

Palestinians await fallout from Lebanon war

REUTERS, Ramallah

While fighting between Israel's army and Palestinian gunmen has been overshadowed by the war with Hezbollah, the clash in Lebanon could have big implications for the Middle East's longer running conflict.

On one hand it might lead to more violence, with militants feeling emboldened by Hezbollah and with the army happy to deliver a blow to the softer Palestinian enemy after the tougher battles in Lebanon.

But it is also likely to spur renewed diplomatic efforts to address a conflict at the core of the region's troubles while putting in doubt any unilateral Israeli move to effectively impose a border in the occupied West Bank.

"Different people will understand the results of the war differently," said Yasser Abed Rabbo, a senior official of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

"The most important lesson is that this war should open the door for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict."

Whatever comes next, the initial focus will be the Gaza Strip, where

militants -- including the armed wing of the governing Hamas Islamist group -- triggered an Israeli offensive in late June by abducting a soldier in a cross-border raid.

Fighting in Gaza has continued in the shadow of the war with Hezbollah and ramped up pressure on the Hamas-led government, already straining under a Western aid embargo to get Hamas to recognise Israel, renounce violence and accept peace accords.

Both Hamas and officials from moderate President Mahmoud Abbas's camp have indicated progress in mediation to free the prisoner -- possibly in exchange for a behind-the-scenes Israeli pledge to free some jailed Palestinians at a later date.

Israel also demands an end to rocket attacks from Gaza.

If mediation fails, there will be little prospect for anything except further fighting.

HEZBOLLAH EXAMPLE

Many Hamas leaders see the fact that Hezbollah survived the Israeli onslaught as an example for themselves.

"After Lebanon, those who did not believe in resistance now have

to reconsider their positions," said Hamas lawmaker Mahmoud Misleh.

While the gunmen might feel that Hezbollah has delivered a demoralising blow to Israel, the army has much greater experience against the Palestinians plus better intelligence. The militants are nowhere near as well armed as Hezbollah.

"Once Israel's hands are free it will switch focus to Hamas," said New York-based academic Muhammad Muslih.

Tellingly, Israel has lost only one soldier -- to "friendly fire" -- during a Gaza offensive that has killed 180 Palestinians, about half of them militants.

"To the extent that Hezbollah declares victory and people like Hamas believe it ... it could very quickly be negated by Israel moving large numbers of troops from south Lebanon to Gaza," Israeli analyst Yossi Alpher said.

Some Palestinians also believe that Hezbollah's apparent strength has actually exposed the relative weakness of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups who have proved far less effective in fighting Israel.

If the immediate crisis in Gaza is

solved, it could lead to better prospects for change, though peace talks look an unlikely prospect while the Palestinian government is headed by a group that formally seeks Israel's destruction.

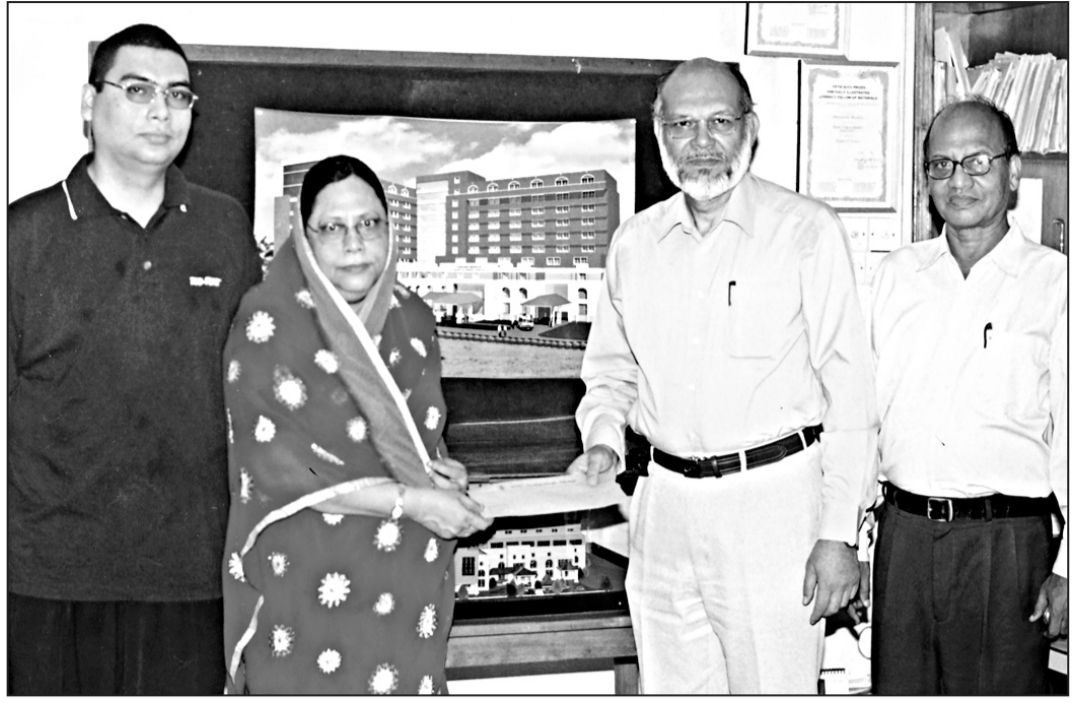
"We could open the door for the resumption of peace moves," one senior Abbas aide said.

