

Military option on table against Iran: Israel

AP, Jerusalem

Military action is one of the options in dealing with Iran's nuclear programme, Israel's deputy prime minister said yesterday, after discussing the issue with senior US officials.

For now, sanctions are the best way to go, said the Cabinet minister, Shaul Mofaz. He said Israel and the US agreed to review the effectiveness of sanctions at the end of 2007.

Mofaz met earlier this week with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. At the time, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said he was not aware of any discussion of a deadline for diplomacy.

The United Nations has imposed sanctions twice against Iran for defying international will with its uranium enrichment program. The United States and its allies have signalled their support for harsher

sanctions.

Mofaz told Israel Radio on Saturday that the US and Israel agree on how to deal with Iran.

"The strategy shared by the US and Israel has three elements," Mofaz told Israel Radio. "One is a united international front against the Iranian nuclear program. Secondly, at this time, sanctions are the best way to act against the aspirations of Iran." He said the third element is "a very, very clear signal and a clear statement that all options are on the table." Mofaz added: "I never said there is no military option, and the military option is included in all the options that are on the table, but at this time it's right to use the path of sanctions, and to intensify them."

Iran insists that its program is designed to produce civilian energy. It has resisted Western offers of diplomatic and economic benefits if it would suspend enrichment pro-

grams.

Meanwhile, Israel has put out secret feelers to Syria, but has not received a response, Israel's deputy prime minister confirmed Saturday.

The comments came a day after an Israeli newspaper reported that Israel has told Syrian leaders it is willing to give up the captured Golan Heights as part of a peace deal that would require Syria to distance itself from Iran's virulently anti-Israeli regime.

Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz, speaking Saturday to Israel Radio, confirmed that a message was sent to Syria, but would not describe the content in detail.

"In light of the tensions in the current period, and considering the fact that in the past ... the Syrians sent messages that they want peace, I thought and I still think today that a secret channel is one of the channels for checking intentions

and expectations," Mofaz said.

"And such an approach, in a secret channel, was done. And this was said clearly by the prime minister's office. At this stage, there is no Syrian response, or any comment on this issue."

Mofaz said he considered a back channel to be important, noting that Israeli peace agreements with other Arab countries started in such a way.

He said Syria seemed to be ambivalent about peace talks with Israel. "At the beginning, they (the Syrians) speak about their desire to renew talks and the process, and after messages are sent, there is no answer," he said. At this stage, he said, Israel is not sure what Syria's intentions are.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Tamil women talk to reporters yesterday in Colombo hours after the government bussed them back to the capital after they were forcibly evicted at gun point on June 7.

Tamils trickle back to Colombo after eviction at gun point

AFP, Colombo

Ethnic Tamils trickled back into Sri Lanka's capital Saturday, two days after a court overturned a police drive to evict hundreds of them as part of a crackdown against Tiger rebels.

The government brought men, women and children back from Vavuniya, 260km north of Colombo, after President Mahinda Rajapakse invited them and ordered disciplinary action against the police chief.

"Most people came back for medical treatment or to secure employment to go overseas," said a senior police official who was involved in Thursday's operation to evict Tamils.

He declined to be named saying he was already in trouble with the Supreme Court, which rapped him and issued an order preventing him and other police officers repeating their illegal eviction of Tamil civilians.

The officer, pleading that he was only carrying out orders given by his superiors, said more than 150 people have returned to the city out of more than 350 bussed out on

Thursday in the pre-dawn swoop.

Heavily-armed police and troops forced hundreds of minority Tamils on to buses and took them away.

"We were asked to go back to our villages, but the government dropped us off at a detention camp in Vavuniya," 64-year old woman, Jainthi, a resident from Jaffna said.

Seated in a cramped rented room in Colombo, Jainthi, who gave only her first name for fear of reprisal, said aid workers and government officials at the detention centre gave them food and medical help.

"I have high blood pressure, and they gave me some medicine. I came to Colombo for medical treatment while I waited for embassy papers to go and stay with my son in Canada," she said.

S Subramaniam, who runs the budget Uthayan Rest in Colombo's Wellawatte neighbourhood said police rounded up 27 of his 42 guests and took them to the nearby police station, before sending them to a detention centre in the north.

"Most of my guests were here in transit, waiting to go abroad for jobs, to get married or to attend to their

personal matters. Only six people made use of the government's offer to return," Subramaniam said.

At the nearby the budget Ideal Lodge, 25-year-old Gajan from Jaffna displayed cards with fellow returnees Thulan and Mahesh outside their rented rooms.

