

Sharon offers temporary truce to Hamas

AFP, AP, Jerusalem
 A top aide to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Friday delivered a ceasefire proposal for a halt in its war against Palestinian militants, a senior Palestinian source told AFP.

Under the terms of the ceasefire, initially to last three days, Israel would stop all attempts to assassinate Palestinian militants in exchange for an agreement by the radical Hamas group to halt all attacks on Israel, including the firing of Qassam rockets, the source said.

Following the three-day period, the truce would be renewed on a daily basis while the two sides discuss plans for a comprehensive ceasefire, he said.

The offer, delivered by Sharon's chief of staff Dov Weisglass to Palestinian finance minister Salam Fayad, was discussed late Friday at a meeting between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and his security chiefs, he added.

But he would not comment on the reaction of the security chiefs meeting in the West Bank town of Ramallah. The meeting is to be continued on Saturday, Palestinian sources said.

A senior adviser to Arafat earlier

said the meeting was called to discuss an apparent US proposal for a ceasefire, amid heavy pressure from Washington for Israel and the Palestinians to return to the US-backed roadmap peace plan.

"It will continue in the morning to follow up on all the issues and to adopt measures and decisions that will serve the higher Palestinian cause," said Nabil Abu Rudeina.

Among those attending were Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan, the head of national security in the West Bank and Gaza, General Abdul Razeq al-Majada, head of public security in Gaza City, Saeb al-Ajajez, and intelligence chief General Amin al-Hindi.

More than 60 people have been killed since a US-Israeli-Palestinian peace summit in Jordan on June 4, most of them in Israeli helicopter strikes targeting Hamas in Gaza and in a Hamas suicide bombing on a Jerusalem bus.

AP adds: Israel and the Palestinians are resuming security talks despite a week of bombings and missile strikes that have killed 60 people, officials said Saturday.

On the table is a proposal that Israel withdraw from parts of the Gaza Strip, to positions held before

the outbreak of fighting in September 2000, officials on both sides said.

Israel also offered to halt military operations for three days to improve the atmosphere, a senior Palestinian official said.

Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan and Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz were to meet later Saturday, said Raanan Gissin, an aide to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

It would be the first high-level meeting since President Bush launched the "road map" peace plan at a Middle East summit last week.

The Dahlan-Mofaz meeting coincides with the arrival of the first contingent of US monitors, who are to supervise implementation of the peace plan. The team of 10 to 15 CIA and State Department officials is headed by John Wolf, an assistant secretary of state.

Under the peace plan, Israel is to withdraw gradually from territory it reoccupied in the past 32 months of fighting, while the Palestinians are required to dismantle militias, including Hamas.

However, Hamas broke off truce talks with Palestinian Prime Minister

Mahmoud Abbas last week, and violence has only escalated, with 36 Palestinians and 24 Israelis killed since the Middle East summit.

Israel carried out seven missile strikes against Hamas targets, including a failed attempt on the life of a Hamas leader, Abdel Aziz Rantisi. Hamas blew up a Jerusalem bus to avenge Rantisi, and carried out a number of other attacks.

Israel has also said it is widening its campaign against Hamas and will target top leaders, among them Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin, in addition to members of the military wing.

Despite the deterioration, behind-the-scenes contacts continued in recent days. The United States and Egypt stepped up mediation efforts, while Palestinian Finance Minister Salam Fayad talked by phone to Dov Weisglass, a senior Sharon aide.

Palestinian leaders and security officials met late Friday and again Saturday morning to discuss a proposed Israeli pullback, and said they are willing to take over areas from which Israel withdraws.



PHOTO: AFP
 An Iraqi walks down the road past a burning oil pipeline in Iraq's northern oilfield of Makhoul on Friday after what residents said were twin bomb attacks aimed at sabotaging deliveries which the US-led coalition is poised to resume. The pipeline is nine miles away from the key refinery town of Baiji.



PHOTO: AFP
 A grenade explodes close to a US army vehicle during clashes in the northern city of Mosul on Friday. A US soldier was critically wounded as fierce clashes broke out on the streets of Iraq's northern capital between US troops and Iraqi gunmen. "Our soldier is in very bad shape, full of shrapnel," Brigadier General Benjamin Freakley told AFP.

