

EU still divided over ME ceasefire call

UN powers speed up peace efforts

AFP, Brussels/United Nations

The European Union battled yesterday to hammer out differences over calling for an immediate ceasefire in the Middle East, as Israel extended its ground war against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

Arriving for emergency talks, EU foreign ministers were united in deploring the fighting that has raged since fighters with the Shiite Muslim militia snatched two Israeli soldiers on July 12, and most want an immediate truce.

"We hope this meeting today will bring in an element of calm and restraint. We must stop this killing, and we must get back to the political and diplomatic path," said Swedish Foreign Minister Jan Eliasson.

A draft version of the final declaration to be agreed by ministers also called for "an immediate ceasefire,"

according to one diplomat.

But heavyweight members Britain and Germany emphasised that a political agreement was needed at the United Nations to ensure that any ceasefire would last.

"What we all hope to achieve today is to get an agreement to call for an end of violence," British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett told reporters as she arrived for the crisis talks, called a week ago.

The talks will also seek "to get the basis for a political agreement and to see whether we can get common ground on what could be the approach to deploy an international force," she added.

Israel said that talks between world powers in Rome last week, which broke up without agreement on a ceasefire call, effectively gave

it "authorisation" to press on with its offensive in Lebanon.

The EU talks come during a 48-hour Israeli "suspension" of air strikes after its war planes killed 52 civilians, mostly children, in the Lebanese village of Qana, sparking international outrage.

Despite the promised halt in air raids, however, Israeli warplanes staged a series of air strikes Monday and early Tuesday, Lebanese police said.

Moreover, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed Monday there would be no early ceasefire in the offensive.

Meanwhile, the UN powers on Monday stepped up the hunt for a peace plan for the Middle East crisis, as Lebanon made an impassioned plea for an immediate ceasefire, which is still opposed by the United States and Israel.

The five permanent UN Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- held their first official consultations on preparing a resolution on the war, which their governments want passed this week.

A planned meeting of countries ready to contribute to a future international force in south Lebanon was postponed because there is no agreed plan. The Security Council extended the mandate for the small UN Interim Force (Unifil) in Lebanon for one month while talks go on.

France has already distributed a draft UN resolution, which calls for a ceasefire and political settlement. The United States is working on its own proposal. Diplomats said others are possible.



Armoured personnel carriers roll followed by an Israeli tank along Israeli-Lebanon border yesterday. Hezbollah guerrillas fought pitched battles with advancing Israeli forces in Lebanon after Israel decided to widen its three-week-old offensive despite accelerating international efforts to broker peace.

Three British troops killed in Afghanistan

AP, Kandahar

Taliban militants killed three British soldiers patrolling in southern Afghanistan on Tuesday in the first fatalities sustained by Nato forces since taking command of the insurgency-wracked region a day earlier, the British military said.

The militants fired rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns at two vehicles of the Nato-led force in the north of volatile Helmand province, where nearly 4,000 British troops are deployed. A fourth soldier was seriously wounded.

Lt. Col. Kevin Stratford Wright, spokesman for the British Helmand Task Force, said the seriously wounded soldier was evacuated to a military hospital in Helmand.

"Within the British headquarters we stood in a minute of silence as a mark of respect of those who have died," he said. "But we must get one with the job."

Afghan officials reported the heavy fighting in Helmand's Musa Qala district started early Tuesday, but had no further information.



Philippine Muslim women and children hold pictures of 'casualties of conflict' during an anti-war protest outside a mosque in Manila yesterday, calling for an end to the fighting between Israeli forces and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon.

Lebanese children bear scars of Israel's high-tech firepower

AFP, Beirut

Nine-year-old Hussein Mahdi writhes in pain on a Beirut hospital bed, trying not to lie on burned parts of his body.

His doctors say the severe burns on his chest, face, hands, legs and back were caused by phosphorous incendiary bombs dropped by the Israelis on civilian areas in southern Lebanon.

"Was my mother also burned?" he cries.

But he has not been told that his mother is dead. Hussein is suffering enough pain already.

He was rushed to the Beirut hospital from the southern town of Naqura where an Israeli air strike destroyed his home this week, killing his mother and 11-year-old sister.

