



Oscar-winning movie legend Gregory Peck dead at 87

AFP, Los Angeles

One of Hollywood's last great leading men, Gregory Peck, famed for his heroic roles in such classics as "To Kill a Mockingbird," died Thursday at the age of 87.

Peck, known for his quiet dignity, became an icon of cinema's golden era with starring roles in more than 60 films, including "Roman Holiday," "Cape Fear" and "Spellbound" and won the best actor Oscar for "Mockingbird" in 1962.

A classic star who became a respected elder statesman of cinema, Peck died peacefully in his Los Angeles home at 4:00am Thursday (1200 GMT) with his French-born wife of 48 years, Veronique, holding his hand, publicist Monroe Friedman said.

His death is a stunning loss to the movie industry and cuts one of the last remaining links to Hollywood's golden age.

US blames Hamas for violence

Diplomats rush to salvage roadmap

AFP, Washington

The White House Thursday squarely blamed resurgent Middle East violence on the extremist group Hamas, as US diplomats scrambled to salvage the tattered roadmap for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

More than 60 Israelis and Palestinians have been killed since Bush won support from both sides for the so-called "roadmap" to peace at a landmark June 4 summit in Aqaba, Jordan.

Israel on Thursday vowed to "completely wipe out" Hamas, which has battled its occupation of the Palestinian territories with waves of suicide bombings and other attacks.

For Washington, Hamas was clearly responsible for the new cycle

of violence.

"The terrorists are Hamas," said White House spokesman Ari Fleischer. "They are the enemies to peace, in the president's judgment."

"The issue is not Israel. The issue is not the Palestinian Authority. The issue are terrorists who are killing in an attempt to stop a hopeful process from moving forward," he said.

Fleischer warned Israel Tuesday that its airstrikes violated the roadmap and imperiled progress along its charted course -- but on Thursday blasted Hamas, which has rejected the roadmap.

Fleischer downplayed the likelihood that Bush would ramp up active US telephone diplomacy and reach out personally to prime ministers Ariel Sharon of Israel or

Mahmud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority.

However US Secretary of State Colin Powell and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice will call officials in the region, he said.

Washington on Thursday dispatched John Wolf, the senior US diplomat charged with overseeing implementation of the roadmap, to the Middle East. He is to begin to work on Saturday, officials said.

And the US State Department announced that the international diplomatic quartet that drew up the roadmap will meet on June 22 in Amman, Jordan.

The meeting will take place on the sidelines of a special June 21-23 World Economic Forum at the Dead Sea. Powell, UN chief Kofi Annan, Russian Foreign Minister Igor

Ivanov and representatives of the European Union will be present, US officials said.

In a telephone call with his Egyptian counterpart Ahmed Maher, Powell urged Egypt to pressure Hamas to stop attacks on Israel, the Egyptian state news agency MENA reported.

Maher in turn warned that Israel's "violent measures will not achieve security and the US administration must intervene with the Israeli government for it to halt its aggressions against Palestinian civilians in Gaza".

On Tuesday, two people died as Israeli helicopters tried but failed to kill Hamas political leader Abdul Aziz al-Rantissi, while three members of another family were killed in another raid the same day that also missed its target.

Annan calls for ME peace force

AFP, Jerusalem

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called for the dispatch of an international peacekeeping force to stem the spiralling violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, according to an interview published here Friday.

Annan told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz that the intervention of US monitors to shepherd through President George W. Bush's "road map" for peace probably would not be enough to bring an immediate halt to the bloodshed.

"The monitoring mechanism that will be put in place next week is a beginning and it may be enough if the parties are able to break the cycle of violence," the UN chief said.

"In the interim I would like to see an armed peacekeeping force act as a buffer between the Israelis and Palestinians," he told Haaretz in New York.

He made his remarks as senior US diplomat John Wolf was expected in the Middle East to begin overseeing implementation of

the roadmap launched at a June 4 summit convened by Bush in Aqaba, Jordan.

Prospects for peace have since been set back by an explosion of violence that has left more than 60 people dead, with Israel and the radical Palestinian group Hamas declaring all-out war on each other.

