

Jamali accuses India of 'double standards'

IANIS, Lahore

Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali has said while confidence building measures by India and Pakistan would help establish friendly ties, New Delhi sometimes pursues "double standards".

"War is detrimental to the interests of both Pakistan and India. We are after a settlement of all contentious issues, including the core issue of Kashmir, through peaceful means," he said.

"However, India sometimes pursues double standards in this regard," he was quoted as saying by Online news agency.

Jamali was speaking to journalists after the launch of two books here.

"We are heading towards a resolution of the Kashmir issue. War is not a good thing for either of the two countries. The world community, including the US, is extending cooperation for a settlement of the Kashmir issue," he said.

He felt confidence building measures offered by both the sides would serve to establish friendly relations between the two countries. India had last week announced 12 measures to help normalise ties with Pakistan.



PHOTO: AFP

Outgoing Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (L) waves to supporters as he leaves the prime minister's office in Putrajaya yesterday. The end of an era was marked in Southeast Asia as the region's longest-serving elected leader, Mahathir Mohamad, stepped down and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was sworn-in as Malaysia's new leader.

Praise and silence follow Mahathir into retirement

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Glowing praise and diplomatic silence marked the retirement yesterday of Malaysia's veteran Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad after an international controversy over his comments about Jews.

The 78-year-old leader of the Muslim Southeast Asian nation spent much of his political career rubbing Western governments the wrong way, while becoming a respected spokesman within the Islamic and developing worlds.

But a speech to an Islamic summit two weeks before stepping down, in which he talked of Jewish domination of the world, raised a storm of protest from the United States, Western Europe, Australia and, of course, Israel.

After attending Friday prayers with his successor, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Mahathir was due to go to the king's palace for a

handover ceremony that would end his 22-year rule.

Western governments had little to say on a historic day for Malaysia.

"The embassy has not received any message from the White House," said a US embassy official in Kuala Lumpur, adding that many of the mission's staff were more focused on Halloween festivities than Mahathir's last day in office.

The reaction from Australia, which Mahathir has described as "some sort of transplant from another region," was also muted.

"I don't have any comments to make except to re-emphasize the fact the links between Australia and Malaysia are very long, they are very deep," Australian Prime Minister John Howard, who has refused to react to Mahathir's attacks on Australia in recent years, told a Melbourne radio station.

Malaysia's former colonial power

Britain, which experienced Mahathir's combative nature when he launched a "Buy British Last" campaign in the 1980s, stuck to diplomatic protocol.

"A message of goodwill is being sent to Abdullah Badawi. It is normal practice to send one to the incoming leader," a senior official at the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur said.

But Mahathir received warm praise from Thai President Thaksin Shinawatra, who many believe will take a leading role in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) after the departure of the veteran Malaysian leader.

"I will be missing my elder brother," Thaksin told Malaysia's New Straits Times daily, adding Mahathir "blazed the trail well for developing nations in the region to prosper."

The government-friendly domestic media was uniformly adulatory in its

coverage of Mahathir's last day in office, thankful for his contribution in putting Malaysia in the front rank of newly industrialized countries with an annual per capita gross domestic product of close to \$4,000.

Malaysia's 24 million ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians have enjoyed peaceful relations under his rule, but many agreed Mahathir's time was up.

"We change kings every five years, but the prime minister lasted 22 years," said Othman, a member of the ruling United Malays National Organization, referring to the figurehead monarchy rotated between the Malay sultans, Malaysia's traditional rulers.

Speaking on the eve of his retirement, Mahathir was modest about his place in history.

"As Shakespeare said, the evil that men do lives after them and the good is oft interred in their bones."

Mahathir's successor faces tough challenges

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

They call him "Mr Nice Guy", but Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will need more than charm to fill the big shoes left by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad when he puts on his retirement slippers yesterday.

Within a year, probably much sooner, he will face an election, with his main opposition coming from hardline Islamists bent on turning multicultural, economically vibrant Malaysia into an Islamic state.

Mahathir, 77, has been in power for so long that nobody, in the absence of opinion polls, can be quite sure how his departure will affect his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), lynchpin of the ruling National Coalition.

Abdullah, 63, has not made it any easier, refusing to be drawn on how he might try to change Malaysia when he

takes over. He has pledged to continue his mentor's policies, but there is no doubt the style will be different.

Mahathir is outspoken and confrontational while Abdullah is seen as quieter, a team player.

