

Asian evacuation from Lebanon flounders

AFP, Hong Kong

Asian governments struggled yesterday to evacuate nationals from war-torn Lebanon, with some coming in for criticism, as the Philippine president asked for 30,000 Filipinos trapped by the conflict to be spared.

President Gloria Arroyo, facing criticism for failing to do enough for the stranded Filipinos, many of whom are female domestic workers, insisted her government was doing everything it could.

But Filipino officials have conceded they are unable to evacuate thousands of people on their own and have asked foreign governments for help.

"The Philippines makes a special appeal to all combatant forces to spare Filipino nationals who have no wish other than to be taken out of harm's way," the president said in a statement.

"In the name of humanity, I ask the combatants not to harm them," she added, while appealing for other countries to "help us in the evacuation process."

Manila radio and television stations have heard emotional appeals from Filipinos stuck in the

conflict zone.

"I am very afraid. I have not slept since the bombings began," said domestic worker Virgie Valencia from Beirut.

The foreign ministry said a majority of the workers wanted to stay with their employers and the decision on evacuation was up to them. But Connie Regalado of support group Migrante International denied most Filipinos wanted to stay.

"There is just neglect in the slowness by which the government responded," Regalado said as she led families of workers stuck in

Lebanon in a protest outside the ministry.

Criticism of Australia's evacuation effort also mounted Thursday. The effort has suffered several setbacks, including the failure of a chartered ferry to arrive at Beirut's port Wednesday because it was double-booked.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said hundreds more Australians were left stranded on the dock after Israel refused to extend a deadline and guarantee a Greek navy rescue ship safe passage.

He said six ships were sched-

uled to arrive in Lebanon from Friday to evacuate around 6,000 Australians, providing the ships could get into Beirut's packed port.

"People have the impression that the evacuation is a farce and the government does not care," Keysar Trad, the outspoken founder of the Islamic Friendship Association of Australia, told AFP.

Sections of the Australian press were also critical. "Exodus descends into farce," said The Sydney Morning Herald in its front-page headline.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard rejected criticism.

Every home storing arms now a target Israel warns Gaza civilians

AFP, Gaza City

Israel yesterday pursued its air and ground offensive in the Gaza Strip, where it has killed nearly 100 people in three weeks, and warned civilians that every home storing weaponry was now a target.

Ignoring international calls for restraint, Israel has vowed to continue its Gaza assault, launched to free a captured soldier and stop rocket attacks, and also its operation in Lebanon targeting Hezbollah militants, "without time limit".

"The life of all those who are holding military equipment and

ammunition in their homes is in danger and they should leave the premises for their safety and that of their families," warned Israeli leaflets dropped on the Gaza Strip. "The Israeli defence force will strike and destroy all sites and buildings housing ammunition and military materiel."

The Israeli campaign in the impoverished Gaza Strip has already killed 97 Palestinians. The latest was killed on Thursday in the central Gaza Strip refugee camp of Maghazi where Israeli fire also wounded six others. Troops have been operating in the region for the past two days.



PHOTO: AFP

Foreign nationals gather in the southern Lebanese port city of Tyre yesterday in order to be evacuated from Lebanon by a Cypriot vessel. The city has been among the worst hit by the Israeli offensive which entered its ninth day.

Tsunami aid efforts shift into gear

AFP, Pangandaran

Aid efforts for Indonesian tsunami survivors intensified yesterday, a day after another tsunami alert triggered panic on the country's main island of Java.

Search and rescue helicopters hovered along the battered coast of this small resort town, which bore the brunt of the fury unleashed by Monday afternoon's tsunami along a 200-kilometre (120-mile) stretch of Java's south coast.

Nerves remain frayed after panicked residents rushed to higher ground on Wednesday, when rumours swirled of another impending wall of water.

Separately, residents on Java's west coast and Sumatra's south coast were told to be on alert Wednesday

evening after a 6.2-magnitude quake struck under the Sunda Strait between the two islands.

While experts later said the quake had posed no threat, about two hours after it struck water surged at Anyer beach on Java's southwest coast and entered a housing area, prompting people to flee to high ground, Koran Tempo newspaper reported.

In Pangandaran Lieutenant Colonel Tri Yuniarto, coordinator of the army's 350-strong rescue team, said an eight-man team armed with satellite phones and walkie-talkies was monitoring the sea to prevent fresh rumours.

He also said he had ordered his men to finish collecting bodies trapped under the rubble of collapsed buildings by next Monday.



PHOTO: AFP

Fishermen fix their fishing nets in Pangandaran yesterday, three-days after strong earthquake-triggered tsunami hit south coast of Java island. Aid efforts cranked into higher gear to assist Indonesian tsunami survivors a day after another tsunami alert triggered panic on the main island of Java.

Numbers of displaced Iraqis rise sharply

REUTERS, Baghdad

Raging sectarian violence has forced a sharp increase in the number of Iraqis fleeing their homes this month, the government said yesterday.

Ministry of Displaced and Migration spokesman Sattar Nowruz said there was a "dangerous" rise of about 32,000 internal refugees over the past three weeks to a total of about 162,000 in five months.

A day earlier the United States and United Nations sounded alarm bells over a slide to sectarian civil war.

"These families were threatened in different parts of Iraq and that is what forced them to leave their homes. We consider this to be a dangerous sign," Nowruz said.

The ministry figures include only those who formally ask for aid within the country, some of them living in tented camps. By excluding thousands fleeing abroad or quietly seeking refuge with relatives, officials accept the data is an underestimate.

The figure of 162,000, a calculation based on the ministry's data of 27,000 families, is the number of those claiming aid since the February 22 bombing of a Shia shrine in Samarra sparked a new phase of killing by Shias and minority Sunni groups.

Much of the latest increase was people fleeing into Baghdad, Nowruz said. Many are leaving the violent and religiously mixed areas around the capital for solidly Shia or Sunni districts inside the city.