Israeli pullout from Lebanon to complete within days

Lebanese swarming into South after withdrawal

METULLAH, Israel, May 23 : Hundreds of Israeli troops left south Lebanon under the cover of darkness early today morning amid reports the Jewish state will end its 22-year occupation of its northern neighbour within days, reports AFP.

An army official confirmed that Israel had evacuated 120 troops from its Bint Jbail headquarters in the central sector of its self-declared "security zone" and described the movement of several hundred more overnight as "technical changes".

Israeli public radio reported that security cabinet decided an an emergency session chaired by Prime Minister Ehud Barak to complete its withdrawal from Lebanon "within days", public radio said.

Israel has been widely ex-pected to carry out a swift with-drawal after its grip on its oc-cupied zone in Lebanon was shaken by the flight of its allied militia on Monday from several border villages in the face of Hezbollah guerrilla advances.

Travelling in armoured ve-hicles including troop carriers, tanks and jeeps, Israeli sol-diers rolled back into Israeli territory through a border gate near this small northern town, many of them dancing and singing and waving their guns in the air.

An AFP photographer saw a first group of up to 600 soldiers cross from the central sector of the zone into Israel near Kib-butz Baram shortly before 2:00 a.m. (2300 GMT Monday) but Is-raeli military censors had im-posed a media blackout on re-porting of the troop movements until some five hours later.

At the gate near Metullah, an AFP correspondent saw at least 370 troops pass through a high metal and barbed wire fence into Israeli territory in five separate convoys from around 3:00 a.m. (6:00 BST) until dawn.

"The army is preparing itself in the security zone according to the new situation that has evolved," the army said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah guer-rillas pushed close to the Israeli border today, reclaiming more Lebanese territory as Israel speeded up its withdrawal from south Lebanon after more than two decades of occupation.

Security sources said Israel pulled out three-quarters of its troops under cover of darkness in a suprise overnight with-drawal after the near total col-lapse of its allied South Lebanon Army (SLA) Monday.

Across south Lebanon resi-dents reclaimed their homeland as fighters from the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah, which has led the armed campaign to drive Israel out of the region, pushed south toward the Israeli border.

Hundreds of residents retook villages in the central and west-ern sectors of south Lebanon close to the frontier with Israel, including the larger towns of Bint Jbail and coastal Naqura, the gateway to the western sec-tor.

Residents rallied at Naqura's Hamra bridge by an outpost abandoned by the SLA as Hezbollah and pro-Syrian Shi-ite Muslim Amal movement fighters took control of ar-moured vehicles.

Israeli tanks are parked at the Israeli border with Lebanon near Metulla yesterday. Israel withdrew overnight three-quarters of its soldiers in Southern Lebanon and totally evacuated the western sector between the coast and Bint Jbail. —AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Plane hijacker to die in Iran:

A Tehran court has passed a death sentence on an Iranian found guilty of hijacking a plane in November 1993, the government newspaper Iran reported yesterday, AFP reports from Tehran.

The sentence on Ali-Reza Karami Kheiabadi, who is in his 50s, was confirmed by the Supreme Court, the newspaper said, adding that Tehran's appeal court rejected the defendant's appeal.

Floods kill 21 in Colombia:

Incessant weekend rain triggered flooding and mudslides that killed at least 21 people, including seven who died when a swollen river swallowed a truck, officials said, AP reports from Bogota.

The cargo truck with 14 passengers aboard was crossing a bridge in southern Putumayo State on Sunday when the San Miguel river rose up and swept it away. The bodies of seven passengers were found, and the others remained missing, the state police chief, Col Daniel Ruiz, said Monday.

Senegal train crash claims 12:

At least 12 people were killed and 210 others injured Monday when a train packed with thousands of Muslim pilgrims went off its rails outside the Senegalese capital Dakar, officials said, AFP reports from Dakar.

Many of the victims were crushed inside the train's carriages, which were tossed into their sides and roofs, witnesses said, hampering rescue efforts.

Mugabe's party admits
MDC can oust it in polls

HARARE, May 23 : A senior member of Zimbabwe's ruling party has admitted it could be trounced by the new opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in next month's elections, press reports said to-day, says AFP.

Eddison Zvobgo, ZANU-PF secretary for legal affairs, was quoted by the independent Daily News as saying that a February referendum rejecting a government-backed constitu-tion was an early indication that the MDC could win the parliamentary vote.

