

Bush still opposed to ME ceasefire

AP, Washington

White House officials said President Bush remains opposed to an immediate ceasefire to stop violence in the Middle East, despite personal pleas from ally Saudi Arabia that he help stop the bloodshed.

Saudi King Abdullah beseeched Bush to intervene in Israel's military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, where the death toll is approaching 400 after less than two weeks of bombing. Abdullah's request was hand-delivered to Bush by Saudi officials who requested a meeting Sunday at the White House.

"We requested a cease-fire to allow for a cessation of hostilities," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal told reporters as he departed the West Wing.

"I have brought a letter from the

Saudi king to stop the bleeding in Lebanon, and there has been an agreement to save Lebanese lives, Lebanese properties and what the Lebanese have built, and to save this country from the ordeal it is facing," Saud said.

Saud's comment reflected Bush's past statements that all want the violence to stop. But Bush has refused to press for an immediate ceasefire.

"Our position on an immediate cease-fire is well known and has not changed," said White House national security spokesman Frederick Jones.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also participated in the Oval Office meeting before departing for Israel in the first US diplomatic effort on the ground since Israel began bombing Lebanon on July 12. The fighting has killed hundreds in Lebanon and dozens in Israel.

On the way to a refuelling stop in Ireland, Rice discussed the possibility of working with Syria to resolve the crisis. In recent weeks, the Bush administration has blamed Syria, along with Iran, for stoking the recent violence by encouraging Hezbollah to attack northern Israel.

"The problem isn't that people haven't talked to the Syrians. It's that the Syrians haven't acted," she said.

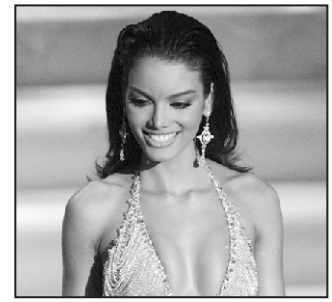
"It's not as if we don't have diplomatic relations," she said. "We do."

Officials from the United Nations, Europe and other Arab countries have already urged an end to the fighting. Rice and Bush have rejected calls for an immediate cease-fire, saying it does not make sense if the terrorist threat from Hezbollah is not addressed. They have said Israel has a right to

defend itself from terrorism and Hezbollah must return two captured Israeli soldiers and stop firing missiles and rockets into Israel if they want the fighting to stop.

For years, the Saudis have been among the United States' closest allies in the Arab world, despite strains from US pressures aimed at increasing democracy in the conservative kingdom.

Nail al-Jubeir, a Saudi embassy spokesman, said the Saudis would not release the letter or get into other details of the proposal because it was a private communication between Abdullah and Bush. Asked whether the Saudis requested that Bush directly pressure Israeli leaders for a cease-fire, al-Jubeir said they cannot tell the president whom to telephone. But he noted Bush has a unique influence to negotiate with Israel.



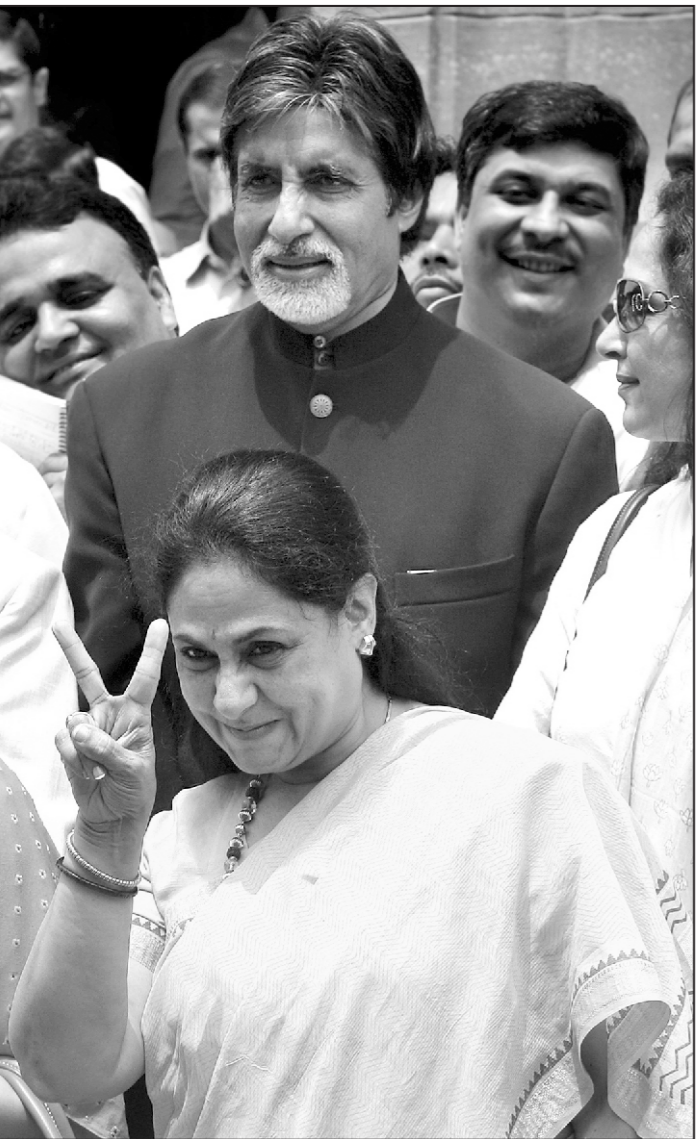
Miss Puerto Rico Zuleyka
Miss Puerto Rico crowned Miss Universe
AP, Los Angeles

