

Israel PM faces tough choices on Lebanon war probe

AFP, Jerusalem

Embattled Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert mulled yesterday whether to set up a powerful state commission to examine the conduct of the Lebanon war amid increasing calls for him to do so.

Ahead of the government's weekly meeting on Sunday, the increasingly unpopular premier huddled with top aides late into the night, weighing the options between a state commission and a government inquiry.

The premier "held consultations over the nature of the commission that will be charged with investigating the failures during the campaign against Hezbollah," government spokesman Avi Pazner told AFP.

No decision on an inquiry was announced at the end of the cabinet meeting.

"No decision has been made yet on what kind of commission will be appointed to investigate the war -- state or governmental," the Maariv daily quoted a close Olmert aide as saying.

Last Thursday, Olmert's spokeswoman said the premier

would make his decision within days and indicated he preferred a government inquiry.

A state commission is Israel's most powerful type of public inquiry, with its members chosen by the Supreme Court and the authority to subpoena witnesses and order the police to conduct searches in order to collect evidence.

A government inquiry is appointed by the premier himself, giving him more control over its work.

Following the month-long offensive against Hezbollah, which left 160 Israelis dead but failed to destroy the Shiite militant group or stop it from firing rockets into northern Israel, public pressure has been growing for Olmert to establish a state commission.

At least 57 percent of Israelis favour such an inquiry, Mina Tzemach, the chief of the respected Dahaf polling agency, told army radio.

"Israelis do not want heads to roll, but for the causes of the failures of the Lebanon war to be established, and for the lessons to be quickly learned ahead of a future armed conflict," she said.

S Lebanon villages still without aid

Key US legislator vows to block relief

AFP, AP, Beirut/ Jerusalem

Many villages in southern Lebanon devastated by clashes between Israel and Hezbollah are still without aid two weeks after an end to the fighting, a top European aid official said yesterday.

"It is surprising to find villages very damaged (by Israeli bombardments) that have not received visits from humanitarian organisations," said Philippe Royan, head of the European Commission's office of humanitarian aid.

Royan was speaking after a six-day tour of Lebanon, and said that while aid organisations had flocked to the country, they were operating "without coordination".

He said that in the south, which bore the brunt of Israel's month-long offensive, the lack of water and electricity was keeping people from returning home and resuming their lives.

"Their supply is essential for the

return and stabilisation of those forced from their villages," he said.

"Many come back during the day to assess the damage but set out again at night to sleep elsewhere," he added, saying that this was stalling the region's economic recovery, especially in the agricultural areas.

Royan also said he wished to see more demining work done in the area, which is littered with thousands of unexploded munitions.

"It is absolutely necessary to defuse (the unexploded bombs), or at least work to mark them," he said.

At least 11 people have been killed and 47 wounded by exploding cluster bomblets since the truce began, and rights groups warn of a humanitarian crisis as thousands of refugees return to homes infested with the deadly munitions.

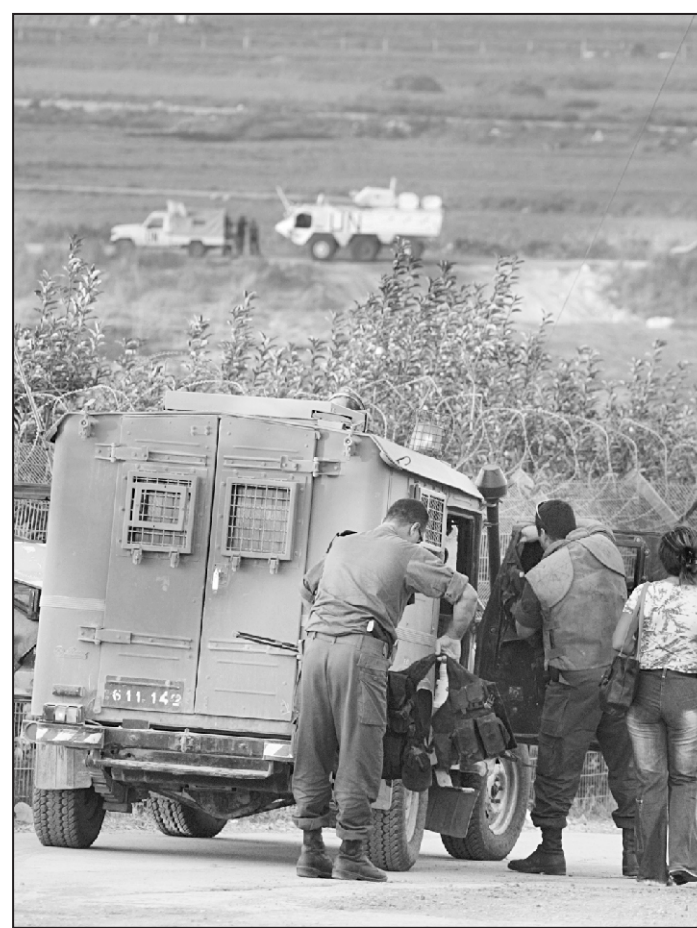
European Union member states have earmarked more than 100

million euros (127 million US dollars) for assistance to Lebanon.

Meanwhile, a key US legislator said in Israel yesterday he would block aid President George W. Bush promised Lebanon and free the funds only when Beirut agreed to the deployment of international troops on the border with Syria.

