



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian women, waving Fatah (2nd R) and national flags, dance during a demonstration in support of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Gaza City, organised by the Association of Women Committees for Social Work, yesterday. The Palestinians condemned the US veto on an Arab Security Council resolution opposing Israel's plan to expel Arafat, saying the move would encourage an "Israeli military escalation."

At least 2,000 foreign fighters could be in Iraq: Rice

AFP, Washington

Up to 2,000 foreign fighters bent on harming Americans and other coalition soldiers in Iraq may have flocked to the Middle East country following its invasion by the United States and Britain, a top White House official acknowledged late Tuesday.

But national security adviser Condoleezza Rice said the administration of President George W. Bush would rather face them in Iraq than in other parts of the world.

"I've seen ... estimates of anything from several hundred -- high hundreds -- to a couple of thousand," said Rice in an interview with ABC's "Nightline" program, adding that the precise numbers of foreigners fighting in Iraq remained unknown.

SAARC yes, but no summit with Pakistan: Indian FM

PTI, Islamabad

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Islamabad in January next to attend the Saarc meet need not necessarily provide a platform for a summit between India and Pakistan, said External Affairs minister Yashwant Sinha in an interview to Pakistan daily The News.

"I am bringing expectations down, because everyone thinks that if Vajpayee travels to Islamabad for the Saarc meet, summit-level dialogue will take place between India and Pakistan," Sinha said.

"The point remains that there must be adequate preparation for a summit-level meeting, and I don't see enough time for such a summit to take place," he said.

Sinha also made it clear that Pakistan should take further mea-

sures to prevent militants from crossing the LoC and infiltrate into Jammu and Kashmir before India-Pak peace process gathered full pace.

Referring to the current pace of the peace process initiated by Vajpayee five months ago, Sinha counselled patience.

"When you're dealing with relations between India and Pakistan, there is a need to be patient. I think impatience has spoiled things in the past, impatience may spoil things once again," he said.

While expressing disappointment over Pakistan's reluctance to block the flow of individuals through the Line of Control, he said the new peace process, however, found a large number of supporters in both the countries which indicates that the process will remain sustainable.

Sinha said barring an "accident", there was no possibility of the Indo-Pak tension becoming an election issue in the next general elections in India.

Asked whether there was any opposition to peace in India as it was poised for national elections next year, Sinha said, "Contrary to what might have been expected, the process initiated by Vajpayee has received wide support in India as indeed it has in Pakistan."

In this regard, he pointed out the support enjoyed by the initiatives on both sides to promote people-to-people contacts.

"The recent people-to-people contact will show that the people of the two countries want peace."

"Therefore, barring an accident, I should think that Pakistan will not be an issue in Indian elections."

Flood situation in Bihar still grim

PTI, Patna

There was no let up in flood situation in Bihar on Wednesday with the Ganga flowing above its all time high level at Kahalgaoon and Bhagalpur and other major rivers also in spate as the death toll shot up to 164 with five more death reported from flood-hit Vaishali and Purnia districts during the past 24 hours, official sources said.

A population of over 54.96 lakh spread over 3977 villages in 23 districts has been hit by floods, a relief and rehabilitation department press release said. It said standing crops in an area of 3.75 lakh hectares worth of over Rs 53.81 crore and 18,000 houses had been damaged due to floods.

Over 3,800 boats had been engaged for carrying out relief and rescue operation and 287 relief centres and 401 health centres are functional in flood-hit districts.

Commission seeks Taiwan's help in Netaji probe

PTI, Kolkata

Justice Mukherjee Commission, probing the disappearance of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, has requested the Taiwan Government to cooperate with it by providing some authenticated and specified documents concerning the alleged air-crash on August 18, 1945, at Taipei, of the plane allegedly carrying Netaji and others.