Annan said the international community had to back efforts by the new Palestinian prime minister, Mahmud Abbas, to try to end suicide bombings, such as the attack on a Jerusalem bus Wednesday that killed 17 Israelis.

The UN secretary general also disputed the decision by the United States and Israel to try to sideline Palestine leader Yasser Arafat from the peace process, saying he has "not been entirely negative."

It would be better "to encourage him (Arafat) to work for the peace process and to work to support Mr. Abbas. They need to work together for the effort to succeed," Annan said.

Blair rejigs cabinet

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair shook up his cabinet Thursday, naming political pitbull John Reid as health minister and burying the role of lord chancellor after a 1,398-year run.

Reid succeeded Alan Milburn, a loyal Blairite whose resignation -- in order to spend more time with his boys aged 11 and six -- came as a complete surprise after days of speculation in London about who was going where.

Stepping down too were Helen Liddell as secretary for Scottish affairs, and -- as expected -- Lord Alexander "Derry" Irvine, who as lord chancellor was de facto justice minister and more.

Moving up was Peter Hain, Britain's chief delegate to the European Union's constitutional drafting committee, who replaced

Reid as leader of the House of Commons, charged with organizing the government's legislative agenda.

Moving in was Lord Charles Falconer, Blair's law school roommate, who joins the cabinet with responsibility for an all-new department of constitutional affairs, spokesman for Blair's office said.

Staying put were the kingpins of Blair's cabinet: Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Home Secretary David Blunkett and Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon.

Political analysts kept their bets open on Hoon, however, after he was widely tipped to get a new, high-profile job as thanks for performing well for Blair in the rocky run-up to the Iraq war.

US vows to maintain nuke preeminence

REUTERS, Washington

The United States will maintain its preeminence in nuclear weapons and could resume testing under certain circumstances, but it is not lowering the threshold for using atomic bombs, a key US official said on Thursday.

Linton Brooks, who heads the agency that maintains the US nuclear weapons stockpile, said the Bush administration has no current plans to end a decade-long moratorium on nuclear testing or develop new types of atomic arms.

Brooks defended administration proposals to allow research into possible new, low-yield nuclear

weapons that could incinerate enemy biological weapons or destroy deeply buried bunkers, and into converting two existing larger bombs for use against underground targets.

The administration won congressional support for the measures in May. Lawmakers must work out differences between House of Representatives and Senate versions before final passage.

"We're not going to restart the arms race," Brooks, under secretary of energy for nuclear security and chief of the National Nuclear Security Administration, told a briefing with defense reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli police helicopter patrols the city with the 'Dome of the Rock' in the background in Jerusalem on Thursday. The Palestinian Islamic militant movement Hamas, urged its leaders to "mobilise" and take all measures and precautions needed to deal with Israel's declaration of war against them. It also warned the Gaza Strip would be turned into a "graveyard" for the Israeli army in case of an Israeli re-occupation of the territory.

Trio may freeze N Korean N-reactor project

AFP, Tokyo

Japan, South Korea and the United States may freeze a nuclear reactor project in North Korea as part of growing diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang over its development of nuclear arms, a report said Friday.

Senior government officials of the three countries are to discuss the issue during a two-day meeting in Honolulu, which is to end later in the day, Kyodo News said, quoting diplomatic sources.

Under the plan, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), an international consortium created to build two light-water reactors in North Korea, would delay placing orders for major parts needed for the construction, according to Kyodo.

Such a postponement would effectively mean the three countries, which are executive board members of KEDO, had frozen the development, it said.

Government officials in Tokyo declined to confirm the report.

The KEDO project is already behind schedule despite its original target of completing one of the two reactors in 2003.

Construction of the building to house one of the reactors only began in August last year, with operations now expected to start sometime after the middle of 2005, officials said.

The consortium was created under the 1994 Agreed Framework between North Korea and the United States.

The accord was to provide North Korea with two nuclear-power reactors to be deemed unsuitable for weapons production, plus 500,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil a year, in return for a freeze on the Stalinist state's nuclear arms programme.

KEDO has maintained construction work on the reactors but suspended shipments of fuel oil to North Korea from December as punishment for Pyongyang's admission in October to running a secret enriched uranium nuclear weapons programme in violation of the 1994 agreement.