Gajan and his 67-year old mother had come to Colombo to get a visa to migrate to Germany.

His mother who declined to be named, had pleaded with policemen not to send them back, because they had very little money left.

"It takes at least eight weeks to get embassy papers sorted out, sometimes its more. So we need the money to stay here. Its expensive to live in Colombo," Gajan's mother said.

Ideal Lodge owner, 62-year old Thambiah said the authorities took away 29 people from his inn, but only 26 returned accepting President Mahinda Rajapakse's invitation on Friday.

al-Qaeda declares holy war on India

AP, Srinagar

A group claiming to represent the al-Qaeda terror network declared a holy war on India over its partial control of the divided Himalayan region of Kashmir, Indian officials said yesterday.

A statement and video was sent Friday to the Current News Service, in Srinagar, the main city of India's Jammu-Kashmir state, in which a masked man standing next to an automatic weapon read the declaration.

"We declare righteous holy war against India on behalf of God the great in which Jammu and Kashmir will be the launch pad for holy war in India," said the statement signed by Abu Abdul Rehman al-Ansari, purportedly the chief of al-Qaeda Fil Hind or al-Qaeda in India.

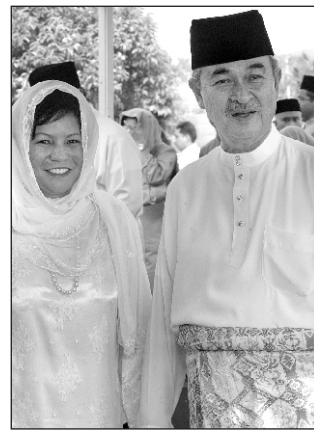


PHOTO: AFP

Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (R) poses for photographs with his newly-wedded wife Jeanne Abdullah, while visiting the grave of Abdullah's first wife, Endon Mahmood, in Putrajaya, near Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Malaysian PM ties the knot again

AFP, Putrajaya

Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi remarried behind closed doors yesterday before heading straight to the cemetery to pay respects to his late first wife.

Aides confirmed Abdullah, 67, had exchanged rings with 53-year-old Jeanne Abdullah, his petite former sister-in-law, in a private ceremony for close family at his residence here.

The family was then due to visit the nearby grave of Abdullah's first wife, Endon, who died of breast cancer in October 2005.

A small crowd of well-wishers braved scorching afternoon temperatures to wait outside Abdullah's Seri Perdana residence here, excitedly taking pictures and waiting for a first glimpse of the new couple.

Atlantis heads for ISS

AFP, Cape Canaveral

The US space shuttle Atlantis headed for the International Space Station early Saturday on this year's first mission, aimed at boosting the station's power-generating capacity.

The shuttle rocketed into a clear blue sky late Friday and reached orbit less than nine minutes after liftoff.

"It's a very good day for Nasa and this nation's space programme," said Rex Geveden, Nasa associate administrator for space operations, speaking at a press conference after the blastoff.

"What a great way to start the year and this mission," gushed shuttle launch director Mike Leinbach. "It's a great launch, it's the first step in a very challenging mission."

A team of Nasa specialists studied the launch video, "and the preliminary word is that we lost no foam off, at least in the preliminary report," said shuttle programme manager Wayne Hale.

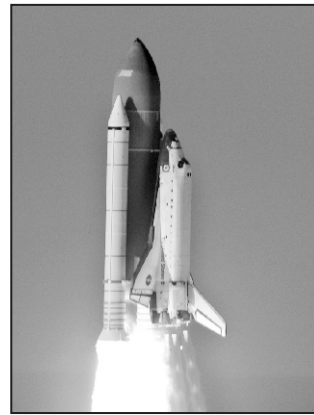


PHOTO: AFP

The US space shuttle Atlantis lifts off Friday at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. The shuttle is on an 11-day mission to the International Space Station.



PHOTO: AFP

Dr Muhammad Yunus (R), founder of the Grameen Bank and Nobel Peace laureate 2006 speaks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel about the world economy and the effects of globalisation on the stage of the 31st German Protestant Church Day (Kirchentag) yesterday in Cologne.

3 Lebanon soldiers killed in camp clashes

AFP, Nahr al-Bared

Three Lebanese soldiers were killed yesterday in new clashes with Islamist militants holed up in a Palestinian refugee camp as mediators announced a setback to efforts to broker a peaceful end to the 21-day siege.

"Three of our soldiers were killed and a dozen wounded by Fatah al-Islam snipers," an army spokesman said, bringing the death toll from three weeks of fighting between Islamists and the army to 112, 51 of them soldiers.