POWER STRUGGLE

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his US ally remain keen to sideline Hamas and strengthen Abbas, who wants negotiations for a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

But that could revive an internal Palestinian power struggle between Hamas and Abbas that was largely put on hold when the Gaza crisis blew up. There is no guarantee that Abbas would win out in any confrontation with Hamas.

A political accord that Hamas and Abbas reached to end their squabble fell far short of what the West wants in terms of getting Hamas to change its stance, or of an arrangement that could bring a Palestinian unity government.



Zeba Ali, principal of Maple Leaf International School, hands over a cheque for Tk 5 lakh to Kazi Rafiqul Alam, president of Dhaka Ahsania Mission, at the Mission office in Dhaka on Thursday.

More donations for AMCH

Zeba Ali, principal of Maple Leaf International School, has donated Tk 5 lakh to Ahsania Mission Cancer Hospital (AMCH) for another bed to be dedicated to her father late Moulavi Abdul Karim Khan, a former government official and social worker, says a press release.

She handed over a cheque for the amount to Kazi Rafiqul Alam, president of Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), at the Mission Bhaban at Dhanmondi in the city on Thursday.

Prof Nurul Islam, director of DAM, Ali M Al-Shams, son of Zeba Ali and executive administrator of the school, were present on the occasion.

In February, Zeba Ali had donated Tk 5 lakh for a bed at the hospital to be named after her father-in-law late Dr Nawab Ali, former principal of Dhaka Medical College.

EU lagging in achieving climate change goal

REUTERS, London

The European Union is doing too little to achieve its goal of limiting global warming although it portrays itself as a world leader, some academics say.

They want upcoming studies of the environment to add new urgency to international action to axe use of fossil fuels.

The EU says to avoid dangerous interference with the climate, global average temperatures should not exceed 2 degrees Celsius (3.6F) above pre-industrial levels. To that end it wants developed countries to cut emissions up to 30 percent by 2020.

"Everyone talks about 2 degrees as if we were on target," said Kevin Anderson, climate scientist at Britain's Tyndall Centre. "EU and UK rhetoric is relatively strong but the policy is completely inadequate, and they're the best there is."

Climate prediction is an inexact science and many politicians, led by US President George W Bush, remain unconvinced by dire warnings of global warming. And scientists themselves dispute exactly how much action is required and when.

But many academics agree action to curb climate change is too slow, pointing to rising greenhouse gas emissions even as the European Union delivers tough

rhetoric on cuts.

The EU's own emissions rose slightly in 2004. Emissions also rose in the United States, the world's biggest polluter, which has not imposed mandatory caps.

"If the priority of climate change stays where it is I am very pessimistic," said Malte Meinshausen from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, who has previously advised the European Commission.

"If mitigation isn't given a higher priority than we can't achieve 2 degrees."

Average temperatures have already risen by 0.6 degrees since the 1800s, and are expected to rise another 1.4 to 5.8 degrees by the year 2100, the United Nations climate change body says.

Scientists advise policymakers by saying where emissions are now, where they are headed, and where they should be to control long-term levels of greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere.

PUSH

Anderson reckons Britain's already ambitious goal of a 60 percent cut in domestic carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions by 2050 is based on old science which could lead to a 3 degrees rise.