Analysts say Abdullah, who has no experience in economic management, is unlikely to change any of Mahathir's business policies which have brought dramatic growth to the country.

His regional foreign policy is likely to focus on enhancing political ties and trade with Southeast Asian nations and Japan, and it is possible he will be less critical of Australia, one of Mahathir's favourite whipping boys.

On the wider international stage he will probably find major trading partners in the United States and the European Union delighted to have a less prickly customer to deal with.

Domestically, analysts hold out little

hope for improvement on human rights issues, for which Mahathir was regularly criticised.

As home minister, a title he held along with deputy prime minister, Abdullah has over the past two years approved the detention without trial of scores of alleged Muslim militants, many suspected of membership in the regional Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network.

Abdullah's major legitimate political challenge will come from the opposition Islamic Party (PAS), a hardline Muslim group which wants to introduce Sharia criminal law, complete with amputations for theft and stoning to death for adultery.

Abdullah has strong religious credentials, having majored in Islamic studies at University Malaysia, but this is unlikely to make much impression on the country's more militant Muslims as long as he upholds the secular nature of the constitution.

Cooling trend dampens California wildfires

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Fire crews worked overnight on Friday to contain two major hot spots in California's wildfires as cool, foggy weather helped them battle flames that have destroyed a growing number of lives and homes.

The wildfires, raging from north of Los Angeles to the Mexican border, have killed 20 people, including a firefighter, and destroyed more than 2,500 homes.

The 10 major fires have charred about 730,000 acres, or 1,125 square miles -- an area slightly smaller than Rhode Island.

"This will be the most expensive natural disaster this state has ever incurred," outgoing Gov. Gray Davis told reporters. "The fires could not only end up being the largest but the longest duration."

For days, firefighters were unable to stay ahead of the worst of the wind-driven blazes that rampaged through drought-stricken timberland in mountain ranges in San Bernardino and San Diego counties.



PHOTO: AFP

Hot spots burn at a destroyed home in Cedar Glen near the resort of Lake Arrowhead in the San Bernardino Mountains east of Los Angeles Thursday. The death toll from wildfires roaring through California rose to 22, as they chewed up 291,501 acres (728,754 acres) and destroyed more than 3,000 buildings, officials said.



Charles seeks spiritual solace in rural India

AFP, Kuttail Gamri

Heir to the British throne Prince Charles, on the first leg of a tour of rural India, Friday visited a hermitage where he sought the blessings of a spiritual woman.

Charles' motorcade had to navigate through bullock carts and goat herds as it drove into this village in northern Harayana state, where he inspected welfare projects run by the hermitage of Param Pujya Mother, or the Holy Mother.

"I am so glad that I could get here," Charles told his hosts while avoiding an admirer trying to put a ceremonial turban on his head.

Kuttail Gamri, 120km north of the Indian capital, is one of the 35 villages of Haryana's Karnal district that benefits from the Holy Mother's many projects for women, children and the infirm.

'US should pay more attention to Indo-Pak tensions'

AFP, Washington

The United States needs to pay more high-level attention to simmering rivalries between India and Pakistan or face the prospect of crises in the region that could present a major threat to US interests, a report said Thursday.

The report, co-sponsored by the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations and the Asia Society, warns the administration of President George W. Bush that India and Pakistan must be seen as foreign policy priorities as "dark shadows" have descended across South Asia.

It also highlights that reconstruction in Afghanistan has stalled, partly due to the worsening security situation outside Kabul.



PHOTO: AFP

Six-year-old Palestinian refugee Nur peeks outside her family's tent as her sister Iman, 10, looks on at the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)-sponsored Haifa Camp, in east Baghdad yesterday. Hundreds of Palestinian families paying drastically reduced rents under the regime of toppled leader Saddam Hussein were expelled from their homes by Iraqi landlords following the US-led war on Iraq.

Iran's nuke declaration comprehensive: IAEA

REUTERS, Ottawa

Iran's declaration to the International Atomic Energy Agency about its controversial nuclear program looks to be comprehensive, the head of the UN agency said on Thursday.

The IAEA's governing board had set an Oct. 31 deadline for Iran to come clean about the program, which Washington alleges is a front for building an atomic bomb. Iran gave the IAEA a declaration on Oct. 23 about the program, which Tehran insists is peaceful.

"I think we are making good progress. Iran has submitted what (it) assumed me to be a comprehensive and accurate declaration," IAEA head Mohamed ElBaradei told reporters in Ottawa.