Mohammed Salam, who leads civil defence rescue workers in the southern port city of Tyre, described

a recent operation after another air strike destroyed a house in the nearby village of Bazuriyah.

First they evacuated a woman and her daughter who were wounded and unconscious. But there was another tiny victim under the debris.

"I found a nine-month-old boy called Yussef Nisr wrapped in blankets in the rubble. I carried him outside toward the ambulance. And when I unwrapped him his body suddenly turned black from the contact with oxygen."

"He was wounded by phosphorous incendiary bombs," Salam says.

The Lebanese authorities and rights activists say such cases prove Israel has deployed weapons whose use is strictly regulated in civilian areas. More than 380 civilians have been killed since the offensive began on July 12.

Tigers hit Lanka's main naval port

Battle for canal heats up as 4 sailors killed

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tigers shelled Sri Lanka's main navy base yesterday, killing four sailors and wounding 30, while military warplanes pounded rebel positions as a bloody battle for control of an irrigation canal entered a seventh day.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) used 122-millimeter artillery to target the base at Trincomalee as a ferry carrying 800 troops was about to dock there, military officials said.

"The 'Jetliner' ferry was making its way to the harbour when... attack started," a military official said.

He said five suspected rebel boats pursued the ferry transporting troops returning home on leave, but the navy was able to beat them back while ground troops fired

multi-barrel rocket launchers to neutralise rebel positions.

"Four naval ratings were killed and about 30 injured," the military official said. "Several buildings caught fire and we are putting them out."

At least 36 explosions were heard from within the naval compound next to the main Trincomalee harbour and also damaged a navy gunboat, official sources said, adding that initially they believed the Tigers were firing mortar bombs.

Warplanes swung into action for the second time Tuesday following the attack on the base, after attacking Tiger positions earlier in the day in the same region, the defence ministry said.

Officials said Israeli-built Kfir jets had carried out bombing sorties around dawn Tuesday near the

Maavilaru irrigation canal in Trincomalee district, which the rebels blocked 10 days ago, sparking bitter fighting.

The ground offensive against the Tigers was at its bloodiest on Monday claiming at least 67 lives on both sides and making a mockery of a ceasefire in force since February 2002.

"We can't say how long it will take for us to open the sluice gates," government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told reporters. "We have to move very cautiously."

The military has said it suspects the area is heavily mined and booby-trapped.

Rambukwella said troops were engaged in "consolidation" Tuesday while continuing long-range artillery attacks against Tiger targets.

Syria puts forces on alert

Assad asks army to prepare for the worst

REUTERS, AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad told the Syrian military on Monday to raise its readiness, pledging not to abandon support for Lebanese resistance against Israel.

In an annual address on the anniversary of the foundation of the Syria Arab Army, Assad called on the military to "work on more preparedness and raise readiness of all units."

"We are facing international circumstances and regional challenges that require caution, alertness, readiness and preparedness," Assad said in the written address.

Diplomats in Damascus say the Syrian army has been on alert since the Israeli onslaught on Lebanon began on July 12 after Hezbollah fighters captured two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border operation.

Assad said Israel's war on Lebanon was an attempt by Israel to settle scores with Hezbollah, whose war of attrition forced Israel to pull out of southern Lebanon in 2000 after a 22-year occupation.

"The barbaric war of annihilation the Israeli aggression is waging on our people in Lebanon and

Palestine is increasing in ferocity," the 40-year-old president said.

"All these threats by the powers supporting the aggression will not stop us from the liberation march and from supporting the resistance."

Over the last three weeks Israel has raided targets just inside the Lebanese side of the border with Syria, but it has not attacked Syria proper since 2003, when it raided installations belonging to a pro-Syrian Palestinian group near Damascus.

The Israeli army, which has forces in the occupied Golan Heights, 35km from Damascus, has repeatedly said it has no intention of attacking Syria.

On Monday, an Israeli official said a Syrian-made bomb was detonated next to an Israeli army patrol in the Golan Heights, causing no casualties.

Israel's Channel Two television quoted military sources as saying the blast in the Golan, which Israel occupied in 1967, was believed to be an act of solidarity with Hezbollah.

