

EU struggles to hammer out troop contributions

AFP, Brussels

Key European nations picked up the diplomatic pace yesterday in a bid to nail down commitments to an expanding UN force in Lebanon on the eve of a critical meeting with UN chief Kofi Annan.

Top diplomats raced against the clock to fix hard troop numbers before EU foreign ministers meet with Annan, who wants Europeans to play the lead role in the enlarged force.

With the Friday meeting looming, countries are under pressure to end their indecision on what they are willing to offer to help police a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

But with memories of the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica — under the protection of Dutch peacekeepers at the time — still fresh, many European countries are reluctant to send troops, especially without a clearer mandate from the United Nations.

Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja of Finland, which currently holds the EU's rotating presidency, said that he was confident the meeting with Annan would help clarify the make-up of the force.

"We hope that we are going to have more clarity on the exact contributions," he told reporters after meeting in Berlin with his German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier and ahead of talks in Paris.

At the request of Britain, Israel, Lebanon and the United States, Rome has stepped forward and offered to lead the force, which the UN wants to eventually count 15,000 soldiers.

In addition to commanding the mission, Italy has also offered to make the biggest contribution to the force with up to 3,000 troops.

With Italy set to play the lead role, Italian Foreign Minister Massimo d'Alema was due to meet with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in Rome after a special Italian envoy held talks with Lebanese leaders in Beirut on Wednesday.

Syria threatens to close Lebanon border if UN force deployed

AP, Beirut

Syria on Wednesday opposed deployment of an international force along its border to prevent arms shipments to Hezbollah, and Israel called the situation in Lebanon "explosive."

A ceasefire was further shaken by artillery shells and explosions that killed three Lebanese soldiers and an Israeli.

Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Saniora asked the US to help lift an Israeli blockade on his country's coast and airport something Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said would not happen until UN troops deployed along the Lebanon-Syria

border to block the flow of weapons. Hezbollah's vast arsenal of rockets and other weapons, much of which is believed to originate in Iran, reaches the guerrillas across the Syrian border.

European Union ambassadors and deputies met in Brussels, Belgium, to drum up volunteers for the force, but tentative pledges reached just 4,200 troops by Wednesday far short of the 15,000 called for by the UN cease-fire resolution. Deployment was likely take weeks or months.

Meanwhile, Syria indicated it might impose a blockade of its own. "They will close their borders for all traffic in the event that UN troops

are deployed along the Lebanon-Syria border," Finland's foreign minister Erkki Tuomioja said after meeting his Syrian counterpart, Walid Moallem, in Helsinki. Finland holds the rotating presidency of the European Union.

Lebanon has land borders only with Syria and Israel.

Syria's threat to close its border and Israel's resolve to continue the blockade were among the burgeoning hurdles facing Lebanon as it struggled to meet key requirements of the UN resolution: deployment of 15,000 Lebanese soldiers south for the first time in four decades and stiffening control on all borders.



PHOTO: AFP

A Lebanese national salvages a television set from his destroyed apartment in the southern Lebanese village of Zahrani yesterday. Hezbollah will not breach the UN-brokered ceasefire with Israel but could respond to violations by the Jewish state, an MP with the Shia militant group said in remarks published Thursday.

Population-short Singapore to ease immigration rules: Official

AFP, Singapore

Singapore plans to ease immigration rules in an effort to offset a population shortage, which officials have warned could threaten the country's long-term survival if not reversed, the government said.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, who is also home affairs minister and minister in charge of population issues, previewed the upcoming changes in remarks on the Ministry of Home Affairs' website Thursday.

He said the manpower ministry was expected to announce changes in the rules for employment visas, allowing holders to switch jobs and to remain in Singapore once their work contracts ended.

Currently, employment visas are cancelled and foreign workers must leave Singapore at the end of their contracts.



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives of the Russian Tupolev Tu-154 plane cry upon their arrival at the airport of Ukrainian city of Donetsk yesterday. Relatives of the 170 people killed in the Russian plane crash gathered in grief Thursday on a hillside overlooking the charred wreckage in eastern Ukraine as Russia observed a day of mourning and investigators searched for causes of the disaster.

Israeli soldiers move into Gaza town

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli forces crossed into the Gaza Strip early yesterday in a raid that captured a local Hamas militant leader and left his brother dead near a Gaza border town, Palestinians witnesses and officials said.

As the forces backed by tanks and helicopter gunships moved into the area of Abasan and took up positions on rooftops, militants began firing at them, sparking gunbattles that wounded two militants, Palestinian officials said.