The unrest, which has also seen at least eight bomb or grenade attacks in and around the capital, is by far Lebanon's deadliest internal strife since the 1975-90 civil war.

The resulting insecurity has prompted many schools to start their summer holidays early and has further dented an economy still reeling from last year's devastating war with Israel.

A military commander outside the besieged Nahr al-Bared refugee camp said four of the wounded soldiers were in a critical condition.

He said that the soldiers had met fierce resistance when they

attempted to capture militant positions on the northeastern outskirts of the camp.

"Our soldiers are fighting from high-rise to high-rise but are encountering fierce resistance from the extremists who have booby-trapped the buildings," the officer said, asking not to be identified.

"The army is advancing slowly but surely," he added.

An AFP correspondent heard heavy shelling of the tower blocks where the fighters of fringe militant group Fatah al-Islam are dug in.

Fatah al-Islam spokesman Shahine Shahine said the bombardment had been cover for a ground assault on militant positions on the camp's outskirts. "The assault was repulsed," he added.

The fighting came as a group of Muslim clerics that has been shuttling between the two sides in a bid to broker a peaceful end to the siege was due to meet army chief Michel Suleiman.

The mediators said they had suffered a setback on Friday when they were only able to see Shahine not more senior Fatah al-Islam leaders.

Attacks kill 11 cops in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Attacks across Afghanistan left 11 policemen and a dozen Taliban fighters dead, authorities said Saturday as the US military announced it had killed "several" Taliban and al-Qaeda men.

In one incident, a group of Taliban fighters attacked a town in the southern province of Kandahar late Friday, sparking a battle that killed 12 of the rebels and five policemen, the provincial police chief said.

Another three policemen were wounded in the attack on the district headquarters in the small town of Ghorak, police chief Ismatullah Alizai said.

Elsewhere in Kandahar -- the 1990s birthplace of the hardcore Taliban movement -- rebel fighters ambushed a police vehicle and attacked it with rocket-propelled grenades and gunfire early Saturday, Alizai said.

"Five police were killed and four more wounded," he said.

A spokesman for the Taliban confirmed that his group was behind both attacks. The hardliners were in government until 2001 and are now waging an insurgency.

In the province of Laghman, adjacent to Kabul, a remote-controlled bomb killed a policeman

on patrol late Friday, a governor's spokesman said.

Three others were hurt in the blast in the volatile Alishing district, about 80km northeast of the capital, said the spokesman, named only as Nizamuddin.

The Afghan army arrested separately Thursday a man they said was a Taliban commander who had planned attacks and explosions in the same district, Nizamuddin said.

The US-led coalition announced that several al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters were killed in a gun battle early Saturday in the southern province of Zabul.

Afghan and foreign soldiers had gone to two compounds on intelligence that they housed fighters of the allied Islamist movements, it said in a statement.

As they approached, they were shot at with small arms, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades from a hillside.

A two-hour battle followed and resulted in "several al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters killed and five militants detained," it said.

A cache of weapons was discovered and destroyed. No civilians were injured in the operation, the counter-terrorism force said.

India offers new proposal in US nuclear talks

AFP, New Delhi

India has proposed to set up a special unit to reprocess spent atomic fuel under international safeguards in a bid to close a major civilian nuclear deal with Washington, a report said Friday.

The proposal was put forth by Indian officials in a meeting with their American counterparts in Germany on the sidelines of the Group of Eight summit, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

It could end the impasse in talks to conclude the India-US nuclear agreement that aims to give New Delhi access to previously forbidden atomic technology to generate power for its booming economy, the report said.

Separately, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh held talks with US President George W. Bush also in Heiligendamm, Singh's spokesman Sanjaya Baru said.

"The conversation was positive," he said after the talks.

India and the United States have been discussing the fine print of the energy accord that intends to reverse three decades of US sanctions on nuclear trade with India, even though New Delhi has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and tested nuclear weapons in 1998.