An 18-year-old from Puerto Rico who hopes to someday star in US and Latin American films was crowned Sunday night as Miss Universe 2006.

Zuleyka Rivera Mendoza shared a nervous emotional hug with first runner-up, Kurara Chibana of Japan, moments before the winner was announced, then clasped her hands to her mouth in amazement as her name was called.



A Lebanese man walks amidst rubble at his destroyed southern Beirut neighbourhood yesterday following Israeli air strikes. The Israeli air force is under orders to blast 10 buildings in south Beirut, a Hezbollah stronghold, for every rocket the Shia militant group fires at the Israeli port of Haifa, army radio said yesterday.



Member of the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of Parliament, Jaya Bachan (C-bottom) shows a victory sign as her film-star husband Amitabh Bachchan (C-top) looks on during the monsoon session of Parliament in New Delhi yesterday. The arrival of superstar Amitabh Bachchan during the session virtually threw the security out of gear, as he was mobbed by a large number of onlookers as well as journalists especially from the electronic media.

Israel targets Gaza weapons facilities

Tank fire kills 3 Palestinians

REUTERS, AFP, Gaza

Israel bombed buildings in the Gaza Strip yesterday, which the army said were being used by militants to make rockets for attacks on the Jewish state.

Israel warned residents to leave the buildings before the air strikes to try to avoid civilian casualties.

One of the targeted warehouses was being used by the Islamic Jihad militant group to manufacture and store missiles and ammunition, the Israeli army said. Palestinian sources confirmed that the group had been using the storage site.

Israel also hit a facility used by Hamas to make rockets, the army said.

In its more than three-week operation against militants in Gaza, the Israeli military has killed around 115 Palestinians, the majority of them civilians.

Three Palestinians were killed and three others injured Monday after an Israeli tank fired on a building in the town of Beit Lahiya in the north of the Gaza Strip, medical sources said.

A shell from the tank hit a high-rise building in Beit Lahiya, not far from Gaza's border with Israel.

Earlier, two Palestinian were wounded by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip, including an air strike on a house of a member of the radical Islamic Jihad movement, security sources said.

Hunger-striking Saddam boycotts court hearing

AFP, Baghdad

Deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein boycotted the latest hearing in his trial for crimes against humanity yesterday, amid reports that a 17-day-old hunger strike has weakened him.

No defence lawyers and only one of Saddam's co-defendants came to the hearing at the Iraqi High Tribunal in Baghdad, triggering the ire of Judge Rauf Abdel Rahman, who accused them of political grandstanding.

"The decision of the lawyers to boycott the hearing is designed to generate publicity and thwart the course of justice," he declared.

Saddam and seven former allies

are accused of having overseen the execution of 148 Shiite civilians from the village of Dujail in revenge for an alleged 1983 bid to assassinate the then Iraqi leader.

The defendants and their legal team claim that the court is a front for US forces in Iraq and have refused to accept its authority. On July 7, Saddam and three defendants began a hunger strike in protest at their treatment.

Saddam's half-brother and former secret police chief Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti did turn up for the hearing, but then refused to accept a court-appointed lawyer and demanded to be excused and allowed to return to his cell.

Fish from heavens rain on India

REUTERS, New Delhi

The people of Kerala in India's southwest are famed for turning fish into spicy feasts fit for gods, but last week the heavens turned provider as fish rained down on the village of Manna, a newspaper reported on Monday.

When the clouds broke last Thursday, villagers said they saw small, pencil-thin live fish falling from the sky.

"Initially no one noticed it. But soon, we saw some slushy objects on the ground and noticed some slight movement," Abubaker, a local shop owner, was quoted as saying in the Hindustan Times.

Two die in UK as inflatable art takes off

REUTERS, London

Two women died and 13 people were injured when they fell from a huge inflatable sculpture after it broke its moorings and flew into the air in a park in northeastern England, police said yesterday.

Up to 30 people were inside the walk-in exhibit, which has been shown around the world, when a gust of wind blew it 9 metres above the park in Chester-le-Street Sunday.

"All of a sudden it just started rising like a balloon," witness Mark Spooner told BBC television. "(It was) flinging people all over. Then it just seemed to flip over in the air."

