

N Korean leader takes new wife

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il has taken a musician-turned-secretary as his new wife after his former spouse died of cancer two years ago, a report said yesterday.

Kim Ok, 42, lived with the reclusive North Korean leader who turned 64 in February after serving as his private secretary, Seoul's Yonhap news agency said quoting an unnamed government source.

"She is virtually North Korea's first lady," said the source who Yonhap called a Seoul government source privy to information on Kim Jong-Il's family.

Kim Ok, a piano major at Pyongyang University of Music and Dance before becoming Kim Jong-Il's secretary in the early 1980s, has since accompanied the North's leader on trips at home and abroad, the source said.

"She is a cute woman rather than a beauty," the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "I heard she is very wise and clever."

She visited Washington as a member of North Korea's delegation led by Jo Myong-Rok, first vice chairman of the National Defence Commission, in 2000 and accompanied Kim Jong-Il to visit China in January, the source added.

Israeli bombing breaks humanitarian law

Says UN official

REUTERS, AFP, Beirut

Israeli bombing of a Beirut neighbourhood where Hezbollah had its headquarters has breached humanitarian law, a senior UN official said yesterday.

"It is horrific. I did not know it was block after block of houses," Jan Egeland, the UN emergency relief coordinator, told reporters as he toured the shattered Haret Hreik district. "It makes it a violation of humanitarian law."

"It's bigger, it's more extensive than I even could imagine," he said, surveying a pile of rubble.

Israeli warplanes have pounded the area nearly every night since its war with Hezbollah began on July 12.

It was last hit early on Sunday, said the few residents not to have fled the usually packed area.

Egeland said between half a million and a million people were in need of international assistance in Lebanon, but delivering aid required safe access. "So far Israel is not giving us access," he said.

Egeland plans to travel to Israel on Tuesday to negotiate safe corridors by land, sea and air. He has estimated that \$100 million is urgently needed to help avert a humanitarian crisis.

"There is definitely a humanitarian crisis unfolding in Lebanon," he said. Israel's bombardment of its northern neighbour has killed 359 people, mostly civilians.

Egeland leaped through the pages of books scattered among the rubble in the Shia Muslim quarter, where air raids have flattened a Hezbollah compound of buildings and destroyed homes.

Two veiled women carrying possessions in plastic bags made their way past the UN official.

"We are setting up a major relief operation but the violence has to stop," Egeland said, calling for a halt to the war.

"The rockets going into Israel have to stop," he said. "The enormous bombardment that we have seen here with one block after another being levelled has to stop."

The Israeli government said the military was trying to be as precise as possible in its operations in Lebanon.

"The Lebanese people are not our enemy. We cannot sit idly by while Hezbollah terrorists launch rockets at our towns and cities," Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev said.

Hezbollah attacks and rockets have killed 37 Israelis. The war was sparked by the group's abduction of two Israeli soldiers in a raid into Israel.

Egeland said the United Nations was planning to deliver aid using a fleet of trucks and by ship into Beirut and the southern city of Tire.

"We're particularly worried for this area of Beirut and for the southern part of the country," he said.

"There are wounded who do not get sufficient treatment. There are people who do not have safe drinking water. There are, first and foremost, tens of thousands of people who are now being besieged, or in areas (of) cross fire," he said.

"It is costing too many lives and it

will not lead to a solution in the south. There is no military solution to these things, it is only a political solution."

He also echoed criticism from other UN officials over the Israeli military response, which has already killed at least 350 people in Lebanon.

The Israeli military response has been "disproportionate, when to my thinking one third of the wounded and killed are women and children, then it clearly goes far beyond responding to armed groups", he said.

Egeland, who was set to visit Israel on Tuesday and the Gaza Strip too, also expressed alarm over the humanitarian situation in Gaza amid the Israeli offensive there.

The Palestinian people are also in "in its gravest hour of need in many years. We need a more effective relief effort there and we need Israel to enable the relief effort more effectively," he said.



Smoke billows following an Israeli air strike in the southern Lebanese town of Khiam Saturday. Israeli warplanes continued southern and eastern Lebanon bombing yesterday after troops in tanks and armoured cars punched across the border and seized a village, intensifying the war on Hezbollah despite mounting concern over the plight of civilians.

PHOTO: AFP



Residents search for belongings amid the rubble of their home after an Israeli air raid hit the nearby Fatima al-Zahra building which contains a library, a school and a mosque linked to Hezbollah in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Cyprus takes in more Lebanon evacuees

REUTERS, Larnaca

Cyprus braced to take in nearly 10,000 more fugitives from Lebanon yesterday as the United Nations appealed for urgent international aid for the far greater numbers of people left behind.

