

# Abbas calls for peace talks with Israel

7 Palestinians killed in raids

AP, AFP, REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas yesterday called for Israel to return to the negotiating table during a speech marking the anniversary of what the Palestinians consider to be the "catastrophe" of Israel's creation.

Abbas also urged Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip to halt rocket attacks on Israel. He said the violence encourages Israel to step up its military activity and proceed with unilateral plans to impose a border on the Palestinians.

"I tell our neighbours, the Israelis, that we want to make a just and lasting peace with you, and we want a better future for our children and yours. So come to make this year a year of peace," he said in remarks set to be broadcast later Monday on Palestinian television and radio.

The Associated Press obtained a copy of the speech.

Abbas called yesterday for a lifting of economic sanctions, which have left tens of thousands of government employees unpaid for the last two months.

"Our first priority is to lift the economic and political siege imposed on

our people, then to end the occupation of our land once and for all, and to establish our independent Palestinian state," Abbas said in a pre-recorded televised address to mark the "catastrophe" of Israel's creation in 1948.

The European Union and United States have both suspended aid payments to the Palestinian Authority since the radical Islamist movement Hamas formed a new government in March over its refusal to renounce violence or recognise Israel's right to exist.

Abbas, who is currently in Russia

where he will hold talks with President Vladimir Putin, said voters should not be punished for electing Hamas.

Earlier Israeli troops killed seven Palestinians including a leading Islamic Jihad militant on Sunday in the bloodiest fighting in weeks in the occupied West Bank, an Israeli military official and Palestinian sources said.

Four other militants died in the raid in which soldiers surrounded a house in the town of Qabatiya, as Eshkar hid inside, including Eshkar's brother, Dallal said.



Former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto speaks while Nawaz Sharif (R) listens during a meeting in central London Sunday. The two former Pak PMs met to launch a common front for 2007 Pakistani elections.

## Saddam charged with murder, torture

AP, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein's trial entered a new phase Monday, when the chief judge formally charged the ousted Iraqi leader with murder, torture of women and children and the illegal arrest of 399 people in a crackdown against Shias in the 1980s.

Saddam, who sat alone in the defendants' pen as the charges were read, refused to enter a plea when chief judge Raouf Abdel-Rahman asked him if he were guilty or not.

"I can't just say yes or no to this. You read all this for the sake of public consumption, and I can't answer it in brief," Saddam replied. "This will never shake one hair of my head."

"You are before Saddam Hussein, president of Iraq. I am the president of Iraq according to the will of the Iraqis and I am still the president up to this moment," he said. Abdel-Rahman entered a "not guilty" plea on Saddam's behalf.



PHOTO: AFP

Daughter of India's ruling Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka (C), leaves the Parliament House after she attended the oath-taking ceremony of her mother in New Delhi yesterday. India's ruling Congress Party chief Sonia Gandhi returned triumphantly to parliament after a massive victory in a by-election.

## Nepal puts off move to check king's powers

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's seven mainstream parties put off a plan yesterday to table a landmark resolution in parliament to curtail the powers of the king, including taking away his control of the army.

The proclamation would now be tabled after an expansion of the cabinet and a debate there, political party leaders said after a three-hour meeting.

"The cabinet is not complete yet. By Tuesday or Wednesday it will be expanded and the expanded cabinet will give a final shape to the draft and it will be presented to parliament," said Madhav Kumar Nepal, general-secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (UML).

Cutting the king's powers was a key demand of pro-democracy protesters during weeks of demonstrations last month, which led to King Gyanendra reinstating parliament and handing the administration to a multi-party government.

The proclamation is expected to strip the king of his title of supreme commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and give control of the army

to parliament. The administration would no longer be known as "His Majesty's Government" and the king's key advisory body, the Raj Parishad or privy council, is likely to be abolished.

Besides, the draft aims to tax the king's income and property and allow his actions to be challenged in court.

King Gyanendra came into direct conflict with political parties after he sacked the government and assumed power in February 2005 saying the parties had failed to tackle a Maoist revolt.

