

Arabs urge Hamas to take peace path

AFP, Cairo

Arab leaders yesterday urged Hamas -- dedicated to destroying Israel -- to talk peace with the Jewish state after the Islamist group rewrote the political map with its shock Palestinian election victory.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in a post-election call to Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, urged his vanquished Fatah party and the victorious Hamas to work together for peace and an independent state.

Mubarak, long a major player in the Middle East's limping peace process, stressed the need to unite Palestinian ranks to promote peace efforts and realise the aspirations of the Palestinian people for an independent state, the government newspaper Al-Ahram said.

The call was underlined by Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit who saw the Hamas victory -- giving it 76 seats in the 132-seat Palestinian parliament -- as creating "a new political reality in the region".

He said Egypt -- where the regime faced its own election challenge by Islamists last year -- respected the Palestinians' choice and hoped the "peace process would continue under the already-established terms of reference."

King Abdullah II of Jordan, along with Egypt the only other Arab nation to have a peace treaty with Israel, called for a "rapid return" to Middle East peace talks.

Whatever the results of the election, the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel remains "the only solution for establishing peace and putting an end to violence and extremism," Abdullah said.

Hamas has carried out numerous attacks on Israel, while its own militants have been targeted by the Jewish state's military, which in March 2004 killed Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, and his successor shortly afterwards.

In Syria, which remains technically at war with Israel and has long supported radical Palestinian groups, the official newspaper Al-

Bath called on the West to work with Hamas.

"The Europeans and especially the Americans, who have rejected this victory, have no other choice than to submit to reality and work with the new situation," it said.

"Those who want stability in the region ... will have to accept the new context, the more so since Hamas has expressed its intent to develop a political action conforming to the greater interests of the Palestinian people and steadfast demands, that is the rejection of occupation and the creation of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital."

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh also called on Hamas to pursue the peace process.

"We hope that the new legislative council and Hamas ... will go ahead in the peace process, according to international resolutions," the SABA news agency quoted him as saying in a letter to Abbas.

In Baghdad, two Iraqi Islamist political groups, one Sunni and one

Shiite, welcomed Hamas's victory.

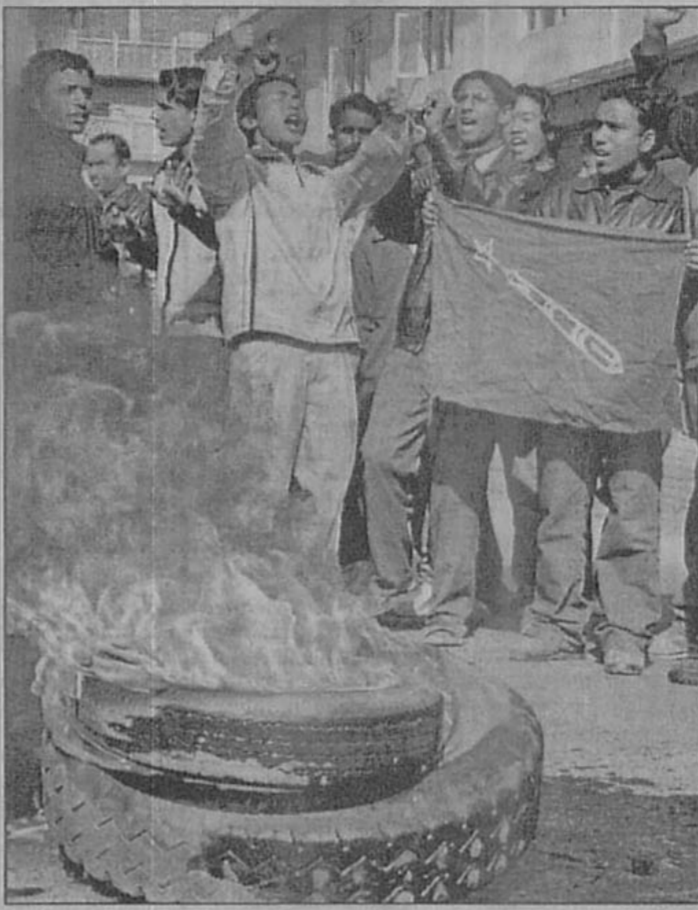
"We hope that the Palestinian people will rid themselves of the occupation and build a state that will secure the needs of their population," Hazem al-Arajji, a representative of firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, told AFP.

The Sunni Arab Iraqi Islamic Party congratulated Hamas for its victory as well as the defeated Fatah for its achievements in the Palestinian struggle.

"We hope that the next government in occupied Palestine will succeed in unifying Palestinian ranks and bring the Palestinian people from six decades of conflict and recover the rights taken away by the Israeli occupation forces."

In non-Arab Iran, headline cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani said in the official weekly sermon at Tehran University: "All the Muslims are happy, and God willing this earthquake... will be felt right up to the White House."

"When you say democracy, it means people, and now the people have spoken," he said.



Nepalese students shout anti-king slogans as they stand beside a pile of burning tyres at the entrance to Patan University Campus in Kathmandu yesterday. Municipal polls planned by Nepal's King Gyanendra as part of his pledge to restore democracy look set to fail, opposition parties said after figures showed a lack of candidates.

Opposition denounces 'farcical' Nepal polls

Few candidates register, opposition vows anti-king rally

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

Municipal polls planned by Nepal's King Gyanendra as part of his pledge to restore democracy look set to fail, opposition parties said yesterday after figures showed a lack of candidates.

The Election Commission reported just over 3,600 people registered to stand for the 4,146 posts up for grabs in the February 8 polls.

"The number of candidates registering for the polls didn't even match the total seats available for contesting," said Pradeep Nepal, spokesman of the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist-Leninist).

"It's a complete failure," he told AFP. "The local election looks like a children's game."

King Gyanendra, who seized power nearly a year ago saying the move was needed to quell a Maoist insurgency, announced the local polls as part of his "roadmap for democracy."

He has said the polls would be followed by a general election before April 2007. But opposition parties have denounced the municipal elections as a sham

aimed at placating international opposition to the king's takeover.

Registration for the polls was held Thursday during a general strike called by a seven-party opposition alliance to protest a crackdown on dissent by the king last week in which scores of activists and party leaders were rounded up.

Life returned to normal Friday as shops and businesses reopened "but police remain on high alert in the (Kathmandu) valley," said a police headquarters officer, who did not wish to be named.

Election Commission spokesman Tejmundi Bajracharya said the candidate registration day had been successful.

Meanwhile, Nepal's main political parties said yesterday they would hold nationwide protests and hoist black flags at public places next week on the anniversary of King Gyanendra's power seizure, raising fears of more violence.

"We will demonstrate all over the place on Wednesday and hoist black flags in public places throughout the country to observe it as a black day," Krishna Prasad Sitaula, a spokesman for the country's biggest political party, Nepal Congress, told Reuters.



A Pakistani border guard (L) watches Pakistani Tourism Manger Anwar Sajjad (R) greet Indian officials upon their arrival at the Wagah Border post yesterday. The Nankana Sahib bus connects northern Amritsar city, seat of Sikhism's holiest shrine the Golden Temple, with the Pakistani town of Nankana Sahib -- birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev, founder of the Sikh religion -- near western Lahore city.

Indian bus leaves for holy Sikh site in Pakistan

AFP, Amritsar

A bus left the Sikh holy city of Amritsar for the Pakistani town of Nankana Sahib yesterday on a trial run for a fourth bus link stemming from a peace drive by the South Asian rivals.

The bus carrying Indian officials crossed over to Pakistan through Wagah border point -- the only road crossing between the two neighbours who have fought three wars since 1947.

The bus connects northern Amritsar city, seat of Sikhism's holiest shrine the Golden Temple, with the Pakistani town of Nankana Sahib -- birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev, founder of the Sikh religion -- near western Lahore city.

Most people in the northern Indian state of Punjab are Sikhs.

The service is expected to start up soon on a daily basis, said Indian transport official A.R. Talwar without specifying when.

"The government has great hope for an increase in the flow of passengers on the route," he said.

India has hard choices on US nuke deal: Rice

REUTERS, Washington

India has "difficult choices" to make on a controversial civil nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States before the deal can be completed, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said on Thursday.

