

Diplomatic drive mounts to end Georgia-Russia clash

AFP, Tbilisi

Diplomatic efforts to stop fighting in Georgia mounted yesterday with French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and Finnish counterpart Alexander Stubb due in Moscow after crisis talks in Tbilisi.

The two European Union ministers were in the Georgian capital discussing a peace plan to be pursued by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was expected in Moscow on Tuesday for talks with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

Kouchner met late Sunday with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to push the EU plan, which calls for an immediate ceasefire, medical access to victims, controlled withdrawals of troops on both sides and eventual political talks.

Meanwhile the United States, a key ally of Saakashvili's, increased pressure on Moscow to end its attacks on Georgia.

President George W. Bush said in Beijing that Moscow's actions were "disproportionate" and condemned Russian bombing outside the separatist region of South Ossetia.

Kouchner, speaking to RTL French radio, said Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili had responded positively to EU proposals and that the French president's talks in Moscow would aim to "finalise our efforts."

France is the current holder of the European Union's rotating presidency.

"We need peace to return so that the civilian population is protected," Kouchner said. "That is all. From that point of view, President Saakashvili has accepted almost all the proposals we made to him."

However Stubb said it was too early to be optimistic about a deal to end fighting.

"We are not yet at (that) stage... We are doing our best and we will

see what comes out today, tomorrow and at the EU ministers' meetings on Wednesday," said Stubb, who currently chairs the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The Georgian president has said his country's existence is threatened by a Russian military onslaught centred on the Moscow-backed rebel region of South Ossetia but also including bombardments across Georgia.

He has argued that Georgia's "fall" would mean the collapse of Western influence in the former Soviet Union. Russia counters that it is following international law by protecting Russian citizens in the rebel region after they came under attack from Georgia.

Moscow has accused Georgia of genocide against ethnic Ossetians.

Saakashvili has continued pushing for intervention by his key ally Washington as well as Nato and the United Nations, for the sake of

the "world order."

In Beijing on Monday, Bush said he had exchanged strong words with Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin when they met at the Olympics.

"I said this violence is unacceptable," Bush told US broadcaster NBC.

"I expressed my grave concern about the disproportionate response of Russia and that we strongly condemn bombing outside of South Ossetia."

"I was very firm with Vladimir Putin... just like I was firm with the Russian President (Dmitry Medvedev)."

US President Dick Cheney expressed solidarity with Georgia and warned Russia against continued "aggression."

Cheney made his remarks in a telephone conversation with Saakashvili on Sunday afternoon, a statement from Cheney's spokeswoman said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Georgian firefighter douses a fire at a military radio tower at an unnamed location outside of Tbilisi yesterday. French and Finnish foreign ministers held talks in Tbilisi ahead of a meeting with Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow as part of the Europe-led diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.

Bolivians back Morales in recall vote

AP, La Paz

Voters vigorously endorsed President Evo Morales on Sunday in a recall referendum he devised to try to break a political stalemate and revive his leftist crusade, partial unofficial results showed.

More than 62 percent of voters in this bitterly divided Andean nation ratified the mandate of Morales and his vice president, Alvaro Garcia, according to a private quick count of votes from 900 of the country's 22,700 polling stations.

The 53.7 percent by which Bolivia's first indigenous president won election in December 2005 had been the previous best electoral showing for a Bolivian leader.

Morales had proposed Sunday's recall in a bold gamble to topple governors who have frustrated his bid to redress historical inequities in favour of Bolivia's long-suppressed indigenous majority and extend his time in office.

Bush wraps up Asia trip

AP, Beijing

President Bush, increasingly distracted by Russia's harsh military crackdown in Georgia, took in one final golden Olympic moment Monday then ended what was likely his last trip to Asia before he leaves the White House.

It appeared that Bush was Michael Phelps' lucky charm as he went to the Water Cube for the second straight day to watch the American swimmer's pursuit of Mark Spitz's record of seven gold medals. The president witnessed a stunning comeback as the 400-meter freestyle US relay team rallied to win, giving Phelps his second gold and second world record here.

But Moscow's military offensive in the former Soviet republic of Georgia was always looming in the background. In an interview with NBC Sports, Bush criticised the violence, calling it unacceptable and Russia's response disproportionate.

The United States is waging an all-out campaign to get Russia to halt its retaliation against Georgia for trying to take control of the breakaway province of South Ossetia.

"I've expressed my grave concern about the disproportionate response of Russia and that we strongly condemn the bombing outside of South Ossetia," Bush said. He said he did so directly to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin before the opening ceremonies Friday Putin left China the next day and by phone to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.



