

Hezbollah chief vows to fire rockets into heart of Israel

AFP, Beirut

Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah vowed Wednesday that his guerrillas will fire rockets into the heart of Israel and counter Israeli military advances inside southern Lebanon.

"We are entering a new phase in the confrontation, the phase of (striking) beyond Haifa," Nasrallah said in a televised speech referring to Israel's main northern city.

A senior Israeli official said the threat of rockets being fired further into the country's heart was real, but added that Israel was prepared for the eventuality.

"The Hezbollah threats are not new .. we know they have longer-range missiles, we are aware of this strategic threat and we're ready," government secretary Israel Maimon told public radio.

Israel has repeatedly said it believes Hezbollah has longer-range rockets capable of reaching beyond Israel's third city, as far as the commercial capital Tel Aviv, or even the southern city of Beersheva.

The radio quoted Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres as saying: "You have to prepare yourselves for Nasrallah's threats as if they're real even if they're lies."

But it also cited another official as casting doubt on Hezbollah's ability to deliver on the threat because of what he said was a continued reliance on advisors from sponsors Iran and Syria.

"Firing these longer-range missiles depends on those who sponsor them," the official was quoted as saying.

The Hezbollah chief denied that the border town of Bint Jbeil had fallen. A UN spokesman had said Tuesday that Israeli troops had entered the town, a stronghold of the Shiite militant group.

"They do not control Bint Jbeil. All the city of Bint Jbeil is still in the hands of the resistance," Nasrallah said.

After he spoke, Israel acknowledged that it was still meeting resistance in the town. Public radio said there had been "six casualties" on the Israeli side.

Arabic news channel Al-Jazeera said they comprised one

After UN and European Union delegations, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a surprise visit in Beirut on Monday where she reportedly presented a ceasefire plan stipulating the deployment of an international force in a buffer zone inside Lebanon for 60 to 90 days.

But Rice's ceasefire plan was rejected by Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Berri, a key Hezbollah ally, because it did not include a prisoner swap with Israel. Israel launched its massive onslaught on Lebanon after Hezbollah captured two soldiers in a deadly cross-border raid on July 12.

Nasrallah said the Israeli offensive was not triggered by the capture of the soldiers, but had been planned to take place in September or October.

He said the offensive was meant to crush Hezbollah and put Lebanon under the control of the United States and Israel who want to "impose a new Middle East" in which they would control the region and its resources.

During a visit in Israel on Tuesday, Rice said it was "time for a new Middle East". "A durable solution will be one that strengthens the forces of peace and democracy in the region," she said.

Nasrallah said: "Our fate is to confront this plan ... we are waging a war for the liberation of the remaining occupied lands and the liberation of our detainees."

Hezbollah says it is fighting for the liberation of the Shebaa Farms district, a territory captured by Israel from Syria in 1967 and unilaterally annexed with the rest of the Golan Heights in 1981.

The district is now claimed by Lebanon with Syrian blessing in an arrangement not recognized by the international community.



Indian protesters shout slogans as they beat an effigy of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in New Delhi yesterday (left) while Indian and Sri Lankan workers wait on board an Indian Navy ship anchored at Beirut's port as they are evacuated from war-torn Lebanon



PHOTO: AFP

Asian workers fear losing jobs more than Israeli raids

AFP, Beirut

As Westerners stream out of Lebanon, tens of thousands of Asian workers have decided that enduring Israeli bombardment is less of a torment than losing their jobs and returning to a life of poverty and hunger at home.

"Of course I am scared, but leaving is a luxury. Going back to Sri Lanka is a greater risk for our lives. The war here is much better than dying from hunger at home," said Sri Lankan domestic worker Shampa.

"What will I do in the Philippines?" cried Filipina Cynthia Madrigal.

"I cannot leave. I am the only bread-winner for my mother, two young children and two nieces," she said, sitting on the balcony of a mountain house to which she fled with her employers in northern Lebanon away from the Israeli strikes.

