

Hamas, Jihad take truce

Bush, Annan welcome accord

AP, AFP, Gaza City

An Islamic Jihad leader said Saturday the radical Palestinian group accepted a conditional three-month halt to attacks on Israelis, the first on-the-record comment from a militant leader involved in the truce.

"We have accepted a conditional cease-fire for three months," the leader, Mohammed al-Hindi, told The Associated Press.

Al-Hindi said intensive meetings on Saturday between Islamic Jihad, the larger militant group Hamas and Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction were working out the final wording of an official cease-fire declaration.

"I expect that it's going to be finished within 24 hours and after that it will be declared, if not tomorrow, the day after," al-Hindi said.

Hamas leaders had indicated that they've agreed to the truce, but

they were waiting to declare formal acceptance in the joint declaration with all the parties. None had gone on the record to say so.

Hamas officials Osama Hamadan and Imad al-Alami arrived in Cairo Friday night and had already had a first meeting with Egyptian officials, the source said, adding that an Islamic Jihad delegation was due to join the talks Saturday.

Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement have "agreed on" a truce document which will be released within the next few days, a senior official of the radical Hamas movement said Friday.

"There is a shared document, which reflects a shared position, and was agreed on by Hamas, Jihad and Fatah. It will be announced very soon, within a few days," Abdelaziz

al-Rantissi told AFP, adding that Hamas "prepared the document."

Rantissi said the three factions now needed to inform Arafat's "Palestinian Authority, our brothers in Egypt and other concerned parties".

Earlier report says, Israeli army will withdraw Monday from parts of the Gaza Strip under a deal reached with the Palestinian Authority, both public and army radio announced.

Citing "senior officials," both reports said Israeli forces will also pull out of the West Bank town of Bethlehem, but did not say when.

The moves will come as part of a deal reached Friday under which Israel will leave certain autonomous areas re-occupied after the Palestinian uprising broke out 33 months ago, with the Palestinian Authority agreeing to police those areas and guarantee that no anti-

Israeli attacks are carried out from them.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Friday welcomed an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority for Israeli forces to withdraw first from positions in the Gaza Strip and then in Bethlehem.

"He looks forward to continued implementation of the roadmap, leading to a permanent settlement of the conflict based on Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) 338 (1973) and 1397 (2002)," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said in a statement.

The United States "applauds" an agreement in principle between Israeli and Palestinian officials over an Israeli army withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the White House said Friday.

Los Angeles demonstrators call for Bush impeachment

AFP, Los Angeles

About 1,000 demonstrators shouting for President George W. Bush's impeachment gathered outside a hotel here where the president was helping raise 3.6 million dollars for his re-election campaign.

The protesters accused Bush of lying about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, a central justification for the US-British invasion of Iraq in March. To date no such weapons have been found in the country.

Inside the hotel, meanwhile, Republican party faithful pledged another 3.6 million dollars for the 2004 elections, organizers said. A similar event earlier in the day in San Francisco raised 1.6 million dollars.

From Los Angeles, Bush was to travel on to Crawford, Texas to spend the weekend at his ranch there.



PHOTO: AFP

A group o demonstrators hold signs in front of the Century Plaza Hotel during a demonstration organized by several social and political groups to oppose Bush's policies in Los Angeles on Friday. The demonstration was called during a Republican Party fundraising event in the Hotel with the presence of President Bush.

Straw to press Iran on nukes, terrorism

REUTERS, London

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw will visit Iran next week to press its leaders to cooperate urgently with United Nations' demands on weapons inspections to dispel doubts over its nuclear ambitions.

Straw -- whose fourth visit to Iran in two years comes as international pressure grows on Tehran to prove its peaceful intentions -- is not expected to give a deadline for signing up to an additional protocol on weapons inspections.

But he will tell Iran there is a "sense of urgency" in the international community to see it address questions about its weapons, British officials said on Friday.

Washington has accused Iran of seeking nuclear weapons. But Iran insists its nuclear sites are purely for domestic energy purposes.

Straw will also be looking for signs that Iran is addressing concerns over human rights and the support of terror groups.

US denies Sahhaf's claims

BBC ONLINE

A spokesman for US forces in Baghdad has denied claims from the former Iraqi Information Minister, known as Comical Ali, that he was questioned by the Americans.

Mohammed Said al-Sahhaf, famed for his deadpan insistence that Iraqi forces were crushing the invading Americans, has resurfaced for the first time since the collapse of the regime in April.

In brief interviews on Al-Arabiya and Abu Dhabi TV on Thursday, he said that he had surrendered himself to US forces, who had released him after questioning.

"Through some friends, I went to the Americans, to the people in charge, and an interview took place about a number of issues relating to my work," he said.

"After the interview, I was released."

Senator's flier on terrorists' burials angers Muslims in US

IANs, Washington

Democratic Senator Guy W Glodis has angered Muslims and a civil rights group by a flier he circulated saying terrorist attacks could be deterred if convicted Muslim extremists were buried with pig entrails.

