



US soldiers and Iraqi policemen deployed at the scene of an explosion in front of the Baghdad headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Baghdad yesterday. An Iraqi hospital ambulance rammed into a barricade in front the ICRC, setting off a huge explosion.

# Israel blamed for breaching roadmap after legalising settlement outposts

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel was accused yesterday of breaching the terms of the Middle East peace "roadmap" after granting "permanent settlement" status to at least five illegal outposts in the West Bank.

A senior advisor to Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said the decision would allow the settlements to obtain grants for education and infrastructure projects as well as making them eligible for protection by security forces.

"We need to give the minimum services to these people who are on the ground, especially for security and education," Ron Sheshner, senior advisor to Mofaz on settlements, told Israeli radio.

"These people must be able to survive and we will provide them a solution."

The radio said several of the outposts set to be accorded "legal" status had earlier been dismantled by the army.

In addition, the radio reported

that parliament's finance commission would unlock Monday some 29 million dollars worth of funds to build apartments in West Bank settlements.

Under the terms of the internationally drafted "roadmap", Israel is obliged to freeze settlement activity in general and dismantle around 60 outposts in the West Bank that have been set up since Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came to power in March 2001. Since the roadmap was officially launched in June, the number of settlement outposts has remained largely unchanged.

Around a dozen were dismantled by the army in a blaze of publicity, but new ones have been since been set up by radical settler groups.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said the latest move illustrated that Sharon's government was determined to kill off the roadmap.

"Israel is continuing to bury the roadmap," Erakat told AFP.

He called on the sponsors of the

roadmap -- the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia -- to pressure Israel to reverse its decision, which he described as part of a wider aim "to destroy the peace process and the Palestinian Authority and prolong the occupation".

Dror Etkes, of the leftist Israeli group Peace Now's Settlement Watch programme, said the move was a "blatant" breach of the roadmap.

"According to the roadmap they are expected to dismantle these outposts. Instead what we are seeing is that they are being integrated," he told AFP.

"They (the Sharon government) are very committed to the peace process -- on condition that they don't have to dismantle the outposts and end the occupation."

The decision comes just four days after Israel also sparked accusations of flouting the roadmap by inviting tenders to build more than 300 apartments in West Bank settlements.

# Maoists extortion forces Nepalis to flee homes

AFP, Kathmandu

With violence surging across rural Nepal, villagers and political leaders opposed to Maoist rebels charge that the guerrillas have stepped up extortion and driven thousands from their homes.

Dhana Kumari Ghale, 82, is suffering from bronchitis. She says she and her farmer husband fled their village in eastern Nepal for an uncertain life on the road after Maoists demanded money to fund their seven-year "people's war."

"We have been forced by the Maoists to be refugees in our own country," said Ghale, interviewed by a state television reporter.

"At a time when we don't have enough to eat and the bitter winter is coming, how can we pay a huge amount of money to the Maoists?" she asked.

The Maoists say their insurgency, which has claimed more than 8,200 lives, is aimed at improving the lives of villagers like Ghale by overthrowing the monarchy and the rest of the Kathmandu-based elite.

Last week the rebel leadership said it would not destroy infrastructure or public projects except those "run directly by the United States."

# Top Hizbul commander killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The operations chief of Indian Kashmir's largest rebel group, Hizbul Mujahedin, was killed in a gunbattle in the summer capital Srinagar, police chief K. Rajindra said yesterday.

Hizbul Mujahedin commander Saiful Rahman was killed by security forces in a gunbattle Sunday evening in Srinagar's Palpora district, said Rajindra, the police chief for the Kashmir Valley around the summer capital.

A police statement said Rahman was a Pakistani from Rahim Yar Khan in the eastern Punjab province and served as Hizbul Mujahedin's "chief operations commander" and "chief military adviser."

It said police, after killing Rahman, searched his hideout and found an automatic rifle and 73 rounds along with one hand grenade and a wireless set.

Hizbul Mujahedin is the largest of the rebel groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir since 1989. The group is made up mostly of local men with the leadership based in the Pakistani-administered zone of Kashmir.

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Thai woman and her daughter walk in the flood on the street in Phetchaburi province southern of Bangkok yesterday. Thousands were hit Sunday by monsoon flooding along Thailand's southcentral coast, which has brought road and rail transport to a virtual halt and forced the evacuation of more than 700 people, authorities said.

# Iraq to drop Saddam-era nat'l anthem, emblem

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq will soon have a new flag and national anthem as part of efforts to sever all links with the era of Saddam Hussein and his Baath party, a member of the US-installed Government Council told AFP on Sunday.

"We have created a committee within the council to chose between different proposals to change the flag and the national anthem," Muwaffak al-Rubai said.

"For the national anthem, there is a consensus to go back to the one which existed before the early 1980s and which was called: 'My homeland, my homeland,'" he said.

Saddam brought in a new song

glorifying his former ruling Baath party, entitled: "A country that has spread its wings to the horizon."

