

Arafat offers truce

Israel rejects proposal, demands crackdown on militants

AP, Jerusalem

Yasser Arafat wants to reach a truce with Israel, his national security adviser said yesterday, but Israeli officials brushed off the offer and instead called on the Palestinian Authority to crack down on militant groups.

The offer came a day after the Palestinian premier-designate, Ahmed Qureia, handed Arafat the authority to appoint a new Cabinet, setting up a new confrontation with Israel, which has said it will not deal with an Arafat-dominated government.

In New York, the UN Security Council debated a Palestinian resolution to halt an Israeli decision to "remove" Arafat and was expected to vote on it Tuesday.

Arafat's national security adviser, Brig. Gen. Jibril Rajoub, said the new ceasefire offer was meant to end all Palestinian acts of violence in exchange for an Israeli

commitment to stop its military operations, including an end to blockades on Palestinian towns and villages.

"We are ready to sit and we are ready to declare a general ceasefire, but there needs to be something mutual because without mutuality nothing will be achieved," Rajoub told Israel Radio.

Rajoub did not say how the Palestinian Authority would reach a new truce with Hamas and Islamic Jihad - the two militant groups responsible for most attacks on Israelis in the past three years. He also did not address the US and Israeli demand that the authority crack down on the groups.

Palestinian militant groups abandoned a truce last month after Israel killed a Hamas political leader in response to an Aug. 19 Hamas bus bombing that killed 22 people.

An Israeli government official, speaking on condition of anonymity,

said the security Cabinet had decided last Thursday to reject all such offers.

"The government of Israel rejects any idea of a ceasefire as a way of dealing with terrorism. Terrorism will stop only with the dismantlement and eradication of the terrorist organisations. This is the duty and the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority," the Cabinet statement says.

Israel's security Cabinet decided at the same meeting to "remove" Arafat, which appears to leave open three options: expelling, killing or further isolating the veteran Palestinian leader. The decision came after twin suicide bombings in which 15 people were killed.

Israel Radio quoted unnamed government officials as saying the truce offer was an attempt to bring Arafat back to centre-stage and "rescue" him from the threat of expulsion.

"There is no need to give a chance to a ceasefire that does not include dismantling all the armed groups, all the terrorist groups," said Israeli lawmaker Yuval Steinitz, who is in Washington meeting with Bush administration officials, including National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

As both sides braced for more violence, diplomats said it would be difficult to form a new Palestinian government.

Sixteen of the 24 ministers in Qureia's new Cabinet will be appointed by Fatah councils controlled by Arafat, officials said Monday.

One official, Hani al-Hassan, who is close to Arafat, said it was undecided whether Fatah would appoint the ministers directly or offer Qureia a list of candidates for his choice. The other eight ministers would represent different movements or independents.



Black smoke raises from an office building as a man took eight hostages and set fire to the building in the central Japanese city of Nagoya yesterday. At least three people died and more casualties feared in the blast that wrecked the fourth floor where a man had taken eight hostages and spread a flammable liquid, threatening to ignite it, an official said.

Hostage taker among 3 killed in Tokyo

AFP, Tokyo

At least three people died and more than 20 were injured Tuesday when a disgruntled worker started a blaze at an office block in Japan after taking eight people hostage, fire officials said.

Police said Noboru Beppu, 52, a contract worker for the Keikyubin courier firm who had entered the company's fourth floor office demanding payment of unpaid wages, was among the dead.

Reports said Beppu was armed with a knife and a bow and arrows and had scattered fuel threatening to set fire to the office in Nagoya, Japan's fourth largest city, 270 km southwest of Tokyo.

Police said eight male employees were taken hostage after female staff were allowed to leave, but seven of the men were freed moments before a blast which engulfed the office in a fireball, shattering windows and sending glass flying.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani (L) greets Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee during a departure ceremony at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport yesterday. Vajpayee left on a three-nation tour that will include the first UN General Assembly since the Iraq war, a session Vajpayee said will be "most important" in determining the world body's future.

'Post-Iraq war UNGA session important'

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee left yesterday on a three-nation tour that will include the first UN General Assembly since the Iraq war, a session he said will be "most important" in determining the world body's future.

"This session is most important. To what extent the world community could maintain global peace and carry everybody along with it will be discussed," said Vajpayee, who is set to address the session September 25.

"The role and structure of the UN has been called into question by some recent development. (And the) presence at the UN General Assembly provides opportunity for exchange of views on these matters with a number of world leaders from different regions," Vajpayee said in a departure statement.

The Indian leader will first travel

to Turkey on his 13-day trip abroad. He will hold talks with US President George W. Bush on the sidelines of the UN meeting in New York and also visit Switzerland.

India was critical of the US-led war in Iraq which did not enjoy specific UN authorisation, although New Delhi has considered -- and so far rejected -- US calls to send peacekeeping troops to the war-torn country.

India in the runup to the General Assembly session has stepped up its demand for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, seizing on calls by Secretary General Kofi Annan for an overhaul of the world body.

