



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli artillery fires towards Lebanon at the Israeli-Lebanese border from the Golan Heights on Friday after the Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah fired weapons at Israeli army posts in the disputed Shebaa Farms area for the first time in seven months. The Israeli army maintained its occupation of the Shebaa Farms area when it pulled out of south Lebanon in 2000. The area was captured from Syria in 1967, but is now claimed by Lebanon with Syria's blessing.

Israel warns Syria, Lebanon over border attacks

Tel Aviv lodges protest at UN after Hezbollah attack

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has stepped up its pressure on Syria and Lebanon to help prevent new rocket attacks on its northern border while it works through a fragile ceasefire with Palestinian militants.

Israeli public radio said yesterday the government had lodged a complaint against the two countries at the United Nations after the first attack by Lebanon-based Islamic radicals in seven months.

The complaint warned that unless Damascus and Beirut use their influence to restrain the Hezbollah militia, Israel would be forced to take steps to protect its citizens, the radio said. It did not elaborate.

Israeli ambassador Danny Gilleran lodged the protest with the UN Security Council, where Syria ironically holds the rotating chairmanship.

Israeli warplanes, helicopter gunships and artillery responded to

the Hezbollah assault on the disputed Shebaa Farms region, formerly part of Syria, now occupied by Israel and claimed by Lebanon with Damascus's accord.

Although no casualties were reported, the Israeli army called the incident "very serious" and vowed in a statement to "act against those who are behind terrorism or support terrorist attacks" against the Jewish state.

The United States also warned Lebanon and Syria against backing new attacks, with State Department spokesman Philip Reeker saying Friday that "the time has come for them to end support for Hezbollah."

The Shiite Hezbollah said it had carried out its onslaught Friday in retaliation for the death of one of its militants in a Beirut car bomb blast last week that it blamed on Israeli agents.

But Israeli officials, who have long feared being caught in a two-front conflict, linked Friday's attack to the precarious ceasefire with

Palestinian militants that took hold six weeks ago.

A senior Israeli official, who asked not to be named, said the assault was prompted by "the frustration felt by Hezbollah and possibly its foreign supporters" over the sharp decline in Israeli-Palestinian violence.

The eruption around the mountainous frontier area Friday was only part of the region's most turbulent day since militant Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad declared a three-month truce on June 29.

An Israeli raid on a suspected bomb factory in the northern West Bank town of Nablus left four Palestinians, including two Hamas militants, and an Israeli soldier dead.

Both sides have expressed fears the truce could unravel, giving way to a new spiral of bloodshed and dealing a crippling blow to a US-sponsored peace roadmap aimed at establishing a Palestinian state by

2005. Hamas political leaders said after the bloody Nablus operation that they were still committed to a ceasefire but leaders of their military wing vowed vengeance.

Officials of the Palestinian Authority see the continued Israeli operations as an impediment to their efforts to keep Hamas and the other militant groups in line.

The Palestinian leadership late Friday called on the quartet which drew up the roadmap -- the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia -- to halt what it termed Israel's "aggressions" which were threatening the truce.

The Israelis, meanwhile, fear that the radicals are using the lull to regroup and rearm and are intent on curbing the Palestinians' capacity to mount any future attacks.

Israeli public television reported late Friday that the Israeli army had arrested 105 Palestinians since the Palestinians proclaimed their ceasefire.

Iraqis riot in Basra over power, gasoline crisis

Bush sees US forces making progress

REUTERS, Basra

British troops in riot gear deployed in Basra yesterday to quell spreading disturbances sparked by shortages of gasoline and power in Iraq's second city, a British military spokesman said.

Witnesses said angry Iraqis threw stones, attacked cars registered in nearby Kuwait and burned tires. Several streets and main roads leading into the city were cut as black smoke rose from the fires.

British forces fired into the air to keep back a crowd at one gasoline station, he said.

The army spokesman said violence broke out outside at least four gasoline stations but he could not confirm that soldiers opened fire.

"We are taking measures to control the crowd," he told Reuters. "We are doing our best to bring about a normalization of the situation."