If shipping and rapidly-rising international aviation are included, he calculates Britain's CO2 emissions in 2006 will exceed those in 1990, a common baseline year for

targets.

Britain is still committed to the 2 degrees target, a Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs spokesman said, but added: "The UK cannot solve climate change alone and the science of climate change is constantly developing."

Scientists and policymakers see two key studies weighing on the politics -- Britain's Stern Review on climate change costs, due out in the autumn, and the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) review of science.

The IPCC review, grouping over 2,000 scientists who advise the United Nations, is published in February and is expected to show stronger evidence for climate change and man's part in it.

"I think the conditions are just right for this report to make a perceptible impact," said IPCC chairman Rajendra Pachauri. "I think there's enough observed evidence now that certainly will influence the policymakers."

"I've just come back from one of the small mountain states of India, and they regard the melting of the glaciers as the most important problem they're facing. Their entire water supply gets completely distorted."

Pak replaces envoy who survived bomb attack in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday announced the appointment of a new envoy to replace outgoing Pakistan High Commissioner (ambassador) Bashir Wali Mohmand who narrowly escaped assassination in a bomb attack here.

The foreign ministry said the Sri Lankan government accepted the appointment of retired Pakistan Air Vice Marshal Shahzad Aslam Chaudhry as Islamabad's new envoy in the island.

Mohmand narrowly escaped a Claymore mine attack in Colombo Monday, but four of his Sri Lankan army commando body guards and three civilians were killed. The government blamed the attack on Tamil Tiger rebels.

The attack came a week after he had made a farewell call on President Mahinda Rajapakse after completing his term of duty here.

Government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said he was targeted because he was arranging a huge arms deal that could have boosted the military's fire power against Tamil Tiger rebels.

Sri Lanka turned to Pakistan to buy weapons after India turned down a request recently, official sources said, adding that the shopping list was worth about 150 million dollars.

Researchers aim to kick-start new AIDS prevention

REUTERS, Toronto

Delighted that prevention is finally at the front of the AIDS agenda, researchers backing microbicides and male circumcision cautioned that they have years of hard work ahead of them before anyone will benefit from such methods.

Activists urged the outside world to keep up the pressure on political leaders in hard-hit countries such as South Africa, while other groups said that reducing violence and discrimination were also key to fighting the AIDS pandemic.

One big winner at this week's International AIDS Conference in Toronto was the field of microbicide research. Top speakers at the conference all stressed that microbicides and circumcision, as

well as drugs, condoms and behavior change, were all key to stopping a pandemic that has killed 25 million people in 25 years.

Delivered as a cream, a gel or perhaps on a small vaginal ring, a microbicide would allow a woman to quietly protect herself against HIV, now transmitted mostly heterosexually.

"Not only are people saying it, but they are pronouncing it correctly," said Renee Ridzon, a programme officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has given \$124 million to support microbicide development.

But there is one big obstacle -- no one has invented one yet. Tests are under way on several formulations.

"As we are undertaking the current set of studies of

microbicides, which are largely gels, we should think of ways to improve formulations," said Dr Salim Abdool Karim of the University of KwaZulu.

"Can we design a microbicide that could be taken once a week or once a month or once every three months?"

Delivery is also key, said Ridzon. "People are not going to use something that they don't like, that doesn't feel good," she said.

Similarly, men will not seek circumcision if they think it will hurt, said Carolyn Williams of the US National Institutes of Health.

SIMPLE, SAFE, PAINLESS

"We need a simple, fast, safe method, with low costs, that nurses can do," said Dr Bertran Auvert of the University of Versailles-Saint Quentin in France.

One South African study has shown that circumcised men were 60 percent less likely to become infected with HIV, and other studies are under way to try to confirm this.

But Auvert said if the studies show clearly that circumcision protects men, men will flock to have the procedure. "The demand will not be satisfied by the current health structure," he said. "We already see waiting lists in southern Africa."

Men will go to traditional practitioners instead, who may not use sterile methods. They could suffer potentially deadly infections. "It will be a nightmare," Auvert said at a news conference.

Many other groups also said the overall health care structure must be improved.

"It's not just a matter of supplying drugs," said Dr Daraus Bukunya of the British-based African Medical and Research Foundation.

"Issues such as poverty, geographical isolation, crumbling health systems, stigma and cultural practices, all play a part in the failure of many HIV/AIDS programmes."