"I also think that we will go back to the old emblem from the time of Abdul Karim Kassem which had a cogwheel with wheat in the centre instead of the eagle now in use," he said, referring to the ruler of Iraq between 1958 and 1963.

Rubai also said "the majority of Council members, and I am one of them, want to maintain the current flag, but want to change the calligraphy of 'Allahu Akbar' (God is Great) which is written in the middle."

"Instead of Saddam Hussein's handwriting, we want to use the calligraphy of the Koran," or Muslim holy book, he explained.

# Diana's butler hits back at princes

AFP, London

The former butler of Britain's late princess Diana on Sunday refused to back down over the escalating row caused by sensational revelations he has made about her most intimate secrets.

In an interview with the BBC, Paul Burrell said he would like to give Princes William and Harry "a piece of his mind" and told them to "grow up," after they accused him last week of betraying them and their mother.

Burrell claimed the two, the only sons of Diana and heir to the British throne Prince Charles, were being used as "emotional cannons" by the "grey men in suits" at Buckingham Palace.

# Vajpayee in Nagaland to boost peace efforts

AFP, Kohima

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee began a three-day trip yesterday to the isolated northeastern state of Nagaland to boost efforts to negotiate an end to the country's longest-running rebellion.

Vajpayee, the first prime minister to visit the state bordering Myanmar in six years, will meet state leaders as he tries to bridge the gap between Indian negotiators and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) guerrillas.

He flew into Nagaland's trading hub of Dimapur but bad weather forced him to abandon a helicopter flight to the state capital Kohima.

Vajpayee instead was driven by car on the 100-kilometre (62-mile) road to Kohima, an official accompanying him said.

The main faction of the NSCN, the most influential of the 30 or so rebel groups in Nagaland, resisted decades of military action by India but entered an uneasy truce with New Delhi in 1997.

The separatist unrest began with India's independence in 1947 and has claimed around 25,000 lives.

During his maiden visit to the state of two million people, Vajpayee will meet state leaders, launch Nagaland's first mobile telephone service and meet local tribal delegations.

# N Korea contacts US on nuclear offer

AFP, Washington

North Korea has contacted the United States over an offer to give written security assurances in return for the communist state ending its nuclear weapons programme, Secretary of State Colin Powell said Sunday.

Powell called it a positive sign, but warned that there are still "long days and nights" of negotiations ahead to end the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula.

"We would only enter into an agreement that can be verified," he insisted.

North Korea signalled a shift in stance on Saturday when it said it was ready to consider President George W. Bush's offer of written security guarantees in return for scrapping its nuclear weapons programme.

China, which has the closest links of any country with the isolated regime, immediately welcomed the North's move as a "positive gesture."

Powell said North Korean officials contacted US counterparts last Friday but did not say where. Normally the two sides carry out unofficial negotiations through their

missions at the United Nations in New York.

The secretary of state said that since the United States had said last year it had no intention of invading or attacking North Korea the two sides have been "doing diplomatic dances" which gathered pace when President George W. Bush went to an Asia-Pacific leaders summit in Bangkok last week.

North Korea has demanded a full non-aggression pact but Bush reaffirmed his offer of some form of multilateral security assurances during talks with China's President Hu Jintao in Bangkok.



BJ Hartly shields her face from the debris blown up by the Santa Ana winds as she surveys her home destroyed by wildfires in San Bernadino, California on Sunday. Hartly said on Saturday she had used the ladder (in foreground) to climb on the roof and watch the flame on the hills, but when the Santa Ana winds came up without warning the flames raced down the hills and into the subdivision, sending families fleeing for their lives. California Governor Gray Davis declared 26 October states of emergency in four fire-ravaged counties in the south of the most populous US state.

# Mahathir hits back at critics

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad hit back yesterday against those who condemned him for saying that Jews rule the world.

"Are we not allowed to say that we are angry with the Jews? Are the Jews some kind of creature who cannot be condemned in any way?" Mahathir asked when questioned by reporters about the fierce international criticism of his remarks.

He said he knew a lot of Jewish people and was not against them, the official Bernama news agency reported.

"I am against those Jews who kill Muslims and the Jews who support the killers of Muslims," he was quoted as saying.

Mahathir said that he did not care if the Europeans, who were among his major critics, did not like him.

"I have European friends. But when they do something wrong, I am going to tell them that it is wrong."

"You say that you are not under the influence of the Jews and yet when I criticise the Jews, the whole of the European Union wants to

condemn me."

"But when somebody condemns the Muslims, calls my Prophet (Muhammad) terrorist and all that, did the European Union say anything? Which shows that they are under the thumb of the Jews."

US Christian fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell called Muhammad a "terrorist" in a television interview in September last year, sparking outrage in the Muslim world.

More recently, a United States general has been under fire for casting the war on terrorism as a Christian struggle against Satan, but retains his post as deputy under-secretary of defense for intelligence.

Lieutenant General William Boykin recalled in a speech how a top lieutenant of Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid, Osman Otto, boasted on CNN he would never be caught because Allah would protect him.

"Well, you know what?" Boykin was quoted as saying, "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol."