

Hamas breaks off truce talks with Abbas

AFP, Gaza City

The radical Islamic movement Hamas said Friday it had broken off talks with Mahmud Abbas over his bid to bring an end to anti-Israeli attacks, setting itself on a collision course with the new Palestinian premier, who has vowed to end such violence.

The announcement was accompanied by calls for demonstrations in the Gaza Strip Friday against the "dangerous results" of this week's US-Israeli-Palestinian summit in Jordan.

And it followed reports that Israeli forces were bracing on Friday, a Jewish holiday, against the prospect of more attacks by Palestinian militants.

"Abu Mazen (as Abbas is commonly known) does not represent us, and we refuse to meet with him because there is no point to it," a

senior Hamas leader, Abdul Aziz al-Rantissi, told AFP.

"In undertaking dangerous commitments that the Palestinian people categorically reject, Abu Mazen closed the door to dialogue," Rantissi said.

The summit in Aqaba, Jordan "declared war on the Palestinian people," and the Abbas government was not doing anything for legitimate national rights, he said.

Rantissi said Abbas had caved in, effectively "fulfilling all the wishes of (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon" by "giving away historical Palestinian rights, notably on Jerusalem, the right of refugees to return and the freeing of prisoners."

At the summit, which brought together Abbas, Sharon and US President George W. Bush to discuss the internationally drafted peace roadmap, Abbas had said there was "no military solution to our conflict."

We repeat our denunciation and renunciation of terrorism and violence against Israelis wherever they might be.

The roadmap calls on the Palestinians to curb radicals and Israelis to freeze all settlement activity and dismantle outposts, in the first steps leading to a Palestinian state in 2005.

"We will exert our full efforts using all our resources to end the militarisation of the Intifada, and we will succeed. The armed Intifada must end, and we must resort to peaceful means in our quest to end the occupation," Abbas said.

But Hamas, its smaller rival, Islamic Jihad, and two secular radical groups quickly responded, saying they would refuse to lay down their arms.

Calls for an end to violence were repeated by Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher, in remarks published Friday in the official Al-

Ahram daily.

He said the Intifada had run its useful course and to continue it would threaten the loss of the gains that it had achieved.

Stating the "general Arab view," he said the "Intifada has succeeded in moving things toward recognition of a Palestinian state, but the appropriate measures need to be taken at each step."

"There is a time for everything," he told the official daily Al-Ahram. "The armed Intifada has reached the point where it cannot further achieve its objective, and it will be exploited against the Palestinian people and their rights."

Maher said the "gains (of the Intifada) need to be preserved so that they are not transformed into losses."

Mystery disease kills 30 children in West Bengal

IANAS, Kolkata

A mystery disease spreading through a central West Bengal district has killed at least 30 children in the past week, reports said on Friday.

Health officials in Murshidabad district, about 200 km north of here, refuted news of the deaths, but media reports quoted families of the victims as confirming the fatalities from an ailment that doctors had apparently failed to diagnose.

Despite the official stand, health ministry sources here said a team of doctors was being sent on Friday to the Lalgola area of Murshidabad that has reported all the deaths so far.

"Though we don't have any report yet from the district administration, we are not taking a chance and sending a team of doctors to look into the complaints," an official at the ministry told IANAS.

Several dailies have reported that the mysterious disease sweeping through villages in Lalgola area was first noticed 7-10 days ago. The victims showed symptoms like high fever, delirium and convulsions.



PHOTO: AFP
Nueara Bibi fans her baby suffering high fever caused by an "unknown disease" in Nasipur village on Friday some 300 km north of Kolkata. At least 30 children below the age of five have died and more than 100 have taken ill in a "mysterious disease" outbreak in the sleepy village of West Bengal triggering panic among the people.

UN nuclear experts arrive in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

UN nuclear experts arrived in Baghdad Friday for the first time since the war to oust Saddam Hussein on a two-week mission to inspect Iraq's largest nuclear facility, a UN official said.

The scientists from the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency are not weapons inspectors but have been tasked with assessing the situation at the Tuwaitha plant outside Baghdad, which was badly damaged by looters after the war.

It is the first time UN monitors are in the country since leaving around three months ago, before the war, which the United States had said was aimed at ridding Saddam's regime of weapons of mass destruction.

The United States was opposed to the return to Iraq of the IAEA, which previously monitored Saddam's nuclear programme, but bowed to international pressure to let the group in.

Pakistan tells India Let UN forces deal with terrorism in Kashmir

PTI, London

Rejecting Indian demand that activities of jihadi groups in PoK should be reined before resumption of Indo-Pak dialogue, Pakistan on Friday asked India to agree to a UN-controlled peacekeeping force in Kashmir to deal with terrorism.

"If you think we are encouraging infiltrators into Kashmir, why don't you agree to a UN-controlled peacekeeping force jointly patrolling under the UN auspices," Pakistan's Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat said.

Participating in BBC World's weekly programme "Question Time Pakistan" broadcast on Friday, Hayat claimed that none of the jihadi organisations were working in Pakistan.

"We do not allow jihadi organisa-

tions in Pakistan. They (India) have mentioned a few organisations (that they say) are working in Kashmir, over which Pakistan has no control. We have already told them (the Indian Government) to give us evidence."

He disagreed with New Delhi's expectation that activities of jihadi groups in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir should be curbed before any dialogue between the two nations could begin.

Answering a question on Sharia law, Hayat criticised the introduction of Sharia law in its present form in the North West Frontier Province.

He attacked the provincial government there, led by the Mutaahida Majlis-e-Amal alliance of six religious parties. "If we follow their

brand of politics, if we follow their brand of Islam, their brand of religion, (it) will be leading us once again towards the Talibanisation of Pakistan," he stated.

Government officials in the Province have been directed to say prayers or face strict disciplinary action.

Commenting on that, Hayat said: "Whatever the MMA has announced in NWFP is absolutely and totally repugnant to the spirit of Islam. Nowhere in Islam is it said that harsh treatment be meted out if you don't say your prayers."

ANI adds: Even as the Indo-Pak peace process is in progress, it seems Islamabad has given up its peace overtures and taken a tougher stance as far as resolution of the Kashmir issue is concerned.

Khmers' trial moves step closer with UN deal

REUTERS, Phnom Penh

The United Nations signed a landmark agreement with Cambodia on Friday to set up special courts to try the aging leaders of the 1970s "Killing Fields" genocide of the Khmer Rouge.

UN chief negotiator Hans Corell inked the deal on behalf of the UN General Assembly, which last month endorsed plans to create "extraordinary chambers" in the Cambodian legal system to try Pol Pot's few surviving henchmen.

"This is indeed an historic day for Cambodia and all humanity," his Cambodian counterpart, Senior Minister Sok An, told 700 diplomats, media and officials crammed into the Chaktomuk Conference Hall, the likely venue of the trial.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian family walks on the dried up Osman Sagar lake on the outskirts of Hyderabad, the capital of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh on Friday. People across the country are desperately waiting for the cooling effect of the monsoon rains, bringing hopes of relief from a devastating heat spell that has killed at least 1,347 people across India.

Rains bring relief to India

AFP, New Delhi

Rains which have begun drenching parts of northeast India have also started in southwest Kerala state, bringing hope that relief is in sight for millions suffering in a searing heat-wave that has already killed more than 1,200 people.

News reports Friday said showers had cooled some parts of Kerala but cautioned that the rains were not the much awaited monsoons, which have been delayed by at least a week.

The monsoon rains, which traditionally hit Kerala on June 1, were now expected to hit the state on June 8 or 10, the weather office said.

Meanwhile, northeastern India could expect heavy monsoon rains later Friday, weather officials said after isolated showers were recorded in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

India's southwest monsoon rains are crucial for sustaining agricultural production, which provides a livelihood to two-thirds of India's population.

Delayed monsoons resulted in a drought last year in several states which clipped annual economic growth and depleted food stocks.

US sees junta role in Suu Kyi's ambush

UN envoy arrives in Yangon

REUTERS, Washington

The United States said on Thursday it suspected "government-affiliated thugs" of staging an ambush against Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The State Department called on the Myanmar government to provide a full account of the incident last Friday, in which diplomats believe Suu Kyi may have been injured.

Soon after the incident in the north of the country the authorities took Suu Kyi into what they called "protective custody." She has not had access to visitors since.

State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said in a statement that officials of the US embassy in Yangon had gone to the scene of the incident to investigate.

"Their findings indicate that there was a premeditated ambush on

Aung San Suu Kyi's motorcade. Circumstances and reports from individuals in the region indicate that the attack was conducted by government-affiliated thugs," he said.

"We call on the ruling State Peace and Development Council (military rulers) in Burma to provide a full accounting of the dead, injured, and missing," he added. Washington uses the old name Burma as a sign of displeasure with the government.

Reeker again called for the release of Suu Kyi and other members of her National League for Democracy, saying it was "outrageous and unacceptable" to detain them in isolation.

He said the authorities must allow visiting UN envoy Razali Ismail to visit Suu Kyi.

"If Ambassador Razali is not able to meet privately with Aung San Suu

Kyi, the United States will need to evaluate the utility of this UN-sponsored effort to support national reconciliation in Burma," the spokesman added.

On Wednesday US lawmakers introduced bills in the US Congress aimed at banning all imports from Myanmar in response to the attack on Suu Kyi.

AFP adds: The UN secretary-general's special envoy to Myanmar Razali Ismail arrived here Friday on his tenth and most crucial mission, seeking to visit detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and report her release.

Myanmar's deputy foreign minister Khin Maung Win and diplomats greeted Razali, who left the airport in a motorcade shortly afterwards.

US forces crack down on growing unrest in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

The US-led administration in Iraq moved early Friday to crack down on growing unrest as the top UN arms inspector questioned the credibility of coalition experts searching for Saddam Hussein's banned weapons.

The occupation authority warned it would enforce a ban on incitement even in mosques as a US soldier and prominent Iraqi tribal leader were killed in separate attacks.

"This applies to the territory of Iraq. We respect religious sites... but if we hear that there are groups who are using and abusing religious establishments such as mosques to incite religious or ethnic violence we would consider taking action," a spokesman for the US-led administration said on condition of anonymity.

"Nothing in this notice will be designed to curb public debate. It is certainly not going to be illegal to criticize the coalition."

The announcement came just hours after one US soldier was killed

and five wounded in the flashpoint city of Fallujah, where anti-US sentiment has been high.

It was the second deadly assault on US troops in Fallujah in nine days and came just hours after more than 1,000 soldiers poured into the area to clamp down on the spate of violence against the US occupation forces.

The spokesman said a primary concern in drawing up the new ban had been to prevent incitement against Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities in the face of the huge communal tensions stoked for decades by Saddam's Baath party regime.

In a sign of the continuing tensions, an influential tribal leader with ties to Saddam's regime was shot dead in the British-occupied southern city of Basra.

Sheikh Ali Najm al-Saadun was killed near the Basra office of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the main Iraqi Shiite movement. Members of his tribe said they suspected the group's armed wing, the Badr Brigade, of being behind the murder.

Bus inferno kills 10 in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Ten passengers were burnt to death and four were seriously injured when a bus caught fire in Indonesia's Java island early Friday.

One survivor, Suparman, blamed the blaze on a broken gasoline hose which the bus driver tried to fix several times during the trip, the state Antara news agency reported.

He said passengers begged the driver to pull over when they noticed a flame as the vehicle entered the town of Brebes in Central Java.

But the driver ignored the passengers and fled as the fire worsened, Suparman said. By then, he said, it was too late for some passengers to save themselves.

The bus was carrying 40 passengers to Solo from Jakarta.

It was the second deadly bus blaze in less than five months in Central Java. In January, 17 people were killed when a bus crashed into a roadside kerosene stall and burst into flames.

Last month 11 people were killed when two buses and a minibus collided just east of Jakarta.

Duma okays amnesty to Chechen guerrillas

AFP, Moscow

Russia's parliament Friday annulled guerrillas and federal troops fighting the Chechen war in a move aimed at giving peace a chance but which comes amid a bloody wave of suicide bombings in the Muslim republic.

President Vladimir Putin has pinned hopes on the amnesty as a means of putting an end to a campaign that he started as prime minister in October 1999 and the Kremlin immediately hailed the outcome.

"The amnesty underlines the fact that the process of a political resolution to the conflict is irreversible," said Sergei Yastrzhembsky, Putin's top aide on Chechen affairs.

The State Duma lower house of parliament overwhelmingly approved the amnesty by a 352-25 vote. Only by the liberal opposition Yabloko faction and the ultranationalist LDPR group run by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy were opposed.

"The amnesty is a very serious instrument which should be used at the right time," said Yabloko's Sergei Mitrokhin.

He argued that the amnesty was a Kremlin public relations stunt that

would achieve little because the two sides were not yet even close to approaching the negotiating table for a true political resolution to the war.

"If there was an active political process taking place as well, it would be needed," he said.

"But at the moment, there is a deadlock, escalating violence and terrorist acts. In such a situation, the amnesty becomes a pure PR stunt."

Meanwhile reflecting the view of Russian nationalists, Zhirinovskiy called the amnesty "shameful" and a "crime for the memory of our soldiers."

"You are covering the country in blood," Zhirinovskiy told his fellow lawmakers before the vote.

The amnesty covers Chechen rebels but not Arab mercenaries who have joined the current campaign and applies to all conflicts in the turbulent republic over the past decade.

But few observers believe that Chechens will give themselves up in any large number since it would then be up to Russian courts to decide if the amnesty should be applied and guerrillas who have committed serious crimes are not eligible.



PHOTO: AFP
This NASA Hubble Space Telescope handout image released on Thursday shows of the Pencil Nebula remnants from a star that exploded thousands of years ago. Officially known as NGC 2736, the Pencil Nebula is part of the huge Vela supernova remnant, located in the southern constellation Vela. The nebula's shape suggests that it is part of the supernova shock wave that recently encountered a region of dense gas. It is this interaction that causes the nebula to glow, appearing like a rippled sheet. The Hubble Heritage Team used the Advanced Camera for Surveys in October 2002 to observe the nebula.