

Russian troops enter South Ossetia after Georgian attack

Tbilisi seeks help to stop aggression: FM

AFP, Megreksis/London

A Russian army convoy entered South Ossetia yesterday and Russian planes attacked a Georgian military base, reports said, after Georgian forces pounded the capital of the breakaway province and warned of "war" if Russia intervened.

Amid spiralling tensions, Moscow threatened retaliation after Russian forces in the beleaguered city of Tskhinvali were reported killed in a night-time Georgian artillery and air barrage.

Dozens of Russian tanks and military vehicles headed for the four-kilometre (2.5 mile) Roki tunnel, which leads into South Ossetia, an AFP reporter at the frontiers said.

Russia's three main news agencies said a convoy had crossed into South Ossetia.

"We cannot allow the deaths of four countrymen to go unpunished. The

guilty parties will receive the punishment they deserve," Russia President Dmitry Medvedev said earlier.

Georgia's National Security Council warned however that there would be "a state of war" between the two countries if the Russian military convoy entered the rebel region, which gets strong backing from Moscow.

Georgia is appealing to world leaders to press Moscow to stop "direct military aggression" on its territory, Georgia's Foreign Minister Ekaterine Tkeshelashvili said Friday.

"We will try to appeal to the international community... our partners, so that they put the clear message to the Russian Federation," she told BBC World television, calling it "the last chance to get peace here".

She added: "The Russian Federation has to be stopped in its attempts to get really directly involved in an aggressive military

operation in Georgia."

Russian aircraft meanwhile launched an attack on a military base near Tbilisi, Georgian interior ministry spokesman Shota Utashvili told AFP.

Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili warned of "large-scale military intervention" and ordered a mass mobilisation.

He said his country's operation had been successful and "most of South Ossetia's territory is liberated and is controlled by Georgia."

Georgia's Foreign Minister Ekaterine Tkeshelashvili told the BBC that Tbilisi was appealing to world leaders to press Moscow to stop "direct military aggression" on its territory.

South Ossetia broke from Georgia in the early 1990s and has since been a constant source of friction between Georgia and Russia. The Georgian government accuses Moscow of wanting to take over South Ossetia.

People are sheltering in their basements with no electricity or access to communications, she added.

At least 15 civilians were killed in the fighting and Georgian shelling and air raids on Tskhinvali, South Ossetian officials said.

A Georgian officer said there were also wounded and dead among the Georgian military but declined to give figures.

The Russian military said Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali had been killed when Georgian shells hit their barracks, Russia's Interfax news agency reported.

The International Committee of the Red Cross called for a "humanitarian corridor" to be opened in South Ossetia to allow ambulances to evacuate the wounded.

"Ambulances cannot move, hospitals are reported to be overflowing, surgery is taking place in corridors," a spokeswoman told journalists in Geneva.

People are sheltering in their basements with no electricity or access to communications, she added.



PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP
Israeli soldiers keep watch as Palestinian children join foreign and Israeli demonstrators during a protest against the Israel's controversial separation barrier yesterday in the West Bank village of Maasarah, near the biblical town of Bethlehem.

Deal close on plan for US troops to leave

Say Iraqis

AP, Baghdad

Iraq and the US are near an agreement on all American combat troops leaving Iraq by October 2010, with the last soldiers out three years after that, two Iraqi officials told The Associated Press on Thursday. US officials, however, insisted no dates had been agreed.

The proposed agreement calls for Americans to hand over parts of Baghdad's Green Zone, where the US Embassy is located to the Iraqis by the end of 2008. It would also remove US forces from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, according to the two senior officials, both close to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and familiar with the negotiations.

The officials, who spoke separately on condition of anonymity because the talks are ongoing, said all US combat troops would leave Iraq by October 2010, with the remaining support personnel gone

"around 2013." The schedule could be amended if both sides agree a face-saving escape clause that would extend the presence of US forces if security conditions warrant.

US acceptance even tentatively of a specific timeline would represent a dramatic reversal of American policy in place since the war began in March 2003.

Both Iraqi and American officials agreed that the deal is not final and that a major unresolved issue is the US demand for immunity for US soldiers from prosecution under Iraqi law.

Throughout the conflict, President Bush steadfastly refused to accept any timetable for bringing US troops home. Last month, however, Bush and al-Maliki agreed to set a "general time horizon" for ending the US mission.

