

Syria finally ends military presence in Lebanon

New era begins for Beirut

AP, AFP, Rayak

Syria ended its 29-year military presence in Lebanon yesterday with a farewell ceremony near their shared border, with a Syrian commander telling Lebanese troops: "Brothers in arms, so long." The soldiers responded, "So long."

Some 250 soldiers in red berets and camouflage, the last Syrian troops remaining in Lebanon, shouted chants supporting Syrian President Bashar Assad during the ceremony at the army air base at Rayak, a few miles from the Syrian border.

The soldiers' departure comes after heavy international and Lebanese pressure following the Feb. 14 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Anger over the killing helped turn the tide against Syria's longtime presence in

Lebanon. The opposition blamed the murder on the Lebanese government and its Syrian backers, accusations both governments deny.

Syria has gradually pulled out its 14,000 troops from Lebanon over the last two months.

Syrian forces, led by their feared intelligence chief General Rustom Ghazaleh, left Lebanon on Monday, ushering in a new era for the tiny country which has been in the military and political grip of Damascus for 29 years.

As overjoyed residents threw flowers after Ghazaleh drove back home in a large convoy, Lebanese troops deployed for the first time across cities and towns evacuated by the Syrian army.

In another blow to Syria's influence, the pro-Damascus chief of Lebanon's General Security service, Jamil Sayyed, quit Monday ahead of

a UN probe into February's assassination of five-time prime minister Rafiq Hariri which triggered a seachange in the country.

Ghazaleh, who held a tight grip on political life in Lebanon for years, crossed the border after evacuating the notorious Syrian army headquarters in the eastern town of Anjar and giving back the house he had been occupying for years in nearby Shtaura.

A Lebanese flag was seen fluttering over the evacuated Syrian headquarters. Ghazaleh himself was expected to return to Lebanon briefly on Tuesday for a formal farewell ceremony that will seal the Syrian withdrawal.

"A few hours from now, and a new era will start in Lebanon," read the headline in the French-language L'Orient-Le Jour newspaper.

A UN team is due in the region this

week to verify the withdrawal, carried out in the face of intense international pressure following Hariri's assassination in a massive bomb blast on the Beirut seafloor.

Most Syrian troops have now crossed the border, but the token force scheduled to attend Tuesday's official send-off.

The same day, UN chief Kofi Annan is due to report to the Security Council on Syria's compliance with a resolution it passed last September requiring the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Israel voiced hope the pullout could pave the way to normal relations with Lebanon, but expressed doubt over whether Syria would actually withdraw all military and intelligence forces or end its backing for anti-Israeli Hezbollah guerrillas.



Rescuers surround a woman being rescued about 15 hours after a commuter train derailed in Amagasaki, near Osaka, western Japan Tuesday. The train crash death toll rose to 73 with 450 others injured.

Japan's rail safety comes under fire

Death toll rises to 76, cops search operator's office

AFP, REUTERS, Amagasaki

Rescuers yesterday pulled three survivors and more bodies from the wreckage of a Japanese train as the death toll rose to 76, with a new derailment raising fresh safety concerns following recent rail privatisation.

Japanese police looking for clues to the cause of the country's worst rail crash in more than 40 years raided the offices of the train's operator yesterday as weeping relatives claimed the remains of many of the 76 confirmed dead from a makeshift morgue.

Investigations were focusing on the speed at which the crowded train was travelling when it jumped the tracks on the outskirts of the western city of Osaka and smashed into an apartment building just after rush hour on Monday morning.

With hundreds of residents

watching in silent prayer, rescue teams squeezed into flattened carriages in a last effort to find survivors. Cranes removed train debris wrapped around an apartment building.

Three people were confirmed dead late Tuesday, some 36 hours after the speeding commuter train jumped the tracks and smashed into an apartment building during the morning rush hour in this industrial city near Osaka.

"I thought Japanese trains were safe. Now I have to think again," said Junko Iwabe, a 35-year-old housewife in this western industrial town, as she bowed in respect before the site of Japan's worst train accident in 42 years.

The search was continuing for a second night so long as hope remained for survivors amid reports that 10 to 20 people could still be trapped under the debris, a fire department spokesman said.



Parents and relatives of Lebanese prisoners and detainees in the Syrian prisons in Syria, clash with security men Tuesday during a demonstration in front of the parliament in Beirut demanding the Lebanese deputies to take action to release their loved ones.

Japan seeks S Asian support to counter China

AFP, Tokyo

Facing a major rift with China, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi heads this week to India and Pakistan hoping to secure a counterweight to Beijing, which is moving closer to New Delhi.

The Japanese leader arrives tomorrow in India where he is expected to highlight the two countries' joint bid for permanent seats on the UN Security Council and show Tokyo's interest in the fast-growing Indian economy.

Koizumi heads on to Pakistan,

the historic rival of India and a traditional ally of China.

But looming over the trip will be the presence of Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, who in mid-April went a charm offensive in India, which he used as a base to lash out at Japan's aspirations for a Security Council seat.

China has been trying to repair often tense ties with India but has seen tension soar with Japan, with the nation seeing some of its biggest rallies in years this month to accuse Japan of whitewashing its militarist past.

"India has received more interna-

tional support for its bid for a permanent seat in the Security Council than Japan, which has drawn outcries of opposition especially from China," said Takako Hirose, professor of South Asian politics at Senshu University in Tokyo.

"One measure of the success of Mr. Koizumi's trip will be how closely India would position itself with Japan over UN reform," she said.

Japan is the biggest aid lender to India but also sees it as "rapidly growing, with its one billion people comprising a huge market," said a Japanese diplomat.

