



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli border policemen scuffle with a Palestinian during a demonstration held by Palestinians and members of a left-wing Israeli group against the construction of a Jewish neighborhood in the Arab east Jerusalem suburb of Jabal Mukaber yesterday. Work has begun on the construction of the new Jewish settlement, which would eventually consist of 500 apartments. The neighborhood, which would be named "Nof Zaav" (the golden landscape), will comprise a school, a children's playground as well as a synagogue and a hotel.

US to meet ME peace plan authors

Angry Israel steps up raids

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel fumed yesterday over Secretary of State Colin Powell's plan to meet the authors of a symbolic peace accord despite fierce Israeli objections.

The Israeli army stepped up raids into West Bank cities to net Palestinian militants, underscoring obstacles on the ground to a diplomatic initiative that emerged in the vacuum of the derailed US-sponsored peace plan, known as the road map.

"We don't want to argue with Powell," government spokesman Avi Pazner said, without elaborating, a day after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's deputy warned the secretary of state it would be wrong to give his imprimatur to the alternative initiative.

Pressure has grown on intransigent incumbents on both sides to overcome a long, bloody Middle East stalemate since Israeli opposition doves and Palestinian moderates launched the "Geneva Accord" to international acclaim Monday.

Palestinian authorities have welcomed the initiative but not endorsed the fine print, while Israel's right-wing government has denounced it as treacherous and cranked up raids in West Bank areas after a relative two-month lull.

Israel has also got into a rare public spat with Washington by

chiding Powell's decision to hear out the Geneva Accord architects at talks in Washington likely later this week.

An Israeli army spokesman said 27 wanted Palestinians were arrested in overnight swoops into Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's West Bank base city of Ramallah and the northern town of Jenin targeting primarily the militant faction Islamic Jihad.

Three Hamas militants and a Palestinian boy of six were killed by Israeli armoured forces in an incursion into Ramallah Monday, hours before the alternative peace deal took the international stage at a ceremony in Geneva.

Palestinian officials said the raid seemed timed to upset the Geneva launch and was counterproductive as it would provoke militants to hit back, spinning anew a cycle of violence prevailing for much of a three-year-old Palestinian uprising for statehood. Sharon's government said the incursion pre-empted a fresh wave of suicide attacks and, to reaffirm its case that the symbolic peace pact was dangerous, again accused Palestinian leaders of indulging "terrorism."

Militants have begun Egyptian-mediated truce talks in Cairo.

The Geneva pact envisages a Palestinian state like the road map but goes further in requiring the dissolution of most Jewish settlements from the West Bank and

Gaza and the right of Israel to decide how many Palestinian refugees to take back.

The two steps have inflamed Israel's pro-settler right and Palestinian militants respectively. But world leaders past and present have hailed the accord as the basis of future compromise and urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders to capitalise on it.

US officials stressed the six-month-old road map remained the way to go but rebuffed Israel's attempt to discredit the more ambitious Geneva accord and said Powell would meet its initiators in Washington later in the week.

During a visit to Tunisia Tuesday, Powell -- whose State Department is seen by Sharon's government as sympathetic to Palestinian positions -- said he had the right to meet anyone with fresh ideas on an elusive Middle East peace.

"We are not stepping back in any way from our commitment to the road map and we hope that circumstances and conditions will permit the resumption of progress on the road map in the near future," Powell told reporters.

"(But) I do not know why I or anyone else in the US government should deny ourselves the opportunity to hear from others who are committed to peace and who have ideas."

Massive manhunt fails to nab Izzat

AFP, Kirkuk

US troops detained the private secretary of Saddam Hussein's fugitive number two, Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, during a huge search operation in north-central Iraq but missed the alleged paymaster of attacks on coalition forces who has a 10-million-dollar bounty on his head.

The massive manhunt, which continued into Tuesday evening, involved the closure of Hawjah, a town of some 80,000 people, for more than 16 hours, as well as a series of raids on villages around the region, according to Iraqi police who helped lead the US troops to their targets.

