

Israel steps up deployment on northern border

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army has stepped up its military deployment on the Jewish state's northern border following a string of armed incidents in the region, Maariv newspaper reported Sunday.

The army has "reinforced its deployment on the border with Syria in case of a deterioration of the situation," said the paper, which ran a photograph of tanks headed north.

Katyusha rockets were fired Saturday from Lebanon, also facing northern Israel, at the Israeli-controlled village of Ghajar, wounding three civilians. Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas, backed by Syria, have been held to blame.

"We view with the utmost seriousness what is happening there," army spokesman General Ron Kitrey said on Israeli radio.

Iraq urges Arabs to hit at US interests

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq urged Arabs Sunday to strike at US interests, after US President George W. Bush's warning that "all options" are on the table if Saddam Hussein fails to prove he no longer has weapons of mass destruction.

"Iraqis stand ready to face up to US-British attacks on our beloved homeland," pledged President Saddam Hussein's younger son, Qussay, who heads the elite Republican Guard and the military bureau of the ruling Baath party.

"Our fighters are like brandished swords, ready to confront any foreign attack and defend Iraqi territory.

"The resistance of the Arab people in Iraq and Palestine bears testimony to the refusal to bow to hegemony and the vindictive US-Zionist offensive," he said in a telegramme marking the 55th anniversary of the Baath's formation.

In a statement carried by the official media, the Baath leadership also called on "all Arab fighters to strike at US interests in the Arab world" in response to "attacks" aimed at the Palestinians and Iraq.

US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed Saturday to consider "all options" for dealing with Iraq, which has rallied to defend the Palestinian cause and announced the mobilisation of 6.5 million volunteers for the "liberation of Palestine."

Both leaders demanded Saddam allow UN arms inspectors back in to Iraq to determine whether nuclear, chemical or biological weapons are being developed.

"The prime minister and I both agree that he needs to prove" he has not developed NCB weapons, Bush said after their meeting at his Texas ranch. "All options are on the table."

"It has always been our policy that Iraq would be a better place without Saddam Hussein," Blair added. "Now, how we approach this, this is a matter for discussion."

Blair stressed that Saddam "knows perfectly well what the international community has demanded of him over these past years, and he's never done it."

In the past, the US administration has threatened to take military action against Iraq and to try to overthrow Saddam's regime unless UN inspectors are allowed back in to check that Baghdad no longer has arms of mass destruction.

The inspectors have been barred from Iraq since pulling out on the eve of a December 1998 US-British bombing blitz.

Baghdad has not reacted officially to the remarks made by Bush and Blair, but Abdul Razzak al-Hashemi, head of a leading Iraqi non-governmental organisation, blasted Bush's declared plan to topple Saddam's government.

