



PHOTO: AFP
Lebanese mourners carry candles in a vigil to honour assassinated Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel in his hometown Bikfaya in the mountains northeast of Beirut Wednesday night. Lebanon was in turmoil as it began three days of mourning for an anti-Syrian minister who was gunned down in an attack that stoked fears the country may again be plunged into civil strife.

Lebanese vent anger at pro-Syrian president

UN to assist Lebanon in Gemayel killing probe

AFP, Beirut/ United Nations

Angry slogans against Syria's Lebanese allies rang out from central Beirut yesterday as tens of thousands of mourners gathered for the funeral of the latest Damascus opponent to be murdered. The massed ranks of mourners began arriving hours before the 1 pm (1100 GMT) funeral of Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel, the sixth critic of Syria to be assassinated in the past two years.

Supporters of the beleaguered pro-Western government had called for the funeral to be turned into a huge show of national defiance and the mourners covered the heart of the capital in red-and-white Lebanese flags.

The angry crowds massed in Martyrs' Square close to the Maronite St George Cathedral voiced their rage at Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his Lebanese allies — President Emile Lahoud and Shiite militant group Hezbollah.

"Get Bashar's agent out of Baabda," the crowd shouted in reference to the presidential palace.

Lahoud's opponents question his legitimacy after his term of office was extended for three years in 2004 through a controversial Syrian-inspired constitutional amendment.

"We want only the army to bear weapons," the mourners chanted, referring to Hezbollah's persistent refusal to lay down its weapons in accordance with UN Security

Council resolutions following the devastating summer war with Israel.

Young men stamped on portraits of Lahoud and his Syrian and Iranian counterparts, Bashar al-Assad and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the principal backers of Hezbollah.

Meanwhile, the UN Security Council has directed UN investigators to provide Beirut with technical help in investigating the murder of anti-Syrian Lebanese Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel.

It took the decision on Wednesday in answer to a letter from UN chief Kofi Annan relaying a request from Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora for UN assistance "to investigate the murder of Mr Gemayel".

'Unsafe abortions kill 68,000 women a yr'

AFP, Paris

Unsafe abortions in the developing world kill 68,000 women a year and lead to the hospitalisation of at least five million others for infection and other complications, a study published in this Saturday's Lancet says.

The global estimate is made from an extrapolation of figures for 13 countries by Susheela Singh of the Guttmacher Institute in New York.

Around 19 million unsafe abortions take place annually around the world, a tally that includes backstreet pregnancy terminations as well as legal ones, according to Singh's paper.

Each year, the death toll from these risky operations is around 68,000 and more than five million women need hospital treatment afterwards, the paper says.

The 13 countries examined in depth by Singh are Egypt, Nigeria

and Uganda; Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines; and Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru. Some data for Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa were also available.

The lowest rate of hospitalisations was in Bangladesh, with 2.8 per 1,000 women; the highest was Uganda, with 16.4, followed by Egypt, with 15.3 in public hospitals.

Singh noted it was hard and sometimes impossible to get accurate or recent figures about unsafe abortions — India was singled out here — but said the toll in mortality and ill health was clearly enormous.

"The most effective way of eliminating this highly preventable cause of maternal illness and death would be to make safe and legal abortion services available and accessible. This goal is a continuing and critical priority in the developing world," the study says.

'Iraq govt to hold talks with insurgent groups'

AFP, London/ Baghdad

The Iraqi government will next week hold talks with representatives of insurgent groups in the country in an effort to quell the violence that has mired Iraq, The Times reported yesterday.

Citing the Iraqi National Dialogue and Reconciliation Minister Akram Al-Hakim, the newspaper said that the one-day conference will be held either on November 28 or 29, and will pave the way for a subsequent meeting outside Iraq, either in Damascus or

Amman in December or January.

"Indirectly, we are in contact with them, their messages are sent back and forth through intermediaries," Hakim was quoted as saying by the newspaper.

"They have declared that they are ready to enter into the political process."

Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki will attend the conference with other prominent officials and MPs, the newspaper said, while British and American diplomats and coalition military officers have also been invited.

A spokesman for the British foreign ministry could not immediately confirm that British diplomats have been invited to any such conference.

The summit, which has apparently been postponed twice already, will not include terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda or the Mahdi Army, but will address the question of Shia militias.

The Mahdi Army, in particular, will not attend because the Shia government believes it can deal with them within the community.

Red Cross calls for stronger alliances to fight disasters

AFP, Singapore

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement on Thursday called for stronger alliances and cooperation in the Asia Pacific to improve help for victims in the world's most disaster-prone region.

Markku Niskala, secretary general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said that "scaling up our work and strategic partnerships" was needed to reduce deaths and injuries from disease and disasters.

"We need to find new and better ways of working together, building strong partnerships and mobilising resources in order to tackle vulnera-

bility, especially in a disaster-prone area like Asia and the Pacific," he said at the close of a four-day conference in Singapore.

The conference gathered more than 200 representatives from 60 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies from the Asia Pacific and Middle East regions to map out a strategy in dealing more effectively with disasters.

In an end-of-meeting declaration, delegates stressed the need to "further develop current regional coordination mechanisms in disaster preparedness, contingency planning and response to get the maximum benefits out of the region's combined considerable strengths."



PHOTO: AFP
Somali refugees displaced by floods cross a swollen river in Dadaab, Garissa district in Kenya's arid northeastern province Wednesday. Barely recovered from a killer drought earlier in the year, Kenya's northeastern province and Somalia's south have suffered at least 85 human fatalities to floods that have caused the displacement of some 150,000 people in Kenya, two-thirds of whom are refugees fleeing Somalia currently on the verge of a civil war.

Israeli MP dreams up new ME peace plan

AFP, Jerusalem

Amid increasing calls for a diplomatic breakthrough to end rampant Israeli-Palestinian violence, a prominent leader of Israel's left-wing bloc has come up with a new Middle East peace initiative.

"We are on the verge of a (diplomatic) development in the region" Meretz MP Yossi Beilin insisted to reporters in Jerusalem, claiming that both sides, locked in deadly conflict since 2000, realise that "violence won't work".

Beilin, one of the "architects" of the 1993 Oslo peace accords but an opposition MP largely marginalised by Israeli governments, has therefore drawn up his own plan — "Mapping the Road from Realignment to Permanent Status".

Millions in UK tsunami aid unaccounted for

AFP, London

More than nine million pounds (13 million euros, 17 million dollars) of British government aid for victims of the Asian tsunami may not yet have been spent, a parliamentary committee said yesterday.

The British government committed 75 million pounds in humanitarian assistance following the December 26, 2004 disaster, including 52.6 million pounds to third parties such as United Nations agencies, charities and other NGOs.

By May 2006, the Department for International Development could account for spending of 43.3 million pounds by third parties, but 9.3 million pounds was not fully accounted for, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) said.

Ex-Russian spy fights for life, mystery remains over poisoning

AFP, London

Former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko was fighting for his life Thursday after his condition worsened further, doctors and friends said, as mystery deepened over what caused his condition.

Friends also reported that Litvinenko had suffered a heart attack in the London hospital where he is in intensive care.

In their latest update doctors ruled out an initial theory that the heavy metal thallium was responsible, said radioactivity was "unlikely" and dismissed a report of three unidentified objects had been found in his intestines.