

3 S Asian states want to vie for Human Rights Council seats

PTI, United Nations

India, Japan, Pakistan and Bangladesh are among the member states, which have given notice that they intend to contest for the newly established 47-member Human Rights Council.

Among other declared candidates for 13 seats allotted to Asia are Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Indonesia and South Korea, UN sources said.

Thus so far 8 candidates have offered themselves for the 13 seats but sources say more countries are expected to jump in fray in coming days.

The 191-member General Assembly is due to hold first election for the Council, which has replaced the much criticized Human Rights Commission, on May 9 and a member to be elected would require a majority of the total membership of the world body or a minimum 96 votes.

Liberia's Taylor captured in Nigeria

REUTERS, Maiduguri

Former Liberian President Charles Taylor, wanted for war crimes by a court in Sierra Leone, was arrested yesterday in northern Nigeria on the border with Cameroon, police said.

The arrest comes a day after Nigerian authorities said Taylor had disappeared from the villa in southeastern Nigeria where he has lived in exile since he stepped down in 2003 as part of a deal to end 14 years of civil war in Liberia.

"He was arrested in Borno state, at the Cameroon border, in the early hours of this morning. He's in the custody of security agencies in Borno," said police spokesman Haz Iwendi.

Police in Borno said Taylor was detained at the Gamboru-Ngala border crossing, a remote outpost in the arid northeast.

The arrest was the latest twist in a complex saga involving Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the United States.

Liberia asked Nigeria on March 5 to hand over Taylor to a special UN-backed court in Sierra Leone, where he is accused of supporting brutal rebels in exchange for diamonds to finance the Liberian conflict.

Nigeria responded on March 25 that Liberia was free to take him into its custody. It made no mention of Sierra Leone and gave no details as to when and how a transfer was supposed to take place.

Then on Tuesday, Nigeria said Taylor had disappeared from his residence, causing an international outcry. Some US congressmen urged President George Bush to cancel a planned meeting with Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo on Wednesday.

Washington has been pressuring Nigeria for years to send Taylor to stand trial in Sierra Leone.

Olmert wins backing of Israelis for border plan

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert looked to begin building a coalition yesterday after winning Israel's election on his plan to impose final borders with the Palestinians by uprooting many West Bank settlements.

Appealing to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Olmert said in a post-election speech that Israel was ready to live alongside the Palestinians in peace after decades of conflict.

But in the absence of peace talks -- now remote with the Islamist militant group Hamas about to take office -- Olmert has vowed to set Israel's frontier by 2010 by removing isolated West Bank settlements while expanding bigger blocs there.

Olmert's centrist Kadima party fared worse than expected in

Tuesday's parliamentary election, signalling he might struggle to sustain support for his historic plan.

However, some political analysts said Olmert should be able to stitch together a coalition that would avoid the need to negotiate with right-wing parties opposed to any withdrawal from West Bank land that settlers see as a biblical birthright.

Palestinians say such go-it-alone moves, sweeping measures that would uproot tens of thousands of Jewish settlers while tracing a border along a fortified barrier Israel is building inside the West Bank, would deny them a viable state.

With votes counted from 99.5 percent of polling stations, official results showed Kadima with 28 seats in the 120-member parliament, centre-left Labour with 20, the ultra-Orthodox Shas with 13, ultranationalist Yisrael Beiteinu with 12 and right-wing Likud with 11.

Opinion polls had once predicted Kadima would win 44 seats.

Olmert said Jews had aspired for thousands of years to create a homeland throughout the Land of Israel, biblical territory that includes the West Bank.

"But acknowledging reality and circumstances, we are ready to compromise, to give up parts of the beloved Land of Israel... and evacuate, with great pain, Jews living there, to create the conditions that will enable you to fulfil your dream and live alongside us," Olmert said.

If the Palestinians did not move toward peace, he said, "Israel will take its destiny in hand" and set permanent borders after lobbying the United States and others for support.

Abbas, who wants a two-state solution but has been weakened by Hamas's victory in elections in January, said the election would

make no difference unless Olmert abandoned unilateralism.

"This result will not change (anything) as long as the agenda of Olmert himself does not change and he does not abandon the question of unilateral agreements," Abbas said in Khartoum.

Kadima was expected to seek a coalition with Labour and a clutch of small parties ranging from ultra-Orthodox Jewish factions to a pensioners' rights group.

"On the face of it, Olmert can form a coalition of 80 seats within a month. The question is how far can he go with such a government?" wrote Yossi Verter, a political analyst for the Haaretz newspaper.



Acting Prime Minister and Kadima leader Ehud Olmert (C) celebrates election win with former prime minister Shimon Peres (R) who congratulates Olmert's wife Aliza during celebrations early yesterday at the temporary Kadima meeting point set up outside Jerusalem in Neve Ilan.



A protester raises placards during rally against Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the commercial hub of Bangkok yesterday. Thousands of protesters marched through downtown Bangkok, threatening to bring the city to a standstill as they pressed their demand for the prime minister to resign before elections this weekend.

