

PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian man hands over his ID to an Israeli soldier at the Qalqilia checkpoint in the West Bank June 1, 2003. Israel eased its closure on the Palestinian territories after a meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his Palestinian counterpart Mahmud Abbas, ahead of the upcoming meeting between American president George W. Bush and the two premiers, later this week.

Expectations run low for ME summit

Israel allows more than 10,000 Palestinian workers

AFP, Jerusalem

Expectations ran low yesterday ahead of a Middle East peace summit with US President George W. Bush, with both Israel and the Palestinians dashing hopes for a joint statement or a ceasefire announcement.

A senior Israeli official said the two sides had failed to reach an understanding on a planned joint statement to be published at the end of Wednesday's three-way summit aimed at kickstarting a peace roadmap.

The source said the two parties could not agree on what would have been a historic statement, due to differences on the core issue of Palestinian refugees and despite mediation by US envoy William Burns.

The Palestinians refuse to waive the right of return of refugees by officially recognising Israel as a Jewish state.

Hopes that the summit in the Red Sea resort of Aqaba would yield a Palestinian ceasefire agreement were already dashed on Sunday, after Palestinian culture minister Ziad Abu Amer said it was premature.

"It is clear it won't be possible to

announce a ceasefire before or at the summit." Abu Amer, one of the top men involved in truce talks with radical groups such as Hamas, told AFP on Sunday.

Today, Abbas will first attend another summit hosted by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh that will group Bush with a number of moderate Arab leaders.

The so-called roadmap for peace which both sides have accepted calls on the Palestinians to disarm radical militant groups as part of the first phase of the blueprint.

It also demands that Israel freeze all settlement activity and dismantle all outposts built in the West Bank since Sharon took power in March 2001.

But Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim told army radio that "dismantlement is only being considered for blatantly illegal settlements, which do not exceed 10 cases".

Meanwhile after the Israeli army said it was easing a blockade on the Palestinian territories, more than 10,000 Palestinians were allowed to cross from the Gaza Strip into Israel through the Erez checkpoint yesterday.

A total of 14,318 Palestinians

were handed a permit to cross through the Erez checkpoint, in line with the figures announced by the Israeli army on Sunday.

The Palestinian sources also said that the army had reopened the southern crossing point of Sufa, through which dozens of farmers crossed into Israel.

According to the military administration, the easing of the restrictions should allow 25,000 Palestinians, including 15,000 from the Gaza Strip to cross the Green line and reach their jobs in Israel in the next few days.

Violence continued in the occupied territories with the overnight killing by the Israeli army of a Palestinian militant in the central Gaza Strip.

The gunman opened fire on a patrol near the Kissufim crossing point before being shot down, security sources on both sides said.

A political leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a secular movement, was also arrested overnight in the West Bank refugee camp of Balata near Nablus, witnesses said.

US to handpick Iraq council: Report

REUTERS, Washington

US administrators in Iraq have decided to select a small group of Iraqis to serve on an interim advisory council rather than convene large a national conference to create a transitional authority, The Washington Post reported yesterday.

The newspaper quoted a senior US official who spoke on condition of anonymity as saying that the council could be formed within about six weeks.

The official, who spoke to a group of reporters in Baghdad, said the shift in plans from a conference to an appointed council was driven by "an enormous and complicated agenda" for the reconstruction of Iraq, the newspaper reported.

Iraqi political groups anxious for a greater say in running their country had expected a national conference to create a US-supervised transitional authority.

Citing the unnamed senior official, the Post reported that the

US occupation authority now planned instead to handpick 25 to 30 Iraqis to advise US officials on day-to-day governance issues.

The official told the newspaper that the council would be selected by the US and British governments, but would be chosen "through a process of consultation" with Iraqis.

"We are asking the Iraqis with whom we are in contact for their suggestions for who should be involved in this process," the official was quoted as saying.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Ryan Crocker briefed representatives of seven formerly exiled political groups about the planned council on Sunday in Baghdad, The Washington Post reported.