Ibrahim's secretary, "Saad Mohammed al-Duri, was arrested in a house in the Hawjah area, where he was hiding," the town's police chief Awad al-Obeidi told AFP.

Forty thousand dollars was found in his possession, which was "suspected of being used to finance attacks on the US-led coalition," said the police chief in the northern oil centre of Kirkuk, 45 kilometres (nearly 30 miles) to the east.

Officers of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade, which carried out the raid on Hawjah, said they had briefly detained a brother or cousin of Ibrahim. It was not immediately clear if he was the same person as Mohammed.

General Turhan Yusef Abdelrahman said more than 100 people were arrested in what he described as a "one-off operation aimed at finding Izzat Ibrahim based on specific intelligence."

Six Iraqis were wounded as several villages put up resistance to

the massive cordon and search sweep, he said.

An official of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the dominant Kurdish faction in Kirkuk, said a former general in the disbanded Iraqi army was also arrested in the raids, and an arms cache and attack plans found in his home.

Abrams tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles and Apache helicopters took part in the raid on Hawjah, the biggest conducted in the strongly anti-US town since US troops first rolled through in May.

During the raid, a tank pulled down a mural of Saddam and dragged it into a river.

"We've had a lot of trouble from this town," said Major Andrew Rohling, the 2-503 Battalion's operations officer.

Before dawn, the troops, moving through a cover of dense fog, sealed the area and stormed into the town, where they searched houses suspected of hiding anti-coalition forces.

At one house a terrified boy screamed after a dozen heavily armed soldiers in combat gear burst into his home, handcuffed two men and made the women and children sit on the ground outside in near-freezing temperatures.

"A lot of this is a show of force," Rohling said of the operation.

Hawjah residents "need to be slapped down a little. They are getting too big for their breeches."

By the side of the road, the captured Iraqis were assembled. There, they sat or squatted, shivering. Yellow bags were placed on their heads, with their names marked on them.

US rights body lambasts Pakistan's gag on press

PTI, New York

Playing Pakistan's military government for becoming 'increasingly intolerant' to freedom of press, a human rights watchdog group has asked President Pervez Musharraf to demonstrate his 'genuine commitment' to press freedom by releasing journalists arrested on "trumped-up" charges.

"It is time for General Musharraf to show the world whether he is a reformer or no different from other military rulers. How he deals with press freedom is a big test. As of now, he and his government are failing," the US-based Human Rights Watch has said.

Since Musharraf took power in a military coup in 1999, the Watch emphasised, the Pakistani government has "systematically" violated the fundamental rights of members of the press corps through "threats, harassment and arbitrary arrests."

"Many have been detained without charge, mistreated and tortured, and otherwise denied basic due process rights," it said. The government, the rights group said, has sought to, and in several cases succeeded in, removing independent journalists from prominent publications.

"Meanwhile, the arrest of editors and reporters from local and regional newspapers on charges of sedition is becoming increasingly commonplace," it added.

The Watch also referred to reports that Musharraf had himself threatened a journalist whose car was later set on fire. In a letter to Pakistani President Musharraf, the Watch highlighted the case of Amir Mir, Senior Assistant Editor of the monthly magazine Herald, whom it said, Musharraf reportedly threatened at a reception for Pakistani newspaper editors.

Musharraf is reported to have condemned the Herald for being

"anti-army" and working against "national interest," and argued that the time had come for the Herald and Mir to be "dealt with," the Watch said.

Musharraf's comments, it added, reportedly included specific references to stories filed by Mir for the magazine. Two days later, unidentified persons set Amir Mir's car ablaze outside his house. Mir later received a message purporting to be from the Pakistani intelligence services (ISI) claiming responsibility for the attack and warning that this was "just the beginning," the rights group alleged.

In this context, the Watch asked Musharraf to publicly disassociate himself from the comments about the Herald and order an investigation into the attack on Amir Mir's car, said Brad Adams, executive director of the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch.

Don't shut door on global cooperation, Annan urges US

REUTERS, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan urged the United States not to turn its back on multilateralism or ignore civil liberties in combating the deadly threat of global terrorism.

