

'Saddam in secret talks with US'

AFP, London

Ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein has been in secret negotiations with US forces in Iraq for the past nine days, a British tabloid newspaper claimed yesterday.

According to the Sunday Mirror report, Saddam is demanding safe passage to the former Soviet republic of Belarus in exchange for information on weapons of mass destruction and his bank accounts.

US President George W. Bush is being kept up to date on the talks by his National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice who is coordinating negotiations led by US general Ricardo Sanchez, the Sunday Mirror said.

Sanchez is the commander of US forces in Iraq.

Berlin summit a failure for Blair: Press

AFP, London

The British press poured cold water yesterday on Prime Minister Tony Blair's attempt to patch up relations with France and Germany, saying the Berlin summit was a failure.

"Blair gets the cold shoulder in Berlin," The Observer said after the prime minister returned from the trilateral talks on Saturday aimed at healing Europe's diplomatic wounds over the US-led war in Iraq.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and French President Jacques Chirac, unlike Blair, fiercely opposed the US-led war on Iraq which toppled Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

The Sunday Times said that Blair returned home "empty-handed" after failing to get any commitment from Schroeder and Chirac in "another setback over Iraq".

Muslim chaplain arrested on suspicion of spying

AFP, Washington

A Muslim US Army chaplain who counseled suspected al-Qaeda militants at a prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is under arrest in the United States on suspicion of espionage, US officials said Saturday.

Southern Command spokesman Captain Thomas Crosson said the chaplain, Captain James Yee, a West Point Military Academy graduate, had been in military custody since September 10.

"There is an ongoing investigation, and no charges have been filed against Captain Yee," he said. "I don't know where in the judicial process he is."

Putin won't send Russian troops to Iraq

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin, preparing for a summit with his US counterpart, was quoted as saying Saturday that Russian troops would not serve in any international force in Iraq.

"In a practical sense, there is no question of sending troops to Iraq, and we are not even considering this matter," he was quoted as saying by Russian news agencies.

Russia opposed the US-led war in Iraq, but Moscow has softened its position recently and been open to US proposals for an international force in Iraq under American leadership.

Joshi may take judicial way back

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Murli Manohar Joshi stayed away from his office Sunday but indications are that he "may be back soon".

One option easing his way back could be judicial. Joshi and the six others charged in the Babari Masjid demolition case by the Rae Bareilly special court will appeal against the court's decision, BJP sources said. The appeal could come as early as Monday.

Politically, Joshi received assurance from party leaders. The Prime Minister, visiting the USA, called Joshi from New York. Atal Behari Vajpayee told Joshi that he should not take any decision till he (the PM) comes back. The PM returns from his foreign tour on 28 September. BJP sources said that Vajpayee was a party to the decision that no minister should resign if charged by the Rae Bareilly court. A meeting on the Ayodhya ruling fallout is likely to be held on 29 September, with the PM attending. Joshi reportedly told the PM that he wanted to "discuss certain issues" with him.

UN poised to tackle faltering ME peace

AFP, United Nations

The foundering US-backed "roadmap" that seeks a peaceful settlement to Middle East violence will be a key topic of heated debate at the 58th UN General Assembly Tuesday, according to diplomatic sources.

World leaders will jet into New York this week for the start of the General Assembly where they will discuss post-war Iraq and other critical matters, but the Middle East peace process will be high on their agenda.

However, with US attention on the Middle East distracted by daily attacks in Iraq, and against the backdrop of Israel's threat that it is prepared to expel Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, international leaders are pessimistic progress will be made.

"We're talking now about the principle of getting the movement forward again, and Israelis and Palestinians engaging positively in the right direction," said Jordan's King Abdullah II, who met with US President George W. Bush Thursday.

"Unfortunately, there is a lull at the moment." Even before the gathering of world leaders kicks off Tuesday, the matter has sparked wide debate, and opposing views, at UN headquarters.

The 57th UN General Assembly on Friday adopted a resolution demanding Israel revoke its decision to expel Arafat, after a US veto of a similar Security Council resolution Tuesday.

The non-binding assembly resolution passed by an

overwhelming 133 votes. Fifteen members abstained from voting and four members – including the United States and Israel – voted in opposition to the measure.

The so-called "quartet" of US, UN, EU and Russian diplomats are due to meet in a bid to resuscitate the tattered "roadmap" this week in a session that has yet to be announced.

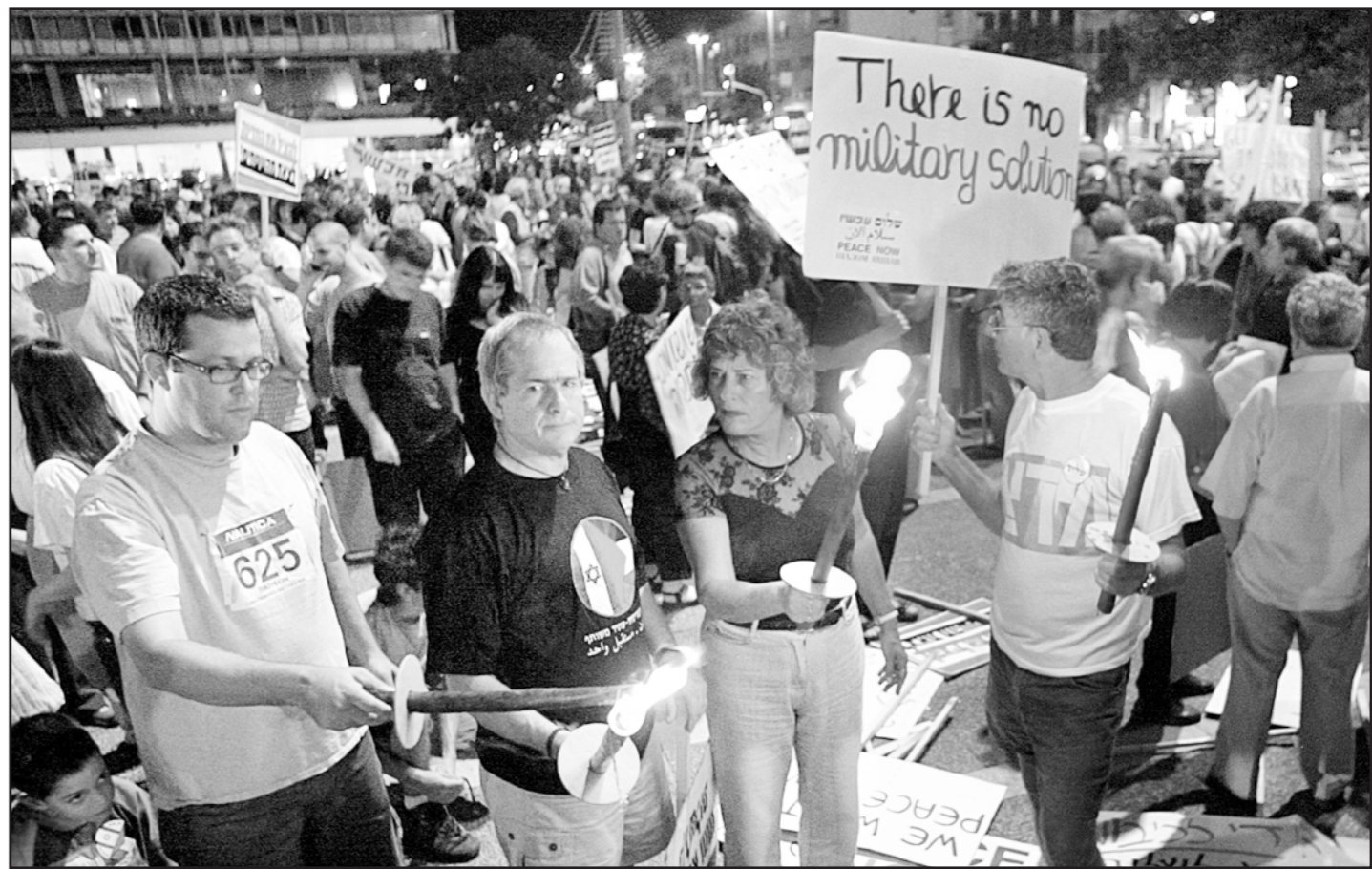
The meeting will include US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan as well as the head of EU foreign relations Javier Solana and, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini.

The international community has called for restraint in the region, but adherence to the roadmap appears to be falling apart amid a daily spiral of violence.

The roadmap called for a halt to violence, a freeze on Israeli settlements and reform of Palestinian institutions with a view to establishing an autonomous Palestinian state by 2005.

Concerns are also mounting that the US might have put the roadmap on a back burner due to the demands of reconstructing war-torn Iraq.

"It would be impossible today for President Bush to go in immersion at Camp David with Israelis and Palestinians for 13 days to work out an agreement," former president Jimmy Carter said this week, recalling his own experience 25 years ago amid the signing of the Camp David peace accords.



Israeli leftwing supporters light torches Saturday as they take part in the Peace Now movement march against their government, calling it to step down or to sign a peace agreement with Palestinians as soon as possible.



North Korean Oh Jin-Ryul (C) hugs South Korean brother Oh Hyung-Yung during a family reunion on Saturday at Mount Geumgang in North Korea. A group of 453 South Koreans left for the North Saturday for reunions with their North Korean relatives whom they have not seen in more than 50 years.

Indo-Pak troops trade fire in Kashmir: 3 die 9 killed in unrest including liquor store blast

AFP, Srinagar

Three civilians were killed and three others injured overnight when Indian and Pakistani troops traded fire across their de facto border in Kashmir, police on the Indian side said yesterday.

A police spokesman said Pakistani shells damaged 15 shops, a home and a government building in the Gurez sector of Baramulla district, 130 km northwest of Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

He said the three dead included a Muslim who drove a state-owned bus who was sleeping inside the vehicle.

Gurez residents ran for cover as Pakistani and Indian troops fired artillery rounds and shells at each other throughout the night, witnesses said.

The three injured were taken to a nearby army hospital where one was in serious condition, doctors said.

Indian and Pakistani troops also exchanged heavy fire in the Karnia sector of neighbouring Kupwara district but there were no casualties, police said.

The two countries' militaries regularly trade fire across their de facto border in Kashmir, with each

side accusing the other of initiating the skirmishes.

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan and claimed in full by both. The nuclear powers have fought two of their three wars over the scenic Himalayan region.

The Indian side of Kashmir is the throes of a 14-year Islamic insurgency that has claimed more than 38,000 lives by official count, or between 80,000 and 100,000 lives according to Pakistan and separatists.

Meanwhile, nine people died Sunday in separatist violence in Indian Kashmir including four civilians killed by a bomb outside a liquor shop, police said.

Suspected Islamic militants placed the explosives inside a video cassette recorder left in front of the alcohol store in the town of Rajouri, 150 km northwest of Indian Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, police said.

"A group of people went to see the VCR and it blew apart, killing two people on the spot," a police official said.

Doctors at the Rajouri hospital said four people were killed in the blast and 28 injured, including four in serious condition who airlifted for treatment in Jammu.

Qorei holds talks to cement support for new govt

Israel says 'no' to immunity for Arafat

AFP, Gaza City

Prime minister-designate Ahmed Qorei was holding talks in the Gaza Strip with Palestinian deputies and faction leaders Sunday in a bid to win support for a new government.

Qorei met representatives from the high committee of national and Islamic groups, a body which includes the headline Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements, Palestinian sources said.

Islamic Jihad officials were at the meeting but Hamas representatives could not be seen, according to an AFP correspondent outside the venue.

Their leaders have gone into hiding after Israel launched an all-out war against the groups, mounting a series of air strikes in Gaza.

Islamic Jihad spokesman Mohammed al-Hindi confirmed that his group "will not participate" in the government but welcomed the opportunity to hold talks with Qorei.

Qorei, who is also known as Abu Ala, earlier met here with local members of the Fatah movement of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, and was also expected to hold talks with local members of the Palestinian parliament.

He was nominated by Arafat two

weeks to succeed Mahmud Abbas as Palestinian prime minister.

Abu Ala has been seeking to cement support from across the spectrum to avoid the fate of Abbas who quit after a power struggle with Arafat.

Meanwhile, the top Israeli minister who said it would be an option for Yasser Arafat to be killed insisted Saturday that the Palestinian leader should not have "immunity" from reprisals.

Amidst international controversy over Israel's threat to expel Arafat from his West Bank base, Ehud Olmert, Israel's deputy prime minister and trade minister, told a Washington conference on the Middle East that Arafat was "responsible for terror" and should be accountable for his actions.

After the Israeli security cabinet agreed on September 11 to "remove" Arafat, Olmert intensified the international condemnation last week by saying that "liquidation" was also possible.

Olmert has since qualified his comments by stating that killing Arafat was only an option, not that it was being considered. But he took the Palestinian Authority leader in his sights again at the conference organised by the Washington

Maldives president faces new threat from unrest

3 killed in rioting

AFP, Colombo

The president of the tiny Indian Ocean atoll nation, the Maldives, has survived three coup bids and huge waves, but faces a new threat from civil unrest as he moves for a sixth five-year term in office.

Known abroad for his activism against global warming which threatens to wipe his country off the map as sea levels rise, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom for the first time Saturday faced riots in the capital island, Male.

The unprecedented violence erupted following the killing of a convict in riots at the infamous Maafushi prison, located in another island some 45 minutes away from

Male by speedboat.

Rampaging mobs set fire to vehicles, stoned public buildings and police stations and smashed state property -- scenes never seen before in the country of 250,000 Sunni Muslims, where there is simmering dissension against Gayoom, despite his firm standing at the polls.

"People were waiting for a moment like this," a Maldivian resident said by telephone, adding the violence had an undertone of displeasure with the administration of Gayoom, who has ruled since 1978.

The unrest coincided with an announcement by elections chief Ibrahim Rashad that Gayoom and

four lesser-known candidates were in the fray for the presidency in elections due in October.

