

Russia rebuffs Sharon over ME roadmap

AFP, Moscow

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon faltered yesterday in a bid to convince top Russian officials to drop their efforts to turn the Middle East peace "roadmap" into a binding United Nations resolution.

Israeli officials said that Sharon met only cautious understanding but no compliance during talks that included a three-hour meeting Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin.

Sharon asked Putin to drop the resolution, Israeli officials said, and to add the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah and Palestinian movements to Russia's list of "terrorist" organisa-

tions.

But the Israeli officials said that Putin and his Kremlin aides refused to offer an immediate response, sticking to a line that only "terror" organisations that operate in Russia will be recognised as such by Moscow.

The officials said there was also little compliance from Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, one of the Russian initiators of a proposed UN resolution supporting the roadmap whom Sharon met on Tuesday.

"The prime minister (Sharon) had a very frank discussion," with the Russian foreign minister, a senior Israeli official told AFP.

"We expressed once more our total opposition to the Russian proposal"

that presents the Middle East roadmap before the United Nations.

The Israeli official said that Ivanov told Sharon "he will consider our (Israeli) stand, but he did not say that Russia was convinced."

In a last-minute push, Sharon was also due to meet Tuesday with his Russian counterpart Mikhail Kasyanov and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov before flying back to Jerusalem.

Israeli officials said that Sharon wanted Putin on Monday to concede that the peace roadmap -- which sees a Palestinian state formed within three years amid mutual concessions -- was now in doubt amid the continued violence, and that a new approach was needed for the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict.

They sounded more hopeful on Monday than following Tuesday's talks with Ivanov, who is seen as a hawk in Russian foreign policy.

"We very clearly explained that Israel is opposed to the Russian proposal," an Israeli official said after Sharon-Putin talks Monday.

"It is my impression that the Russians understand our position better," the Israeli official added.

But defying those comments, there was no official confirmation from the Kremlin that Putin's position had changed, with the Kremlin press office refusing to comment on the Israeli official's statement when contacted by telephone.

Annan vows changes as UN pulls out of Iraq

AFP, United Nations

Secretary General Kofi Annan said Monday the withdrawal of international UN staff from Baghdad was almost finished and that changes in security procedures were already under way.

The few staff remaining in the Iraqi capital are being sent to Cyprus while the world body reviews security in Baghdad after a scathing independent report found a litany of failures in United Nations safety procedures within Iraq.

Annan ordered the pullout last week after a car bombing at the International Committee of the Red Cross in Baghdad killed 12 people on the heels of a similar attack August 19 at the UN's Baghdad offices that left 22 dead.

He said Monday the withdrawal was nearly complete and that UN officials were reviewing the report.



PHOTO: AFP

This photo taken on Monday shows Indonesians escaping by a rope over a flooded river the wrecked resort town in Bohorok, North Sumatra province, where a wall of water flooded the area late Sunday. Rescuers searching shattered homes in Bohorok had found 85 bodies and about 100 people were still missing and feared dead after a flash flood linked to illegal logging.

Snapped communication links hamper rescue bid

Sumatra flood toll nears 100, hundred others missing & feared dead

THE JAKARTA POST/ ANN, Langkat

Flash floods ripped through a popular resort town in North Sumatra late Sunday night, killing at least 92 people, including five foreign tourists.

Hundred others were missing and feared dead, while downed communication lines and demolished bridges hampered rescue efforts, officials said on Monday.

Around 420 houses, including five tourist cottages, were destroyed or damaged when floodwaters, mud, trees and other debris hit the Bukit

Lawang resort in Bahorok subdistrict, Langkat regency.

The floods, triggered by days of heavy rains and severe deforestation, hit Bahorok, about 100 kilometers from the North Sumatra capital Medan, from 10 p.m. on Sunday till 1 a.m. Monday.

Bahorok river, which flows down from nearby mountains, and smaller rivers burst their banks and washed away residential areas and dozens of guesthouses that host tourists in the area famous around the world as an orangutan rehabilitation center.

The foreigners killed were identified by police only as Mathias and Lusi from the United States, Austria's Florian Lub, Singapore's Tan Tek Kai and Eli from Germany. Their bodies were taken to the Adam Malik General Hospital in Medan.

Also among the dead were a group of 20 domestic tourists from West Sumatra.

Officials at the Bukit Lawang disaster handling task force said they had found at least 92 bodies by late Monday evening, while other sources put the death toll at more than 100.



PHOTO: AFP

The Prince of Wales, Prince Charles (3-L) gestures while talking with Indian actor Amir Khan (2nd L), film producer Bobby Bedi (L) and British actor Toby Stevens (2-R) on the set of epic Bollywood drama movie, "The Rising" in Mumbai yesterday. The movie "The Rising" revolves around an Indian army soldier who rebels against the then British rulers and triggers India's first known rebellion against the colonial power.

West urged to address root cause of terrorism

Operations against al-Qaeda have tactical value: Musharraf

AFP, Beijing

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf vowed yesterday to pursue extremists but warned that operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban were of short-term tactical value and that root causes of terrorism must be addressed.