After hearing the deposition of three persons in the commission during the day, Justice Mukherjee on Tuesday said that even as the commission had come to know about an e-mail of the Taiwan government to an Indian journalist Anuj Dhar that it had no record of any plane crash at Taiwan between August, 1945 and October, 1945, the probe panel sought cooperation of the Taiwan government as to what was the basis of such conclusion.

ting Baghdad's nuclear capability, until its inspectors were thrown out of Iraq.

REUTERS, Sydney

Former UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix now believes Iraq destroyed its weapons of mass destruction 10 years ago and that intelligence agencies were wrong in their weapons assessment that led to war.

In an interview with Australian radio from Sweden, Blix said the search for evidence of biological, chemical or nuclear weapons would probably only uncover documents at best.

"The more time that has passed, the more I think it's unlikely that anything will be found," Blix said in the interview, which was broadcast on Wednesday.

"I'm certainly more and more to the conclusion that Iraq has, as they maintained, destroyed almost all of what they had in the summer of 1991," Blix said.

In 1991, the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) found what it called a secret nuclear weapons program in Iraq. It spent the next seven years dismantling

US sets up terrorist screening system

IANs, Washington

The US has set up a Terrorist Screening Centre (TSC), to consolidate many screening mechanisms into a single, comprehensive, anti-terror watch list that will become operational by December 1.

It will provide 24/7 operational support for thousands of federal screeners in the US and the world, said a Homeland Security Department press release.

Attorney General John Ashcroft, Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director Robert Mueller and director of Central Intelligence George Tenet spoke on the TSC.

They said the centre would ensure that government investigators, screeners and agents, were working on the same unified, comprehensive set of anti-terrorist information -- and that they had access to information and expertise that would allow them to act quickly,

when a suspected terrorist was screened or stopped.

The TSC does not provide any new law enforcement or collection powers to any government official; it simply consolidates information that law enforcement, the intelligence community, the State Department and others already possess.

The TSC was established by a presidential directive to the heads of all departments and agencies.

Powell said the programme has around 100,000 names of "potential terrorists".

Tom Ridge said: "The creation of the TSC is one of several new critical initiatives taken by this administration, to increase the sharing of information at all levels of government. The department's new information analysis and infrastructure protection unit allows the Department of Homeland Security, to analyse information and take specific action to protect critical infrastructure.

Is Sobhraj in Nepal?

IANs, Kathmandu

French national Charles Sobhraj, who attained notoriety worldwide for allegedly drugging and killing tourists, is in Kathmandu eyeing new ventures, a local daily reported on Wednesday.

Sobhraj was released from New Delhi's Tihar Jail six years ago.

The 59-year-old former gangster, whose lurid career attracted fans as well as marriage proposals from girls in India and who was reported to have signed a movie and book deal with French actor-producer Yves Renier, has been camping in Thamel, the upmarket tourist hub of the capital, for a fortnight, The Himalayan Times said.

In a front-page report titled The Serpent Living Incognito in Thamel, the daily also carried five photographs of a man wearing blue jeans, a white shirt and blue jacket, his face hidden by a white cap pulled over the forehead.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents and vacationers head away from the Outer Banks, North Carolina, area Tuesday night towards inland areas on the emergency evacuation route as Hurricane Isabel approaches. Officials estimate as many as 100,000 people have evacuated in advance of the hurricane, which is expected to come ashore today.

US braces for Hurricane Isabel

Tens of thousands flee to safety

AFP, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina

US authorities ordered more than 150,000 people to leave the North Carolina coast, as the waning yet feared Hurricane Isabel steadily closed in to its expected landfall early Thursday.

All along the US East Coast, people made contingency plans, as the US Navy ordered dozens of vessels out to sea to ride out the storm.

Long lines of cars, pickup trucks and SUVs flowed inland in waves Tuesday as authorities ordered the evacuations along the North Carolina coast.

"We're leaving. Everybody's leaving," said Nick Napolitano, the owner of the Ocean Side Court vacation cottages, whose occupants sometimes ride these things out.

"This one had 160 miles-per-hour winds and they were talking about 40-foot waves. We got something like that and the Outer Banks

are going to end up in Raleigh."

