

UNSC fails to agree on call for truce

AFP, United Nations

UN Security Council efforts to end fighting in the breakaway Georgian enclave of South Ossetia were deadlocked yesterday after envoys failed to agree on a call for a truce between Russia and Georgia.

"We have come to the conclusion that it will be very difficult if not impossible to find common ground on a statement," Belgian ambassador Jan Grauls, the council chair this month, told reporters after informal closed-door consultations Saturday.

The collapse marked the third time the Security Council has failed to agree on the Belgian-drafted statement that would urge the warring sides to "show restraint and to refrain from any further acts of violence or force."

Late Saturday, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called for a negotiated resolution of the conflict.

The secretary-general urges all parties to immediately end hostilities and to engage, without delay, in negotiations to achieve a peaceful settlement," said a statement issued by Ban's office.

Evacuation gathers pace for foreigners in Georgia: Warsaw

AFP, Warsaw

Hundreds of foreign nationals caught up in the Georgian conflict have begun to be evacuated into neighbouring Armenia and Turkey, the Polish foreign ministry announced.

A Polish government aircraft was Sunday on its way to Yerevan -- the capital of Georgia's southern neighbour Armenia -- to collect around 180 evacuees waiting there after completing a 260 kilometre (160-mile) crossing by coach from the Polish embassy in Tbilisi.

Most are Poles or people of Polish origin, although that figure includes an unspecified number of Czech Republic and Estonian nationals, a consular official told reporters.

There are around 300 Poles in Georgia, many just inside the

border with Turkey in the southern city of Batumi, according to a foreign ministry count.

After taking the evacuees to Warsaw Sunday evening, the aircraft will return to the Turkish Black Sea city of Trabzon, about 500 kilometres due west, where it will pick up another 80 Poles as well as other European Union citizens, the official added.

The air ferry will then return to Yerevan, with further evacuations expected.

Between 130 and 140 of 200 Italian nationals known to be working in Georgia will also be taken into Armenia, news agency ANSA cited Italian official Pierluigi Schettino as saying from Georgia.

Britain's Foreign Office also urged its nationals in Georgia on non-urgent business to "leave as soon as possible," strengthening

advice given Saturday similar to a travel warning issued by Switzerland.

Germany's foreign ministry meanwhile warned its citizens that there had been "bombing of strategic sites such as railways, ports and military installations outside the conflict areas proper."

Major regional airlines, Turkish Airlines and Austrian Airways, each suspended flights in and out of Tbilisi and Batumi on Sunday, rerouting passengers to Trabzon.

An Austrian Airways spokesman said Sunday and Monday's flights were cancelled, with a decision regarding subsequent schedules to follow.

Turkish news agency Anatolia quoted a Turkish Airlines spokesman as saying its first cancelled flight was due to leave on Saturday evening.



Georgians flee on a tractor in South Ossetia near the village of Troiavi yesterday. Russian troops are heading towards the Georgian town of Gori, where Georgian forces are positioned to defend, Georgia's national security council chief Alexander Lomakidze said Sunday.