"There must be no doubt that we must all act and launch a war against extremism and terrorism," he said in a speech to students at the prestigious Peking University on the second day of a visit to meet China's new leaders.

"But let me say that these are only symptoms. If we want to win the war against extremism and terrorism, we must also address the root causes."

His comments were in a similar vein to those of outspoken and recently retired Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad who warned last month that conflicts would never be won through brute force.

"Operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Hamas and Hezbollah are

all of short-term tactical value," said Musharraf.

"Long-term strategy lies in addressing the root causes of terrorism. What is the cause of extremism and militancy? It is hopelessness, powerlessness, desperation, injustice and because of non-resolution of long-standing political dispute.

"That is the cause. Also added to this are poverty and lack of education."

Pakistan, home to several Islamic extremist organisations and a hideout for hundreds of al-Qaeda fugitives, has since the September 11, 2001 attacks, evolved as a crucial ally of Washington in its anti-terror campaign.

But Musharraf warned that Muslims increasingly feel that Islam is being targeted in the current campaigns being waged by the United States

Without referring to the Bush administration explicitly, he said many people in the West were under the impression that Islam was a religion of

extremism, militancy and intolerance.

"Both these misconceptions are wrong and must be addressed," he said.

He emphasized that Islam does not teach extremism, militancy or intolerance and was not in conflict with democracy, secularism, and modernism.

"Unfortunately, the Muslim extremists show a distorted version of our great religion Islam."

The Pakistani leader is on his first visit to Beijing since China's new leadership was installed in March.

His trip comes five months after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was welcomed by Chinese President Hu Jintao as the first Indian premier in Beijing for a decade.

China's relationship with both its nuclear-capable South Asian neighbours has been viewed as of particular interest since India and Pakistan began a delicate peace process after coming close to their fourth war last year.

3,000 tribal rebels to lay down arms in Assam

IANAS, Guwahati

At least 3,000 tribal separatists are expected to lay down arms in Assam this month following a peace accord signed between the powerful militant group - Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) and the Centre.

"Our cadres numbering about 3,000 would be surrendering all weapons before authorities on the day the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) Council comes into effect," Mainao Daimary of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) said.

The BLT entered into a ceasefire agreement with New Delhi in March 2000 and the two sides held 17 rounds of talks before a peace accord was signed in February this year.

The pact is aimed at ending nearly two decades of Bodo militancy in Assam.

The BLT, unlike other militant groups in Assam, was not fighting for secession but a homeland for the ethnic Bodo tribe within the Indian union.

The accord paved the way for cre-

ation of BTAD, with the militant group climbing down from its earlier demand for a homeland.

The BTAD was expected to be a politico-administrative structure with more executive and legislative powers to be vested with the tribal Bodos, who number about 1.6 million out of Assam's total population of 26 million.

The Assam government has issued notifications for creating a 12-member interim council of the BTAD that is expected to come into effect this month. Dates are, however, yet to be announced.

"Our cache of weapons includes various sophisticated arms that we are going to lay down," Daimary said.

The BLT was formed in 1996 and its cadres were known for their expertise in explosives, having blown up several trains. A powerful blast triggered by the BLT in western Assam in 1999 killed 33 railway passengers.

Congress hands Bush \$87.5b for Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

After one of the bloodiest days for US forces in Iraq, the US Senate on Monday gave final congressional approval to President Bush's request for \$87.5 billion legislation to finance that country's occupation and reconstruction. Congress sent Bush the bill -- that gives him almost everything he sought to fund operations in Iraq and Afghanistan through much of next year -- the day after 16 US soldiers were killed when insurgents shot down their Chinook helicopter near Falluja.

Senators passed the biggest emergency spending bill in history by a voice vote, ending weeks of bitter debate and a near rebellion among some of Bush's fellow Republicans who felt Iraq should repay part of the aid with its oil revenues.

Bowing to Bush, lawmakers provided all of the nearly \$20 billion reconstruction money as a no-strings grant, although a number of Republicans joined Democrats in advocating that at least half of the rebuilding money be in the form of loans.

The White House had threatened to veto the entire bill if it required any

repayment, arguing that would undermine efforts to stabilise Iraq.

Bush said in a statement that the bill's passage "underscores that America and the world are united to prevail in the central front in the war on terror by helping build a peaceful, democratic, and prosperous Iraq."

He said the United States was "being tested" by forces who "want America and its coalition partners to run so the terrorists can reclaim control."

The bill's passage was never in doubt, as lawmakers said the United States had no option but to keep forces in Iraq. But their agreement to bypass a usual roll-call vote showed the measure's political sensitivity as many lawmakers did not want to be viewed as endorsing Bush on Iraq.

The House of Representatives on Friday overwhelmingly passed the final bill with \$64.7 billion for US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and \$18.6 billion to rebuild Iraq.

This follows on \$79 billion Congress approved in April mostly for Iraq and Afghanistan operations.