The Boston Globe said the flier, which Glodis sent to 39 colleagues Wednesday, said an execution of Muslim extremists in the Philippines was ordered by General John Joseph "Black Jack" Pershing before World War I, in which they were shot with bullets dipped in pigs' blood, then buried with "pigs' blood, entrails".

Pakistan asks Sharif's kin to leave country

PTI, Islamabad

In an apparent reaction to the recent criticism by deposed Premier Nawaz Sharif against President Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistan government has ordered his brother Shahbaz Sharif's wife and daughters to leave the country and join the exiled family in Jeddah.

"They will be sent today (Saturday)," Pakistan Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat. said reacting to reports of police cordoning off the residence of Sharif's relatives in Lahore to find Shahbaz's wife Nusrat and two daughters Rabia and Jaweria.



PHOTO: AFP

A female activist of the multi-party opposition shouts anti-government slogans during a march towards the parliament in Islamabad on Saturday. Under a tight security, more than a hundred anti-government slogan chanting legislators demonstrated against President Pervez Musharraf over sweeping powers acquired by him through constitutional changes enforced in August last year before holding elections.

Democrats launch own Iraqi WMD probe

AFP, Washington

Frustrated by what they see as Republican stonewalling, US congressional Democrats Friday launched their own probe into whether the Bush administration had manipulated intelligence about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to justify the war.

The announcement by Senator Carl Levin, ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, followed revelations that experts from the State Department had questioned CIA findings last month that two tractor-trailers discovered in Iraq were mobile biological weapons labs.

It also came after Committee Chairman John Warner rejected Levin's call for immediate bipartisan action stating, in a letter, that "the course of action for our committee should be to await the intelligence committee's findings."

"Accordingly, I have directed my Armed Services Committee staff to proceed and to keep Senator Warner, through his staff, informed on our work plan and to invite his staff to join with us at any time on any matter," Levin said in a statement.

He said he felt "a heavy responsibility" to look into "the objectivity and credibility of the intelligence concerning the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq immediately before the war" and the effect of such intelligence on defense policy decisions.

The threat from Iraqi chemical and biological weapons -- as well as suspected efforts to build nuclear

weapons -- was the US-British pretext for the March 20 allied invasion.

But more than two months since the fall of Baghdad, the US military and Central Intelligence Agency have found no such weapons, prompting speculation that in making its case for the war and getting Congress to authorize it, the administration had either used intelligence selectively, or pressured the intelligence community into turning a blind eye on questionable sources.

Critics cite a September 2002 Defense Intelligence Agency report, in which the DIA said there was "no reliable information" that Iraq was producing chemical weapons.

They insist the secret assessment was issued as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was telling Congress of Iraq's efforts to build up its chemical arsenal.

Vice President Richard Cheney, an ardent advocate of the war, paid repeated visits to CIA headquarters in the run-up to the conflict, a fact that made some wonder whether such attention put implicit pressure on agency analysts.

The intelligence committees of both the Senate and the House of Representatives are conducting separate closed-door reviews of the pre-war US intelligence.

But many Democrats believe their Republican colleagues are trying to artificially narrow the scope of the probe to shield the president from possible political fallout.

UK govt renews demand for BBC apology

REUTERS, London

A war of words between the British government and the BBC over Iraq gained momentum on Saturday after the prime minister's press chief appeared on a rival television channel to renew his demand for an apology.

Alastair Campbell accused the British Broadcasting Corporation of "weasel words" and once again asked it to apologize for claims the government had exaggerated the case for war on Iraq.

"Let them accept for once that they have got it wrong," he told Channel 4 news.

"The BBC should acknowledge they have made a mistake and then should apologise to the government."

The row between the two sides erupted earlier this week after the BBC, citing an intelligence source, accused Campbell of "sexing up" a September dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the government's main justification for war.

Campbell denied the accusations and demanded an immediate apology, but the broadcaster is standing by its story.

The press supremo appeared on Channel 4 news Friday after receiving a letter from the BBC's news chief accusing him of waging a "personal vendetta."

50,000 displaced by floods in Assam

50 villages submerged as Brahmaputra banks bust

AFP, Guwahati

At least 50,000 people were displaced overnight in a second wave of floods triggered by heavy rains in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, officials said Saturday.

Up to 50 villages were submerged when Assam's main river, the Brahmaputra, burst its banks in the eastern districts of Dhemaji and Jorhat, officials in the two districts said.

About 400,000 people had been displaced in the state in the first wave of floods in early June, but the waters receded last week.

Ali Mian, a senior administrator in Dhemaji district 460 km east of Assam's capital Guwahati, said the main highway leading to the area had been flooded, cutting off road travel.

"People have constructed footbridges made of bamboo poles to cross certain breached portions of the highway," Mian told AFP by telephone.

Authorities in Dhemaji, where 30,000 people were displaced in 15 villages, have stockpiled basic supplies including medicines, Mian said.

"We have enough food, grains and other essentials to tide over the crisis," he said.

