

Hamas warns truce doomed unless prisoners freed

Talks will continue despite Palestinian splits: Israel

REUTERS, Gaza

A US-backed Middle East peace plan was under new strain on Thursday after the main Palestinian militant group Hamas warned that a cease-fire would unravel unless Israel freed thousands of prisoners.

Adding to tensions over the prisoner issue, Palestinian witnesses said Israeli soldiers had detained three Palestinian boys playing outside a flashpoint Jewish settlement in the West Bank.

The truce was declared by Palestinian militant groups at the end of June, but many Palestinians think Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas has failed to win enough back from Israel in return.

Up to 8,000 Palestinians, including minors, have been arrested since an uprising for independence began in September 2000.

Israel has said it will release hundreds of prisoners, but will not free anyone accused of being behind suicide bombings and ambush attacks.

However, Hamas founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, warned on Wednesday militants could not stick to the truce unless jailed comrades were freed.

"Our patience has its limits. Israeli practices (including) the issue of the prisoners, are a red line that can never be bypassed in any way or form," Yassin said.

Israel dismissed conditions set by militant groups, saying it would deal only with Abbas's Palestinian Authority.

In a move aimed at strengthening Abbas's hand, the United States announced \$20 million in direct aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Yassin and other militant factions are currently holding talks with a visiting Egyptian security delegation trying to shore up the truce which has been rattled by violence this week.

Israel killed a Palestinian man in a West Bank raid on Wednesday and a Palestinian suicide bomber killed an Israeli woman on Monday.

Late on Wednesday, Palestinian witnesses said Israeli soldiers had detained three boys, aged 10 and 11, who were taken away, bound and blindfolded, from their home village of Aurif, near the city of Nablus, around nightfall.

Israeli military sources confirmed three Palestinians had been arrested in the area which abuts the Jewish settlement of Yitzhar.

A military source said the boys were "under investigation for actions hostile to Israeli military forces."

Abbas on Wednesday denied reports he was considering quitting and called on Israel to free all detainees "as soon as possible."

Israel should also withdraw forces from more Palestinian cities and cease settlement-building on occupied land, he said.

Israel has already withdrawn some forces in Gaza and the West Bank.

AFP adds: Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said that peace talks would continue despite a political crisis within the Palestinian leadership over how to handle the negotiations.

"There will be other crises in the talks with the government of Abu Mazen (Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas' nom de guerre) but the negotiations will continue," he said in an interview published in the Yediot Aharonot daily Thursday.

"There is reason to think that we are making progress," added Mofaz, who is considered a hawk in Ariel Sharon's government.

Bomb blast in Philippines market: 6 killed

AFP, Manila

Six people were killed in a bomb blast that ripped through the public market of the southern Philippines city of Koronadal on Thursday, the military said.

As many as 20 people were also wounded by the bomb that went off inside a crowded area of the market, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Lucero said.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the blast, which occurred in a region where Muslim separatist guerrillas operate.

Local officials said the number of wounded could be even higher as many of the injured were rushed to hospitals before any head count could be made.

Minutes after getting the news, President Gloria Arroyo's spokesman, Ignacio Bunye said that "the president strongly condemns this terrorist act."

"We will try to go after the perpetrators of this incident. We will make sure they are brought to justice."

'PM won't testify before panel on Ayodhya'

PTI, New Delhi

The Centre on Thursday vehemently opposed the application seeking summoning of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee before the Liberhan Commission inquiring the demolition of the disputed structure in Ayodhya in 1992.

"The Central government wishes to place on record that it did not wish to examine any new witness or recall any witness," Centre's counsel Lala Ram Gupta told the Commission while opposing the application to summon the Prime Minister.

The opposition comes in the wake of allegation by former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Kalyan Singh that Vajpayee knew about the alleged conspiracy to demolish the disputed structure.

The application along with others seeking re-summoning of Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani and summoning of Kalyan Singh will be taken into consideration by the Commission on July 21.

