

Thousands flee spectre of Israeli invasion in south

AFP, Mimes /London

With Israel massing thousands of soldiers near the Lebanese border in apparent preparation for an invasion, diehard residents of southern Lebanon who had been defiantly staying put were finally joining the exodus north yesterday.

"We resisted for 10 days with just the basics in our houses, with little to eat, but I decided to leave because Israel is thinking of launching a ground offensive in Lebanon," said Mohammad Hammud, 60.

He was in a car with his wife and their five children, part of a convoy of 20 vehicles adorned with white flags taking advantage of a relative lull in Israel's bombardment to join the estimated 300,000 other people who have fled their homes in the region.

Hundreds of other vehicles were also in the area, using mainly narrow secondary roads chosen to avoid main routes constantly targeted by Israeli jets and to get around the destruction of bridges along the way.

"We want to save our lives and we don't know where we're going to find refuge," Hammud said.

Fatima Kaban, a 55-year-old mother fleeing with her children from the border village of Mais al-Jabal, pointed to the white handkerchief she had tied to the antenna of her car.

"This isn't a sign of defeatism, as the Israeli enemy might believe, but a means of ensuring our survival -- that of my four children," she said, her face heavy with fatigue.

Her village, Kaban added, "has become a ghost town. Most of the homes are destroyed or badly damaged and the roads are holed."

The road she and other cars were using was "particularly dangerous," locals said, because it passes close along the border and is under Israeli surveillance.

Alli Mansour, from the village of Taibeh, wistfully recalled the day six years ago that Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon after 22 years of occupation.

"We ran out in the street, making

the signs of victory, right up to the (border) gate which closed behind the last Israelis," he said.

"Now the situation is reversed. We are running away, with fear in our gut, hastily abandoning our villages. Our worries are over the small things -- finding a can of petrol on the black market so we can get to somewhere safe."

According to the police, 90 percent of the population of the villages directly on the border with Israel have fled, amounting to some 80,000 people.

"Those who don't run away will certainly die -- by hunger, by thirst or by the Israeli bombardments," Mansour said.

Zeinab al-Assaad, 40, also from Taibeh, said life had been hell since the Israelis began their attacks on July 12.

"The Israeli war is war against humanity. We were without electricity, without water, without bread. Only a rain of Israeli bombs that wreaked destruction everywhere," she said.

Hezbollah using Viet Cong-style defences: Jane's

Hezbollah is proving a tough opponent for Israel because of their Viet Cong-style network of tunnels in southern Lebanon, the authoritative Jane's Defence Weekly magazine said Friday.

The Shia Muslim militia has launched hundreds of rockets on towns in northern Israel and is seemingly still capable to carry on with the rocket strikes despite a punishing bombardment by the Jewish state, Jane's said.

Alon Ben-David, a Jane's Defence Weekly correspondent, said that intensive Israeli air raids had done limited damage to Hezbollah's defensive fortifications, despite IDF special forces launching small incursions into Lebanese territory.

"The Israeli forces have discovered that Hezbollah has established a Viet Cong-style network of tunnels and trenches close to the Israeli border, providing shelter for its operatives and their weapons," said Ben-David.



Lebanese displaced people take refuge at the municipality park in the southern coastal city of Saidawho yesterday. They fled border villages in south Lebanon after warnings that Israel may step up its war against Hezbollah with a ground offensive.



An Israeli soldier talks on his radio as tanks and armoured personnel carriers prepare to enter southern Lebanon from a position located along the Israeli-Lebanese border yesterday.

Mass evacuation from Lebanon to Cyprus gathers speed

REUTERS, Larnaca

Ships and aircraft toiled through the night into Saturday whisking more shell-shocked fugitives from the fighting in Lebanon to safety in Cyprus in a mass evacuation now exceeding 25,000 people.

Cypriot Foreign Minister Georgios Lillikas, inspecting a French-chartered boat in Larnaca port that had just brought in 1,200 people, said he expected many more evacuees to arrive on the tiny holiday island, straining its limited resources.

"We expect the number to triple in the coming days. There are more than 60,000 to 70,000 to be evacuated through Cyprus," he said as he toured the lera Petra with Catherine Colonna, France's

minister for European affairs.

Colonna praised Cyprus's handling of the crisis.

"Things are moving as smoothly as possible... I think the situation here is really under control," Colonna said.

Asked about Cyprus's appeal for help from its European Union partners in moving evacuees home, she said: "I hope the answer is swift and positive... This is an enormous burden on Cyprus."

Conditions on the boat were cramped, with people lying on sheets on the floor. Long queues had formed outside the toilets.

Officials said the French humanitarian agency Medecins Sans Frontieres planned to send 60 metric tons of emergency aid through Cyprus to Lebanon.

UN members press for Lebanon truce

AFP, United nations

Speakers at a UN Security Council debate on Friday demanded a quick end to the bloodshed in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip as UN relief coordinator Jan Egeland announced a trip to the region to assess a worsening humanitarian crisis.

But UN envoy Vijay Nambiar, whose three-member mediation team just returned from the region, pointed to "serious obstacles to the achievement of a comprehensive ceasefire in the immediate future" in the deadly fighting between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Nambiar said that some form of "cessation of hostilities" as called for by UN chief Kofi Annan Thursday was "essential so that captives are protected, humanitar-

ian access is assured, civilian casualties are dramatically reduced, and the political space is opened to negotiate a full and durable ceasefire."

Briefing the 15-member Security Council on efforts to end the bloodshed in Lebanon, Israel and the Gaza Strip, he also appealed to ensure humanitarian access to civilians trapped in the Lebanon fighting.

