INTERNÄTIONAL

Last Spanish combat units leave Iraq

AFP, Madrid

Spain removed its last combat troops from Iraq on yesterday and the only Spanish soldiers still there are those tasked with organising the withdrawal ordered by the new Socialist government, defence ministry officials said.

A ministry spokesman said 248 soldiers flew into Badajoz, southwestern Spain, from Kuwait, after pulling out of the Plus Ultra II brigade, a contingent of the US-led occupation forces in Iraq which also contains Latin Americans.

The defence ministry declined to confirm press reports that there were about 1,000 Spanish soldiers left in Iraq.

Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero told parliament in Madrid on Tuesday that no Spanish member of the Plus Ultra II brigade remained in Iraq and added that all Spanish personnel would have left Iraq by May 27.

Zapatero's right-wing predecessor, Jose Maria Aznar, last year sent 1,300 soldiers to take part in the Plus Ultra II brigade, in the face of overwhelming public opposition at home.

CLASHES IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

Blood-soaked bodies lie on streets

AFP. Pattan

Bodies lay on the road in pools of blood, armoured personnel carriers patrolled the streets and one of the country's most revered mosques was left bullet-scarred and smoking.

In one of the most violent days in Thailand's history 112 suspected Muslim separatists and five security forces were killed and the Muslimdominated southern provinces was left looking like a warzone.

In the last of 10 battles staged across the region, helicopters hovered over the historic Kreasae mosque outside Pattani where 32 besieged rebels holed up in a six-hour standoff.

"We heard lots of shooting and some rocket-propelled grenades," witness Saroni Duereh told AFP at the scene

"We don't know who was inside but we know that they are all Muslims and all Muslims are brothers," said another man who identified himself only as Mohammed.

About 600 onlookers wandered in and around the battle-scarred mosque after police removed the last of the bodies, wrapped in bloodstained shrouds.

Prayer mats were still neatly stacked along with copies of the Muslim holy book the Koran in recesses in the walls which were splashed with blood.

"Police had to do this but we are upset they were all killed and no one survived the assault to tell us what happened," a 40-year-old labourer told AFP.

"We have heard all the people

killed were Muslims so we want to see their faces and their bodies but police won't let us." he said.

Sunai Phasuk, a spokesman for Thai human rights group Forum Asia, said the mosque holds major significance for Muslims across Southeast Asia.

"We had been in communication with the government before noon and had urged them to be very careful with that mosque," he said, adding that imams had been on stand-by and prepared to act as negotiators.

A senior Muslim spiritual figure in white robes and a turban entered the mosque with police shortly after the dramatic shoot-out.

The attackers were young, barely out of their teens, and poorly armed with mostly machetes and

only a few weapons. By all accounts, they were mown down by well-prepared police backed up by army reinforcements.

Television footage showed checkpoints ablaze and bleeding police officers being carried away for medical attention.

The fallout from the morning's battle -- the worst violence in the history of the restive southern provinces bordering Malaysia where most Thai Muslims live -- was evident in the dozens of bodies scattered around the scene.

Some dressed in Muslim skull caps or balaclavas, and others still holding their machetes in their hands, the blood-soaked bodies were unceremoniously thrown into pick-up trucks to be taken for forensic examination.



PHOTO: AFF

TV grab shows Thai policemen and soldiers checking the bodies of attackers at the checkpoint in Pattani yesterday. The death toll from violence in Thailand's Muslim south has risen to over 100, including 93 attackers who mounted a series of dawn raids on police and army checkpoints, officials said.

Explosions, gunfire shake

PHOTO: AFP

South Korean Red Cross delgation leader Lee Jong-Kun prepares to board a ship loaded with relief goods for victims of last week's train explosion in North Korea sails out of port in Incheon yesterday. The freighter, Han Kwang, carrying instant noodles and other relief goods is due in North Korea's Nampo after 15 hours of yoyage.

First S Korean relief ship leaves for N Korea

AFP, Seoul

A South Korean ship loaded with aid for victims of last week's train disaster in North Korea set sail yesterday as Seoul agreed to a costly request from the Stalinist state for much more.

South Korea originally offered one million dollars in aid but has now assented to a 27 million-dollar shopping list fired back by Pyongyang, including bulldozers, school equipment and color televisions.

North Korea also set tight restrictions on how the donations could be delivered and refused permission for South Koreans to travel to the site, signalling that a thaw with the outside world was still some way off.

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South Korea's first shipment of aid Wednesday left a port west of Seoul under a banner saying: "Emergency

shipment of relief goods for the Ryongchon disaster." The 1,534-tonne ship, the Han Kwang, will reach North Korea's western showcase port of Nampo Thursday through a direct sea route used for inter-Korean trade.

From there the aid will be trans-

ported by road to the site of the accident that left at least 161 people dead and 1,300 injured at Ryongchon near the Chinese border.

South Koreans however were

South Koreans, however, were not allowed to travel to the disaster zone.

"If they would let me in, I would try to visit the site," said Lee Jong-Kun, a South Korean Red Cross official, after watching relief aid being loaded on to the ship.

The goods included instant noodles, mineral water, blankets, towels and clothes.

North Korea has expressed gratitude for the relief shipment but said it needed more costly items to cope. It estimated the damage Tuesday at around 356 million US dollars

ollars.
The goods it asked for included

tonnes of iron bars, 50 television sets and 10,000 tonnes of food as well as school blackboards and desks. Unification Minister Jeong Se-Hyun said after talks with ruling party

500,000 tonnes of cement, 10 bull-dozers, 1,000 tonnes of fuel oil, 1,000

leaders that South Korea would accept the North's request, worth up to 27 million dollars.

"We hope this kind of humanitarian aid will help the two Koreas build mutual confidence," Jeong said.

