



PHOTO: AFP

A young Palestinian girl grabs a peace placard held by a protestor next to her on Saturday in Jerusalem's Old City as part of an Israeli and Palestinian human chain for peace, after a week of violence in the region that claimed lives of 41 Palestinians and 23 Israelis.

Accord nears on Israeli pullout from Gaza

US peace monitor starts mission

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian officials were reportedly near agreement Sunday on an Israeli withdrawal from parts of Gaza as a senior US envoy began the task of implementing an international "roadmap" for peace.

Veteran diplomat John Wolf arrived late Saturday amid stepped-up US pressure on both sides to end one of the worst cycles of bloodshed in their 32-month-old conflict and advance on the peace plan championed by President George W. Bush.

Israeli army radio said the military was preparing Sunday to pull out of the northern Gaza Strip following talks late Saturday on handing over security responsibility to the Palestinians.

It said General Amos Gilad, coordinator of Israeli activities in the Palestinian territories, offered the move in return for a Palestinian

pledge to prevent militants from launching anti-Israeli attacks from the evacuated areas.

Senior Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan agreed to the deal but was also seeking a pullout from the West Bank town of Bethlehem as well as an end to Israeli incursions and attempts to kill militant leaders, the radio said.

The report did not say when the military might pull out of the northern Gaza Strip, from which the Palestinian militant group Hamas has fired a stream of home-made rockets into Israel, doing negligible damage.

The moves, in line with the peace roadmap, followed one of the bloodiest periods in the Palestinian uprising, with more than 60 people killed since a June 4 Israeli-Palestinian-US summit to launch the plan.

Israeli public radio quoted Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as telling his

weekly cabinet meeting Sunday that his forces would continue to take pre-emptive actions to curb Palestinian suicide bombings.

"Israel will continue to act against targets identified as human bombs, and unless the Palestinians decide to destroy the infrastructure of terrorist organisations, Israel will take care of it," he said.

Seven Israeli helicopter strikes in Gaza last week left 27 people dead.

Among them were six members of Hamas, which has carried out scores of suicide bombings, including an attack on a Jerusalem bus that killed 17 people on Wednesday.

Israeli authorities, in accordance with the roadmap, dismantled two Jewish settlement outposts in the West Bank on Sunday. But Israel's Peace Now group said four more had been set up in the past week.

Israeli radio said that Wolf, heading a 12-member US team,

began his work as peace monitor late Saturday by conferring with Avi Dichter, head of Israel's domestic intelligence service Shin Beth.

He was also to meet with Sharon, Foreign Minister Sylvan Shalom, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz and military and security service officials on Monday. Palestinian sources said he would also have talks with Palestinian officials.

Wolf, who has little Middle East experience, was named by Bush to oversee implementation of the plan that provides for a series of confidence-building measures ahead of the creation of a Palestinian state in 2005.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell kept up the heat on both sides to stick to the peace blueprint, telling the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in Washington that "we have no choice but to move forward".

Pentagon rebukes French minister

AFP, Washington

The US Department of Defense on Saturday dismissed comments by French Defense Minister Michele Alliot-Marie, who has accused her US counterpart Donald Rumsfeld of espousing a US-centered vision of the world.

"The French defense minister is entitled to her own opinion," said department spokesman Jim Turner. "However, her opinion does not accurately characterize the policy or position of the secretary of defense, or the position of the US government."

The testy exchange came amid signs of a general thaw in Franco-US relations that have been jolted by France's refusal to support a US-led invasion of Iraq and its threat to veto a UN Security Council resolution authorizing use of force against Baghdad.

Lebanese PM's TV station comes under attack

AFP, Beirut

The headquarters of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's broadcasting network came under rocket attack overnight in the Lebanese capital, causing damage but no casualties, his Future TV said Sunday.

Two 107-mm rockets damaged equipment in the main studios of Future TV and Radio Orient, which also belongs to the premier, in the attack at around 1:30 a.m. (2230 GMT Saturday).

Information Minister Michel Samaha condemned the rocket attack, saying "the message is directed not only against this channel but the stability and security of the country".

Iraq occupation to last longer

AFP, Washington

The prospect of a long and difficult occupation of Iraq was brought home to Americans this week as US forces moved sharply to crush an armed resistance that has left a trail of US dead.

Over the past 10 days, US forces have surged into the Baathist stronghold of Fallujah, raided suspected terrorist camps in northern and western Iraq, and battled armed irregulars in the Badat area northeast of Baghdad.

The full scope of the operations are still secret, but they were clearly the biggest since President George W. Bush declared on May 1 the end

of major combat operations in Iraq, and suggested that the war is far from over.

US commanders said the 147,000 US troops now in the country are sufficient to stabilize Iraq but they did not know when conditions will allow soldiers to begin going home.

