

Georgia starts South Ossetia pullout

BBC ONLINE

Georgia has begun withdrawing troops from the conflict zone in South Ossetia a day after it claimed to have captured key strategic positions in the area.

It is handing over control to a joint peacekeeping force composed of Russian, Ossetian and Georgian soldiers.

Georgian leader Mikhail Saakashvili said the withdrawal was the "last chance for peace" in the region.

Separatist South Ossetian fighters have been battling Georgian soldiers in the worst violence there in 10 years.

Heavy shelling and skirmishes are said to have claimed the lives of at least seven Georgian soldiers recently.

The Georgian authorities say their troops killed eight South Ossetian fighters in the latest overnight fighting. The claim has not been confirmed.

Russia has fiercely criticised Georgian advances in the area.

Efforts are now underway to enforce a ceasefire deal struck last Friday and steadily violated since then.

South Ossetia broke away from Georgia in 1992 following an 18-month conflict. Many of its inhabitants want to link up with North Ossetia, which is part of Russia.



PHOTO: AFP

Members of Indonesian radical Muslim group burn a miniature US flag and a US dollar bill in front of the US embassy in Jakarta yesterday as they protest against the US war on Iraq. The protesters said that the US and its allies don't realise the price they would have to pay for their action in Iraq.

Iran calls for urgent OIC meeting on Iraq

No evidence Tehran is aiding Sadr militia: US

AFP, Tehran

Iranian reformist president Mohammad Khatami yesterday asked the heads of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to urgently convene "to try to find solutions to the deepening Iraqi crisis," state media reported.

Khatami's request came when he called up the current chairman of the OIC, Malaysian prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

He urged him "to call on members of OIC countries to meet in an emergency summit to try to find solutions to the deepening Iraqi crisis.

"The Iraqi interim government is in a difficult situation vis-a-vis the crisis in the holy city of Najaf, ...immediate action must be taken to end the escalating violence in that city," the Iranian president said.

US and Iraqi government forces are besieging rebel militia of cleric Moqtada Sadr in Najaf, a city sacred to Shia Muslims, who make up 90 per cent of Iran's 66.5 million people are Shias.

On Thursday, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi called for an urgent meeting of Iraq's neighbours to

help end the crisis there, marked by both Sunni and Shia insurgencies against the government and the US-led multinational force that support it.

"It is time for Iraq's neighbours to contribute to a resolution of the Iraq crisis," Kharazi was quoted as saying during a telephone conversation with his Jordanian counterpart, Marwan Moasher.

Four other countries neighbour Iraq, besides Iran and Jordan: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey. Their foreign ministers have had a number of meetings since the US-led invasion that toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in March last year.

Meanwhile, the United States has no conclusive evidence that radical Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr has received arms from Iran, but refuses to rule out the possibility, a senior US official said Thursday.

"There are certainly those charges being made, but I guess we are hesitant to say definitively 'yes' or definitively 'no' because we just don't have conclusive evidence it's either validated or knocked down," a senior State Department official told reporters.

For more than two weeks, Sadr's

Mehdi Army has been locked in heavy fighting with US-led Iraqi government forces on a mission to crush his militia in the holy city of Najaf.

Noting the "porous border" with Iran, the US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said "it's certainly plausible" that Sadr was receiving weapons from Iran, but added that Washington could not be certain.

"I don't know if we've traced weapons in the hands of Mehdi people across the border to Iran," the official said. "There are plenty of weapons in Iraq you don't have to rely on Iran for them.

"Obviously they are getting their guns from somebody, but I don't think we are ready to say it is the Iranian government that's doing it."

On August 10, State Department deputy spokesman Adam Ereli said the United States was concerned by suggestions that Iran is involved in deadly unrest in Iraq's Shiite holy city of Najaf and maintained it was not in Tehran's interest to foment instability in its neighbor.

Israel gets double warning over impact of its policies

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli government was given a double warning over its policies in the West Bank yesterday as its top legal officer said it faced a real threat of sanctions over its controversial separation barrier and the United States condemned the latest settlement drive.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government had previously vowed to ignore a non-binding verdict by the International Court of Justice in July that parts of the barrier built on Palestinian land were illegal and should be torn down.

But judicial sources confirmed Friday that the country's supreme court has told the government to respond within 30 days to the ruling by the UN's top legal body which Attorney General Menachem Mazuz was warning could have "inestimably negative consequences".

