



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas stands as Hamas leader Ismail Haniya (L) swears in as Palestinian prime minister in Gaza City yesterday.

## Hamas govt takes over amid Western isolation

REUTERS, Gaza City

Hamas ministers began work yesterday after the Palestinian militant group's government took office, battling Western isolation and a crippling cash crunch.

One of the first challenges for Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and his cabinet, sworn in on Wednesday, will be paying March salaries for 140,000 Palestinian Authority staff that fall due within days.

Israel, where interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is building a coalition after his Kadima party won elections this week but took less than a quarter of seats in parliament, has already cut monthly tax

transfers of \$50-\$55 million.

On Wednesday, the United States ordered its diplomats and contractors to have no contacts with Palestinian ministries and Canada suspended aid to the Palestinian Authority. Hamas took over the Palestinian government after winning January elections.

"We are surprised democratic regimes adopt the method of boycott and punishment without even sitting down with this new government," Minister of Information Youssef Rizka told Reuters.

"This government has true intentions and the determination to face the big challenges especially on the economic front."

The Hamas Islamists are committed to Israel's destruction and have rebuffed demands from the "Quartet" of Middle East peace mediators to recognise the Jewish state, renounce violence and abide by peace accords or risk losing vital aid.

The Quartet -- the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations -- has yet to agree on mechanisms to ensure humanitarian assistance bypasses Hamas but continues to flow to the Palestinian people.

February salaries to 140,000 Palestinian Authority workers, including security personnel, were paid weeks overdue.

Asked if wages would be paid on time, normally in the first week of each month, Haniyeh said the Authority was seeking funds from Arab and Islamic countries as well as the European Union.

The Palestinian Authority relies on some \$1 billion in foreign aid each year. Aid groups say a funding crisis could lead to violence in Palestinian areas, where as many as one in four people is dependent on wages from the Authority.

The government said it would also try to access a Palestinian investment fund worth some \$1.3 billion and which is controlled by the office of President Mahmoud Abbas.



PHOTO: AFP

Cosmonauts Pavel Vinogradov (R), Jeffrey Williams (top) and Marcos Pontes wave during the farewell ceremony at the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan yesterday.

## Crew lifts off for space station

AP, Baikonur

A Russian Soyuz rocket streaked into the skies over the Central Asian steppe yesterday, launching a US-Russian-Brazilian crew on a mission to the international space station.

Russian Pavel Vinogradov and American Jeffrey Williams were to stay on board the station for about six months. Brazil's first man in space, Marcos C. Pontes, will stay at the station for nine days before returning to Earth on April 9 with the station's current crew of Russian Valery Tokarev and American Bill McArthur.

Officials monitoring the launch at Russian Mission Control outside Moscow held their applause until the spacecraft reached near-Earth orbit, about 10 minutes after its 6:30 a.m. (9:30 p.m. EST Wednesday) launch.

## Iran still ready for talks with US on Iraq: FM

AFP, Geneva/ United Nations

Iran is still ready to hold talks with the United States limited to the situation in neighbouring Iraq, Iran's Foreign Minister Mounachehr Mottaki said yesterday.

"The recent proposal made by Iraqi leaders for Iran to talk with the US about issues relating to Iraq: we look on this proposal as an opportunity to help the Iraqi nation," Mottaki told journalists in Geneva.

"These negotiations will be limited only to Iraq. The venue, the team of negotiators and the time is yet to be finalised," he added.

The idea was floated earlier this

month by Ali Larjani, head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, and was later accepted by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad despite his own sense of "distrust" of the United States.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said last week she was "quite certain" that US officials would hold direct talks with Iran on the turmoil in Iraq.

Any direct meeting would mark a break in a near three-decade pause in direct contacts between US and Iranian officials following the country's 1979 Islamic revolution, despite heightened tensions due to the standoff over Iran's nuclear

programme.

US President George W. Bush expressed concern Wednesday about Iran meddling in Iraq's formation of a national unity government.

Earlier Russia urged Iran to heed "in the fullest way" possible a UN Security Council call for Tehran to end uranium enrichment activities within 30 days.

"We urge the Iranian leadership to obey the common view of UN Security Council members in the fullest way and guarantee full cooperation with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency)," Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement.

## Thai protesters want cancellation of polls

AFP, Bangkok

Thousands of Thai protesters marched on the offices of the country's election commission yesterday demanding the last-minute cancellation of this weekend's polls.

The latest protest in two months of political turmoil followed a Bangkok sit-in overnight that drew around 50,000 people onto the streets calling on Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to step down before Sunday's vote.

"This is a very critical moment. Only people power can force Prime Minister Thaksin to quit," rally leader Chamlong Srimuang told the crowd,

which waved banners calling the commission members "political criminals."

Thousands of Thai protesters who spent the night in a downtown Bangkok street to demand the prime minister quit cut short their demonstration yesterday, just three days before troubled elections.

Support for Chamlong's movement appeared to be waning. He cut short the sit-in at a major Bangkok retail district, which was originally planned to run until Friday, after widespread complaints over traffic jams.

## Kashmir rebels ready for talks, truce with India

AFP, Srinagar

A Pakistan-based rebel group fighting India over Kashmir said a ceasefire is possible if New Delhi recognises groups like his as a party to the dispute, according to a report published Thursday.

"Not only Hizbul Mujahedin but also the entire militant leadership would consider (a) truce only if Indian government acknowledges the disputed and tripartite nature of

Kashmir issue," Hizbul's supreme commander Syed Salahudin told the Kashmir News Service in a telephone interview from Pakistan.

India has engaged in a peace process with Pakistan since January 2004 that includes attempts to settle their dispute over Kashmir, which both claim in full and occupy in part. They have observed a ceasefire in the region, the scene of two of their three wars since 1947.