

Cash crisis, attacks put pressure on Hamas

8 Palestinians killed in Israeli raids

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian premier Ismail Haniya yesterday accused the West of blackmail after the US and EU froze badly needed aid, while president Mahmud Abbas warned that a new unilateral Israeli withdrawal would lead to more bloodshed.

The declarations came as the Israeli military stepped up its attacks in the Gaza Strip, carrying out two deadly air strikes in which eight Palestinians were killed in a bid to stem ongoing militant rocket fire into Israel.

One raid in northern Gaza targeted two members of the militant Al

Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades group, responsible for most of the firing of the makeshift rockets, which have caused little damage.

On Friday night, six Palestinians were killed at a training base for the Popular Resistance Committees militant group in the southern Gaza Strip in one of the deadliest air strikes in months.

Squeezed between the intensification of Israeli attacks and massive international pressure, the newly elected Hamas government is struggling to establish order within and legitimacy abroad.

The radical Islamist group has been under massive Western

pressure to recognise Israel's right to exist, renounce its support for armed struggle and respect past Palestinian agreements with Israel.

But on Friday the United States and the European Union both announced they were suspending millions of dollars in direct aid to the Palestinian Authority because Hamas refused to change its hard-line positions regarding Israel.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the Hamas government, which catapulted to power in January elections, "must take responsibility for the consequences of its policies".

Both Washington and Brussels

regard Hamas as a terrorist organisation.

US officials on Friday asked other governments to follow suit to pressure Hamas to return to the roadmap for Middle East peace, which calls for the creation of a Palestinian state that can co-exist with Israel.

The roadmap is backed by the quartet of the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union.

Yet Palestinian prime minister Haniya remained defiant, accusing the west of blackmail and insisting his government will not crack under international pressure.



PHOTO: AFP

Local people shout anti-king slogans while riot police look on at Kirtipur, on the outskirts of Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's government slapped a daytime curfew on the capital and warned violators could be shot in a bid to thwart anti-king protests as the army said clashes with Maoist rebels left at least 14 dead in the west of the kingdom.

Tornadoes sweep thru' Tennessee: 11 killed

AP, Nashville

In the second wave of violent weather to hit the state in less than a week, severe thunderstorms and tornadoes tore off roofs and overturned cars and left 11 people dead.

While families of Sunday's tornado victims in the western counties of Dyer and Gibson planned funerals for this weekend, many residents of Sumner County began picking through newly flattened homes and mangled cars.

Talmadge Woodall, 81, described the twister that destroyed his house Friday afternoon as "rolling, throwing debris hundreds of feet in the air." He lived in an upscale subdivision of Gallatin, about 24 miles northeast of Nashville, where three bodies were found.

"These were at least half-million-dollar homes or better," he said. "Now there's nothing left. I didn't even have a shingle off my house."

Suicide car bomb kills 2 outside Nato base

AP, Kabul

A suicide car bomb outside a Nato military base in a western Afghan city yesterday killed two Afghans and wounded seven others in the second such attack on a foreign military base in as many days.

The explosions highlighted the increasing risk to foreign forces as they expand into new areas across Afghanistan. A suicide attack outside a US-led coalition base Friday wounded two US military service members and one US civilian contractor in southern Helmand province.

Saturday's attack occurred near the gates of the base in Herat city, which is home to hundreds of Italian soldiers, said police chief Gen. Mohammed Ayub Salingi.

A spokesman for the Nato force, Warrant Officer Cosimo Argentieri, said no foreign troops were killed. He said one foreign civilian inside the base was slightly wounded in an arm.

He said the blast was being investigated, but declined to give further details.

Salingi said a suicide attacker drove a vehicle up to the gates of the base and detonated explosives inside the car.