Chief Justice Aharon Barak is understood to have said that a petition filed by residents against one tranche of the barrier would be "an appropriate opportunity" to compile a written assessment of the ramifications of the ICJ ruling.

Mazuz was also warning the government not to simply brush aside the

ruling.

"It is hard to overestimate the negative repercussions of the decision of the International Court of Justice at The Hague for the state of Israel in various realms, including issues that go beyond the separation fence," said Mazuz in a report commissioned by Sharon.

"The decision creates a legal reality for Israel in the international arena, which could serve as an excuse and a catalyst for activity against Israel in international forums, to the point of sanctions."

In a separate report Mazuz's department recommended that the government "deploy large efforts to modify the route of the fence", taking into account the main points of the ICJ ruling "in order to reduce the tension on the international legal front."

Israeli defense officials have been reworking the route of the barrier after the Supreme Court ruled in late June that its current path violated the rights of tens of thousands of Palestinians living near Jerusalem.

In contrast to its pledge to ignore the ICJ's non-binding verdict, the government has said it will respect the Supreme Court ruling.

Europeans seek access to Maldives detainees

AFP, Male

European nations have requested the Maldives authorities to give them access to activists detained after last week's pro-democracy demonstrations, diplomatic sources said yesterday.

EU diplomats based in Sri Lanka are expected to arrive in Male Sunday on a "fact-finding mission" they had asked to make after President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom declared a state of emergency, the sources said.

Gayoom's office had said Thursday the Male authorities had initiated the contact, asking the European Union to send a mission to Asia's most expensive tourist resort after the unrest.

"The statement from the president's office has amused us," a Western diplomatic source said. "But, we are glad that the government is allowing us in."

Another source said the diplomats

had requested access to a detention centre where seven parliamentarians and a member of the Maldivian Human Rights Comm-ission are being held.

The government said it had arrested 185 people over last week's unrest and has accused the pro-democracy movement of seeking to stage a coup against Gayoom, Asia's longest serving leader.

The dissident Maldivian Democratic Party has accused Gayoom, who has ruled for 26 years in a one-party system, of ordering mass arrests and unleashing the National Security Service and the police on political opponents.

Gayoom's office said he had thanked the security forces and the police "for the sincerity with which they had performed their national duty during Friday's mob violence."

Nepal agrees to meet Maoist demand

Rebels attack govt building in Kathmandu

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels who have cut off Kathmandu for three days attacked security forces and bombed buildings inside the Nepalese capital yesterday, as the government partially agreed to guerrilla demands for lifting the blockade.

The government said it would investigate and make public within 30 days the whereabouts of an unspecified number of leftist activists who have disappeared in the Himalayan kingdom's increasingly deadly civil war.

The acceptance of a key rebel demand came after the blockade, which has been enforced mostly through fear, turned violent for the first time.

Two rebels opened fire on police and soldiers guarding Kathmandu's Land Registration office soon after the building was badly damaged by a bomb, said Deputy Superin-tendent of Police Ganesh K.C.

The rebels then fled.

One police officer was injured in the attack and taken to hospital where he was in serious condition, the superintendent said.

The attack prompted staff to close down the office, which had remained open despite the blockade that has stalled transport links and sent prices soaring in the city of 1.5 million people.

Another bomb exploded at an empty police post on the outskirts of Kathmandu Friday and caused no

injuries, police said.

The Maoists, who have taken over vast swathes of the countryside in their eight-year war to overthrow the monarchy, announced the blockade of the capital after their threats, including a bombing at a top hotel, led some 24 major companies to shut down.

Information Minister Moha-mmud Mohsin appealed for normality in Kathmandu and said the government would probe the whereabouts of missing Maoists and trade union activists.

"We will make public the results of our investigation within 30 days," Mohsin told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

A group of Nepalese human rights activists stage a demonstration protesting against the Maoist blockade in Kathmandu yesterday. The demonstrators gathered to protest against the Maoist rebel blockade of Kathmandu, which began on August 18.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) talks with Sonia Gandhi (2R), head of India's ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and Congress Party President while Rahul Gandhi, Member of Parliament (MP) and son of Sonia (R) looks on during a ceremony on the 60th birth anniversary of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi at his memorial - Bir Bhumi (Land of the Brave) in New Delhi yesterday. Rajiv was assassinated on May 21, 1991, allegedly by Sri Lankan separatists.

TROOP CUT TIMETABLE

US, S Korea fail to hammer out deal

AFP, Seoul

The United States and South Korea failed yesterday to hammer out a deal over a timetable for the planned reduction of US troops here, with Seoul asking for the cut to be delayed, officials said.