"We are afraid that history can repeat itself and we can lose the elections," Zvobgo, who is also a minister without portfo-lio, was quoted as saying at an election rally in the southern town of Masvingo.

"We really have tough homework because the MDC poses a serious challenge," Zvobgo said.

He said he was grateful that the invasions of white-owned farms by war veterans in the run-up to elections had helped the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) regain some of its lost sup-port.

"If the former fighters had not invaded the farms, then we could be facing serious trouble," he said, adding: "The invasions helped the party to garner sup-port from the people."

Veterans of the country's war of independence have spear-headed the often violent occu-pation of more than 1,300 white-owned farms.

Zvobgo, the first ruling party official to openly admit the threat posed to its continued rule by the labour-backed party, said however that none of the current MDC officials had suf-ficient leadership ability to run the southern African country.

US-based pre-election ob-servers from the National Democratic Institute for Inter-national Affairs have said Zimbabwe is not ready for free and fair elections because of high levels of violence and in-timidation of the electorate in the run-up to the vote, set for June 24 and 25.

At least 25 people, most of them opposition supporters, have been killed and more than 100 people have been injured in election-related violence.

Elian's rescuer sues Reno

MIAMI, May 23 : One of the fishermen who rescued Elian Gonzalez off the Florida coast, said suit against top US offi-cials Monday, including Attor-ney General Janet Reno over last month's federal raid to re-move the Cuban castaway from his Miami relatives' home, re-ports AFP.

Donato Dalrymple is seek-ing more than 100 million dol-lars in damages after the April 22 raid by armed federal agents that wrested Elian from his Mi-ami relatives, allowing the six-year-old to be reunited with his father.

"I'm doing this for the whole community" of Miami, Dal-rymple said at a press confer-ence in Miami.

His lawsuit, which alleges his constitutional rights were violated by the raid, also names US Immigration and Natural-ization Service (INS) Commis-sioner Doris Meissner and Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder.

Washington-based Judicial Watch, whose lawyers are rep-resenting Dalrymple, seeks to hold Reno, Meissner and Holder personally accountable.

Norway ready to host face-to-face meeting to end Lanka war

COLOMBO, May 23 : Norway is ready to host a face-to-face meeting of Sri Lanka's warring parties in a bid to politically end the drawn out ethnic blood-shed, diplomats here said to-day, reports AFP.

Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Raymond Johansen and Oslo's special peace envoy, Erik Solheim, arrived here for talks with Sri Lankan leaders on the military situation and are due to leave Tuesday.

Diplomatic sources said that the Norwegian delegation had made it clear that they were prepared to get the talks off the ground but were awaiting a green light from the Colombo government to press ahead.

There has been no official word from the government over the latest peace moves made in the backdrop of intense fighting between security forces and Tamil Tiger rebels in the is-land's north.

The Norwegian team also met with India's top envoy here,

Shivshankar Menon, but de-tails of their meeting were not known.

Solheim was in the Indian capital New Delhi on May 11 to brief the Indian authorities on the peace moves in Sri Lanka.

President Chandrika Ku-maratunga announced in De-cember that she had asked Norway to help bring the sepa-ratist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the peace-negotiating table, but so far no face-to-face meeting has taken place.

Norway's then foreign min-ister Knut Vollebaek was here in February for talks with Sri Lankan leaders, but the gov-ernment collapsed on May 10 delaying the peace effort. Sol-heim later replaced Vollebaek as the peace envoy.

The Norwegians have al-ready had talks with LTTE's London-based ideologue, Anton Balasingham, who recently un-derwent a kidney transplant.

Trimble's deputy to oppose restoring N Ireland govt

BELFAST, May 23 : The Ul-ster Unionist Party's deputy leader John Taylor dealt a fresh blow to hopes of a breakthrough in the Northern Ireland peace process today, warning he would not back moves to restore a power-sharing government in Belfast, reports AFP.

"On Thursday last I made it clear I was not satisfied with the package that was on the table, and I'll be voting against it," Taylor told AFP. "That will be my position on Saturday un-less things seriously improve."

UUP leader David Trimble is to put the issue to the vote at a meeting of his party's 860-strong policy-making council on Saturday.

