cypriots swarm into N Cyprus

AFP, Nicosia

UN peacekeepers reinforced Greek and Turkish Cypriot police struggling to control thousands of Greek Cypriots trying to swarm into Turkish-held northern Cyprus Friday.

Hundreds of people aiming to cross the UN-manned Green Line on foot on the third day since Turkish Cypriot authorities opened the border between the two sides jammed the road through the buffer zone at the Ledra Palace checkpoint in Nicosia.

They prevented all but the first handful of some 2,000 mostly full cars waiting to cross from passing through, and almost overwhelmed the Turkish Cypriot police processing the stream of people on the other side.

The Greek Cypriots, who had started arriving at the checkpoint some 10 hours before the crossing opened at 9:00 a.m. (0600 GMT), wanted to use the long Orthodox Church Easter break to revisit homes

they had not seen since fleeing when the Turkish invasion split the island in 1974.

Tempers became frayed, with some shouting, but with the border due to close again at midnight (2100 GMT), many people said they were prepared to wait as long as it took to get through, leaving their vehicles for another night and going home to sleep.

Some 50 troops and police from all the contingents in the peacekeeping force closed the road by the Ledra Palace hotel, a UN headquarters, and started letting people through in batches in a bid to prevent a dangerous stampede.

By mid-afternoon some sort of order had been established, and cars had again started passing through, while Turkish Cypriots going the other way -- who numbered fewer than 800, according to Greek Cypriot police -- were sent round the back of the Ledra Palace.

At the Turkish checkpoint, the mayor of north Nicosia, Kutaly Erk, told AFP that 12 computers had been

installed, compared with two when the border first opened on Wednesday.

But he expected numbers to increase, particularly on Monday, the traditional day of pilgrimage to an Orthodox monastery in the north-eastern Karpas peninsula.

"We were surprised at the numbers coming from the Greek Cypriot side, especially as the Greek Cypriot authorities discouraged them over the question of recognition and told them they were not confident about security," he said.

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkish forces invaded and occupied the northern third in response to a coup by elements of the Greek Cypriot national guard aimed at union with Greece.

Rauf Denkash's Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), recognised only by Ankara, announced surprisingly Monday that it would allow Turkish Cypriots to cross into the south for day trips for the first time since the TRNC was declared in 1983.

US may use rebels to put pressure on Tehran

REUTERS, Dubai

After years of shunning the Iraq-based People's Mujahideen as "terrorists," the United States might use Iran's main rebel group to pressure Tehran as tensions rise between the two countries over post-Saddam Iraq.

Washington has warned Shi'ite Muslim power Iran, which it has labeled as part of an "axis of evil," not to try to exploit a power vacuum left after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

And to make Tehran listen, some

analysts say Washington may use the heavily armed Mujahideen as a sobering reminder.

Shi'ites form at least 60 percent of Iraq's population and many of their spiritual leaders have strong ties to Iran.

"The US is groping to find its bearings on a post-war policy to stabilize Iraq and prevent anything Iran might do in regards to the Shi'ites," said Shireen Hunter of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

"A group like this might come handy."

US officials say Iranian agents have

crossed into neighboring Iraq to promote Iran's influence among Iraq's majority Shi'ite Muslim community.

Secretary of State Colin Powell told Arabic daily al-Hayat it was "regrettable" that the fall of the Saddam government had led to the arrival of Iranians in the south of the country, which he said could lead to instability.

Iran has denied interfering in Iraq. While staying neutral in the war, Tehran has welcomed Saddam's fall, but it has demanded that the United States leave Iraq immediately.

Omar's allies wanted in Kabul

AFP, Islamabad

A gang of four Taliban commanders named by Afghan leaders as possibly hiding out in Pakistan were top allies of the militia's leader Mullah Omar, diplomats and Taliban experts say.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai named the men during a two-day state visit to Pakistan that was dominated by Kabul's quest for more help in apprehending top Taliban believed to have regrouped in Pakistan.

Karzai requested help in hunting the men along their ill-defined 2,450 kilometer (1,519 mile) border during the talks, a Pakistani official told AFP.



Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) soldiers march and bid farewell to residents on Friday in Bunia, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, during their withdrawal from the Ituri region. Uganda began pulling out thousands of troops stationed in DRC's volatile Ituri region today, when 450 soldiers boarded three Antonov cargo planes bound for Entebbe.

First Ugandan contingent of troops leave DR Congo

AFP, Bunia

Uganda on Friday began pulling out thousands of troops it has stationed in Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) volatile northeastern Ituri region.

As about 450 Ugandan soldiers boarded three Antonov cargo planes bound for Entebbe, Uganda's main airport, hundreds of others marched through the streets of Bunia, the main town in Ituri, to bid farewell to the Congolese.

"Today we come here to say bye. We came here to fight our enemies and to help Ituri to achieve peace," Brigadier Kale Kaihura told thousands of people, who gathered at a rally on the town's main street.

"We did what we could and we know that we have so many people who appreciated, but those who did not appreciate, it is their problem," he added in a short emotional speech.

The Ugandans were supposed to use the occasion to hand over the town to forces of MONUC, the UN force in DRC, which, however, was not represented at the ceremony.

The withdrawal, initially planned to start on Thursday, was delayed by a day after a minor mishap at Bunia airport.

"We failed to start on the first day because of an airport mishap when a plane suffered a puncture on one of its tyres and broke down on the runway, making it unsuitable for landing and take-off by heavy aircraft," Kaihura told AFP.

There was further confusion Thursday when Ugandan commanders complained of receiving mixed signals from MONUC regarding the handover.

The Ugandans declined to accept MONUC's request that they stagger their withdrawal so as to synchronise it with their own deployment, saying such a request should be made in writing.