

Israel braces for conflict as Lebanon, Iraq fronts tense

Israel cuts off fuel supplies to Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

After almost five months of blazing violence in the Palestinian territories, Israel faced the prospect Sunday of fresh conflict on its northern border while the US-British air strikes on Iraq stoked tensions further.

Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh said although Israel did not consider Iraqi President Saddam Hussein an immediate threat despite his threats of retaliation, it feared a front uniting Iraq with Iran and Syria.

"Saddam does not represent an immediate danger, but his threats must be taken seriously. He has proved in the past that he meant them," Sneh told Israeli radio.

"A rapprochement between Syria, Iraq and Iran would be dangerous because it can lead to an upsurge in violence intended to provoke us into responding and to a limited conflict with Syria."

Saddam on Saturday ordered 21 military divisions to be created for his "Jerusalem Liberation Army" following the air strikes by US and British warplanes against military installations around Baghdad Friday that killed two civilians.

Iraq announced the creation of the army to "liberate Palestine" the day after Ariel Sharon, a hardline former

general despised by the Arab world, defeated Ehud Barak in an election for Israel's prime minister.

During the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq fired 39 Scud missiles against Israel, killing two people and injuring hundreds more.

The heightened tensions come only a week before US Secretary of State Colin Powell is due in the region for a tour taking him to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait.

Fears of a new battle front also heightened following the killing of an Israeli soldier Friday in a rocket attack by the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah guerrillas in a disputed border region.

Elad Shnior, 19, who is to be buried in the southern town of Ashdod Sunday, was the second soldier to be killed in the area since Israel pulled out its troops from Lebanon in May after a 22-year occupation.

Meanwhile, Israel has tightened its blockade further on the Palestinian territories, stopping the supply of fuel and gas supplies to the Gaza Strip, a Palestinian official told AFP Sunday.

"Last Thursday the Israeli army banned until further notice the conveyance of fuel and domestic gas to the Gaza Strip," said Luay Arandas, head of the Palestinian Authority's oil commission.



PHOTO: AFP

Sub Lieutenant Gemma Mountney, 23, of Wolverhampton, salutes Indian President Shri Narayanan with the crew of HMS Cumberland as the presidential yacht sails past the Royal Navy frigate in an Indian Fleet Review off Bombay on Saturday. Seventy Indian and foreign ships took part in the first Indian Fleet Review since 1989 and the first to include foreign warships.

Oslo peace bid in Lanka hits snags again

AFP, Colombo

Norway's peace attempts in Sri Lanka have run into fresh trouble over the composition of an international panel to monitor a truce between government troops and Tiger rebels, a press report said Sunday.

Oslo assembled the ceasefire monitoring team drawn from nine countries, including Britain and Japan, but the Tigers as well as neighbouring India had objected to some of them, the privately-run Sunday Leader said.

The newspaper, quoting unidentified Western sources said India had objected to Britain and Japan being included in the team that could give them a larger role in a South Asian issue.

"India wants to avoid the setting up of any precedent that may in the future encourage further interference by the West or the East," the

Leader said.

Japan, which is Sri Lanka's largest single foreign aid donor, was expected to head the truce monitoring panel and finance its activities, it said.

There was no official reaction Sunday to the Leader report.

Norway's special envoy, Erik Solheim, has made it a point to brief India's top envoy in Colombo during his visits for talks with Sri Lankan leaders.

The Leader said the Sri Lankan government too was against having a high representation of Western nations in the panel, fearing a backlash from nationalist elements among the majority Sinhalese community.

Equally, the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had objections against to any country which was funding the Sri Lankan government's military campaign.

Indian army regrets killing of 5 demonstrators in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The Indian army on Sunday expressed regret over two incidents of firing by troops on demonstrators in Kashmir state which caused the death of five people.

"On our part, I give you my solemn word that those of my men who are blameworthy will be brought to book and dealt with according to the law," Indian Army's 15 Corps chief, John Ray Mukherjee, told journalists here.

In the first incident at Haigam north of Srinagar on Thursday, Indian troops opened fire on thousands of demonstrators, killing four people including two women.

It sparked off sporadic clashes between stone-throwing protesters and the security forces which continued until Sunday around Kashmir.

Curfew extended in Kashmir as ceasefire decision looms

AFP, Srinagar

Police again enforced a curfew in the Kashmiri capital Srinagar Sunday as sporadic unrest flared ahead of an Indian cabinet meeting over whether to extend a ceasefire in the region.

Around half a dozen Muslim separatist leaders in Indian-held Kashmir were also put under house arrest and two pro-independence activists were detained ahead of Sunday's meeting of the cabinet committee on security affairs.

It is the third day running a curfew has been imposed on parts of Srinagar in response to a spate of protests across Kashmir triggered by the death in police custody last week of a Kashmiri independence campaigner.

In an incident at Higam north of Srinagar Indian troops on Thursday opened fire on a crowd of demon-

strators, killing four people.

"The curfew has been imposed in only three police stations as a precautionary measure keeping in view the fourth day ceremony of the four civilians killed at Higam," said Kashmir police chief Ashok Suri.