Hamas officials identified the captured man as Younis Abu Daka, a local Hamas leader and a lecturer at Islamic University in Gaza City. His brother, Yousef, was killed in the fighting, the militant group said.

The army confirmed that a senior Hamas operative was arrested, and at least one militant was killed. It did not identify the men.

The violence came as Israel continued its offensive in the Gaza Strip, which it began June 28, three days after Hamas-linked militants tunneled into Israel, attacked an Israeli army post and captured a soldier, Cpl. Gilad Shalit.

Israel said it would maintain its offensive until Shalit was released and militants ceased firing rockets into Israel.

The army has routinely carried out nighttime raids into Gaza since the offensive began.

Israel has killed more than 200 Palestinians most of them militants since the offensive began two months ago. Palestinian officials fear that Israel, after battling Hezbollah guerrillas to a stalemate in Lebanon, now turn its attention back on Gaza.

Late Wednesday, an Israeli tank fired a shell at two men who approached Gaza's border fence with Israel near Abasan, according to Palestinian officials and the army.

US in the dark over Iran

Warns Congress intelligence report

AFP, Washington

A congressional committee warned Wednesday of "significant" gaps in US intelligence on Iran, a scenario it said precluded confident assessments on Tehran's alleged weapons of mass destruction programmes.

The unclassified report called on US intelligence agencies to offer better information to policymakers in the event of any talks on the current nuclear showdown, or to check compliance with sanctions if negotiations founder.

It was released as tensions between Iran and the United States

rose another notch, as the State Department said Tehran's response to an incentives package aimed at ending the standoff fell short of conditions to avoid sanctions.

"There is a great deal about Iran that we do not know," the report, issued by the House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said.

"The United States lacks critical information needed for analysts to make many of their judgments with confidence about Iran and there are many significant information gaps," said the report, accompanied by a classified

annex.

The committee declined to specify where gaps were evident, saying it did not want to tip off the Iranian government, but added that more needed to be done to decipher Iran's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons efforts, its political and economic strategy, alleged support for terrorism and involvement in fomenting violence in Iraq.

"US policymakers and intelligence officials believe, without exception, that the United States must collect more and better intelligence on a wide range of Iranian issues," the report said.

Muslims alarmed over US racial profiling

AFP, New York

A leading US Muslim group said Wednesday it was disturbed by reports that US authorities were racially profiling passengers at New York's Kennedy airport.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations said it had received three separate reports from Iraqi-born Americans alleging they were detained for up to six hours at the airport last week without justification.

The allegations came from a Michigan couple, two people from California and a New Jersey woman travelling with her five children.

The council said that it feared hundreds of other passengers had been filtered by security on the basis of their names or appearance.

It called on officials "to partner with the American Muslim community in order to ensure national security in a manner that is consistent with American values of justice

and equality."

A statement from US customs authorities denied they were screening passengers on the basis of ethnicity, but acknowledged increased security over an alleged plot by Muslim extremists to bomb US flights from Britain.

"CBP (Customs and Border Protection) does not use racial profiling, however CBP officers may scrutinise more closely individuals arriving from high-risk countries," it said in a statement.



Anousheh Ansari

Soyuz space capsule modified for first female space tourist

AFP, Moscow

Russian space engineers are modifying a Soyuz capsule for the first female space tourist ahead of a launch for the International Space Station (ISS) next month, officials said Wednesday.

"A woman's organism is different, that's why we need to modify some of the life systems in the capsule," Nikolai Sevastyanov, head of the RKK Energia space corporation was quoted by ITAR-TASS as saying.

Anousheh Ansari of the United States is set to blast off from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on September 14, taking the place of Japan's Daisuke Enomoto, who failed medical tests this month.

A Russian space expert, who preferred to remain anonymous, told AFP the main change on the capsule for Ansari would be to provide "special equipment for the toilet."

Engineers will also replace a seat in the Soyuz that had been tailor-made for Enomoto with another that fits Ansari and come up with a programme of scientific tests for Ansari to carry out, Sevastyanov said.

2 US soldiers killed in Iraq attacks

AP, Baghdad

Two US soldiers were killed south of Baghdad, the US military said yesterday, while a series of attacks across the country left at least 11 Iraqis dead and several wounded.

One US soldier was killed Wednesday during a raid to capture "foreign terrorists," the US military command said.

Two of the militants also were killed, it said, without elaborating.

The other American soldier died Thursday when his vehicle struck a roadside bomb, the military said.