"We do have plans, but they're all conditions-based. It depends on what the enemy does," Lieutenant General David McKiernan, the commander of coalition ground forces in Iraq, told reporters Friday.

As US troops have increased their presence throughout the country in order to restore order and security,

they have been targeted by hit-and-run attacks, mainly in the predominantly Sunni areas north of Baghdad.

By the Pentagon's count, 40 US military personnel have been killed since May 1 - a dozen of them by hostile fire, and most of those in the past three weeks.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged this week that it may take months to root out resistance, and the failure to capture or otherwise account for deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was making the task of pacifying the country more difficult.

"If anybody else inside Iraq, particularly, the former Baathists

think he is alive then that can be a problem," Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Richard Myers told Fox News Channel.

But McKiernan and other US commanders believe that the resistance is locally organized by remnants of the former regime - and not a nationally orchestrated campaign of resistance.

The core of the resistance is believed to be from Fedayeen Saddam, Baathist militants, Iraqi Intelligence Service and Special Republican Guards who survived the war intact in an "iron triangle" running from Baghdad north to Fallujah and Tikrit.

Mahathir fears power struggle in party after he steps down

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has expressed fear that a power struggle may emerge in his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party after he steps down, a report said Sunday.

"I do not think there would be anyone who will challenge Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. But until the issue of (who becomes) deputy president of UMNO is resolved, there will be a power struggle for the number two post," Mahathir was quoted as saying in the Malay-language daily Minggu Malaysia.

Abdullah, 63, is the political heir to the 77-year-old Mahathir, who has vowed to bow out in October after 22 years in power.

Mahathir said he was confident his deputy would take over UMNO, the backbone of the National Front coalition of ruling racially based parties.

"I do not think Abdullah would be

challenged. I would be sad if this happens," he said. "If they do it, they will lose."

He believed there would be infighting over other positions, such as for deputy and vice president.

He said, however, the deputy would be chosen by Abdullah when he takes power.

Meanwhile, one year after Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad confounded the nation with an emotional resignation, he presides this week over his last annual party conference.

Tributes to his 22 year leadership will hide burgeoning infighting for power within his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), party sources say.

"Delegates will praise Mahathir for his sacrifices. But one must understand these sentiments are not aimed at persuading him to stay on," a senior UMNO member told AFP.

80-yr-old Pak grandma expecting

IANS, Islamabad

An 80-year-old Pakistani woman is expecting a baby and euphoric as she is, she's wondering how to break the news to her grandchildren.

Khurshid Bibi had been admitted to a hospital in Multan after she complained of abdominal pain. An ultrasound revealed she was four months pregnant.

"During ultrasound, it came to light that she is pregnant of four months, which was unbelievable for her," The News quoted Fatima Suraiya, the doctor who conducted the procedure, as saying.

"When this news was given to Khurshid Bibi, she was astonished and wondered how she could see her face young grandsons and granddaughters," the newspaper said.

Khurshid Bibi's husband Ahmed Din is 85. The couple got married in 1950, when Khurshid Bibi was 26.

After a year, she gave birth to a girl, whose children are now married. Some years ago, a palmist told Ahmed Din that he would soon become the father of another child.

ASEAN warns Western powers to handle Myanmar delicately

AFP, Phnom Penh

ASEAN defended its policy on Myanmar Sunday and cautioned Western powers to handle the issue of restoring democracy in the country delicately, fearing it could blow up into another Yugoslavia and be the focus of intense external power rivalry.

Ong Keng Yong, secretary general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), said the group had managed to contain the Myanmar issue within the country's boundaries with its "constructive engagement" policy.

"Speaking as the ASEAN Secretary-General, I am not talking about the right or wrong of the institutions in Myanmar, but what is important is for everyone to understand the complexities of Myanmar," Ong told AFP in an interview ahead of a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers.

Reacting to a barrage of criticism levelled at ASEAN for what some have called its failure to restore

democracy in Myanmar, he said: "The situation there should not be allowed to develop into a ugly confrontation that will destabilise the situation in Southeast Asia."

Citing the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, Ong said military-ruled Myanmar, with up to 10 major communities and more than 100 linguistic groups located alongside China and the South Asian continent, could flare up into "another Yugoslavia, multiplied many times over."

"We sometimes forget that this unique piece of geography called Myanmar can be a major destabilising factor in the Indian ocean, not just in Southeast Asia, which is just a small part of the equation," he said.

Yangon arrested Aung San Suu Kyi after a bloody May 30 clash between supporters of her National League for Democracy (NLD) and backers of the military regime, leading to intensified criticism of the junta.



PHOTO: AFP

Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong (L) hold talks with his Chinese counterpart Li Zhaoxing (R front row facing) during a meeting in Phnom Penh on Sunday.

Iraqis snub US deadline to surrender arms

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqis snubbed a coalition deadline to surrender their weapons by June 15 with the US-led forces reporting Sunday that only a few hundred arms had been handed over.