Lanka to make fresh move to revive talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka announced Wednesday it was finalising "concrete proposals" to grant greater political and financial powers to Tamil Tiger rebels in a bid to salvage the faltering peace process.

The government's chief peace negotiator, G. L. Peiris, said proposals for the setting up of a "provisional administrative structure" for the island's embattled northeast would be sent to the rebels "in the next few days."

Peiris, who is also the government's constitutional affairs minister, declined to give details of the latest proposals following the rebels' rejection of two previous offers of limited financial and political powers.

"What we are sending is not a final document, but something that outlines our thoughts on a provisional administrative structure," Peiris told reporters here.

Muslims must 'put fear into hearts of enemies', says Mahathir

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Muslims must learn again how to "put fear in the hearts" of their enemies because false religious teachings have left them backward and easily oppressed, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said Thursday.

He told an international conference of Islamic scholars that when US-led forces attacked Iraq, Muslims "all over the world prayed for Allah to save the Iraqi Muslims and their country. But their prayers have not been answered."

This was not because Allah had abandoned the Muslims, but because they had not caught up with the developed world "in knowledge and the capacity to produce arms, to have disciplined and well-trained forces for their defence," Mahathir said.

He later expanded on the theme at a question and answer session, saying: "We must have the capability to put fear in the hearts of our enemies to defend ourselves, not as aggressors but to defend ourselves."



Overview of the crash scene where a double-decker bus crashed on Thursday. At least 22 people died and more than 20 were injured when the bus ran off a highway and plunged down a steep slope in one of the Hong Kong city's worst ever traffic accidents.

22 killed in HK bus accident

AFP, Hong Kong

At least 22 people were killed and 20 injured Thursday when a double-decker bus ran off a highway and plunged down a steep slope in one of Hong Kong's worst ever traffic accidents.

Police said the bus, operated by the Kowloon Motor Bus company, crashed through railings on the busy Tuen Mun highway in the western Kowloon area of Hong Kong's largely rural New Territories.

"It is now learnt that 22 persons died in the traffic accident in Tuen Mun," a police spokeswoman said, adding that 20 injured people aged nine to 54 had been admitted to four hospitals.

Three patients were in critical conditions, 14 were serious and three were stable, she said. The condition of three other patients was not immediately known.

Police said the crash, which saw the bus tumble about 15 metres before coming to rest on its side, was one of the worst to affect the territory's relatively safe highways for at least a decade.

"It is the worst traffic accident in Hong Kong... for more than 10 years," the spokeswoman said, without giving further details.

Firefighters at the scene said 19 people were killed instantly when the bus left the hilly stretch of highway, eventually coming to rest near a small village.

The cause of the crash was not immediately known but witnesses said the bus collided with a cargo truck. Police said skid marks at the crash site indicated a collision.

"At some point, both drivers applied their brakes, you can see from the scene the large skid marks," a police officer at the scene told reporters.

"The bus was pushed over from the highway," he said, adding that the driver of the truck was helping them with inquiries.

"We have set up a special investigating team," the officer said.

S Korea presses North on multilateral talks

AFP, Seoul

South Korea used inter-Korean high-level talks here Thursday to pressure North Korea to agree to multilateral discussions to resolve the worsening nuclear crisis, officials said.

North Korea's head delegate opened the talks with a warning of the gathering "dark clouds" of nuclear confrontation and said the Stalinist State wanted peace but would not flinch from war.

South Korea stressed the urgency of holding talks in a multilateral format.

"We explained how urgent and useful it would be (for North Korea) to participate in the expanded multilateral talks," Shin Un-Sang, spokesman for the South Korean delegation, said after two-hour morning session.

The North Koreans insisted on one-on-one US-North Korean negotiations, but added that the format would no longer be an obstacle if the United States dropped its "hostile" policy, Shin said.

The nuclear crisis erupted in October last year when the United States disclosed that North Korea admitted to developing nuclear weapons in violation of a 1994 agreement that froze its atomic facilities in return for economic aid and other benefits.