PHOTO: AFP

Georgians protest in Tbilisi's Republic Square against Russian "aggression and occupation" on Sunday. Georgia's very existence is threatened by a widening conflict with Russia, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said in a televised address on Sunday.

Nepali assembly to elect PM this week

AFP, Kathmandu

Lawmakers in Nepal are to vote this week on who will be the country's first post-royal premier, after Maoists and their rivals failed to form a consensus government, officials said yesterday.

The Maoists and Nepal's mainstream parties have been wrangling for months over who will become prime minister, leaving the country in political limbo.

In elections held in April, the former rebels won the most seats in a new constitutional assembly but not an outright majority needed to govern alone -- and other parties are demanding they have key portfolios.

The Maoists also threatened not to form a government at all after their choice of president was rejected last month by a coalition of rivals.

Nepal has not had a proper government since the abolition of the monarchy in May, and officials said that with the dispute still unresolved the matter will now go

to a straight vote in the constitutional assembly.

"The working committee of the constituent assembly announced today that voting for choosing the prime minister will take place on Friday," Manohar Prasad Bhattacharji, general secretary of the assembly, told AFP.

"The parties will nominate their candidates on Thursday."

The Nepali Congress -- the country's oldest party -- said it was ready to have a Maoist prime minister, but did not want the former rebels to have all the key cabinet positions because they had yet to fully disarm.

"We want the Maoists to head the government but they must give up their rigidity of keeping the home, defence and finance ministries," said Nepali Congress spokesman Arjun Narsingh Khati Chettri.

The Maoists, however, have said that including politicians from rival parties in senior positions will hobble the government and hamper the leftists' radical reform

agenda.

"There is no point in leading a government if we don't get the key portfolios. We will have our hands and legs tied," senior Maoist Dev Gurung told AFP.

They were willing to accept rival parties in government, but only in lesser roles, Gurung said.

"The major parties are now in agreement that we should lead the government and we are negotiating to share power with Congress and other parties but differences remain in sharing out the ministerial portfolios," he said.

The Maoists began battling to turn Nepal into a communist republic in 1996 and fought the Himalayan country's security forces to a bloody standstill in the conflict that claimed at least 13,000 lives.

The ending of the country's 240-year-old monarchy was a major victory for the fiercely republican Maoists but their transition from guerrillas to a mainstream political force has not been smooth.

The Maoists, however, have said that including politicians from rival parties in senior positions will hobble the government and hamper the leftists' radical reform

Georgia crisis triggers war of words on White House trail

AFP, Washington

Prominent supporters of White House runners John McCain and Barack Obama clashed Sunday over the crisis in Georgia as a McCain adviser came under fire for his links to the government in Tbilisi.

As the Russian military seized control of the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, the campaign of Democratic hopeful Obama defended its attacks on McCain foreign policy adviser Randy Scheunemann.

New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson said McCain's campaign "is run by lobbyists that represent Georgia and other countries."

"He takes huge amounts of money from oil companies that are profiting in the (former) Soviet Union and many parts of the world," the Democrat told ABC News, attempting to depict a conflict of interest for McCain.

Richardson, a former US ambassador to the United Nations, said the crisis vindicated Obama's pledge to rebuild US alliances in Europe that were strained under President George W. Bush.

"This has been one of the failures of the Bush administration, failing to build a strong

relationship, a mutually beneficial relationship with Russia, so we'd have the kind of influence to persuade them to stop some of these very, very dangerous efforts within their territory," he said.

Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine, who is touted as a prospective running mate for Obama, denied that the crisis might drive US voters to the more experienced McCain.

"Experience is only positive insofar as it creates good judgment," he said on CBS News.

"And I think Senator Obama's strong case to the American people is that he will have the right judgment about how to balance America's military force with strong diplomacy to protect our interests abroad," Kaine said.

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, one of the names mentioned as McCain's vice presidential pick, said on ABC that the Republican's warnings about Russian expansionism had been borne out by events in Georgia.

"They're an example of Senator McCain's push to spread democracy in that part of the world as a very important advance of America's interest, as well as being good for international stability," he said.

Iraq demands 'clear timeline' for US withdrawal

AP, Baghdad

Iraq's foreign minister insisted Sunday that any security deal with the United States must contain a "very clear timeline" for the departure of US troops. A suicide bomber struck north of Baghdad, killing at least five people including an American soldier.

Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari told reporters that American and Iraqi negotiators were "very close" to reaching a long-term security agreement that will set the rules for US troops in Iraq after the US mandate expires at the end of the year.

Zebari said the Iraqis were insisting that the agreement include a "very clear timeline" for the withdrawal of US-led forces, but he refused to talk about specific dates.

"We have said that this is a condition-driven process," he added, suggesting that the departure schedule could be modified if the security situation changed.

