



PHOTO: AFP

A wounded Palestinian girl receives treatment at a hospital following an attack by an Israeli helicopter missiles in Gaza City on Wednesday. Six Palestinians were killed when an Israeli helicopter fired a missile on a car in the Shajayah neighbourhood in Gaza City, Palestinian medical and security sources said. The strike came about an hour after a suicide bomb ripped through a bus in central west Jerusalem, killing 16 people and wounding scores.

Wave of violence hits ME

Israel declares all-out war on Hamas

AP, Jerusalem

As a wave of new violence swept over Jerusalem and Gaza, leaving 27 people dead, President Bush urged nations to cut off funding for terrorists trying to stymie efforts to bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Israeli helicopters struck a car in Gaza City with missiles early Thursday, killing two men and a bystander hours after an earlier airstrike killed seven. Four of the dead were from the Islamic militant group Hamas, which claimed responsibility for a deadly suicide strike in downtown Jerusalem.

In that attack, a Palestinian teenager disguised as an Orthodox Jew got on a Jerusalem city bus and blew himself up Wednesday, killing 16 people and wounding 70 others. It was the bloodiest suicide attack since Jan. 5, when two bombers killed 23 in downtown Tel Aviv.

The familiar pattern of attack and retaliation wrested attention from the US-backed "road map" peace plan, designed to end 32 months of violence and solve the Israel-Palestinian conflict with a formula of two states living side by side in peace.

President Bush, who just a week ago launched the plan and now was watching its chances of success diminish by the hour, angrily condemned the bus bombing.

He urged all nations "to fight off terror, to cut off money to organizations such as Hamas, to isolate those who hate so

much that they're willing to kill to stop peace from going forward." The State Department has designated Hamas a terror group.

A day earlier, Bush had scolded Israel for a missile strike in Gaza that wounded Abdel Aziz Rantisi, a political leader of Hamas.

Among those wounded in the attack was Sarri Singer, 30, the daughter of Robert Singer, a Republican state senator in New Jersey. She said she had just taken a seat on the packed bus when the explosion ripped through it.

"It was, like, a very strong blast and the next thing I know people are pulling me out of the bus," she told Israel Radio. "I have a fracture in my shoulder, other than that, thank God, I'm happy to be alive."

Natan Sharansky, Israel's minister for Jerusalem affairs, stood next to the bus ruins shaking his head.

"My daughter rides that bus, so immediately you start checking where your family is and getting irritated because one doesn't know where the other is and none of the phones work," he said.

Palestinians identified the attacker as Abdel Madi Shabneh, 18, a high school student from Hebron.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, shunted aside in recent weeks in a US peace effort, moved back to center stage, summoning reporters and reading a tough statement calling on all

Palestinian factions to cease fire, condemning the attacks in both Jerusalem and Gaza and pleading for international intervention to rescue the road map plan.

Arafat said the factions must "put the Palestinian national interest as a first priority and not to give Israel a chance to drag us into destroying the peace process."

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon declared that though he is committed to a diplomatic process leading to peace, his army would pursue violent Palestinian groups "to the bitter end."

Left behind was Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, promoted by Israel and the U.S. as a replacement for Arafat. His position has been badly weakened by the spiraling violence, burying his efforts to persuade Palestinian militants to halt attacks against Israelis instead of ordering a crackdown.

AFP adds: The Israeli army has been ordered to "completely wipe out" the Palestinian Islamic militant group Hamas, army radio reported on Thursday, a day after a suicide bomber killed 16 people on a Jerusalem bus.

The order, which directs the military to use "whatever means necessary," was issued following a meeting of Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz with the army's top command shortly after the attack.

Everyone, "from the lowliest member to Sheikh Ahmad Yassin," a Hamas founder and its spiritual guide, is a legitimate target, the report said.

India divided on sending troops to Iraq

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government is caught between a rock and a hard place over Washington's request to supply troops for a stabilising force in Iraq, observers said Thursday, as the issue threatened to divide the nation.

On the one hand, they said New Delhi wishes to retain good relations with Washington, but on the other there is fierce political pressure at home not to accede to the request.

Should Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee give the go-ahead for the deployment and significant casualties occur, he could face a severe political backlash ahead of key state and national elections in the next year.

New Delhi had opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq from the outset, saying any action against Baghdad should be co-ordinated by the United Nations.

India's deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, who is touring the US, has denied any US pressure on the issue but has hit out at opposition members who have objected to the deployment, saying they are uninformed.

Pakistan epicentre of global terror: Advani

US urged to work with India against 'terrorism'

PTI, AFP, Los Angeles

Declaring that the epicentre of international terrorism lay in Pakistan, Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani has said a strategic relationship between India and US is an "important component" to fight jihadi terrorism which is a threat to the security of the two countries.

"The epicentre of international terrorism lies in India's immediate neighbourhood. It gives me no joy in pointing fingers, but the involvement of Pakistan can no longer be ignored," Advani said at the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles on Wednesday.

Advani said that India and the United States have to work in active partnership to defeat the menace of terrorism fuelled by religious extremism.

"I would say that this is an important component in the strategic relationship between our two countries, because jihadi terrorism is a threat not only to the security of our two countries, but to peace and tranquility

around the world," he said.

Pointing out that India had been a victim of terrorism for more than two decades, Advani said that the sponsors and instigators of this menace hailed from the same common pool that also provides (support to) the terrorists that have been active against the United States.

He said India was determined to see that the scourge of terrorism is decimated, and urged Pakistan to "heed the voices of sanity and give up its futile path of confrontation with India."

AFP adds: India's Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani on Wednesday urged the United States to help New Delhi battle the threat of Islamic "terrorism" from rival Pakistan.

The call, which came in a speech extolling closer Indo-US ties made during a visit to the West Coast city of Los Angeles, appeared to underscore a key issue at play between Washington and New Delhi over

Pakistan.

"The epicenter of international terrorism lies in India's immediate neighbourhood. It gives me no joy in pointing fingers, but the involvement of Pakistan can no longer be ignored," he told the World Affairs Council.

"India and the United States have to work in active partnership to defeat the menace of terrorism fuelled by religious extremism."

"This is an important component in the strategic relationship between our two countries because jihadi terrorism is a threat not only to the security of our two countries, but to peace and tranquillity in the world," he said.

The comments came after Advani reportedly made it clear during his visit to Washington earlier this week that India wanted to see US pressure applied to Pakistan to end what New Delhi terms "cross-border terrorism" before it will decide on whether to agree to a US request for Indian troops in Iraq.

US troops nab about 400 Iraqi suspects

AFP, Washington

The US military, stung by sporadic guerrilla strikes in Iraq, has lunged back at their presumed assailants, rounding up about 400 suspect in what is seen as one of the largest combat operations since the fall of Baghdad, US defence officials said late on Wednesday.

"It's an ongoing operation, and we don't discuss the size or scope of such things until they are over," Central Command spokesman Lieutenant Ryan Fitzgerald pointed out.

But he said Operation "Peninsula Strike" was "one of the largest operations in a continuing effort to secure the peace in Iraq."

The two-phased operation consisted of a series of raids to eradicate Baath Party loyalists, paramilitary groups and other "subversive elements" that US intelligence believed had found refuge in several communities perched on a peninsula along the Tigris River, northeast of the town of Balad, according to the command.

US Senate passes bill to ban imports from Myanmar

AFP, Washington

The US Senate on Wednesday overwhelmingly passed legislation to ban the import of goods made in Myanmar and freeze the Yangon military government's assets in the US in protest to a recent crackdown on the opposition.

The "Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003," which requires mirror legislation in the House of Representatives, contains a basket of economic and political sanctions.

They include expansion of an existing visa ban on members of the Yangon government past and present, their family members and associates, and a requirement that Washington oppose loans or other aid to Myanmar by international financial institutions.

Passage of the bill, by a 97 to one vote, follows the May 30 arrest and detention of democratic opposition leader and Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in what the US State Department has termed "an ambush by government affiliated thugs."

The arrest was condemned by democratic governments around the world.

