



Flood affected Pakistani people gather during a food distribution in Ketri Bandar, some 200 km northeast of Karachi on Monday. At least one million people in southern Pakistan have been left marooned, homeless and facing disease as a result of floods caused by the worst monsoon rains in a decade which has left at least 162 people dead.

Abbas shuns talks with Sharon

Israel halts transfer of West Bank towns

REUTERS, AP, Jerusalem

Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas yesterday called off a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, saying Israel was not doing enough to implement a US-backed peace "road map."

The decision, taken amid a row over how many prisoners Israel should free to build confidence between the two sides, was a fresh setback to hopes of forging trust between the two sides and implementing the peace plan rapidly.

The meeting had been due to take place on Wednesday, when Israel is scheduled to release 342 Palestinian prisoners. The Palestinians were disappointed by the figure because Israeli officials had earlier said 540 would go free.

Israel, for its part, accuses Abbas of holding up the peace plan by failing to crack down on militants. It had already ruled out any further troop withdrawals from West Bank cities after an ambush that wounded a

Jewish settler and her three children.

"Abu Mazen canceled the meeting because it will only be ceremonial on the day prisoners are released, and he believes the Israelis are not doing enough to promote the road map," a senior Palestinian official said, using Abbas's nom de guerre.

A source in Sharon's office confirmed the meeting had been canceled because of Palestinian "displeasure" at Israel's prisoner-release roster.

Abbas and Sharon have met several times in recent weeks in talks that have helped build confidence and promote the road map, although deep mistrust remains between the two sides.

The road map does not specifically mention a prisoner release but requires implementation of a previous plan which called for release of "all Palestinians arrested in security sweeps who have no association with terrorist activities."

The Palestinians want an amnesty for all

6,000 of their jailed compatriots, saying this would show Israel is committed to the road map leading to creation of a Palestinian state by 2005 in territories occupied by Israel since 1967.

Sharon says he favors a limited release to boost Abbas, who faces internal opposition to peacemaking.

"I am for taking chances in order to reach an agreement," Sharon told a parliamentary committee on Monday.

AP adds: A US-backed peace plan hit a rough patch after Israel reacted to a Palestinian shooting attack by suspending the transfer of control of West Bank towns to Palestinian security, and both sides reportedly called off a meeting of premiers.

On Monday, Israel listed hundreds of prisoners it planned to release. Palestinians, angry over the list and the numbers, called off a summit between their premier, Mahmoud Abbas, and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israeli media reported.

The reports said Sharon also called off the meeting, set for Wednesday, because of the ambush. Officials from both sides were not immediately available for comment.

The two last met on July 20, before their separate talks with President Bush in Washington, and said then that they would meet again afterward.

Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said Monday that Israel would not hand over control of any more towns until the Palestinians apprehend the gunmen who ambushed an Israeli car near Jerusalem on Sunday, badly wounding a mother and daughter and slightly injuring her two other children.

The attack took place near Bethlehem, the first town that reverted to Palestinian control last month under terms of the U.S.-backed peace plan.

Coalition warns Iraqis against violent demos

4 Baath party members detained

AFP, Baghdad

The US-led coalition occupying Iraq issued a stark warning Tuesday that violent demonstrations in the war-ravaged country will be met with force.

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) posted dozens of posters near the gates to its Baghdad headquarters, stating that protests must be peaceful.

The area has been the scene of dozens of demonstrations by Iraq's bloated community of unemployed and other groups taking advantage of the freedom of speech that came with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in April.

"Liberty equals responsibility," the posters read. "After the liberation, you have the right to demonstrate without fear, but with this right you have the responsibility to pro-

test peacefully.

"Violence against citizens, Iraqi police or coalition forces will not be tolerated and will be dealt with forcibly," it added.

The posters appeared at the end of a week of daily protests outside CPA headquarters by a group calling itself the Union of the Unemployed and boosted by ultra-leftist Communist groups, demanding jobs or financial support from the occupying coalition. A handful of protests have turned deadly in Iraq since Saddam's regime collapsed April 9, while many other tense stand-offs between demonstrators and coalition troops saw violence narrowly averted.

Americans shot dead at least 16 Iraqi demonstrators in late April in the flashpoint town of Fallujah.

Meanwhile, the US army said Tuesday it had arrested four fugitive

members of the disbanded Baath party during several overnight raids in the region of Tuz, 150 kilometres (95 miles) north of Baghdad.

"Out of seven raids in the Tuz area, nine people were eventually detained, four of whom were Baath party members we were targeting," said Lieutenant Colonel Bill MacDonald, spokesman for Task Force Iron Horse, which is conducting the crackdown on Saddam Hussein loyalists in the region.

MacDonald gave no further details on the identities of those arrested or their role in Saddam's ousted regime.

He added that a cache of weapons and ammunition was discovered Monday by US forces in an open-air site close to Tuz, near the highway that links Baghdad with the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk.

