



Two Iraqi detainees sit handcuffed in a US army truck as they are transported from a holding cell to an undisclosed location for interrogation at the US Army's 4th ID headquarter base in the northeastern Iraqi town of Tikrit yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

## US senators predict close vote on Iraq funding

REUTERS, Washington

US senators on Sunday predicted narrow approval of President Bush's \$87 billion Iraq spending package but not until the reconstruction funding is examined further, a leading Democrat suggested.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, a West Virginia Democrat and the vice chairman of the US Senate Intelligence Committee, said he "probably will end up" supporting the massive spending package but the administration had so far failed to detail how the \$20 billion intended for rebuilding Iraq would be spent.

"We don't have the \$87 billion that the president needs now. We're probably going to have to borrow it, and we'll probably end up giving it to him, but the American people are going to be very resentful about that," Rockefeller told "Fox News Sunday."

The Senate and the full US House of Representatives this week are expected to consider the \$87 billion emergency spending bill for Iraq and Afghanistan, which has been a lightning rod for Democratic criticism of Bush's handling of postwar Iraq.

## Belarus mental hospital fire kills 30 inmates

AP, Minsk, Belarus

A fire believed to have been set by a psychiatric patient engulfed a Belarusian mental hospital Sunday, killing 30 patients and reducing much of the century-old wooden building to ashes.

One of the 62 patients who lived at the hospital in the village of Randilovshchina, some 150 miles west of the capital, Minsk, was missing. Emergency officials said they did not know whether he ran away or died in the pre-dawn blaze.

Another 31 patients had minor injuries, officials said. No hospital staff were in the building when the fire started.

A spokeswoman for President Alexander Lukashenko, Natalya Petkevich, said the fire was set by a patient who had tried to burn down the building twice before. The patient was among those killed.

But Igor Zarembo, a duty officer at the Emergency Situations Ministry, said investigators were also considering a second possibility that the fire resulted from carelessness on the part of the staff.

# Israeli opposition, Palestinians talk alternative peace plan

## Tel Aviv slams doves' move

AFP, Cairo

Former Israeli and Palestinian ministers Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abed Rabbo held talks here yesterday with top Egyptian officials about an alternative peace plan they drafted in Jordan, an official said.

Beilin and Abed Rabbo met with President Hosni Mubarak's top advisor Osama al-Baz and were later due to meet with Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher, an Egyptian official said.

The initiative by MPs from the opposition Labour and Meretz parties to parley with prominent Palestinians at a time when the peace process is at its lowest ebb has ruffled a hardline government that has ditched the Oslo accords in the face of three years of renewed Intifada.

Beilin, a former Israeli justice minister, and Abed Rabbo, a former Palestinian information minister, were part of a group which met in Jordan over the weekend to draft a peace pact they plan to sign in Switzerland in two weeks.

Beilin was closely involved with the Oslo accords.

Participants in the Jordan meeting have yet to reveal the full contents of their plan, saying they will do so only when it has been formally adopted in Geneva later this month.

But Meretz MP Haim Oron insisted it contained serious concessions from both sides, including an acceptance by the Palestinians that Israel was a Jewish state and that there could be no right of return for Palestinian refugees.

Meanwhile, right-wing Israeli government ministers hit out yesterday at an alternative Middle East peace plan drawn up by leading doves at a three-day meeting in Jordan over the weekend.

"The Israelis who put their names to the plan are marginal people who represent nobody but themselves and who paid the price for that at the last elections," said Education Minister Limor Livnat.

She was alluding to the meeting's leading Israeli participant, former justice minister Yossi Beilin, who masterminded the Oslo

accords but lost his seat in January after joining the dovish Meretz party.

"These people are the playthings of (Palestinian leader) Yasser Arafat," Livnat told public radio.

"They're sending the message that despite the generous peace proposals of (then Labour prime minister) Ehud Barak at the (2000) Camp David summit, (Arafat) was right to resort to terrorism and that they are prepared to reward him with new concessions."

Foreign Minister Sylvan Shalom echoed her attack, both on Beilin and the peace plan.

"I wouldn't have expected anything else from the people who gave us the Oslo accords -- we're still paying for them today," he told Israeli dailies.

"We have a government in Israel and it is its prerogative to handle these matters ... Everything else is just hot air."

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has ruffled a hardline government that has ditched the Oslo accords in the face of three years of renewed intifada.

Last week Prime Minister Ariel Sharon accused the Israeli doves of "going behind his back" and acting without any authority.