Trimble wants his party to agree to rejoin the power-shar-ing executive alongside minis-ters from Sinn Fein, the politi-cal wing the Irish Republican Army (IRA), to restore direct rule in Northern Ireland.

Japanese leader crashes in poll

TOKYO, May 23 : Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's government crashed in the pop-ularity polls today as it faced a motion of no-confidence ahead of general elections, reports AFP.

Mori's government, barely seven weeks old, slumped in two popularity polls, each blaming a gaffe by the new leader who described Japan as a divine na-tion with the emperor at the centre.

Four key opposition parties agreed to move a no-confidence motion in the government, gearing up for elections which Mori is widely expected to call for June 25.

The main opposition Demo-cratic Party of Japan, along with the Communist Party of Japan, the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party, were infuriated by Mori's com-ment.

"Prime Minister Mori's re-mark on a divine nation is un-constitutional. It denies the constitution and we seek a swift resignation of the cabinet," said a joint statement by the opposi-tion.

At a party celebrating the 30th anniversary of the found-ing of a lawmakers' group sup-porting Shintoism on May 15, the prime minister declared: "Japan is God's country, centred on the emperor."

World's oldest man is 110, living in Oklahoma

LONDON, May 23 : A 110-year-old American is the world's oldest living man, the Guinness World Records book said Monday, reports AFP.

Benjamin Harrison Holcomb was born on July 3 1889 in Robinson, Kansas, and now lives at the Carnegie Nursing Home in Oklahoma where he is cared for by three of his five children: Lucille, 85, Leona, 84 and John, 80, the records book said.

And the secret of his longevity? He likes a good cry, according to one of his daughters.

"Dad has always known how to handle things, how to handle his emotions," said Leona. "That's why he's lived so long. He lies to cry."

Holcomb spent most of his life as a farmer in Oklahoma and is a keen hunter. But he remains something of a young pup in comparison with the world's oldest living person, 114-year-old Eva Morris from Staffordshire.

Wahid rules out emergency in Aceh

JAKARTA, May 23 : Indone-sian Defense Minister Yuwono Sudarsono said today that he had proposed a state of emer-gency for troubled Aceh province but that President Abdurrahman Wahid had rejected the idea, reports AFP.

"Many times in November last year I, together with armed forces and police chiefs, de-manded that a state of civil or military emergency be imposed in Aceh but he (Wahid) rejected it," Sudarsono told a press con-ference here.

He said Wahid favoured a so-lution which involved all strands of the community in Aceh "as part of efforts to de-velop tolerance and democ-racy."

Aceh, a staunchly Muslim province, has seen years of vio-lence between government forces and separatist rebels fighting for an independent state.

Coup leader and self-appointed Prime Minister of Fiji, George Speight (C) speaks to Taukei supporters acting as a human shield around Parliament House in Suva yesterday where he is holding deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Pal Chaudhry captive. Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic-Indian premier, continues to be held hostage inside the Fijian Parliament with his Cabinet. The Taukei militias have renewed their threat to kill PM Chaudry if the compound is attacked. —AFP photo

Pressure mounts on Fiji's coup leaders to free PM

UN administrator to go to Suva

SUVA, May 23 : Fiji's power-ful Great Council of Chiefs Tuesday called for leaders of a coup to release Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his cabinet, as international pres-sure against the rebels mounted, reports AFP.

Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian premier, has been held hostage with his cabinet in Parliament since Friday, when gunmen stormed the building in the name of indigenous Fijians.

A brief burst of automatic gunfire in the parliament build-ing rang out earlier Tuesday, signalling a new heightening of tension as the special forces soldiers extended their siege into a fifth day.

Former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka said that at Tuesday's meeting the nation's chief had called for the coup leaders to release Chaudhry and the other hostages.

Coup leaders have admitted that Chaudhry has been beaten during the ordeal and the acting

leader of his coalition govern-ment, Ratu Tevita Momoedonu, said Tuesday he had suffered serious internal injuries.

However Rabuka, who him-self led two coups in 1987, said he doubted the ringleader, busi-nessman George Speight, would bow to the chiefs' demands.

Fiji's neighbours turned up the pressure on the coup leaders Tuesday. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer warned it would not accept any compromise which undermined Chaudhry's elected government.

"The Australian government is appalled at what has hap-pened in Fiji," he said in a ma-jor toughening of his stance.