Arabs say 'no' to Israeli border plan

AFP, Khartoum

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas led vehement Arab opposition Wednesday to Israeli acting premier Ehud Olmert's plan to set the borders of the Jewish state unilaterally after his election win.

"The result was expected. But what is more important now is that Olmert changes his agenda and abandon his unilateral plans to fix the borders," Abbas told reporters on the sidelines of an Arab summit in Khartoum.

The double whammy of Olmert's victory and international threats to isolate the Palestinians' new Hamas-led government has left the Arab world grappling for the proper response to the challenging new realities.

The Arab summit quickly adopted a resolution in reaction to Olmert's victory, which paved the way for his centrist Kadima party to implement its groundbreaking pledge to fix the Jewish state's

boundaries by 2010.

The leaders endorsed a statement calling for the rejection of "Israeli measures including... fixing Israel's borders unilaterally in a way that fulfills its expansionist greed."

The resolution said such actions by Israel "render impossible the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state."

The summit had already urged the international community not to punish the Palestinians for voting the Islamic radical movement Hamas into power in January in an upset victory over Abbas's mainstream Fatah party.

"All calls to distort the political meaning of the Palestinian choice by threatening to boycott it and cut aid cannot be justified," Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika told the summit, which itself has been marred by poor attendance and the absence of key regional leaders.

Taliban attack Afghan base: 34 killed

American, Canadian soldier among the victims

AFP, Kandahar

US-led troops battled Taliban rebels who attacked a base in south Afghanistan yesterday, leaving an American and a Canadian soldier dead along with at least 32 insurgents, officials said.

Coalition forces also destroyed two Taliban headquarters buildings containing weapons and bomb-making material during several hours of fighting in insurgency-hit Helmand province, a coalition statement said.

The attack was the biggest on a coalition base in months and came about two weeks after Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime pledged a new spring offensive.

Militants attacked the coalition base in Sangin district at about 2:30

am with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and small arms.

Coalition attack aircraft dropped three 500-pound bombs and two 1,000-pound bombs and also fired high-explosive rockets, guided missiles and incendiary rounds, spokesman Lieutenant Mike Cody told AFP.

Four coalition troops and an Afghan soldier were wounded in the firefight.

The coalition said at least 12 insurgents were killed in the initial effort to beat back a "significant enemy element".

It later reported a further 20 enemy casualties "as part of an early-morning engagement that continued into daylight hours as coalition forces defeated a large enemy element that was attempting

to retreat into sanctuaries," the statement said.

The coalition then discovered large caches of munitions as they overran the Taliban buildings and the insurgents fled, the statements said.

"Coalition forces destroyed the munitions, which included weapons and improvised explosive device materials, causing multiple secondary explosions and destroying the compound and all enemy military equipment inside," the statement said.

Thirteen US troops have now died in hostile action in Afghanistan this year. The Canadian soldier named as Private Robert Costall was the first from his country to die in combat here in 2006.

Lanka vows talks despite sinking of navy craft

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government yesterday pledged to continue talks with Tamil Tiger rebels despite the killing of eight sailors in a suicide blast and fears the island could slip back to full scale war.

Colombo's chief peace negotiator Nimal Siripala de Silva said Sri Lanka's government will go ahead with talks next month at a venue in Switzerland despite Saturday's suspected Tiger sinking of a navy gunboat.

"The government (is) committed towards a negotiated settlement despite (the) recent provocative action," de Silva said in talks with the Swiss ambassador here Bernardino Regazzoni.

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels blew up a trawler together with six of their own men as a navy gunboat

approached them, sinking both craft and also killing eight sailors.

The Swiss envoy was meeting with de Silva to discuss logistics for the next round of talks, tentatively scheduled for April 19 to 21.

"The minister and the ambassador discussed ways and means of making necessary arrangements for the second round of talks scheduled to be held in the third week of April in Geneva," de Silva's office said in a statement.

Diplomatic sources said the talks may be delayed for logistical reasons.

Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway was also meeting with the top Tamil Tiger peace negotiator Anton Balasingham in London Wednesday.

Norway's International Development Minister and peace envoy Erik Solheim and

Balasingham will prepare the groundwork for the meeting between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The two sides held a first meeting at Celigny, near Geneva in February aimed at shoring up a fragile ceasefire in place since 2002 and preventing a return to civil war amid flaring violence.

The ceasefire negotiations are separate from the Sri Lanka peace talks that have been suspended since April 2003.

The LTTE rebels have been fighting for autonomy in the north-eastern part of the island for more than 30 years, in a conflict that has claimed at least 60,000 lives since 1972.

REUTERS, United Nations

The five UN Security Council powers are close to a deal on Iran's suspect nuclear programme and hope for approval of a new draft statement when the full council meets on Wednesday, diplomats said.

Britain and France, backed by the United States, distributed a revised text late on Tuesday to all 15 Security Council members that makes concessions to Russia and China. But it still calls on Iran to suspend uranium enrichment efforts, which the West believes are a cover for bomb making.

"We have reached agreement on the bulk of the text, so there was movement on all sides. And now we need to see whether we can cross this last bridge, but we're very close," US Ambassador John Bolton told reporters on Tuesday.

"We have been incredibly flexible. Incredibly flexible. I probably have never been more flexible," Bolton said of the compromise.

The Security Council consults on Wednesday afternoon after the five powers meet again. The hope is that the statement will be adopted then or at least be ready for approval early on Thursday when foreign ministers of the five council powers and Germany meet in Berlin to discuss strategy toward Iran.

But not all issues have been settled and a presidential state-

ment, compared to a resolution, needs the approval of all 15 nations with seats on the council.

Negotiations have stretched over three weeks on the statement, which is nonbinding and threatens no punitive measures. But Russia, backed by China, fear Security Council involvement will lay the groundwork for tougher action, such as sanctions, which they have vowed to oppose.

The International Atomic Energy Agency, the Vienna-based UN nuclear watchdog, referred the Iranian dossier to the council on March 8 after Tehran resumed nuclear fuel work. This

prompted European negotiators -- Germany, France and Britain -- to break off 2-1/2 years of talks. Oil-rich Iran insists its programmes are to develop nuclear energy only.

One change in the text is a watering down of a phrase calling Iran's actions a possible "threat to international peace and security," a term that Beijing and Moscow said established an escalation of council involvement.

The new version notes the council's "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security" as defined in the UN Charter.

But this language has still not been approved by Russia, diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of secret negotiations, and is considered the main

obstacle.

The new text also deletes specific charges and demands on Iran's nuclear programme. Instead it refers to resolutions of the IAEA board that mention them.

Another modification is a request that the IAEA director general, Mohamed ElBaradei, report back on Iran's compliance within 30 days instead of the 14 days in the original text.

In Washington on Tuesday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the United States had "a number of tools" to isolate Iran and "if necessary, within the UN Security Council."

She did not elaborate but the implication was some form of punitive action, such as sanctions.

In London, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw in London sought to assure Russia and China that Security Council action would not lead to military strikes.

"As to the possibility of this leading to another Iraq, it won't. I have made clear often enough that I don't regard military action as appropriate or indeed conceivable," Straw said. "Nor do I believe there would be any international consensus on that and I think Russia and China are well reassured on that."

Iraqi politicians return to talks

AP, Baghdad

After a one-day boycott by Shia leaders, Iraqi politicians returned to talks on forming a government but that may have been all they could agree on.

They debated what the security powers of the new government's prime minister should be, but reached no conclusions Tuesday, Kurdish legislator Mahmoud Othman said.

On Wednesday, unidentified gunmen stormed a trading company in an upscale Baghdad neighbourhood and opened fire Wednesday, killing eight employees and wounding six, police

said.

The men, who wore civilian clothes, arrived at the al-Ibtikar Trade Contracting Co. in five black BMWs about 8:15 a.m., police Lt. Maitam Abdul-Razzaq said. Those killed included five men and three women, he said.

The motive of the attack was not immediately clear. The assailants burned part of the building but appeared to have taken no money, Abdul-Razzaq said.

Parts of world get a stunning solar show

AP, Accra

Schoolchildren cheered as the first total eclipse in years plunged Ghana into daytime darkness yesterday, a solar show sweeping northeast from Brazil to Mongolia.

As the heavens and Earth moved into rare alignment, all that could be seen of the sun were the rays of its corona the usually invisible extended atmosphere of the sun that glowed a dull yellow for about three minutes, barely illuminating the west African nation.

Automatic street lights flickered on, authorities sounded whistles and schoolchildren burst into applause across Ghana's capital, Accra. Many in the deeply religious country of Christians and Muslims said the phenomenon bolstered their faith.

"I believe it's a wonderful work of God, despite all what the scientists say," said Solomon Pomenya, a 52-

year old doctor. "This tells me that God is a true engineer."

The last such eclipse in November 2003 was best viewed from Antarctica, said Alex Young, a NASA scientist involved in solar research.

In Turkey's Mediterranean town of Side, hundreds of people streamed down a main street, some carrying tripods, to an ancient Greek temple dedicated to Apollo, as market sellers hawked T-shirts and protective glasses.

Joaquim Boix travelled from Barcelona, Spain, to view the eclipse. He said he became addicted to eclipses after seeing one in Germany.

"It's fantastic," Boix said. "It's the colour, the metallic blue-green colour on the skin of the people. The sky with the stars in the background. Usually you watch the stars in a black background... The background is blue. It's a special feeling."



French children watch a solar eclipse yesterday in the southern French town of Marseille. The moon blotted out the sun, turning day into night, in a total solar eclipse that carved a path from the tip of Brazil over northern Africa to the steppes of Mongolia.