The make-up of the five permanent veto-wielding Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- dates back more than half a century and the idea of expansion has gained currency since the Iraq war.

43 killed in bus accident in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 43 people were killed and 19 others injured when their bus plunged 80 metres (128 feet) off the Surkhet-Salyan road in Salyan district in western Nepal, into the torrential Bheri river Monday, police said Tuesday.

"At least 43 people were killed and 19 others injured when their bus fell 80 metres (128 feet) off the Surkhet-Salyan road in Salyan district in the far west into the torrential Bheri river Monday morning," police said Tuesday.

The bus was heading towards Salli Bazaar from Chhinchu, Surkhet in western Nepal when it plunged off the road, the police said.

Police said the accident occurred when the bus tried to give way to a truck coming from the opposite direction.

Benazir, Sharif agree to fight military jointly

PTI, Islamabad

Former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif have reached a tacit understanding not to persecute each other when they return to power in Pakistan and pledged legal action against the military rulers subservient of the coup and subversion of the Constitution.

"The future governments of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) headed by Bhutto and Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), led by Sharif will register cases against military rulers for imposing martial law and violating Constitution", sources with the Alliance of Restoration Democracy (ARD), in which both the parties were a part, said.

ARD president Nawabzada

Nasarullah Khan, who is currently visiting both Sharif and Benazir in their exiles in Jeddah and London, extracted the agreement between the two, local daily The Nation reported yesterday.

The two leaders also agreed to follow a "unanimous" policy on foreign and internal affairs, it said adding, they have agreed to return to Pakistan together to make an "international impact."

While Benazir lived in self exile in London and Dubai to escape prosecution in a number of cases registered by Sharif government, which was subsequently overthrown in a military coup by Pervez Musharraf, Sharif and his family have been exiled in Jeddah by the military regime.

Iraqis angry as US raids Saddam's hometown

REUTERS, Tikrit

US troops lost the hearts and minds of some Iraqis yesterday in aggressive pre-dawn house raids in the hometown of Saddam Hussein, blowing open gates, kicking down doors and shoving faces in the dirt.

Ten-year-old Ahmed, herded with the rest of his family into his garden, shook visibly as he watched soldiers interrogate one man, whose head slammed onto the ground with a thud.

"I will become an Iraqi fighter and I will kill Americans," the boy said. He pointed at troops who charged into his home with rifles, sledgehammers and bolt-cutters hunting for anti-American guerrillas. "They are the enemy," he said.

An old, barefoot man was led from his house over shards of glass from a broken picture frame knocked off the wall.

A balding man with a grey beard and dark tunic sat with his hands cuffed behind his back. "Why did

you smash the gate down?" he asked the soldiers pointing their weapons at his chest. "I would have let you in."

The US military raids dozens of homes each day throughout Iraq, trying to stem the flood of mine, grenade and mortar attacks against them by rounding up suspected assailants.

Senior commanders say the strategy has helped wrest the initiative from the guerrillas who have killed 73 US soldiers since Washington declared major combat over in Iraq on May 1.

But they acknowledge that when innocent Iraqis are caught up in the raids, it deepens distrust of the occupiers and can undermine the goodwill the soldiers generate by projects such as restoring electricity that aim to win over "hearts and minds."

While the United States said it invaded Iraq to free its people and eliminate a threat posed by Saddam, critics say the war has

backfired, inflaming Arab anger at the West and creating fertile ground for recruiting anti-American fighters.

At the end of Tuesday's raid, troops said they did not know if any of roughly a dozen detained men were the suspects they had targeted in what they dubbed "Operation High Five."

But Lieutenant David Poirier, who led the raids, said soldiers found explosives material in one home. "I am certain we found some bad guys," he said.

US commanders say they believe Saddam is probably still in the area around Tikrit but they have yet to find him.

During one of Tuesday's raids, a young girl covered in a woman's lap pressing her hands over her ears to block out the soldiers' yells of "Get down, get down." Sitting cross-legged, an old woman dressed all in black, rocked back and forth, muttering to herself with her cheeks cupped in her hands.

Confusion over death of Taliban commander

REUTERS, Spin Boldak

There was confusion yesterday over the reported death of Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Rahim, with some guerrillas confirming it and a man who identified himself as Rahim saying he was very much alive.

Afghan officials said on Monday that Rahim, who controlled Taliban forces in southern Afghanistan, was among 15 Taliban guerrillas killed in fighting in Kandahar province on Sunday.

Another Taliban commander, Mullah Abdul Rauf, and Taliban official Mullah Rahmatullah confirmed that Rahim was dead.

"The fact is that Mullah Abdul Rahim has been martyred," Rahmatullah told Reuters.

But a man identifying himself as Rahim called Reuters about 30 minutes earlier to say he was very much alive.

"The Taliban movement cannot be weakened by spreading news of my death," he said in the call arranged by other Taliban officials. "I am alive and all right."

India, China set for border talks next month

AFP, New Delhi

Senior representatives from India and China will meet in New Delhi next month for talks to resolve their dragging border dispute, it was reported yesterday.