As wealthy nations dispatched

their final ships to evacuate citizens in Lebanon on the 15th day of relentless Israeli bombardments, less fortunate authorities across Asia have struggled to reach their nationals stranded in the war-torn country.

Amid complaints of slow evacuations, Asian countries like Sri Lanka have even asked nationals to stay put. But with the largest contingent of expatriate workers in Lebanon, only a fraction of the 80,000 Sri Lankans in Lebanon has asked to be evacuated.

Filipino officials, facing sharp criticism for failing to do enough for their 30,000 stranded nationals in Lebanon, have conceded they are unable to carry out evacuations and have asked foreign governments for help.

The International Office of Migration (IOM) said it is to airlift some 450 Filipino workers from Beirut via Damascus after President Gloria Arroyo issued an appeal to the international commu-

nity for help with repatriation.

But many Asian workers are prepared to ignore the chance of rescue and stick out the bombardment, even though they are painfully aware that several compatriots have been killed in the south when their employers' houses were hit by Israeli missiles.

Filipino Merle Lincien's employers wanted to take her with them to Geneva, but she had to stay behind because she could not board the French boat which evacuated them to the neighboring island of Cyprus, even though she had a travel visa.

She was staying with her employer's cousins who live in a house perched on a cliff overlooking a thick pine forest in the summer mountain resort of Brumana, east of Beirut.

So far, she has been away from the bombardments but she could still hear and see the explosions in Beirut's suburbs further down, especially at nighttime.

"But I am all right, I do not really want to leave because I need to work. I have five children to feed and I need to pay for their schools," said the 40-year-old woman.

"We are in the mountains, we are safe, but it is our parents at home who are getting hysterical," she said.

Mary, a Filipina who works at a pastry shop, has registered her name to be evacuated, but has since changed her mind.

"What will I do back home, there is no work. Who is going to pay for my return once all goes back to normal? I need to pay for my son's high school," she said.

At the Catholic Miraculous Medal church in Beirut, Father Augustine Advincula runs a meeting point for Filipinos who want to be evacuated.

"Most Filipinos want to stay put. So far we have evacuated 700 people and only 1,500 have registered themselves to be evacuated. They are taken by bus to Syria from

where they fly back home. The government pays for the trip," he said.

"Our main problem is to be able to evacuate the Filipinos who are stranded in the south and cannot flee because of the bombardments," he said.

"We have also had a few cases where employers exerted pressure on domestic workers to stay. We call them and tell them that they have to let them go for security reasons," he said.

"Many employers feel that they have moved with their domestic workers to safe areas and so there is no danger and do not want to lose costly contracts," he said.

Advincula also said that dozens of Filipinos who had been detained in jail because they did not have legal residences have been released by Lebanese authorities in order to allow the embassy to evacuate them.

Hopes rise for North Korea nuclear talks

Beijing, Seoul make joint push

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Hopes rose Wednesday for a breakthrough in efforts to disarm North Korea as China and South Korea made a united push to bring Pyongyang back to stalled six-nation talks on its nuclear ambitions.

North Korea has stayed silent on whether it will respond to the flurry of diplomacy and join its dialogue partners on the sidelines of a regional security conference, which the issue is expected to dominate.

But in a sign of the growing optimism, Chinese deputy foreign minister Wu Dawei said late Monday that a session of the six-way talks had been provisionally scheduled for Friday in Kuala Lumpur.

"The time currently being planned is the afternoon of the 28th, but it is still under negotia-

tion," he said. "At the moment, all sides are still making efforts but whether it will happen or not, nobody can tell yet."

China is seen as the biggest influence on North Korea, although the hermit state snubbed Beijing's appeals earlier this month and launched a volley of ballistic missile tests that inflamed the region.

"We have agreed that we will encourage together the resumption of six-party talks," Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said Tuesday after a meeting with his South Korean counterpart Ban Ki-Moon.

"We both feel that we should treasure the consensus reached at the six-party talks. That is, the nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and its peace and stability. That is the aim of our joint efforts."

The alliance of China and South Korea represents a new strategy in attempts to get communist North

Korea to the talks, which was derailed in November after Pyongyang objected to a US-ordered freeze on its bank accounts.

"Even if North Korea launched missiles to create tensions and difficult situations, South Korea and China have closely cooperated to maintain the situation properly," Ban told Li at the meeting.

North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-Sun is scheduled to arrive in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday for the 26-nation ASEAN Regional Forum security meeting the following day.

Both China and South Korea rejected the possibility of going ahead with a five-way discussion without North Korea. The nuclear talks group the two Koreas, China, Japan, the United States and Russia.

'Shoot me if I'm convicted'

AFP, Baghdad

Deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein demanded in court Wednesday that he be shot by firing squad rather than hanged if he is found guilty of crimes against humanity.

"Remember that Saddam was a soldier and that therefore, if he is condemned to death, he should be shot and not hanged," he declared, speaking of himself in the third person during his trial in Baghdad.

Judge Rauf Abdel Rahman replied simply that the Iraqi High Tribunal had not yet delivered its verdict.

Earlier, Saddam Hussein was forced on Wednesday to listen to a court-appointed lawyer defend his role in the deaths of 148 Shiite civilians, after he was brought to court against his will.

The former strongman, showing no ill-effects from his 18-day hunger strike, praised the insurgents fighting US forces in Iraq and refused once again to accept the authority of the Iraqi tribunal prosecuting him.

"I was brought here by force by the Americans, but I did not resist them because I have too much self-respect," he said, urging the court to excuse him, and adding that he had been brought directly from hospital.

"I refuse the lawyers that have been assigned to me, they will be considered enemies by the people," he declared. Saddam's defence team is boycotting the trial and the court has named replacement counsel to represent him.

Judge Rauf Abdel Rahman refused his request, and insisted the 68-year-old defendant remain

to hear the defence case prepared on his behalf.

Saddam and seven former aides face charges of crimes against humanity relating to a crackdown on the Shiite town of Dujail following an assassination attempt on Saddam in 1982. They face the death penalty if convicted.

The ousted dictator appeared in his trademark grey business suit and did not seem to have been weakened by his protest, begun after his evening meal on July 7 in protest at the conduct of the trial and the recent murder of a defence lawyer.

"Three days ago I was taken to hospital and today I was brought here forcibly from the hospital. I was fed intravenously and by a nasal drip," he said.

Lieutenant Colonel Keir-Kevin Curry, spokesman of US detainee operations maintained that Saddam "voluntarily received nutrition through a feeding tube."

Saddam also alleged that the court-appointed defence lawyers were reading from briefs prepared by "American and Canadian spies".

"Your honour, I refuse to appear before this tribunal, but this tribunal can do as it wills," he added.



PHOTO: AFP

Saddam Hussein laughs during his trial held in Baghdad's heavily-fortified Green Zone yesterday.

Two suspected rebels killed in Indian Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Two suspected Muslim rebels were shot dead in separate gunbattles with troops and nine people on a tourist route were hurt in a grenade attack Wednesday in Indian Kashmir, police said.

The people were hurt when a grenade exploded in the hands of a suspected militant as he was about to hurl it at a security patrol near a busy bus stand in Magam, 25 kilometers (15 miles) north of the summer capital Srinagar.

"Nine people were hurt, including a suspected militant," a police spokesman said. "We have not been able to question him as his condition is critical."

Magam is on the route leading to the tourist resorts of Tangmarg and Gulmarg. Seven people were hurt on Tuesday in a grenade attack on the same route.

Malaria kills 271 in Assam since outbreak in March

AFP, Guwahati

At least 271 people have died from malaria in India's northeast Assam state since March with thousands more suffering from the mosquito-borne disease, the state health minister said Tuesday.

"So far we have received reports of 271 deaths. The exact death toll could be higher as we are still getting reports of malaria deaths from interior areas," said the minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Sarma said the spread of malaria in Assam was rapid this year as an anti-malaria drive in the state was slow to get started, yielding what he called the "large number of deaths".

