

# Ahmadiyya mosque

**FROM PAGE 16**  
Over 500 members of police, Rapid Action Battalion, Armed Police Battalion and Bangladesh Rifles were deployed at 19 points a few hours before the capture bid, which was scheduled to start after Juma prayers.

Over 4,000 Nabuwat leaders and activists gathered at Trishal Nazrul College after the Juma prayers.

Before marching to Dhani-khola, the leaders asked the local administration not to intervene in their "peaceful programme". They threatened that they would create a 'Karbala'-like situation if the law enforcers bar them from observing their programme.

As the procession reached Mucharpara, five kilometres off Dhani-khola, police and BDR led by Mymensingh Superintendent of Police Abdullaeh Baki obstructed them on the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway.

Officials of the police and local administration told the Nabuwat leaders they would not be allowed to march to Dhani-khola.

The IKNMB leaders made an effort to hang the signboard at Boilor Bazar but the police did not allow them to advance. The Nabuwat leaders in the end hung the signboard on a mango tree.

The IKNMB leaders announced that they would capture Ahmadiyya mosque in Sylhet on March 24 and at Shyamnagar in Satkhira on May 12. They also announced to observe April 17 as 'Mosque Freeing Day' across the country.

Before marching towards Dhani-khola, IKNMB activists held a grand rally on Trishal Nazrul College premises after

the Juma prayers. Shaikhul Hadith Maolana Giasuddin chaired the rally, while IKNMB President Mufti Noor Hossain Noorani addressed it as the chief guest.

The speakers said the government has an obligation to declare Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim, complying with the demand of the Muslims of the country "who voted the ruling alliance to power".

"Even 10 ministers could not do what we have done for Begum Zia," Mufti Noorani said.

Demanding a new law for declaring Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim, the speakers threatened that the government will have to face "a negative reaction" by the Muslims through ballots in future if the demand is not met.

Nabuwat leaders Maolana Abdul Alim Nizami, Mufti Mofazzal Hossain, Joynul Abedin, Sharifuddin, Ruhul Amin Sadi, Mufti Anwarul Islam and Saidur Rahman also addressed the rally.

A group of human rights organisations led by Abdullaeh Kafi, director of Bangladesh Development Partnership Centre, visited the area.

Central Ahmadiyya missionary Abdul Awal Khan at a press conference at the local press club thanked the police administration for their steps.

"The will of the government is sufficient to stop the alarming rise of fundamentalism. It has been proved here again today," he said. He termed the forcible hanging of the signboard "anarchy in the name of religion".

## 2 killed

**FROM PAGE 16**  
The four people were killed in hostilities between two local criminal gangs.

Rab-3 arrested Mamun and his three associates --Leon, Shanta and Nahid -- in Raghunathpur under Fatullah Police Station in Narayanganj early Saturday, a Rab press release said.

Following leads from the arrestees, Rab conducted a drive taking Leon with them to recover firearms and arrest other gang members.

When they reached Karail T&T ground at 2:55am, Leon's associates opened fire on the Rab members, who retaliated.

Trying to flee, Leon fell in the line of fire and was bullet-hit. Later he was found dead.

Four bullets hit Leon in the head, chest and left hand, said sources at Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue, where Leon was taken for autopsy.

Rab recovered a 9mm pistol, an LG and several cartridges from the spot.

Mohammad Ismail Hossain, 32, a regional leader of outlawed Purba Banglar Communist Party (BCCP-ML-Janajuddho), was killed in an 'encounter' between his accomplices and Rab-6 members in Khulna, reports Staff Correspondent from Khulna.

Rab arrested Ismail from a noodles factory in Gazipur district on Friday and conducted a raid at Devipur under Rupsha in Khulna at around 4:00am yesterday after Ismail disclosed that some arms and ammunition were kept at their Devipur hideout.

When the Rab men reached Devipur, Ismail's accomplices opened fire, prompting the law enforcers to retaliate.

Ismail fell in the line of fire while he was trying to escape, a Rab press release said, adding that he was taken to a nearby hospital where doctors declared him dead.

A single barrel indigenous gun and two bullets of shotgun were recovered from the spot.

Ismail was wanted in several murder, extortion, abduction and rape cases filed with different police stations in Khulna, the Rab release said.

# Govt loses crores

**FROM PAGE 1**  
Electrification Board (REB), the government is paying the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank huge commitment charges on a monthly basis," said an ERD source yesterday.