Bush's shift to a timeline was seen as a move to speed agreement on a security pact governing the US

military presence in Iraq after the UN mandate expires at the end of the year.

Iraq's Shia-led government has been holding firm for some sort of withdrawal schedule, a move the Iraqis said was essential to win parliamentary approval.

The US Embassy in Baghdad declined to comment on details of the talks. Embassy spokeswoman Mirembe Nangtong said the negotiations were taking place "in a constructive spirit" based on respect for Iraqi sovereignty.

In Washington, US officials acknowledged that some progress has been made on the timelines for troop withdrawals but that the immunity issue remained a huge problem. One senior US official close to the discussion said no dates have been agreed upon.

They spoke on condition of anonymity because the negotiations have not been finished.



PHOTO: AFP
Two-year-old Bengal tiger cubs Riley and Hope, play with a ball in their cage at the Al-Zawraa zoo in Baghdad yesterday. Two rare Bengal tigers were presented to Baghdad's Al-Zawraa zoo Friday by a private US conservation group, in a move deeply symbolic of American efforts to help restore the animal park.

US-bred Bengal tigers given to Baghdad zoo

AFP, Baghdad

Two rare Bengal tigers were presented to Baghdad's Al-Zawraa zoo yesterday by a private US conservation group, in a move deeply symbolic of American efforts to help restore the animal park.

The two-year-old, 150-pound (68-kilo) cubs, named Riley, a male, and Hope, a female, cost \$30,000 dollars each to ship and arrived four days ago after a wildlife conservation centre in North Carolina agreed to donate the US-bred animals.

"We're thrilled to welcome these two beautiful animals to our family at the Baghdad zoo," director Adel Salman Mousa said, adding that he hoped their arrival would help renew the zoo after years of hard times.

The private agreement between the Conservators' Centre and the zoo was arranged with the help of the US army.

The Conservators' Centre is proud to contribute these tigers toward the restoration of the Baghdad zoo and the important education work it will engage in over the next decade," Mindy Stinner, executive director of the centre, said in a statement.

New fighting kills 21 combatants in Lanka

AP, AFP, Colombo

Fresh fighting between government forces and Tamil Tiger separatists across Sri Lanka's embattled north killed 17 rebels and four soldiers, the military said yesterday.

Separately, Tamil rebels accused government forces of firing artillery shells into a hospital deep in rebel territory overnight, killing one infant and wounding 16 people. The military denied the claim.

Fighting has escalated on this Indian Ocean island in recent months with the government intensifying its campaign against the rebels' de facto state in the north, promising to crush them by the end of the year.

The latest clashes broke out Thursday along the front lines in the Vavuniya and Welioya regions, said military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara.

He said army troops attacked and captured a rebel bunker in Welioya, where separate clashes

killed 15 rebels and four soldiers. In nearby Vavuniya district, fighting killed two rebels and wounded two soldiers.

Artillery shells fired by the army hit a hospital overnight killing an 18-month-old baby and wounding 16 people, the rebels said in an emailed statement.

Security forces hit the Mullaitivu area early Friday using artillery, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said.

"Indiscriminate and widespread shelling by the Sri Lanka army... left a baby dead and 16 people injured," the rebels said in a rare statement on casualties.

Earlier at least 23 Tamil Tiger rebels and two soldiers have been killed in the latest fighting in Sri Lanka's north, the defence ministry said Thursday.

Government troops kept up attacks against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Mullaitivu, Wel Oya and Vavuniya, with 75 rebels and three soldiers also wounded during Wednesday's clashes.

Security forces and militants exchanged fire throughout the day Friday as the operation continued against militants in Bajaur region, he added.

Earlier 10 soldiers and 25 rebels

37 killed in Pakistani tribal area fighting

AFP, Khar

At least seven Pakistani troops and 30 militants have been killed in two days of clashes in a Pakistani tribal area bordering Afghanistan, the army said yesterday.

Helicopter gunships pounded militant positions Friday as fierce gunbattles resumed between Taliban rebels and troops in the semi-autonomous Bajaur tribal district, known hideout for Taliban and al-Qaeda rebels.

"Security forces are responding with helicopters, artillery and mortar fire, but there were no immediate reports about casualties," he said.

Maj Gen Athar Abbas confirmed the offensive, saying army helicopters were supporting paramilitary ground troops.