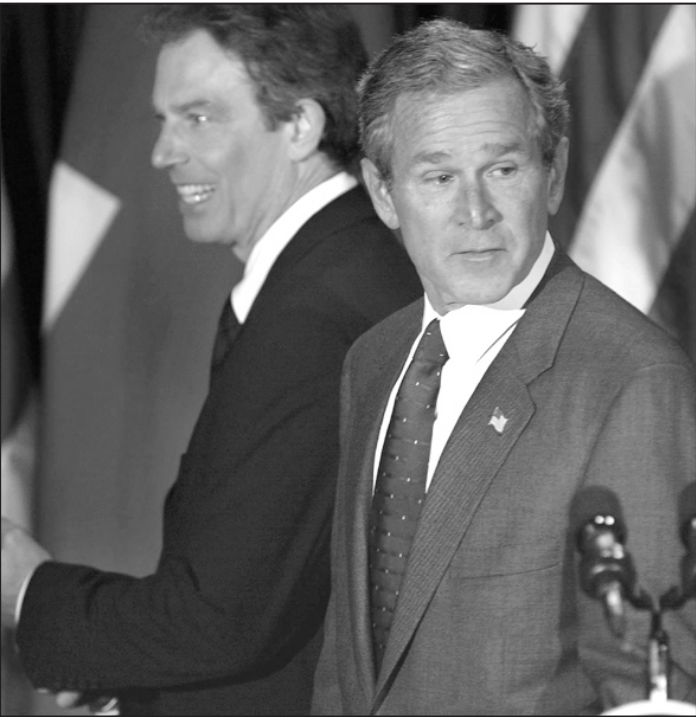


PHOTO: AFP

British Prime Minister Tony Blair (L) and US President George W. Bush (R) leave the stage following their joint press conference in the gymnasium at Crawford High School in Crawford, Texas on Saturday. Blair and Bush met to discuss issues at Bush's ranch near Crawford.

Australia offers peacekeeping troops for ME

AFP, Sydney

Australia hinted strongly Sunday it was prepared to offer troops to any future peacekeeping mission in the Middle East aimed at stemming the violence between Israel and the Palestinians.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that he had informed a number of Arab ambassadors to Canberra that Australia was "happy to play a bigger role than just the role of making statements and participating in votes in multilateral organisations in particular the United Nations".

"I said to them, 'look, if the parties in the Middle East want Australia to play a more active role, bearing in mind our experience in bringing peace to different parts of the Asia-Pacific region, we'd be happy to look at any proposals', and they were going to transmit that message back to their capital cities."



PHOTO: AFP

A police officer stands on a barricade as protesters march against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas during a rally in New York on Saturday. Several hundred protesters marched across the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan in a peaceful march.

World slams Israeli offensive

AFP, Paris

Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets worldwide on Saturday to angrily denounce the Israeli blitz on the West Bank, in a massive but peaceful show of support for the Palestinians.

The largest turnout was in Paris, where nearly 20,000 people heeded a call by labour unions and human rights groups, with other rallies around France, as well as in Bahrain, Chile, Jordan, Turkey and the United States.

A large group of women in traditional black Arab headscarves marched to the central Bastille Square along with leading French union and pacifist figures, some of whom had until recently been holed

up in Yasser Arafat's besieged headquarters in Ramallah.

To the cries of "Sharon and Bush - murderers", referring to the Israeli and US leaders, protesters at the head of the march carried a banner reading "Support the Palestinian resistance against the occupation."

The demonstrations passed off peacefully, in marked contrast to Friday, when protesters in Jordan and Bahrain hurled stones and Molotov cocktails at police in anti-Israel and anti-US marches. Security forces used teargas and clubs -- injuring 100 in Manama -- and arrested several people.

At an officially-sanctioned march, some 15,000 protesters showed up in the northern Jordanian town of Irbid, calling for a

holy war, denouncing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as a criminal and shouting "Allahu Akbar" (God is the greatest).

"We can't keep quiet much longer," a statement from organisers of a pro-Palestinian rally in the Swiss capital Bern said, all the while denouncing suicide attacks on Israeli people. Around 9,000 people were at the gathering, called by the Swiss Socialist and Green parties.

In Paris, Christophe Aguiton of the anti-globalisation organisation Attac said "you can't deny people their human rights," commenting on the Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian territories March 29.

35 bodies found in Afghan mass graves

AFP, Kabul

At least 35 bodies, including some of children, have been found in three mass graves in the central Afghan province of Bamiyan, a representative of local leader Karim Khalili said Sunday.

"A person who had seen Daudy valley had counted around 35 to 36 bodies," Khalili's secretary Abdul Satar told AFP.

He said the dead bodies "lay very close to each other" in graves in the Zagran Valley, Fad Masty, and Daudy -- all within 10 kilometres (seven miles) of Bamiyan city, Satar reported.

Rockets fired at ISAF compound in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Two rockets were fired early Sunday at the base of the multinational security force in Kabul, but there were no injuries, officials said.

"At 2:30 am (2200 GMT) this morning, guards on the compound walls surrounding the Brigade Support Group (BSG) down on Jalalabad Road heard two missiles transit over the top of the BSG," International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) spokesman Tony Marshall said.

'US-led coalition has no plans to enter Pakistan'

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The US-led coalition in Afghanistan has no plans to pursue suspected al-Qaeda fighters into neighbouring Pakistan, despite conducting searches close to the border, a coalition spokesman said Sunday.

"Our focus is on Afghanistan and there are hundreds of people in Afghanistan we want to find," coalition spokesman Major Bryan Hilferty said when asked if the troops were to be sent over the border.

Hundreds of troops drafted in to Gujarat

AFP, Ahmedabad

Hundreds of federal police were drafted in Sunday to back up local forces as village elections began in the Indian state of Gujarat amid unrelenting Hindu-Muslim clashes, police said Sunday.

The reinforcements arrived after a man was stabbed to death and another seriously injured late Saturday in Visnagar, 100 km north of state capital Ahmedabad, police said.

Two companies totalling around 350 men of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) from Faizabad arrived here early Sunday and would be deployed in sensitive parts of the city, police said.

"It is an additional reinforcement," said police commissioner P.C. Pande.

"One more company of the CRPF

is expected to arrive Monday," he said.

The army, the State Reserve Police, Central Industrial Security Forces and the Rapid Action Force are already present in substantial numbers across the state.

Incidents of stone-pelting and stabbing were also reported from various parts of Ahmedabad city.

A rickshaw-puller stabbed a cyclist in the shoulder in the eastern part of the city Saturday, police said.

And police fired in the air to disperse stone-throwing mobs in the Kalupur area.

The continuing clashes follow India's worst communal violence in a decade, triggered by the massacre of 58 Hindu pilgrims by a Muslim-led mob at the end of February. Around 750 people -- most of them Muslims -- were killed in subsequent rioting.

UN blamed for failing to maintain world peace

IANs, New Delhi

Ripples from the Israeli military raids on Palestine were felt in New Delhi when legal experts from across the globe roundly criticised the United Nations for failing to maintain world peace.

Eminent lawyers, jurists and academicians at the 70th biennial conference of the International Law Association also played US policies towards the West Asia and its bombing of Afghanistan, leading to the deaths of innocent civilians.

Some accused the UN of acting on behalf of the US and said the world body had become irrelevant.

A furious Mohammad Shafia Karim from Qatar said: "Just before coming to India, I witnessed the Israeli bombings at the office of Yasser Arafat for three hours. Is this not terrorism? What is the UN doing to save innocents in Palestine?"

"Are the UN and other international bodies going to do something on the ground?" Karim asked during a discussion on international terrorism.

The majority of delegates from across the globe supported his contention, questioning the UN ability to function as a problem-solving agency as well as maintaining peace and security in the world.

Charles gets public nod to wed Camilla

REUTERS, London

Britain's Prince Charles has received unprecedented backing from the public for a marriage to his companion Camilla Parker Bowles, two separate polls showed on Sunday.

In a shift in public opinion, 52 per cent of Britons canvassed by the Sunday Mirror newspaper said they believed the pair should marry.

The sentiment was echoed in another poll by the Sunday People, which found 57 per cent approved of a union between heir-to-the-thrown Charles and his long-term companion.

The news, which comes just over a week after the death of Charles' beloved grandmother, the Queen Mother, at 101, heralds a softening of public feeling towards the couple.

Parker Bowles, a divorcee, was

unpopular six years ago when Charles' marriage to the people's favourite, the late Princess Diana, ended with admissions of adultery on both sides.

But opinions have mellowed, with just 21 per cent of Britons now against the idea of their marriage, the Sunday Mirror poll showed. The Sunday People found that 31 per cent thought the pair should not marry.

"This poll is extremely important because it shows how public opinion... is firmly behind Charles and Camilla," royal expert David Rogers told the Sunday People.

"The queen will always want to do the best for her country and if she feels the public want their future king to be happily married, then she will allow him to do so."

Bush-Blair voice concern over Israeli offensive

AP, Crawford

President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted Saturday that Israel halt its escalating offensive in the West Bank and immediately withdraw its troops, but Israel's leader vowed to fight on for now.