Shahi Imam raps 'secret' meet on Ayodhya

PTI, New Delhi
 Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid Syed Ahmed Bukhari on Saturday criticised the "secret" meeting of president of All India Muslim Personal Law Board Maulana Rabey Hasani Nadvi with Kanchi seer Jayendra Saraswati on Ayodhya issue recently and said the board would not be allowed to "bargain" on the issue of Babri Masjid.

Maintaining that first the Shankaracharya approached him through a "Muslim middleman" to hold a secret talk on Babri issue, Bukhari said in a statement that why the meeting between Maulana Rabey and Shankaracharya on June seven in Lucknow was kept "secret".

The Kanchi seer, he claimed, had sent some suggestions through the same middleman for the construction of Ram Temple at the demolished site of Babri Masjid, which he had rejected insisting that the "negotiations should be transparent and open for all".

Militias attack Tehran protesters

BBC ONLINE, Tehran
 Security forces and headline supporters of Iran's conservative leadership have clashed with large crowds in the capital Tehran who were protesting against clerical rule.

Tear gas, clubs, and iron bars were used to disperse the protesters.

Hardline vigilantes were seen pulling people from cars and beating them. Gunfire was also heard.

Saturday morning's demonstrations were the fourth consecutive night of protests about the slow pace of reform in the country.

The Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had warned demonstrators they would be shown no pity if they continued their protests.

Despite attempts by the security forces to seal off the area, roads near Tehran University were clogged with cars and protesters on foot, hooting horns and shouting slogans.

Stones were thrown and chants wishing death on Ayatollah Khamenei were heard.

Such condemnation of the supreme leader is said by correspondents to be unprecedented in Iran.

Eyewitnesses said some police officers stood by as militiamen beat the protesters.

"Most were armed with sticks and chains but a few had Kalashnikovs," a Reuters correspondent reported from the scene.

The authorities have accused the United States and Iranian exiles of fomenting the unrest.

Exiled opposition groups have been encouraging the protests through US-based satellite channels.

Uniformed and plainclothes officers saturated the city on Friday, stopping and searching vehicles in

Two Koreas hold symbolic ceremony to relink railways

AFP, Seoul
 South and North Korea Saturday held a symbolic ceremony to reconnect cross-border railways severed for more than 50 years, pool reports said, rekindling hopes of reconciliation on the Korean peninsula.

In an apparent bid to show off inter-Korean unity to the outside world at a time when its nuclear weapons drive has left it increasingly isolated, North Korea insisted on putting on a gala ceremony, according to Yonhap news agency.

But the South, mindful of its allies' calls for strong international pressure on the North over its suspected nuclear programme, wanted a low-key event.

"Having cleared barbed wires and mines in the demilitarized zone (DMZ), we have restored a national artery," South Korea's chief delegate Cho Myung-Kyoon, a director of the unification ministry said.

Early polls likely in India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi
 A flurry of meetings by the top leadership of India's two main political parties — ruling BJP and opposition Congress — have given rise to strong speculation that fresh general elections are likely sometime early next year, six months ahead of schedule.

The BJP is holding a four-day brainstorming session in Bombay from June 17 and the party's top policy-making forum the national executive meets early next month to finalise the strategies for next year's parliamentary polls as well as elections to legislatures in four states later this year.

The Congress had earlier this month held a meeting of chief ministers of 15 states ruled by the party in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, and the party top leadership is meeting again in Shimla, the former summer capital of the British rulers, early July. The purpose is the same: frame electoral strategies.

If indications emanating from

BJP central headquarters here are anything to go by, a majority view in the party favours February next year as the time for fresh general elections although the tenure of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee ends in October 2004.

February, however, could be the BJP choice only if the party can wrest power from Congress in three of the four states which go to assembly polls later this year. These states are Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Chattisgarh ruled by Congress.

The assessment in BJP is that if the party does succeed in winning in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh assembly polls, it will give boost to its prospects in parliamentary elections in February, said the sources.

There is a section in BJP, party sources say, which would like advancing fresh parliamentary elections later this year to coincide with the assembly polls in the four states.