The newspaper said the participants included the Iraqi National Congress, which is headed by Ahmed Chalabi, the Shiite-dominated Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and two Kurdish political parties.

Saddam's daughters 'to seek UK asylum'

BBC ONLINE

Two of Saddam Hussein's three daughters are planning to seek asylum in the UK, it has been claimed. A cousin of the deposed Iraqi president told a London-based Arab newspaper he was arranging an asylum application for Raghda, 35, and Rana, 33.

Britain was top of the sisters' list for asylum destinations, Izzi-Din Mohammed Hassan al-Majid told the al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper.

But if they were refused access, they would try to start new lives in Egypt, Qatar or the United Arab Emirates.

Mr al-Majid said the two women were living with their nine children in two rooms of a trusted middle-class family's Baghdad home, having been thrown out of their palaces.

They "wash clothes by their own hands, cook their own food and clean the house by themselves and live without electricity," he said.

"They live in a severe psychological disorder."

He added that neither they nor he had any idea of the location of Saddam or his sons Uday and Qusay - top of the coalition's most-wanted list.

The two women's husbands were both assassinated by Saddam

in 1996 after they defected to Jordan. Mr al-Majid, who fled the country in 1995 and later settled in London, returned to Iraq in April.

In a telephone interview, he told the paper Raghda and Rana were "very enraged" about what had happened to Iraq.

"I saw the tears in their eyes, especially when we talked about the war and the fall of the regime," he said. Mr al-Majid said the two women blamed aides of their father for his fall from power.

"The regime fell because of the aides employed by my father, whose only interest was to stay in power and seek personal gain," he quoted Raghda as saying.

A Home Office spokesman would not confirm what would happen if an application was received from the women.

"The UK is not required to offer asylum to known war criminals or those who have breached the human rights of others," he said.

"But I am not saying that this would apply in these two cases."

Saddam's third and youngest daughter, Hala, lived with her two sisters for a short period but later left with her children for an unknown location.

Bush, Chirac shake hands but still disagree on Iraq attack

AFP, Evian

With the fallout over Iraq still weighing on US-French ties, Presidents George W. Bush and Jacques Chirac said all the right things yesterday as they met for their first one-on-one talks since the war.

The two leaders appeared relaxed as they chatted to reporters ahead of their private talks on the sidelines of the Group of Eight summit, stressing their ability to work together but acknowledging that differences remained.

"We must be frank, we went through a difficult period," Bush said, referring to the row over Iraq that badly damaged transatlantic ties, with Washington deeply resenting Paris for its refusal to back the invasion of Iraq.

"There is no question where Jacques Chirac stood and I made it clear where I stood. That's why I can say we've got good relations, because we are able to be very honest with each other," the US leader noted.

"But when the time came to focus

on a free Iraq, a healthy Iraq, a prosperous Iraq, we're in agreement," Bush added, referring to Chirac, who was the most outspoken critic of the war to topple Saddam Hussein.

The two men, who had several brief exchanges on Sunday at the start of the G8 summit in Evian, had not met since last November at a NATO summit in Prague, and had only spoken twice by telephone since the US-French crisis erupted.

The acrimonious dispute sparked a torrent of vitriolic anti-French comments from US lawmakers and a wave of France-bashing in the United States.

The US president said critics in both countries were wondering whether the two could "actually sit down and have a comfortable conversation. And the answer is absolutely."

Bush added that the two had already discussed their "common desires to grow our economies", as G8 leaders were tackling the issue of how to kickstart world growth.

But neither has backed down

from their positions on the Iraq war, with Chirac telling the Financial Times last week: "A war which lacks legitimacy does not acquire legitimacy just because it has been won."

The two managed to find common ground on UN Security Resolution 1483, adopted last month, which lifted sanctions on Iraq imposed in 1990 and set up a framework for the reconstruction of the battered country.

"We have a solid basis that is called resolution 1483," Chirac said when asked if France and the United States could work together on the issue.