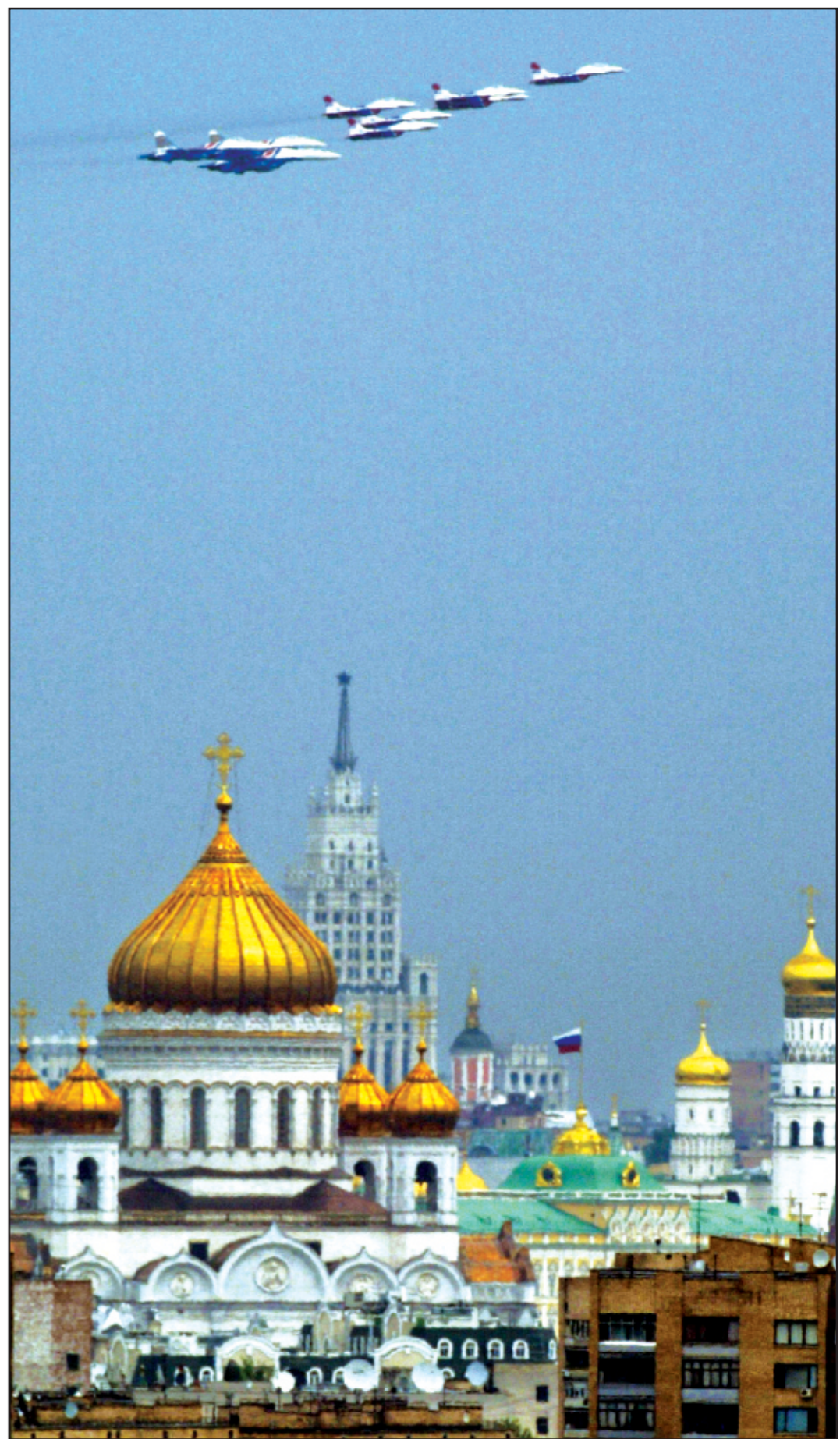


PHOTO: AFP

Military jets fly in the sky over Moscow as part of the military parade marking the Independence Day of Russia on Thursday. Called Independence Day for short, the holiday's official name is the "Day of the Passage of the Declaration of State Sovereignty." This year's festivities marked the first large-scale celebration of the day in 1990 when Russia's Soviet adopted a document declaring the country's sovereignty within the Soviet Union.

Anti-prostitution norms not met by S Asia: US

Sex trafficking rampant in 15 nations

PTI, AFP, Washington

India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka do not meet minimum standards to end prostitution, child labour and other categories of trafficking in human beings but are making "significant efforts" to meet minimum standards, the US State Department says in its latest annual "Trafficking in Persons" report.

The report alleges that India is a country of origin, transit and destination for thousands of trafficked persons.

Internal trafficking of women, men, and children for purposes of sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, bonded labour and indentured servitude is widespread. Indian men and women also are put into situations of coerced labour and sometimes slave-like conditions in countries in the Middle East and the West, the report claims.

