

Lebanon militants declare truce

Syria distances itself from Lebanese Islamists

AFP, Beirut/ Damascus

The Sunni extremist group Fatah al-Islam which has been battling Lebanese troops for three days around a Palestinian refugee camp said yesterday it would observe a unilateral ceasefire.

"We have announced through the media that we are ready to respect a ceasefire, starting at 1130 GMT on Tuesday, and we hope that the Lebanese army will accept our offer in order to help end the suffering of civilians in Nahr Al-Bared," spokesman Abu Sali Taha said.

However "if the bombardments of the army resume, we will be patient for a while but we will

respond if they persist," he said.

A total of 65 people have been killed in three days of battles around the impoverished refugee camp and the nearby Mediterranean port city of Tripoli.

"We want to put an end to the ordeal of the civilians in the camp which is bombarded by the army in order to end a battle that we have not chosen and into which we have been dragged," he said.

A Lebanese army spokesman told AFP that "we are not ready to announce any agreements because since the start, the army has been respecting (the rules of) a ceasefire."

"Our soldiers are only returning

fire," said the spokesman who did not wish to be identified.

"The force will continue to respond to the fire of armed elements deployed inside the camp where civilians reside and which we are trying to protect."

Meanwhile, Syria distanced itself on Tuesday from the Islamists staging a deadly showdown in Lebanon while warning that a planned international murder trial for an ex-Lebanese premier would only further destabilise its neighbour.

"We renounce Fatah al-Islam. Members of the group are wanted by the Syrian security services," Foreign Minister Walid Muallem

said, according to the official news agency SANA.

"This group serves neither the Palestinian cause nor the interests of the Palestinian people," he added.

Lebanese officials have accused Fatah al-Islam, whose fighters in the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared have been locked in fierce clashes with the army since Sunday, of working for Syrian intelligence to stir up trouble.

The group's Palestinian leader Shaker al-Abssi slipped in to Lebanon last year after serving three years in a Syrian jail and is the subject of another arrest warrant issued by Damascus.



A Palestinian man drives his motorbike in front of burning tires at the entrance of Bedawi Palestinian refugee camp in north Lebanon, which is adjacent to the besieged Nahr al-Bared camp yesterday.

Pak troops strike al-Qaeda camp: 4 killed

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani troops backed by helicopter gunships yesterday stormed a suspected al-Qaeda camp in a tribal area bordering Afghanistan, killing at least four foreign rebels, officials said.

Soldiers raided the training camp at Zargarkhel village in North Waziristan after militants refused to meet a peace delegation flown in by helicopter and opened fire, military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad said.

The strike came as the United States continued to press key ally President Pervez Musharraf to crush al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents, who have allegedly regrouped in the rugged frontier area since 2001.

Arshad told AFP the security forces had cordoned off the area after "confirmed reports that miscreants were operating a terrorist training facility in Zargarkhel."



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (R) chats with Dr Muhammad Yunus (L), founder of the Grameen Bank and Bangladeshi Nobel Peace laureate at the Chancellery in Berlin on Monday. They discussed microcredit, creation of Africa Microfinance Fund and social business. Yunus is in Berlin for a World Bank Forum.

Democrats step back from Iraq timelines

AFP, Washington

Democratic congressional leaders were Monday close to dropping their troop withdrawal timelines from an Iraq war budget, in a move, which could ease a standoff with President George W. Bush.

Democratic leaders in the House and Senate were still hammering out details of the final bill with Bush aides, and plan to send legislation to the president this week after a weeks-long showdown over control of the war.

Several congressional sources reported privately that timelines, fiercely resisted by Bush, and the cause of his veto of a previous 124 billion dollar funding bill this month, would likely not be included.

However, the bill, intended to finance the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq until the end of September, would include some benchmarks to force Bush to report on the Iraqi government's progress on security and political issues, sources said.

US urges Myanmar to release Suu Kyi

AFP, Bangkok

The United States yesterday urged military-run Myanmar to release democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners ahead of the junta's review of her detention this week.

Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, who was travelling in neighbouring Thailand, said the junta's detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners was "very damaging" to Myanmar, formerly known as Burma.

Lanka sinks into lawlessness

AFP, Colombo

Cases of murder, abduction, disappearance and intimidation surface almost daily in Sri Lanka as the South Asian nation appears to be sliding into lawlessness and war.

With a truce between the government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in tatters and peace talks long since abandoned, rights workers and the media fear the situation is spiraling out of control.

The government is pressing for a military victory over the Tigers, and a series of tit-for-tat clashes have left heavy casualties on both sides -- as well as discrepancies over the true body count.

But away from the front lines, bloodshed is just as frequent and usually involves civilians, although it is seldom clear who is behind the day-to-day violence.

"The situation is out of control,"

said Sunander Deshapriya of the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a private think tank.

"What we are seeing today is uncertainty. We do not know who is doing what. It is very difficult to find out who is responsible, violence is so widespread," Deshapriya said.

"It is also very difficult to see the situation improving."

Almost 5,000 people have been killed since December 2005, according to the defence ministry.

And more than 700 people are reported to have "disappeared" in the past year in Sri Lanka, where at least 60,000 people have been killed in the Tamil separatist conflict since 1972.

Such a climate of fear has not been seen on the island since 1987-1990, when the army crushed a Marxist Sinhalese uprising at the official cost of 16,750 dead and thousands more missing.