Heavily forested and cut by rivers, northeast India is a known "malaria zone" with the disease claiming an estimated 500 lives annually, according to health officials.

Malaria is caused by a small parasite spread through mosquito bites and can spread quickly during the annual summer monsoon rains in India.

At the weekend, the state also sounded a health alert after 15 people died of Japanese encephalitis and hundreds more came down with the disease over the past two weeks.

"We have alerted health officials across the state to take preventive measures to stop Japanese encephalitis from spreading to

newer areas," Assam Health Director Dhruva Hojai said.

Last year, an outbreak of Japanese encephalitis claimed 1,402 lives in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh alone.

The disease is transmitted from pigs to humans via mosquitoes during the monsoon rains from June to September.

Last year, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said at least 70 million children in India were at risk of getting the disease but there were not enough vaccines to protect them.

UNICEF said 66 million children between the age of one and five in India would be immunised against Japanese encephalitis in the next five years.

AFP, Mumbai

Indian police said Wednesday that the Mumbai train bombers had probably left the country after the number of arrests in the inquiry rose to six.

Jamir Sheikh, 31, and Sohail Sheikh, 38, were arrested late Tuesday after being questioned for several days over the blasts that killed 183 and injured more than 800. They were being probed for providing "support" to the bombers.

Jamir Sheikh, who ran a key-cutting shop in Mumbai, and Sohail Sheikh, a chemical engineer, were allegedly trained on how to make bombs in Pakistan in 2004/5, additional commissioner of police Jayjit Singh told AFP.

"They are from the core group that gave support to the terrorists," Singh alleged.

"They had training in 2004/5. They told us and we have evidence for it. That was explosives training, how to make bombs. There will be more arrests."

The men were being questioned in Mumbai and the DNA newspaper said they had allegedly confessed to being members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, the pro-Pakistan militant group fighting Indian control in Kashmir.

Police have said that the seven coordinated blasts that ripped through packed first-class train carriages on July 11 bore the hallmarks of Lashkar-e-Taiba but have stopped short of directly blaming the group.

"We don't have conclusive proof but we believe it's true that the

people who have done it are out of the country," said Singh.

Singh declined to name any country.

Tensions have risen between Pakistan and India since the Indian premier Manmohan Singh said within a week of the blasts that "elements" across the border had a role in the attacks.

Slow-moving peace talks between the two countries over Kashmir have been delayed because of the attacks.

Police have also said others arrested in the inquiry had links with Nepal and Bangladesh.

Indian media said the two arrested men were allegedly part of the same militant cell led by Tanvir Ansari, a doctor, who has been accused of conspiracy and was under suspicion of having trained abroad in handling arms, ammunition and making bombs. He was arrested earlier this week.

The two men were suspected to have visited Pakistan through Iran and went on a 28-day training camp to learn how to handle sophisticated weapons and manufacture bombs, the Press Trust of India said, quoting unnamed sources.

Sohail Sheikh's family, at their home in the western Indian city of Pune, denied he was linked to terrorism and told reporters he had travelled to Iran to investigate the dry fruit business.

"He was showing me how to do my exercises when we first heard about the blasts. How can he have had anything to do with them?" his mother Hazra told the Hindustan Times.

Iran bans 'Da Vinci Code'

AFP, Tehran

Iran has banned the best-selling novel "The Da Vinci Code" after receiving a protest letter from Christians, Iranian newspapers reported on Wednesday.

"After receiving the letter of protest from religious Christians, the culture ministry decided to cancel the authority given for publication of this book," Mohammad Reza Vafsi, a ministry official, told the daily Etemad.

The controversial book by author Dan Brown, which has sold more than 40 million copies worldwide, supports the thesis according to which Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene were married and had a child whose descendants are alive today -- a claim which the book says the Church has tried to smother for two millennia.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters at a sit-in organised by the Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace in central Kathmandu yesterday. At least 2,000 people joined the protest urging the government and Maoist rebels to speed up a fledgling peace process.