Among those put under house arrest were Professor Abdul Gani Bhat and Syed Ali Geelani, key leaders of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), a coalition of around two dozen Kashmiri separatist groups.

"They have been arrested to prevent them going to Higam where these leaders are giving provocative lectures instigating violence," said a police official.

Javed Mir, who was injured in Friday's clashes, was arrested Sunday morning while Shabir Shah was kept in detention for a second day.

There were several minor

incidents of stone-throwing in Srinagar on Sunday, said the police official, giving the reason for the renewed curfew.

There was also a heavy deployment of para-military forces in sensitive areas.

However the measures angered local residents.

Meanwhile, India's ceasefire in Kashmir has failed to bring an end to violence in the troubled region, Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee said Saturday on the eve of a crucial meeting on whether to renew the truce.

"The ceasefire did not achieve the results that were expected. Violence in Kashmir has not ebbed and we had thought Pakistan would be able to rein back the terrorists but it has failed," Vajpayee told a news conference here.

Surging crowds choke naval extravaganza in Bombay

AFP, Bombay

Large crowds surged through police barricades on Sunday causing chaos ahead of a parade by the navies of 19 countries at a maritime review in the western Indian port of Bombay.

Thousands of people thronged the area round the parade route on the Marine Drive seafront, known as the Queen's Necklace, as naval guards and policemen desperately tried to fight back the holiday crowd.

The review has drawn 25 warships from 19 countries. They have been joined by 95 Indian destroyers, frigates, corvettes and submarines.

People clambered their way up telephone pillars, electricity poles and packed the rooftops of high rise buildings in a bid to get a vantage point of the parade.

The march past eventually went ahead but was delayed for more than one hour.

"We have never seen such a rush of people. Our preparations are not adequate to handle this and we have no back up plans, if god forbid, a stampede was to occur," Ram

Swarup Vaghe, inspector of police, told AFP.

Police were unable to run their customary security checks with metal detectors as people pushed their way towards the parade route.

The parade was preceded by a flypast of Indian naval helicopters from which parachutists dropped into the Arabian Sea.

Marine commandos armed with machine guns guarded the seafront and naval divers were in the water at the venue where Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was accompanied by the chiefs of 19 navies.

The traffic around the area was stopped by the police but some cars and vehicles managed to squeeze onto the roads adding to the chaos. Many invitees were turned back by the police.

"It is extremely sad that we have travelled 60 kilometres (38 miles) to Bombay and my mother is 80-years-old. We have valid passes for the parade ground and we were shoed away by the police," said Maya Joshi, a prominent fashion designer.

Fresh tremor hits Salvador

AFP, San Salvador

A new strong earth tremor shook El Salvador again late Saturday, scaring local residents but leaving no victims, authorities announced.

The National Committee on Emergencies retracted its earlier report that two people had been killed by the tremor in the northern village of Apopa, saying instead there were no dead or wounded this time.

But the tremor, which was felt in the Salvadoran capital at 2:30 pm (2:30 BST), caused panic among local residents, who have lived through two major earthquakes since the beginning of the year.

As the ground began shaking, people rushed out of restaurants and stores fearing for their lives.

According to the committee, the tremor registered 5.3 on the Richter scale. Its epicenter was located south of the capital San Salvador.

The 6.6 Richter earthquake that shook El Salvador Tuesday left at least 305 dead and 3,153 injured, while the massive 7.7 degree tremor that struck on January 13

left 827 dead and about 2,000 missing.

Already, the quakes are producing social and political turmoil in a once bitterly-divided country still struggling to pick itself up nine years after a bitter civil war was brought to an end.

Dozens of communities have yet to receive even basic aid four days after Tuesday's quake, and several mayors told local media Saturday that death tolls and damage to buildings and crops in fact exceed the official figures.

In the central Salvadoran province of San Vicente alone, rescuers have retrieved the bodies of 53 people from last week's tremor, though official figures show only 37 dead, Colonel Jorge Armando Reyes, who directs rescue teams working in the area, told AFP.

Oscar Navarro is mayor of Candelaria, a small town 23 km east of here where 19 children and their teacher were buried alive after their school collapsed in Tuesday's quake.

900 Kurdish migrants rescued

AFP, Frejus

More than 900 Kurdish migrants who suffered a week-long ordeal in the hold of a clapped-out cargo ship were transferred to a temporary holding centre on the French Riviera Sunday, while the crew who ran them aground and abandoned them were still on the run.

Red Cross officials said that a total of 918 Kurds were transferred overnight from a military base, where they were fed Saturday after being rescued from the stricken ship, to a disused military warehouse in Frejus, southern France.

All the migrants, who included 300 children under 10 and 200 elderly people, were to be given medical examinations from 9:00 am (0800 GMT) apart from some

16 who had already been sent to hospital suffering from the effects of the voyage, Red Cross officials said.

"We have put in place, along with the public health authorities, a programme of systematic medical checks with paediatricians and general practitioners in order to build up a complete picture of their state of health," Claude Oliver Martin, the Red Cross co-ordinator in Frejus, told AFP.