Seoul is seeking to use the cabinet-level talks here to persuade Pyongyang to come to the multilateral talks, proposed by the United

States and backed by its allies, to resolve the nuclear impasse.

During the talks which will end on Saturday, Seoul is also pushing to arrange defense chiefs' talks with Pyongyang in a way to reduce tensions and restore trust.

North Korean chief delegate Kim Ryong-Song said in an arrival statement Wednesday that "dark clouds of nuclear war" were approaching while calling for unity between the two Koreas to overcome the crisis.

"We are prepared for both dialogue and war," Kim said Thursday in his keynote speech to the ministerial talks which will end Saturday. "The basic is to resolve the issue peacefully through dialogue."

But Kim's call for South Korea to support North Korea in resolving the crisis was rebuffed.

"This is not the kind of issue that can be settled by just South and North Korea joining forces, but one requiring cooperation with the international community," said his southern counterpart, Unification Minister Jeong Se-Hyun.

Cabinet level talks between the two Koreas have been taking places since 2000, with the intention of spurring economic cooperation.

Recent meetings have been hampered by the nine-month-old nuclear impasse and tension was unusually high this time after South Korea's intelligence chief testified Wednesday that the North had recently conducted several dozen test explosions.

Musharraf hoodwinked US on N-tech transfer to N Korea: Expert

PTI, New Delhi

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has "blatantly lied" to the United States about the supply of Pakistani nuclear technology to North Korea, a leading South Asia expert has said.

"Musharraf had blatantly lied to (US Secretary of State Colin) Powell that no Pakistani nuclear technology had been supplied to North Korea", renowned American expert Selig S Harrison told 'South Asia Tribune' in an interview.

Harrison, who is the Asia Director at Washington-based Center for International Policy, was also quoted as saying, "British intelligence contacts at the Pakistani High Commission in London last year obtained incriminating documents that Musharraf was fully involved in supplying uranium enrichment technology to Pyongyang".

He told the Pakistani web magazine that the idea of "lionising" Musharraf was wrong as the Pakistani General was "badly isolated at home and was totally dependent on US economic life support for his political survival".

Harrison, a former Bureau Chief of Washington Post in South Asia, expressed concern that "some of the latest Nodong missiles from North Korea may have been purchased by Musharraf through hard cash originally meant for social

uplift," the magazine said.

Stating that "duplicity had been a hallmark of Musharraf during his entire military career", he said in the last elections "while vowing (US-led anti-terror) alliance to end terrorism, his (Musharraf's) administration at the same time ensured the victory of fundamentalists in the two provinces of Frontier and Baluchistan".

