

G8 FMs rally round Afghanistan

US turns up heat on Syria

AFP, London

Foreign ministers from the Group of Eight nations began a one-day meeting in London yesterday with a pledge to remain committed to Afghanistan beyond the war-tattered country's elections in September.

On the sidelines, Washington stepped up pressure on Syria saying it is "certain" that Damascus still has intelligence agents operating in Lebanon to destabilise the country.

In addition, the so-called "quartet" of diplomatic powers seeking Middle East peace, got together to stress the "urgent need" for Israel and the Palestinians to coordinate the Israeli pullout from the Gaza.

The foreign ministers from Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States were also expected to use the meeting to discuss a goal set by British Prime Minister Tony Blair to tackle poverty in Africa and global warming at the main G8 summit in Scotland next month.

Following talks with their Afghan counterpart Abdullah Abdullah, the G8 foreign ministers congratulated

Afghanistan on its "remarkable progress" since the downfall of the hardline Taliban regime in 2001.

"We warmly welcome the prospect of parliamentary and provincial elections on September 18 as a further important step towards democracy," the G8 said.

"These elections will mark a successful conclusion to the formal Bonn Process (initiated in December 2001 to map out Afghanistan's transition) but not the end of the international community's commitment to Afghanistan."

The statement of support from the G8 to President Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul coincided with news of fierce clashes in southern Afghanistan in which 132 Taliban rebels were killed, according to the Afghan defence ministry.

Staying with the Middle East, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, fresh from a whistlestop tour of the Middle East and a conference on Iraq in Brussels, met with her French counterpart Philippe Douste-Blazy ahead of the G8 talks to talk about Syria.

Both diplomats reiterated a call for Damascus to respect a UN Security Council Resolution 1559

which France and the United States promoted last year calling for a full withdrawal of all Syrian forces from Lebanon and an end to foreign interference in the country.

After the meeting, a senior US State Department official said Washington was extremely concerned about the situation in Lebanon following two political assassinations this month and three since February when former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri was killed in a bomb attack on his motorcade.

Syria withdrew the last of its troops in April to end a 29-year presence. But the official, who asked not to be named, said: "There is no question that Syrian military intelligence agents have stayed behind and are asserting a very negative influence."

In a morning of diplomacy, foreign ministers from the United States, Russia, European Union and United Nations reiterated a call for Israel and the Palestinians to live up to their obligations under the "roadmap" for peace.

New Saddam novel to hit market soon

AFP, Amman

A novel said to have been penned by ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein telling the story of an Arab warrior who saves a town from a plot to overthrow its ruler is to be published soon, a newspaper reported yesterday.

Jordan's independent Al-Arab Al-Yawm newspaper carried a picture of the cover of the Arabic-language book "Ekhroj minha ya mal'un" whose title could be translated into "Damned one, get out of here!"

The book is expected to be published in Jordan and other Arab countries within a week, the newspaper said.

It relates the story of a man named Haskeel who plots to overthrow the ruler of a town but is eventually defeated by an Arab warrior and the ruler's daughter, according to the newspaper.

The book carries a message from Saddam's eldest daughter Raghda praising her father, who is now in US custody in Iraq after his toppling in the US-led war in 2003.

Saddam family lawyer Ziad Najjawi told AFP the book had been on sale in Iraq since the US-led war of March 2003, where it was released as a novel "by its author" with no mention of Saddam.



PHOTO: AFP
British Prime Minister Tony Blair gives his speech at the European Parliament in Brussels yesterday to express the priorities of the next British EU rotational presidency. Blair hailed EU enlargement as an "historic opportunity," in a keynote speech a week after the collapsed summit raised questions over the bloc's expansion plans.

Blair asks EU to change or fail

BBC ONLINE

The European Union faces a "crisis in political leadership" and must change to win back public support, Prime Minister Tony Blair has told Euro MPs.

Blair, outlining plans for the UK's six-month EU presidency, argued the EU would fail "on a grand scale" if did not face up to globalisation.

"Only by change will Europe recover its strength, its relevance, its idealism" and therefore public support, he said.

EC president Jose Manuel Barroso said consensus was vital to avoid paralysis.

Pointing to last week's turbulent talks over the EU budget, Barroso said the union faced a "decisive moment".

The EU presidency would be a test of the UK's historic pragmatism during its presidency, he added.

Last week's summit saw clashes over the UK refusal to give up its £3bn annual refund from the EU budget unless there were reforms to farm subsidies.

Blair said he did not think Europe quite realised the competitive challenge it faced from countries like China and India.

He was met with both heckles and applause when he said he had always been a "passionate pro-European". He insisted he wanted

to reinvigorate the EU, not wreck it.

He argued the French and Dutch voters' rejection of the draft European constitution reflected a wide discontent with the EU.

"This is not a time to accuse those who want Europe to change of betraying Europe," he argued.

"Ideals survive through change, they die through inertia in the face of challenge."

Blair denied he had been unwilling to discuss the UK rebate or that he had demanded the Common Agricultural Policy be renegotiated overnight.

But it would be too late to wait until 2014 to begin to change the fact that 40 percent of the EU budget was currently spent on agriculture, for example, he said.