"We abhor this attempt to seize power in an undemocratic way," he said, adding that Aus-tralia may withdraw diplo-matic links and suspend its aid program if Speight successfully overthrew the elected govern-ment.

Similar sentiments were

aired by New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark who warned that "if power changes at the barrel of a gun the Com-monwealth for one will not stand for it".

Rabuka said that at the meeting the chiefs declared their support for President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who pre-sented them with a proposal to end the crisis.

Mara refused to reveal what he had tabled, but on Monday made it clear that if Chaudhry was released, he could not ex-pect to return to his job.

"I cannot say that I will put back the government that caused this problem," said the president.

The council of chiefs is a key institution for indigenous Fi-jians. While its role is theoreti-cally advisory, council agree-ment is deemed crucial for most major political decisions in Fiji.

Speight, who has declared himself the interim prime min-

ister, had been confident earlier Tuesday that the chiefs would back him.

Another report says, the United Nations will send a spe-cial envoy to Fiji to voice inter-national concern over the coup attempt, New Zealand's Foreign Minister Phil Goff said today.

Goff spoke to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan early Tues-day and briefed him on the sit-uation in the Pacific nation.

It was decided that the UN administrator for East Timor, Sergio Vieira de Mello, would go to Suva at the earliest oppor-tunity.

"He has agreed to send a spe-cial emissary to Fiji today, and that emissary is Sergio de Mello, who is a very experi-enced, very capable United Na-tions public servant who is cur-rently running the United Na-tions administration in East Timor," Goff told New Zealand Press Association.

Eritrea agrees to negotiate without preconditions: EU

ADDIS ABABA, May 23 : Er-itrea has agreed to resume peace negotiations with Ethiopia "without preconditions," EU special envoy Rino Serri said today, reports AFP.

Since fighting between the Horn of Africa neighbours re-sumed May 12, Eritrea has said a ceasefire must come before any resumption of talks that failed in Algiers on May 5.

"What is in our knowledge today is that the Eritreans do accept to return to Algiers with-out preconditions," said Serri.

Meanwhile, three World Food Programme (WFP) planes carrying emergency UN food re-lief to war-torn Eritrea were ex-pected in Asmara early today, a top UN official in Asmara said.

"We are expecting a total of 70,000 tonnes," UN resident co-ordinator in Asmara, Simon Nhongo, told AFP.

The flights had been delayed by clearance problems with Su-dan, but the planes were ex-pected after 10:00 a.m. (14:00 BST).

A WFP official in the Kenyan capital Nairobi told AFP there that the three planes — one coming from Uganda and two from Kenya — would be used to evacuate non-essential UN staff and their families from Asmara to Nairobi.

Nhongo earlier announced in Asmara that 47 UN staff would be evacuated from the Eritrean capital on Tuesday or Wednesday.

Eritrea is facing a major humanitarian crisis as a result of renewed fighting over the past 12 days in the country's fertile southwestern region.

The Eritrean government estimates that some 550,000 people have been displaced by the fighting, and that the num-ber could jump to one million if Ethiopia continued its push eastward across southern Er-itrea to the central front in the two-year-old border war.

Indian air force jet crashes

NEW DELHI, May 23 : An In-dian air force fighter jet crashed in the northern Indian desert state of Rajasthan, killing the pilot, an air force spokesman said today.

The MiG-21 plane crashed at 7:30 am (8:00 BST) in Nimbala village, some 32 km from Barmer town in Rajasthan's Jaisalmer district, Squadron Leader Rajesh Dhingra told AFP.

"The aircraft was on a rou-tine training sortie when the mishap took place. The pilot was killed in the accident. We have located the wreckage of the MiG-21," Dhingra said.

Woody Allen campaigns to save historic houses

NEW YORK, May 23 : Direc-tor Woody Allen is leading a battle to save 12 Manhattan townhouses from being de-stroyed and replaced by a skyscraper, the Daily News re-ported Monday, says AFP.

The latest cause of the New York filmmaker, whose film "Small Time Crooks" was re-leased this weekend, could be the plot of one of his films, which portray humanity and love in Manhattan.

The kidnappers are seeking a separate Muslim state in the southern Philippines and re-dress of alleged abuses of Fil-ipino Muslim immigrants in the Malaysian state of Sabah in exchange for the hostages, who were snatched from the Malaysian Sipadan resort.