AP adds: Tanks guarded the Maldivian President's house in the capital of the Muslim island nation on Sunday, a day after demonstrators attacked police vehicles and set fire to government buildings, residents and officials said.

At least three people were killed in the protest, which came on the same day that President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom filed for re-election. Mobs burned the Election Commission's office and the High Court building in Male, capital of the Maldives, a resident said on condition of anonymity.

Adviser to Nepali king, ruling party activist killed by Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels fighting to overthrow Nepal's monarchy shot dead a junior adviser to King Gyanendra and a leader of the ruling party, police said yesterday.

Ganga Prasad Subedi, one of 200 members on the Royal Advisory Council, was killed by a group of armed rebels who barged into his home late Saturday in Jarbutha village in the western Surkhet district, a police official said.

The Royal Advisory Council is called by the king when he seeks consultations. Subedi, 65, is survived by his wife and four children.

Suspected Maoists last week burned down the home of the Royal Advisory Council standing committee's chairman, Parsu Narayan Chaudhari, in the southwestern Dang district.

IAEA lays groundwork for showdown with Iran

AFP, Vienna

In meetings over the last two weeks in Vienna, the UN's nuclear watchdog laid the groundwork for what could be an historic showdown with Iran over its alleged atomic weapons program.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on September 12, at a meeting of its 35-nation board of governors, imposed an October 31 deadline on Iran to finally answer all the agency's questions about the Islamic Republic's nuclear energy programme.

Prime among these were where components with traces of highly enriched uranium that could be weapons-grade had come from and for Iran to sign a protocol allowing IAEA inspectors to make surprise inspections of suspect sites.

The board is to be presented with a report on Iraqi compliance by November 10 and then meet on November 20, IAEA spokesman Mark Gwozdecky said.

IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei warned Iran the IAEA could declare it to be in non-compliance with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if it failed to answer all the agency's questions.

If the IAEA finds Iran in non-compliance with this international accord, which since 1970 has mandated efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, it could bring the issue to the UN Security Council, which has the power to impose punishing sanctions on the Islamic republic.

Ali Akbar Salehi, the Iranian ambassador to the IAEA, reacted to the deadline by warning that Iran

World leaders to take on 'root causes' of terror at NY meet

AFP, New York

Two years after the September 11 attacks on the United States, more than a dozen world leaders will meet in New York Monday to discuss the next generation of policy measures in the global war against terrorism.

The one-day conference, "Fighting Terrorism for Humanity," is the joint brainchild of Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik and Nobel peace laureate Elie Wiesel.

The stated aim of the gathering -- which will take place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly and will be opened by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan -- is a discussion of the root causes of terrorism.

"Our aim is that the struggle against terrorism will lead to

increased security, and to enhanced understanding, openness and tolerance between cultures and religions," Bondevik said in a statement.

"In the struggle against crime, all agree to the need to prevent, to introduce security measures, to investigate and to arrest offenders. As part of the international struggle against terrorism, it is vital that political leaders also focus on the roots of terrorism," Bondevik said.

Among the 14 leaders who have confirmed their attendance at the summit are French President Jacques Chirac, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President George W. Bush

have also been invited, but officials at the Norwegian mission to the United Nations said it was more likely that their chief diplomats would attend.

During the conference, the participants will meet with survivors of the September 11, 2001 attacks and other terrorist strikes.

As a starting point for discussions, the conference will use the report of an international panel of terrorism experts which convened in Oslo in June.

The panel sought to debunk certain myths, with wide agreement among the experts that there was only a weak and indirect relationship between poverty and terrorism, and that state sponsorship is not a "root cause" of terrorism.



Thai Deputy Prime Minister Purachai Piemsomboon (C) and activists release pigeons to mark World Peace Day at Victory Monument in Bangkok yesterday. The activities are supposed to encourage a sense of inner peace, the first step towards achieving international peace.

Marriott victim ties the knot

THE JAKARTA POST/ ANN, Jakarta

What was planned as a cheerful wedding left a lump in the throats of most of the guests when Marriott bombing victim Feby Firmansyah wed Deli Ratnasari on Saturday morning.

The Medical Commission Room, next to the burns ward on the second floor of Pertamina Hospital, South Jakarta, was packed with family, close friends and several other recovering bomb victims.

Feby, 26, clad in a traditional gold Malay suit, and Sari, 26, who was dressed in a matching Malay dress, sat in front of the bride's parents.

"Dear father and mother, I bestow upon you 10 of my fingers, 11 with my head and 12 including my soul, to beg your consent to marry the man I truly care about and love," asked the bride, sobbing, just before the akad nikah (wedding vows) ceremony.