



PHOTO: AFP

Members of the Israeli organisation of army reserve soldiers refusing to take part in military activities in the occupied Palestinian territories demonstrate on Wednesday in front of the security government office in Tel Aviv to protest Israel's policy of target killings against Palestinian activists, a day after a helicopter attack on Gaza City which failed to kill Hamas leader Abdul Aziz al-Rantissi.

## US concerned over Gaza attacks

### Israel fends off US criticism for strike

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel has come under rare fire from the White House for its attempted assassination of a high-profile Palestinian militant leader that could endanger an already tenuous US-backed "road map" to Middle East peace.

Tuesday's helicopter attack that wounded Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi of Hamas raised the spectre of another welter tit-for-tat bloodshed undermining the new moderate Palestinian premier's bid to sideline militants hostile to negotiated peace.

Another violent spree by militants, as Hamas gunmen swiftly threatened in response to the attempt on Rantissi, could also halt Israel's evacuation of settler outposts on occupied land required by a peace plan it accepted only under US pressure.

Asked by reporters in

Washington whether the helicopter missile strike that Rantissi barely eluded in downtown Gaza City was "out of bounds" of the peace plan known as the "road map," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said: "That's correct."

President Bush vowed to persevere with the road map but said the assault on Rantissi could weaken Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, who wants militants to call off a campaign of suicide bombings and ambush shootings.

"I'm concerned that the attacks will make it more difficult for Palestinian leadership to fight off terrorist attacks. I also don't believe the attacks helped Israeli security."

Bush ordered top aides to urgently convey those points to Israeli and Palestinian officials and lean on them to stick to the letter and spirit of the road map, which stipulates reciprocal concessions lead-

ing to a Palestinian state by 2005.

Hamas is on Washington's list of "terrorist" groups.

Israel defended itself against the US rebuke for its attempted assassination of a Palestinian militant leader that further undermined a Middle East peace plan.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ordered aides to turn over intelligence to US officials to back accusations that Abdel-Aziz al-Rantissi, the public face of the radical Islamic group Hamas, had been coordinating attacks on Israelis.

"This information is intended to show that Rantissi was not just a ticking bomb but a factory of ticking bombs," a senior Israeli security source said.

The helicopter missile strike that wounded Rantissi in Gaza on Tuesday drew vows of revenge from Hamas, raising the spectre of a new cycle of bloodshed that could bury a US-backed "road map" aimed at

ending 32 months of conflict.

Israel killed one of Rantissi's aides and a woman bystander in the attack. Hamas responded by firing rockets into a town in nearby Israel, prompting a second helicopter attack that killed three more Palestinians -- all civilians.

Some Israeli political commentators joined in the criticism of Sharon, including suggestions the right-wing leader had used the assassination attempt to try to mollify hard-liners fiercely opposed to his acceptance of the road map.

"Targeted screw-up" was what Maariv newspaper commentator Chemi Shalev dubbed the assassination attempt.

"It was a matter of miserable timing," columnist Zvi Barel wrote in the daily Haaretz, saying the missiles unleashed against Rantissi had effectively hit Bush and Abbas.

## Snoopers beware

AFP, London

Employers in Britain who snoop on their workers' e-mails and telephone calls could find themselves in court, the government's information commissioner Richard Thomas said Wednesday.

Intrusive monitoring will have to be justified, and in almost all cases employees will have to be told when they are being watched according to advice published by the commissioner.

The Employment Practices Data Protection Code covers a range of surveillance activities including opening e-mails or voicemail, checking Internet usage, and recording with closed-circuit TV cameras.

It sets out how employers should comply with the Data Protection Act and encourages respect for the Human Rights Act, which creates a right to respect for personal correspondence.

"Employers may have alternative ways of meeting these requirements," the commissioner's advice said. "But if they do nothing, they risk breaking the law."

## Iran nuke experts visited N Korea this year: Report

REUTERS, Tokyo

Iranian experts on nuclear issues secretly visited North Korea this year, possibly to ask North Korean officials for advice on how to handle international inspectors, a Japanese newspaper said on Wednesday.

The Iranian experts made three visits to North Korea between March and May, the conservative Sankei Shimbun said, quoting what it described as "a Korean peninsula source," who was not named.

