



## Lebanon govt defiant as protesters up pressure

Israel looks nervously at standoff

REUTERS, AFP, Beirut/ Jerusalem

Lebanon's political crisis showed no sign of easing yesterday, with the pro-Syrian opposition pressing on with its protest campaign to topple the Western-backed government. Thousands of protesters from Hezbollah and its allies spent a second night in a tent city in central Beirut, within earshot of the office-towered residence of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

"We are not letting them (ministers) sleep, we're disturbing them with our noise. We have the resilience to stay not for one month, but a year or two," said Ahmed Kayello, 20, from south Lebanon, sitting on a grassy slope.

Breakfast vendors parked on pavements, some protesters read

newspapers, and long queues formed behind portable latrines, a morning after thousands of protesters chanted "Beirut is free, Siniora out," during a late Saturday night rally.

The opposition led by Hezbollah, which is backed by Syria and Iran, has been demanding effective veto power in the government whose majority is composed of anti-Syrian politicians.

But these politicians insist the opposition only wants to weaken the government and delay a UN tribunal, which would try suspects in the 2005 slaying of ex-premier Rafik al-Hariri.

A preliminary UN inquiry has implicated Syrian and Lebanese security officials.

Six opposition ministers

resigned from cabinet after the talks on national unity collapsed. Nevertheless, the depleted government approved plans for the tribunal, which served as a catalyst for the latest protests.

The cabinet was also weakened by the November 21 assassination of anti-Syrian minister Pierre Gemayel. A mass for Gemayel's killing was conducted at the Governmental Palace which Siniora and other anti-Syrian politicians attended.

"We assure the Lebanese that change is coming soon. A national unity government will be achieved," Hezbollah member of parliament Hussein Haj Hassan told the group's al-Manar television from the camp city.

Siniora, who has vowed he

would not be forced out by the protests, has won expressions of support from Arab and Western countries, including the United States, Britain and Germany.

Meanwhile, Israel is keeping a close watch of the political crisis in Lebanon where the Hezbollah-led campaign to bring down the government is likely to impact the Jewish state, senior officials said Sunday.

The tense standoff in Beirut, where the Shiite militant group Hezbollah and allies are trying to bring down Prime Minister Fuad Siniora's government, was a focus of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's weekly cabinet meeting.

"Israel is closely following developments in Lebanon," Olmert told ministers, according to a senior government official.



## Pinochet suffers heart attack

AP, Santiago

Former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet has suffered a life-threatening heart attack while under house arrest and was rushed to hospital early yesterday, doctors said.

He was listed at Santiago Military Hospital in "stable condition," according to an official statement released by the hospital.

But one of his doctors, Juan Ignacio Vergara said the retired general's life was "in danger."

"His fate is in the hands of God and his doctors," added Pinochet's youngest son, Marco Antonio Pinochet Hiriart.

Following his arrival shortly after 2:00 am (0600 GMT) on Sunday, Pinochet underwent angioplasty -- a procedure designed to widen a narrowed or totally obstructed blood vessel -- to stabilize his condition, the hospital said, but offered no further details.

Pinochet, who ruled Chile for 17 years after seizing power in a 1973 military coup, turned 91 on November 25.

## India develops missile defence system

REUTERS, New Delhi

India has developed an anti-missile defence system, which could be put in place in 3 to 5 years, the country's top defence research body said on Saturday.

Earlier this week, India conducted a mid-air collision of two nuclear-capable ballistic missiles in a successful test of an interception programme.

"We have made a very good beginning," said VK Saraswat, an official of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).

"We have successfully developed technology for anti-ballistic missile defence system. As and when the country needs it, we can have our anti-missile defence system but it may take at least three to five years," he added.

Analysts said the DRDO has missed many project deadlines in the past.

## US puts a \$350b price tag on Iraq war

AFP, Washington

The war in Iraq has cost the United States more than 350 billion dollars since the March 2003 invasion, according to an AFP review of Congress figures.