For instance, as per the agreement, the government every month pays the World Bank (WB) 0.3 percent commitment fee on the full loan amount for the Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Programme (HNPS). The fee amounts to the tune of \$10 lakh a year.

The WB has committed a total of \$30 crore for the HNPS under the health ministry. Of the amount, the bank is supposed to release \$7 crore in FY06 as the first instalment.

But, so far the HNPS authorities have spent \$5 lakh only. The official reasons cited for such sluggishness are the obligation to meet some WB conditions related to audit objections and inept line directors.

A health ministry source however said mainly inefficiency of the line directors, all of them physicians, and the pressure from the Doctors Associations of Bangladesh (Dab) have slowed down the programme implementation.

"There are 37 line directors under this programme. All of them are senior doctors. On the one hand they don't understand the technicalities of the programme and on the other they are busy with their own professions. They have no commitment to the programme. If the government wants to remove any of these directors, the Dab resists hard. As a result, nothing can be done to improve the project performance," the source explained.

"This programme became problematic right on the day it started in July last," he added.

The planning ministry has conveyed its concerns about the line directors to the health ministry and suggested recruiting an appropriate person to head the massive scheme.

The REB runs the remaining three defaulting projects funded by the ADB and the WB. Against a Tk 166 crore annual allocation for these three power-distribution expansion projects, the REB has spent only Tk 18 crore in the first six months. As a result, the government is paying 0.3 percent commitment fee to the WB and 0.75 percent to the ADB.

Under one of the projects the Power Division Board (PDB) is supposed to hand over more than a hundred power lines to the REB for expansion. But the lines are yet to be handed over due to the alleged resistance of a vested interest group.

"These are just some examples of

how project implementations are being delayed. This is a regular phenomenon in case of the ADP projects every year, for which the government has to shoulder huge losses in commitment fees," the ERD source said.

Nine of the remaining 30 problematic projects are seriously lagging behind the schedule due to delays in appointment of consultants. Of them, five are under the Roads and Highways Department with a total annual allocation of Tk 248 crore. But, in July to December the department could spend only Tk 11 crore.

Other than bureaucratic tangles, in one instance the department even sat for 23 months to issue a work order.

The Tk 679 crore WB-funded Water Management Improvement Project under the water ministry saw no spending at all this fiscal year, as the government could not appoint a consultant for it.

In another instance, the Chittagong Port Authority was given an allocation of Tk 60 crore for four projects but could not spend a single taka so far.

"Such delays are mostly caused by the inefficiency of the government agencies. But, in a handful of cases, the donors also cause the delays," the ERD source pointed out.

## Bird fair held at JU

**JU CORRESPONDENT**

Hundreds of bird lovers thronged the Jahangirnagar University (JU) campus on February 10 to take part in the daylong bird fair.

With the objective to create awareness among people about birds and their habitat, the university's zoology department and the Institute of Policy Support Unit of the environment and forest ministry jointly organised the fair.

Vice-chancellor Khandaker Mustahidur Rahman inaugurated the programme at the proposed Zahir Raihan auditorium at 8:00am.

Bangladesh Bird Club, Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh, Wildlife Rescue Centre, Nature Study and Conservation Club and Jugantar Swajan Samabesh were the co-organisers of the fair.

Seven teams of students and four of bird experts in a "bird race" event identified 61 species of birds on the campus.

Seven universities and colleges took part in bird identification and watching competitions while a children's drawing competition on birds was held in the corridor of the auditorium. A debate on selected topics on birds was also held.

The organisers rewarded Dr Md Ali Reza Khan, curator of Dubai Zoo, for his remarkable research on birds and Sazzad Hossain Mukul, chairman of Shilmaria Union Parishad, for establishing a bird sanctuary at his own initiative in his area.

The number of the species of birds on the campus rose to 128 from 81, including 30 species of migratory birds, since 1988 due to friendly environment and habitat. About 70 species breed on the campus, says a publication styled "Jolippi" of the organisers published on the occasion.

# PM flies to Pakistan

**FROM PAGE 1**  
The deals are aimed at consolidating the existing close ties between the two South Asian countries, officials added.

Khaleda Zia, current chairperson of the Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), is visiting Pakistan at the invitation of Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz.

