

Civilian deaths in Lebanon 'unacceptable': ICRC

AFP, Geneva

The International Committee of the Red Cross on Sunday slammed the ongoing heavy civilian casualties in the conflict in Lebanon as "unacceptable".

"The ICRC has repeatedly expressed its concerns about insufficient precautions taken in attacks by the parties to the armed conflict," the agency said in a statement.

"It is unacceptable that after more than 30 days of ongoing military operations, all necessary precautions to spare civilian life and those engaged in medical work have still not been taken," it said.

The humanitarian agency highlighted an Israeli air strike Friday on hundreds of people fleeing the area of Marjayoun by car, in which six were killed and 32 were wounded.

A Lebanese Red Cross volunteer, Mikhael Jbayleh, was killed in

the raid while trying to give first aid to a wounded person, it said.

Two other Lebanese Red Cross volunteers were injured when their ambulance was hit by "two projectiles" east of Tyre, although no fighting was taking place nearby, the statement said. The source of the projectiles was not identified.

"The ICRC deplors the heavy impact of hostilities on civilians and on Lebanese Red Cross emergency medical personnel and assets."

It also deplors "the continuing lack of respect for the rules governing the conduct of hostilities, such as the distinction between military objectives and civilian persons and objects," the statement added.

The Israeli military has banned the movement of all vehicles in the region south of the Litani river, including near Tyre, warning they will be considered to be supporting the Shiite Muslim militia Hezbollah

and attacked.

Only Red Cross and UN vehicles are exempted, but they still need prior authorisation from the Israelis to travel.

In a newspaper interview Sunday, the head of the ICRC's office in the embattled city of Tyre, Roland Huguenin, highlighted direct warnings to Israeli authorities.

"I tell and keep on repeating to Israeli authorities that they must respect the rights of victims," he told the Swiss newspaper *Le Matin*, after being asked about an overall lack of distinction between civilian and military assets in the conflict.

Huguenin said the air strikes were also affecting attempts to rescue civilians buried under bombed buildings.

"The Israeli air force is shooting at all vehicles except those of the ICRC."

"As a result, when a building

collapses, machines such as diggers cannot intervene to lift concrete blocks and save the people stuck in the ruins," he explained.

Huguenin said he had been trying to help a woman and three children in a village 15km from Tyre who were sleeping in the cellar of their home when it was destroyed.

Although voices could be heard, rescuers could not bring in digging equipment to break through the ruins.

"I don't see in what way the outcome of the conflict could be changed by allowing rescuers to get civilians out of the ruins," he commented.

Alongside its role as a relief agency, the ICRC is the guardian of the Geneva Conventions, which guarantee protection for civilians and the wounded in conflicts.



A Lebanese civil defence worker runs for cover during Israeli air strikes in the southern city of Tyre yesterday. Israeli warplanes bombed seven petrol stations in the southern port city of Tyre yesterday, sparking a huge fire that threatened to engulf a nearby hospital.

UK rejects foreign policy link to attack threat

REUTERS, London

The British government on Saturday rejected as "dangerous and foolish" accusations that its foreign policy heightened the threat of terrorist attacks after police foiled a plot to blow up transatlantic airliners.

In an open letter to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, British Muslim groups and politicians said his policies on issues like Iraq and the Israel-Hezbollah war were putting civilians at increased risk in Britain and elsewhere.

Thirteen months after four British Islamist suicide bombers killed 52 people on London's transport system, British Muslims fear they are being demonised because of extremist militants.

"We urge the prime minister to redouble his efforts to tackle terror and extremism and change our foreign policy," said the letter, whose signatories included six politicians from Blair's Labour Party.



Sri Lanka Policy Planning Minister Keheliya Rambukwella (L) addresses media representatives as the chief of the Peace Secretariat Palitha Kohana looks on during a press conference in Colombo yesterday. Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have made an overture through truce monitors to revive their stalled talks and the government was positive despite the growing violence.