About 14 vessels were expected to dock at the Cypriot ports of Larnaca and Limassol on Sunday and Monday, part of a days-old mass evacuation already involving more than 25,000 people from dozens of countries that shows no signs of slowing.

More than 1,000 weary Canadians walked ashore in the sticky Cypriot summer night. Women tried to pacify screaming infants as they queued to enter a cramped reception centre.

"We are really tired, it has been a very long trip ... Many more people could not leave, the boats were

simply too crowded," said student Cynthia Eid.

Elie Coriati, 51, an engineering consultant from Montreal, said Canada had been slower to act than some other countries.

"The Canadians were behind for the first few days... but now it is picking up... They are making up for lost time," he said.

Two ships carrying nearly 2,000 Americans docked in Limassol, adding to the nearly 8,000 the Pentagon said had already been evacuated from Lebanon via Cyprus and Turkey.

Many Americans were still stuck at a makeshift camp in a fairground in the Cypriot capital Nicosia awaiting chartered planes to fly them home.

By contrast, an estimated 5,000 British evacuees passing through the British air force base at Akrotiri in southern Cyprus were swiftly processed and flown home.

Diplomatic flurry in Israel over Lebanon offensive

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Envoys from three European countries joined intensifying diplomacy in Israel yesterday aimed at ending fighting between Israeli forces and Hezbollah that has wrecked swathes of Lebanon and left hundreds dead.

Ministers from France, Germany and Britain are all due to hold separate talks with Israeli officials ahead of the arrival of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who heads for the Middle East on Sunday.

European countries have been far more critical of Israel's offensive than its main ally, the United States, which has resisted growing calls for a ceasefire and made clear that it blames Iranian-backed Hezbollah for the crisis.

Few expect diplomacy to deliver swift results and an Israeli newspaper reported on Sunday that Israeli

officials believe they have a green light from Washington to continue the onslaught on Hezbollah for at least another week.

Israeli attacks aimed at Hezbollah have killed some 357 Lebanese, most of them civilians, since the guerrilla group captured two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid on July 12. Israeli troops have edged into southern Lebanon.

A total of 35 Israelis have died, 15 of them civilians killed by Hezbollah rockets rained on the north of the country.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and British Foreign Office minister Kim Howells will all hold meetings with Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and other senior officials.

In Cairo on Saturday before flying to Israel, Douste-Blazy reiterated France's call for an immediate ceasefire.

"If not, it will be the destruction of the Lebanese state," he said.

Howells, who during a stop in Beirut delivered Britain's strongest criticism yet of Israeli attacks, said: "We want to find a way to resolve this crisis as soon as possible."

Rice has said that an immediate ceasefire would produce a "false promise" that would allow Hezbollah to re-emerge to attack Israel instead of disarming the group, as foreseen under a UN resolution, and removing it from the border.

Foreign ministers from the world's most powerful countries and Arab states are due to hold an emergency meeting in Rome on Wednesday to discuss the crisis. No decision on international action is likely before that.

Israel's Haaretz newspaper said: "Senior officials believe Israel has an American nod to continue operations against Hezbollah at least until next Sunday."

US military encourages abuse in Iraq: HR body

AP, New York

The group Human Rights Watch said in a report released Sunday that US military commanders encouraged abusive interrogations of detainees in Iraq, even after the Abu Ghraib prison scandal called attention to the issue in 2004.

Between 2003 and 2005, prisoners were routinely physically mistreated, deprived of sleep and exposed to extreme temperatures as part of the interrogation process, the report said.

"Soldiers were told that the Geneva Conventions did not apply, and that interrogators could use abusive techniques to get detainees to talk," wrote John Sifton, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch.

The organisation said it based its conclusion on interviews with military personnel and sworn statements in declassified documents.

A Pentagon spokesman, Cmdr. Greg Hicks, said he wasn't aware of the report, but noted the military is reviewing its procedures regarding detainees following a Supreme Court ruling that the Geneva Conventions should apply in the conflict with al-Qaeda.

The Bush administration had previously held that certain enemies, including terrorists, were illegal combatants and not protected by those rules.

The conventions prohibit "outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment."

Human Rights Watch focused

much of its report on a detention facility called Camp Nama at Baghdad International Airport.

One soldier, whose name was withheld from the report, described a suspected insurgent being stripped naked, thrown in the mud, sprayed with water and then exposed to frigid temperatures in an attempt to soften him up for interrogators.

Commanders, the soldier said, seemed confident that their treatment of prisoners was legal.

He described computerised authorisation forms that had to be filled out before subjecting detainees to strobe lights, loud music, extreme heat or cold, or intimidation by barking dogs.