Notably, this will be the first high-level bilateral visit from Bangladesh in last four years since the BNP-led alliance government assumed power, although Khaleda Zia visited Pakistan to attend the 12th Saarc Summit on January 2004. On the other hand, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf visited Bangladesh in 2002 and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz came last year.

The leaders of both the countries have had regular interaction on the sidelines of various regional and multilateral forums.

Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin termed the visit 'very significant' and hoped the trip would help strengthen bilateral relations.

Sources said Pakistan and Bangladesh already have a mechanism in place for bilateral annual consultations between their foreign secretaries and also have ongoing security cooperation in intelligence sharing.

According to the itinerary, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is scheduled to arrive at Pakistan Air Force base Chaklala in Islamabad this afternoon. Pak Adviser on Women Development and Federal Minister of Pakistan Ms Nilofar Bakhtiar will receive her. Nineteen gun-salutes will herald the PM's arrival and a contingent drawn from the three services will present a guard of honour to her.

The prime minister will be leading a 73-member delegation, including 30-member business team from leading chamber bodies and individuals in the private sector.

Her entourage also comprises Health and Family Welfare Minister Dr Khandaker Mosharrar Hossain, Agriculture Minister MK Anwar and Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan, high officials and several senior journalists.

On the first day of her tour, Pakistani Commerce Minister Humayoon Akhtar Khan will call on Khaleda Zia at her presidential suite at Hotel Serena where she will be staying.

Tomorrow, Pak Foreign Minister

Mian Khurshheed Mehmood Kasuri will call on her and she will visit an earthquake relief camp in sector H-11 in Islamabad.

The Bangladeshi premier will hold delegation-level talks with her Pakistani counterpart Shaukat Aziz tomorrow afternoon, which will last for about 40 minutes. Following a welcome reception at the Pak PM's house, she will hold a tête-à-tête with Shaukat Aziz prior to the official talks.

After the official talks, the MoUs will be signed. The Pak prime minister will host a banquet in her honour.

Official sources said Dhaka will seek duty free access of 73 items under nine categories to Pakistani market and will request Islamabad to implement Safta so it comes into effect on schedule during the talks.

Besides, the longstanding issue of repatriation of 2.5 lakh stranded Pakistanis and apportionment of pre-independence assets would also figure during the official talks.

Apart from other assets, some \$200 million remained stuck in a Pakistani bank.

The next day, chairman of Pakistan Senate Mohammedmian Soomro will call on her at the hotel suite.

The same day, Khaleda Zia will call on Pak President Pervez Musharraf at Aiwan-e-Sadr at around 12:30pm. President Musharraf will host a luncheon in her honour.

Sources said, during the talks with the Pak president, the prime minister will take up the issue of repatriation of Pakistanis stranded in Bangladesh since 1971 when former East Pakistan became an independent country.

Foreign ministry officials said that Bangladesh and Pakistan have traditionally enjoyed excellent fraternal relations and both the countries had convergence on regional and international issues.

The relationship is based on the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in each other's internal affairs and mutual respect, they added. Both the countries had worked closely on the bilateral level as well as in international forums like the OIC, Commonwealth, NAM, D-8, and Saarc.

# Erratic power supply

**FROM PAGE 1**  
grid caused due to irrigation using power pumps during this season causes fluctuation in voltage.

"The situation might deteriorate in the next few days when boro fields are ready for irrigation," he feared.

"PDB has nothing to do with this until new plants are set up to raise power supply in the national grid," he said when contacted.

But a PDB official seeking anonymity said one of the two power plants at Baghabari in Sirajganj is out of operation for the last several days due to mechanical trouble. This has led to the present power crisis.

Officials of the PDB and REB (Rural Electrification Board) said they could not solve the power crisis since supply of power for the eight northern districts is only 60 to 70 MW against the demand for 220 MW.

As per a decision of the ministry concerned, the PDB supplies power to the rural areas through the REB for five hours every day, keeping the district headquarters under load shedding.

Full swing operation of Baropukuria power plant in Dinajpur might have eased the power crisis to a great extent but it went inoperative soon after its trial operation started, sources said.

A unit of the Baropukuria power plant supplied 75 MW of electricity to the national grid on an experimental basis but it is

kept now inoperative on technical grounds, said Fazlur Rahman, project director of the Baropukuria power plant.