The visits "may have been intended to ask North Korea for know-how on how to act when accepting inspectors," Sankei

quoted the source as saying. "Cooperation on nuclear development may also have been discussed," the source added.

Two Iranian experts stayed in North Korea for several days in March for talks with North Korean officials in charge of nuclear development, Sankei said. One expert visited in April and two experts visited in May, the newspaper added.

Sankei said North Korea may receive, or may already have received, funds from Iran, both of which have been branded as part of an "axis of evil" by President Bush along with pre-war Iraq. Washington has accused Iran of

violating the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which Tehran has signed, by using undeclared nuclear material to test a uranium enrichment system.

Iran says its nuclear ambitions are limited to producing electricity and it has allowed inspectors from the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, to visit several of its nuclear facilities.

On Tuesday it denied having any hidden nuclear facilities that should have been declared to UN inspectors, following a critical UN report of Tehran's nuclear program which Washington called "deeply troubling."

## Kidnap drama ends in Peru

AFP, Lima

All 71 gas pipeline workers kidnapped in southeastern Peru were rescued late Tuesday and were "safe and sound," President Alejandro Toledo announced.

Heavily-armed gunmen on Monday seized staff from the Argentine firm Techint, which is building a gas pipeline in Ayacucho department, 600 kilometers (370 miles) southeast of Lima, demanding one million dollars in ransom and threatening to kill them if a rescue attempt were made.

In a short, nationally broadcast statement Toledo said the workers -- initially thought to number 60 -- were set free in a lightning operation of "rapid efficiency and great professionalism."

"They are all safe and sound and without a scratch, even the foreigners," Toledo said, adding that no ransom had been paid.

He said remnants of the Shining Path guerrilla group were behind the raid, and that the kidnapers fled

into the jungle.

"In Peru there are no people kidnapped, or hostages in the hands of terrorists or gangs of criminals," Toledo said, adding that the episode was a "nightmare that had a successful ending."

Among those abducted were six Colombians and a Chilean.

It was unclear if there was a gun battle during the rescue mission. Toledo said government forces had managed to surround the kidnapers.

Once the mass kidnapping became known, the defence ministry put four Ayacucho provinces under military rule and sent 300 anti-guerrilla experts from the army and police, backed by several helicopter gunships, to the lush mountain jungles where the kidnapers were believed to hide.

With interests from steel to oil and gas and health care, the Techint Group comprises more than 100 companies worldwide with about 42,400 permanent workers and total sales of 7.8 billion dollars, according to the company web site.



PHOTO: AFP

A protestor hurls a cobberstone at anti-riot policemen (out of camera range) during clashes which erupted near Concorde Square in Paris on Tuesday. Tens of thousands of demonstrators marched in rallies across the country to oppose French Prime minister Jean Pierre Raffarin's controversial pensions reform plan.

## Egyptian intelligence chief holds talks with Arafat, Abbas on truce

AFP, West Bank

Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman met Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and premier Mahmud Abbas Wednesday as part of a bid to broker a truce between radical militants and Israel.

The meeting in Arafat's battered West Bank headquarters lasted almost three hours but no concrete information emerged when the three men stepped out.

"We had a meeting with the factions last night, which Hamas did not attend, and we reiterate that our line is to pursue efforts for a dialogue," Arafat told reporters.

"Suleiman was carrying a message from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak," said Abbas, who also

reaffirmed his commitment to a Palestinian dialogue.

Palestinian information minister Nabil Amr said Suleiman's visit was aimed at "promoting a truce" to boost the implementation of the roadmap for peace.

But his visit came a day after Israel tried and failed to assassinate Abdul Aziz al-Rantissi, the political leader of the hardline Islamist movement Hamas.

Rantissi, who suffered light wounds from the missile attack, was quick to promise bloody revenge, vowing from his hospital bed "not to leave one Jew in Palestine".

His movement issued a statement demanding Abbas' government freeze all contacts with Israel and ruling out any ceasefire

arrangement.

In his closing statement at the Israeli-Palestinian-US summit in Aqaba, Jordan on June 4, Abbas called on radical groups to end the armed intifada and described their operations as "terrorism".

Suleiman was not scheduled to hold any talks with Hamas during his lightning visit.