Pak media feel heat as Musharraf digs in

AFP, Islamabad

The increasing vulnerability of military ruler President Pervez Musharraf has been matched by a sudden rise in pressure put on the media in Pakistan, television and press organisations say.

TV stations and newspaper offices have been attacked and journalists assaulted since Musharraf's suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in March sparked a political crisis marked by violent protests.

In the latest incident, a news agency editor was severely beaten on Friday evening, reportedly for criticising General Musharraf's action against Chaudhry, Pakistan's top judge.

Chaudhry has become the focal point of anti-Musharraf feeling in Pakistan, presenting the president with the most serious threat to his rule since he seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999.

Shakil Turabi, editor of the South Asian News Agency, said he was driving home when a gang forced him from his car, physically

attacked him and abused him over the agency's coverage of the Chaudhry crisis.

Turabi was reported to have accused the Pakistani intelligence services of the attack.

The Committee to Protect Journalists condemned the assault, saying that "Pakistani media organizations and individual journalists have come under legal and economic pressure as well as outright assault" in recent weeks.

The premises of private TV station Aaj and the Business Recorder newspaper were attacked during the May 12 riots in Karachi that left 40 dead.

Paris-based Reporters Without Borders blamed the assault on activists from the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a political party that supports Musharraf.

One of Aaj's young news presenters broke down as she saw footage of her own car being torched in the violence. Nadia Mirza exclaimed "I can't do it, I can't do it" during the live broadcast, said Talat Hussain, head of Aaj TV news.

No Hamas leader safe from attack

Warns Israel

AFP, Sderot

Israel warned Hamas yesterday that none of its leaders were safe from attack after a rocket fired by Gaza militants killed a woman in the shell-shocked town of Sderot, where anger mounted over the army's inability to stop the barrage.

In a new air raid on Gaza on Tuesday, the military struck an abandoned building of Hamas's paramilitary force, lightly wounding nine people, witnesses and security sources said.

"There is no one who is in the circle of commanders and leaders in Hamas who is immune from a strike," Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh told public radio.

"The political branch of Hamas gives its green light to those who

fire rockets," he said. "When someone preaches that the state of Israel should be destroyed, he is not in the political echelon, he is a terrorist in a suit."

"Hamas, which is leading the (Palestinian) unity government encourages terrorism and we will not stop hitting it," Defence Minister Amir Peretz told army radio.

The comments came after 35-year-old Shirel Feldman died after a rocket crashed into her car as she was driving in Sderot late Monday, the first deadly rocket strike inside Israel in six months.

Israel has pounded Hamas targets in Gaza for nearly a week in response to a sharp increase of rocket fire from the lawless territory that came amid deadly street battles between Islamist Hamas

and its rival secular Fatah.

The raids have so far killed 11 civilians and 25 militants.

The bloodshed in Gaza has driven the impoverished territory, one of the most densely-populated places on earth, to the brink of civil war and has threatened to torpedo attempts to revive the moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

It has sparked widespread international concern and calls for restraint from both Israelis and Palestinians.

Visiting EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said after meeting with Peretz in Israel on Tuesday: "The violence must stop in all theatres... We need a political dialogue to solve the crisis... This is the only solution."



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of Pakistani opposition parties torch an effigy of President Pervez Musharraf as they shout slogans against pro-Musharraf party Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) during a rally in Lahore Monday.

India looks at UPA report card as it steps into 4th year

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government yesterday completed three years in office with a mixed bag of achievements on the economic and foreign policy fronts while some setbacks on political arena.

With the average economic growth rate in the last three years at around 8.6 percent, the government report card released here Tuesday said performance of key manufacturing sectors like textiles, steel, petrochemicals, automobiles, cement and pharmaceuticals has been impressive.

The progress in economic reforms by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been understandably calibrated as it is critically dependent on support from Left parties which have strong reservations about key measures like opening up banking, insurance, aviation, pension fund and retail sectors to Foreign Direct Investment.

The FDI has gone up from 2.6 billion dollars in 2003-4 to 10.6 billion dollars in the first nine months of 2006-7.

Inflation, which has hovered around 6.5 per cent in recent times, remains an area of concern. The government has taken a number of fiscal and monetary measures like lowering import duty, countering speculation, raising interest rates to contain cash supply to contain inflation.

UPA came to power in May 2004 riding high on a plank of pro-rural and common man agenda against the BJP-led NDA's pro-elite and urban India bias. The UPA government's report card says it has remained focused on its pro-rural flagship programmes. It also points to doubling of budgetary support to sectors like education and health.

One of the major achievements of the UPA government has been enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, accomplishing the difficult task of striking a balance between governance, transparency and civil society's critical scrutiny.

On the foreign policy front, the UPA government has made the landmark civil nuclear deal with the US, which is the centre piece of its achievements. Despite the Left parties' hue and cry against the deal with the US, a detailed bilateral agreement is now being negotiated to implement the deal that seeks to end six decades of technology denial to India. The deal has enormous significance for India's search for energy security, especially clean energy in the face of growing global warming and climate change resulting from use of fossil fuels like oil and gas.

Bilateral ties with China and Pakistan have improved with several confidence building measures having been taken and exchange of high-level visits. Bilateral trade with China has crossed the 25-billion dollar mark and efforts are on to resolve the contentious boundary issue.