

Thackeray flays golden throne for Sai Baba

PTI, Mumbai

The Shirdi Sai Baba temple trust's plan to install a Rs 22-crore golden throne for the saint has evoked sharp criticism from Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray, who said the money should be used for welfare purposes.

"What kind of devotion is this? This amount can be used to help people affected by calamities like recent floods, farmers' suicides and serial blasts," Thackeray said in Sunday's issue of party mouthpiece Saamna.

The Trust chief Jayant Sasane had recently announced that a golden throne would soon replace the silver throne, currently the seat of the idol of the saint.

"This (the proposal) is sheer madness. Can this money not be used to help families of Jawans who sacrifice their lives for the country," he said. "Leave this madness and extend a helping hand to the needy," he added.



Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora (R) and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri walks amid the rubble as they visit Hezbollah "security perimeter" in the southern suburb of Beirut yesterday destroyed by Israeli strikes.

Lebanon warns against truce violations

Lebanese PM accuses Israel of committing crimes against humanity

AFP, Beirut

Anyone who violates a ceasefire deal by firing rockets on Israel from Lebanon will be tried for treason, Defence Minister Elias Murr said yesterday, in an implicit warning to Hezbollah and other armed groups.

"Any violation... any rocket that would give Israel a justification (to hit Lebanon) will be treated harshly," Murr told a press conference.

"It will be considered as direct collaboration with the Israeli enemy," Murr said, adding that those responsible "will be tried and referred to a military tribunal."

He was referring to a UN-brokered ceasefire that came into effect on Monday to end 34 days of

warfare between Israel and the Shia Muslim Hezbollah that left around 1,400 people dead, mostly Lebanese civilians.

Murr said that Hezbollah "is totally committed to this, so there are no fears."

"When the Resistance (Hezbollah) is committed not to fire rockets, any rocket that is fired from Lebanese territories will be considered a direct collaboration with Israel," he said.

"When the Resistance is committed, any violation will be in favor of Israel," he said.

Murr said Lebanese troops will complete over the next few weeks their first deployment in four decades in southern Lebanon and along the borders with Syria.

The UN resolution that led to the ceasefire calls for Israeli troops to withdraw from south Lebanon in tandem with the deployment of the Lebanese army and a strengthened UN force of 15,000 troops.

Earlier Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora on Sunday accused Israel of committing crimes against humanity during its month-long offensive on his country.

"This is a criminal act which reflects Israel's hatred to destroy Lebanon and its unity," he said during a tour of Beirut's bombed-out southern suburbs with parliament speaker Nabih Berri.

"I hope all the international media will transmit this picture to every person in the world so that it shows this criminal act, this crime

against humanity that Israel has committed in this area and every region of Lebanon."

Siniora was speaking as a fragile UN-brokered truce to end the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah entered its seventh day. Close to 1,300 people in Lebanon were killed and billions of dollars in damage caused to homes and infrastructure such as bridges and roads.

"We will not allow the Israeli enemy... to destroy our national unity," said Hezbollah MP Ali Ammar who met Siniora and Berri during their tour of the southern suburbs, a stronghold of the Shia Muslim group.

'Hillary to run for US presidency'

AFP, Washington

US Senator and former First Lady Hillary Clinton is quietly putting in place the infrastructure and logistics for a White House run, Time Magazine reported in its issue to hit the newsstands today.

Although the wife of former president Bill Clinton officially remains focused on her reelection race as New York state's US senator, her strategists told Time that they are urging her to make her intentions clear about running for the US presidency by next spring, to lock in funding and political talent.

The magazine reported that Democrat Clinton so far has collected 33 million dollars in campaign contributions, of which 10 million dollars or more might be squirreled away for an eventual White House run.

She also has assembled a small army of 32 full-time staffers and 13 political consultants, and has devised the outlines of a centrist campaign agenda that focuses on energy policy, the economy, and privacy, among other issues.

Iran defiant as nuclear deadline nears

AFP, Tehran

Iran insisted yesterday that a nuclear freeze was not on the agenda and showed off its latest weaponry, two days before it is to respond to an international offer aimed at ending the long-running crisis.