US President Bill Clinton (L) escorts South African President Thabo Mbeki during a state arrival ceremony at the White House in Washington, DC Monday that was moved inside because of heavy rain. —AFP photo

Taliban condemn Russian warning of possible airstrikes

KABUL, May 23 : Afghanistan's ruling Taliban today condemned warning from Russia of possible airstrikes against suspected Is-lamic training camps in Afghanistan, reports AFP.

An Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman Faiz Ahmad Faiz shrugged off the warning and vowed that the Islamic militia would continue to extend "moral backing" for the Chechen rebels.

He was commenting on a statement by Russian President Valdimir Putin's top spokesman Sergei Yastrzhemb-sky on Monday.

"Such statements by the Russians is not something new. The Russians have always openly interfered in Afghan in-ternal affairs," Faiz said.

Serbian court jails 143 Kosovars for 'terrorism'

NIS, Yugoslavia, May 23 : A Serbian court on Monday jailed 143 Kosovo Albanians to terms of between seven and 13 years on terrorism charges at the end of what defence lawyers de-nounced as a "political" trial, reports AFP.

The district court in the southern Serbian town of Nis handed down sentences to-talling 1,632 years to the defen-dants, for what it said was their part in attacks against govern-ment forces during the 1999 NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia.

About 3,000 Kosovar Alba-nians protested against the ver-dicts Monday by marching

through the streets of Djakovica, southwest Kosovo, the defendants' home town.

The court sentenced 49 of the accused to 13 years in prison; 51 received 12-year sentences; 20 were sentenced to 10 years; 11 got nine-year terms; and 10 were jailed for seven years.

Two other ethnic Albanians sentenced to seven years' im-prisonment were not old enough to be jailed as adults and were sent to serve their sen-tences in a juvenile detention centre.

Defence lawyer Teki Bokshi denounced the verdicts as a "po-litical decision."

Abu Sayyaf leaders hold talks with Manila

PATIKUL, Philippines, May 23 : Two leaders of a Muslim extremist group holding 21 mostly foreign captives met a government negotiator here to-day as the hostage crisis entered its second month, reports AFP.

Details of the meeting with the Abu Sayyaf leaders were not immediately available.

"Peace be with you," Abu Sayyaf leader Ghalib Andang said in the broad Tausug lan-guage as he waved to reporters before going into a closed-door meeting with provincial gover-nor Abdusakur Tan in the mu-nicipal hall.

Andang, accompanied by another senior Abu Sayyaf leader Mujib Susukan, arrived in a convoy of three jeeps packed with about 50 Muslim guerrillas, armed with assault rifles and with their faces cov-ered in black ski masks.

The rendezvous area was se-cured by scores of policemen, but the military stayed away, in keeping with a previous ar-rangement with the rebels.

Atlantis astronauts enter ISS

HOUSTON, Texas, May 23 : Astronauts from the space shut-tle Atlantis entered the interna-tional Space Station (ISS) late Monday to prepare it for a full time crew to arrive later in the year, NASA announced, reports AFP.

Astronaut Susan Helms and Russian cosmonaut Yuri Us-achev opened the hatch to the US module Unity at 4:03 BST and entered the Russian module Zarya some 55 minutes later.

After examining the mod-ules, the seven member crew set to work on their extensive to-do list.

Ten smoke detectors will be changed aboard Zarya, and fans installed to improve air flow aboard the module to remove the risk of exposure to toxic

fumes experienced by previous crews.

The crew will also work on Zarya's sound proofing, after criticism that the noise level onboard was too high.

Their most important task is to replace a charger and four of the six batteries needed to generate electricity for the ISS that no longer work.

They are also to load more than a tonne of material onto the ISS for use by future crews, including clothing, computers and exercise equipment.

If another module, Zvezda is launched in July as planned, there will be at least four more space flights to the station by the end of the year — three by US shuttles and one by a Rus-sian Soyuz spacecraft.

'Ocalan suffering from respiratory problems'

ANKARA, May 23 : Con-demned Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan is suffering from respiratory problems due to the unfavourable conditions of his solitary confinement on the prison island of Imrali in northwestern Turkey, one of his lawyers said today.

"For the past one-and-a-half months, our client has been complaining of important res-piratory problems and has been given medical treatment. He is unable to get enough air," Attor-ney Dogan Erbas told AFP.