Annan said the Bush administration would get more support, such for its activities in Iraq and elsewhere if it built alliances patiently.

"I sense a widespread international acceptance of American leadership," he said, according to remarks prepared for a speech in Los Angeles for the 50th anniversary of the World Affairs Council.

"But I also sense that its leadership will be more admired than resented, and indeed that it will be most effective, when it is exercised within a multilateral framework, when it is based on dialogue and

the patient building of alliances through diplomacy, and when it is aimed at strengthening the rule of law in international affairs," Annan said.

The Bush administration has been criticised by allies for its rejection of the Kyoto global climate treaty, the International Criminal Court and the lack of a legal framework for suspects held in Guantanamo Bay, among other issues.

Tracing the key US role in founding the United Nations 58 years ago, Annan said that the world had rarely been more united than in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington.

At that time, he said, nearly all governments understood that the best way -- and perhaps the only way -- was to confront terrorism through collective action.

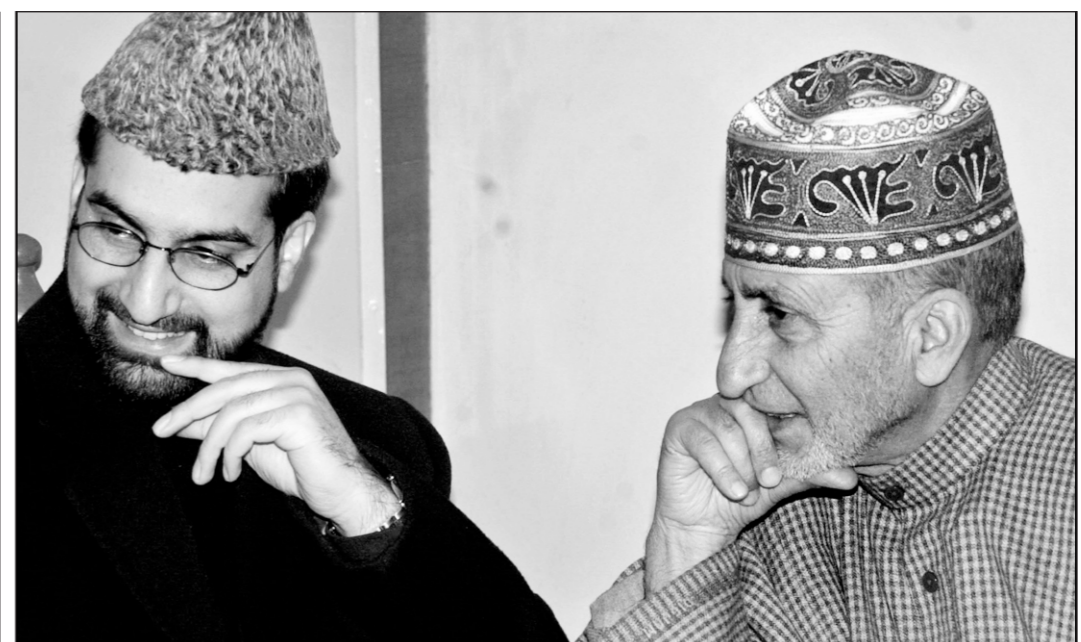


PHOTO: AFP

Kashmir's senior separatist leader Moulvi Umar Farooq (L) talks to former chairman of the main separatist alliance in Indian-administered Kashmir the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) Abdul Gani Bhatt prior to a meeting at the APHC headquarters in Srinagar yesterday. The APHC was due to meet to discuss its possible expansion three months after a bitter split. Umar Farooq, a moderate executive of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an amalgam of 27 separatist parties, told AFP that there would be a meeting to discuss applications by four parties to join the Hurriyat.

Iraqi leaders meets Bremer about polls

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's US-installed interim leadership met Paul Bremer yesterday for its first talks with the US overseer since the Shiite Muslim religious hierarchy rammed a huge hole through the coalition's plans for an accelerated transfer of power with a demand for prior elections.

