

Syrian army evacuates bases in Lebanon

AP, Mdeirej

Syrian soldiers flashed victory signs and waved automatic rifles as they drove eastward through Lebanon's mountains on Wednesday, pressing ahead with their evacuation of positions they have held for almost three decades and allowing for the Lebanese army to take their place.

Meanwhile, President Emile Lahoud began consultations with parliament on naming a new prime minister to replace Omar Karami, who resigned Feb. 28 following a massive demonstration demanding his ouster, as well as that of the Syrian military.

A huge demonstration is also scheduled to take place in the Syrian capital, Damascus, to show support for that country's embattled president, Bashar Assad, whose government is under intense pressure from Lebanese opposition groups and the United States to stop interfering in Lebanon's affairs.

The protest follows Tuesday's

mass pro-Syrian rally in Beirut organized by the Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim group Hezbollah, which attracted an estimated 500,000 anti-U.S. chanting protesters and proved the militant group will be a force to be reckoned with here if Syria leaves.

The demonstration dwarfed a series of anti-Syrian protests that have been staged in Beirut since the Feb. 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Many Lebanese have blamed his killing on Syria and Lebanon's pro Damascus government. Both have denied responsibility.

By Wednesday morning, a number of Syrian positions in central and northern Lebanon stood empty after late-night withdrawals. Outside Batroun, about 30 miles north of Beirut, the Syrian soldiers had evacuated four posts, one of which was then taken over by the Lebanese army, witnesses said.

Baghdad wakes up to death, destruction

AFP, Baghdad

"A suicide bomber just blew himself up in Baghdad," blurted out the radio from a car stuck in traffic off Al-Andalus Square not far from a massive attack Wednesday on the agriculture ministry and a hotel.

A group of women in night gowns, some with blankets draped over their shoulders, emerged into the street, faces covered in soot.

"My son, my son!" screamed an old woman as she was comforted by the others who explained to her that he had been rushed to the hospital.

They refused to say whether he was part of the ministry's security force or just passing by when a truck bomb went off at 6:30 (0330 GMT) leaving a trail of destruction and mayhem and engulfing the sky over the capital's centre with heavy black smoke for more than an hour.

"What's the use? Nobody is hearing our voice. May those who did this burn in hell, each one of them," said another woman, who did want to be named.

Maher Moayad, 24, jumped out of bed when he heard gunfire. He lives on the second floor of a building across from the ministry on Nidal Street.

"I rushed out to the balcony and at that moment the explosion happened. I lost my balance and glass fell on me," he said, his arms cut.

"The flames and smoke were horrible; I was almost blinded."

In a carefully orchestrated attack, a garbage truck drove into the ministry parking lot after attackers, some dressed as Iraqi policemen, killed guards at two posts leading to the entrance, witnesses said.

The driver detonated his load

against a low wall of concrete and sand barriers separating the parking lot from the back of the Al-Sadeer Hotel.

The blast gouged a big hole in the ground, destroyed the wall and reduced the more than two dozen pickup trucks and sports utility vehicles belonging to the ministry's security force into a pile of twisted and smouldering debris.

A ministry annex building was badly damaged and all the windows of the Sadeer, occupied by Western contractors and advisors involved in Iraq's reconstruction effort, were blown out. Curtains were left fluttering in the air.

Security guards on the hotel roof unleashed a hail of bullets for almost 15 minutes onto the parking lot right after the blast.



PHOTO: AFP

Burnt vehicles litter the car park close to the ministry of Agriculture following a car bomb in the center of Baghdad yesterday. Gunmen and a suicide truck bomb set a blaze Iraq's agriculture ministry and a neighboring hotel, popular with westerners, killing two security guards and wounding 28, eyewitnesses and medical sources said.



PHOTO: AFP

A picture released yesterday by the British Royal Mail shows the commemorative stamps that will go on sale on April 8, 2005, for the wedding of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles.

Four wounded in Afghanistan bomb blasts

AFP, Kabul

Four people were wounded after two bombs exploded Tuesday within minutes of each other near an aid organization's guest house in the northern Afghanistan province of Faryab, officials said Wednesday.

"Two bombs exploded with a gap of 10-14 minutes, but we do not know at the moment what sorts of bombs these were," interior ministry press officer Dad Mohammed Rasa told AFP in Kabul.

"Three policemen and one civilian were injured as the result of the (second) explosion."

UNGA bans all types of cloning

PTI, United Nations

A divided UN General Assembly adopted a non-binding declaration banning all types of cloning, including for therapeutic purposes, but those, who opposed it, said they would go ahead with the research.

India on Tuesday joined 34 member states in opposing the document, strongly backed by the Bush administration, with 84 states voting for it. As many as 37 members of the 191-member assembly preferred to absent themselves during the vote, which pitted some of the staunchest American allies, including Britain, against the United States.

The adoption of declaration, which gives symbolic victory to the US, brings to conclusion four-years efforts to negotiate an international treaty putting a mandatory ban on reproductive cloning.

However, nations supporting therapeutic cloning, said the world body has lost a major chance to explicitly ban cloning for producing babies.