Immigration officials and border police were to begin interviewing the families early Sunday.

A warrant has been issued for the arrest of the crew, which investigators believe made off in a smaller boat after running the 880-tonne East Sea, a Cambodian-registered cargo vessel owned by a Syrian,

onto a sandbank.

The grounding happened at around 4:00 am Saturday just off the beach at the up-market French Riviera resort of Boulouris, 40 kilometres (25 miles) west of Cannes.

The Kurds, who said they had made a two-month journey from their homes in Iraq and Turkey, remained trapped for several hours until some of them managed to swim to the rocky beach and alert local residents.

Rescuers found the rest trapped in "deplorable" conditions in the leaking, over-crowded boat, and it soon became clear that France was dealing with its biggest ever human-trafficking drama as hundreds of dehydrated, confused migrants were brought ashore.



PHOTO: AFP

Kurdish refugees arrive at the Fench military camp of the 21 RIMA at Frejus on Saturday, where they were to be sheltered after the Cambodian-registered cargo East Sea, carrying 900 Iraqi Kurds, ran aground on the Cote d'Azur.

Sub collision facts elusive as US Navy continues probe

AFP, Washington

The US Navy prepared Sunday to send a second deep-diving robot to the ocean floor to scan the wreckage of a Japanese fishing vessel as investigations continued into its deadly collision with a navy submarine.

The navy late Friday located the sunken Ehime Maru using a remote-control submersible vehicle, known as Scorpio, equipped with sonar radar and cameras, the US Navy Pacific Fleet said.

The navy was to send Sunday a second remote-controlled vehicle, known as Deep Drone, to supplement the work of the Scorpio, said

Pacific Fleet spokesman Sean Hughes.

"They are still on scene and the operation is ongoing," Hughes said. "They have no plans to cease operations."

Late Saturday, the navy launched a top-level inquiry into a collision off Hawaii between the nuclear-powered submarine and the fishing vessel that left nine Japanese nationals missing and presumed dead.

A hearing has been scheduled for Thursday in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

"I have elected to convene a court of inquiry," US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Thomas Fargo announced.

Shuttle crew prepares to return to Earth

AFP, Washington

The crew of the US space shuttle Atlantis prepared to return to Earth Sunday after successfully attaching a new science laboratory to the International Space Station (ISS).

The main achievement of the mission was the successful assembly of the US-built Destiny space laboratory, which required three carefully choreographed spacewalks for completion.

With the addition of the Destiny lab, the space station is now the largest man-made object in space, orbiting the Earth at an altitude of

400 kilometres (244 miles).

It weighs 112 tonnes and is 51 meters (168.3 feet) long, 72 meters (237.6 feet) wide and 27 meters (89.1 feet) high.

The 1.4 billion dollar laboratory will be the station's main US research facility, and one of six space labs in which astronauts from the 16 countries involved in the space station project will conduct research.

The lab will also be used as a command and control center for the station and adds 41 percent to the station's living quarters.

Iraq blasts 'dwarf' Bush after air strikes

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq denounced US President George W. Bush on Sunday as a "dwarf" and a criminal for ordering air strikes around Baghdad, vowing it would continue to stand up to the United States.

"This criminal will fare no better against Iraq than his father," George Bush, who as president waged the 1991 Gulf War that expelled Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait, said the Babel newspaper run by President Saddam Hussein's elder son, Uday.

"The new dwarf in the 'Black House' will not be capable of doing any better than his father, who suffered a stinging defeat," it said, referring to the survival of Saddam's rule.

It was the first time that Iraq launched a personal attack on Bush since he took office on January 20.

Babel said the US and British air strikes on Friday against radar and command centres, in which Baghdad said two people were killed and more than 20 wounded, were the latest in a list of "US and Zionist crimes against Iraq and its people."

Taliban vow further attacks after retaking Bamiyan

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's Taliban soldiers are gearing up for more attacks against the opposition after retaking Bamiyan city in the central highlands, officials of the ruling militia said Sunday.

Taliban's Bakhtar news agency chief Abdul Manan Hemat said the religious militia fighters were ready to attack opposition Hezb-e-Wahdat supporters in Shaheedan region on Bamiyan's outskirts.

"The fighting is going to start with the aim of taking all the lost areas," he told AFP.

"Sufficient number of reinforcements have been sent to Bamiyan for the job."

He said three helicopter gunships were standing by at the Bamiyan airstrip to assist the Taliban ground operations.

The Taliban militia took

Bamiyan in fierce fighting early Saturday, three days after they were ejected by the opposition from the strategic town.

Hemat, who had no information about casualties in Saturday's battles, said the retreating opposition left behind quantities of food and military supplies.

Bamiyan is crucial to the Taliban as it provides the quickest alternative route to the militia-held northern provinces while the main highway through the Salang tunnel atop Hindu Kush range remains closed by the opposition.

Earlier this month the opposition had taken the nearby district of Yakawlang to the west of Bamiyan.

The hardline Taliban movement controls most of the country with the main opposition military commander Ahmad Shah Masood, a former defence minister, holding northeastern Badakhshan province and the Panjshir valley.