

## ME truce 'very fragile,' warns Merkel

REUTERS, Beirut

German Chancellor Angela Merkel described the situation in Lebanon as "very fragile" on Monday as a truce between Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas entered its second week.

Speaking in Berlin, Merkel said it was vital to get United Nations peace-keeping troops to the area quickly to prevent a rekindling of the conflict, in which nearly 1,200 people in Lebanon and 157 Israelis died.

Italy emerged as the potential leader of such troops following telephone talks between Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi and his opposite numbers in Beirut and Jerusalem.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, due to host senior UN envoys in Jerusalem, spoke to Prodi late on Sunday and said he would be happy to see the Italians in charge.

"Italy should lead the international force and send troops to also oversee the Lebanon-Syria border crossings," a statement from Olmert's office said.



Lebanese troops patrol the Lebanese-Israeli border Sunday. Israel will prevent the Lebanese army from deploying along the volatile border in areas currently held by Israeli troops until the arrival of an international force in the area, Defence Minister Amir Peretz said yesterday.

## 8 killed in Moscow market blast

AP, Moscow

An explosion tore through a Moscow market yesterday morning, killing at least eight people and injuring about 25, the Emergency Situations Ministry said.

Preliminary information indicated the blast that hit the Cherkizovsky market in the north-eastern part of the city was caused by a bomb, ministry spokeswoman Yulia Stadnikova said.

But the ITAR-Tass news agency cited police as saying the explosion appeared to have been caused by a gas cylinder. Such cylinders are widely used at Moscow's markets for heating and cooking.

The news agency Interfax cited an official in the Interior Ministry, which runs police forces, as saying that terrorism was not being considered in connection with the blast.

Stadnikova said eight people were confirmed dead, including two children. But news reports citing unnamed police officials said the death toll was at least 10.

# No sign Iran will accept West's atomic offer

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Monday Iran would press ahead with its pursuit of nuclear energy, indicating it will not heed a UN demand it stop enriching uranium or face possible sanctions.

Khamenei, who has the final word, did not mention enrichment by name but senior officials have repeated in recent days that it would not be stopped, with the deputy head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation joining the chorus on Monday.

"Considering the technical advancement of Iranian scientists, the suspension of uranium enrichment is not possible any more," Mohammad Saeedi was quoted as saying on Iran's Fars News Agency.

Saeedi said Iran would formally reply on Tuesday to a nuclear package offered by six world powers, in return for an end to enrichment, that

is aimed at allaying the West's fears that Iran wants atomic bombs. Khamenei said Iran would pursue its nuclear plans.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has made its decision and, in the issue of nuclear energy, will continue its path powerfully ... and it will receive the sweet fruits of its efforts," state television quoted him as saying.

The United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany presented the package in June, offering Iran economic and other incentives if it first halted uranium enrichment, a process that has both military and civilian uses.

The UN Security Council has demanded Iran halt enrichment by August 31 or face possible sanctions.

Iran has suggested it will not give a simple 'yes' or 'no' to the package but said the reply would be "multi-dimensional."

Iranian officials say they want

more talks, but Western diplomats say Iran must halt enrichment first.

Anything short of that is likely to be considered a rejection of the offer in Western capitals.

Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, visiting South Africa, repeated a call for negotiations to end the dispute.

Iran has not said precisely how it will give its formal reply. One Iranian official suggested it could deliver a letter to European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana, who handed the package to Tehran. But this could not be confirmed.

Solana said in a statement that he had spoken by phone with Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larjani, on Sunday.

"We both agreed on our openness, under the right circumstances, to further contacts with the aim of establishing confidence in the purely civilian nature of the Iranian nuclear program," he said without

mentioning a deadline for a reply. Solana's office gave no reaction to Khamenei's statement, only saying Solana expected a reply from Larjani. "The Larjani-Solana channel is the one that counts," an EU diplomat said.

The world's fourth largest oil exporter insists it has the right to enrich uranium under international treaty and says it will use the technology to produce electricity.

Western diplomats say Iran must first prove its aims are entirely peaceful to enjoy that right but the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy (IAEA), says questions must be answered before it can give Iran a clean bill of health.

