



PHOTO: AFP

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (C) shakes hands with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (R) while his wife Siti Hasmah (L) looks on as they pose for photographers at Putrajaya's convention center before the opening of a summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Malaysia's administrative capital yesterday. Leaders from 57-nation OIC opened their biggest summit meeting since the September 11 attacks on the United States, with turmoil in Iraq and the Middle East topping the agenda.

Iran utters 'readiness' to sign NPT: ElBaradei

Legislation in US Congress seeking sanctions

AFP, Tehran

Iran has expressed its "readiness" to sign the additional protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) allowing tougher UN inspections of its nuclear facilities, IAEA director Mohamed ElBaradei said yesterday after talks with a top Iranian official.

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency said he had also been assured by Hassan Rowhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council on National Security, that Tehran would also seek to answer a number of pressing questions over its nuclear activities.

"I was assured by Rowhani that the Islamic Republic of Iran will clarify all the outstanding issues for us to be able to verify all aspects of its nuclear activities," the IAEA director general said in a joint appearance with Rowhani.

"He expressed the readiness of Iran to sign the additional protocol," ElBaradei said, adding that

Rowhani again reiterated "apprehensions" over allowing unhindered inspector access and its implications for Iranian sovereignty.

"I made it very clear that all these apprehensions are unfounded. The protocol is never meant in anyway to compromise state sovereignty, dignity, security or technical development. That is not the purpose of the protocol," the IAEA chief, who is in Tehran for a day of talks, told reporters.

Despite the Iranian assurances, ElBaradei said "there are a number of outstanding issues and technical issues that we need clarification on." He added: "I hope we will be able to clarify these issues and get a satisfactory answer."

In his own brief comments, Rowhani said Iran did have "a certain number of apprehensions" over the additional protocol, but he added: "I am not pessimistic".

The IAEA has given Iran until October 31 to answer questions on its nuclear program. It began an

intensive round of inspections on October 1, and ElBaradei has revealed that military as well as civilian sites have been visited. He has also said the deadline will not be extended.

Washington accuses Iran of trying to develop nuclear arms and has branded it part of an "axis of evil", along with the Iraq of Saddam Hussein that it said held weapons of mass destruction, and North Korea, which has claimed it is making atomic bombs.

Meanwhile, a resolution introduced Wednesday in the US Senate urged Iran to abandon its alleged nuclear weapons program or face the threat of United Nations sanctions.

The measure introduced by senators Dianne Feinstein and Jon Kyl give Tehran two weeks to cease its alleged efforts to produce nuclear weapons and to come into compliance under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty or face the risk of UN sanctions.

Two mortar shells hit coalition HQ in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Two mortar shells have hit an area near a section of central Baghdad area sealed off by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) for use as its operational headquarters, a military spokesperson said yesterday.

There were no casualties in the attack late Wednesday near the sector referred to by the military as the "Green Zone," serving as the CPA's main hub in Iraq, the spokesperson said.

Coalition spokesman Charles Healy said there were two explosions late Wednesday near the CPA headquarters in Saddam Hussein's former Republican Palace.

"A couple of explosions were heard in the vicinity of the Coalition Provisional Authority, but there was nothing inside the palace itself," Healy said.

Meanwhile a US military convoy was hit by a road bomb yesterday near Baqubah, northeast of Baghdad, which damaged a vehicle but caused no casualties, a witness told AFP.

5 detained for US convoy bombing in Gaza

AP, Gaza City

Palestinian police arrested five members of a militant group early yesterday in connection with a deadly attack on a US diplomatic convoy, security officials said. Witnesses said a gunfight erupted during the raid.

The five are members of the Popular Resistance Committees, a group that consists largely of former Palestinian security officials and disgruntled members of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, the security officials said.

The five were arrested in the Jebaliya refugee camp, which is near the site of Wednesday's attack. The bombing killed three American security guards working for the US Embassy in Tel Aviv.

One of those arrested was identified as Ahmed Saker, 25.

Palestinian witnesses said that when Palestinian police came to Block 8 of Jebaliya to make arrests, a gun fight erupted. There were no reports of injuries.