An Isabel now downgraded to Category Two on the Saffir-Simpson scale from a top level Category Five at the weekend, was still nonetheless packing maximum sustained winds close to 177 kilometres (110 miles) an hour with higher gusts.

Little change in Isabel's strength is forecast prior to landfall, the Miami-based National Hurricane Center said at 0300 GMT Wednesday.

"Hurricane force winds extend outward up to 145 miles (233 kilometers) from the center ... and tropical storm force winds extend outward up to 260 miles (418 kilometers)," it added in a statement.

Isabel is expected to make landfall early Thursday, according to the Center.

Forecasters said it would pack its first punch in North Carolina and then sweep up the seaboard towards Washington. Nearly 50 million people live in the path Isabel is expected to take.

North Carolina and Virginia both declared a state of emergency.

About 23,000 people in North Carolina's Dare county were affected by the evacuation order. In summer the Dare population swells to 150,000 but Frank Pierce, a state public safety spokesman, said there were few tourists in the county now.

North Carolina Governor Mike Easley urged people to "stock up on needed supplies such as gasoline and water, and tune to news broadcasts to hear the latest updates from emergency management personnel."

Easley Tuesday declared a state of emergency to accelerate relief, as officials warned more than 150,000 people to retreat inland.

Thousands of home and store owners from South Carolina to Virginia and Maryland rushed to board up windows and buy emergency food, batteries and first aid kits. Several hardware stores reported shortages.

Minister (Ariel) Sharon has an overloaded timetable," said Sharon's office.

But Housing Minister Effy Eitam told military radio that while the "Americans are allies of Israel who are helping the economic plan, there should be limits to the interference by a foreign country on matters of vital security for Israel."

US President George W. Bush has called the barrier, which at times cuts deep into Palestinian territory, a "problem".

The US State Department said Tuesday that Washington would penalize Israel for building in Palestinian areas by deducting the amount spent on such settlements from promised loan guarantees.

"serious consequences may follow the use of this veto, and the United States will bear the consequences for that."

Meanwhile Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon postponed a meeting of his security cabinet which was due to decide Wednesday the path of a new section of a controversial West Bank security barrier after the United States warned it could dock loan guarantees as punishment for its construction.

The security cabinet had been expected to decide whether the barrier should snake round the Jewish settlements of Kedoumin and Ariel, which lies some 20 kilometers (12 miles) over the Green Line which separates Israel from the West Bank.

The meeting was delayed "until next week, not under pressure from the United State but because Prime

response to the July 17 government proposal for an interim administration will be realistic and will allow the two sides to return to the table at an early date," the US statement said.

The United States has been taking a hands-on approach to support the peace process in Sri Lanka and has also stepped up its military cooperation with the Sri Lankan security forces in recent times.

The latest US statement came as two top Norwegian peace brokers arrived in the island in a bid to jump start the stalled process.

Norway's deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen and special envoy Erik Solheim were starting a three-day visit to the island and were due to hold talks with political leaders of the LTTE.



PHOTO: AFP

The Dalai Lama and US actor Richard Gere address members of the news media Tuesday evening at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. They discussed the Dalai Lama's visit to NYC which will include a public talk in Central Park.

Trusted minister sacked by ROK president

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun Wednesday sacked his home affairs minister who had been targeted in a no-confidence motion in parliament over his handling of anti-US protests.

Roh bowed to opposition demands to accept the resignation of trusted ally Kim Doo-Kwan, a 44-year-old former dissident, whose ministry controls the South Korean national police.

Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Minister Suh Sung-Kwan will replace him, the president's office said.

The National Assembly voted two weeks ago to oust Kim, the youngest member in the cabinet formed in February when Roh took office.

The conservative Grand National Party which controls parliament accused Kim of taking a soft line on anti-US protests after a dozen activists stormed a US shooting range and burned American flags in early August in north-east of Seoul, provoking strong protests from US officials.