Syrian officials have occasionally said they could consider activating the Golan front, which has been quiet since a 1974 ceasefire with Israel.

Syria has long been accused by Israel of offering more than mere moral support to Hezbollah. And while saying it is not looking for a fight with Syria, Israel is still taking precautions in case it becomes embroiled in a war with the neighbor it accuses of sponsoring the Shia militants.

"We have said on numerous occasions that we have no intention of an offensive toward Syria," Defence Minister Amir Peretz said Friday, after Israel mobilised more reservists for the fight against Hezbollah.

"We are doing all so that the situation on the front with Syria remains unchanged, and we are sending the message with the hope that it will be heard."

An explosives expert with the Israeli police said a missile fired Friday by Hezbollah at the Israeli town of Afula nearly 50km south of Israel's northern border with Lebanon was Syrian-made.

Hezbollah has fired more than 1,500 rockets at Israel since July 12. "If necessary we will use all the force necessary to defend Israel and complete our campaign," Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Thursday. "The Syrians know we are on alert."

Atomic clock ticking for Iran after UN resolution

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council order for Iran to suspend its nuclear activities set off a tense wait to see how Tehran responds and whether UN unity remains strong if sanctions need to be imposed.

"The clock has begun to tick," said John Bolton, the US ambassador to the United Nations, after Resolution 1696 was passed on Monday, giving Iran until August 31 to halt sensitive nuclear work.

If International Atomic Energy Agency director Mohammed ElBaradei then says that Iran has followed the order, the council can start debating economic and political sanctions.

"The ball is now clearly in Iran's court. The choice is up to them," added Bolton.

While Iran's UN representative angrily rebuffed the resolution as "destructive and totally unwarranted", not all Security Council members took this as an immediate rejection.

But the unity shown by the

Security Council in setting the August 31 deadline has given the United States hope that the unofficial coalition will remain strong if a sanctions threat has to be carried out.

Russia and China fought strongly to make sure there was no mention of sanctions but after two weeks of talks gave their backing to Resolution 1696 -- which says that punitive measures could be taken under Article 41, Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

"I am quite confident that if this continues and if August 31 there is not a positive answer, then we'll be able to come to agreement on a next resolution under Article 41," said US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as she welcomed the Security Council move.

"I'm also confident that we have very good cooperation with Russia and China on this issue," she added.

"I think this is a record of moving steadily ahead and I'm quite confident that when the time comes to the next step, we'll move ahead again."

Meteor shower lights up India

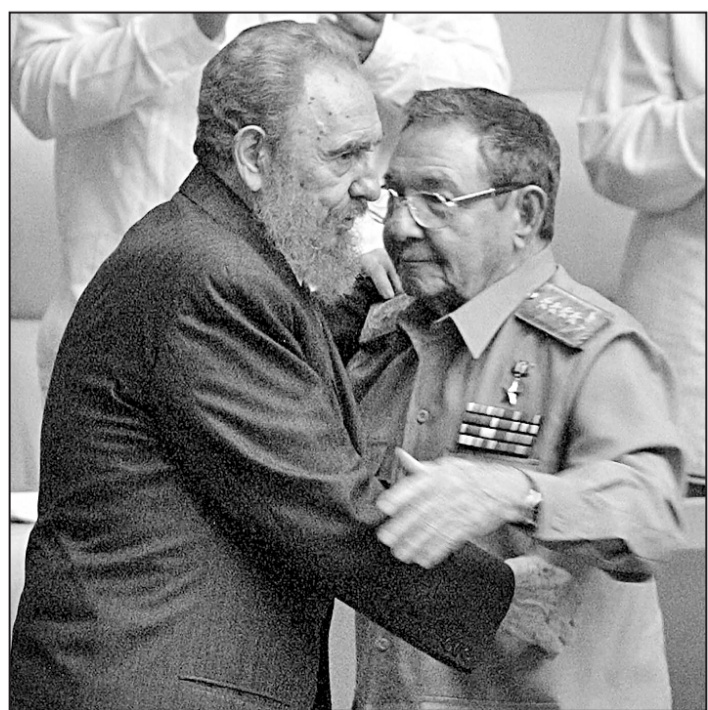
AFP, New Delhi

A meteor shower in the skies over western India prompted a hunt for celestial debris Tuesday after witnesses spoke of a "great flash".

