

World fears ME turmoil if Israel loses Sharon

AFP, Paris

World leaders sent wishes of recovery to critically ill Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon yesterday, while foes and Arab and Israeli media raised the prospect of a profoundly changed Middle East if he dies.

Anxiety over the future direction of Israel and the conflict with the Palestinians was palpable, following 77-year-old Sharon's urgent hospitalisation Wednesday after suffering a massive stroke.

Arab media were alarmed. While Palestinian newspapers Al-Quds and Al-Ayyam reported Sharon to be close to death, Lebanon's As-Safir newspaper wrote that "Israel is on the brink of political strife."

Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei said in a letter sent to Israel's acting premier Ehud Olmert that "Our thoughts and prayers are with Prime Minister Sharon, the Israeli government and people. We wish the prime minister a full and quick recovery."

Some Israeli newspapers saw the end of Sharon's rule, whether he survived or not.

"One can cautiously say that it appears that the era in which Sharon stood at Israel's helm came to a tragic end on Wednesday," wrote a columnist for the Haaretz newspaper, Aluf Benn.

Sharon's fiercest enemy, the Palestinian militant group Hamas, gloated over the news.

The Middle East, its spokesman Sami Abu Zubri told AFP, "will be a better place without Sharon. The world is on the verge of being rid of one of its worst leaders."

He added: "Sharon's fate is divine intervention reserved for despots and evil-doers."

Leaders everywhere else, though, expressed their concern, with those from countries sponsoring the fragile Israeli-Palestinian peace process especially quick to say they hoped Sharon would recover.

US President George W. Bush issued a statement late Wednesday saying he and wife Laura shared "the concerns of the Israeli people about Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's health" and were praying for him.

"Prime Minister Sharon is a man of courage and peace," Bush said.

French President Jacques Chirac -- who himself suffered what was believed to have been a minor stroke last September -- said Thursday that "all my wishes and all my thoughts" were with Sharon.

He said wanted to see continued "the courageous initiatives started by Mr Sharon that have already won approval from the entire international community."

In Moscow, the Kremlin said "President Putin, via Russia's ambassador in Israel, expressed his sincere sympathies to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and wished him the speediest recovery."

Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said on a visit to Beirut that "I don't want to speculate about the consequences" of Sharon's invalidity and possible death.

"Sharon is very ill and remains the prime minister. We hope and pray that he recovers... We hope and pray for that miracle."

Other messages flowed in from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has been unremittingly hostile to Israel, made no direct mention of Sharon's medical emergency but did launch a verbal attack on Western support of his rule.

"Be sure that not only the Palestinian people, but also all Islamic nations will not even for a moment tolerate this occupying regime and corrupt government empowered by you," he told Western nations.



Palestinian shopkeepers watch the news about Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's grave state of health yesterday in the West Bank town of Hebron. Sharon is to remain in a deep coma for the next 24 hours after he underwent surgery for a massive brain haemorrhage, a hospital spokesman said.

India begins counting tigers

REUTERS, Mumbai

Armed with radio collars and high-tech cameras, hundreds of wildlife experts fanned out across a vast mangrove in India's east on Thursday as part of the world's largest census of the endangered tiger.

Alarmed by reports of large-scale poaching in India's famed tiger sanctuaries, about 250 officials used speedboats or walked through muddy creeks and marshland looking for tell-tale footprints, or pugmarks, in West Bengal's Sunderbans, the world's largest natural tiger habitat.

"This census is the world's biggest and the most scientific to date," Pradeep Vyas, the census chief, told Reuters from the Sunderbans, a 10,000 sq km sparsely populated mangrove marshland on the eastern coast.

Conservationists, who have been highly critical of India's efforts to protect the tiger, have also expressed reservations over the accuracy of the pugmark system, saying the method has in the past masked the big cats' dwindling numbers in the country's national parks.

Car bomb kills 10 in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

Ten people died and 50 were wounded yesterday in a suicide car bomb attack in central Afghanistan during a visit by the US ambassador, US and Afghan officials said.

US envoy Ronald Neumann was unhurt by the massive blast near the governor's headquarters in Tirin Kot, capital of the central province of Uruzgan, provincial officials and the US embassy told AFP.

The Taliban militia, which was ousted from power in late 2001 by a US-led military operation, claimed responsibility for the attack.

"Today when the US ambassador was on a visit to Uruzgan an explosion took place which killed ten people and wounded 50 others, and the ambassador was in the provincial headquarters," deputy governor Abdul Aziz told AFP.

"Fifteen of the wounded are in critical condition including the provincial police director. The area was crowded because the US ambassador was visiting," he added.

Provincial spokesman Abdullah Jan said it was a suicide attack. "It was a suicide car bomb attack half a kilometre outside the provincial headquarters," he said.

A spokesman for the US embassy in Kabul, Lou Finton, confirmed that the ambassador was unhurt after the "security incident" in Uruzgan.

"Ambassador Neumann and his delegation of US officials visited a PRT (provincial reconstruction team) and conferred with local officials in Tirin Kot on Thursday," he said.

"The ambassador and his delegation are safe and have been accounted for. They were never in any danger."

The governor, Jan Mohammad Khan, was away in Mecca for the Hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage, provincial spokesman Jan added.

He said there were both police and civilians in the area at the time but the breakdown of the casualties was not available.

India, Pakistan begin talks on 2nd rail link

Pak consulate plan scuppered in Mumbai

AFP, REUTERS, New Delhi/Mumbai

India and Pakistan began talks yesterday to finalise a second rail link connecting the two countries as part of confidence building measures for an ongoing peace process, an Indian foreign ministry official said.

Railway officials from the two countries were to discuss visas, fares and passenger security for the train link between Munnabao in India's western state of Rajasthan and Khokhrapur in Pakistan's Sindh province, the official said.

Ahead of the talks, Pakistani officials said they were hopeful for a final agreement to begin the rail services.

"We hope to finalise the agreement. We have come with an open mind. This is another confidence building measure and we will be discussing the draft proposal for the movement of passengers," Saleem-ur-Rehman Akhoond, general manager of operations at Pakistan Railways, was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India.

A year ago, the Samjhota (Concord) Express train began operating between Attari in India and Lahore in Pakistan.

The expansion of transport links is part of a slow-moving peace process between the fractious

South Asian neighbours to ease long-standing tensions after they almost came to blows for the fourth time in 2002.

In Mumbai tenants of a high-rise office building in India's financial capital have stopped Pakistan from reopening a long-delayed consulate there, saying crowds of visa seekers would present a security threat.

Pakistan's foreign ministry rented a sprawling office in Mumbai's crowded main business district after India turned down Islamabad's long-standing demand to allow the use of a Mumbai house in which Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the father of the Pakistani nation, lived before Pakistan was created in 1947.

The consulate was to reopen this month, but occupants of Mittal Chambers that houses several top private companies objected, say the building's security was not good enough to handle huge crowds.

"There is bound to be security problems. It will disturb the peace of the present occupants. So, we don't want the consulate here," said E.S.R. Khan, secretary of the building's tenants' association.

Pakistani officials said they were disappointed and expected New Delhi to find a solution.

"India didn't give us our property and now they wouldn't let us rent a space. What can we say? But something has to be done," said Rai Riyaz Ahmed, spokesman at the Pakistani embassy in New Delhi.