Washington has said it plans to withdraw by next year 12,500 of some 37,000 US troops stationed here since the end of the 1950-1953 Korean War.

South Korea, which is still technically at war with communist North Korea, had wanted the troop cut to be delayed by at least 2006, or preferably to 2008, Yonhap news agency reported, citing defense officials.

"We decided to discuss it later as differences exist over the timing of individual combat units subject to the troop cut," Seoul's chief delegate Ahn Kwang-Chan, an assistant defense

minister, told a joint new conference here.

Ahn said he and his US counterpart, Under Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless, had "agreed in general to a need" for rescheduling the withdrawal of some units during the two-day meeting here that began on Thursday.

Defense analysts here have said Seoul, jittery about security, may need time to prepare itself to cover the US military phase-out.

"We surely want to push it back," a South Korean defense ministry official told AFP ahead of the tense military talks.

Defense officials said the issue would be referred to the annual US-South Korean security consultation meeting between their defense chiefs in Washington in October.

ROCCA SAYS

Indo-Pak peace will help calm extremism in S Asia

PTI, Washington

Asserting that it has sought to foster reconciliation between India and Pakistan, the United States has said peace between the two nations would help calm the extremist impulses in the region.

"We have sought to foster reconciliation between India and Pakistan," told US Assistant Secre-tary of State Christina Rocca at the House International Relations Committee.

She said peace, if it can be achieved between these two long-time rivals, would do much to calm extremist impulses in the region.

Rooting for a long-term US commitment to Pakistan in its struggle against extremism, Rocca said President George

W. Bush's requested USD 600 million-per-year aid for Islamabad was critical "to build a society in which extremism cannot flourish."

Bush, in June 2003, made a five-year commitment to Pakistan of USD 600 million per year, evenly divided between military and economic assistance.

Rocca, who is in charge of South Asian affairs in the State Depart-ment, noted Pakistan's "effective" operations against al-Qaeda operatives in the country as well as along the border with Afghanistan.

Observing that Pakistani action against terror operatives had provided valuable information of threats and plots against the US, she said counterterrorism efforts should be

combined with sound policies to revive Pakistan's economy.

"The Pakistani economy will have to maintain its current growth rate for years if it is to reduce poverty significantly and give ordinary Pakistanis genuine hope for a better life," she said.

Rocca said that the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon set in motion events that completely transformed the US-Pakistan relationship.

"Without Pakistani help, our victory in Afghanistan would have been far more costly and difficult," she said.

Rocca said the US had sought to assure Pakistan that it is a reliable partner for the future.

Deliberate failure to treat PoW violates law: ICRC

Doctors helped design Iraqi prison abuse methods, US command faulted

AFP, REUTERS, Geneva/Washington

A deliberate failure by army doctors to treat prisoners would be a violation of the international rules of war, a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said yesterday.

The comments came after a report that US military doctors working at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq helped design abusive interrogation methods and failed to report deaths triggered by beatings.

"There is absolutely no doubt that the Geneva Conventions as well as other human rights legislation prohibit any form of mistreatment and torture of people deprived of their freedom," ICRC spokesman Florian Westphal said.

Jailors were under a clear obligation to provide sufficient medical aid to their captives, he told a news conference in Geneva.

"Deliberately not providing that would appear to be, to me, in violation of the requirements of the conventions," he added.

Westphal had no comment to make on whether the ICRC, which has been the only agency with access to Iraqi prisoners since the US-led invasion last year, had also found evidence of abuse by doctors.

The spokesman said he had read the study, which is due to be published in the Lancet journal Saturday.

Citing government documents, including sworn testimony of detainees and troops, the respected medical weekly outlined a disturbing litany of failures by medics to safeguard detainees' human rights at the prison.

"This is something which would be taken up by the ICRC in its continued dialogue with the people directly responsible, the detaining authorities," the Red Cross spokesman said.

Medical staff and experts usually accompany ICRC staff when they visit prisons in Iraq, including Abu Ghraib on the outskirts of Baghdad.

Reports by the ICRC raised warning flags about prisoner abuse in Iraq, which resulted in a huge scandal for the US administration.

Reuters adds: A US Army investigation into abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq finds they resulted from failures of leadership at the highest levels of command, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

The Post quoted unnamed senior defence officials as saying the investigation led by Maj. Gen. George Fay found that a combination of leadership failures, confusing policies, lack of discipline and "absolute confusion" at the prison led to the abuse.