The Maoists have been fighting a bloody war against the king for more than a decade in which over 13,000 people have been killed.

New Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala has matched a rebel ceasefire which the king had earlier rejected and invited the Maoists for talks.

The parties and the Maoists have agreed to hold elections to an assembly to draft a new constitution and decide the future of the monarchy. But no dates have been set for the vote.

## Merapi volcano erupts with gas and ash

REUTERS, Mount Merapi

Indonesia's Mount Merapi volcano erupted with clouds of hot gas and rained ash on surrounding areas on Monday, sending some nearby villagers who had been reluctant to leave scurrying for safety.

Gray ash covered crop fields and hundreds of rooftops in the area of Ketep, 10km from the base of the mountain, and many houses appeared deserted after residents evacuated.

Not everyone was gone. Some people cleaned ash off their houses and others opened shops, while commercial mini-buses continued to run. As ash rained down on villages around the mountain in the early morning hours, schoolchildren in uniform had hurried to class, covering their noses and mouths.

The mountain "has exploded already," the head of the Merapi section at the Centre of Volcanological Research and Technology in Yogyakarta told Reuters.

## CIVILIAN MASSACRE Lankan govt trades charges with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government traded charges with Tiger rebels yesterday over the killing of 13 Tamil civilians at the weekend, amid escalating violence in the restive northern region.

Another bomb went off in the northern peninsula of Jaffna on Monday but there were no casualties, military officials said. Security had been stepped up in the area following the weekend bloodshed.

The government said it "strongly condemned" the Saturday night murder of Tamils in the navy-controlled islet of Kayts and pointed a finger at the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"Minister Keheliya Rambukwella, spokesman on security matters, said the ruthless killing of Tamil civilians could very well be a part of the LTTE strategy to divert international opinion," a government statement said.

However, the LTTE blamed the navy for killing the civilians in an area where it said the guerrillas had no access.

"The slaughter of these civilians is seen by the local people as a punishment and a warning to others for not yielding to the demand of the Sri Lankan navy," an LTTE statement said.

"They are executions to cover down the civilians."

The separatists said terrorised local residents had taken refuge in churches.

A four-month-old baby and a four-year-old child were gunned down while they slept with their parents, both of whom were also shot dead.

Nine of the victims died in one house where people had gathered for the night fearing attacks from "paramilitary" or rival Tamil groups supported by the security forces, the LTTE said, releasing gruesome pictures of the corpses.

## Iranian forces kill 10 Sunni militants after roadside killing

AFP, Tehran

Iranian security forces have killed 10 suspected hardline Sunni militants following the roadside murders of a dozen civilians in the restive southeast of the county, state television said Monday.

Late Saturday's execution-style murders, on a main road between the cities of Bam and Kerman, were claimed by a shadowy group called Jundullah ('Army of God'). The group is believed to be based across the border in Afghanistan.

"At least 10 members of those who were responsible for the senseless killing of our citizens on the Bam-Kerman road were killed by local forces," Iran's national police chief, Esmaeel Ahmadi-Moghadam, was quoted as saying.

He said the fugitives were trying to flee eastwards and leave Iran,

"but we closed off all of their escape routes," adding that police, members of the elite Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij militia were hunting the group.

Official media said the victims of the fugitives were shot in cold blood on Saturday evening on the side of a highway near Bam -- just over 200km west of where the borders of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan meet.

The crime has shocked Iran -- which generally enjoys good internal security -- with state television showing the corpses of the victims tied up and dumped in a trench.

Only a young boy was spared, but he was reported to be severely traumatised after being tied to a post and forced to watch the shootings.

## Sonia returns to parliament

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The ruling Congress Party chief Sonia Gandhi yesterday took oath as a member of the Lok Sabha, marking her return to the parliament one and half months after she had quit it in the wake of row over office of profit.

Clad in a navy blue saree with maroon border, 59-year-old Sonia took oath in Hindi amid cheer by thumping of desks by treasury bench members.

The Leader of the Opposition L K Advani and senior BJP leader Vijay Kumar Malhotra greeted Sonia who comes back to the House after registering a landslide win in parliamentary by-election in Rae Bareilly constituency, the traditional bastion of Nehru-Gandhi family.

As Sonia took oath, her daughter Priyanka, who was her election agent in Rae Bareilly polls, and her son Rahul, who was the Congress chief's campaign manager, watched the proceedings. Priyanka's husband Robert Vadra was also present.

## Iraqi rebels down US helicopter: 2 GIs die

AP, Baghdad

Insurgents shot down a US helicopter south of Baghdad and killed two soldiers, the US military said yesterday.

Their deaths, along with those of three other soldiers and two Marines, brought the weekend toll to seven US service members.

Elsewhere, eight Iraqis were killed, including four teachers on their way to school and a civilian struck by a roadside bomb that hit an oil tanker, sending black smoke billowing over central Baghdad.

In southern Iraq, militants fired more than 30 mortar rounds at a British military camp, wounding four soldiers.

The helicopter attack occurred Sunday during fighting in Youssifiyah, 12 miles south of the Iraqi capital, the military said in a brief statement.

It was the second helicopter shot down in the past six weeks over that

area, known as the "Triangle of Death" as the scene of a large number of insurgent attacks. An Apache helicopter went down there on April 1.

The two US Marines died Sunday during unspecified "enemy action" in Anbar Province, the area of western Iraq that is the heart of the Sunni-led insurgency, the US command said. Two US Army soldiers also died Sunday in a roadside bombing in Baghdad.

The six fatalities raised to at least 2,443 the number of US military personnel who have died since the Iraq war began in 2003, according to a count by The Associated Press. Another US soldier was killed by a roadside bomb in Baghdad on Saturday.

The mortar barrage came at about 4:30 a.m. Monday at Camp Abu Naji in Amarah, 180 miles southeast of Baghdad, said British spokeswoman Capt. Kelly Goodall.

## 23 more killed in Sao Paulo gang attacks

AFP, AP, Sao Paulo

Another night of gang attacks against Brazilian police and civilians in Sao Paulo left 23 more people dead last morning, bringing the three-day toll to 78, local CBN radio said citing police sources.

The weekend onslaught by the powerful "First Capital Command", the biggest criminal gang in the southeastern Brazilian state, has left several dozen police officers dead.

The prison-based gang also launched rebellions in more than 50 jails and penitentiaries, taking numerous hostages.

On Sunday Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva offered Sao Paulo Governor Claudio Lembo federal help to restore order, but Lembo declined the assistance, according to a CBN radio report.

The gang violence was apparently sparked in reaction to the transfer of 765 gang members from their current prisons to higher-security facilities.

Meanwhile, another 33 related prison rebellions also broke out on Sunday, bringing the number of penitentiary revolts across Sao Paulo state to 51 at the peak of the two-day uprising more than one-third of Brazil's 144 prisons. By late Sunday, rebellions continued at 41 prisons, and inmates were holding 229 prison guards hostage.

The inmates have not made any demands nor have they harmed any

of their hostages, said Jorge de Souza a spokesman for the Sao Paulo Prison Affairs Department.

He said visiting relatives were inside several of the prisons but "we don't consider them hostages because they are there to show solidarity with their jailed relatives."

Enio Lucciola, spokesman for the Sao Paulo State Public Safety Department said the attacks and prison rebellions, planned by the First Capital Command, known by its Portuguese initials PCC, "were the most vicious and deadliest attacks on public security forces that have ever taken place in Brazil."

The attacks were in response to the transfer of eight imprisoned PCC leaders, a practice authorities use to sever prisoners' ties to gang members outside prison.

Lucciola said authorities were prepared for some kind of PCC attack after the transfer "but we never imagined it would be so big or ferocious."

Late Sunday evening, the Folha de Sao Paulo newspaper's Web site reported the death toll had risen to 55 and that at least 10 public buses had been burned by bandits in the city of Sao Paulo. Television images showed the buses engulfed in flames, while Folha Online said passengers were ordered out of the vehicles before bandits set them ablaze.