Chung Sye-kyun, chief policymaker of the ruling Uri Party, said: "It is desirable for the two Koreas to cooperate closely to cope with the sudden disaster."

But South Koreans were stunned

on Monday when North Korea barred Seoul from using a quicker overland route across the tense border.

Gaddafi urges world to follow his lead

AFP, Brussels

On his first visit to Europe in 15 years, Libyan leader Moamar Gaddafi trumpeted his "lead" in promoting world peace by renouncing weapons of mass destruction and called on others, including the US and China, to follow suit.

Libya had now "decided to lead the peace movement all over the world", he told a news conference, trumpeting Tripoli's pledge to end its programmes of mass destruction, which has been hailed notably in the United States and Britain.

"Libya calls all other countries

from America to China to discard and get rid of all weapons of mass destruction, programmes of mass destruction," he added. "Libya has become an example to be followed," he added. During his landmark visit to

Brussels the maverick Libyan leader -- an international pariah until only recently -- said Tripoli and other nations now faced common enemies.

Gaddafi, clad in his trademark flowing robes and flanked by a quartet of female bodyguards,

underlined the need for reconcilia

"We need peace, stability, development. Now we are facing different and new challenges, which are common enemies to all of us ... who fought each other at some time," he said

European Commission President Romano Prodi meanwhile hailed the latest step in Tripoli's return to the international community by saying the European Union wanted to restore formal links with Libya as rapidly as possible. "We are committed to make

Libya a full member of the Barcelona process," he said, referring to the process launched in 1995 to cement closer ties between Europe and the Mediterranean countries.

Gaddafi on Tuesday also briefly

met EU foreign affairs chief Javier Solana in a blue bedouin tent set up in front of the Val Duchesse residence for visiting heads of state.

He then met Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and was to be the guest of honour at a dinner with Belgian political and economic leaders.

Damascus on security alert after four killed

The Syrian capital went on high security alert yesterday after a series of explosions and a shootout in the diplomatic quarter where two "terrorists", a policeman and a woman passer-by were killed.

Syrian capital

The state news agency SANA said authorities later uncovered a cache of arms and explosives that belonged to the unknown group which carried out the attacks late Tuesday.

The cache was found in Khan al-Shih, a village 25 kilometres (15 miles) south of Damascus, it said.

The US State Department said it was keeping the American embassy closed on Wednesday as a precaution and advised non-essential personnel to remain at home after the violence.

Syrian police, meanwhile, blocked off access routes to the embassy.

Though the incident occurred far from the US embassy compound, the Canadian and Iranian embassies are

located nearby and Ottawa said its mission had sustained minor damage in the gunbattle between the attackers and police.

On Wednesday, security mea-

sures were stepped up around public buildings and the diplomatic quarter of Mazzeh, in western Damascus, where the attacks took place. Army units and police were deployed overnight along the 45-

kilometre (28 mile) stretch between the Lebanese border and Damascus following the attack, travellers said. Syria's ruling Baath party newspaper said Wednesday the attack

was another sign of the "inferno"

gripping the entire region.
"It seems it is difficult to maintain
100 percent security in a tense region
which has turned into an inferno ...
but stability must remain the priority

of priorities for all Syrians," it said.
"Over the course of the past year, dangerous security and political developments have taken place, with the occupation of Iraq and the intensification of Israeli aggression" in the Palestinian territories, it said.

The Syrian interior ministry gave an account of the violence, identifying the assailants only as a "terrorist group".

"A group of four persons placed a device under a parked car early on Tuesday evening. The device exploded sparking damage to an uninhabited building in Mazzeh," an interior ministry official said.

"A clash ensued between the security forces and the terrorist group, which fled aboard a second car throwing grenades at the security forces," he said, quoted by SANA.

Two of the assailants were killed and the two others seriously wounded. A policeman was killed and a woman passer-by also died, the official said.

"Syria, which has been facing up to terrorism for a quarter of a century, denounces this terrorist incident which attacks stability and threatens the safety of citizen and country," he added.

Bush, Cheney to face 9/11 commission in secret

REUTERS, Washington

The White House said on Tuesday it would not allow any recordings or transcripts of private testimony this week by President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney to the panel investigating the Sept. 11 attacks.

Rebuffing demands from families of some of the nearly 3,000 dead and other critics of the administration for public testimony, Bush and Cheney only agreed to Thursday's unprecedented interview under pressure and on the grounds they would appear together and behind closed doors.

At the administration's request, the session will not be recorded and an official transcript will not be made. The White House said Bush was already providing unprecedented access to the panel and that the decision was consistent with previous private interviews.

"This is a private interview and it's being treated that way," said commission spokesman Al Felzenberg.

Both sides said they will have note-takers present.

In preparation for Thursday's session, White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Bush was reviewing documents and meeting with his top advisers.

He said Bush does not plan to make an opening statement and is likely to personally field most of the questions -- rather than Cheney. They will not be under oath.

While details of the commission's line of inquiry remain secret, it is clear from previous public hearings that the panel of five Republicans and five Democrats will press for answers to a now-famous Washington question: "What did the president know and when did he know it?"

Democrats say the White House insistence the two appear together may be an attempt to eliminate the possibility of contradictory testimony over whether the administration did all it could to head off the Sept. 11 attacks.



PHOTO: A

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga (R) greets the new minister for Agriculture, Livestock, Land and Irrigation, Anura Dissanayake (L) shortly after he was sworn in yesterday at her official residence in the capital Colombo in an expansion of the cabinet with the induction of four Marxist legislators. The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front ended a stand off with Kumaratunga and accepted the portfolios allocated to them after their coalition narrowly won the April 2 parliamentary elections.