Farmers in many areas in the districts alleged that they are not getting power for even two hours a day. "Voltage is so low and its fluctuation is so frequent that coil in the power pumps are burnt," said farmer Anwar of Parul under Pargachha upazila in Rangpur.

Power crisis is also creating troubles for subscribers in the towns. Household electronic goods, mainly television and refrigerators, are developing troubles due to voltage fluctuation.

"We welcomed the government decision of five-hour load shedding a day in the greater interest of the country but general subscribers are annoyed with eight-hour load shedding," president of Rangpur Chamber of Commerce and Industry Mostafa Azad Chowdhury Babu said.

## Holiday

**FROM PAGE 16**  
reporting in time," Nur told The Daily Star.

He said sometimes the employers show mercy if the workers provide satisfactory reason for the delay. "I have no documents to speak for my delay and for that I may have to meet the worst," he said.

Like Nur, another passenger of the same flight Mohammad Shakil, who also works in a Kuwaiti firm, was anxious about the fate of his job.

In every two years of service, the employers in most of the Arab countries allow their workers a vacation for two months. They asked them to return to work sharp after the vacation, sources concerned said.

# Indian traders

**FROM PAGE 16**  
an indefinite strike on February 8.

On February 4, the Indian traders and truckers announced that they would go for an indefinite strike if Bangladesh authorities failed to end the stalemate at Hilli land port by February 8.

Sources said hundreds of goods-laden Indian trucks remained stranded on the opposite site of the port, while the Bangladesh government is incurring a loss of Tk 80 lakh in revenue every day due to the strike.

District magistrate of Balurghat held a meeting with the Indian traders and truckers on February 9, which failed to yield any positive results.

Exporters, importers and clearing and forwarding agents (C&F) began an indefinite strike at Hilli land port on January 30 demanding withdrawal of a new rule imposed by the Indian exporters.

According to the rule, Bangladeshi importers will not be allowed to carry more than 10 tons of goods in a single truck. This new rule increases transportation cost of the Bangladeshi traders, as they used to carry 20 tons in a truck.

## JS to discuss cartoons

**FROM PAGE 1**  
accepted by the secretariat.

The cartoons were first published in a Danish newspaper in September and other European newspapers began reprinting them last week.

Islamic political groups including the partners of the four-party alliance government have begun agitating in the streets for the last few days against the publication of the cartoons and demanding adoption of a censure motion in parliament.

Some of the Islamic groups have even threatened to launch an out-governments movement if their demand is not met.

The House has already witnessed an unscheduled discussion of around 45 minutes on the issue and Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan delivered a statement in parliament condemning the publication of the cartoons.

BNP lawmaker Abdul Alim on February 5 raised the issue on a point of order and wanted to know about the steps taken in this regard by the foreign ministry. He demanded a general discussion

## Doctors

**FROM PAGE 16**  
prime minister's digestive system" and he was being taken for emergency surgery.

Yael Bosen-Levy, a hospital spokeswoman, said Sharon's condition had deteriorated to its most critical point since his admission to the facility. She said at 11:30 a.m. (0930 GMT) that surgery could take between three and six hours.

After suffering his massive stroke, Sharon, 77, was put into a medically-induced coma. Doctors later tried without success to rouse him.

Long reviled in the Arab world but increasingly regarded as a peacemaker by the West, Sharon suffered his stroke at a crucial juncture in Israeli politics, as he was fighting for re-election on a promise to end conflict with the Palestinians.

His deputy, Ehud Olmert, was named interim prime minister and experts said they did not expect Sharon to make a recovery and return to office.

Opinion polls predict the centrist Kadima party, which Sharon founded after a rebellion in his right-wing Likud over Israel's Gaza pullout, will easily win the March 28 general election with Olmert at the helm.

Sharon, a hefty ex-general, has for decades been a key figure in shaping the Middle East, voicing in recent years support for a Palestinian state but demanding the disarming of Palestinian militant groups before peace talks could resume.

Sharon suffered his stroke a day before he was to check into Hadassah Hospital for a procedure to correct a tiny defect in his heart that was said to have contributed to a mild stroke he suffered two weeks earlier.

Doctors had treated Sharon with blood thinners before the planned heart operation, leading to questions within the medical community whether that strategy was wise.

Sharon's second stroke was caused by massive bleeding in the brain.