Meanwhile, a North Korean freighter left a western Japanese port on Friday as relations between the two countries worsened after Tokyo warned of tighter inspections on North Korean vessels.

The 298-tonne freighter Namsan-3 left Maizuru port some 400 kilometers (248 miles) west of Tokyo, carrying home electronics

goods, machinery parts and used bicycles, officials said.

The freighter also carried some of the cargo that the Man Gyong Bong-92, a North Korean ferry providing the only direct passenger link between the two countries, had been due to ship back to North Korea this week.

The ferry called off a scheduled port call here Sunday as protests grew against Pyongyang over the nuclear standoff and other issues.

Japan has warned it would boost inspections of North Korean ships to check Pyongyang's suspected drug smuggling and missile parts trade.

"We sent three extra officers this time after we concluded that we needed strict inspections," an official of Osaka Immigration Bureau said, referring to the Namsan-3.

Suspicious are growing that North Korean ships visiting Japan -- the Man Gyong Bong in particular -- are engaged in smuggling narcotics into the country and illegally purchasing components for missile development from Japanese firms.



PHOTO: AFP

Greenpeace activists hold a banner reading "Oil Kills" in front of Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul on Thursday to protest against the "Tale of Three Seas" energy conference attended by the biggest oil companies in the world and several ministers on a yacht touring the Bosphorus.

Fierce clashes as Serbia arrests war crimes suspect

REUTERS, Belgrade

Serbian police commandos stormed a Belgrade apartment on Friday and arrested a top war crimes suspect while officers clashed with his hardline nationalist supporters in the street outside.

More than 100 riot police and camouflage-uniformed gendarmes fired tear gas and stun grenades at the hostile crowd before a commando squad battered their way into the flat of former Yugoslav army colonel, Veselin Slijivancanin.

The Interior Ministry confirmed Slijivancanin had been taken into custody. The arrest was made after the United States called on Belgrade to detain the former army officer so it could approve further aid to impoverished Serbia.

The arrest of Slijivancanin, who had been a fugitive since former President Slobodan Milosevic was toppled in October 2000, came after a tense 10-hour standoff outside the flat where he had apparently returned to celebrate his 50th birthday.

Anti-regime protests continue in Tehran

US also turns up heat on Iran

AFP, Tehran

Anti-regime protestors took to the streets of Tehran for a third night late Thursday, drawing strong support from the United States and new warnings to the Islamic regime over its policies toward Iraq and its alleged nuclear weapons programme.

Demonstrators directed their venom at supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has accused Washington of fomenting the unrest, and called again for him to step down.

A hundred students managed to break out of their university campus after midnight and take to the street after smashing down a door.

They chanted slogans hostile to Iran's hardline Islamic leadership and hurled stones at police and members of Islamist militias.

Police fired teargas to disperse hundreds of other student demonstrators who had lit fires inside the campus.

Thousands of cars converged near the campus, with drivers sounding their horns in support of

the students. But unlike the two preceding nights, few people rallied in the area on foot.

Anti-riot squads largely succeeded in blocking the roads, preventing both drivers and the extremist Ansar Hezbollah militia from getting too near the campus.

Armed with clubs and chains, the militia members roared around on motorbikes, smashing car windcreens and insulting the occupants, and even confronting the police at times, witnesses said.

Khamenei on Thursday accused the United States of stirring trouble in the country.

He said Washington had realized it could not overthrow the Islamic republic militarily and "wanted to create trouble in Iran ... divide the people and create a chasm between the regime and the populace".

In a speech in the southern city of Varamin broadcast on state television, he said that if the United States "sees that disgruntled people and adventurers want to cause trouble, and if it can turn them into mercenaries, it will not hesitate to do so in giving them its support."



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian students chant slogans during an overnight anti-government demonstration outside the campus of Tehran University early Friday for the third consecutive night. The United States gave its full backing on Thursday to anti-government protestors in Iran who have defied threats of a crackdown to demonstrate against the Islamic regime this week. At the same time, though, the State Department denied charges from Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that Washington is fomenting the protests because it realised it could not topple the government by force.