Israel mulls halting arms shipments to Georgia

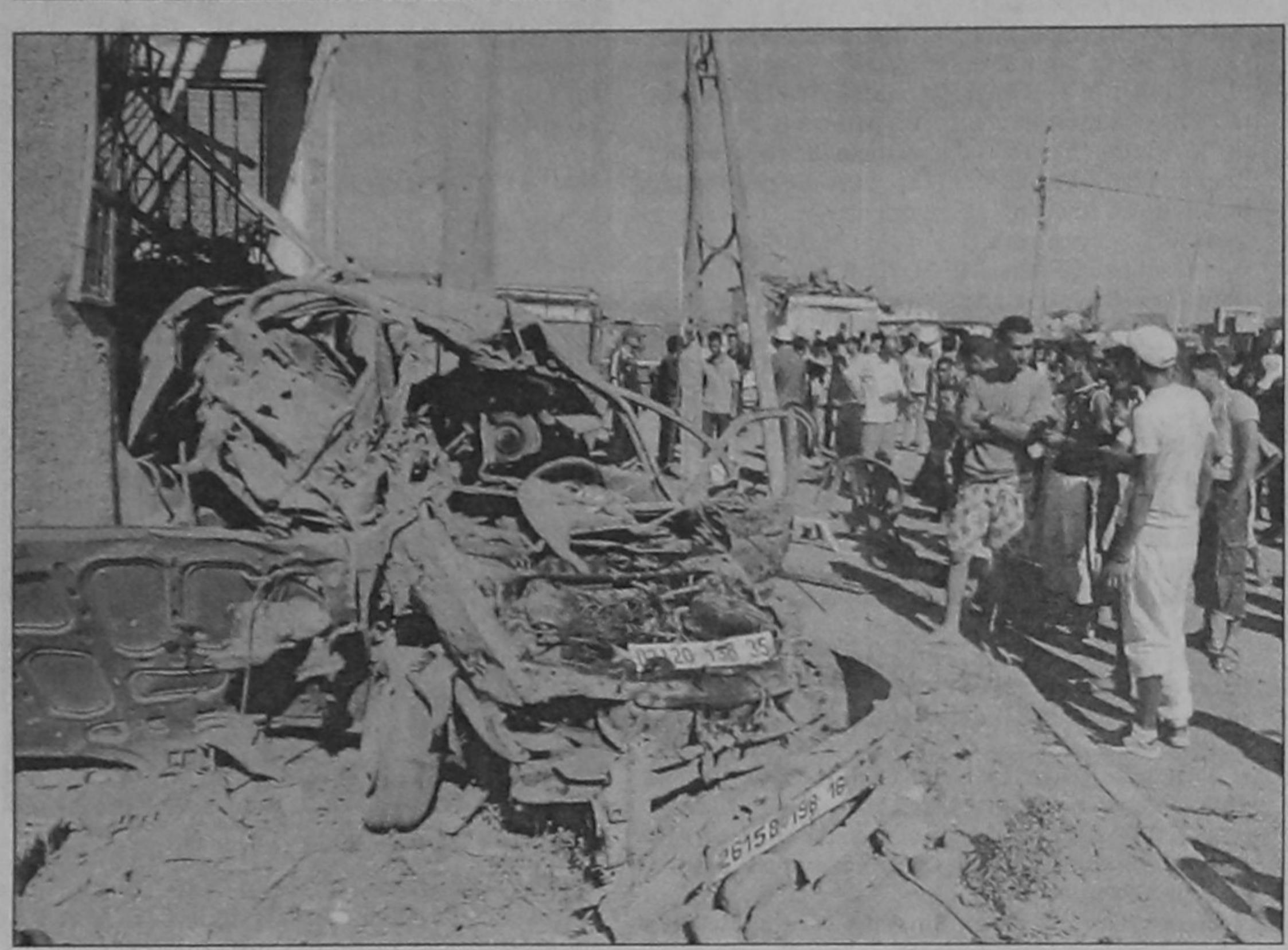
AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli foreign ministry has recommended a complete halt to the sale of arms to Georgia for fear of spurring Russia to increase its support of Syria and Iran, an Israeli newspaper reported yesterday.

The Haaretz newspaper quoted an unnamed senior official as saying that Israel would try to remain neutral as Russia and Georgia drift towards all-out war over the fate of the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

"Israel needs to be very careful and sensitive these days," the official said. "The Russians are selling many arms to Iran and Syria and there is no need to offer them an excuse to sell even more advanced weapons."

Israel considers Iran its main strategic threat because of that country's accelerating nuclear programme, and has long pushed for stronger international sanctions against Tehran.



Algerians stand at the site of a suicide bomb blast outside a police station in Zemmouri el-Bahri, 70 km east of the Algerian capital Algiers yesterday. A suicide bomber rammed a van full of explosives into a police post killing seven people and injuring 19 others overnight.

Immediate withdrawal of N Korea from terror list unlikely: US

AFP, Beijing

The United States said yesterday it was unlikely North Korea would be immediately taken off the US list of countries that sponsor terrorism.