The talks opened at 10:00 am (0700 GMT) with just one or two absentees among the council's 25 members, a spokesman said.

The Governing Council is deeply divided over Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's rejection of the coalition's blueprint for the handover of sovereignty by June next year.

Representatives of the power-

ful Shiite religious parties support the demand from the majority community's top cleric for an elected caretaker administration, in line with the coalition's war-time promises of post-Saddam Hussein democracy.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, took over the rotating chairmanship of the interim council on Monday.

But other members of the council, including Sunnis and secular Shiites, reject the ayatollah's insistence that immediate polls based on Iraq's longstanding ration card system would be a closer approximation of democracy than the arcane system of indirect selection by caucuses being proposed by the coalition.

Assam violence rocks Indian parliament

AFP, New Delhi

A storm of protests over ethnic bloodletting in the northeastern Indian state of Assam abruptly closed Indian parliament for an hour yesterday.

The lower house went into recess after several agitated members of parliament from the eastern state of Bihar stormed the well of the house demanding the issue be taken up.

Bihar state MP Prabhunath Singh from the Samata (People's) Party accused India's main opposition Congress party, which rules Assam, of turning a blind eye to targeted killings.

"Biharis living in Assam are being murdered, their property looted and the police are silent

spectators," Singh said.

"Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi is doing very little to prevent the large-scale violence -- he is involved," Singh added, provoking an outcry from the Congress benches.

In an effort to stem the ethnic violence, India's ruling party recently announced that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was prepared to talk with a rebel group in Assam blamed for killing 54 Hindi-speaking settlers last month.

The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) has not responded to past government appeals to end its campaign for an independent homeland. More than 10,000 people have died in insurgency in Assam in the past two decades.

Iranian hardliners disrupts speech by Ebadi

AFP, Tehran

A group of hardline Iranian Islamists yesterday prevented Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi from giving a speech at a women's university in Tehran by chanting slogans including "Death to Ebadi", university sources and the Nobel laureate's office said.

"Around 50 students stopped Shirin Ebadi from giving a speech. The event had to be cancelled," a university official told AFP.

The protesters were also quoted as chanting "Shirin the American, ask for pardon".

Ebadi shocked conservative Iranians by appearing without a headscarf in front of television cameras in Paris after the announcement of her award on October 10.

Rumsfeld gets 'Foot in Mouth'

BBC ONLINE

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has won a "Foot in Mouth" award for one of his now legendary bizarre remarks.

Mr Rumsfeld won the prize for comments made at a news conference in February last year which left observers baffled.

"There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns," he said.

The British Plain English Campaign annually hands out the prize for the most nonsensical remark made by a public figure.

A spokesman for the organisation, which tries to ensure public information is delivered in a clear manner, said Mr Rumsfeld's remarks were typical of the kind of comments they were trying to prevent.

"We think we know what he means," he told Reuters news agency.

"But we don't know if we really know."

Mr Rumsfeld fought off stiff competition for the award from actor turned California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger among others.

Mr Schwarzenegger weighed in on the gay marriage debate with the comment "I think that gay marriage is something that should be between a man and a woman."

And European Commissioner Chris Patten came close with his remark that the British Conservative Party had committed political suicide and was now living to regret it.

Previous winners of the award have included US actress Alicia Silverstone and actor Richard Gere.

But despite Mr Rumsfeld's rather outlandish mode of speaking, fans of the tough-talking US defence secretary argue he is misunderstood.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai PM claims victory in war on drugs

AFP, Bangkok

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra yesterday declared victory in Thailand's controversial war on drugs and said the government would now set its sights on eliminating poverty.

Thaksin dismissed criticism from human rights campaigners over the thousands of traffickers killed during the campaign, saying he was not sorry to see "enemies of the nation" eliminated.

"Some of the bad guys have died, and some of them are serving prison terms. I am ready to confront them in every way. I am not afraid at all and you should not be afraid of them either," he said at a ceremony.

In front of a portrait of the nation's revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thaksin said the victory was a tribute to the monarch whose public concerns over Thailand's drug crisis sparked the campaign launched in February.