# JMB men's

**FROM PAGE 16**  
under the directive of the prime minister, leaders of the major opposition party alleged.

Addressing a press conference at the party's Dhanmondi office in the capital, the AL leaders said the government in a planned way forced militant kinglyns Sunny and Awal to give statements implicating AL's Religious Affairs Secretary Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah in militancy.

They warned the government that the consequences of planned linking of AL leaders to militancy would not be good for the present rulers. Links between the BNP-Jamaat and JMB are crystal clear to the people, and this is why the coalition is now playing a dirty game against the AL, its leaders said.

AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil said the government patronised militancy in its own political interests and is now trying to save the militants and set them free.

It is also trying to destroy democracy, achievements of the Liberation War and communal harmony by patronising militancy.

"Confessional statements of Sunny and Awal that Abdullah is their patron is nothing but a ploy to destroy the image of Awami League," Jalil said.

Condemning such acts of the

government, AL presidium member Tofail Ahmed said Sunny-Awal's trial process is nothing but the government's pre-planned drama to save JMB militants.

Abdullah termed Sunny and Awal's confessional statements motivated, vindictive, false and baseless.

The government has extracted such 'false and fabricated statements from the militants' kingpins' with malicious political motives and to shift the blame for militancy onto the AL, he alleged.

The BNP-Jamaat coalition is out to tarnish the image of the AL realising that they would never return to power again, Abdullah said.

Other AL leaders present at the press conference included Abdur Razzak, Suranjit Sengupta, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, Motia Chowdhury, Mukul Bose, Abdul Mannan Khan, Dr Abdur Razzak, Shohel Taj, Sahara Katun and Bahauddin Nasim.

# Govt's fate depends

**FROM PAGE 1**  
and the extent of load-shedding may cross the limit of 1,500 MW.

In the summer, they said the power generation will be between 3,600 and 3,800MW against the demand ranging between 4,500 and 5,000 MW.

The power minister said load-shedding is obvious, and unavoidable, as there is a significant gap between the supply and a growing demand.

But the government will try to minimise gap through "holiday staggering" and implementing a countrywide load-management mechanism.

Secretary of the Power division ANH Akhtar Hossain made a presentation on the planned holiday staggering under which the capital city will be divided into seven zones.

As per the zoning plan, one day a week, all the shopping malls and industrial units will be completely closed in each of the zones. Through this system, he claimed that about 150 to 200 MW power consumption could easily be saved in the city and diverted elsewhere in the country.

He claimed the present power crisis is a result of wrong forecast and perception that undermined the present development growth.

"Our present economic growth is more than 7 percent... But we have prepared our planning giving the growth rate at 5 percent, which ultimately led to this unusual power crisis," he told his audience during the brainstorming on a shabby power situation.

## Robber

**FROM PAGE 16**  
under police guard.

As the gang again stormed into the house after sometime, Jamaluddin cried for help. Neighbours rushed to the spot and caught another gang member, Babul, 23, while others managed to flee. They beat up the robber mercilessly, resulting in his death on the spot.

## Mohiuddin

**FROM PAGE 1**  
Top Jamaat-Shibir leaders the same day held a rally attended by Shalehi and threatened police and journalists with dire consequences for doing or writing anything against him.

A huge number of police were on hand in and around the rally, but none of them moved to arrest Shalehi.

City unit Jamaat President Aatur Rahman, Central Shibir President Shafikul Islam Masud, RU Shibir Secretary Noor Muhammad, among others, addressed the rally chaired by city unit Jamaat Secretary Rokon Uddin.

Shalehi in a brief speech denied the charge against him and disappeared by a motorcycle as the rally ended.

**CAMPUS MOVEMENT**  
Over 1,000 RU teachers, officials and students formed a human chain on both sides of the road from Juberi Bhaban to RU main gate, demanding immediate arrest of Taher's killers.

They paraded in a silent procession, all gagged with black cloths, in protest against the killing of the teacher, reports our RU correspondent.

Campus sources said RU unit Shibir postponed its day's programme witnessing the huge movement by general students and teachers.

Meanwhile, former vice-presidents and general secretaries of Rajshahi University Central Students Union (Rucusu) start protest movement including hunger strike and rally from February 16.

In a joint statement on February 10, eight VPs and seven GSs termed Shibir a militant outfit and demanded proper investigations into the murders of Prof Muhammad Yunus and Prof Taher.

