

Annan fleshes out plans for Lebanon force

AFP, Brussels

UN chief Kofi Annan fleshed out plans for a UN force for violence-wracked Lebanon yesterday, saying it could help Beirut get a grip on Hezbollah militants behind the upsurge of clashes in the Middle East.

Annan elaborated on his proposals after talks in Brussels with European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana, who was preparing to head back to the region.

If approved by the United Nations Security Council, the proposed new UN stabilisation force would be much bigger than the current 2,000-strong UN force in the country, the UN secretary general said.

"Details will have to be worked out including the concept and the size. I would expect a force which is considerably larger than the 2,000 force that is there," he told reporters.

"I would expect a force that would have a modified and a

different concept of operations," he said in Brussels, where he held talks on the Middle East in the sidelines of a conference on Darfur.

The proposal for an international stabilisation force was made by leaders of the G8 nations -- Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Russia and the United States -- at a weekend summit in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Annan said he hoped the UN Security Council would give the new force a mandate "to help stabilise the situation while the government of Lebanon tries to organise itself and ... prepare its army to extend its authority" in the southern part of the country.

He said that would give the Lebanese government "time for them to sort out the disarmament of the militia," which triggered the current upsurge of violence by seizing two Israeli soldiers.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said Monday that the force

must have more bite and "far greater" numbers than Unifil, set up in March 1978 to oversee the volatile border region between Lebanon and Israel.

Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi talked of 8,000 troops, but the United States has appeared cautious, stressing that all the leaders had done was to ask the United Nations to consider deployment.

European Commission head Jose Manuel Barroso reiterated that a number of European Union countries have said they stand ready to participate in such a force.

"This is crucially important and we hope that we can help the parties avoid an escalation of violence. We are very concerned with the situation there," said Barroso.

Annan welcomed the EU commitment.

"I would expect contributions from the European countries and countries from other regions," he said, adding that the UN Security

Council "will have to discuss this and define a specific mandate" for the force.

But the UN chief stressed the need in the short term to curb the upsurge of violence, which was triggered by the seizure of two Israeli soldiers for Hezbollah militants in Lebanon.

"I'm extremely concerned about developments on the ground ... It is urgent that the international community acts to make a difference on the ground," he said.

Meanwhile, the EU's Solana pushing ahead with his efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the violence said that he was preparing to head back to the Middle East following a snap weekend trip to Lebanon.

"I have been there a few days ago and I may be continuing the trip in the coming hours," the EU's top diplomat told journalists.

His spokeswoman said that Solana was expected to leave late Tuesday but declined to specify his destination.



Residents look for their belongings among the wreckage of collapsed houses in Pangandaran yesterday after a strong earthquake triggered a tsunami, which hit the resort. At least 343 people were killed by the tsunami waves in Indonesia's Java Island.



A Lebanese Shia man frees a pigeon from the rubble of a destroyed house in Beirut's eastern Shouwayfat suburb yesterday as Israeli attacks on Lebanon continues for the seventh consecutive day.

Taliban threatens major offensive

Rebels drive Afghan forces out of one district

AFP, Kandahar

Taliban militants vowed yesterday to intensify their insurgency with fresh attacks and suicide bombings, saying they would shortly take control of southern Afghanistan.

"During these operations which will begin today or tomorrow, we'll take most of the districts in southern and south-central Afghanistan," purported Taliban spokesman Mohammad Hanif told AFP.

The threat came as the Afghan government confirmed that the rebels had forced government forces out of at least one district in the troubled southern province of Helmand late Monday.

The Taliban was holding at least one district in southern Afghanistan yesterday as the US-led coalition said it had "seriously disrupted" elements of the rebel leadership.

The militants had taken over southernmost Garmser district in Helmand province after days of fighting, the president's office told reporters in the capital, confirming claims by district officials.

"After 16 days of brave resistance, our police -- who numbered only 42 people -- had to pull back," said presidential spokesman Karim Rahimi.

"After they left the area, eight vehicles loaded with Taliban came from across the border and took the district," he said. The remote desert province borders Pakistan.

Other officials said the Taliban had stormed the Naway-i-Barakzayi district, to the north of Garmser, on Monday and were in control for a few hours before being pushed back after heavy clashes. Rahimi could not confirm this.

Nations mobilise for mass evacuations

Aid agencies to help poor nations evacuate nationals

AFP, Paris/ Geneva

Tens of thousands of foreigners were fleeing Israeli bombardments of Lebanon yesterday, as outside powers organised helicopters, warships, ferries and buses in a vast campaign of evacuation.

With Beirut's airport out of operation, many foreign nationals escaped by bus to Syria as others were taken away by ship or helicopter to Cyprus.

Israel has imposed an air and sea blockade around Lebanon but has said it will co-ordinate with foreign governments to allow their terrified nationals to leave.

In London, Prime Minister Tony Blair said Britain now has six ships in the region. They include the Royal Navy flagship, the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious, and an amphibious assault ship, HMS Bulwark.

