

Nations step up Lebanon evacuation plans

AFP, Paris

Governments across the world stepped up measures yesterday to evacuate their nationals from Lebanon as the violence there intensified.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters at the G8 summit of industrialised nations in Saint Petersburg that an aircraft would leave Moscow Monday morning to fly Russian nationals home from the Jordanian capital Amman. "It is due to repatriate 74 citizens of Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, mostly women and children," he said.

A ferry chartered by the French government to evacuate its nationals is due to arrive off the coast of Lebanon during the night and start taking on board its first passengers early Monday, the foreign ministry in Paris said Sunday.

The boat can accommodate 800 to 1,600 people and will shuttle between Cyprus and the Lebanese coast, taking off those of the estimated 20,000 French tourists and residents in Lebanon who wish to leave, as well as other foreigners.

Three helicopters are being sent to Larnaca in Cyprus, as well as two aircraft, one a communications centre and the other a mobile headquarters. Two warships left ports in the Mediterranean on the way to the region.

The British aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious sailed from Gibraltar Sunday to help evacuate British citizens, Sky News reported, citing its correspondent who saw the ship depart. The amphibious assault ship HMS Bulwark is also reported to be on its way to the area.

The British defence ministry called the ships' move closer to Lebanon "precautionary", a spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair told reporters at the G8 summit, which has been dominated by the escalating crisis in the Middle East.

"It is sensible to have ships in the region, but it is a precaution," he said.

About 3,500 British families, or 10,000 people, live in Lebanon, and there are some 10,000 people with dual nationality.

Several European countries have announced plans to evacuate their citizens by land to Syria or by ferry to Cyprus since Israeli air

strikes pounded deep craters in Beirut airport runways last week, making air travel impossible.

The Cypriot foreign ministry said it was prepared to support a joint European Union-coordinated mass evacuation of Europeans stranded in Lebanon, and gave permission for its ports to be used for sea evacuation.

Australia is drawing up an evacuation plan for thousands of its citizens trapped in Lebanon, Prime Minister John Howard said.

Howard said about 25,000 dual Lebanese-Australian nationals were living in Lebanon along with 3,000 Australian visitors.

"We are doing everything we can, 24 hours a day, to arrange an evacuation plan," Howard told Australian television.

"The most likely way of evacuation, on my advice, is by ferry to Cyprus and we are actively exploring all the possibilities in relation to that."

Canada urged its citizens trapped in Lebanon to remain indoors while the government prepared a potential evacuation plan.

Arab FMs declare ME peace process 'dead'

REUTERS, Cairo

Rebuffed by the United Nations and the United States, impotent against militant groups fighting Israel, and often unpopular at home, Arab governments have made a joint appeal for urgent assistance.

At a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo on Saturday, they declared Middle East peacemaking finally dead, only to implore the UN Security Council to revive it immediately.

As war raged between Israel and the Lebanese Shia Muslim group Hezbollah, an Arab minister said fighting was out of the question and diplomacy was the only option.

"I don't believe that anyone could expect that the Arab states will now enter a war or are ready to go into a war," Mohammed Hussein al-Shaali, minister of state from the United Arab Emirates, told a news conference.

"The alternative is political and diplomatic action and that is what we are doing," he added.

But, cowed by popular sympathy for Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Islamist group Hamas in the Palestinian territories, the ministers

hardly dared criticise their Islamist rivals for provoking the military might of Israel.

Hamas and Hezbollah, despite their electoral successes, have not yet found a place in delegations to Arab League meetings.

The secular Fatah movement of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the old Palestine Liberation Organisation have maintained their grip on Palestinian foreign policy, despite the defeat of Fatah in January elections.

The furthest the ministers went was to say that all parties should coordinate their actions toward Israel because some acts undermine regional stability and do not serve Arab interests.

Saudi Arabia has come closest to overt criticism of Hezbollah with talk about "ill-considered adventures." In private, Egypt and Jordan share the Saudi view, diplomats say.

The trigger for the latest round of fighting was a cross-border operation by Hezbollah to capture Israeli soldiers for exchange with some of the thousands of Arab prisoners held by Israel, some of them jailed for decades without trial.



PHOTO: AFP

Thick clouds of smoke rise above Lebanese firemen trying to extinguish a fire at a factory, which was hit during Israeli air strike in Bourj Shimali near Tyre, southern Lebanon yesterday. For the fifth consecutive day, Israeli forces led an ever-widening assault on its northern neighbour that has killed 16 more on Sunday and left the country almost completely cut off from the outside world.

British soldier, 17 others killed in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A British soldier was killed and three others wounded in two different attacks near Iraq's main southern city of Basra yesterday, while 17 people were killed in rebel violence across the country.