India is a destination for sex

tourists from Europe and the United States. Bangladeshi women are trafficked to India or transited through India en route to Pakistan and the Middle East for purposes of sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and forced labour. Nepalese women and girls are trafficked to India for commercial and sexual exploitation, it alleges.

However, says the report, the Central and State governments support prevention campaigns. The Central Government and an international organisation signed a \$400 million agreement for a five-year programme to prevent trafficking and to assist at-risk children.

AFP adds: The United States has cited 15 nations, including NATO allies Greece and Turkey, for failing to adequately fight sex trafficking, opening the way for possible sanctions.

In addition to Greece and Turkey, the nations affected are: Belize,

Bosnia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Georgia, Haiti, Kazakhstan, Liberia, Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, Suriname and Uzbekistan, the State Department said in its third annual "Trafficking in Persons" report on Wednesday.

The countries named will be subject to cut-offs in non-humanitarian and non-trade-related US aid unless they take steps to improve their performance by October 1 or receive a waiver, officials said.

Affected aid could include military, educational and cultural assistance, although Washington wants to work with countries to help them improve their policies.

"Countries can avoid sanctions by working with us and taking prompt action to improve their policies and practices," Secretary of State Colin Powell said in presenting the report.

Pop King settles suit with former advisers

AP, Los Angeles

A \$12 million lawsuit against Michael Jackson by former financial advisers that could have revealed details of his finances has been settled, his lawyer said Wednesday.

The attorney declined to discuss terms. The case had been scheduled for trial June 18. "It just got to a point where we agreed on what we needed to do," Zia Modabber said in a phone interview, adding that Jackson "was thrilled."

Calls seeking comment from the plaintiffs' attorney, Pierce O'Donnell, were not immediately returned. Union Investment Corp. of South Korea and its financial adviser, Myung-Ho Lee, claimed Jackson owed them \$12 million in unpaid fees and expenses for their efforts to put his financial affairs in order.



PHOTO: AFP

US pop singer Michael Jackson (R) greets fans while visiting City Hall on Wednesday in Gary, Indiana. Jackson made his first public appearance in his hometown in over twenty years after settling a law suit with his former advisers.

Blix to write book about his inside view of Iraq

AP, United Nations

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix has said he's going back to Sweden to pick mushrooms and possibly blueberries when he retires on June 30, but now it looks like he may be much busier.

Blix told The Associated Press he'd like to write a book about his inside view of the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the prelude to the US-led war that toppled Saddam Hussein.

"I think documentation is important, and certainly getting the history straight is important," he said in an interview Tuesday. "I saw an important part of this operation."

"If I can put together something, yes, I'd like to do that," Blix said. "I'm trying to think of what I could say."

Republicans reject call for formal probe on WMDs

AP, Washington

Congressional Republicans on Wednesday rejected Democratic calls for a formal investigation into intelligence on Iraq's weapons programs, contending that such a probe could harm intelligence agencies' work.

The majority Republicans said the routine oversight by Congress' Intelligence and Armed Services committees will be adequate to evaluate intelligence findings that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Those findings have served as the basis for the war on Iraq, but no such weapons have been found.

The inability of Democrats and Republicans to agree on an inquiry deepens partisan divisions in an area with potential consequences in the 2004 election: whether prewar intelligence on Iraq was inaccurate or had been manipulated to make

the case for war. Republican lawmakers say there is no evidence of wrongdoing and an investigation would suggest "there's something dreadfully wrong and you're going to have to set things straight," said Sen. Pat Roberts, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Roberts, R-Kan., said his committee will evaluate prewar intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and its connection to terrorist groups. It will examine whether the findings were reasonable and accurate. The CIA has begun submitting details of the intelligence that supported administration claims on the weapons.

"If it proves out that there is some concern and some kind of egregious mistake, why obviously, we'll go further with that with further action," Roberts said.

The committee's top Democrat, Sen. Jay Rockefeller of West

Virginia, said he will continue pressing Roberts for an investigation.

"What they appear to be doing is entirely inadequate and slow-paced and potentially kind of sleepwalking through history," he said.

Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., another committee member, said, "It takes a special effort to put this committee into an oversight gear and it will not happen with the routine business-as-usual approach suggested by Republicans."

Democrats say the credibility of US intelligence is at stake because of the failure to locate weapons of mass destruction and problems in some of the evidence cited by the administration. Documents indicating Iraq imported uranium from Niger were forgeries. Aluminum tubes described as intended for nuclear weapons were probably meant for conventional artillery rockets.