US President George W Bush began a process in June of taking North Korea off the blacklist, and said then it could happen in 45 days, which is Monday.

"At this point, I think, it is reasonable to say that tomorrow probably will come and go without that happening," said Dennis Wilder, National Security Council senior director for Asian affairs, who is in Beijing with Bush.

Bush notified Congress of his intent to delist North Korea immediately after he gave a long-awaited declaration of the nuclear programmes it had spent decades developing.

However the United States had to be satisfied that the declaration was complete and true for the delisting to occur, and the verification process has not proceeded as quickly as US officials had originally indicated it would.

Suicide bomber kills 7 in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

A suicide bomber rammed a van full of explosives into a police post in eastern Algeria, killing seven people and injuring 19 others overnight, Algerian public radio reported yesterday.

The attack happened at Zemmouri el-Bahri, a popular beach with holidaymakers, particularly in the summer heatwave, near Boumerdes, east of the capital Algiers.

It came less than a week after a suicide attack on a police station at Tizi Ouzou, in the eastern Kabylie region, wounded 25 people.

Responsibility for the August 3 attack was claimed by Al-Qaeda's North African branch.

The group also claimed an attack on July 23, in which police said a suicide bomber on a motorcycle blew himself up and injured 13 Algerian soldiers in Lakhdaria, also east of Algiers.

Nevertheless, Wilder said the United States was still "satisfied" with what North Korea had presented so far.

"So these discussions will continue," he said.

China is another key player in the disarmament process because it is one of North Korea's closest allies.

We need to have a strong verification regime before we can take action on removing the North Koreans from the state sponsors of terrorism list," he said.

Speaking after Bush held talks with Chinese President Hu Jintao on Sunday, Wilder made similar remarks.

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Armed groups in Boumerdes, neighbouring the mountainous wooded region of Kabylie, remain the most active in Algeria. Unofficial sources estimate them to number 300 to 400 armed militants.

Zimbabwe rivals close in on deal Mbeki holds crisis talks

AFP, Harare

South African President Thabo Mbeki held talks with Zimbabwe's political rivals yesterday as they edged closer to a power-sharing deal following Robert Mugabe's widely condemned re-election.

Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe arrived at the hotel in central Harare where the meetings were to occur, making no comment as he followed a red carpet that led to an elevator inside.

Government ministers greeted the smiling 84-year-old leader as his motorcade pulled up.

Opposition chief Morgan Tsvangirai had earlier arrived at the hotel, but left shortly afterward without commenting. Negotiators for his party exited after he did.

Asked whether there was any progress, opposition number two Tendai Biti, the party's chief negotiator, nodded yes and told reporters outside the Rainbow Towers hotel: "I think we all need to pray."

Mbeki, the mediator for the Zimbabwe talks, arrived in Harare late Saturday following more than two weeks of negotiations in South Africa in a bid to reach a power-sharing deal to resolve the country's political crisis.

The South African leader was to hold talks with Mugabe, opposition Movement for Democratic Change chief Tsvangirai and the head of a smaller MDC faction, Arthur Mutambara, during his one-day visit.

His trip comes amid signs the rivals were nearing a deal in the negotiations, with both Mbeki's government and Mugabe reporting progress in recent days.

It is also ahead of Zimbabwe's Heroes' Day on Monday in honour of those who died in the guerrilla war that led to the country's independence and a summit of southern African heads of state next weekend in Johannesburg.

Zimbabwean state media reported Sunday that negotiators had reached agreement on key issues and Mbeki's meetings on Sunday would focus on hammering out details of a new government.

"Issues with the structure and scope of the new government are likely to take centre stage," The Sunday Mail newspaper said.

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Georgia takes on impossible odds in battle against Russia

AFP, Paris

Georgia's army of less than 25,000 men is confronting a Russian force, which can count on more than one million troops -- and experts say

they are detained.

"We asked the local authorities to release them. We haven't got any reply so far," local NLD leader Thein Hlaing told AFP on Sunday.

"We do not know where they were detained since their arrest. Their family members worry for them very much."

Aung San Suu Kyi is known as "The Lady" throughout Myanmar, where she remains a potent symbol

of the struggle to end military rule despite being largely silenced by the ruling generals.