Palestinian militant groups, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, have been quick to distance themselves from the attack, and the Popular Resistance Committees issued a statement saying it was not involved.

Palestinians face pressure to crack down on militants

Israel revives threat to expel Arafat

REUTERS, Gaza

The Palestinian leadership faced tough US and international pressure yesterday to crack down on militant groups after a roadside bombing that killed three US security men in the Gaza Strip.

The United States was sending a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) team to the region and made clear that Washington, whose plan for Palestinian-Israeli peace has been stymied by more violence, would play a key role in inquiries.

It blamed the Palestinian Authority for security lapses that led to Wednesday's killings, the first slayings of Americans in a three-year-old Palestinian uprising against Israel, and took a tough line on terms for resuming Middle East diplomacy.

President Bush said Palestinian authorities should have acted long ago "to fight terror in all its forms."

"The failure to create effective Palestinian security forces dedi-

cated to fighting terror continues to cost lives," he said in a statement on the bombing.

"I condemn in the strongest terms the vicious act of terrorism directed against Americans in Gaza today."

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei pledged cooperation and President Yasser Arafat told BBC television that he was mobilizing his security team to find the attackers.

"We will send all of them, the majority of them, to settle this point, to (find out) who are behind it and who are working this dirty and shameful and very serious attack against our friends and our colleagues, the Americans," he said.

Palestinian security sources said Arafat named Major-General Abdel-Razek al-Majaydeh, head of Palestinian national security forces in Gaza, to oversee the Palestinian inquiry into the attack and he planned to meet US investigators on Thursday.

A bomb apparently detonated by remote control crumpled a silver, armor-plated jeep in a US convoy and tore a crater in the road. Body parts and debris were flung meters (yards) away.

Palestinian militant groups denied involvement in the attack. But the United States, the United Nations, and Europe blamed the bombing on lax Palestinian security.

UN Middle East envoy Terje Roed-Larsen said the attack "underscores the vital need for the Palestinian Authority to revamp and strengthen its security forces so such terror attacks do not occur."

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana wrote to Arafat insisting he "react seriously" to the attack. "Condemnations and excuses will not do," a spokeswoman reported Solana as saying.

Secretary of State Colin Powell stressed to Qurei in a phone call that "it was important that the Palestinian Authority take action to

put an end to violence and terrorism," according to a Palestinian official said.

AFP adds: Foreign Minister Sylvan Shalom revived yesterday the Israeli threat to expel Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat following the bombing ambush of a US diplomatic convoy in the Gaza Strip that killed three Americans.

"The Palestinians, and Arafat at their head, continue to encourage terrorist attacks, and I believe that, at the end of the day, the Americans realize that as long as Arafat remains in the region, it will not be possible to see emerge another, moderate Palestinian leadership prepared for dialogue with Israel," Shalom told public radio.

Following two suicide bombings in early September, which left 15 Israelis dead in Jerusalem and near Tel Aviv, the Israeli security cabinet approved in principle the forcible expulsion of Arafat, but left the timing of such a move open to question.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters brandishing truncheons march in downtown La Paz on Wednesday against the government of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. An independent Bolivian human rights group said Wednesday that at least 86 people have been killed and 400 injured in a month of protests.

Pope celebrates silver jubilee

REUTERS, Vatican City

Sapped by age and ailment, Pope John Paul celebrates his 25th anniversary as head of the Roman Catholic Church yesterday with attention focused both on his past achievements and on future uncertainties.

Cardinals from around the world will join thousands of pilgrims in St Peter's square for a mass in honor of the 83-year-old pope, who has revolutionized his office and taken his message far beyond the confines of the tiny Vatican state.

"I think he will go down (in history) as John Paul the Great," US Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, DC told Reuters this week.

As the Silver Jubilee has neared, the pope's fragile health has appeared to go into steep decline and speculation about how long he might live or who might succeed him have inevitably cast a long shadow over the festivities.

Close friends and advisers say he will carry on to the bitter end and have told the faithful gathering in the Vatican that the papacy, already the fourth-longest in the history of the 2,000-year old Church, is still alive and well.