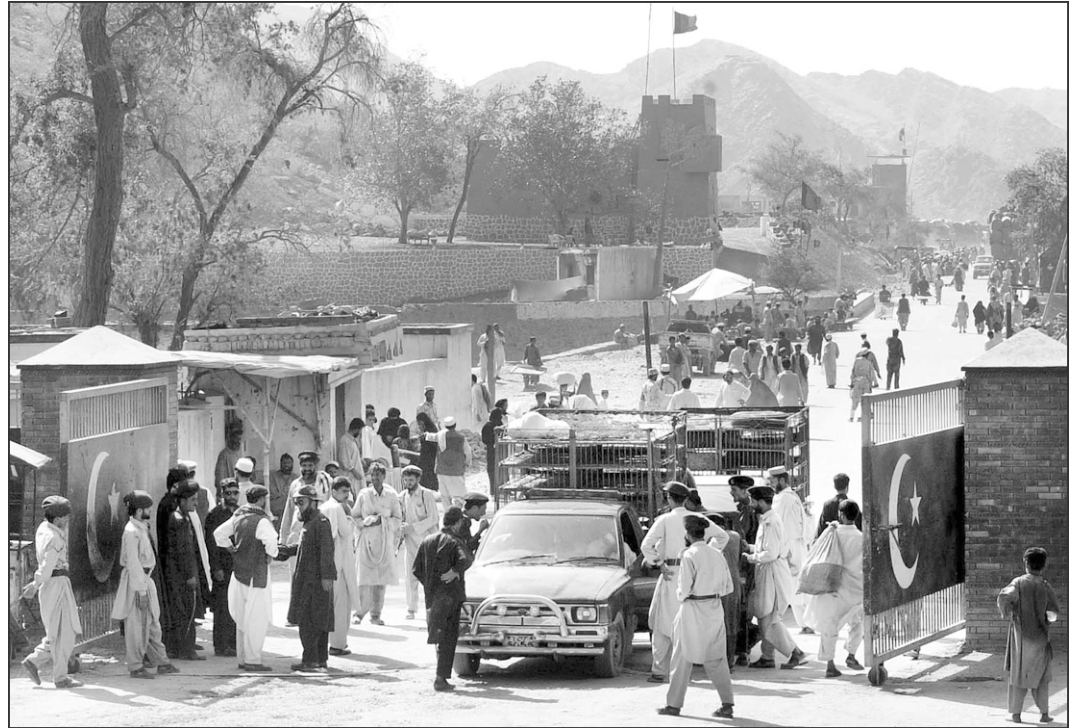
UNESCO sends team to Taj

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The UNESCO is sending a team of experts to assess the possible impact of the construction work on a controversial project on the Taj Mahal, the 17th century marble epitome of love in Agra, one of the world heritage sites.

This was conveyed to Indian Tourism and Culture Jagmohan by UNESCO Director General K Matsuura at a meeting here yesterday.

Emerging from the 45-minute meeting, Matsuura said the UNESCO world heritage committee had met recently and a decision was taken to send a team of experts to India to ascertain the possible effect of the construction work on a heritage corridor near the Taj.



Pakistani border security personnel search a vehicle entering the country from Afghanistan via the Torkham border Wednesday. Pakistani authorities have tightened security at the Pakistani-Afghan border following the ransacking of the Pakistan embassy in Kabul by angry Afghan demonstrators on July 8.

Floods ravage eastern India

AFP, Guwahati

A family of four swept away by flood waters and a 68-year-old man who drowned when his boat cap-sized were the latest victims of torrential rains ravaging eastern India, officials said Thursday.

With the death toll rising to 117 and more than 1.5 million people displaced by the flooding which began June 27 and which has also hit Bangladesh and Nepal, Indian officials appealed to international agencies for assistance.

"We urge the Red Cross or any other aid agencies to send medical teams to assist our government health workers treat people suffering from various waterborne diseases like dysentery, gastroenteritis, jaundice and malaria," Assam state's health minister Bhumidhar Barman told AFP.

"If we don't take urgent steps

now, the situation could assume epidemic proportions in the coming days and weeks."

An outbreak of malaria, Japanese encephalitis, and other water-borne diseases in flood-hit areas in Assam have claimed the lives of at least 75 people since the beginning of June.

More land was inundated overnight in Assam, which has borne the brunt of the flooding, when the Brahmaputra River broke through embankments, sending thousands of villagers fleeing to higher ground, an official said.

"Hundreds of families are living on river embankments, roadways or any elevated ground while some refused to flee their stranded homes and managed to survive on rooftops," eastern Dhemaji district lawmaker Dilip Saikia said by telephone.

Police said a 68-year-old man drowned Wednesday in Dhemaji

district when his boat upturned in the floodwaters.

In eastern Bihar state, a family of four drowned when they were swept away by a river at Narayanpur village in Madhubani district, 240 km from the state capital Patna, a government official said.

A police spokesman, confirming the first flooding-related deaths in the state, said the bodies of two women, an eight-year-old boy and a man had been recovered from the floodwaters.

Bihar lawmaker Ram Kumar Yadav said the flood situation was worsening, with major rivers threatening to burst their banks and flood villages.

Heavy rains in the past few days have caused flooding and mudslides in parts of southeastern and eastern Nepal, with two deaths reported.