About 290 billion dollars, including 254 billion for military operations, were allocated for the war in fiscal year 2006, which closed on September 30, according to a September 22 report by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

The Congressional Research Service estimated the cost at 319 billion dollars, representing 73 percent of US spending for the "war on terror" launched after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

Congress has approved 70 billion dollars for the "war on terror" in the 2007 defence budget that includes about 50

billion dollars for the Iraq conflict, bringing the three-and-a-half-year spending over 350 billion dollars.

A Democratic senator said last month that the Defence Department will request an additional 127 billion dollars for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an amount that would bring the cost of the "war on terror" over 500 billion dollars.

The new funding request would make the "war on terror" more expensive for the United States than Washington's spending during the Vietnam War that ended in 1975.

The Congressional Research Service said in a September report that the cost of the war in Iraq rose this year to eight billion dollars a month, compared to 6.4 billion a month last year.

## Divided UN powers to meet for Iran talks

AFP, Moscow

A meeting of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany to discuss a UN resolution on Iran's nuclear programme will go ahead Tuesday, after Russia on Saturday withdrew a statement saying it had been called off due to disagreements.

"The meeting of political directors of the six (countries) will take place on Tuesday," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on arrival in Moscow from talks in Egypt, Russian news agencies reported.

On leaving Egypt hours earlier, the same agencies reported Lavrov as saying that the meeting had been cancelled because some of the participants were "avoiding continuing the job."

He gave no indication of which countries had voiced reservations, or whether he had been in touch with any of Russia's partners during the flight.

He said it was still not certain

where it would take place, saying it would likely be held "somewhere in Europe, probably in Paris."

A foreign ministry spokesman in Paris confirmed that the meeting would take place "early next week" but was unable to name the venue.

Amid the confused signals, there was little sign that the so-called P5-plus-one group -- Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States -- was any closer to bridging wide disagreements on the issue.

The six have been trying for weeks to agree on what sanctions to impose on Iran for its refusal to comply with an earlier UN resolution requiring it to freeze a uranium enrichment programme.

While all six states have agreed in principle to impose some sanctions until Iran agrees to suspend the enrichment and enter into negotiations on its nuclear programme, Russia and China have balked at the terms of a draft resolution drawn up by Britain, France and Germany.

AP, Daraga

The top Red Cross official in the Philippines said yesterday that he thinks 1,000 people or more have been killed by Typhoon Durian.

"We're estimating the casualties could reach 1,000, perhaps more," said Sen Richard Gordon, who heads the local Red Cross. His figure of 1,000 was based on reports from Red Cross officials on the ground in the devastated areas.

Gordon said at present his group has recorded a death toll of at least 406, with 398 others missing, based on figures provided by mayors of devastated towns in the eastern

Philippines, where Durian hit with 139 mph winds and torrential rains on Thursday.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo declared a state of national calamity Sunday, allowing the government to more rapidly release funds needed to bolster search and rescue efforts.

Typhoon Durian was the fourth major storm to hit the Philippines in four months. It buffeted the Mayon volcano with so much wind and rain that ash and boulders cascaded down in walls of black mud that swamped entire villages on Thursday.

The Philippines' location in the

northwestern Pacific often makes it the region's welcome mat for typhoons.

"We are often the first to experience typhoons before they go to China, Taiwan and Japan," said Thelma Cinco, senior weather specialist of the Philippine weather bureau.

Durian, named after a thorny fruit with a powerful odour that many find offensive, blew away roofs, toppled trees and power lines and sent tons of rocks and volcanic ash down Mayon, the region's most famous landmark about 210 miles south-east of Manila.



PHOTO: AFP

A woman looks yesterday at soldiers carrying a body bag over mudflow that buried villages in Padang in Legaspi city. Rescuers continue to recover bodies around Legaspi city in Philippines' eastern Bicol region swamped by volcanic debris from nearby Mayon volcano, partly covered by clouds in the background, unleashed by heavy rains from super typhoon Durian.