"I think I could say that at first glance the report is comprehensive but we still have to do a lot of fine-tuning, we still have to do a lot of questioning, and that is why we are there right now and we will continue to be there doing an inspection for quite a few months in fact."

Iran is allowing UN inspectors to examine thousands of imported uranium

enrichment machinery parts to determine the origin of the traces of weapons-grade uranium found earlier this year, a senior Iranian official said on Tuesday.

ElBaradei did not say whether the declaration answered all the IAEA's questions. Diplomats said UN officials had yet to verify if the answers were true and complete.

Last week, Iran agreed to freeze uranium enrichment and to sign the Additional Protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, allowing snap inspections of its nuclear sites.

"I will expect that, next week, they will send me a letter requesting they will conclude an additional protocol, which also would be a very positive development," ElBaradei said after talks with Canadian Foreign Minister Bill Graham.

A spokeswoman for the Vienna-based IAEA said the declaration contained "a great deal of information addressing key areas of Iran's past nuclear program which IAEA inspectors had raised questions about."

"Whether it provides all the answers

has yet to be verified," said Melissa Fleming.

A Vienna-based Western diplomat closely following the IAEA inspections in Iran said he expected Tehran had complied with the agency's demand for information to the extent that it "at least gave some kind of answer" to all the questions raised.

"There has been some co-operation by Iran," he said.

These questions included a full picture of Tehran's uranium enrichment program, nuclear import and export lists and other information.

But the Western diplomat said if Iran's declaration did not address the question of what the relationship is between Iran's military and what Tehran says is a peaceful nuclear program, this would be a "glaring omission."

The IAEA has been keen to have details about the origin of uranium enrichment centrifuge parts, which Iran says it bought on the black market and blames for contaminating two Iranian sites where the IAEA found traces of bomb-grade uranium.

Sharon willing to talk with Palestinians

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon expressed a willingness to negotiate with the new Palestinian prime minister, but US officials said the Palestinians first must dismantle terror organizations.

Sharon, speaking Thursday at an economic forum in Tel Aviv, said he believes "we are on the verge of a new opportunity to bring about quiet and peace."

Sharon blamed Palestinian reluctance for the absence of a top-level dialogue between the two sides.

"The reason we don't have prime ministerial level contacts stems from the fact that Palestinians have requested time to allow the designated Palestinian prime minister to establish himself," Sharon said. "We are ready to enter negotiations at any time."

Israel previously indicated it would not talk with the new Palestinian government led by Ahmed Qureia because that Cabinet was too closely associated with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

The implementation of the "road map" peace plan, which was drafted by the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union and presented in

June, has bogged down in violence and efforts to form a stable Palestinian government.

Sharon's comments came a day after Qureia said he has a two-stage strategy for achieving a cease-fire ending three years of Middle East violence. Qureia wants to first negotiate a truce with Palestinian militants and then ask Israel to sign on.

Any new truce would replace one that collapsed in the summer. On June 29, the main Palestinian militant groups declared a unilateral halt to attacks against Israel. But six weeks later, there was a new wave of militant suicide bombings and Israeli military operations.

Israel has been cool to the idea of a new truce, demanding instead that the Palestinians crack down on the violent groups and disarm them, as required by the peace plan, which aims at ending violence and creating a Palestinian state by 2005.

Russia, meanwhile, introduced a resolution asking the UN Security Council to endorse the peace plan. But US deputy ambassador James Cunningham said the timing wasn't right, citing the absence of a Palestinian government that can implement the peace plan.

S Korea sees prospects to end North's nuke crisis

REUTERS, Sogupo

The North Korean nuclear crisis could soon be peacefully resolved following Pyongyang's agreement to new talks with the United States and its allies, South Korea's foreign minister said yesterday.

"This greatly enhances the prospects for a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue," Yoon Young-kwan said in a speech to diplomats and scholars at a forum on South Korea's Cheju island.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and Wu Bangguo, head of China's parliament and number two in the Communist Party hierarchy, agreed in principle in Pyongyang on Thursday to hold a new round of six-way nuclear talks, Chinese television said.

US warns of Iraq threat as aid package gets nod

AFP, Baghdad

The Iraqi capital braced for fresh attacks yesterday following a warning from US consular officials, as a multi-billion-dollar aid package crossed a new hurdle in its passage through the US Congress.

In Seoul, the foreign ministry revealed a South Korean diplomat had been kidnapped briefly by Iraqi gunmen as a warning against its continued involvement in the US-led occupation, as foreign missions continued to draw down their personnel in the face of the bloodiest week since the invasion.

