

Russia sees 'real' threat of wider ME conflict

Bush, Putin voice concern over ME violence, clash on democracy

AFP, Saint Petersburg

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov warned yesterday of a "real threat" that the Middle East crisis could drag other countries in the region into the conflict.

"There is a real threat of the involvement of other states in this conflict," he told reporters here just ahead of a G8 summit of world leaders likely to be dominated by Israel's military offensives in Lebanon and Gaza.

"On the one hand, the capture of prisoners and shelling the territory of another state is absolutely unacceptable," Ivanov went on, referring to the Shia Hezbollah militia in Lebanon.

"On the other hand, the use of military force on such a scale and against such targets I think is also unacceptable, or at least disproportionate," he added, referring this time to Israel.

"Whether we like it or not the only way of resolving this very difficult situation is to return to the negotiating table."

Israel has pounded targets in Gaza, on its southern border, and Lebanon to the north after the capture by militant groups of three of its soldiers and rocket attacks on the Jewish state.

US President George W Bush and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin appealed yesterday for an end to the raging violence in

the Middle East, but clashed on democracy in talks here and failed to clinch a key trade deal.

Meeting ahead of a G8 summit of world leaders, the presidents papered over their differences on Israel's offensives in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, which have left scores of people dead and triggered fears of a regional war.

Bush put the blame firmly on the Shia Hezbollah militia and Putin said Israel's response had to be measured, but neither leader resorted to stronger language used by their governments earlier in the week.

"We share the same concerns," Bush told a joint press conference with host Putin.

Earlier Bush led a campaign Friday

to starve the Lebanese militia Hezbollah of support, but did not pressure Israel to halt strikes on targets in Lebanon, his spokesman said.

"The president is not going to make military decisions for Israel," White House press secretary Tony Snow told reporters.

The US president told Lebanon Prime Minister Fuad Siniora "that he believes that the Israelis have a right to protect themselves, and also that we think it's important that in doing that, they try to limit as much as possible so-called collateral damage, not only to facilities but also to human lives," said the spokesman.



Palstinians search the rubble for survivors after an Israeli jet shelled a house in Gaza City yesterday. One person was killed and eight others were injured when Israeli aircraft struck a house in Gaza City with two missiles. PHOTO: AFP

India undecided over next round of peace talks with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

India said yesterday it was still deciding whether to go ahead with high-level peace talks with Pakistan after claiming the Mumbai blasts were carried out with help from "across the border." The talks, slated for next Thursday in the Indian capital between top foreign ministry officials of both countries, were meant to review progress in a slow-moving peace process between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

But their fate has come under a cloud in the wake of Tuesday's blasts on commuter trains during evening rush hour that killed at least 181 people and wounded nearly 900 others.

"No decision has been taken (on the talks) one way or the other," foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told AFP.

His statement followed an earlier Press Trust of India report quoting India's junior foreign minister Anand Sharma as saying "the talks will be held at an appropriate time".

Before the blasts, Islamabad had confirmed its participation in the talks but New Delhi had not announced any dates officially.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said on Friday the Mumbai attackers had support from "across the border" in a reference to Pakistan. He also warned that the talks could be harmed if Pakistan did not live up to a promise to curb "terrorism" directed against Indian targets.

UNSC nears vote on N Korea missile tests

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations Security Council yesterday edged closer to a vote on a resolution chastising North Korea for its missile tests, with the United States hinting a watered-down text could be agreed to overcome Chinese objections.

The draft resolution includes a reference to Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, which can authorize mandatory sanctions or even the use of force.

China has made it clear it will veto any text that invokes Chapter Seven.

Speaking to reporters after closed-door Security Council consultations late Friday, French Ambassador Jean-Marc de La Sabliere, the council president for July, said the 15-member body would resume consultations on a revised draft resolution at 3:00 pm

(1900 GMT) Saturday.

The compromise text "is ready to be put to a vote we hope for action tomorrow," Japanese Ambassador Kenzo Oshima said.

US Ambassador John Bolton signalled that even without a reference to Chapter Seven, the draft would still be legally binding. His comment appeared to indicate that the co-sponsors were prepared to drop the reference to mollify the Chinese.

"It is not required to have a binding resolution to use the word Chapter Seven," he noted, adding that he had been instructed by his government to seek a vote Saturday.

A compromise text was thrashed out in day-long haggling involving ambassadors of the five veto-wielding permanent members of the council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- as well as Japan.

Chechens drop independence demand

Russia offers amnesty

AFP, Moscow

Chechnya's rebels are ready to drop their independence bid in exchange for peace, a senior representative said, as Russia offered an amnesty yesterday.