"The international community must use all our available means to stiffen Lebanon's spine and to convince the government of Lebanon to have the new Unifil troops on the Syrian border in adequate numbers," said Tom Lantos, the ranking Democrat on the US House of Representatives' International Relations Committee.

Lantos said he was putting a legislative hold on Bush's proposal to provide \$230 million in aid for Lebanon in the aftermath of the 34-day war between Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas.



Israeli soldiers escort a Lebanese civilian (R) living in Israel to the Lebanese-Israeli border at Metula in an attempt to negotiate passage for family members blocked in Lebanon with United Nations forces Saturday.

Kidnapped Fox News journalists released

AP, Gaza City

Militants freed two Fox News journalists yesterday in the Gaza Strip, ending a nearly two week hostage drama in which one of the former captives said they were forced at gunpoint to make statements, including that they had converted to Islam.

Correspondent Steve Centanni, 60, of Washington, D.C., and cameraman Olaf Wiig, 36, of New Zealand, were dropped off at Gaza City's Beach Hotel by Palestinian security officials. A tearful Centanni briefly embraced a Palestinian journalist in the lobby, then rushed upstairs with Wiig behind him.

The pair, who appeared to be in good health, then met with Palestinian officials, including Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh. The three men sat in a circle of chairs at the Beach Hotel.

"I want to thank everybody. I am happy to be here. I hope that this never scares a single journalist away from coming to Gaza to cover the story because the Palestinian people are very beautiful and kind hearted," Centanni told reporters later at a news conference. "The world needs to know more about them. Don't be discouraged."



People hold hands as they create a human chain to circle the Louisiana Superdome Saturday in New Orleans, three days before the first anniversary of hurricane Katrina.

Bombs rock Baghdad

REUTERS, Baghdad

A car bomb blasted a state-run newspaper yesterday as police reported finding 20 bodies in Baghdad, one day after Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki again called on ethnically and religiously divided Iraqis to unite.

A bomb on a minibus killed nine people in central Baghdad, sending clouds of thick smoke billowing into the sky, while a bomb planted inside a food market in a town north of Baghdad killed at least five and wounded 15, police said.

The blasts occurred despite a major security operation by thousands of American and Iraqi troops to restore order to the capital, where sectarian and Sunni insurgent violence claimed the lives of more than 3,000 Iraqis in July alone.

Police said 20 bodies had been found in various districts of Baghdad on Saturday. Some bore signs of torture and most had been killed by gunshots to the head, a typical feature of the communal bloodshed between the Shia and Sunni sects.

Maliki, whose government has struggled to contain the bloodshed, called on tribal leaders gathered in the capital on Saturday to use their influence to unite "Iraq's sons" to end violence that has raised fears of all-out civil war.

The car bomb exploded in the parking lot of al-Sabah daily in Baghdad's Waziriya district, killing a guard and another employee, wounding 18 and causing extensive damage to the building. A car bomb attack on the newspaper in May killed one.

Iran test-fires missile Vows to continue nuke works

AP, REUTERS, Tehran

Iran yesterday test-fired a sub-surface missile in the Persian Gulf during large-scale military exercises, state-run television reported.

"The army successfully test-fired a top speed long-range sub-surface missile off the Persian Gulf," the Army's Navy commander, Gen. Sajjad Kouchaki, said on state television.

A brief video clip showed the missile, fired from a submarine, hitting a target on the surface of the water within less than a mile.

The test came as part of large-scale military exercises under way throughout the country. Iran has routinely held war games over the past two decades to improve its combat readiness and to test equipment including missiles, tanks and armoured personnel carriers.

Earlier a Reuters report said Iran will pursue its nuclear fuel activities despite mounting international pressure to halt the disputed opera-

tions. "Production of nuclear fuel is our strategic aim," state radio quoted chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani as saying Sunday.

The UN Security Council has demanded Iran suspend atomic fuel work by August 31 or face the threat of sanctions. The West accuses Iran of pursuing nuclear weapons, while Iran insists its nuclear work is meant only for generating power.

"Any measure to deprive Iran of its right will not change our mind about our aim," Larjani said.

Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Reza Baqheri reiterated that Iran would never halt uranium enrichment.

"It is our red line. We will never do it," he told the official IRNA news agency.

The West's main concern is Iran's uranium enrichment programme, a process that can be used to make fuel for nuclear power stations or material for nuclear bombs.

N Korea warns of 'counter-measures' against sanctions

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has warned it will take "all necessary counter-measures" against US financial sanctions amid reports the communist state may be preparing for a nuclear test.

A North Korean foreign ministry spokesman said, in a first response late Saturday to intensifying US hunts for Pyongyang-owned bank accounts overseas, that Washington was ratcheting up the pressure in vain.

"It is the height of folly for the US to think that it can solve any issue by means of sanctions and pressure," the spokesman said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

It said the US Treasury Department was tracing North Korea-opened bank accounts in "at least 10 countries" in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states as well as Mongolia and Russia.

"Now that the Bush administration is escalating its pressure upon the DPRK through the tightened financial sanctions in a bid to keep itself politically alive, the DPRK is left with no other option but to take all necessary counter-measures to protect its ideology, system, sovereignty and dignity."

The spokesman, however, did not elaborate on what counter-measures could be taken, according to the KCNA report monitored here.