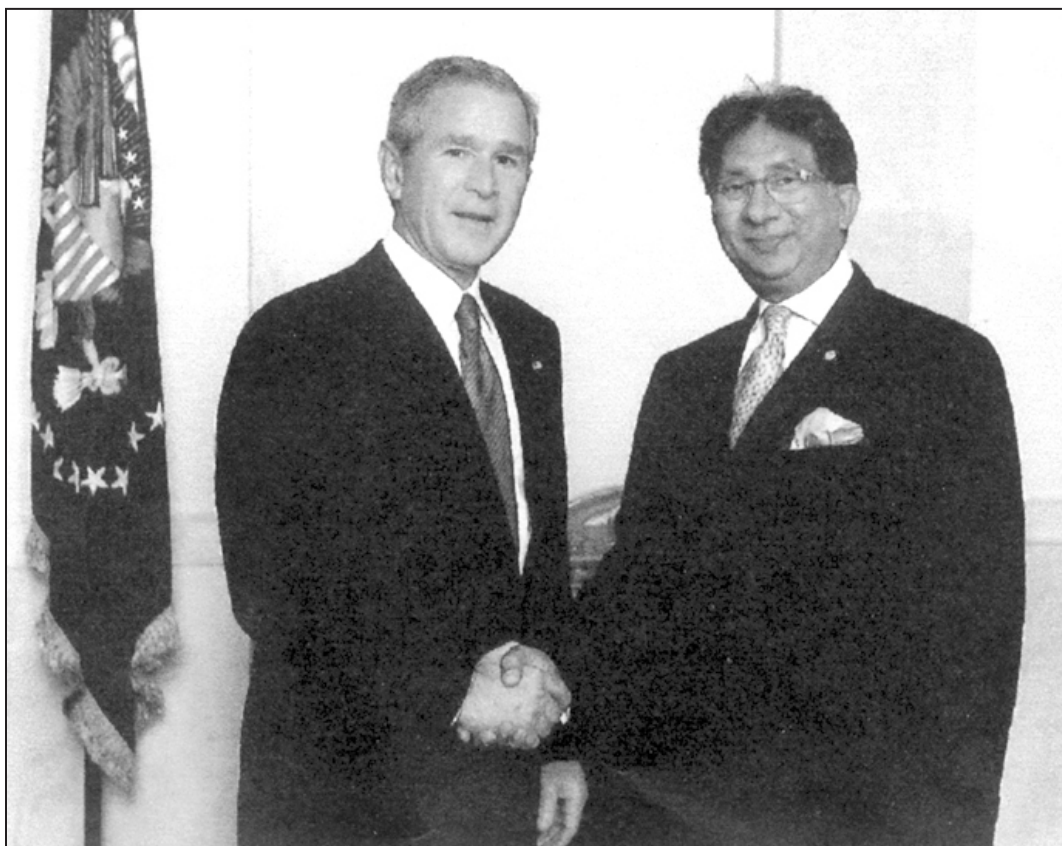
The move to reopen a consulate in Mumbai, and an Indian consulate in the Pakistani port city of Karachi, is part of a slow peace process between the arch rivals that also aims to boost links between people of the two countries.

The missions are expected to make it easier for thousands of Indians and Pakistanis to get visas, who now have to travel to their respective capital cities for the purpose.

But the refusal of the Mumbai building is likely to delay the opening of the Indian consulate too as the two countries had agreed that they would start functioning simultaneously.

In 1994, Pakistan closed its consulate in Mumbai, then known as Bombay, after a city hotel refused to host Pakistan day celebrations.

Islamabad called it the last straw, saying there was already a history of non-cooperation by Indian officials. India reciprocated by shutting down its consulate in Karachi.



Bangladesh Ambassador to the United States Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury called on US President George W Bush recently at the White House. Picture shows Bangladesh ambassador is shaking hands with the US president.

Lanka for Norwegian pressure on Tigers

Troops attacked, funeral of students ends peacefully

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka said yesterday it wants a Norwegian peace envoy due later this month to put pressure on Tamil Tiger rebels to resume talks with the government on saving their troubled truce.

Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva said they expect Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim, due here on January 23, to pressure the Tamil Tiger rebels to compromise on a venue for the face-to-face talks.