The Rucusu leaders include Prof Abu Sayeed, Fazle Hossain Badsha, Abdur Razzak, Sardar Amjad Hossain, Nurul Islam Thandu and Ruhul Kuddus Babu.

# AL returns to JS today

**FROM PAGE 1**  
Before joining the House, the main opposition AL will hold a parliamentary party meeting with Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina in the chair to fix its strategy.

"We are joining the House tomorrow (Sunday) and place our views on the latest situation, especially the reform proposals for the caretaker government system and the Election Commission," Opposition Chief Whip Abdus Shahid told The Daily Star yesterday.

Welcoming the main opposition party's return to parliament, Deputy Speaker Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui told The Daily Star that he would try to provide adequate time for the opposition lawmakers to speak in accordance with the rules of procedure.

The AL-led 14-party opposition combine has begun agitating in the streets for the reforms since the leader of the opposition announced the proposals on June 15 last year.

Meanwhile, the parliament membership of the leader of the opposition is now at stake for her absence without notifying the speaker. Hasina will have to join the House by Feb 14 to save her membership before 90 consecutive days of absence.

## BSF kills 3

**FROM PAGE 16**  
BDR said a BSF patrol team of Shikarpur checkpoint of Karimpur Thana in Nadia district opened fire when the Bangladeshi cow traders were haggling with some Indian traders on cattle price near pillar No 147 at about 3:30am.

Akbar and Ashraf got caught in BSF fire and died on the spot, while Lalchad received serious bullets injuries. The BSF dragged the dead bodies inside the Indian territory and handed them over to Karimpur police in Nadia.

The BDR sent a letter protesting the incident and asking for a flag meeting. The Indian side did not respond by yesterday evening.

Lalchad was admitted to Kushtia General Hospital.

At least 24 Bangladeshis were killed and over 100 were injured by BSF at different southwestern border points last year. The BSF also abducted at least 70 Bangladeshis during this period, among whom 40 are still in different jails in India while the rest were released.

In Thakurgaon, Ershad Ali died on the spot when the BSF personnel of Khurka camp opened fire as he went near a border pillar at Bujurak for grazing cow at about 10:00am, UNB says quoting BDR sources.

The BSF members entered Bangladesh and drag the body into the Indian territory.

## Judges

**FROM PAGE 16**  
programme against the government's delay in meeting their 11-point demand.

The judges wore black badges during the court proceedings in those three days and vowed to go for tougher movement if the government failed to meet all their demands by January 29.

Postponing their January 29 extended meeting in consideration of the Biswa Itjema, the BJSA rescheduled it for today.

BJSA's demands include providing personal gunmen, tax-free vehicles and firearms for all the judges, guards at judges' residences across the country and payment of Tk 50 lakh each in compensation to the families of the slain judges in Jhalakathi bomb attack on November 14 last year.

The government has met their demands partly but has not taken any steps for meeting the rest, BJSA sources said.

In addition to their 11-point demand, BJSA placed a three-point demand to the prime minister on December 21 at their 55th annual conference, and those are yet to be fulfilled, they said.

These include -- appointing assistant judges for the vacant posts, giving the district and sessions judges the status of joint secretary and appointing 50 percent of the High Court judges from the lower courts.

A district judge's salary is equal to that of a joint secretary but district judges are not provided the status of that rank, BJSA sources said.

## US accepts

**FROM PAGE 16**  
absent any sort of change in Hamas, meeting those (quartet) conditions."

But he recognised that the quartet statement did not rule out contacts with the hard-line Islamic group and left the door open for other countries regarding the question of assistance to the Palestinians.

"There is a principle in there as it relates to review of aid programmes," McCormack said. "And that principle is that individual countries will make their sovereign decisions about these issues."

Earlier United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan said most Palestinians oppose terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians and accept Israel's right to exist, urging a new Hamas government to stick with the internationally backed road map to Middle East peace.

Annan chose a high-profile meeting of a UN panel that promotes Palestinian human rights to warn the Palestinians that "the international community will be watching very carefully to see how a new government rises to these challenges."

The 2006 session of the UN General Assembly's Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People opened on Friday without its traditional display of a map of pre-1948 Palestine -- now comprising the state of Israel -- following a complaint from UN Ambassador John Bolton.

Bolton wrote Annan last month that UN dignitaries attending committee events at which such a map was displayed "can be misconstrued to suggest that the United Nations tacitly supports the abolition of the state of Israel."