Senior Hamas official Ismail Haniya reiterated Wednesday that truce talks were not on the cards following Tuesday's strike.

"After the failed assassination attempt against Abdul Aziz Rantissi and Israel's escalation against the Palestinian people, there is no place for ceasefire talks with the Zionists at this stage," he told AFP.

## Hillary's tell-all book sells like hotcake

REUTERS, New York

Former US first lady Hillary Clinton's tell-all memoir Living History sold about 2,00,000 copies in its first day of publication, the book's publisher said on Tuesday.

Simon & Schuster said sales had been so brisk that it had already ordered another 3,00,000 copies of the book to be printed on top of the 1 million copies which were printed for Monday's launch.

"We are certainly happy," Simon & Schuster spokeswoman Victoria Meyer said. "By any measure this is a huge number."

Meyer said that the publisher, which paid Clinton \$8 million for her memoir and hopes it will become the No 1 non-fiction title of the year, expects to increase its print run again later this week.

The sales pace of Clinton's book -- which covers eight tumultuous years at the White House including

President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky and subsequent impeachment -- is in the league of novelists like Tom Clancy and Stephen King, said John Baker, editorial director at Publishers' Weekly.

"It's strikingly good," Baker said, noting Clinton's book has sold much faster than memoirs by President Ronald Reagan or his wife Nancy.

The book tells how Clinton's love for politics began with strong Republican convictions rather than the Democratic Party politics she is known for.

Barnes & Noble Inc., the world's largest bookseller, said Living History set a one-day sales record on Monday for a non-fiction book at its stores.

The company said in a statement it shifted 40,000 copies in just 24 hours at retail stores and online.



PHOTO: AFP

A mask of Osama bin Laden (C), chief of al-Qaeda terror network, hangs along with others as a Thai vendor waits for the customers at a tourist spot in Bangkok, on Tuesday. Two Thai Muslims accused of planning bomb attacks on embassies and tourist spots in Thailand have confessed to the plot and admitted belonging to regional terror group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), blamed for last year's Bali bombing. Special Branch police commander Major General Triton Ronnarivichai had said earlier that all three men admitted belonging to JI, which is believed to be the Asian arm of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terror network.

## US ready for fresh round of talks with N Korea

AFP, Seoul

The United States is ready for a new round of talks with North Korea and other parties towards resolving the peninsula's nuclear crisis but no date has been fixed, the top US envoy to South Korea said Wednesday.

Ambassador Thomas Hubbard said Washington wanted talks "as soon as possible" to follow up on April's opening round of negotiations in Beijing which he described as a useful first step.

He said there was no timetable for further talks which would depend on whether North Korea would agree to a multilateral framework.

"We believe that for these talks to be successful they need to include at a minimum Japan, South Korea as well as China. But we don't have a timetable for such

talks," he told journalists.

North Korea has been holding out for one-on-one talks with the United States while Washington insists that key regional players should sit at the table to resolve the stand-off.

In Tokyo Tuesday, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Yukio Takeuchi agreed that the participation of Japan and South Korea would be "indispensable" to nuclear talks with North Korea.

North Korea refused to admit Japan and South Korea to the Beijing talks attended by China, North Korea and the United States.

Armitage said in Japan he saw "fair" prospects for multilateral talks involving Japan and South Korea to be held "in the near future."

## 2 Australian sisters face drugs trial in Vietnam

AFP, Hanoi

Two of three Australian sisters arrested last November on drug trafficking charges in Vietnam's southern metropolis of Ho Chi Minh City were to appear in court on Thursday.

Phan Thi Ngoc Phuong, 24, and Phan Ngoc Viet Phi, 14, could face the death penalty or life imprisonment at the end of their one-day trial at the Ho Chi Minh City People's Court, a court clerk said Wednesday.

Australian consular officials confirmed that their younger sister Phan Ngoc Viet Chau, aged 12 when they were arrested on November 1 last year, does not face any criminal charges.

Vietnamese law prohibits prosecution of people under the age of 14. The trio, of Vietnamese origin, were stopped at Ho Chi Minh City's Tan Son Nhat airport as they boarded a flight to Sydney.

The two younger sisters were allegedly carrying 656 grams of heroin concealed in packages beneath their clothing.