Blair claimed the debate on the EU's future was being misrepresented as a battle between a free market Europe and a social Europe, nor was it about "trading insults".

He hit out at the caricature of an "Anglo-Saxon market philosophy that tramples on the poor and disadvantaged".

"Social Europe" was needed but it must be one which worked and focused on skills, not regulation which might save some jobs for a time at the expense of many future jobs.

Floods ravage China

97 die, 1.4 million flee homes to take shelter in higher ground

AFP, Beijing

At least 97 people were dead and over 60 missing after torrential rains and floods pounded southern China, sending some 1.4 million evacuees fleeing for higher ground, the government said yesterday.

The heavy downpours have been lashing the region for over a week and were not expected to let up until Saturday, the State Meteorological Bureau said in an alert.

As many as 16.6 million people have been affected by the storms that have caused up to 11.3 billion yuan (1.36 billion dollars) in damages and led to the emergency evacuation of 1.4 million people, the Ministry of Civil Affairs said in a report.

Mountainous areas of Guangxi region and Guangdong and Fujian provinces were the worst hit, while

the neighbouring provinces of Hunan, Jiangxi and Zhejiang were also swept with the worst rains in years, the ministry said.

In the southeastern coastal province of Fujian Thursday a landslide triggered by the rains swept a bus into the turbulent Min River near Jianou city with local officials leaving scant hope for 23 passengers.

Two people have survived including the driver, 23 passengers are still missing," a Jianou traffic policeman surnamed Wang told AFP.

"At the time the whole mountain side shook and then the side of the mountain collapsed and pushed the bus into the river," Wang said.

"If the waters do not subside, then it is hard to say if we will find anyone alive, the river is very rapid and turbulent right now.

Between 300 to 400 millimeters

(12 to 16 inches) of rain has fallen on parts of the province since last Friday and so far has taken the lives of 13 people, Xinhua news agency said.

China's civil affairs ministry Wednesday issued a "level three alert" calling on the establishment of a joint ministerial task force to address the disaster that has also hit the Guangxi region and nearby province of Guangdong.

Premier Wen Jiabao has called for an "all-out effort" to combat the floods and step up disaster relief and evacuation efforts.

Since June 16, 42 people have died and 13 were missing in Guangdong to the storms, while another 38 died and 27 were missing in Guangxi, the ministry said.

state institution in the hands of hardliners.

Meanwhile, Rafsanjani made a last minute bid to steal Ahmadinejad's core of low income supporters, promising to hand ordinary Iranians billions of dollars in stock options.

Pledging to "prioritise the poorer classes", he said that every month the unemployed will receive between 800,000 and 1.5 million rials (90-165 dollars), while women heads of households would be given 700,000 rials (80 dollars).

Superficially the candidates could not be more different: a wily 70-year-old cleric who has held top positions without a break since the 1979 revolution, against an ex-commando and municipal official who makes great play of his modest means.

Thailand aims to 'kill' rebels as violence rages on in south

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand plans to declare "violent zones" in Muslim southern provinces where security forces will seek to hunt down and kill Islamic insurgents blamed for a surge of deadly attacks, the defence minister said yesterday.

"At the moment, the violence is escalating more and more. They are killing indiscriminately, and the situation will continue until those militants are killed," General Thammarak Issarangkura Na Ayutthaya said.

Each district in Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces will be declared either "violent" or "peaceful," he told reporters after a special national security meeting to address the mounting bloodshed.

"We will have to fight them in the violent zones," he warned, without specifying which areas would fall in the military's crosshairs.

The minister said a spate of beheadings this month -- including a man decapitated in broad daylight Wednesday at a roadside teashop in Narathiwat province -- was not necessarily the work of insurgents.

The beheadings could have been committed by narcotraffickers, gangs of extortionists, or owners of illegal casinos with ties to the militants, he said.

Thammarak spoke after Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra held a special meeting of his security chiefs, including the heads of the army, police, the National Security Council, the National Intelligence Agency, and the interior and defence ministries.

The defence minister said the zoning scheme would begin once the government finishes training village self-defence forces -- teams of volunteers who receive military training and arms.



PHOTO: AFP
Freed Filipino hostage Roberto Tarongoy (R) walks with his wife Ivy Grace after a courtesy call on President Gloria Arroyo at the Malacanang Palace in Manila yesterday. Freed hostage Roberto Tarongoy flew home to the Philippines Thursday after nearly eight-month kidnapping ordeal during which he was kept blindfolded by Iraqi militants.

Rafsanjani moves to thwart hardliners

Run-off vote today

AFP, Tehran

Iranian regime veteran Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani faces the hardline Tehran mayor today in a presidential election that could hand the anti-Western right unchallenged power but whose outcome is too close to call.

Rafsanjani and his rival Mahmood Ahmadinejad pulled out all stops in the last hours of campaigning to sway undecided voters in an election that could decide the fate of cautious reforms and set the tone for future relations with the West.

Pragmatic conservative Rafsanjani will need to garner broad support from Iran's disenchanted reformists and a wider apathetic electorate if he is to thwart an Ahmadinejad victory, which would leave every