Security was tight across Baghdad as Iraqis flocked to the first Friday prayers of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, following the warning from the US consular office that there "ru-

mours" new violence was pending.

"There are a number of rumours of a 'day resistance' throughout Baghdad on Saturday and Sunday, November 1 and 2," the US statement said.

"US citizens are encouraged to continue to maintain a high level of vigilance and continue to take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness."

Washington has now lost 117 troops in action since it declared major combat over on May 1, more than it lost during the six-week spring invasion.

A wave of almost simultaneous car bombings killed 43 people and wounded more than 200 here Monday, launching a week of violence that has prompted an array of international

organizations to review their presence in Iraq.

In a rare fillip for the US-led occupation amid the spiralling bloodshed, the US House of Representatives early Friday approved a huge appropriations bill including 18.6 billion dollars of relief and reconstruction aid for Iraq.

The bill was passed by 298 votes to 121 and now moves on to the Senate where it is expected to be put to the vote next week.

Late Wednesday, a congressional reconciliation committee had rejected moves to require half of the aid to be repaid from Iraqi oil revenues, although it did trim 1.7 billion dollars from the package originally requested by President George W. Bush.

Way clear for eurosceptic Howard to lead Conservatives

AFP, London

Former British finance minister and europhile Kenneth Clarke yesterday ruled himself out of the race to lead Britain's opposition Conservatives, immediately throwing his weight behind clear favourite Michael Howard.

"I think Michael will set a tone and a style for the party which gets us back into real politics," Clarke told Sky News. "He is an experienced politician with all the right political skills," he added.

Clarke, 63, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer in the last Tory government led by John Major, was seen as the person most likely to stand against Howard, a former interior minister and eurosceptic who threw his hat into the ring on Thursday.

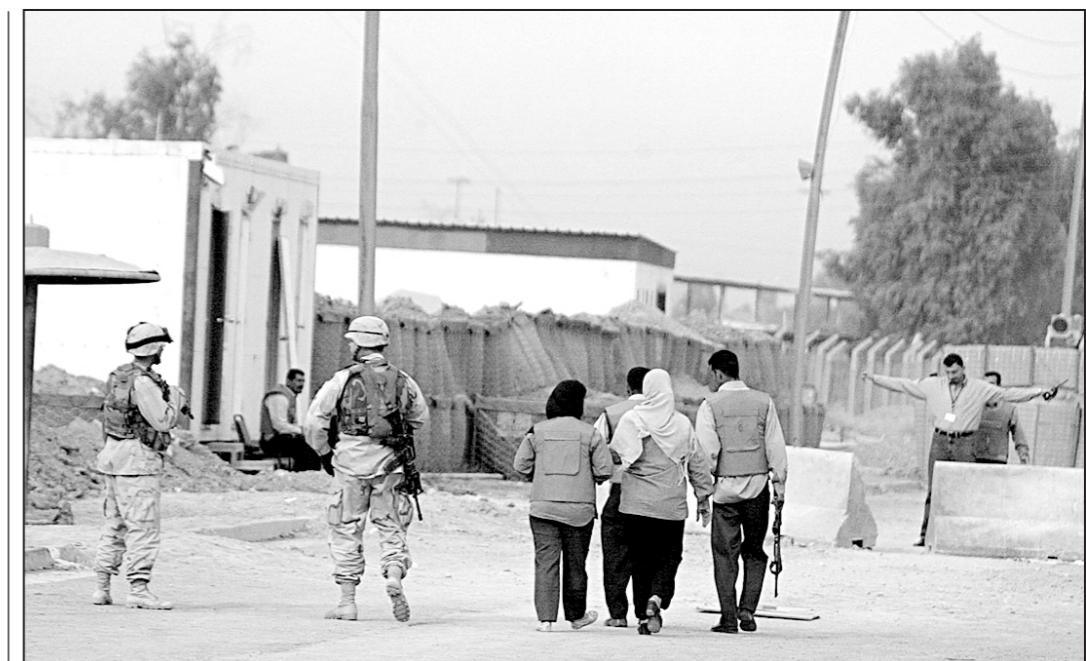


PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi security man searches an employee (R) at the entrance of UN headquarters in Baghdad yesterday. The United Nations followed the Red Cross in announcing it would pull its foreign staff out of Baghdad, while Washington said it was dispatching 24 more diplomats to Iraq in an image-boosting effort.