

Saddam refusing meals again

AFP, Baghdad

Ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and three of his co-defendants on trial for crimes against humanity have launched a new hunger strike, the US military said yesterday.

"Saddam Hussein and his three co-defendants have now refused meals since their evening meal on July 7," said US spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Keir Kevin Curry.

Saddam, his former secret police chief Barzan al-Tikriti, vice president Taha Yassin Ramadan and head of the former revolutionary court Awad al-Bandar, are all on trial over a crackdown against a Shia village following an assassination attempt against the former Iraqi leader in 1982.

"All are apparently protesting the Iraqi High Tribunal procedures and security for the defence attorneys," added Curry.

"Saddam Hussein is drinking coffee with sugar and water with nutrients," he said, adding that all the defendants were in good health and receiving additional medical care.



PHOTO: AFP

A Lebanese soldier stands guard at Rafiq Hariri International Airport in Beirut as smoke billows following Israeli air strikes yesterday. Israeli warplanes bombed Beirut's international airport before dawn yesterday and killed 39 Lebanese civilians in a series of raids after Israel vowed a harsh response to the killing and capture of its soldiers by Hezbollah guerrillas.

World leaders call for restraint in ME

AFP, Paris

World powers pleaded for restraint yesterday to stop the fiercest Israeli-Lebanese clashes in a decade slipping into all-out war.

"Hezbollah doesn't want there to be peace, the militant arm of Hamas doesn't want there to be peace, and those of us who do want peace will continue to work together to encourage peace," Bush said.

Israeli war planes carried out at least 50 raids across Lebanon on Thursday, including on Beirut airport, a day after the killing of eight Israeli soldiers and the capture of two by Hezbollah guerrillas.

Bush, speaking on a visit to Germany, also urged Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad to help pressure Hezbollah to release the Israeli soldiers, adding: "Syria needs to be held to account."

In the Gaza Strip, Israeli jets bombed the Palestinian foreign ministry, wounding 10 children and increasing pressure on the Hamas government over another soldier abducted last month.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, at a joint press conference with Bush, called for a "de-escalation", stressing the starting point had been the capture of the Israeli soldiers.

"The attacks did not start from the Israeli side, but from Hezbollah's side," she said.

At least 39 civilians have been killed since Israel began pounding Lebanon from the land, sea and air. Hezbollah retaliated by firing off a barrage of rockets. One Israeli woman was killed.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has warned of the risk of a "regional war" in the Middle East amid the twin Israeli offensives on southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.

Russia, France, Britain and Italy criticised Israel for its "disproportionate" use of force.

Moscow, a member of the diplomatic quartet on Middle East peace, also warned against the region slipping back into war.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was quoted by the Interfax news agency as warning of a "very dramatic and tragic" outcome to the

Middle East violence.

Moscow condemned the abduction of Israeli soldiers by Palestinian militants and Lebanon's Hezbollah. "All forms of terrorism are completely unacceptable," a foreign ministry statement said, calling for the "immediate and unconditional release" of the soldiers.

"All sides involved in the current events should take rapid measures to stop the region sliding into open conflict."

But Moscow also turned its criticism on Israeli action in Gaza.

"One cannot justify the continued destruction by Israel of the civilian infrastructure in Lebanon and in Palestinian territory, involving the disproportionate use of force in which the civilian population suffers," the Russian foreign ministry said.

In Paris, French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy described the Israeli army strikes on Lebanon as a "disproportionate act of war", warning one consequence could be to plunge Lebanon "back into the worst years of war".

Iraqis take up security in southern province

16 people killed in violence, US chopper crashes

AFP, Samawa

Iraq yesterday took charge of security in the southern province of Muthanna, replacing British and Australian forces in the first such transfer of responsibility in the country.

But in other parts of the country, violence continued with at least 16 people killed. A US military helicopter also crashed southwest of Baghdad.

"I warn you that the terrorists will do their utmost to make this experiment fail, but we promise that we will stand beside you and give you all the support you need," Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki told Muthanna's governor Mohammed Ali al-Hassani at the handover.

Speaking during a colourful ceremony featuring dancing tribesmen and displays of martial prowess from local security forces, Hassani said "the transfer of security will make the Iraqi people understand that the occupation will end."

Coalition forces will, however, remain in the province but will be pulled out of urban areas and largely

assume a supporting and advisory role.

The transfer means that the governor will maintain security with provincial police forces and can call for help from central government, which remains in command of army and national police forces located in the province.

"We saw that in Muthanna province all the conditions required were met so we handed the security to Iraqi forces," said British Major General John Cooper, head of coalition troops in southern Iraq. A US military helicopter crashed southwest of Baghdad on Thursday, the military said, adding that the two pilots survived.

It said the Apache Longbow helicopter was conducting a combat air patrol when it plunged to the ground at about 2 pm (1000 GMT) and that the "cause of the incident is unknown."

In eastern Baghdad a bomb killed five municipal road sweepers, while 11 people were killed elsewhere in the country.

Iran defiant after nuke case goes back to UN

REUTERS, AFP, Tehran/United Nations

The Iranian president said yesterday Iran would not abandon its right to nuclear technology in a defiant statement after Tehran's case was referred back to the UN Security Council in its atomic dispute with the West.

Five permanent Security Council members, the United States, France, Britain, Russia, China, plus Germany have backed a nuclear package aimed at ending the standoff but on Wednesday asked the council to intervene after Tehran failed to reply.

"Our answer to the P5+1 package is clear, the Iranian nation abides by international laws and regulations but will not abandon its obvious right to obtain nuclear technology," President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying by state TV.

He repeated that Iran would give its final response to the package by August 22, despite pressure for a swifter response.

The package offers Iran economic and diplomatic incentives if it suspends uranium enrichment, a process the West believes Iran is using to develop an atomic bomb. Iran has refused to halt the work, saying it has the right to carry it out.

France said world powers would propose a UN resolution over Iran's nuclear activities that could include sanctions if Iran does not give them a positive response by mid-August.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said this would be part of a two-stage process.

"The first is a (UN) resolution as soon as possible, in a few days, to demand the suspension of all sensitive nuclear activity by Iran," he told Europe 1 radio.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (L) and Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas pose with two Palestinian girls in traditional dress for a photograph yesterday during his official visit to the West Bank town of Ramallah, the administrative capital for the Palestinian territories.

Fresh \$30m Japanese aid for Palestinians

AFP, Ramallah

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi unveiled nearly 30 million dollars in fresh aid to the Palestinians on Thursday, urging calm in the full glare of an escalating Middle East crisis. Koizumi announced the new package in humanitarian assistance, to be distributed mainly through UN bodies, when he met Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in the West Bank city of Ramallah amid widening regional chaos.

Tokyo, the third largest donor for the Palestinians after the United States and the European Union, insists the aid will not be used to finance the Hamas-led administration, which is politically and financially boycotted by the West.