Howard mulls hosting US bases in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister John Howard on Tuesday said he would consider allowing US military bases on Australian soil if approached by Washington.

Howard said no overtures had yet been made but the United States was undertaking a review of its military bases around the world following the war in Iraq.

"There shouldn't be any assumptions made that we would automatically agree or disagree, we will have a look at it -- it's possible," Howard told public radio in the Northern Territory capital of Darwin, regarded as a possible site for a US military presence aimed at curbing terrorism in South East Asia.

Howard said he would not provide any "blank cheques" to the United States but added "if they have a proposal to put to us, we'll have to consider it".

Australia was one of the staunchest members of the so-called coalition of the willing that backed the US-led invasion of Iraq, sending about 2,000 troops to the

Gulf.

Howard and US President George W. Bush also share a close personal relationship, with Howard visiting Bush's ranch in Texas earlier this year.

US ambassador Tom Schieffer said recently that he expected to see greater cooperation between US and Australian forces and local media reports said Washington was looking at basing up to 5,000 US marines in Australia.

The countries already jointly operate the top-secret Pine Gap base in the Australian outback, which monitors communications satellites.

The US-Australian military alliance dates back to World War II. Since then the two countries troops have fought alongside each other in Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf.

However, the close relationship has at times heightened tensions with Australia's regional neighbours, particularly Howard's 1999 comments likening Australia to the United States' "deputy sheriff" in Asia.

Mizoram plans to deport Myanmar settlers

AFP, Guwahati

India's northeastern state of Mizoram yesterday said it was launching a drive to detect and deport thousands of illegal refugees from Myanmar in response to pressure from local residents.

"We have formed a special Border Management Cell to carry out a village to village survey to find out if there are illegal Myanmar nationals," Mizoram Home Minister R. Tlanghmingthanga told AFP by telephone from capital Aizawl.

"We guess there could be at least 30,000 Myanmar nationals illegally staying in Mizoram. Anybody found staying illegally will either be deported or their applications for asylum might be taken up."

The decision to detect illegal settlers from Myanmar follows a massive anti-foreigners uprising by local pressure groups.

"At least 3,000 Myanmar nationals have fled the state in the past fortnight after some local groups served them with notices," Tlanghmingthanga said.



Indian policemen inspect the wreckage of a helicopter, owned by the state government, after it crashed at Ganderbal yesterday some 25 km from Srinagar killing four Hindu pilgrims and the pilot and injuring another pilgrim. The devotees, including two couples, were on their way to join the Amarnath pilgrimage south of Srinagar when the accident occurred.



Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (R) share a light moment with Russian President Vladimir Putin upon arrival at the prime minister's office in Putrajaya, Malaysia yesterday. Putin's two-day visit to Malaysia is the first by a Russian leader in 35 years of bilateral relations and follows a visit by Mahathir to Moscow in March 2002.

MILF chief dies, but talks to go on with Manila

AFP, Manila

Salamat Hashim, the chairman of the biggest Moro separatist group in the Philippines, has died but his successor will pursue peace talks for a political settlement of the decades-old rebellion, officials said yesterday.

Hashim, 61, head of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), died of "acute ulcer and heart ailments" on July 13 but news of the death was held back to allow a smooth transition and avoid possible demoralisation of the 12,500-strong group, MILF political affairs chief Ghazali Jaafar said.

Hashim, who died in the southern town of Butig, was buried on the same day in keeping with Muslim tradition, Jaafar said.

An official MILF statement said its central committee convened after Hashim's death and appointed his right-hand man, Murad Ebrahim, to take his place.

Blair's office accused of smearing Kelly

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's office yesterday faced allegations that it had sought to smear a dead government weapons expert at the centre of a row over how Britain went to war on Iraq, by describing him as a Walter Mitty-style fantasist.

The latest twist in a controversy that has bedevilled Blair came after The Independent newspaper quoted a senior government source as saying scientist David Kelly "was a Walter Mitty".

The comment refers to a shy, daydreaming hero, invented by US writer James Thurber in a 1941 short story, who indulges in an imaginary life of adventure doubling that of his day job as accountant.

The British newspaper report laid the government open to charges of a deliberate attempt to undermine the reputation of the scientist, whose apparent suicide last month has sparked the biggest political crisis of Blair's career.

Kelly, a Ministry of Defence expert on chemical and biological weapons, and a one-time UN weap-

ons inspector in Iraq, died on July 17.

His apparent suicide came shortly after he was named as the source for a BBC report -- hotly denied by Blair -- alleging that the government had "sexed up" a September dossier on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in order to make the case for war against Saddam Hussein more compelling. Kelly's funeral is set for Wednesday.

Downing Street admitted that an official did speak to The Independent about Kelly, though it said the conversation was not intended as an official briefing and did not reflect the government's view.

A spokeswoman suggested that comments made by the official may have been "misunderstood".

Initially, a Downing Street spokeswoman had said she did not know from where the Walter Mitty comment originated, but stressed that nobody with either "the prime minister's or anybody else in Downing Street's approval would say such a thing".