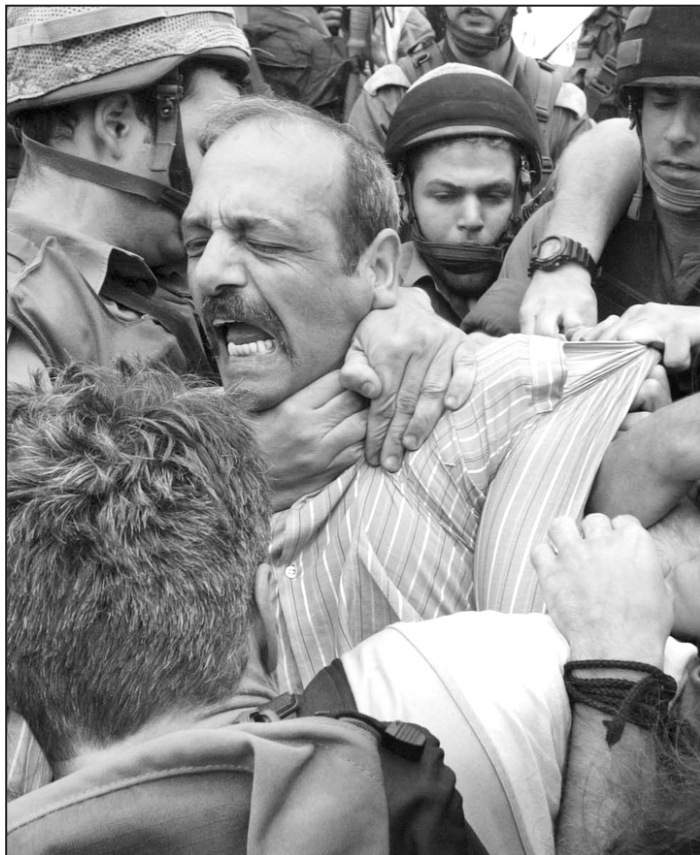


PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian activist scuffles with Israeli soldiers during a demonstration against the Israeli separation wall at Umm Salamuna village south of the West Bank town of Bethlehem on Friday. The barrier is a combination of concrete walls and wire fences running more than 650 kilometres (400 miles) north to south that Israel says is necessary to protect itself from Palestinian militants.

Pope discusses 'worrying' Iraq situation with Bush

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI yesterday discussed the "worrying situation in Iraq" with visiting US President George W Bush, the Vatican said.

"The worrying situation in Iraq and the critical situation of the Christian community there" were among issues discussed along with "the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian question and Lebanon," the Holy See said in a statement.

A Catholic Chaldean priest and three deacons were murdered last Sunday in northern Iraq, followed three days later by the kidnapping of another priest and five of his parishioners.

Benedict's right-hand man Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone lamented in a recent interview "the dramatic situation for Iraqi Christians, which continues to get worse."

The Chaldean Catholic church is an autonomous Eastern rite church with upwards of 700,000 followers that maintains full communion with the Vatican.

Benedict said "it was hoped, once more, for 'regional' and 'negotiated' solutions to the conflicts and crises afflicting the (Middle East) region," the Vatican statement said, describing the half-hour talks with Bush as "cordial."

G8 spurs hope for climate accord

AFP, Heiligendamm

A Group of Eight accord on cutting dangerous greenhouse gas emissions has breathed new life into the search for a follow-up accord on global warming spearheaded by the UN.

But emerging nations are insisting that any new pact against global warming allow them the "flexibility" they need to keep their economies growing.

After weeks of wrangling in the run-up to the summit in this Baltic Sea resort, leaders of the world's wealthiest countries inked a declaration setting the goal of "substantial" cuts in global heat-trapping emissions and vowing to "seriously consider" Europe's aim of halving this pollution by 2050.

Although it was not binding, the deal did meet one goal German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the summit's host, had set of assuring that the United Nations would retain

the upper hand to manage the negotiations.

The accord paved the way for talks beginning in Bali, Indonesia in December to find a successor to the UN-backed Kyoto Protocol on capping heat-trapping carbon emissions that expires in 2012.

"There is still a lot of work to do," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said.

"But one of the main outcomes of the summit is that the UN is the umbrella under which climate protection will be negotiated."

Europeans in particular had feared that US President George W. Bush's refusal to ratify Kyoto and his initiative announced last week to seek a commitment from up to 14 of the world's other top polluters to a climate change pact would undermine the UN's leadership of the process.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the G8 declaration during a stop in Heiligendamm and

announced a "high-level meeting" in September in New York to gain momentum for the road to Bali.

"What we are desperately in need of this time is political will at the leaders' level to make significant emissions reductions and to help countries adapt to climate change," he said.

"On both, we'll need leadership by the G8 countries. The outcome of this summit is an important first step."

Ban spoke to leaders of five emerging nations including China and India -- two countries Bush has insisted must join any binding emissions cuts -- who were invited to take part in the summit.

The countries issued their own declaration Friday saying they would play their part to limit climate change. But they said any global accord must allow them to continue their rapid economic expansion.