'No proof Iraq hid WMDs in Syria'

REUTERS, WASHINGTON

The US-led group that scoured Iraq for weapons of mass destruction has found no evidence Iraq hid such weapons in Syria before the US invasion in March 2003, according to a final report on the investigation.

The 1,700-member Iraq Survey Team, responsible for the weapons hunt, also said in a report released late on Monday it found no Iraqi officials with direct knowledge of a transfer of weapons of mass destruction developed by former President Saddam Hussein.

President Bush and other US officials cited a grave threat posed by Iraq's chemical and biological weapons and Baghdad's efforts to acquire a nuclear arms capability as a justification for war. No such

weapons were found but US officials said it was possible Saddam sent them to Syria for safekeeping.

The report is the final addendum to the investigators' September report that concluded pre-war Iraq had no WMD stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons and that its nuclear program had decayed before the US-led invasion.

The Iraq Survey Group, led by CIA special adviser Charles Duelfer, wrapped up its physical searches for weapons of mass destruction last December.

The new report posted on the CIA Web site said: "Based on evidence available... it is unlikely that an official transfer of WMD material from Iraq to Syria took place. However ISG was unable to rule out unofficial movement of limited

Annan to talk UN reform with Indian leaders today

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan yesterday conferred with UN officials based here ahead of his talks with top Indian leaders today focusing on New Delhi's claim for a permanent membership of the Security Council and on reforms of the world body.

The official parleys of Annan, who arrived here with his wife last Monday on a three-day visit, to start today when he meets President APJ Abdul Kalam, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh.

In a break from protocol, Natwar Singh received Annan at the airport on his arrival here.

In an arrival statement here Monday night, Annan said he hoped to discuss UN reforms with Indian leadership and "other issues of interest to both of us."

He emphasised the need for respecting human rights as an essential prerequisite for development and security.

"There cannot be security without development and there cannot be development without security and we will have neither unless we respect human rights", Annan said.

Considerable significance is being attached to Annan's interaction with Indian leaders since the subject of UN reforms would be taken up in the Millennium Review Summit to be held in New York this September, Indian officials said.

Taiwan opposition chief visits China

Hundreds protest in Taipei

REUTERS, Nanjing

Taiwan opposition leader Lien Chan began a historic "journey of peace" to China yesterday, seeking reconciliation with an old enemy even as pro-independence supporters in Taipei protested against the trip.

Lien, the first chairman of the Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT) to set foot on Chinese soil since 1949 when the party was toppled by the communists and fled to Taiwan, was lavished with red-carpet treatment and flowers upon his arrival in the eastern Chinese city of Nanjing.

"Nanjing is not far away from Taipei in space, but it has taken more than 60 years for me to revisit this city," Lien told a crowd gathered on the tarmac, referring to the Nationalists' one-time capital.

"We are very happy to finally be able to make this historic first step, this visit. In order to reach this target -- peaceful and stable cross-strait relations -- the KMT is willing to make its efforts," he said.

China views Taiwan as part of its territory and has pointed an esti-

mated 700 missiles at the democratically ruled island, making the Taiwan Strait one of Asia's most dangerous hot spots.

Tensions have been reignited by Beijing's enactment of an anti-secession law in March, which sanctioned non-peaceful measures against Taiwan should it push for formal statehood.

In Taipei, protesters called Lien "traitor!" and scuffled with riot police at the airport, infuriated that he appeared to be playing into Beijing's strategy of wooing the pro-unification opposition to alienate independence-leaning Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian.

Lien, whose KMT party supports unification with a democratic China, avoided the angry crowds who waved sticks, threw eggs, fired slingshots and lit firecrackers. Several protesters had bloodied foreheads.

Before leaving, Lien said he hoped to use this visit to understand developments on the mainland and exchange views with mainland leaders on peace, and cultural and economic ties.



Taiwan's opposition leader Lien Chan (R) shakes hands with Chen Yun-lin, the Chinese official in charge of Taiwan affairs after his arrival at Nanjing airport Tuesday. Lien began his landmark eight-day peace journey to China yesterday.

7 guilty of US centre attack in Kolkata

REUTERS, Kolkata

An Indian court convicted seven men yesterday for killing five policemen who were guarding US government offices in the eastern city of Kolkata more than three years ago, an official said.

The policemen were killed when two gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire with automatic weapons outside the American Centre that houses US trade and cultural offices.

Another 17 people, mainly policemen, were wounded.

"The seven accused were convicted on charges of waging war against the state..." Public

Prosecutor Ashok Bakshi told reporters outside the high-security Presidency jail, where the men were held.

He said Judge Basudeb Majumder, who held court hearings inside the jail due to security concerns, would announce sentences today for the seven men. Within days of the attack, police gunned down two men who officials said were members of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group, adding that one of dead men had taken part in the Kolkata raid. The other is still missing.

The seven men convicted Tuesday face either long jail terms or the death penalty under Indian law.

Iraq invasion hounds Blair as MP quits

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair was forced onto the defensive yet again over Iraq Tuesday as a senior member of his Labour Party quit in protest at the war and urged voters to give the premier "a bloody nose" at next week's election.

Brian Sedgmore, a Labour lawmaker for 27 years who is now retiring from parliament, said he had joined the opposition Liberal Democrats, who opposed the March 2003 Iraq conflict.

"I urge everyone from the centre and left of British politics to give Blair

a bloody nose at the general election and vote for the Liberal Democrats," Sedgmore told reporters.

The defection was not entirely unexpected -- Sedgmore was a long-time Labour rebel who had consistently criticised the Iraq war -- but was nonetheless deeply uncomfortable for Blair, just nine days before the May 5 poll.

Although Labour remained well ahead in a new opinion poll published Tuesday, party strategists remain worried that Blair's decision to back the US-led war has alienated many traditional left-wing supporters.