



A Lebanese woman inspects the destruction yesterday following Israeli airstrikes in the southern suburbs of Beirut. PHOTO: AFP

US, France reach deal on UN ME resolution

REUTERS, AP, United Nations

The United States and France reached agreement yesterday on a UN Security Council resolution calling for an end to the fighting between Israel and Lebanon as the first step toward a political settlement of the conflict, French and British officials said.

The full 15-nation Security Council was scheduled to meet later Saturday to review the text, which is expected to be adopted within the next few days, the officials said.

US Ambassador John Bolton and French President Jacques Chirac's office confirmed that agreement had been reached.

An official with knowledge of the document said the draft calls for a "full cessation of violence" between Israel and Hezbollah, but would allow Israel the right to launch strikes if Hezbollah attacks

it. "It does not say immediate cessation of violence," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the draft had not yet been made public.

That appeared to be a major victory for the US and Israel. France and many other nations had demanded an immediate and halt to violence without conditions as a way to push the region back toward stability.

The French presidential palace in Paris said a deal was reached on a resolution that seeks a total halt to hostilities and would work toward a permanent cease-fire and a long-term solution.

US Ambassador John Bolton met with his French counterpart, Jean-Marc de La Sabliere, on Friday to try to bridge the remaining differences. French and US officials were expected to meet again

Saturday.

With international pressure for an end to hostilities intensifying, the United States said it expects the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution early next week.

"We are very close to a final draft with the French on a text," US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in Washington.

Bolton and de La Sabliere have refused to say what the remaining differences are, but Security Council diplomats said one crucial problem was the timing of a halt to the fighting and the deployment of an international force.

France, reflecting wide international opinion, including that of its former colony Lebanon, wants an immediate end to the violence. The United States, Israel's closest ally, does not want a halt without the immediate implementation of other steps, including the deploy-

ment of peacekeepers.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the negotiations, said late Friday that negotiations had gone so well the draft might be ready to circulate to the rest of the Security Council over the weekend.

Under the most optimistic scenario, a vote could come as early as Tuesday.

If agreement on a resolution appears likely, there is a possibility that foreign ministers of the 15 council nations may fly to New York for a meeting.

Rice expressed support Thursday for an immediate halt to the fighting as the first phase in ending the conflict. It was the most concrete signal yet that the US may be willing to compromise on the diplomatic stalemate.



Iran bans Nobel laureate Ebadi's rights group

AFP, Tehran

Iran has declared as "illegal" a human rights group headed by Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi and vowed to prosecute its continued activities, local media reported yesterday.

"As the group calling itself 'Defenders of Human Rights Centre' has not obtained a permit from the interior ministry, its activities are illegal and the violators of this decision will be prosecuted," interior ministry was quoted as saying by the centrist Shargh newspaper.

But Ebadi, quoting Iran's constitution, responded that her centre did not require a permit.

"Non-governmental organisations that observe the law and do not disrupt public safety do not need a permit. So the... Centre does not need authorisation".

US slaps sanctions on Indian, Russian firms

REUTERS, Washington

The United States has imposed sanctions against seven companies from North Korea, Russia, India and Cuba for their alleged arms dealings with Iran, a State Department official said on Friday.

The official, who spoke on condition he not be named, said the sanctions were imposed after the United States obtained "credible information" that the companies had transferred equipment or materials to Iran since January 1, 1999.

"The sanctions apply to the specific entities and their successors, sub-units or subsidiaries and not to their respective countries or governments," said the official.

The Federal Register said the sanctions were imposed as these firms had passed on equipment or technology to Iran that could contribute to the development of weapons of mass destruction or cruise or ballistic missile systems.

The sanctioned companies were listed as the Korean Mining and Industrial Development Corporation and the Korea Pagan Trading

Corporation of North Korea. The Russian firms were listed as state-owned arms export firm Rosoboronexport and warplane maker Sukhoi.

The Indian firms were Balaji Amines and Prachi Poly Products while the Cuban company was identified as the Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology.

Russia strongly condemned the move.

"This is a clearly illegitimate attempt to make foreign companies work by internal American rules," said a Russian government statement.

Under the restrictions, no US government agency may enter into a deal with the companies on the list.

The sanctions will be in place at least until July 28, 2008, and are in effect immediately.

"A new determination will be made in the event that circumstances change in such a manner as to warrant a change in the duration of sanctions," said the Federal Register.

Lankan refugees live under trees

15,000 Muslims flee shelling

AFP, Kantalai

Families huddled under trees and slept in bullock carts Saturday as accommodation ran out for over 15,000 Muslim men, women and children fleeing Sri Lanka's bloodiest battle in four years.

The first ones to get out of the coastal Muslim town of Muttur were holed up in four schools here where hundreds of Sinhalese were already living as refugees after Tiger rebels cut off their water supplies last month.

"We have no place to go -- that's why we're sleeping here," a Muslim man said as he sheltered under his bullock cart that brought his family as well as neighbours along a 45km road to this farming town.

More troops and police were seen in the town providing security to the refugees, some of whom used plastic sheets to set up makeshift shelters as the official death toll in 11 days of fighting rose to 326.

Four schools in Kantalai sheltered thousands of people fleeing Muttur.

"We have a list of 14,380 people already on the move," administrative officer H. K. Karunawathi said. "There are many more who have not been registered yet. They belong to Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil families."

However, the majority are Muslims from Muttur where there have been heavy artillery battles between security forces and Tamil Tiger rebels since Wednesday, she said.

Chief Minister Berty Premalal Dissanayake said arranging cooked food for the refugees was a major challenge and authorities brought in extra supplies.

"We have arranged for cooked meals to be given from this morning," Dissanayake told reporters as he visited refugee centres and the hospital here where some of the wounded and sick were taken.



Sri Lankan refugee, Fawseyya, (42), who was injured in a shell attack at the town of Muttur in Sri Lanka's north-eastern district of Trincomalee sits at the main hospital in the town of Trincomalee Friday. PHOTO: AFP

Cuba readies troops fearing US attack

AP, Havana

Cuba government has mobilised citizen defence militias, saying it fears a US attack during Fidel Castro's health crisis, even though the White House insists no such threat exists.

The island's government, under the control of Castro's brother, Defence Minister Raul Castro, has also asked military reservists to check in daily.

Cubans interviewed on state-run media Friday said they would fight to the death against any invaders from the north, while the Communist Party daily Granma said, "We Cubans are prepared for the defence" of the island.