This section feels that BJP can capitalise on a perceived anti-incumbency factor in the three

LTTE vessel blown up, politician slain

AFP, Colombo
 A Tamil Tiger rebel merchant ship was blown up Saturday, while a politician opposed to the guerrillas was gunned down, compounding problems for the island's faltering peace bid, officials said.

The vessel belonging to the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was being towed by a smaller boat when a navy craft confronted it in high seas, Defence Secretary Austin Fernando said.

He said the navy had told him the smaller craft sailed off, leaving the ship behind. The crew reportedly blew up the vessel before the navy could board it, Fernando said.

"We have taken steps to report the matter to the monitoring mission," he said referring to the Scandinavian team monitoring a truce between government forces and Tamil Tiger guerrillas, which has been in place since February last year.

The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) said it had begun an investigation.

"We are told there were 12 Sea Tigers. They jumped over board. There are concerns that the ship has sunk," SLMM spokesman Agnes Bragadottir said. "We have no information if the Sea Tigers have been rescued or not."

There was no immediate reaction from the LTTE, but rebel sources said that the navy had attacked the ship in international waters where the Sri Lankan security forces would have no authority to open fire.

The Norwegian-backed ceasefire between the government and the rebels does not extend fully to action at sea where there had been several clashes between Tiger boats and the navy.

A pro-rebel website, Tamilnet.com, reported Saturday that the LTTE's political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan had told SLMM chief Tryggve Tellefsen Friday that there could be confrontations with the navy.



PHOTO: AFP
 An injured boy is wheeled into the al-Shifa hospital, following a helicopter missile attack by Israeli forces on a vehicle Friday in the al-Sabra sector of Gaza City.

Pak court issues notices to leaders on educational qualifications

REUTERS, Islamabad
 Pakistan's top court sent notices Friday to several leaders of an Islamic alliance locked in a bitter row with the government, to answer whether their educational qualifications met election criteria.

The Supreme Court sent the notices on a petition by a private lawyer seeking the disqualification of 65 members of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, a six-party Islamic alliance.

MMA is engaged in a standoff with the government over the powers of military President Pervez Musharraf — a key ally of the United States in its war on terror.

The MMA wants Musharraf to resign as army chief and seeks a reversal of constitutional changes which undermine parliament.

The lawyer, Aslam Khaki, has argued that the degrees held by MMA members from Islamic seminaries were not equivalent to graduate degrees, the minimum qualification set for those contesting the 2002 national elections.



PHOTO: AFP
 A group of Indian Sikhs devotees, en route to celebrate the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev in Lahore, cross the Indian-Pakistan border at the Wagah border post on Saturday. In the sixteenth century Guru Arjun Dev started the construction of the holiest of Sikh shrines called Hari Mandir, also known as the Golden Temple, in the Indian city of Amritsar.

No immediate meeting with Vajpayee: Jamali

ANI, Islamabad
 Even as the roadmap for the Indo-Pak peace process is being given final touches at both ends, Pakistan seems to be adopting a cautious approach as far as breaking the deadlock is concerned.

On Friday Pakistani Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Jamali said a meeting with his Indian counterpart Atal Bihari Vajpayee was not on his current agenda.

He, however, said he was hopeful that the meeting would take place in the "very near future". It would be a meaningful dialogue, he added.

Jamali said that at present the groundwork was underway to initiate secretary-level talks, which would, in turn, determine the future of prime ministerial-level talks. The News reported on Saturday.

He parried a question referring to LK Advani's recent remarks made in the US that Pakistan was the epicentre of terrorism. He said, "This matter pertained to Indian premier and it was up to Vajpayee to decide

whether the statements of his deputy were encouraging the peace process or otherwise."

Meanwhile PTI from Dehradun quoted Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes saying that there was no change in India's stand that Pakistan must stop cross-border terrorism before resumption of any talks between the two countries.

To a question, he said there was no change in the level of infiltration of militants from across the border. "More or less, things are the same on the border."

"Confidence-building measures (undertaken by the two countries) are not an indication towards resumption of the dialogue process," Fernandes, who witnessed the Indian Military Academy passing out parade in Dehradun, said.

"There has been some talks regarding resumption of bus and train services to Pakistan. But that does not mean we are moving towards resumption of talks," he said.