US rushing arms to Israel amid Lebanon bombings: Official

AFP, Washington

The United States is expediting a shipment of precision bombs to Israel from an arms deal struck last year amid the Jewish state's ongoing assault on Lebanon, a US official said Saturday.

A decision to rush the delivery of the weapons following an Israeli request was made around the time Israel began pounding Lebanon by air and sea on July 12 after the capture of two Israeli soldiers by the Hezbollah militia, the official said.

"It's part of an arms sale that was made in 2005," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The official said the shipment "has either been made or is in the process of being delivered" but refused to specify whether it was being delivered by air or by sea.

Last year's arms deal allows Israel -- which agreed to purchase about one billion dollars in US military equipment in 2005, according to a congressional report -- to tap into the package depending on need.

It was not immediately clear if Israel requested the new shipments following the start of the Lebanon campaign or while it was still in the peak of an air offensive in the Palestinian Gaza Strip on its southern border.

Deadly scramble for shelter in Lebanon

AFP, Tebnine

On the side of the scarred rubble-strewn road just north of the smoking ruins in the southern Shia town of Bint Jbail, an aging barefoot woman has given up hope and just sits quietly.

Hayat Jamaa, her lips crusted white, is one of hundreds who have walked this stretch of road, coming from Lebanon's border towns and heading for the government hospital in the village of Tebnine.

The hospital she was bound for is brimming with some 1,500 refugees with apocalyptic stories, who came in search of food, water, medicine and, most importantly, refuge.

Travelling the roads into and out of these southern villages is a crapshoot with Israeli missiles

regularly slamming into fleeing vehicles. The hospital is struggling for supplies to feed dozens of hungry displaced people.

"A piece of bread and a slice of cheese count as a meal," said the hospital's stand-in director Mohammad Zeineddin, a Lebanese army officer.

Doctors struggled with nine heart attacks and four women have given birth in the hospital, which was closed for remodelling when the humanitarian crisis erupted after Israel launched a massive offensive.

The old equipment was long ago carted off and the new has yet to arrive. The hospital has no x-ray machine, anaesthesia, or oxygen to treat those wounded in the bombardment.

Some 400 children have diarrhoea and are vomiting.

"We don't know why," says Jihad Mehanna, one of just two exhausted doctors who remain at the hospital. "Maybe the water is no good."

Still, displaced people continue to stream in by the dozens, making the desperate trek along deserted sun-baked roads, through abandoned and tattered villages, carrying infants and waving white flags as a plea to the warplanes above.

They claw at the windows of passing vehicles begging for a sip of water or a lift. It's an eight-kilometre journey from Bint Jbail to the hospital. From Aitaroun and Maroun al-Ras, other villages at the frontlines of the Israeli onslaught, it's a bit longer.

Thousands protest Israeli attacks

REUTERS, London

Thousands of demonstrators marched through London and hundreds more gathered in Amsterdam and Chicago on Saturday to protest against Israeli attacks in Lebanon and the refusal of the US and British governments to condemn them.

Police said around 7,000 people joined the London protest as it snaked from the banks of the Thames to Hyde Park, first in brilliant sunshine and then in torrential rain.

Many carried red and white Lebanese flags and placards condemning "Israeli crimes in Lebanon."

"We are all Hezbollah. Boycott Israel" read one. "Axis of evil: Bush, Blair, Olmert," read another, referring to the political leaders of the United States, Britain and Israel.

"Having seen the devastation on our TV screens in recent days, it's impossible to view the Israeli response as anything other than a gross overreaction said Yasmin Ataullah, spokeswoman for the British Muslim Initiative, one of the groups behind the rally.

Hundreds more protesters took to the streets of Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, Newcastle



Protestors hold Lebanese flags and placards as they take part in a march through central London Saturday protesting against Israeli attacks in Lebanon. The Israeli army yesterday sent armoured vehicles into southern Lebanon as it held its grip on a Lebanese village and massed thousands of troops at the border amid fears of a full-scale ground invasion.

PHOTO: AFP

and Sheffield.

In the United States, several hundred demonstrators gathered in bright sunshine in downtown Chicago for a rally to protest Israeli military actions in Lebanon and Gaza.

Protesters carried banners proclaiming "The Right to Fight Or The Might to Smite," or "Not with

our money, not in our name."

"I'm outraged as an American, I'm outraged as a human being at what is happening to the people of Lebanon," said Dale Lehman, a 60-year-old Jewish resident of Chicago.

Nader Ismail, a computer engineer of Palestinian origin resident in Chicago for a decade, said he had

come to protest the "collective punishment inflicted on the Lebanese civilian population by Israel."

"All Israel is doing is feeding anger across the Middle East and they won't get peace that way," he added. "The only way they can achieve peace now is to sit down at the negotiating table."