Tehran risks sanctions if it fails to abide by a UN Security Council resolution calling for a halt to uranium enrichment, a process, which creates fuel for nuclear power plants but can also be used to make the core of a bomb.

"The issue of suspension means returning to the past. It is not on the agenda of the Islamic republic of Iran," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters.

Tehran is due to respond on August 22 to a package of incentives offered by major powers in return for a freeze in enrichment, amid Western fears its nuclear programme is a cover for efforts to build atomic weapons.

The Security Council has also given Iran until August 31 to halt enrichment and reprocessing activities or face possible sanctions.

"The resolution is of no legal and

lawful validity. Therefore, it is unacceptable for the Islamic republic," Asefi said.

"It (sanctions) would be more harmful to them (the West) than for us. We have been under informal sanctions since the 1979 Islamic revolution and we can deal with the consequences by planning," Asefi said.

In the meantime, Iran is preparing for any possible military action over its nuclear activities and showed off new tactical missiles on Sunday during nationwide war games.

Iran test-fired a short-range missile in a demonstration of its "readiness to respond to any threat," state television reported.

The upgraded surface-to-surface missile, called Saegheh or lightning in Farsi, has a range of between 80 and 250 kilometres (50 and 155 miles).

Massive military exercises began Saturday with the aim of testing new weapons and tactics against a potential enemy.

Twelve army divisions along with air and naval forces and missile units are involved in the military operation, named "Zolfaghar Blow" after the two-point sword of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the

Prophet Mohammed.

"The enemy has gone insane because of the capabilities of Lebanon's Hezbollah," army chief Major General Ataollah Salehi was quoted as saying by official news agency IRNA Saturday, referring to the Shia group which was locked in a 34-day conflict with Israel under a ceasefire last week.

"And given the insane enemy's history, we should always be prepared," he said.

In April, the Islamic republic unveiled a wide range of weaponry such as multiple-head missiles, high-speed torpedoes and radar-evading anti-ship missiles during a week of exercises in the strategic Gulf waters to the south.

Iran has remained defiant since a UN resolution was adopted on July 31 after Tehran ignored a previous non-binding deadline and failed to respond to the incentives package, although it says it is still open to negotiations.

The package, backed by the five permanent UN Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany, offers Iran trade, technology and diplomatic incentives if the country agrees to suspend uranium enrichment.

Scandals rock Israel after the war

REUTERS, Jerusalem

The president is locked in a sex scandal, the justice minister is quitting over a purported stolen kiss, the prime minister is haunted by a property deal and the country's top general is under fire for stock trading.

Welcome to Israel, after the war.

With a ceasefire in Israel's bitter battles with Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas in effect for nearly a week, Israeli media have turned the spotlight on a series of scandals.

No criminal charges have been filed in any of the cases. But suspicions of sleaze at the top have darkened the public mood in Israel, where many have begun to question their leaders' conduct of a costly month-long conflict in Lebanon.

Some of the allegations: -- A former employee at the official residence of President Moshe Katsav says he coerced her into having sex with him. Katsav has denied the woman's allegations, which police are investigating. The scandal is unlikely to have any significant political impact as Katsav's post is largely ceremonial.

Justice Minister Haim Ramon announced on Friday he would resign after the attorney general said he was considering indicting the veteran politician over allegations by a former government employee that he forcibly kissed her.

A Justice Ministry statement said the woman accused Ramon of "kissing her on the lips while inserting his tongue without her consent." Ramon denied the charges and said he would prove his innocence in court.

Israel's top government watchdog has confirmed it is examining the terms of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's purchase of a Jerusalem apartment for \$1.2 million in 2004.

The state comptroller's office said it has not finished looking into the case. The prime minister's office has reserved comment, pending an official approach on the matter by the comptroller.

Olmert's popularity has already taken a beating in the polls, part of a public backlash over his handling of a war in Lebanon that failed to deal a fatal blow to Hezbollah or stop nearly 4,000 rockets from hitting northern Israel.

'Clarify' contribution to Lebanon force

France asks EU

AFP, Paris

France yesterday called for a meeting of EU countries to "clarify" their troop contributions to the UN force in Lebanon, Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy told AFP.

Paris, which has come under criticism for sending just 200 soldiers to the expanded UN deployment, urged its partners to show "European solidarity."