At least 341 people have been killed and more than 500,000 displaced in Lebanon since the start of the Israeli offensive against Hezbollah targets 10 days ago. The worst cross-border fighting in a quarter century has also killed 33 Israelis.

As an indication of the grave humanitarian crisis, Egeland

announced that he would travel to Lebanon later Friday.

Israel has imposed an air and sea blockade on Lebanon, put its only international airport out of action, and bombed roads, bridges, and buildings.

Thousands of Lebanese, in cars, trucks and minibuses, are still fleeing southern Lebanon, where the massive bombardment has raised fears of a shortage of food and medicines.

Egeland told reporters that he had asked Israel to allow humanitarian routes through northern Lebanon to Beirut by road, unimpeded entry points for seabound cargo through Tripoli, Tyre and Beirut, and the reopening of Beirut international airport to humanitarian flights.

LTTE ultimatum may push monitors out

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels are being unreasonable in demanding the exit of truce monitors from European Union nations, and the observers will have to pull out unless their safety is guaranteed, a top Swedish envoy said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have given monitors from EU nations -- Sweden, Denmark and Finland -- until Sept. 1 to leave Sri Lanka in light of a new EU ban against them, which analysts warn would leave a dangerous vacuum as growing violence kindles fears of renewed civil war.

Before the ban the Tigers had warned they would not be able to guarantee the safety of monitors who travel aboard navy ships, but it is not yet clear what will happen if the unarmed Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) ignores their demand.

"If they can't guarantee their safety, it means they cannot accept us, and then it's not only the safety it is also the working conditions for the Swedish, Finnish and Danish members," visiting Swedish Ambassador-at-Large Anders Oljelund told Reuters in an interview late on Friday.

"Then we will have to pull out," he added. "If LTTE sticks to their decision to exclude three northern countries for these reasons from

the mission, I think the work of the mission will be hampered and I think also the credibility of the mission will be reduced."

The rebels insist 37 monitors from the three countries must leave, which would leave just 20 from Norway and Iceland -- not enough to properly oversee a 2002 truce.

The Tigers rejected Oljelund's plea on Friday to reconsider their decision.

Tiger political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan told Reuters this month the rebels would only review their position once the EU removes them from their list of terrorist organisations.

"I can understand the reaction of the Tigers. They perceive this (EU) decision as a ban of their whole organisation. They don't see that there is any balance," Oljelund said on his return from a visit to the Tigers' northern stronghold of Kilinochchi.

"But I think it is unreasonable still, because also the Tigers must little by little be able to look upon themselves (and see) this is a wider peace process in which the international community... must be taken into consideration."

The monitors themselves say opinions range from withdrawing the mission to ignoring the LTTE demand and continuing work as normal -- a dangerous option after close shaves during attacks.

Indo-US nuke deal bill introduced in Senate

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

The process for Congressional approval of the Indo-US nuclear deal got underway with the introduction of the enabling legislation in the Senate.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Republican Chairman Richard Lugar had reported the Bill on Friday to the Upper House that would permit resumption of exports of nuclear materials, equipment, and technology to India after 30 years.

Lugar's counterpart on the House International Committee, Henry Hyde, is expected to introduce its own version of the enabling legislation before the full House early next week.

The House panel had approved a slightly different version of the Bill by an equally huge 37-5 margin.

Once approved by the two Houses, the legislation will have to go to a Conference Committee to work out a common language as a Bill cannot become a law until it has been approved in identical form by both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Reflecting a common intent, both suggest a two-step vote for the final Congressional approval of the nuclear deal that both agree would become a cornerstone for US-India relations.

Iraq holds reconciliation talks amid scepticism

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders met in a show of sectarian and ethnic solidarity yesterday before a White House visit by the prime minister, but some were pessimistic about the chances of tackling rising sectarian bloodshed.

The biggest party from the Sunni Arab community, which forms the backbone of a raging insurgency against a Shia-led, US-backed government, did not join the talks.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki will visit Washington to meet President Bush on Tuesday and they are expected to discuss ways of improving security in Baghdad, which is gripped by sectarian violence fuelling fears of civil war.

Maliki, a tough-talking Islamist, strongly urged Iraqis to embrace peaceful politics during a break from the talks in Baghdad's heavily fortified government headquarters.

"Those who oppose the political process want to return to dictatorship," he told a news conference, standing beside the president, a Kurd, and the Sunni speaker of parliament.

So far, Maliki's 24-point reconciliation plan, long on promises but short on details, has failed to stem the rising violence, which kills between 30 and 50 people in Baghdad alone every day.

A senior US official said in

Washington on Friday that one option for improving security is to bring more US and Iraqi forces into the capital.

The largest Sunni political bloc, the Iraqi Accordance Front, did not show up for Saturday's meeting, and one Sunni parliamentarian said this was for "administrative" reasons.

He also said Sunni leaders have little hope that the talks will help ease divisions. "There have been previous meetings and they have led to nothing," said the parliamentarian, who asked not to be named.

Iraqi leaders have admitted they despair of being able to avert all-out civil war.

"Iraq as a political project is finished," a top government official told Reuters on Friday -- anonymously because the coalition led by Maliki remains committed in public to a US-sponsored constitution preserving Iraq's unity.

Iraqi and US officials now believe sectarian militias are killing more Iraqis and pose a greater security threat than the insurgency -- though this is still a major destabilizing force.

Sunnis accuse Shia militias of running death squads and Iraqis fear they could be kidnapped or killed at any minute in the communal violence.



A Lebanese boy is carried on his father's shoulders as over 10,000 mostly Lebanese-Australians marched through the streets of Sydney yesterday against Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Gaza and called for a United Nations backed ceasefire.