US asks Tigers to return to talks

AFP, Washington

The United States urged Tamil Tiger rebels in Sri Lanka Thursday to cease political assassinations, suicide bombings and recruitment of child soldiers and resume peace talks with the government.

The call was made by the US State Department amid a spate of political assassinations blamed on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and European Union criticism of the guerrillas for killing opponents and failing to honour promises not to recruit child soldiers.

The Tigers have also refused to accept any counter-proposals from the government to revive peace negotiations stalled since April last year as fears mount the island could slide back into war.

"Assassinations and suicide bombings are unacceptable. The recruitment of child soldiers must cease," deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said.

He explained that Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had reviewed the situation in Sri Lanka with US

Ambassador in Colombo Jeffrey Lunstead, including "the recurring acts of violence such as assassinations and suicide bombings.

"In light of this discussion, we urge the parties to take steps to work to rebuild trust and schedule the promised talks as soon as possible," Ereli said.

Following an internal split, the Tiger guerrillas have been reportedly behind a spate of killings of rivals in the island's embattled eastern region.

Diplomats said the murders had undermined Norway's attempts to broker peace in Sri Lanka where more than 60,000 people have been killed in ethnic bloodshed since 1972.

Noting that President Chandrika Kumaratunga had shown her desire to move forward on the peace process launched with a 2002 ceasefire, he said the LTTE "needs to respond positively and enter talks with the Sri Lankan government.

"The ceasefire and a return to negotiations represent the best hope for Sri Lanka's future as a peaceful, prosperous, and unified nation," he said.

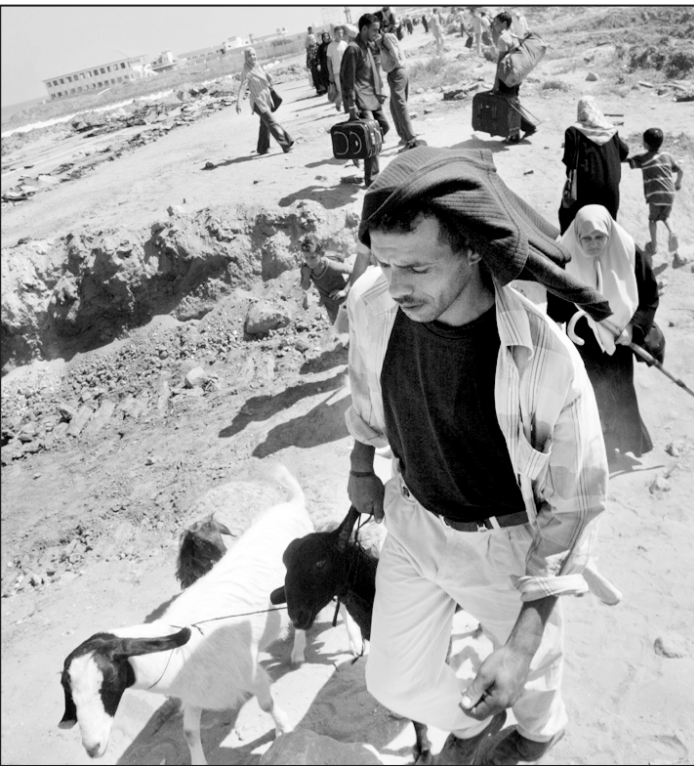


PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian man pulling his goats walk along the coast after the closure of the main road near the Netzarim settlement in Gaza City yesterday. Israeli Prime Minister Israeli Ariel Sharon vowed in an interview published yesterday to see his Gaza pullout plan through to the finish despite an embarrassing defeat by his right-wing Likud Party.

Beer-guzzling bear lands up with sore head

AFP, Los Angeles

Workers at a US resort were stunned to find a black bear passed out drunk their lawn after he guzzled down 36 beers in a night of drunken revelry, they said Thursday.

Staff at the Baker Lake Resort, about 130km northwest of the US city of Seattle, discovered the large and furry visitor sound asleep in the campground when they turned up for work, staff member Lisa Broxon told AFP.

"It is very unusual to see a bear just lying there sleeping on the lawn, so the camp host started looking around to find out what had happened," she said.

"He found that some campers had left out some coolers and that the bear had broken into them and started drinking their beer after opening the cans with its teeth.

"The strange thing is that he appeared to like only Rainer (a local brand) beer, and he tried one can of Busch but didn't even finish it," Broxon said of the picky wildlife reveller.