"Iraqi citizens voluntarily turned in a variety of weapons under the Weapons Turn-In Program that began June 1," a coalition statement said.

"As of today, Iraqi citizens have delivered to Weapons Collection Points a total of 123 pistols, 76 semi-automatic rifles or shotguns, 435 automatic rifles, 46 machine-guns, 162 anti-tank weapons, 11 anti-air weapons, and 381 grenades and other explosive devices."

However, some five million weapons are believed to be in circulation in Iraq where lawlessness has taken root since the April 9 ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Possession of heavy and automatic weapons now carries a one-year jail term and a 1,000-dollar fine. The coalition arms controls which came into force on June 15 after a two-week amnesty period allow private individuals to keep light weapons in their homes and businesses.

But separately it requires all Iraqi factions to disarm their militias, outside the three northern provinces still held by two Kurdish former rebel groups which fought alongside the coalition during the war.

Meanwhile, the US army's ongo-

ing bid to mop up resistance in northern Iraq has left at least 113 dead this week, according to US and Iraqi sources, as a top Iraqi politician warned that attacks would continue until local people are given more power.

US forces killed 82 combatants at a desert training camp at Sahi, near the border with Syria, a Muslim leader from a neighbouring village told AFP.

Some of the fighters appeared to have been summarily executed, said Sheikh Gharbi Abdul Aziz, imam of the main mosque at Rawa, a few kilometres (miles) from Sahi.

Rawa villagers who went to the camp found the corpses of seven people who had been handcuffed and shot in the forehead, chest or in the back of the head, the imam said.

He said the villagers had found another 50 bodies all in a line at the camp, which appears to have been used as a training ground by die-hard supporters of ousted leader Saddam Hussein, ousted by US-led coalition forces in April.

He said he helped bury 82 bodies after fighting erupted Thursday at dawn at the suspected extremist training camp.

The US military had reported killing 27 Iraqis after clashes broke out late Thursday, when a US 4th Infantry Division armoured patrol came under rocket propelled grenade attack near Balad, about 80 kilometres (50 miles) northeast of Baghdad.

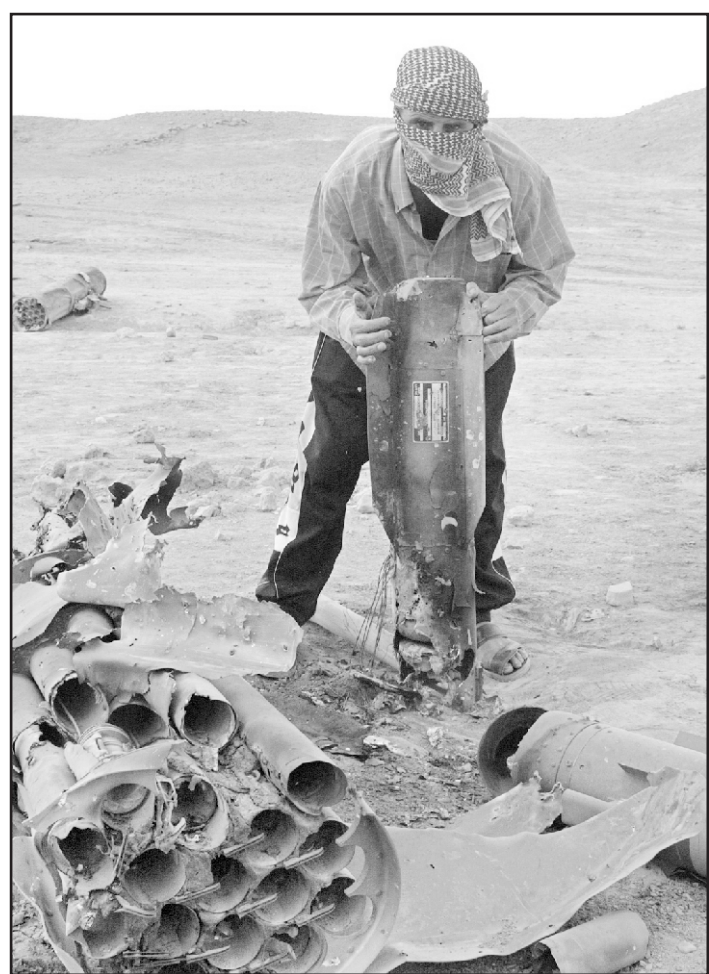


PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi man lifts up the remains of one of two US helicopters downed on June 12 in Sahi area, 350 km northwest of Baghdad. Eighty-two fighters, including one foreigner, were killed earlier this week in a massive US army raid on desert training camp near the Syrian border, witnesses said. The fighting erupted on June 12 at dawn at the camp, which included an arms dump, and lasted 13 hours, residents from the nearby village of Rawa said.