The landmark accord, agreed in principle in July but still to be negotiated in detail, would grant New Delhi access to civil nuclear technology it has been denied for three decades, provided it puts its civilian facilities under international inspections. Senior-level talks in New Delhi last week failed to close the gap on major issues, including which Indian facilities would be designated as civilian and military. The military plants would still be off-limits to UN monitors.

"In order to move on to a new phase in which civil nuclear power would be available to India, India has to make some difficult choices," Rice told Reuters in an interview.

She refused to provide any details but insisted, "I think we're making progress."

Although announced with great fanfare, the deal has run into criticism from nuclear experts and some members of the US Congress who say it undermines global nonproliferation goals.

A related issue is whether India will side with the United States when the International Atomic Energy Agency board of governors debates Iran's nuclear program at a Feb. 2 meeting.

Washington and major European powers say Iran is developing a bomb and wants the case referred to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions. Tehran denies the charge and is fighting referral.

The US ambassador to India said on Wednesday if India did not back the US position, the nuclear agreement could be in trouble.

The United States and India are trying to resolve differences before President George W. Bush visits

New Delhi in March.

Rice did not speak directly of the Iran vote in the IAEA.

She said the nuclear agreement presented "a difficult set of issues."

"But it's very important to understand that in order to satisfy the concerns of the American Congress and our laws and the concerns of the (44-nation) Nuclear Suppliers Group, that there will have to be some steps taken to make sure that the proliferation risks are not enhanced by this deal," she said.

Both the US Congress and the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which sets rules for nuclear-related commerce, must approve the agreement.

For 30 years, the United States led the effort to deny India nuclear technology because it tested and developed nuclear weapons in contravention of international norms. Both India and its neighbour and nuclear-armed rival Pakistan have refused to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Nawaz Sharif heading to Britain

AFP, London

Former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif was to end five years of exile in Saudi Arabia by travelling to Britain on Sunday, a spokesman said Thursday.

Sharif was due to arrive at London's main Heathrow airport at 5:40 pm (17:40 GMT) on a Saudi Airlines flight.

A spokesman for the opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz party said nearly 3,000 people were expected to head to Heathrow in west London to receive him. Britain has a sizeable Pakistani minority population.

Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid announced in November that Sharif would be issued with a passport so he can travel to London with his sick son.

Rashid said Sharif -- who was prime minister from 1990 to 1993 and again from 1997 until 1999 -- would be free to go anywhere, but that "he cannot come to Pakistan".

Industrialist-turned politician Sharif was ousted by General Pervez Musharraf in a bloodless coup on October 12, 1999. He was sentenced to life in prison on tax evasion and treason charges.

Tigers, troops accuse each other of attacks

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military and Tamil Tiger rebels accused each other of new attacks on Thursday, a day after agreeing to peace talks that international truce monitors warned could be prevented by the violence.

The Tigers said a senior militant was killed in an ambush by troops and paramilitaries in the east, while the army said they were not involved but had heard an explosion and shooting.

Two rocket propelled grenades were then fired at a military bunker from behind rebel lines.

A military spokesman said they were not apportioning blame for the grenade attack, but another army source said they believed it had been carried out by the Tigers.

"This is madness," said Hargrup Haukland, the Norwegian ex-soldier who heads the unarmed Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission

(SLMM). "There are parties in this country who want nothing but war. If this goes on, the ceasefire agreement talks will go down the drain."

A string of suspected rebel attacks on government troops nearly destroyed a 2002 truce and brought the island to the edge of a new civil war, but on Wednesday, Norwegian truce broker Erik Solheim got the two sides to agree to direct talks.

Senior delegations from the rebels and government are to meet in Switzerland in February to discuss the implementation of the truce, he said, a meeting diplomats said was badly needed after about 200 people were killed in less than two months.

The Tigers denied they had fired on the army on Thursday, and said they were extremely concerned by the attack on them.

"The leadership is seriously disturbed," S. Puledevan, the

head of the Tiger peace secretariat, told Reuters from the rebel de facto capital Kilinochchi.

He did not say the talks were threatened, but warned: "This is not going to help the peace process. Definitely it is going to create problems."

The incident occurred in an area monitors say is a stronghold of the Karuna group, a rebel faction, which has split from the mainstream.

It is believed linked to the government, and the SLMM says security forces have turned a blind eye to its activities.

Analysts say Karuna Amman, a former Tiger commander with strong support in the east, would be crucial to the army in any new war. But in peacetime, they say he might be assassinated by the Tigers and so his force is one of a handful of groups with a strong motive to wreck the truce.

UN top job contenders face off at Davos

AFP, Davos

Some of the contenders touted to replace UN chief Kofi Annan set out their stalls Thursday when they faced off at a debate here on the future of the world body.

Joining Annan on stage at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, were Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon of South Korea and senior Sri Lankan diplomat Jayantha Dhanapala.

All three promised to continue sweeping UN reforms, with Vike-Freiberga in particular lashing the make-up and influence of the Security Council's five permanent, veto-wielding members.

Annan, who took office on January 1, 1997, ends his second term next year, and Asia believes the UN tradition of regional rotation means it is owed the next turn at the helm.



Queen Rania of Jordan talks with (L to R) President of the Iraq National Assembly Hajim Alhasani, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf during the session "Muslim Societies in the Modern World" at the World Economic Forum in Davos Thursday.

PAKISTAN SAYS US strike violated its sovereignty

REUTERS, London

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said in an interview on Thursday that a US airstrike this month which killed some 18 civilians near the country's border with Afghanistan was a "violation of sovereignty."

In an interview with CNN at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Musharraf said he believed around five or six al-Qaeda figures had died in the raid.

The US airstrike on January 13 targeted Ayman al-Zawahiri, deputy to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, in the remote Bajaur tribal region along the border with Afghanistan, according to American officials.

Pakistani intelligence officials have said Zawahiri was not there at the time of the attack, but that at least four al-Qaeda figures were killed.

"We were disappointed," Musharraf told CNN, which issued a partial transcript of the interview prior to broadcast.

Muslims plead for better understanding of Islam

AFP, Davos

With Muslim extremists blamed for fomenting global unrest, leaders from Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan and Pakistan met here to mull the Islamic world's fractious relations with the West.

The discussion at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, switched from areas such as terrorism and modernisation to the nuclear balance in the Middle East.

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, Islamic extremists have been blamed for attacks as far apart as Amman, Bali, Istanbul, London, Madrid and Saudi Arabia, among others, leaving many hundreds dead.

Queen Rania of Jordan told the audience that terror groups which used Islam to justify attacks had "led the Muslim world to a critical crossroads of self-examination and self-definition."

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf argued that the tensions had more to do with Western, rather than democratic, values or modernisation.

"If you're talking of westernisation, yes, that is in conflict with Islam and Islamic teaching because we have our different values," he said, adding it was normal for all cultures to maintain their respective identities.

But Hajim Alhasani, president of the Iraq National Assembly, argued that Muslim intellectuals and reformers saw more of Islam's core values outside the Middle East.

"They find Islam more in the West than they find it in Muslim countries," he maintained, because while Islamic philosophers had helped foster human values in the 19th century, "the problem with Muslim countries is that you don't find these values and principles implemented within the Muslim society."

Women bear brunt of poverty in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Umm Ziyad, her husband, two sons and granddaughter were just making ends meet in a one-room hovel in Baghdad when a suicide bomber decided the best way to attack a police station was to drive through the car-wash where her husband worked.

"We didn't used to need anyone. He worked and we could make do, but now it's obvious that we are in need," said the widow, swathed in black and looking much older than her 46 years.

But one year after she applied for government assistance, she has heard nothing and her eldest son, Ziyad, has dropped out of high school to support the family with occasional work.

Poverty has exploded across Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 US

invasion.

A recent study by the United Nations Development Programme and International Monetary Fund shows that 20 percent of the population has fallen below the international poverty line of one dollar per day per person.

The numbers of families registering for assistance with the labor and social affairs ministry has more than tripled since the war to 171,000 and even that, according to Leila Kazem, a director general at the ministry, is a "drop in the ocean."

"After the war, a new dangerous issue arose in Iraqi society -- poverty, which is clear to everyone," she said, blaming unemployment and violence which has been killing off the main bread-winners, something "which is happening every hour of every day."

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In-charge, Purchase Deptt.
For Managing Director

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