Their talks on the sidelines of the G8 summit followed up their brief exchanges on Sunday, characterised by a brief handshake, stock smiles for the cameras and Bush's gift to Chirac of three books on Native American culture.

Both have taken pains to emphasise the importance of focusing on the future, especially on Iraq, but their contrasting world views hint that it could take time to mend their strained relationship.



PHOTO: AFP

French President Jacques Chirac and US President George W. Bush arrive at the Hotel Royal in the French resort Evian for a short meeting yesterday.

Bali bomb suspect faces death, if convicted

AFP, Denpasar

Suspected Bali bombing field commander Iman Samudra, who went on trial for his life yesterday, is the modern face of militant Islam -- a computer expert who was inspired by the Internet to wage a holy war.

Samudra also appears chillingly indifferent to the suffering of his victims and to his own fate if convicted, according to police and his own statements.

"He's not like ordinary criminals. He doesn't fear death," detective chief Erwin Mappaseng has said.

Just last Wednesday the man who allegedly picked two crowded Western-frequented nightspots as the Bali targets described bombings in general as a part of jihad.

"God will grant forgiveness" if any Muslims die unintentionally in bombings, he testified during the separate trial of terror suspect Abu Bakar Bashir.

Asked about Christians, he replied: "Christians are not my brothers." Samudra was also dismissive of Bashir, an elderly Muslim cleric who is accused of leading the

Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) regional terror group.

"It's the age of the Internet but he still talks about mysticism while Muslims are being slaughtered," Samudra told the court.

Police say Samudra has admitted ordering the attack, which killed 202 people from 21 countries in Bali last October, as part of a jihad to avenge injustice against Muslims.

Samudra, 33, who has also admitted to a church bombing at Batam island in 2000, has six aliases but was born Abdul Azis in West Java.

Police have described him as a computer expert who always carried a laptop. Fellow Bali suspect Amrozi has called him brilliant and fluent in English and Arabic.

Samudra is also believed to be a leading member of JI, which is blamed for the Bali blasts and a string of others.

Samudra spent 2 1/2 years in Afghanistan and six more in Malaysia in the 1990s, learning how to handle a number of weapons -- and how to use the Internet.

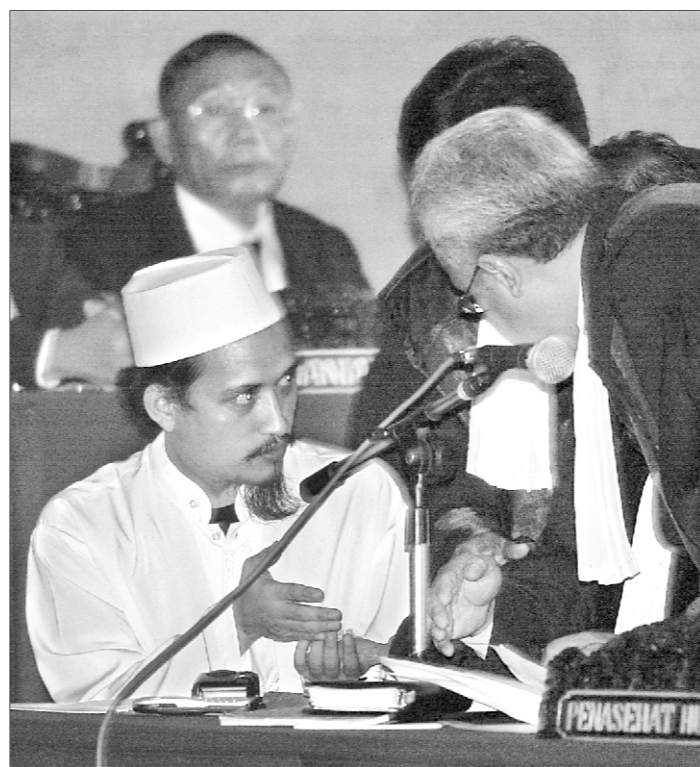


PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian Imam Samudra (L), the alleged field commander of the Bali bombings, talks with his lawyers during his trial in a Denpasar court, Bali, yesterday.