Tigers deny offering fresh peace talks

Leading peace negotiator shot dead

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels denied yesterday offering to hold peace talks after Colombo announced they were willing to revive stalled negotiations despite heavy fighting in the island's north.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they had only told Norwegian ceasefire monitors they did not think the Sri Lanka government was interested in a peaceful end to the conflict.

"I only explained to the SLMM (Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission) head that the Sri Lankan government is not interested in peace after several gestures made by us," said S. Puleedevan, LTTE's top peace coordinator.

"To say that I have offered talks is a total fabrication," he told AFP by

telephone from the rebel-held north.

However, he did not rule out negotiations saying the Tigers had always wanted a peaceful solution to the drawn-out conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

"We always want a peaceful resolution to the conflict and that is why we have made several good will gestures, but the government has not responded favourably. They have a different agenda," he said.

The government said Sunday it was ready to revive talks after its top peace broker received a call from Nordic truce monitors late Friday conveying the LTTE's offer to resume talks.

The truce monitors were not immediately available for comment.

The government has accused the Tigers of seeking to return the

island to full-scale war as the fiercest fighting since a 2002 ceasefire has raged between the two sides in the north and northeast of the country.

President Mahinda Rajapakse blamed the shooting of Ketheesh Loganathan, the deputy secretary-general of the Peace Secretariat, on the LTTE although there was no claim of responsibility.

"The president condemns the assassination and says this is the work of the LTTE and shows how they are targeting members of the Tamil community who are working for peace," presidential spokesman Chandrapala Liyanage told AFP.

US involved in Lebanon massacre plot: New Yorker

AFP, New York

The US government was closely involved in the planning of Israel's military operations against Islamic militant group Hezbollah even before the July 12 kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, *The New Yorker* magazine reported in its latest issue.

The kidnapping triggered a month-long Israeli operation in South Lebanon that is expected to come to an end on Monday.

But Pulitzer Prize-winning US journalist Seymour Hersh writes that President George W Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney were convinced that a successful Israeli bombing campaign against Hezbollah could ease Israel's security concerns and also serve as a prelude to a potential US preemptive attack to destroy Iran's nuclear installations.

Citing an unnamed Middle East expert with knowledge of the current

thinking of the Israeli and US governments, Israel had devised a plan for attacking Hezbollah -- and shared it with Bush administration officials -- well before the July 12 kidnappings.

The expert added that the White House had several reasons for supporting a bombing campaign, the report said.

If there was to be a military operation against Iran, it had to get rid of the weapons Hezbollah could use in a potential retaliation against Israel, Hersh writes.

Citing a US government consultant with close ties to Israel, Hersh also reports that earlier this summer, before the Hezbollah kidnappings, several Israeli officials visited Washington "to get a green light" for a bombing operation following a Hezbollah provocation, and "to find out how much the United States would bear".

Terrorism has to go for Indo-Pak peace: EU

Border talks to go ahead

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, PTI, New Delhi

Terrorism has to be shunned if the India-Pakistan peace process has to move forward, says Neena Gill, a British member of the European Parliament (MEP) in charge of South Asia.

"You can't speed up the peace process if you resort to terrorism. Terrorism can only slow it down," Gill said in an interview after a visit to Nepal.

"It was unfortunate that a Pakistani foreign minister said that," Gill said, referring to Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri's reported remarks, linking the train bombings in Mumbai with a resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir issue.

"When so many people are suffering, it is not a constructive way to create a dialogue," the Ludhiana-born MEP said. Kasuri's remarks sparked outrage in India and snowballed into a row. Kasuri, however, denied making the comments.

"Discussion and dialogue are the only way forward," Gill stressed.

India suspects that terrorists linked to Pakistan are behind the July terror attacks in Mumbai that

killed some 200 people and injured hundreds. Pakistan has denied any involvement and asked India to produce evidence.

Gill refused to speculate on who could be behind the Mumbai blasts. "It's cowardly. That way anyone with any cause can justify violence. We have not gone into who was behind the blasts."

"There is an increasing recognition in the European Union and elsewhere that international terrorist cells are working in all parts of the world," said Gill, chairperson of the delegation for relations with South Asia and Saarc.

