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Peretz: the peacenik who led Israel to war

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By Emma Thomasson

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - "I am a man of peace," declared Defence Minister Amir Peretz as he insisted Israel had no choice but to expand its war against Hizbollah guerrillas in Lebanon.

Peretz's background as a labour and peace activist with no command-level military experience was seen as a major handicap when he took the job in a coalition government with the centrist Kadima after his Labour Party came second in elections in March.

But now Israel is at war, Peretz's dovish past is helping secure broader support for Israel's biggest offensive in a generation. Once the fighting is over, he could use his new military credentials to push for peace with the Palestinians.

"He is the public face of the war effort," said Mark Heller from the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies. "His personal background probably gives the government even more credibility because he is not suspected of being a hawk."

The peace movement and left-wingers would have given former general Ariel Sharon a much harder time had it been him leading the new advance into Lebanon, commentators said.

As Israeli defence minister, Sharon masterminded an invasion of Lebanon in 1982 but was forced to resign in disgrace after Christian militia allies massacred Palestinian refugees. Israel only ended its occupation of south Lebanon in 2000.

Sharon later became prime minister and his collapse into a coma in January led to his replacement by Ehud Olmert, who brought Peretz into his coalition after winning elections.

"Behind this war stands the liberal, social-democratic, civilian, sober, realistic Israel. The defence minister is the civilian Peretz, not the warrior Sharon," commentator Sever Plotzker wrote in Israel's leading daily Yedioth Ahronoth.

WORKING CLASS ROOTS

Born in Morocco in 1952, Peretz moved to Israel in 1956 and settled in the southern town of Sderot, near the Gaza Strip. Badly wounded as a young parachute brigade officer, he went into farming and then local Labour politics as mayor of Sderot.

He was elected to parliament in 1988 and became chairman of Israel's powerful trade union federation in 1995, earning the nickname Stalin for his militancy and the heavy moustache that gives him more than passing resemblance to the Soviet dictator.

His victory over elder statesman Shimon Peres for the Labour leadership last year was seen as a breakthrough for the Sephardi -- Jews from North Africa and the Middle East -- over an Israeli elite dominated by Ashkenazi Jews hailing from Europe.

Peretz hoped he could help Labour win over working class Sephardi from the right-wing Likud, but the party came a disappointing second and many blamed the 54-year-old for his focus on social issues rather than weightier security matters.

But since the war began, Peretz's confidence has grown and his popularity has soared. A recent poll showed that 60 percent of the public is satisfied with his performance.

"There is nothing that will break us because at this time of crisis, we are all united," a defiant Peretz told parliament despite heckling from Israeli Arab lawmakers who called him a murderer for Sunday's air strike on Qana which killed 54 civilians.

Three Moroccan lawyers said on Tuesday they had filed a war crimes suit against Peretz, who still has Moroccan nationality.

Peretz adviser Rachel Turgeman said the minister had ordered the army to avoid civilian casualties at all cost.

"He didn't become defence minister to run a war -- he took the job because he wanted to help bring peace," she told the Jerusalem Post daily.

"After the war is over, Amir will make an effort to reach peace with Lebanon and with the Palestinians."

Heller said Peretz's inexperience could make him a scapegoat if the offensive is deemed a failure. If it succeeds, the man who reportedly had an Arab wet nurse could push for the Palestinian state he has long campaigned for.

Yariv Oppenheimer, a leader of the left-wing Peace Now group that Peretz used to belong to, said: "Now they are showing they know how to fight, it will help Peretz and Olmert to push forward a peace agenda."

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