Shiite Muslim clerics were at the main flashpoint, a gasoline station at Saad Square, trying in vain to convince a crowd of hundreds to stop hurling stones at the troops, witnesses said.

The spokesman said British officers were in contact with local

authorities to contain the situation.

Hundreds of people also marched to the headquarters of the British forces -- once a palace for the deposed Saddam Hussein -- where they demanded the restoration of power and petrol supplies, witnesses said.

Some stones were thrown at the guards.

About 10,000 British soldiers have been policing large swathes of southern Iraq since the US-British invasion in March forced Saddam into hiding and destroyed his government.

Earlier a British military spokesman said there had been trouble at a petrol station in the city and that some Iraqis had stoned and burned a Kuwaiti tanker.

He said British forces rescued the occupants of the vehicle. Another Kuwaiti car was stoned and burned, witnesses said. Witnesses said the crowd was enraged by the lack of petrol at the station and power in the city where summer temperature was over 122 degrees Fahrenheit.

They said the soldiers opened fire in the air after the angry crowd threw stones at them and at the Kuwaiti tanker at the fuel station in

Saad Square. The crowd then set the tanker on fire, they said.

Meanwhile, US President George Bush said Friday US forces were slowly but surely wiping out those responsible for attacks on American troops in Iraq, but he gave no timetable for an end to occupation.

In Baghdad, a senior Iraqi politician said Iraqi and US investigators had leads that could soon uncover who mounted a truck bomb attack on the Jordanian embassy that killed 17 people.

Iyad Allawi, head of the security committee of Iraq's US-appointed Governing Council, told Reuters those responsible for Thursday's blast could be identified within days.

Bush, marking 100 days since he announced major combat in Iraq over, offered an upbeat assessment of the situation despite daily attacks on US troops in which 55 have been killed since May 1.

He was speaking at his Texas ranch after talks there with Vice-President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Richard Myers.

'Britain in favour of new UN resolution on Iraq'

AFP, London

Britain is in favour of a new United Nations resolution endorsing the reconstruction of Iraq, Valerie Amos, British Secretary of State for International Development, indicated in an interview published yesterday.

According to the Daily Telegraph, Amos suggested that the US was drawing up proposals for a new resolution, saying: "The Americans are doing exactly the same thing".

Amos believes that the US, stung by the spiralling cost -- in terms of both money and lives -- of policing Iraq, is beginning to see the benefits of the UN, according to the Telegraph.

Indian MPs in goodwill visit to Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

Some 30 Indian lawmakers and journalists headed Saturday to Pakistan with a message of goodwill in the largest Indian delegation to visit the rival country since the neighbours began mending ties in April.

The group, ranging from maverick low-caste icon Laloo Prasad Yadav to the editor of a right-wing Hindu newspaper, will attend a conference in Islamabad and are expected to meet with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

The delegates left the Indian capital by train for the northern city of Amritsar from where they will go by road to nearby Wagah, the only legal land crossing between the South Asian rivals.



PHOTO: AFP

Doves fly over the peace monument during the memorial service to pray for atomic bomb victims in Nagasaki, western Japan yesterday. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi denied Japan would go nuclear itself Saturday as the city of Nagasaki marked the 58th anniversary of its atomic-bomb devastation with worries over the Korean nuclear crisis.

BJP won't 'sacrifice' govt for Ayodhya temple: Advani

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani Saturday said his Hindu nationalist BJP party would not "sacrifice" its government to meet the demands of hardliners seeking a temple on the ruins of a razed mosque.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, VHP), a hardline movement with close links to the BJP, has repeatedly demanded that the government pass a law to enable the construction of a temple in the northern city of Ayodhya.

But Advani said the government was "not ready to bring a legislation to create a division" in parliament.

The "VHP wants us to bring ... a legislation which will definitely not

get passed in parliament," Advani was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India news agency.

"It (the VHP) wants us to contest elections on this plank. We are not ready to sacrifice the government," Advani told reporters en route to the southern Indian city of Hyderabad.

Hindu zealots in 1992 tore down Ayodhya's Babri mosque, which they say was built over a temple marking the god Ram's birthplace, setting off India's worst Hindu-Muslim riots since independence in 1947 that left more than 2,000 dead.