Douste-Blazy said he had asked current EU president Finland to organise a meeting in the coming week to discuss the issue.

"I have just asked the Finnish Foreign Minister, Erkki Tuomioja, for a meeting so the different

European countries can clarify their contributions to the reinforced Unifil (UN Interim Force in Lebanon)," he said.

"This meeting should take place at the beginning of the week."

France and other countries that have offered to contribute troops are consulting with the United Nations on the details of the deployment.

"We want to obtain guarantees from the United Nations," Douste-Blazy said. In particular "to whom does the Unifil command report? What is the force's freedom of action?"

The expanded Unifil was agreed under UN resolution 1701 just over a week ago.

Nepali women strip and plough to appease rain gods

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Dozens of Nepali women stripped naked and ploughed their fields in west Nepal, hoping to appease the gods and get some much needed rain, a newspaper report said yesterday.

About 50 women in two villages in Kapilvastu district, 190 km (120 miles) west of Kathmandu, resorted to the desperate move at night on Friday as days of prayers and Hindu ceremonies failed to bring rains for the parched paddy crop, it said.

"This is our last weapon, we used it, and there was light rainfall," Nepali daily Rajdhani quoted one of the women as saying.



Thousands of Indonesian hardline Muslims hold a rally on Jakarta's main street yesterday as they condemned the Israeli attack on Palestine and Lebanon.

US, South Korea to start military drills

REUTERS, Seoul

US and South Korean troops start military drills today which are likely to increase regional tensions already high due to the North's July 5 missile launches and reports it is preparing for a nuclear test.

The annual drills, dubbed Ulchi Focus Lens, have been held without incident in South Korea for decades. Yet the North brands them as a prelude to invasion and nuclear war, vowing to boost its nuclear deterrent to counter threats of this sort.

Some are wondering if North Korea may use this year's drills as an excuse to step up preparations for a possible nuclear test.

Analysts said North Korea could be trying an extreme form of sabre rattling by giving signs of a possible nuclear test to force the international community, and Washington in particular, into making concessions to the poor and isolated state.

"The joint military exercises are another grave military provocation

to the DPRK (North Korea). They are nothing but a very dangerous military adventure driving the situation of the Korean peninsula to the brink of a war," its official KCNA news agency said on Friday.

The North defied international warnings and test-fired seven missiles on July 5, including its long-range Taepodong-2, which experts said could one day hit parts of US territory.

ABC News reported last week that a US intelligence agency had observed suspicious vehicle movements at a suspected North Korean test site. It quoted an unidentified senior State Department official saying a test was a real possibility.

President George W. Bush warned on Friday that North Korea would pose a threat to the world if it tested a nuclear bomb for the first time.

Government officials in Washington and Seoul would not confirm the reports of an impending test, with South Korea's point man for the North saying he was sceptical.



Muslims demonstrators protest US and British foreign policy outside the US Embassy in central London Saturday. The group was calling for an end to the interference of Western governments in the Muslim world.

Experts call for radical re-think in global water management

AFP, Stockholm

With the world's population forecast to grow by 2-3 billion by 2050 and water already a scarce resource for some, there has to be a radical transformation in the management of the planet's resources of the life-giving liquid, experts warned at the start of World Water Week here.

"One in three people is enduring one form or another of water scarcity" in the world today, according to a report compiled over five years by 700 experts and presented at the event in the Swedish capital opening on Monday.

"It is much more widespread than we thought at first," Frank Rijsberman, Director General of the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), told AFP.

"It's very concerning. We see what we can easily call a water crisis in quite a few different coun-

tries," Rijsberman said, citing as examples Australia, south-central China, and last year's devastating drought in India.

According to Rijsberman, there are two types of shortages: those observed in regions where water is over-exploited, causing a lowering of groundwater levels and rivers to dry up; and those in countries lacking the technical and financial resources to capture water, although it may be abundant.

The problem with water is linked much more to usage than to availability, he noted, with shortages caused "98 percent (by) human reasons and 2 percent natural reasons."

Currently, it takes one litre of water to produce one calorie of food, the study says, and producing one kilo (2.2 pounds) of wheat takes 4,000 litres (1,040 US gallons) of water, while 10,000 litres are needed for one kilo of meat.