"Israel should halt incursions in the Palestinian-controlled areas and begin to withdraw without delay from those cities it has recently occupied," Bush said during a news conference with Blair, who said he agreed entirely with Bush's views toward Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Afterward, with the three allies mired in an uncomfortable stalemate, Bush placed a 20-minute

telephone call to Sharon that aides described as tense. Seeking to turn up the pressure on the Israeli, Bush expressed "deep concerns" for the attacks into Palestinian cities that intensified Saturday. He asked Sharon defuse the Middle East crisis and pull back his troops, U.S. officials said.

Sharon expressed sympathy with Bush's position, according to accounts issued by both countries, but did not promise to bow to U.S. demands. Indeed, a statement issued by Sharon's office seemed to justify continued attacks by saying Israel is operating in difficult conditions in the West Bank towns and villages where "there are a great deal of weapons, explosives and armed terrorists."

The statement did not say when the offensive would end, though Sharon pledged to expedite the operation.

Bush is not interested in promises of future action; he wants Israeli troops urgently pulled out, U.S. officials said.

A senior Bush administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, described the conversation as "pretty brutal" but said there was some hope in the fact that Sharon had not ruled out a quick withdrawal. The president hopes that by turning up pressure on Sharon, he will force the Israeli's hand or give him political cover to back down.

Musharraf begins campaign

Opposition calls for boycott

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan opposition groups were Sunday mustering support for a mass boycott of General Pervez Musharraf's coming referendum on extending his presidency, as the military leader launched his own campaign.

A coalition of opposition parties has pledged to defy a ban on public political assemblies to launch a series of spoiler rallies to scupper Musharraf's attempts to win backing in the referendum he announced Friday.

"We reject the extra-constitutional referendum and we

have decided to boycott it," the head of the 15-party Alliance for Democratic Reform (ARD), Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, told reporters after a meeting in Islamabad.

"We will hold public rallies at the same venues as General Musharraf to present our point of view to the people of Pakistan."

"It is our basic right and the military government will have no right to stop us from doing so."

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999 and made himself president last June, wants public approval to prolong his leadership by five years, insisting he

needs more time to implement political and economic reforms.

The referendum is scheduled for the first week in May, ahead of general elections planned for October.

On Saturday, the president addressed hundreds of elected local government leaders, launching his own campaign to spur voters into backing him through the referendum.

"A positive vote will strengthen my hands and gives me greater confidence to serve the country and the people," an official quoted him as saying at the gathering.

Kashmir CM has no objection to foreign polls observers

AFP, Srinagar

Indian-administered Kashmir's chief minister said Sunday he had no objection to national or international observers during the upcoming provincial election.

"I have no objection to the presence of observers from any part of India, nor am I averse to the presence of international observers," Farooq Abdullah said in a statement.

Provincial polls in the restive Indian state of Kashmir are due in late September or early October, as the six-year term of the ruling party ends October 9.

The opposition has alleged rigging in past polls in the troubled state, claims Abdullah denies.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has promised the election will be "free and fair".

"Let them (the observers) visit each and every booth of the state during the polling and see for them selves the fairness of the elections," Abdullah said.

Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Party Hurriyat Conference, has said it will boycott the election.

Abdullah told the separatists to decide whether they want to stay with India or Pakistan, both of which claim Kashmir.

"If they (Hurriyat leaders) want to go to Pakistan, I will open the route for them. Let them go to Pakistan and form a government there," Abdullah said.



PHOTO: AFP

A handout picture released on Saturday shows Steve Brooks (L) and Graham Stratford inside the British Ice Challenger expedition's "Snowbird 6", now just eight miles from the International Dateline in the Bering Strait. Brooks and Stratford are the first to drive over the treacherous moving ice flows of the Bering Strait, which divides America from Russia. After a gruelling nights drive through temperatures as low as -30, amidst enormous moving ice blocks they are now within hours of setting a new world record and realising, what for them has been a five-year dream.