But Zebari made clear that the Iraqis would not accept a deal that lacks a timeline for the end of the US military presence.

"They're an example of Senator McCain's push to spread democracy in that part of the world as a very important advance of America's interest, as well as being good for international stability," he said.

Differences over a withdrawal timetable have become one of the

most contentious issues remaining in the talks, which began early this year. US and Iraqi negotiators missed a July 31 target date for completing the deal, which must be approved by Iraq's parliament.

President Bush has steadfastly refused to accept any timetable for bringing US troops home. Last month, however, Bush and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki agreed to set a "general time horizon" for a US departure.

Last week, two senior Iraqi officials told The Associated Press that American negotiators had agreed to a formula which would remove US forces from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, with all combat troops out of the country by October 2010.

The last American support troops would leave about three years later, the Iraqis said.

But US officials insist there is no agreement on specific dates. Both the American and Iraqi officials spoke on condition of anonymity because the talks are ongoing. Iraq's Shia-led government believes a withdrawal schedule is essential to win parliamentary approval.

American officials have been less optimistic because of major differences on key issues including who can authorise US military operations and immunity for US troops from prosecution under Iraqi law.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (R) welcomes his Algerian counterpart Abdelaziz Bouteflika at the presidential palace in Tehran yesterday. Bouteflika is on the second day of a visit to the Islamic republic aimed at bolstering political and economic ties.

Iran, EU to continue nuclear talks

AFP, Tehran

Iran's top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana agreed yesterday to pursue talks aimed at resolving the nuclear crisis, state television reported.

Their telephone talks came just days after European Union nations last week introduced fresh sanctions against Iran over its atomic drive, which Western nations fear could be a cover for a secret nuclear weapons programme.

"The two sides agreed to continue negotiations in a constructive atmosphere," the television said. "Solana and Jalili voiced satisfaction at the constructive trend of negotiations in Geneva and the contacts afterwards."

In Brussels, Solana's office

confirmed the conversation but gave no details.

Jalili met on July 19 in Geneva with Solana, who is the pointman for the six major powers, which have offered Iran a package of incentives in return for a freeze in uranium enrichment activities. They also spoke by phone on August 4.

On Friday, the presidency of the 27-member EU announced new sanctions against Iran, including restrictions on public loans and tougher cargo inspections.

The move came after Tehran gave an ambiguous answer to the demands of the six nations -- UN Security Council permanent members Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States plus Germany.

Iran is facing a possible fourth round of UN Security Council sanctions over its refusal to halt enrichment, a process which makes nuclear fuel but also the core of an atomic bomb.

On Wednesday, Britain and the United States had "no choice" but to seek new UN sanctions after Iran failed to give a "clear positive response" to the incentives package.

The European Union and the United States have also imposed restrictions on the activities of Iran's largest banks which are running in parallel to the three sets of sanctions agreed by the Security Council.

Iran retaliated to the European move by ordering the state oil company to deposit oil revenues only in selected banks.

Oil exports are far the biggest foreign currency earner for Iran, which is Opec's second largest exporter.

Forklift helps 700-lb Mexican man take rare outing

AP, Monterrey

A 700-pound (310-kilogram) man once considered the world's most obese person left his home for the first time in five months Sunday with the aid of a forklift and a platform truck.

Manuel Uribe travelled to the shore of a lake in northern Mexico without ever leaving his specially designed bed. A forklift hoisted the bed onto the truck, which then hauled him to the lake, where he snacked on fish and vegetables and joked with a local boat operator.

Looking at the boatman's small craft, Uribe joked, "Too bad I can't get on it if it would sink."

Once considered the world's fattest man when his weight hit over half a ton, more than two years of steady dieting had helped Uribe drop to about 700 pounds (310 kilograms) as of June 550 pounds (250 kilograms) less than his former Guinness record weight of 1,235 pounds (560 kilograms). He did not say what his current weight is.



PHOTO: AP

Manuel Uribe, better known as 'Meme' who weighs around 310 kilograms (700 pounds), uses a forklift to move his specially designed bed onto a truck to a lake where children look at him in Monterrey, northern Mexico, on Sunday. Uribe, 43, who once weighed half a ton, has been largely confined to his home for the last six years.

Filipino troops press assault on MILF

130,000 villagers flee homes

AP, Manila

Philippine troops, backed by helicopter gunships, regained control of two southern villages from Muslim rebels Monday and pressed ahead with a massive assault to clear 13 others, officials said.

At least one army soldier and seven Moro Islamic Liberation Front guerrillas have been killed since nearly 3,000 troops and police launched the attack on Sunday. The assault, backed by artillery and rocket-f