Floodwaters also inundated at least 35 villages in Majuli, the

world's largest river island, 350 kilometres (17 miles) east of Guwahati, affecting up to 20,000 people, said Ratul Pathak, a magistrate in the district.

Assam Flood Control Minister Nurzaman Sarkar said the situation remained grim with fears the Brahmaputra may burst its banks at any moment in other parts of the state.

"We are maintaining a close watch on the situation, which definitely is not good with heavy showers lashing the region for the past few days," he told AFP.

A Central Water Commission bulletin said the river had crossed the danger level in five main channels, while in eight vulnerable areas it was flowing above the warning level.

Earlier Assam's revenue minister Mithias Tudu added that a second bout of flooding would add to the miseries of the people.

"Villagers affected by the first wave of floods are still staying in makeshift camps as their homes have been washed away," said Tudu, adding that meagre resources would now have to be diverted to addressing fresh problems.

Local authorities, mindful of last year's record-breaking floods in Assam, hastily erected sandbag barriers.

'Pakistan ready to settle Kashmir issue bilaterally'

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mohammad Kasuri has said that Islamabad was prepared to discuss the Kashmir issue bilaterally as Pakistan was serious and interested enough in initiating a composite dialogue process with India at the earliest.

According to a report in Online News, he said this while commenting on the recent statement of External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha that India does not welcome any third party mediation or facilitation, but was prepared to discuss the issue with Pakistan on a bilateral basis.

This is perhaps for the first time that Pakistan has hinted that it would be inclined towards resolving the Kashmir dispute by holding bilateral talks with India. Till now Pakistan has always favoured third

party mediation in resolving the Kashmir dispute.

Kasuri said his country was prepared to discuss the Kashmir issue in a bilateral or multilateral setting. Reiterating that Pakistan was very serious about the resumption of a composite dialogue with India as soon as possible, he said that though there was no external road map in place, the path to such a dialogue had already been crafted with great skill by Foreign Secretaries of the two countries on at least ten occasions in their meeting between 1994 96 and 97.

He said India and International print and electronic media would bear out that the blue print for future dialogue has been agreed to by the leaders and date and time of the signing was imminent.

He said, "We must get over

any complexes and hangovers and express our gratitude to the international community for being concerned about the fate of 1.3 billion people of south Asia".

He hailed the US' role last year when, according to him, it prevented a conflict between Pakistan and India after both the countries amassed troops following the December 13 attack on the Parliament.

The minister said India had on several occasions in the past accepted the use of facilitation by a third party. "More recently Advani during his visit to Washington had discussed issues relating to Pakistan and Kashmir with the US Administration," he added.

Iran negotiating extradition of senior al-Qaeda members

AFP, Tehran

Iran has been locked in highly secretive and complex extradition talks with Egypt, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia over prisoners held here who are widely believed to be senior members of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, diplomatic sources told AFP.

According to the well-placed sources, the Islamic republic could deal the biggest blow to the network since the United States-led war in Afghanistan by handing over some of bin Laden's closest aides.

The sources said they have strong reason to believe that three top al-Qaeda fugitives have been detained in Iran.

One is Egyptian-born Saif al-Adel, thought to have taken over as al-Qaeda's number three from military operations chief Mohammad Atef, who was believed killed in Afghanistan.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian President Abul Kalam (R) talks to Kashmiri women as Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed (2nd from R) looks on during a visit in Uri on Saturday near the Line of Control (LOC) some 102 km north of Srinagar. Kalam is on a three-day visit in the insurgency-hit Indian-administered Kashmir.

Powell calls for patience amid rising toll in Iraq

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Friday called on Americans to be patient in the face of mounting US casualties in Iraq as US forces attempt to secure and start rebuilding the country.

"I would say to the American people that we always recognized this would be a dangerous operation," Powell said in an interview on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" program.

"And even though major combat action is over... we always expected there would be this residual problem of Fedayeen, of the Baath Party members, of old Saddam cronies and others who are coming in to make mischief, and they would have to be dealt with," Powell said.

"I hope the American people will

demonstrate the patience and the understanding of the situation," he added.

"My experience with the American people is when they know it's going to be tough and it's going to take a while, they will give us that patience and give us that understanding as we work our way through this."

US forces were searching Friday for two soldiers believed abducted along with their vehicle as attacks against coalition troops in Iraq continued, with one soldier killed and another shot in the face.

The Pentagon announced Friday that 60 US soldiers have died in Iraq since President George W. Bush declared the end of major combat operations on May 1. Twenty were killed in hostile fire, while 40 deaths

were not combat-related.

Meanwhile, in another sign of the increasingly perilous security situation in Iraq, six members of Britain's military police force were killed and eight other British soldiers were wounded in separate attacks Tuesday in southern Iraq, the first known fatal incidents involving British troops since the end of the war.

Powell said he hoped the mounting casualty toll would not increase pressure to withdraw US troops from Iraq prematurely.

"I hope it does not. I hope it increases the pressure on us to get the security situation under control more quickly," he said.