

## French troops in Lebanon to boost UN force

European nations urged to step up contributions

AFP, Naqura

About 50 French soldiers arrived by sea yesterday in the southern Lebanese coastal town of Naqura, the first troops to reinforce UN peacekeepers amid calls for France and other European nations to step up their contributions.

Navy commandos were the first to disembark from the force-projection and command ship Mistral anchored off Naqura, which is about three kilometres (two miles) from the Israeli border.

France's reinforcements arrived under a United Nations resolution that ended a 34-day war between Israel and the Shia Hezbollah

militia, which killed 1,150 people, mostly civilians, in Lebanon. Hezbollah killed 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers.

The French commandos, who landed in rigid-hulled inflatable boats, secured the area before landing craft moved in and unloaded a plastic carpet on the sand to allow the unloading of armoured troop transports, jeeps and excavation equipment.

Commander Bertrand Bonneau said 49 members of an engineering unit were arriving Saturday ahead of 150 others who would leave for Naqura Sunday from the French port of Toulon, and who should arrive from August 25.

"It acts as a first stage... which illustrates the French presence and engagement in Lebanon," Bonneau said.

"All these men will be placed under UN command and reinforce the 200 French soldiers already in Unifil," he said.

"When the French government gives the order to deploy we will be ready."

France's contribution has fallen far short of the major commanding role that many had foreseen for the former colonial power in Lebanon.

US President George W. Bush said he hoped France would reconsider its decision and dispatch more troops, noting that "there have been

different signals coming out of France."

Britain's The Independent newspaper wrote in a Saturday editorial that "France seems to have lost its nerve" by being willing to contribute only 200 troops.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which governs the ceasefire, called for Israeli troops to withdraw from south Lebanon in tandem with deployment of Lebanese troops and a beefed-up UN peacekeeping force in the area.

The United Nations has been urging European countries to provide troops to the peacekeeping force, as the Beirut government moved ahead with its deployment.



PHOTO: AFP

French soldiers from the engineering unit arrive at the Lebanese port of Naqura to join the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) on the border with Israel yesterday as the first troops to reinforce UN peacekeepers amid calls for France and other European nations to step up their contributions.

## Ulfa declares truce

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A leading militant group in north-eastern Indian state of Assam said it will suspend its armed operations against Indian security forces in reciprocation of government's gesture in an effort to open direct peace talks.

"All the cadres and units of Ulfa have been directed to immediately halt all kinds of armed activities against the Indian security forces," said United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa in a statement faxed to the media in Assam on Friday.

After hearing the government's move, "we've decided to reciprocate to prepare the ground for direct peace talks", he said.

On August 13, Indian government had, in a goodwill gesture, announced that security forces would halt operations against the Ulfa for a few days in an effort to jump-start the talks.

The Indian government and Ulfa-nominated intermediaries have so

far held three rounds of preliminary discussions over the past year in an effort to initiate direct talks between Ulfa and India government.

The message from Rajkhowa came on a day when two of the Ulfa-appointed intermediaries held talks with Indian National Security Advisor M K Narayanan and Home Secretary V K Duggal in New Delhi on Friday.

Duggal told reporters after the meeting that there would be another round of discussions in a few days to finalise modalities for initiation of direct talks between Ulfa and the government.

The insurgent group's decision to respond to the government's olive branch notwithstanding, there remains the issue of release of five key Ulfa's leaders jailed in Guwahati to be sorted out.

The intermediaries of Ulfa want the release of the leaders before the direct talks but the Indian government has made it clear that the release be simultaneous to Ulfa's stating time and place for the talks and also publicly abjuring violence.

## Maoists will get party status only if they lay down arms: Koirala

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's prime minister said Maoist rebels cannot be accepted as a political party unless they lay down their arms, state media said yesterday.

The Maoists "cannot be given the status of a political party... until they give up weapons," Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala said in the eastern city of Biratnagar, the Rising Nepal newspaper reported.

The rebels and an alliance of seven parties led mass protests in April that forced King Gyanendra to hand back power seized from lawmakers in February 2005. He has since been obliged to give up most of his powers.

"The Maoists must lay down their arms and we are trying our best to

create the right kind of environment for that," Koirala said.

"Only after that they will be treated as the eighth party and only then will it be possible to move ahead jointly with them," he said.

Koirala said the government was awaiting the arrival of a UN team to speed up the drive to establish lasting peace in the kingdom where the rebels began their deadly insurgency to install a communist republic in 1996.

The Maoists have since said they were willing to accept multi-party democracy and join the political mainstream.

"The UN team will arrive shortly to address the issue of arms management," said Koirala.

## 7 Shia pilgrims gunned down in Baghdad

AP, Baghdad

Seven pilgrims heading to a major Shia religious gathering were shot dead in a Sunni neighbourhood, while a vehicle ban aimed at preventing attacks during two days of ceremonies emptied Baghdad's streets Saturday.

The seven victims were among a group of Shias walking in western Baghdad on Friday night when assailants in a passing car sprayed them with gunfire, said police Lt. Maitham Abdul Razzaq. The Shias had been heading to spend the night at the site of a religious gathering in northern Baghdad.

The vehicle ban went into effect Friday night, the eve of two days of ceremonies to mark the death in 799 A.D. of Imam Moussa Kadhim, one of the 12 major Shia Saints.

## Egypt warns against strike on Iran

REUTERS, Cairo

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak warned against any military strike on Iran in an interview published yesterday.

The United Nations Security Council has demanded Iran suspend uranium enrichment by the end of the month after Tehran failed to persuade the international community its atomic scientists were working on power stations, not bombs.

Washington has declined to rule out military strikes as a solution to the nuclear dispute.

"The conflict between the United States and Iran must be resolved through diplomatic channels and direct dialogue, because any strike on Iran means the end of stability in the region and the world," Mubarak said in an interview published on Saturday in Egypt's Akhbar al-Yom newspaper.

Iran has set itself an August 22 deadline to respond to an offer of economic incentives designed to persuade it to comply with the suspension demand.

Egypt has not had full diplomatic relations with Tehran in more than 25 years and high-level contacts are rare, usually limited to international meetings. But Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki came to Egypt last week for talks with Mubarak on the conflict in Lebanon and other regional issues.

In April, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed About Gheit received a telephone call from Mottaki on the nuclear issue, and the ministers agreed to stay in touch.

## Jaffna cut off by battle

Prices soar amid dwindling food supplies in war zone

REUTERS, Colombo

The government-held city of Jaffna, cut off by fighting between Sri Lankan forces and Tamil Tiger rebels, faced dwindling food supplies and soaring prices yesterday but no real panic, aid workers and witnesses from the beleaguered town say.

One city resident told Reuters by telephone that prices for staples were up more than three-fold, with petrol selling for more than four times the going price before the latest fighting began three weeks ago.

A cash shortage also hit the remote northern city, with people rushing to withdraw money from local banks in anticipation of a possible evacuation, he said.

Witnesses and aid workers said

gunfire and artillery shelling could be heard throughout the night and into the morning, but authorities eased recent curfew restrictions somewhat.

The Sri Lankan military said it had attacked Tiger naval units from the air along the Jaffna peninsula late on Friday.

"If this continues for another week, there won't be any more food," said Dilan, a pharmaceutical salesman who did not want to give his surname.

"People are withdrawing money from the banks, so there is no money to be had," he said by telephone. Communications with the region have been sporadic at best over the last week.

Police in Colombo, meanwhile, set up checkpoints at all roads leading into the city as part of secu-

rity for the South Asia Games, being held in the capital, a government spokesman said.

"They have covered all entry points to the city. This is to ensure security during the SAG," he said.

Across the island, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says more than 160,000 people have fled their homes -- 41,000 of them in Jaffna.

The city has long been a key rebel objective for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, who are fighting the Sinhalese-majority state for a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils.

Initial reports said things were relatively quiet on Saturday around the eastern port of Trincomalee, just north of where the latest fighting began around a rebel-held water supply.

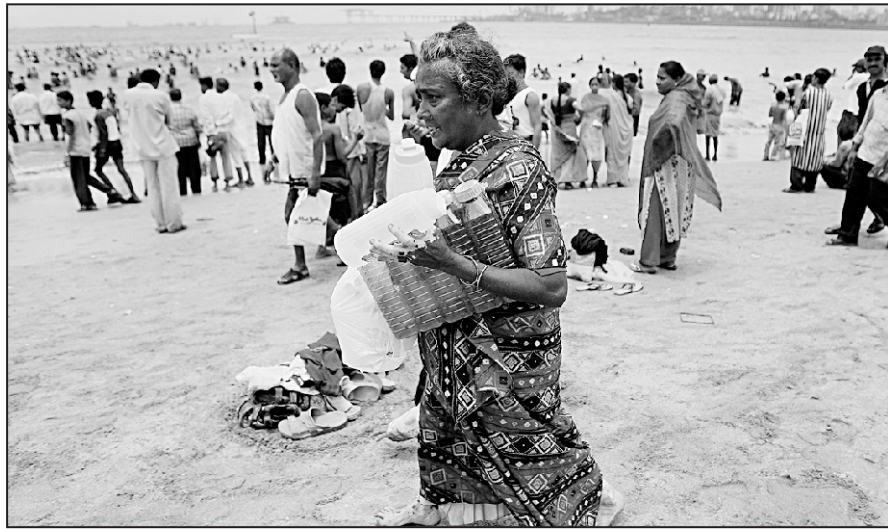


PHOTO: AFP

A woman sells empty water bottles to fill seawater as Indians through the Mahim beach to experience the "sweetened" seawater in Mumbai yesterday.

## Indians drink seawater as it turns sweet

REUTERS, Mumbai

Thousands of Indians drank from a murky Arabian Sea creek after news spread overnight that its water had miraculously turned sweet and could cure illnesses, police said yesterday.

About 5,000 people gathered at the creek in India's biggest city of Mumbai overnight, and many of them were seen drinking the dirty water with their palms, they said.

"Sweet seawater, this is a miracle. This water is divine," Sheikh Naseer, a Mumbai resident, told a local TV news channel.

He was also shown giving a young boy a bath in the creek's murky waters that receive thousands of tonnes of sewage and industrial waste every day.

Some people carried seawater away in bottles and plastic bags, saying they were going to share it with their families. Children as well as adults bathed in the murky water in which garbage and plastic were seen floating.



Amisha Patel

## Airline employee accuses Bollywood star of abuse

REUTERS, Mumbai

An employee of state-run Air-India has complained to police that a Bollywood actress abused and threatened her for refusing to upgrade a friend on a flight, an airline spokesman and a newspaper said on Saturday.

Amisha Patel, who starred in one of Bollywood's biggest box office hits, "Gadar" (Mutiny) in 2001, was upset after the airline employee refused to upgrade her friend to first class on a flight to the United States on Friday, they said.

Patel, known for playing the mushy girlfriend in romantic potboilers, allegedly used foul language and threatened to have the employee sacked, they said.

"We have ordered an internal inquiry to find out what happened. But what appears now is that the passenger was at fault," said Air-India spokesman S. Venkat.

"A police complaint has been lodged by the employee."

Patel's friend was later upgraded to first class even though she was not entitled to it and the two boarded the flight, the Times of India daily said.