The authorities in Gujarat state's Kutch region dispatched teams to collect evidence after the event was seen clearly over three heavily-populated districts of the state late Monday.

Kutch district administrator Dhananjay Dwivedi reported that five small "rocks" had been picked up after the celestial event which prompted people to rush to sites where debris was believed to have fallen.

Witnesses spoke of feeling or hearing a big thud as if a meteorite hit the earth while others reported seeing streaks of red and yellow light falling from the sky.



File photo shows Cuban President Fidel Castro (L) congratulated by his brother, Vice President and Minister of the Armed Forces Gen. Raul Castro. Castro on Monday delegated power to brother Raul before undergoing surgery.

Lone Communist clinging to power in Americas

AFP, Havana

Fidel Castro, who temporarily handed power to his brother Raul on Monday, has defied four decades of US attempts to oust him and has held on as the only Communist leader in Latin America. Castro has stayed in power despite a tough US economic embargo and a US-abetted invasion attempt and has seen 10 US presidents take office since his 1959 revolution, which ended decades of US dominance that followed the United States' 1898 victory in the Spanish-American War.

But an intestinal ailment forced him to undergo surgery and cede power to his brother Raul, the defence chief, for the first time in his 47-year rule.

After seizing power, Castro became an icon of international socialism, sending as many as 15,000 soldiers to help Soviet-backed troops in Angola in 1975, and dispatching forces to Ethiopia

in 1977. A driving force behind the Non-Aligned Movement, Castro has been an energetic symbol to developing countries that a sovereign nation, however small, could thumb its nose at US policy and appear to get away with it.

The Jesuit-educated lawyer, who came to power at age 32, was the perpetual thorn in the paw of the United States, which was alarmed and embarrassed by Castro's establishment of a Cold War Communist-bloc nation in the Americas, just 144km off its south-east flank.

Known for his fiery, long-winded oratory, the tempestuous Cuban president drove his economic policy forward, fixing the blame for hardship on the US economic embargo that Washington hoped would foment rebellion against him. The United States had invaded before, Castro reminded Cubans constantly, and could do so again at any time.

Manmohan asks Jaswant to name US mole at PMO during Rao's rule

PTI, New Delhi

Senior BJP leader Jaswant Singh yesterday found himself at the receiving end in the Rajya Sabha with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asking him to name the 'mole' in the PMO during Narasimha Rao's regime who "leaked" nuclear secrets to the US.

"The honourable member should answer the simple question. Who is the mole and why is he shying away from that," the Prime Minister asked him during an acrimonious debate on the issue.

In the midst of heated exchanges between the treasury and opposition benches, Jaswant Singh said he was trying to establish the centrality of the US efforts to "control, curb and put in tight wrap India's nuclear programme".

This sparked off another bout of protests from the ruling side, which said the BJP leader's comments had no relevance to the 'mole' issue and he was not naming the person.

BJP to take Left's help if necessary to oppose nuke deal

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA, New Delhi

The BJP yesterday decided to totally oppose the Indo-US nuclear treaty in Parliament, taking the support of the Left parties if necessary.

A resolution to this effect was passed in the BJP Parliamentary Party meeting in New Delhi, presided over by leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha LK Advani. The party also decided to go ahead with its own resolution, if the Left parties, supporting the UPA government from outside, were either unwilling or reluctant to associate with the BJP, party spokesman Vijay Kumar Malhotra told media persons after the meeting.

"Opposing the treaty is necessary in the national interest - with or

without the Communists," he said.

Prof Malhotra said the party also decided to raise the Bofors scandal after the sensational revelations by former Union Minister and key Rajiv Gandhi aide Arun Singh that "somebody certainly received kickbacks money in the gun deal."

The party will also raise the issue of permitting defreezing of the London bank accounts of the Italian fugitive Ottavio Quattrocchi, revelations about the Russian intelligence agency KGB's penetration into the key decision-making bodies during the Indra Gandhi regime as revealed by former KGB agent Vasili Mitrokhin.

Other scandals like navy war room leak, and the Scorpene submarine deals will also not be spared.