## Beirut asserts authority to avert new Israeli attack

AFP, Beirut

While the truce that halted a month-long war between Israel and Hezbollah entered its second week, Lebanon made an all-out effort to control its territory to ward off a new round of Israeli attacks.

Israel has warned it was preparing for the "next round" against Hezbollah, as the United Nations struggles to persuade states wary of sending troops to boost the weak UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon.

After the UN warned that the ceasefire, which ended 34 days of hostilities was still fragile, Lebanese officials sought to demonstrate that the country was fulfilling its terms.

Lebanese troops pursued their historic deployment to the border

with Israel and Defence Minister Elias Murr vowed to punish any breach of the truce from Lebanese territory, insisting that Hezbollah was committed to the ceasefire.

The An-Nahar newspaper said Lebanese officials had told visiting UN envoys Sunday that the country was determined to "prove its capability to maintain order at air, sea and land borders."

On Saturday, the Lebanese army reinforced deployment and security measures at border crossing posts.

"It seems the Lebanese pledges have 'armed' UN envoys with important guarantees and convincing arguments that will help them negotiate with Israel to stop violations of UN Security Council Resolution" 1701, An-Nahar said.

UN chief Kofi Annan slammed an Israeli raid deep into Lebanon on Saturday as a violation of Resolution 1701 which established the ceasefire conditions.

Israel said the raid was staged to thwart alleged cross-border arms smuggling to Hezbollah from neighbouring Syria.

The Lebanese pledges would also underpin efforts to convince countries hesitant over participating in the UN force, An-Nahar said.

The United Nations has been urging countries, particularly in Europe, to send troops, but most have insisted on obtaining precise details on the force's mandate before signing on.

## Israeli PM rules out talks with Syria

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert yesterday ruled out any resumption of peace talks with Syria, which stalled for more than six years ago, as long as Damascus continues to support "terrorism."

"As long as Syria continues to support terrorism, there is no basis for negotiations," Olmert said.

"When Syria stops support for terror, when it stops giving missiles to terror organisations, then we will be happy to negotiate with them," he said.

The premier was speaking one day after Israel announced that Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni had set up a ministerial working group on

Syria, seen in the local media as a first step towards the possible renewal of peace talks.

The regime in Damascus is repeatedly accused by Israel and Washington of sponsoring "terrorism" and of being a key supporter of Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah, which the Jewish state failed to destroy during its war in Lebanon.

"We should not forget that thousands of rockets," fired by Hezbollah militiamen at Israel during the month-long Lebanon offensive "came from Syria," Olmert said.

Earlier in the day, Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres made a similar statement.



Sri Lankan army soldiers fire artillery shells at LTTE positions in this picture taken on August 20 at an undisclosed location on the Jaffna Peninsula, some 400kms north of Colombo. Sri Lankan troops backed by artillery and fighter jets are resisting a Tamil Tiger rebel advance on the Jaffna peninsula amid moves to lift a nine-day siege of the embattled region.



Egyptian onlookers stand at the site of a train crash in Qaliub, about 20km north of Cairo yesterday. At least 58 people were killed yesterday when two trains travelling on the same track collided north of Cairo in Egypt's deadliest train crash in four years.

## Tamil cultural capital turns into killing field

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops and Tigers are locked in fierce fighting over Jaffna, but analysts say the arid peninsula is of little real value to either party except as a symbol.

Yet, more blood has been spilt over Jaffna than any other region in Sri Lanka. The latest fighting, which began 10 days ago despite a truce in place for the past four years, has seen at least 600 combatants killed on both sides according to an official count.

Government troops are using artillery and war planes to stall a rebel advance on the Jaffna peninsula, regarded by minority Tamils as their cultural home. For the government it is the fountainhead of Tamil separatism.

Security forces took control of Jaffna, 400 kilometres (250 miles) north

of the capital Colombo, after a 50-day offensive in December 1995 and since then the region has also been an "Achilles' heel" for the troops.

The military scored a psychological victory by capturing the former de facto Tiger state, but ended up having to feed 350,000 civilians and 40,000 soldiers using expensive sea and air transport, both vulnerable to Tiger attacks.

The Tigers control the only land access to Jaffna, linked to the rest of the island by a narrow causeway. Recent shell attacks on the only airfield at the northern edge of the peninsula cut off the air bridge and placed the troops under siege.