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But Meretz MP Haim Oron insisted it contained serious concessions from both sides, including an acceptance by the Palestinians that Israel was a Jewish state and that there could be no right of return for Palestinian refugees.

And Palestinian MP Fares Kadura vowed to work to ensure that the plan was more than a mere academic exercise.

"We are ready to campaign to win support for this plan on the Palestinian street because we want better life and we believe we've found a way to achieve it," Kadura told the radio.

## Musharraf slams Arab nations over Kashmir

### Pakistan to 'counter' India's Phalcon

IANS, PTI, Dubai/ Putrajaya

President Pervez Musharraf has criticised Arab countries for not supporting Pakistan in its dispute with India over Kashmir.

"Pakistan has always been at the forefront in support of the Palestinian cause, yet there is a degree of disappointment as to the support we get on the Kashmir issue," Musharraf said in an interview with the Dubai-based Khaleej Times newspaper.

Calling the disputes over Kashmir and Palestine "two sides of the same coin", he said: "Our Arab Muslim brothers must understand that there is a similar dispute with the same conditions subject to a Security Council resolution and thousands of people are being killed. There should be no selectivity in approaches."

"India wants to become a member of the UN Security Council: how can a nation violating the Security Council's regulations be a permanent member?"

"If India accepts the Council's resolutions and sits for dialogue with Pakistan, we can arrive at a solution. Such a solution must be acceptable to both sides and the people of Kashmir as well. We are doing our best to show flexibility."

Asked about growing Indian ties with Israel and whether Pakistan

would also recognise the Jewish state, he said: "Each country is pursuing its national interests and we are not ready to do anything to please others at the expense of our national interests. We have a good relationship with the US as partners in combating terrorism, but we have no relation whatsoever with Israel."

PTI adds: President Pervez Musharraf has declared that Pakistan would "counter" India's move to acquire Israeli Phalcon airborne radar systems and urged the United States to "try harder" to persuade New Delhi to resume Indo-Pak dialogue.

In an interview to Malaysian daily New Strait Times published on Monday, the Pakistani General asserted he would never allow his country to be at a military disadvantage and would do his best to maintain a no-win situation.

"We will maintain that no-win situation come what may - this, the world and India should know. They have reached an agreement and we will counter it. That has to be very clear. We will never allow the no-win situation to be disturbed," Musharraf said in response to a question on India's tripartite agreement with Russia and Israel for the manufacture of AWACS.

## Bolivian troops quell protests: 20 killed

REUTERS, La Paz

Around 20 protesters were reported killed on Sunday after Bolivia's government sent thousands of troops backed by tanks to quell increasingly violent protests against President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada.

The protesters were killed during pitched battles with troops clearing roadblocks choking food and gasoline supplies to the capital and around the poor industrial suburb of El Alto, outside La Paz, human rights officials said.

The government, which has played down death tolls in recent protests, said four civilians and one soldier were killed and that around 30 others were injured.

## Separated twins stable, but face long road to recovery

AFP, Dallas

Two Egyptian boys who were born joined at the head were lying in separate beds for the first time in their two years of existence, but doctors who worked 26 hours to separate them warned that they still faced a long road to recovery.

Separation of the twins was successfully completed at 11:17 am (1617 GMT) on Sunday, the Children's Medical Center announced, 26 hours after surgery began.

Plastic surgeons then worked another seven hours to close the wounds, grafting tissue taken from the boys' thighs over the tops of the their skulls, which had previously been joined at the crown.

## JI bombmaker killed in Philippines

AFP, Manila

The Philippines government hailed yesterday the killing of a top Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) operative, calling it a victory against terrorism just days before President George W. Bush's visit here.

The United States and countries in the region also welcomed the death of Indonesian Islamic militant Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi in a shoot-out with security forces on the southern island of Mindanao Sunday.

## Pakistan to send troops to Iraq only under UN banner

AFP, Putrajaya

Pakistan will only dispatch troops to Iraq under a United Nations banner and if other Muslim nations agree to participate, Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri said yesterday.

Despite requests from the United States and Britain to contribute to a stabilisation force, he said Pakistan does "not want to be perceived as an extension of the occupation force."

"We are waiting for the emergence of a consensus in the international community," he told AFP at a meeting here ahead of a summit of the 57-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

"As of this moment, a consensus has not yet been arrived at. I hope that it will be," he said.

"We want to be perceived as friends of the people of Iraq, as

people who are invited to go there."

"So the minimum requirement after a UN resolution is that Pakistan does not go alone, that there are other Muslim countries and it will be much better if we are invited by some established Iraqi authority."

Kasuri said Pakistan had no plans to make a formal request for the OIC to send troops to Iraq as a collective effort but it would "talk informally to other Muslim countries" once a UN resolution was approved.

The United States has so far appealed for military help from three Muslim countries -- Bangladesh, Pakistan and Turkey.

Bangladesh echoed Pakistan's position, with Foreign Minister Morshed Khan telling reporters here that his country would only send troops "if the UN gets a central role under the UN blue helmets."



Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmoed Kasuri (L) chats with his Malaysian counterpart Syed Hamid Albar (R) upon arrival for the opening of the Ministerial Preparatory Meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference 10th triennial summit in Putrajaya yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

# OIC meet paints bleak picture of Islamic world

AFP, Putrajaya

A bleak picture of weakness and disarray in the Muslim world was painted by foreign ministers meeting here yesterday ahead of the biggest Islamic summit since the September 11 terror attacks on the United States.

Islamic countries stand accused of terrorism and are threatened by sanctions, plagued by economic problems and ethnic strife, while some are under foreign occupation, speakers noted at the opening session of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) meeting.

OIC secretary general Abdelouahed Belkeziz warned that the "dangers" confronting Muslims were "unprecedented in (their) contemporary history."

Belkeziz said "Muslims are filled with feelings of impotence and

frustration as some of their countries are occupied, others are under sanctions, a third group threatened and a fourth group accused of sponsoring terrorism," he said.

"Muslims abroad are considered with suspicion, besieged, deprived of their rights."

Belkeziz also pointed to the economic weakness of Islamic states, many of which depend heavily on oil revenue that can no longer meet the needs of their growing populations, causing rising unemployment and poverty.

"Our economic conditions are fragile and weak compared to large economic blocs and we cannot achieve minimum economic coordination," he said.

The world seemed to have forgotten about the high values of Islam after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, stress-

ing only the violence perpetrated by extremists, Belkeziz added, deploring the inability of politicians and the media to correct this image.

"Islam itself is being accused in its culture, civilisation and message. Our religion is a religion of peace and tolerance... it stresses the sanctity of human life, it upholds the noble values and calls for welfare."

"Our media is unable to confront the false accusations and joint Islamic political action is unable to confer to us protection and pride," he said.

Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar of incoming OIC chairman Malaysia said "the threat of unilateralism, globalisation and terrorism, the precarious situation in the Middle East and the uncertain future of Iraq... have only served to threaten our very survival."

## Palestinian PM hints at quitting next month

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie suggested Sunday he would quit next month after agreeing to head a 30-day caretaker cabinet, stoking uncertainty over a US-backed plan for peace with Israel.

Palestinian political chaos triggered by power struggles between President Yasser Arafat and reform-minded deputies has combined with intractable violence on the ground to stymie the "road map" to a Palestinian state in Israeli-occupied territory.

Asked about his plans following a meeting of Arafat's Fatah faction, Qurie said: "The same (five-day-old) government will continue for another 25 days, and after that there will be a new government and a new prime minister also."

But officials close to Qurie said he was not necessarily ruling out continuing in office if he obtained the cabinet roster of his choice. Negotiations to overcome Qurie's differences with Arafat were likely in the coming

weeks. After three days of fighting that killed eight Palestinians and left more than 1,000 homeless, Israel withdrew most forces from the large Gaza Strip refugee camp of Rafah Sunday, three days after they swooped on suspected arms-smuggling tunnels.

Palestinian militants operating elsewhere in Gaza fired three Qassam rockets into the nearby western Negev desert region of Israel. No casualties or serious damage were reported.

Aides to Arafat, 74, said he had fully recovered from a stomach illness and chaired a meeting of Fatah's executive that sewed up a deal for Qurie to run the emergency cabinet for 30 days without an interior minister.

The accord put in abeyance Qurie's threat last week to resign over Arafat's rejection of his nominee for interior minister, Nasser Youssef. The interior minister would oversee any steps to rein in militants hostile to peace negotiations.



Iran's Mohammed Hussain Adelle (R), vice chairman of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) talks with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (C) and Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando (L) at the ceremonial closing of a two-day meeting of IOR-ARC in Colombo yesterday. Wickremesinghe used the forum to defend greater foreign involvement in the island's Norwegian-backed peace process and brushed aside allegations that the country's sovereignty had been compromised. PHOTO: AFP