"We have taken out of Lebanon

the first 60 people and that was done yesterday. The first ship will come today so obviously we can take far larger numbers out," he told parliament.

A chartered French ferry with 900 people aboard docked overnight in Larnaca, Cyprus, and was awaiting authorisation to return for more evacuees.

An Italian vessel -- with 186 Italians, 58 Lebanese and 49 Swedes and a new-born baby on board -- docked there late Monday.

The United States -- which flew 43 people out of Lebanon Monday on military helicopters, most of them children, elderly and sick people -- has chartered a ship capable of carrying 750 passengers from Lebanon to Cyprus.

The United States has an estimated 25,000 passport-holders in Lebanon. Russians fleeing southern

Lebanon described a harrowing journey along deserted and bombed roads to Beirut as others returned safely to Moscow from the Palestinian territories.

Meanwhile, international aid agencies said yesterday that they were stepping in to help tens of thousands of people from poor countries escape war-torn Lebanon.

Jemini Pandya, spokeswoman for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), told journalists that the Geneva-based body had rushed a team to Lebanon to take stock of the situation and establish how many people needed to be evacuated.

Pandya said that the IOM had been approached by governments including Bangladesh, the Philippines and Sri Lanka to help their nationals who want to leave Lebanon.

Israel vows to fight Palestinians until end of terror

AFP, Gaza City

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed Monday to fight the Palestinians until terrorism stops, as Israel ploughed on with its Gaza offensive, bombing the foreign ministry to ruins and killing two people.

Israel has shown little reprieve in the three-week offensive, launched with the twin aims of retrieving a corporal abducted by Hamas militants and stopping rocket fire.

Tanks and troops are in the northern town of Beit Hanun conducting what is their deepest Gaza incursion since withdrawing from the impoverished territory barely 10 months ago, closing the doors on a 38-year occupation.

Yet "Operation Summer Rain" has left at least 87 Palestinians and one Israeli soldier dead since July 5.

Israel opened up a second front after Hezbollah captured another two soldiers last week and has pounded Lebanon with air strikes for six days, killing more than 200 people and seeing world leaders scramble to head off all-out war.

Yet Olmert vowed no let-up in Israel's deadly offensives against either Hamas or Hezbollah, addressing himself to MPs in parliament.

"We will fight the Palestinians without fail until terrorism stops, until Corporal Gilad Shalit is returned safe and sound, and Cassam rocket fire ceases," he vowed.

"We will not cease our operations. In both cases, in Lebanon and in the Gaza Strip, this is an act of self-defence, because the nation is at a moment of truth," added the premier, who is facing the biggest test of his leadership.

Pacific 'Ring of Fire' unleashes yet another disaster

AFP, Jakarta

The earthquake that rocked Java and unleashed another deadly tsunami was the latest disaster in the so-called Pacific "Ring of Fire" that has seen a burst of seismic and volcanic activity this year.

Less than two months ago the central Indonesian region was hit by a 6.3-magnitude quake that killed more than 5,800 people and increased activity at Mount Merapi volcano which was already on high alert for a major eruption.

Each new temblor adds to the infamy of the so-called Ring of Fire, the volatile edges of the north Pacific both on land or undersea that are bounded by the east Asian rim and the west coast of the Americas.

Some of the most dramatic natural disasters of recent history have happened within the Ring's arc, which stretches from Chile,

north to Alaska and then west to encompass Japan, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands.

From the nuclear-like explosion of Krakatoa volcano off the coast of Indonesia in 1883 to the Indian Ocean tsunami that killed 220,000 across 11 nations in late 2004, the Ring's awesome power is legend.

Indonesia suffered the heaviest casualties in the 2004 tsunami disaster, which was triggered by a 9.3-magnitude submarine earthquake off Sumatra island.

The 2004 tsunami was followed by an 8.7-level quake just 160 kilometres (100 miles) to the south on March 28 2005, killing more than 600.

Other large scale disasters within the Ring were the eruption of Mount St Helens in the United States in 1980, the freak quake that felled much of San Francisco in 1906 and the one that devastated Kobe, Japan, in 1995.



People participate in a demonstration on Monday in Marseille, south of France denouncing Israeli attacks and urged the international community to help protect Lebanon.

Couple makes false body claim for cash in India

AFP, Mumbai

An Indian couple falsely claimed and cremated the body of a victim of the Mumbai train blasts to collect more than 2,000 dollars in compensation, according to reports yesterday.

Sagar Thakur, 28, claimed a 60-year-old victim was his father, held a funeral and received the 100,000 rupee (2,150 dollar) cheque from the state government the following day, newspapers said.

His alleged crime was uncovered when the dead man's son realised Jitendra Gandhi's body was not among those in any hospital following the July 11 blasts that killed 182 and injured nearly 900.

Police showed the victim's son, Mitul Gandhi, photographs of the deceased and he recognised his father and realised his body had already been taken away.