A debate on Jammu and Kashmir is likely to take place in the European Parliament around September.

Underlining the point that India and the European Union needed to step up cooperation in counter-terrorism, Gill conjured up a robust picture of India-EU relations. But she rued that the huge potential remained largely untapped due to an inadequate awareness of the EU role in India.

"A vast majority of the people is not aware of EU or its activities. The political classes and the media in

India have to become more aware," she said.

"We have to realise India and the EU are natural partners. We both believe in a multi-polar world," said Gill, who represents the West Midlands for the Labour Party.

Gill, the only female British MP of Asian descent, has been a member of the European Parliament since 1999.

Meanwhile, India and Pakistan are expected to hold discussions on the Sir Creek border dispute this month amid assertions by officials that technical-level parleys on various issues will go ahead despite the indefinite postponement of talks between foreign secretaries in the wake of Mumbai blasts.

Officials of the two countries are expected to meet in Pakistan this month to discuss the Sir Creek issue.

No dates have been fixed yet but officials here said the expert-level meeting will take place this month as agreed on by the two sides.

Cubans wish absent Castro happy 80th birthday

REUTERS, Havana

Cubans wished Fidel Castro a happy 80th birthday yesterday even though the ailing leader has not been seen or heard in public since ceding power to his brother two weeks ago after stomach surgery.

"Fidel, Fidel, long live Fidel," chanted young Cubans at a birthday concert on Havana's Malecon seafront boulevard where 3,000 gathered to listen to a five-hour lineup of the island's top musical talent.

Castro did not make an appearance at the concert or issue a statement about his birthday.

Details of Castro's health are considered a state secret, so there has been little information about his condition or even confirmation he was alive following surgery for internal bleeding.

Raul Castro, 75, has not appeared in public either, adding to the uncertainty over the political future of one of the world's last communist outposts.

"We hope he (Fidel) gets better. For all oppressed people, Cuba is an example that socialism is possible," said Juan Carlos Cruz, a Bolivian studying medicine in Cuba for free. Students bused to the show held Cuban, Venezuelan and Bolivian flags.

Britain reveals new terror threats

Aircraft bomb probe rumbles on

AFP, London

Britain said yesterday it had thwarted "at least" four major terror attacks since the July 7 bombings last year, while up to 24 separate threats were under investigation, as police probed the foiled bid to explode aircraft en route to the United States.

Police had swooped on key suspects on Thursday over an alleged plot to wreak mass murder by smuggling liquids in hand baggage onto US-bound planes to assemble into bombs.

Questioned about how many terrorist attacks had been stopped since the July 2005 London bombings, Home Secretary John Reid told the BBC News 24 television channel on Sunday: "I can tell you that at least four major plots have been thwarted."

Reid said that the plots would have led to significant loss of life and indicated that up to two dozen terror investigations were currently being pursued, confirming reports that police were hunting that number of terror cells in Britain.

"I'm not going to confirm an exact number but I wouldn't deny that that would indicate the number of major conspiracies that we are trying to look at," Reid said.

Regarding Thursday's terror raids, a Metropolitan Police spokeswoman told AFP on Sunday that enquiries were ongoing and searches continuing while 23 suspects remained in custody.

Reid added: "We think we have the main suspects in this particular plot."

"I have to be honest and say on the basis of what we know, there could be others out there ... so the threat of a terrorist attack in the UK is still very substantial."

Britain on Thursday upped its security alert to "critical" -- the highest of five levels -- from "severe," where it had been since security was relaxed in the weeks after the London transport attacks of July 2005, which killed 56 people.

Last week's news has caused air travel chaos around the world, especially in Britain. Stringent security checks were introduced, reviving memories of the September 11 attacks in the United States in 2001.

British airports operator BAA argues that the measures -- including body checks and the banning of hand luggage -- were not sustainable, while all airlines have struggled to cope with the new demands.



This combo photograph shows Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (L) and former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad in a file photo.

'Mahathir out to topple prime minister'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad is out to topple his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as fears grow over divisions in the ruling party, reports said yesterday.