Nyan Win said he did not have any details of what was discussed with the lawyer, although the NLD has lodged an appeal against the recent one-year extension of their leader's house arrest.

The meeting came a day after the new United Nations human rights envoy for Myanmar, Tomas Ojea Quintana, left the country after his first visit.

It also came as the junta rounded up 48 activists on Friday as they marched in western

spending in July that will take the annual budget to almost one billion dollars.

Russia's military spending has also mushroomed in recent years as the government seeks to rejuvenate the antiquated services, and a 16 percent increase this year took the defence budget to 956 billion rubles, or 40 billion dollars.

There are about 19,000 troops in Georgia's army, 2,000 in the air force -- with only Soviet-era jets -- and 1,350 in the navy with its small fleet of second-hand vessels.

Russia's military is giant by comparison with more than one million permanent troops with a pool of about 20 million men aged between 16 and 49 who could be called up, according to US estimates.

Russia has 395,000 men in its ground army, including 190,000 conscripts, with 22,000 armoured vehicles. Its air force has 170,000 men and an estimated 1,700 fighter planes.

Experts said Georgia was taking on impossible odds against Russia.

9 killed in Iraq attacks

AFP, Baghdad

A spate of bomb attacks across Iraq yesterday targeting a bank, a town hall and a string of military patrols killed at least nine people and wounded more than 50, security and hospital officials said.

Four military patrols came under attack in succession in Baghdad, they said.

In Khilani, in the centre of the embattled Iraqi capital, a car bomb exploded as a military patrol escorting a finance ministry convoy passed by, killing an Iraqi soldier and two civilians, a security official said.

At least nine people were injured in the attack, among them four soldiers.

At Maidan, on the southern outskirts of Baghdad, an Iraqi soldier was killed and five others injured when their patrol was hit by a car bomb, the official said.

In the Shia enclave of Kadhimiyah in northwestern Baghdad, a roadside bomb as a joint Iraqi-US military patrol passed by, killing three soldiers, the official said, without providing their nationalities.

The US military did not immediately confirm the attack.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Russia marks strategic red line with Georgia fight

AFP, Moscow

Georgian attempt to grab back either rebel province by force to go unanswered -- said Russia's response was "legitimate" and needed.

"The war was inevitable," commented Pavel Felgenhauer, an independent military analyst in Moscow.

"There are people in Georgia who had for some time been advancing this move to re-take control of South Ossetia by force, he said.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili "sometimes goes overboard, and he gave the OK for this attempt."

Russia's armed forces, however, though far larger than those of Georgia, face real limits in pursuing military objectives there -- and it remains unclear how heavy a political price Moscow is willing to pay for doing so.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin -- who as president warned that Moscow would not allow any

a pretext to back up its oft-stated policy rhetoric with concrete action, though it was far from clear that this action would ultimately prove successful.

"Russia can deploy only a small fraction of its enormous military in this small place," he said, referring to the province of South Ossetia where fighting between Russian and Georgian troops has raged since Thursday.

"There is only one road, several metres (yards) wide, between Russia and South Ossetia. It's a question of logistics."

Sergel Markov, a political analyst whose views tend to be aligned with Kremlin policy, said Georgia's effort to take control of South Ossetia by military means left Moscow with no choice but to respond in kind.

"Sakashvili put Russia in a very difficult situation," Markov said.

Though it was Georgia that launched the initial attack on South Ossetia and then withdrew under heavy Russian fire, it is also Georgia -- whose quest to join Nato, supported by the United States, rankles the Kremlin -- that is being portrayed as the victim in the conflict, analysts said.

"It would have been insane for Sakashvili to count on direct Western military support," said independent defence analyst Alexander Golts.

"But what he has undoubtedly succeeded in is that the whole world now sees Russia as a military aggressor."

Confirming that thesis, the White House described Russia's actions in South Ossetia as a "disproportionate and dangerous escalation" that would have a "significant long term impact" on US-Russian relations if it continued.

PHOTO: AFP

PHOTO: AFP