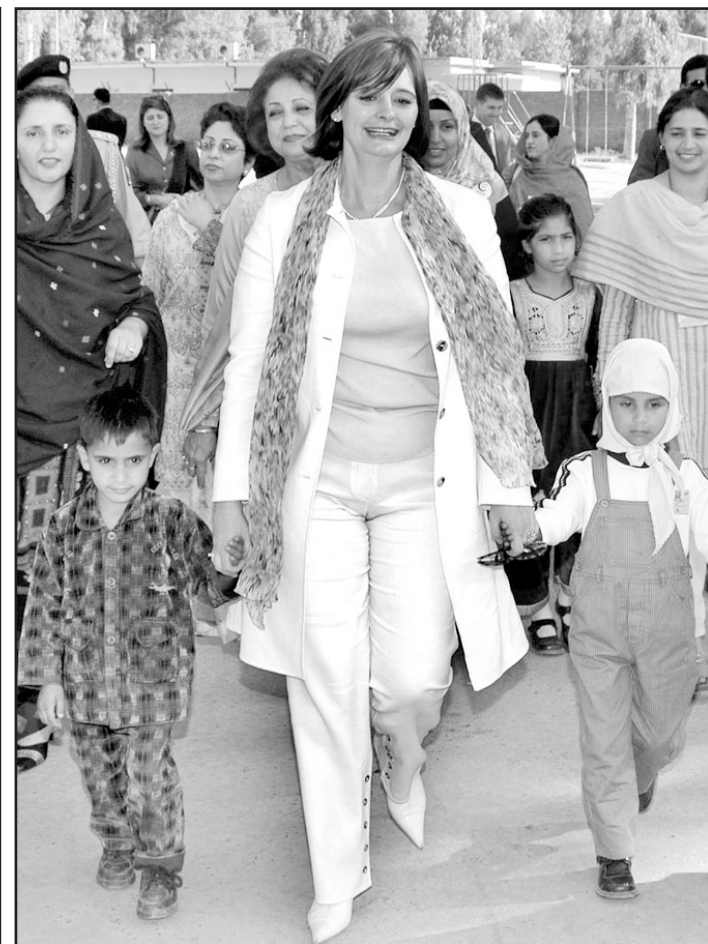


PHOTO: AFP

Cherie Blair, (C) the wife of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Pakistani First Lady Begum Sehba Musharraf visit a school in Hattian Bala on Friday and talk with earthquake survivors. Traumatized by aftershocks and driven by grief, some Pakistani children are still too scared to enter the new classrooms that are rising from the rubble of the earthquake six months ago.

Nepal king committed 'travesty' against democracy: US

AFP, New Delhi

A top US envoy said Friday Nepal's king had committed a "travesty against democracy" when he seized power, as hundreds more protesters were arrested in the Himalayan kingdom during an anti-royal strike.

"He (King Gyanendra) has done a travesty to democracy," US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher said in New Delhi, where he held talks with Indian foreign ministry officials.

There is "no logic to supporting the king," he told a business forum in the Indian capital, adding that Gyanendra "has destroyed democracy" in Nepal.

But Boucher stopped short of calling for the king's removal, saying Washington was pressing the monarch to restore democracy and that US diplomats were sending "strong messages every day".

Boucher was in New Delhi as part of his first swing through South and Central Asia since being appointed to the post in January.

Troops, Tigers accuse each other of attacks

REUTERS, Colombo

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels shot and wounded two Sri Lankan soldiers yesterday, the army said, shortly after the rebels themselves complained they had come under fire from the military in the run-up to peace talks.

The two sides are due to meet later in the month in Switzerland for talks aimed at averting a slide towards a resumption of the island's two decade civil war.

Violence had fallen since the two sides agreed to meet earlier in the

year but has spiked again in recent days.

"They have fired at one of our observation posts," army spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarsinghe said. "Two of our men were seriously injured."

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) media co-ordinator Daya Master said the military had attacked a rebel position in the east early in the morning with 50 mm mortars, but that no rebels had been injured.

The military denied any involvement in the attack on the Tigers, and

the rebels could not immediately be reached for comment regarding the later attack on an army checkpoint. Both incidents took place near the northeastern port of Trincomalee.

Each side accuses the other of failing to honour pledges made at the last round of talks in Geneva in February, where the government promised to disarm groups operating in their areas and the rebels pledged to avoid any military action.

Iraqi Shia leader warns against civil war

REUTERS, Baghdad

One of Iraq's most powerful Shia leaders urged his followers yesterday to resist being drawn into a sectarian civil war after a triple suicide bombing killed at least 70 people at a mosque associated with his party.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, a top figure in the ruling Shia Alliance, urged Shias to stand firm against what he called a campaign by al-Qaeda

leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to ignite civil war with bombings like the one at a Baghdad mosque a day earlier.

"The alert Iraqi people, who are obedient to the religious establishments, should not give in to sectarian discord that is part of a campaign by Zarqawi and groups associated with him aimed at sectarian war," he told thousands of supporters.

'Congress may take a year to implement Indo-US N-deal'

AFP, New Delhi/ Washington

A top United States envoy said Friday he was confident the US Congress would approve a major civilian nuclear deal but said it could take a year to implement.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher said he believed Congress would clear the agreement "because it is part and parcel

of a new relationship with India. People want to support it."

"We are moving full speed ahead," said Boucher.

He was in New Delhi for talks with Indian foreign ministry officials as part of his first swing through the region since being named to the post in January.

US opponents say the deal abandons long-standing non-proliferation rules, complicates efforts to curb the

spread of atomic weapons, such as in Iran and North Korea, and could spur India to expand its nuclear weapons arsenal.

The deal was struck last month during a visit to New Delhi but Boucher hesitated to predict when Congress would pass the agreement, saying the legislators set their own timetable.

Bush signals opposition to automatic citizenship for illegals

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush yesterday expressed his opposition to granting automatic citizenship to those who had crossed the US border illegally after a Republican-sponsored immigration reform plan collapsed in the US Senate.

"We must ensure that those who break our laws are not granted an automatic path to citizenship," Bush said in his weekly radio address.

The comment appears to place Bush at odds with two key proposals considered by the Senate over the past weeks, which offer legalization -- and eventual citizenship -- to all or most of an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants currently living in the United States.

CPI-M to review govt support after polls

REUTERS, New Delhi

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) on Friday said it would review its support for the government after state elections are out of the way next month.

CPI-M general secretary Prakash Karat said his party hoped success in state elections this month would give it more influence on the foreign and economic policies of the Congress party-led coalition.

Karat said the government had "shot itself in the foot" by agreeing a landmark civil nuclear deal with the United States, which he said was likely to come with many strings attached.

"It means that Americans expect you to have a quid pro quo on other issues, not just nuclear power," Karat told Reuters in an interview in his spartan office.

"We are apprehensive that this agreement will become the basis for a wider strategic alliance and, you will have to fall in line with the United States on many key issues."