



PHOTO: AFP
Residents make their way on what used to be their road in their village buried by mudflow and in Daraga town in Albay province yesterday in Philippines. Apocalyptic scenes greeted rescue workers as they arrived in the eastern Philippines to begin the grim search for bodies buried by mudslides that swept away villages killing hundreds.

Hezbollah backers aim to oust Lebanese govt

AP, Beirut

Thousands of Hezbollah supporters camped out in tents in central Beirut yesterday as the Shia Muslim guerrilla group and its allies kept up the pressure on the US-backed government of Fuad Saniora to resign.

Hezbollah officials said their campaign, which has disrupted life in the capital's commercial district, will not stop until their demand for a national unity government is fulfilled. But the government showed no sign of backing down in a confrontation that has the potential to turn violent.

The street action has been largely peaceful so far. On Friday, hundreds of thousands of Hezbollah supporters flooded downtown Beirut chanting nationalist slogans and songs just outside the main government offices. Barbed wire and armoured vehicles separated the demonstrators from government headquarters where Prime Minister Saniora and some of his ministers have hunkered down.

Following the demonstration, participants set up hundreds of

white tents across the downtown area a dozen of so just 50 yards from Saniora's offices.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar television station said about 500 tents were pitched in central Beirut.

On Saturday, the demonstrators kept up the noisy, carnival-like protests with occasional shouts of "Saniora out!"

Hezbollah supporters set up water tanks and portable latrines and distributed sandwiches, tea and coffee to those camped out. Young men sprawled lazily on mats in and outside their white tents under the bright, warm sun. Some read newspapers, others smoked waterpipes. Dozens of white-capped Hezbollah workers swept the streets, littered with left-over food and drink from the night before.

"Yesterday's demonstration was just the beginning. There are a lot of other surprises on the way," said Ali Ammar, an 18-year-old who had just woken up. "This government lost the trust of the people a long time ago, and we will not stop until it goes," the information technology student added.

Ex-Russian spy's contact in hospital

AFP, London

A close contact of Alexander Litvinenko, the ex-Russian spy who died after apparently being poisoned with radioactivity, was in a London hospital Saturday after testing positive for the same substance.

Mario Scaramella, who met the exiled former agent at a central London sushi restaurant on November 1, was admitted to University College Hospital London (UHCL) on Friday after polonium-210 was detected in his body.

Doctors said late Friday that Scaramella was "well" and not showing any signs of radiation poisoning but several British newspapers Saturday gave a more serious assessment of the Italian academic's condition.

The tabloid Daily Mirror quoted an unnamed police source as saying: "Doctors have assessed that his chances of survival at virtually nil. They think he will now become progressively more ill and die."

Hamas missed chance to end siege: Solana

Hamas, Fatah rivalry intensified

AFP, AP, Gaza City/ Ramallah

The ruling Islamist Hamas movement squandered an opportunity to end a crippling aid boycott on the Palestinian Authority, European Union foreign minister Javier Solana said yesterday.

"I can say that (Hamas) had an offer by the president (Mahmud Abbas) and I think it was a very generous offer," Solana told reporters after meeting with Abbas.

Solana's declaration came after Abbas said on Friday that talks to form a national unity government involving Hamas and Abbas's moderate Fatah were at a dead end.

"It is an offer that would have resolved many of the problems facing the Palestinian people and unfortunately that offer has not been accepted," Solana continued.

The EU has joined the United

States and Israel in enforcing a crippling aid freeze on the Palestinian Authority since Hamas took power in March.

Meanwhile, Hamas yesterday rejected demands by PLO leaders that its government resign over the failure to form a moderate coalition acceptable to the West a sign of an intensifying power struggle between Islamic militants and moderate President Mahmoud Abbas.

The crisis was accompanied by angry exchanges between Hamas and leaders of Abbas' Fatah Party.

Hamas accused Fatah, which controls the Palestine Liberation Organisation and was defeated in parliament elections a year ago, of trying to overthrow the government. A leading Fatah official called for early elections to resolve the standoff.

The showdown began Thursday

when Abbas announced the failure of months of negotiations with Hamas over setting up a moderate government that could win international recognition and help end a foreign aid boycott. Talks deadlocked over the distribution of key portfolios and the government's platform, with Hamas rejecting international demands that it renounce violence and recognize Israel.

11 killed in fresh Lankan fighting

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan police detained two people over an attempt to assassinate the president's brother, officials said, as 11 people were killed in fresh fighting.

The Police Criminal Investigations Department took into custody two men who owned the auto-rickshaw used in Friday's suicide bombing targeting Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse's heavily armed convoy in Colombo.

"We have tracked down the owner of the vehicle used in the bombing," a police official said. "Two are being questioned."

Forensic experts suggested the three-wheel rickshaw was fitted with eight to 10 kilograms of plastic explosives and packed with ball bearings, which acted as pellets, he said.

Two army bodyguards of Rajapakse died in the attack, which also wounded 15 people, including five civilians.

The suicide bomber's body was found on the back of a pickup truck caught up in the powerful blast on the high-security Dharmapala Mawatha road. The head was destroyed beyond recognition, police said.

US plans more arms for Iraq's Maliki

Washington weighs tilt towards Shias

AFP, Washington

The United States plans to better arm Iraqi forces to allow a speedier withdrawal of US troops and appears to be tilting toward greater support of the Shia majority, after failing to convince Sunnis to abandon violence.

Talks between President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Amman on Thursday were dominated by the question of the Iraqi army's ability to assure security in the country, according to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

"We're looking at how to better equip those forces," Rice said in a US Fox television interview, one of several she made after the leaders' talks.

"I think you'll see an acceleration not just of the transfer of authority to the Iraqis over certain areas of the country ... but really in looking at the capabilities themselves and reacting to Iraqi suggestions and con-

cerns about what may be needed," she said.

Before leaving Jordan, Bush himself revealed that Maliki had complained the US had not given him adequate means to conduct the kind of policy the US expected of him in his war-torn country, wracked by insurgency and sectarian violence.

The US president said his administration's aim was to assure the Iraqi premier has more capable forces under his command.

Asked what the president meant, national security advisor Stephen Hadley was vague, saying only that Bush was referring to an improvement in equipment and an acceleration in the training of the Iraqi army and its intelligence-gathering capabilities.

According to the Fox television network, the US already has given Maliki light arms, vehicles, tanks and helicopters. The Bush administration has not confirmed that information.