Cyprus pleads for help with Lebanon exodus

AFP, Nicosia

Cyprus appealed for urgent international help yesterday as tens of thousands of evacuees from the Israeli offensive in Lebanon threatened to overwhelm the small resort island's infrastructure.

"So far the situation is under control but we have reached our limit," Communications Minister Haris Thrassou said as the number of evacuees reaching the Mediterranean island of less than a million people hit 35,000.

He said more evacuees were coming in than there were aircraft to take them off the island and said the response from fellow European

Union members to a request for more planes "was not what we expected".

More aircraft were still desperately needed, he said, with the Lebanon exodus coinciding with the island's peak summer tourist season.

"If the arrivals are more than the departures the numbers of those staying will slowly increase and our infrastructure will not be able to respond," Thrassou said.

He complained that there had also been a "lack of coordination" from foreign embassies in handling the evacuations.

"Planes are landing at the airport but there are no passengers to take

or vice versa," he said.

Of the 35,000 evacuees brought out in 55 separate sailings over the past week only 23,000 have so far been flown out of the island, overwhelming the island's hotel space.

The US embassy has set up a makeshift transit centre for its nationals at the state fair ground in the capital Nicosia.

Schools and indoor sports stadiums are also being made available to accommodate evacuees as authorities struggle to cope with the bottleneck.

Around 4,500 more evacuees were due to be flown home Monday. On Sunday alone, there were 300 flights and 40 helicopter runs.

Asean mulls referring Myanmar to UN

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Southeast Asian ministers will decide this week whether to abandon their campaign for democratic reforms in Myanmar and ask the United Nations to take over the job, Asean's chief said yesterday.

Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar of Malaysia, the current chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), has said the bloc is stepping back after its efforts to mediate were snubbed.

Asean secretary general Ong Keng Yong said Monday, as the group's foreign ministers arrived in

Kuala Lumpur for their annual talks, that the issue of handing over to the United Nations would be discussed here.

"We have not made a decision. The foreign ministers will discuss it and decide what to do," he told reporters.

Ong signalled the grouping's frustration over being constantly overshadowed by its reclusive member, saying that the Myanmar issue was proving too much of a burden.

"In the first place it is not an Asean problem to the extent that all other Asean agenda items are neglected," he said.

"We have 95 percent of other issues to deal with but the rest of you are not interested in the 95 percent of what we are doing."

Meanwhile, leaders of key Muslim countries may be called for an "immediate" meeting to discuss the escalating crisis in the Middle East, Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said yesterday.

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) will not call an emergency gathering of all 57 members despite a request by Iran's president but may instead hold an "executive committee meeting", Syed Hamid said.

Hundreds of Taliban assault police post

11 more killed in Afghan violence

AP, AFP, Kabul

Hundreds of Taliban fighters firing rocket-propelled grenades on yesterday attacked a district headquarters in southwestern Afghanistan, killing three police and wounding seven, amid of a flurry of suicide attacks, roadside bombings and shootings that claimed lives across the country.

A car bomb seriously wounded two US-led coalition soldiers near Kandahar, and in another incident, four suspected suicide attackers riding two motorcycles died in a confrontation with

Afghan police. In the west, gunmen killed two Afghans working for international aid agency World Vision who had been delivering medicine.

Two coalition soldiers were badly wounded in the latest of a wave of Taliban-linked suicide attacks in southern Afghanistan yesterday, while 11 people died in other violence.

The soldiers were travelling in a convoy of US-led coalition and Afghan army vehicles outside Kandahar when a suicide attacker detonated a van filled with explosives, sending his body parts

across the blast site, the coalition said.

It was the latest in a bloody wave of violence between resurgent Taliban-led rebels and Afghan and foreign troops, and comes as Nato-led forces prepare to take over command of security operations in the hard-line militia's former southern heartland.

The heaviest fighting took place in Bakwa, a town in southwestern Farah province, which has been spared from the worst of the recent violence that has claimed more than 800 lives, mostly militants, since mid-May.

Maliki insists Iraq will not slide into civil war

REUTERS, London/ Baghdad

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki insisted yesterday that his country would not slide into civil war despite rising levels of sectarian violence which is killing up to 100 people a day.

"We have reached an agreement in the government that we will have to confront them (the militias) and deal with them. This is the security vision that we have. We are confident that we will confront the terrorism and violence that is in Iraq."

After talks with Blair on Monday, Maliki is due to travel to Washington to meet President George W. Bush on Tuesday, where he is also expected to discuss ways of improving security in Baghdad. It is Maliki's first trip outside the Middle

East since he formed his unity government two months ago.

Fresh US troops are being brought into Baghdad to stabilise the city after six weeks of a joint US-Iraqi security plan failed to quell a surge in sectarian violence, US officers confirmed.

The exact number and designations of the troops have not been revealed, but units that were originally due to be sent elsewhere in the war-torn country are now being diverted to the capital.

"They've been redirected to Baghdad," said US Major Scott Coulson. "Where they were going before, they're not going now."