'Indo-Israeli nexus to destabilise S Asia'

ANI, Islamabad

India's move to enhance its defence ties with Israel will de-stabilise the South Asian region, Pakistan's Foreign Office officials have warned.

Expressing concern over this development particularly in view of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's expected visit to New Delhi next month, The News quoted Foreign Office spokesman Masood Khan as saying: "We are concerned about the defence cooperation between India and Israel, as this will have a negative impact on the region."

"Also, it is a very disturbing development about reports that New Delhi is to receive F-16 aircraft from the United States. This will have a very negative impact on the security situation in the region," he added.

Regretting what he alleged to be Washington's double standards on the aircraft issue, Khan said that the United States had been reluctant to

sell F-16 aircraft to Islamabad even though it had received payment for the same.

"We did have a settlement of the issue, but these aircraft were never delivered."

Islamabad is worried about the "conditionality" imposed by the US Congress while releasing the \$3 billion aid package announced by President Bush. Khan said talks between Pakistan, the US government, Congress and opinion makers were continuing.

Counter charging India with maintaining "terrorist training camps", the spokesman said New Delhi needed to dismantle them immediately and stop what he termed "anti-Pakistan activities" through its consulates in Afghanistan.

"There are terrorist camps across the LoC (Line of Control)...and we hope India would dismantle its terrorist training apparatus. India should cease its activities inside Afghanistan, as it is

regrettable. It should hold back these activities (against Pakistan). We have conveyed our concern and perceptions to Afghanistan."

He rejected accusations of terrorists being trained in Pakistan. "These are all lies, there is no substance to them."

Khan also said Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's "regrettable" remark on Monday on the Ayodhya issue was sub-judice, and every precaution should be taken to respect the sentiments of the communities involved. "It is for the government of India to protect all places of worship," he said.

"If Prime Minister Vajpayee wants to talk to Prime Minister Jamali or President Musharraf he can pick up the phone and do so. As far as the visit of Maulana Fazlur Rehman (in July) is concerned, it is too early to say whether this has helped relations between the two countries.

India, Pakistan to begin talks on air links

PTI, New Delhi

Top aviation officials of India and Pakistan will meet later in August to discuss the resumption of air services between the two countries, the Government told Rajya Sabha on Tuesday.

Replying to supplementaries during Question Hour, Civil Aviation Minister Rajiv Pratap Rudy said technical level talks between the two countries, led by their DGCA's, will be held on August 27 and 28.

The meeting was convened following a proposal by Pakistan for a date for discussion for restoration of air links between the two countries which were snapped in the wake of December 13 attack on Parliament.

Rudy said the two teams have also agreed for September 3 and 4 as alternate dates for the meeting.

The Minister said it was at the initiative of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee that a decision was taken for restoration of air links between the two countries.

Admitting the delay is causing inconvenience to passengers, Rudy said the talks were expected to pave the way for discussion on modalities for restoring overflying of Pakistan

aircraft over Indian air space and other issues.

AFP adds: Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali told Hindi-language radio listeners Monday that protracted peace moves with India would pick up speed once suspended airlinks are resumed.

"At the moment this process is on the bus, and the bus moves slowly. When the planes would begin to run and fly, then I hope that the things would move with that speed," Jamali told the BBC's Hindi program in a live link-up with listeners.

"At the moment let the bus move."

Since Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's landmark peace offer on April 18, New Delhi and Islamabad have reappointed ambassadors after a 12-month absence and resumed a cross-border bus service.

But train and air transport links remain suspended, and direct talks between the fractious neighbours' leaders remain a long way off.

The transport ties were cut after allegedly Pakistan-backed militants stormed the Indian parliament killing nine people in December 2001.

Suicide on the rise in S Korea

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

The shocking news of Hyundai Asan Chairman Chung Mong-hun's suicide Monday morning brings to the fore a disturbing trend which has almost reached epidemic proportions in Korea in recent months.

Though his death may have farther-reaching social implications, Chung is only the latest example of a massive number of Koreans who have taken their own lives for various reasons.

"Suicide is a last resort to cope with utter despair and depression," psychiatrist Kim Hye-nam said, noting that celebrity deaths have a far greater impact on society in general.

In fact, a glance at a series of suicide stories that carried attention-grabbing headlines in various media outlets in the past few weeks shows where Korea stands on this subject.

Last Sunday, a 45-year-old taxi driver in Seoul, took his own life after spending 10 days in his teenage son's room agonising over why the boy hung himself after a series of poor academic achievements.

Early last week, a young mother leapt to her death after killing her two children at an apartment in Ulsan. The woman went through great financial difficulties after her husband lost 170 million won (\$140,000) in stock trading.



A family visit the monument to atomic bomb victims (rear) at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park yesterday. The 58th annual memorial service for the hundreds thousands A-bomb victims will be held today. Hiroshima was devastated by the first nuclear attack on humanity on August 6, 1945, which hastened Japan's surrender in World War II.