Atomic row stalls North, South Korean talks

REUTERS, Seoul

The rival Koreas were locked in a stalemate yesterday after communist North Korea refused to discuss the nuclear crisis that South Korea sought to be the top agenda item at ministerial talks in Pyongyang.

South Korean media pool reports on the third day of four-day cabinet-level bilateral talks said there had been no meetings since Wednesday when the chief North Korean delegate shut down discussion of the row over the North's nuclear arms program.

North Korean senior cabinet councillor Kim Ryong-song rebuffed South Korean Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun's plea

that the North take a "more forward-looking approach" and agree to an early resumption of diplomatic discussions on the crisis.

China, Russia, the two Koreas, Japan and the United States held an inconclusive first round of talks in Beijing in late August.

All sides pledged to avoid steps that would aggravate the year-old dispute and all the parties except North Korea said they sought another round of talks.

North Korea has since continued to ratchet up pressure with announcements it had advanced its drive to expand its nuclear arsenal by processing weapons-grade plutonium.

Putin makes surprise speech at OIC summit

AFP, Putrajaya

Russian President Vladimir Putin made a surprise appearance as a speaker at the opening session of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) here yesterday.

He won warm applause from the leaders of the Islamic world when he said through an interpreter that terrorism should not be equated to any religion.

While always slated to attend as an observer, he was not on the list of speakers for the summit, which is the biggest Islamic conference since the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States.

"The position of Russia is constant and clear. Terrorism must not be equated to any religion, culture, tradition, or any way of life," Putin said.

Blair admits being warned about al-Qaeda threat

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair acknowledged Wednesday he was warned about increased threats to Western interests from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terror network in the event of war on Iraq.

But Blair said that following the warning from British intelligence, he decided to take Britain into the US-led war after weighing the possible short-term risk of increased terrorism against the long-term risks of rogue states developing weapons of mass destruction.

Blair's acknowledgement came as a leading security think-tank Wednesday said al-Qaeda recruitment was probably increasing following the Iraq conflict.

"The assessment I received was

that the greatest terrorist threat to Western interests came from al-Qaeda and related groups, and that this threat would be heightened by military action against Iraq," Blair said in a written reply to parliament.

Blair was responding to claims about the warning, made by British intelligence in evidence to an inquiry into the suicide of British government scientist David Kelly.

"When I took the decision that military action would be required to ensure that Iraq complied with United Nations Security Council resolutions, I had to weigh all the factors, including the possible short-term risk of increased terrorism, against the longer-term risks of rogue states developing weapons of mass destruction," Blair said in his reply.

Numbers of world hungry keep on growing: WFP

AFP, Rome

Donations from the international community are failing to keep pace with the needs of the world's hungry, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) said yesterday in a message to mark World Food Day.

The Rome-based agency said it faced the highest global food aid needs in its 40-year history despite the contributions of donor countries.

"It is simply unacceptable in this day and age that hunger and malnutrition remain the number one cause of death worldwide," said WFP director James T. Morris.

"Millions are counting on us to remind the world of their daily struggle, and the best way for them to be heard is for all of us to speak with one loud voice."

The UN agency said progress towards the goal of world leaders to halve the number of global hungry -- 800 million people -- by 2015, was being hampered by

historically low levels of investment in agriculture.

"Clearly, no single organization can solve world hunger. Its causes are incredibly complex, and its solution requires more than food aid alone," said Morris.

"All of us -- individuals, businesses, non-governmental organizations and governments -- have a deep responsibility to join the campaign to end hunger."

The WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency. It claims to have fed 72 million people in 82 countries in 2002.

However, it said it faced a donor shortfall of 600 million dollars in its anti-hunger campaign this year, 15 percent of its 4.3 billion dollar target.

It identified civil-war battered Liberia, drought-struck Eritrea, the Teso District of Uganda, and North Korea as world hunger flashpoints requiring particular attention in the coming months.



PHOTO: AFP

Destruction to the Staten Island Ferry boat Andrew J. Barberi which was involved in a fatal accident at the ferry terminal in Staten Island, New York on Wednesday. A ferry packed with commuters slammed into a pier leaving at least 10 dead.