Two of the soldiers were part of a raid in the tribal area of Garmat Ali, north of the city, to "apprehend individuals involved in terrorist activities in Basra," British spokesman Major Charlie Burbridge said.

He said one soldier was killed in exchange of fire during the raid which resulted in the detention of two "suspected terrorists" while another soldier was wounded but was "not in a serious condition".

The soldier's death brought to 114 the British military's losses in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion.

Two other soldiers were wounded when a roadside bomb on the road to Al-Zubair, southwest of Basra, exploded next to their vehicle lightly wounding them.

The incidents are part of a pattern of increased instability in the south, which had once been considered relatively calm compared with restive Sunni central and western Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) speaks to his US counterpart George W. Bush during the G8 leaders' working session at Konstantinovskiy Palace outside Saint Petersburg yesterday. Leaders of the G8 group of major industrialised democracies are working on a statement to call for ceasefire in Lebanon.

Syria, Iran vow tough response to Israel

AFP, Damascus

Syria warned yesterday it would respond directly and by all means necessary to any Israeli attack on its territory, in its first official reaction to Israel's offensive on neighbouring Lebanon.

The warning coincided with a similar threat by Damascus's key ally Iran, and came amid rising fears that the Middle East is being dragged deeper into the spiralling conflict sparked by the capture of Israeli soldiers by militants linked to Hamas and Hezbollah.

"Any Israeli attack against Syria

will provoke an unlimited, direct and firm response using all means necessary," Information Minister Mohsen Bilal told the official SANA news agency.

Iran also warned arch-enemy Israel of "unimaginable losses" if it attacked Syria and vowed that it was standing by the Syrian people.

"We hope the Zionist regime does not make the mistake of attacking Syria, because extending the front would definitely make the Zionist regime face unimaginable losses," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters in Tehran.

Israel said one of the rockets fired Sunday by Hezbollah guerrillas on Israel's third-largest city of Haifa, killing eight people, may have been Syrian-made.

"There is a possibility that one of the rockets was made in Syria," a senior military official told reporters following the deadliest cross-border attack in decades.

"Maybe Hezbollah wants to involve Syria in this mess," he said. "It could be a big advantage for Hezbollah to open a third front against Israel."

India develops local bird flu vaccine

REUTERS, New Delhi

India announced yesterday it has successfully developed a vaccine against bird flu in poultry.

The country has culled hundreds of thousands of birds since February when it reported its first outbreak in poultry. Although no human infections have been reported, thousands of people were monitored for flu-like symptoms.

"I am happy to announce the high security animal disease laboratory (in) Bhopal ... has made significant effort to develop a killed vaccine against the bird flu in a short period of time," Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar said in New Delhi.

The laboratory in Bhopal is the main facility in the country for testing and research. India is not developing a vaccine for humans but has imported vaccines for poultry from the Netherlands.

Last month, Indian authorities said bird flu had subsided and in six months the country could be declared free from the infection.

Worldwide, the H5N1 strain of avian flu has killed 132 people since 2003, according to the World Health Organisation.

Rainstorms, flooding kill 88 in China

AFP, Beijing

The death toll from severe rainstorms and flooding across China in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Bilis has risen to 88, state media said yesterday.

Torrential rain hit provinces including Fujian, Hunan, Guangdong, Jiangxi and Zhejiang, forcing millions of residents to be evacuated, Xinhua news agency reported.

Seventy-eight people were confirmed dead in the central province of Hunan, where more than 100 were still missing, Xinhua said, citing official figures.

More than 70 deaths in the province occurred in Chenzhou city, where 190,000 people had to be evacuated, the report said. Some

5.47 million people were trapped by floods at one stage but they have since been rescued.

At least 2.3 million people across the province have been affected by rainstorms and floods, Xinhua said earlier, with some 31,400 houses toppled and 36,630 hectares (90,500 acres) of farmland damaged.

In neighbouring Guangdong province, ten people were killed and 12 others were missing after 550,000 people were hit by the rainstorms, Xinhua said.

Some 47,000 people had to be evacuated in the southern province, it said.

Television news footage showed muddy floodwater gushing down the streets in various regions while many trapped residents awaited rescue.

UN nuclear referral 'not constructive'

Says Iran

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran said yesterday sending its nuclear file back to the UN Security Council undermined prospects for talks over its atomic dispute with the West.

Iran's case was referred back to the council after Tehran failed to respond to a set of proposals backed by six world powers, which called for Tehran to halt uranium enrichment in return for economic and diplomatic incentives.

Tehran publicly insists it wants to talk but has refused to give up enrichment. Western diplomats said Iran's top nuclear negotiator gave no sign he was interested in negotiating when he met the European Union foreign policy chief on Tuesday.