Residents in Bajaur's main town of Khar reported seeing helicopter gunships flying overhead and heard the sound of mortar fire.

Pakistani Taliban spokesman Maulvi Umar claimed only two militants were killed this week. The

clashes began on Wednesday when hundreds of militants attacked a security checkpoint in Loisam, which paramilitary troops had reoccupied after a period of several months.

Loisam lies on the strategically important road leading towards the main northwestern city of Peshawar.

Taliban militants in Bajaur also beheaded two men and shot dead a third accusing them of spying on the rebels, officials and witnesses said Friday.

The bodies of the three men were found dumped by a road with notes saying "these people were spying on Taliban movement fighters," a local government official told AFP.

Pakistan is under mounting international pressure to crack down on militants in the northwest and the tribal zone amid a surge in cross-border rebel attacks on international forces in Afghanistan.

UNSC renews mandate of UN mission in Iraq

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council voted unanimously Thursday to renew for one year the mandate of the UN mission for Iraq.

It adopted Resolution 1830, sponsored by Britain, Italy and the United States, which also called on the Iraqi government and other member states to continue to provide security and logistical support to the UN mission in Iraq.

The 15-member body extended the mandate of the 767-strong UN mission (UNAMI) for 12 months from Thursday and expressed its intention to review the mandate "in 12 months or sooner, if requested by the government of Iraq."

"This is a good day for Iraq," said Belgium's UN Ambassador Jan Grauls, who chairs the council this month. "This shows the support of the international community for what they are doing."

"The Iraqi government is willing to protect the UN (and) has expressed readiness to contribute financially to the building of the new UN headquarters (in Baghdad)," he added.



PHOTO: AFP
Malaysian Chinese newly wed couples pose during a mass wedding ceremony group photo at a temple in Klang outside Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Some 238 Chinese couples chose to get married in a mass wedding on 08/08/08 as the number eight is believed to be lucky according to Chinese tradition.

Police question Israeli PM again in graft probe

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli police questioned Prime Minister Ehud Olmert yesterday for the second time since he announced he would resign after his centrist Kadima party chooses a new leader in September.

Anti-fraud officers were at Olmert's official residence in Jerusalem to conduct the interview, the fifth since claims the premier accepted illegal funds from a wealthy US financier emerged in May.

Dogged by six police investigations over alleged wrongdoing in the years before he took office in 2006, Olmert, 62, announced last week he would step down after Kadima party holds a leadership election on September 17.

Public radio said Friday's questioning would likely focus on the graft allegations as well as claims of influence peddling.

On Thursday, police questioned a former aide to Olmert over the influence peddling allegations that date back to the time when Olmert was trade and industry minister between 2003 and 2006.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Musharraf impeachment unlikely to dampen US 'war on terror'

AFP, Washington

chief in November last year, experts said his possible removal would have little impact on the counterterrorism campaign.

"I don't think Musharraf is indispensable, neither to the war on terror nor Pakistan's role in the war on terror," said Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer now with the Washington-based Brookings Institution.

Since September 11, 2001, when al-Qaeda attacked the United States, the terror network's "safe haven and sanctuary in Pakistan grew enormously under General Musharraf's watch," he pointed out.

"It came much more dangerous during the years of his military dictatorship, so I don't think he can be seen as critical" to Washington now, Riedel said.

"He said that while there was still tremendous sympathy for Musharraf in the White House, I don't think that extends beyond that to Congress."

Musharraf should just resign, Riedel said.

"I think that Pakistan needs now to focus on the very many different difficulties it faces -- politically and

February elections were successful and appeared committed to keeping the army out of politics.

"The US should stay as removed as possible from the political machinations in Pakistan while urging all sides to find a peaceful resolution to the political crisis that strengthens the democratic institutions of the country and prevents a return to military rule," said Curtis, now with the Washington-based Heritage Foundation.

US officials are reportedly concerned that the government of Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani lacks control over the military or the powerful intelligence service, ISI, which has been linked to a July suicide bombing of the Indian embassy in Afghanistan. Lieutenant General David McKiernan, the top US commander in Afghanistan, Thursday publicly accused the ISI of "some complicity" with militant groups fomenting violence in Afghanistan.

While Gilani has agreed to investigate the allegations against the ISI, Musharraf appears to take a more defiant position, viewing the allegations as a US conspiracy against Pakistan, noted Curtis.