The temple-building campaign was championed by the then-opposition BJP and Advani still faces court charges for an alleged role in the mosque's destruction.

But the BJP has sought to distance itself from the temple move-

ment since coming to power in 1998. Even though it has enough support to push most laws through parliament, the BJP is aware it could lose some of its two dozen coalition partners if it is viewed as taking an aggressively "anti-Muslim" stance.

The dispute over the Babri mosque site is now before the courts.

Advani said a "real solution" to the row "lies in an agreement between the two communities (Muslims and Hindus), and I am optimistic that it is going to come."

He said the government would bring legislation on a temple "only in case of consensus not only within the NDA (National Democratic Alliance coalition) but also the opposition."

Israeli fencing holds up Palestinian state: Bush

AFP, Crawford

President George W. Bush said Friday that a security barrier being built by Israel around the West Bank could hinder the creation of a Palestinian state.

But the US leader said the barrier was a reaction to "the days when there were terror" in the region.

Bush has called the wall a problem and the United States has warned it is considering financial sanctions against Israel because of the construction.

And Israel said Friday it was exploring alternative routes for the next section of the controversial barrier, which Palestinians consider an attempt to take part of their territory.

Colombian car bomb blast kills 5

AP, Bogota

Suspected rebels set off a car bomb Friday outside a violence-wracked town in eastern Colombia, killing five civilians, including two children, police said.

Four others, including a soldier, were wounded in the explosion near the Saravena airport and a Colombian military base where US Special Forces have been training Colombian troops, Gen. Luis Alfredo Rodriguez said.

A Colombian army patrol was passing by when the bomb exploded, Rodriguez said. A 3-year-old girl and 13-year-old boy were among those killed, he said.

Saravena, 225 miles northeast of Bogota, is in Arauca state, one of Colombia's hottest war zones where rebels and paramilitary forces are fighting over the region's rich oil resources.



PHOTO: AFP

Firemen fight a fire, which has been ravaging the heights of Luceram, southern France on Friday. Forecasters warned yesterday that searing heat wave currently afflicting much of Europe could last for at least another week as fast-moving forest fires raged on across the southern part of the continent.

Mahathir presses for UN reforms to lift world out of war fears

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad pressed Saturday for democratic reforms in the United Nations (UN) so that the world would not always live in fear of war.

Mahathir, a moderate Muslim leader who opposed the US-led Iraq war, said the "risk of being invaded and occupied is real" because no one dared to criticise powerful countries.

He said it was unfortunate that countries had to invest heavily in defence because "warlike predators" remained in the world.

"Peace is possible if we make exceptions for no one in terms of submission to the only international authority that we have, the United Nations," he said when opening a two-day peace conference here.

"It is presently not a democratic organisation, prevented from being so by the very people who preach democracy but it is still the only international authority that we have."

"We have to make it work. And it can work if powerful countries restore its credibility by respecting it and the decisions made by it."

Southeast Asia's longest-serving leader took a swipe at rich countries, saying they developed "state-of-the-art murder weapons" and there was therefore "an itch to test these weapons in real war conditions."

"And so little wars are encour-

aged so these weapons can be tested. Off and on, a fairly major war would be launched deliberately for no very good reason," he said, without making any reference.

"The weapons are gleefully used in these real life tests and their effectiveness are evaluated so that they can be improved and made even more lethal."

But he also condemned Islamic terrorist groups, saying Muslims can only fight in self-defense but "many Muslims invoke Islam when they commit un-Islamic things."

Mahathir, 77, who is due to retire end-October after 22 years in power, renewed a call for the rich to be taxed as part of "affirmative action" to narrow wealth gap between countries and to curb terrorism.

"The world needs affirmative action between countries so that the disparities between rich and poor countries worldwide are reduced and tension minimised," he said.

"Only when wealth is fairly and evenly distributed in the globalised world community, will we be free from the tensions, the bitterness and the anger which make the deprived resort to violence and terrorism."

Mahathir said poor countries need not rely on the rich forever but should be helped through provision of necessary basic amenities.