"The objective of the Tigers is to take Jaffna," defence ministry spokesman Upali Rajapakse said. "If they can't go all the way to Jaffna, at least they want to make it impossible for us to maintain supplies to Jaffna."

## Diplomats in new push for peace in Lanka

Norwegian named as new head of truce monitors

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's key financial backers held talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse yesterday to try to salvage the island's collapsing ceasefire, officials said.

Diplomats from the United States, the European Union, Norway and Japan met Rajapakse at his official residence to discuss the worsening security situation in the island's embattled northeast, officials said.

"The discussions focused on the peace process and the current security situation in Jaffna and elsewhere in the northeast," an official in Rajapakse's office said.

Details of the talks were not immediately known but officials said the diplomats expressed growing concern at the violence between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels, which has claimed over 1,500 lives since December.

Nordic truce monitors have said the Norwegian-arranged 2002 truce now exists on paper only. The two sides have traded artillery fire across a de facto front line in the northern peninsula of Jaffna for the past 10 days.

The backers have been pressing for an immediate halt to the bloodshed and a resumption of talks, which were put on hold in April 2003 by the Tiger guerrillas.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist conflict in the past three decades.

Meanwhile, a former Norwegian army chief was named Monday as the new head monitor of Sri Lanka's crumbling ceasefire after Tamil Tiger rebels demanded European Union members quit the team.

Major General Lars Solberg will take charge of the 30-strong group of Icelandic and Norwegian monitors, said Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) spokesman Thorfinnur Omarsson.

"He is due to come for a visit before September 1," he said.

## Run-off in Congo presidential polls: 5 killed

AFP, Kinshasa

Incumbent Joseph Kabila easily topped the poll in the presidential election in the Democratic Republic of Congo but fell short of an outright majority and will face a run-off against Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba, the independent electoral commission (CEI) said.

Kabila won 44.81 percent of the vote in the war-ravaged central African nation, while Bemba, a former rebel leader, collected 20.03 percent. CEI president Apollinaire Malu Malu announced late Sunday on national television.

The announcement came as gunfire claimed the lives of five in the centre of the capital Kinshasa late Sunday, according to a toll compiled from police, military and UN sources.

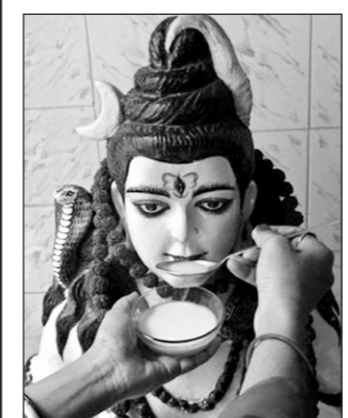
## Srebrenica trial resumes

AFP, The Hague

The war crimes trial of seven Serb military officers over the 1995 Srebrenica massacre resumed here Monday with fresh condemnation of Serbia's "scandalous" refusal to arrest top suspect Ratko Mladic.

In her opening statement, chief UN war crimes prosecutor Carla Del Ponte said the accused were among the "most responsible" for the slaughter in the eastern Bosnian town, but she condemned Serbia for allowing top suspect Mladic to remain at large.

"This trial is an important step... These seven men, serving under Mladic and (general Zdravko) Tolimir, are the most responsible for the crimes committed in Srebrenica," Del Ponte said in her opening statement.



A devotee offers milk to Lord Shiva inside a temple in Siliguri yesterday.

## Indians rush to temples to feed 'thirsty' idols

REUTERS, Lucknow

Thousands of people flocked to temples across India yesterday following reports that idols of Hindu gods were drinking milk given by devotees as sacred offerings, witnesses said.

Teenagers, adults and the aged stood in long lines with garlands and bowls of milk to feed the idols of Lord Shiva, Lord Krishna and the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha, they said.

Hundreds chanted hymns in the northern city of Lucknow and the eastern city of Kolkata and went into hysterics when the milk held against the idols disappeared.

"It is amazing, Lord Ganesha drank milk from my hands. Now he will answer all my prayers," said Surama Dasgupta, a middle-aged woman in Kolkata.