The Indian delegation will be headed by National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra while the Chinese side will be led by Dai Bingqiao, China's vice foreign minister, the Hindustan Times reported.

"The meeting between the two special representatives is likely to be held in October," Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha was quoted as saying. "We are trying to work on a date."

Mishra and Dai were identified as the pointmen by New Delhi and Beijing to carry forward border talks during a visit by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to China in June this year.

The two Asian giants fought a brief but bitter war in 1962 and are yet to demarcate their regions with an established border. Instead, they use the post-conflict Line of Actual Control (LAC) to identify their respective territories.



PHOTO: AFP

Anti-US demonstrators color their hands with red paint in Manila to protest the ongoing joint US-Philippine war games in the country yesterday. The protestors also denounced the scheduled visit of US President George W. Bush next month.

Hutton inquiry begins cross-examination

REUTERS, London

Britain's inquiry into the death of weapons expert David Kelly begins cross-examination yesterday as it digs deeper into the case the government made for war against Iraq and the possible motives for Kelly's suicide.

So far, witnesses including Prime Minister Tony Blair and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon have only been quizzed by lawyers for the inquiry itself. From now on, with counsel for the government, Kelly's family and the BBC involved, the questioning will become much tougher.

Blair is not re-appearing at the Hutton inquiry but Hoon, widely expected to become the first ministerial casualty of the Kelly affair, has been summoned for next Monday.

Scientist Kelly killed himself after being singled out as the source of a BBC report that claimed the government had "sexed up" evidence of Iraq's

weapons of mass destruction to justify the conflict to a sceptical public.

The inquiry, chaired by Lord Hutton, has plunged Blair into the worst crisis of his six-year tenure and raised serious questions over a dossier on Iraq's weapons that helped make the case for war.

Martin Howard, deputy chief of defence intelligence, is one of the witnesses to be cross-examined yesterday.

During the drafting of the Iraq dossier, at least two intelligence officers told Howard they were unhappy with how it was presenting evidence of Iraq's weapons.

Howard is also likely to be quizzed about his involvement in the government's strategy to name Kelly as the source of the BBC's report.

Kelly's wife Janice told the inquiry her husband felt betrayed by the ministry after he was singled out as the source of the BBC report. He died from a slit

wrist soon after his name was made public.

A Thames Valley Police officer, a pathologist and a second Ministry of Defence official, Kate Wilson, will also testify on Tuesday.

Evidence given to the Hutton inquiry has particularly raised doubts about a claim in Blair's dossier on Iraq's armament that banned weapons could be fired within 45 minutes.

Britain's secretive intelligence chief, MI6 head Sir Richard Dearlove, conceded on Monday that criticism of the dossier was valid because the 45-minute assertion was "misinterpreted."

Breaking with precedent, Dearlove testified via audio-link to the inquiry. He said he stood by the intelligence in the September 2002 dossier but added the statement that Iraq could deploy chemical or biological weapons at 45 minutes' notice was only meant to refer to short-range arms.

Federal court orders delay in California recall vote

AP, San Francisco

Candidates in California's recall election voted to go ahead in their courting of voters after a judicial panel postponed the ballot, which could now be more than five months away.

"I thought I was running a sprint, and it looks like I may have to run a marathon," said Steve Smith, an adviser to Gov. Gray Davis, the target of the recall. "And I don't even like running that much."

A three-judge panel of the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Monday that California's planned use of punch-card ballots - the same kind used in the contested 2000 presidential election - would disenfranchise thousands of Californians.

The court did not set a new date for the recall, but backed a suggestion from the American Civil Liberties Union that balloting be held during the March 2 presidential primary.

One of the groups behind the effort to yank Davis from office planned to appeal to the US Supreme Court to keep the recall date Oct. 7. The circuit court's decision was stayed for a week to allow for such appeals.

World should have stopped Saddam sooner, says Powell

REUTERS, Halabja

Secretary of State Colin Powell used a visit to a mass Kurdish grave in northern Iraq Monday to defend the war that ousted Saddam Hussein, and accused Syria of allowing saboteurs to slip over its border.

Powell and leaders of Washington's Kurdish allies lit candles at a memorial for 5,000 Iraqi Kurds killed in a 1988 gas attack, which he said showed the world should have acted sooner against the brutal regime of the former Iraqi president.

The United States has often cited the killings in the northern town of Halabja as proof of their accusation that Saddam was developing weapons of mass destruction.

Powell, the second top US official to visit Iraq since US-led forces ousted Saddam in April, heard high praise from Kurds in the north, where US occupiers enjoy a sympathy denied them in Sunni areas to the south.



PHOTO: AFP

A group of illegal immigrants from Somalia are rounded up by a policeman yesterday at the Ambouli district in Djibouti. Police in Djibouti swept the capital early yesterday, arresting illegal foreign residents only hours after a deadline for them to leave the tiny Horn of Africa country expired, a police officer said.