The declaration, which has no force in law, urges member states, among other things, to "prohibit all

forms of human cloning in as much as they are incompatible with human dignity".

Several Arab and Latin American countries joined the US in voting for the declaration but Asians and Europeans mostly opposed it. Among the abstentions were many Muslim nations, who said they were not voting either way because of lack of consensus.

Indian delegate M Gandhi, legal adviser at the Indian Mission to the United Nations, asserted that New Delhi's position on therapeutic cloning remains unchanged as the declaration was non-binding and does not reflect agreement among the wider membership of the Assembly.

Explaining India's position, he said New Delhi remains totally opposed to reproductive cloning owing to the doubtful nature of its safety, success, utility and ethical acceptability.

However, it considers therapeutic cloning on case-by-case basis within the guidelines laid down with the approval of National Bioethical Committee.

Chechen rebels vow to fight on

AFP, Moscow

Chechen rebels vowed Wednesday to pursue and expand their fight for independence from Russia, calling the killing of rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov a fleeting coup for the Kremlin that obliterated any hope of a negotiated end to the conflict.

"The occupiers and puppets are celebrating what they regard as a victory," stated a commentary on an Internet website regularly used by the rebels.

"Indeed they can claim a victory for temporary propagandistic euphoria."

Speaking to AFP earlier, Akhmed Zakayev, a longtime ally and spokesman of Maskhadov, confirmed by telephone from Britain the leader had been killed by Russian troops.

However he vowed that the fight would go on: "The resistance will continue, no doubt about it."

The killing of Maskhadov, the 53-year-old separatist leader who was elected president of Chechnya in 1997 in elections acknowledged by Moscow and who was seen as a relative moderate among rebel leaders, means talks on ending the war are no longer possible, the Internet message stated.

Nepal students defy emergency

AFP, Kathmandu

Hundreds of students in Kathmandu defied a ban on public rallies Wednesday and protested against King Gyanendra's power grab in one of the largest shows of dissent since the monarch's sacking of government, witnesses said.

"Protests were organized by seven student unions in over a dozen campuses," a student of Ratna Rajya college, requesting anonymity, told AFP.

Demonstrators were shouting, "Down with the Royal Proclamation!" and "Long live democracy!", the student said.

Dharma Koirala, assistant campus chief at Ratna Rajya college, said, "Riot police entered our campus to stop the protests but no one has been arrested."

The reports could not be confirmed by AFP correspondents due to censorship curbs imposed under the king's suspension of civil liberties.

The protests, banned since Gyanendra declared emergency rule last month, followed the arrests

Tuesday of at least 176 political activists in Kathmandu and Nepal's southeast following large demonstrations, witnesses said.

Some 140 of those arrested in the southeast were freed Wednesday, government officials said, but 36 held in Kathmandu were still in detention.

Gyanendra seized control of the impoverished kingdom February 1, sacking the government, imposing emergency rule and vowing to tackle an increasingly deadly Maoist revolt. He has given himself three years to restore peace and democracy.

Gopal Upadhyay, head of the pro-left All Nepal National Free Students' Union of Ratna Rajya Campus Bal, urged students at a meeting to oppose the king's power grab and to press for the return of democracy, witnesses said.

Nepal's foreign minister, meanwhile, said in an interview published at the end of a three-day visit to India that Gyanendra took power to prevent the kingdom from becoming a "failed state" and to bring multi-party democracy "back on track".

Israelis to leave WB towns

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Israel has agreed in talks to cede control of two West Bank towns - Jericho and Tulkarm - to Palestinian forces in the coming days. Israel's army will draw back from the town of Jericho first, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas said.

However, a meeting between him and Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz ended without agreement on when and how far the Israeli forces will withdraw.

The talks form part of an effort to revive a stalled peace process.

Contacts between Israeli and Palestinian officials were frozen after a suicide bomb attack by Palestinian militants in Tel Aviv killed four Israelis on 25 February.

The meeting between Abbas and Mofaz, held at the Gaza Strip's Erez Checkpoint, is the most high-profile contact between the two sides since the Sharm al-Sheikh summit in Egypt last month.

At the February summit, the two sides tentatively agreed that Israel will give Palestinian police control over five West Bank towns - Tulkarm, Jericho, Qalqilya, Ramallah and Bethlehem - to test their ability to curb militants.

China prosecutes 30,788 officials for corruption in 2004

AFP, Beijing

China said Wednesday it prosecuted 30,788 officials for corruption last year, as it steps up efforts to fight a scourge that threatens the Communist Party's legitimacy.

Corruption remained the main offense by civil servants, as most of the 43,757 officials investigated last year took bribes or public funds, Chief Prosecutor Jia Chunwang told the annual session of parliament.

Of those investigated, 35,031 took part in crimes involving corruption, bribe-taking and embezzlement of public funds, while 8,726 were probed for dereliction of duties and abuse of power, Jia said.

Not all of those were prosecuted last year.

About 555 million US dollars stolen from public coffers was retrieved, Jia said in his annual report, without giving the total amount embezzled.

Those targetted for corruption investigations included officials in charge of road construction, urban reconstruction and land requisitions which have led to large protests and deep public discontent.