Influential cabinet minister Nazri Abdul Aziz, citing information he had gleaned from Mahathir's conversations with friends, said the ex-premier was working to unseat Abdullah, also president of the

ruling United Malays National Organisation (Umno).

"If he continues his actions to destroy Umno, to bring down the president, I will be at the forefront as a warrior to defend the party," Nazri was quoted as saying in the *New Straits Times*.

Nearly 200 Umno divisions are currently holding their annual meetings nationwide and the dispute between the two has featured high on the agenda.



A woman raises her fist while shouting slogans during a march Saturday in Washington, DC. The protesters were calling for Israel to withdraw from Lebanon as the UN Security Council unanimously called for an end to the bloodshed between Israel and Hezbollah.

A YEAR AFTER PULLOUT

Gazans see no end to Israeli occupation

AFP, Gaza City

One year after Israel began its historic Gaza Strip pullout, Palestinians are bitter that the end of Jewish settlements never brought an end to occupation.

"We had the withdrawal, but we don't have freedom. It is now clear, one year after the departure of Israeli forces, that the occupation is continuing," journalist and political analyst Hani Habib told AFP.

"Israel still exercises total control over all aspects of (Gaza) inhabitants' lives."

At midnight on August 15, 2005, Israel began withdrawing 8,000 Jewish settlers and thousands of troops from the impoverished strip of land, the beginning of the end of the Jewish state's 38-year occupation.

"Israel portrayed this withdrawal as the Palestinians recovering their freedom and independence, but since the first day, the Gaza Strip has remained under occupation," said lawyer and rights activist Younes al-Jaru.

"Many Palestinians hoped Gaza would become the embryo for an independent Palestinian state, but this hope has disappeared because of Palestinian leaders' inability to build (a state) and continued Israeli offensives," said Habib.

Since June 28, the Gaza Strip has been living and dying under the bombs, shells and missiles of an Israeli offensive that has killed 172 Palestinians, mostly civilians, launched after militants captured two Israeli troops.

Since then, the sealing off of the tiny, densely-populated territory has

been almost hermetic. The only crossing point to the outside world, to Egypt in the southern town of Rafah, has been closed almost non-stop.

"Today the Gaza Strip is like a giant prison where it is impossible to leave or enter without Israeli authorisation," said lawyer Jaru.

The situation has been worsened by economic sanctions imposed on the Palestinian government in the wake of Islamist faction Hamas's election victory in January, he said.

Israel, the United States and the European Union consider Hamas a terrorist organisation because of its refusal to lay down arms or recognise Israel, leading to the suspension of much foreign aid to the Palestinians.

Indian security on edge for Independence Day

REUTERS, New Delhi

Alarmed by the Mumbai blasts, a terror plot in Britain and a US warning of a likely al-Qaeda attack, India has stepped up security to its highest levels in years for this week's Independence Day anniversary.

The celebrations on August 15 -- which mark India's independence from British rule in 1947 -- have been frequently disturbed by insurgent groups who use the national day to mount attacks and underline their presence, forcing heightened vigil.

But the July 11 train bombings in the country's financial hub which killed 186 people, the foiling of a plot to bomb transatlantic airliners by British police last week, followed by a US embassy warning of a likely al-Qaeda attack in Mumbai or Delhi, have unnerved security agencies this year.

"Intelligence inputs ... have indicated renewed determination of

terrorist outfits to undertake terrorist acts, target prominent political leaders and symbols of national importance," said Ajay Chaddha, a top Delhi Police officer.

Thousands of policemen and troops were positioned across cities and sites considered to be targets of militants fighting Indian rule in disputed Kashmir as well as insurgent groups in the troubled northeast, officials said.

Snipers, metal detectors, x-ray machines, sniffer dogs, radio frequency jammers and security cameras were also being deployed and troops armed with machine guns were patrolling the airport in New Delhi, officials and witnesses said.

The threat is considered to be the highest in the capital as the main celebrations on August 15 are centred in the city with the Indian prime minister hoisting the national flag at a historic fort and addressing the nation from its ramparts.