"We will tell him to pressure the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to come to a reasonable solution," said de Silva, who is also a government spokesman on the

peace process.

Norway's attempts to bring the two parties to the table remain deadlocked over a dispute on the venue.

The Sri Lankan government initially insisted that the meeting must be in an area under their control within Sri Lanka but later agreed to move to an Asian venue. The Tigers insisted that talks must be in territory under their control or in Oslo, the capital of the peacebroker.

Sri Lankan troops twice came under attack from suspected Tamil Tiger rebels Thursday but the funeral of five students allegedly killed in cold blood by soldiers passed off relatively peacefully,

officials said.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas ambushed an army tractor and wounded a soldier in the district of Vavuniya by setting off a Claymore mine, a military spokesman said.

In northeastern Trincomalee district, where the students were killed on Monday, a military camp came under a mortar bomb attack but there were no casualties, the spokesman said.

Autopsy reports said the students had been shot dead although the military had earlier maintained that they died when an explosive device they carried exploded prematurely.

Japan, India to start talks on nuke issue

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and Japan agreed on Wednesday to launch talks on nuclear issues under the framework of disarmament and non-proliferation in a move to help New Delhi smoothen its integration with the international nuclear regime.

The agreement was reached during talks between visiting Japanese Foreign Minister Tarō Aso and Indian Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed here.

A joint press statement issued after the talks said "the ministers agreed to launch a dialogue on disarmament and non-proliferation with the objective of promoting commonalities and enlarging areas of convergence for mutual cooperation."

The annual dialogue will also address issues relating to high-technology trade, it said adding the joint secretary level discussion was a follow up of the decision taken by the two sides during Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to India in April last year.

As part of high-level bilateral political contacts to carry forward the strategic cooperation agreed

during Koizumi's visit, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is likely to visit Japan later this year. The visit will be preceded by Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee's trip to Japan.

The visit by the Japanese Foreign Minister assumed significance because it came at a time when India was working hard to ensure the implementation of its landmark civil nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States. The accord, reached in July last year, is pushed through the US Congress as well as the meeting of 44-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

Japan had reacted harshly when India conducted nuclear tests in May 1998 and raised certain tough questions about India's nuclear programme at the NSG meeting two months back although it did not oppose Indo-US civil nuclear deal.

The US, while entering into the deal with India on civil nuclear sector, had promised to help India secure NSG's approval in order to lift curbs on India's access to nuclear power technology. France and Canada have already agreed to cooperate with India in civil nuclear field.

Nepali Maoists launch fresh attacks

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Five people including three civilians were wounded as Nepal's Maoist rebels launched a string of attacks yesterday, days after they ended a four-month truce, police and witnesses said.

Two police officers and a civilian were hurt in a shooting in the town of Mahendranagar, the largest in the district of Kanchanpur, a rebel stronghold 650km west of the capital, Kathmandu.

"Eight police officers were on their way to replace their colleagues when the Maoists fired on them," a police officer told Reuters.

One officer was hit in the stomach and the other in the chest. A 62-year-old passer-by was also wounded.

Hours later, two men walked into a government office in Biratnagar, a bustling business city 500km east of Kathmandu, and left a bomb after telling employees to flee.

"Minutes later, the bomb went

off [injuring] two people," said local journalist Bickram Niraula.

In the tourist town of Pokhara, Nepal's second city, another bomb was detonated but no-one was hurt.

"The bomb appeared to have been fitted on a bicycle. It went off minutes after an army truck passed by," said Keshav Lamichhane, a journalist in Pokhara, 200km west of Kathmandu.

On Monday, the rebels -- who have been fighting since 1996 to topple the Hindu monarchy and set up a single-party communist state -- ended a four-month unilateral ceasefire, accusing government forces of provoking the move.

The government, appointed by King Gyanendra after he seized total control in February vowing to crush the insurgency which has killed more than 12,500 people, said troops were on alert across the country to avert further attacks by the Maoists.