However the radical wing of the guerrilla movement showed no sign of agreeing.

Akhmed Zakayev, the fugitive rebel government's foreign minister, wrote in an appeal to the Group of Eight leaders meeting in Saint Petersburg, that the people of Chechnya had always wanted independence.

But if "some other solution can be found to the problem of peace with the Russians...then we are ready for the necessary negotiations," said Zakayev, who won asylum in Britain, in the statement seen Saturday on two rebel websites -- www.chechenpress.info and www.daymohk.info.

40 Taliban killed in Afghan fighting

Kabul probes reports of civilian deaths in air raid

AP, AFP, Kandahar

Coalition and Afghan forces killed more than 40 militants in clashes across southern Afghanistan yesterday, according to the US military.

Afghan and coalition officials on Saturday investigated claims that civilians were killed in a coalition air raid after reports that scores of people may have died.

The clashes come amid stepped up US-led military efforts to crush armed extremists, primarily the Taliban, behind a bloody insurgency raging across Afghanistan, particularly in the south.

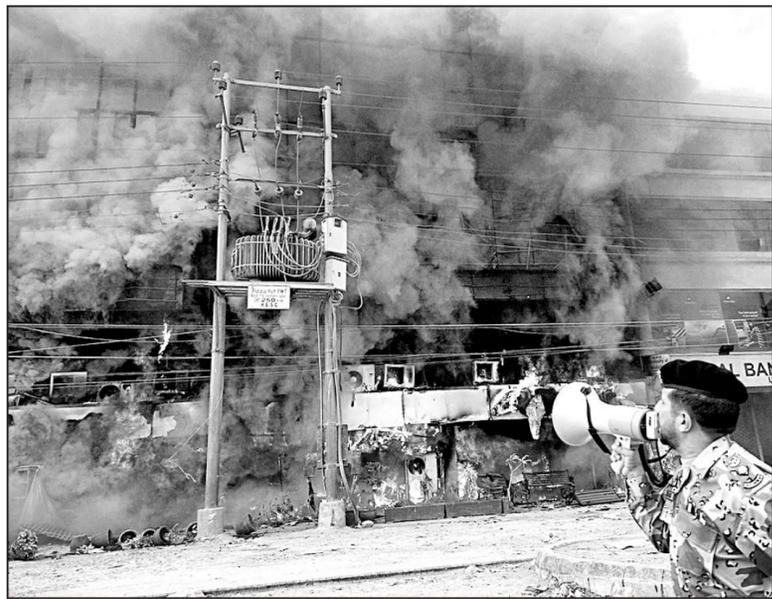
Skirmishes between coalition and Taliban militants raged throughout the southern Uruzgan province Friday into Saturday, with battlefield estimates indicating that 31 insurgents were killed in and around the Chora district, said Lt. Col. Paul Fitzpatrick.

Afghan and coalition soldiers also killed two male "foreigners" wearing burkas the body-shrouding veil worn by women and detained five Taliban in Uruzgan's Dihrawud district on Friday, an Afghan Defence Ministry statement said. The nationalities of the foreigners were unclear.

Elsewhere in Uruzgan, Afghan and coalition soldiers repelled an attack by 20 insurgents, killing one, the US military said in a statement.

Coalition and Afghan soldiers also raided several militant positions in neighbouring Helmand province's volatile Sangin district, killing 10 insurgents in a "brief battle," the military said in a statement.

The British military in southern Afghanistan denied there were any civilian deaths in Wednesday's bombing in the Nawzad district of Helmand province, which it said was aimed at legitimate Taliban targets and killed 19 rebels.



A Pakistani paramilitary soldier shouts instructions to people trapped inside the burning Pizza Hut restaurant after an angry mob set it alight in Karachi yesterday after the funeral of slain Shia cleric Hassan Turabi who was killed along with his young nephew in a suicide bombing the previous day. PHOTO: AFP

Iraq extends state of emergency

AFP, Baghdad

Parliament voted yesterday to extend Iraq's state of emergency for 30 days and President Jalal Talabani warned of the perils of civil war, as the head of Iraq's Olympic committee was kidnapped.

Also defying a security plan designed to stabilize Baghdad, fresh clashes erupted in the capital killing at least five people.

Gunmen in military uniforms staged a brazen daylight raid on a meeting of the Iraqi Olympic committee at a club in Baghdad and kidnapped four of its members and a bodyguard.

Committee president Ahmed al-Hejea, secretary general Amr Abdel Jabbar, head of Iraq's Tae Kwon Do federation Jamal Abdel Karim, and water sports director Saeb Hakim were all taken, along with the guard.

"As far as I know, there was no interior ministry order or arrest warrant against these people," said Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani.