

Palestinian leadership denies rift over premier

Israel PM against large Gaza operation

AFP, Gaza City

The Palestinian Authority denied yesterday that president Mahmud Abbas had rejected Hamas's candidate to head a promised national unity cabinet as reported by a website close to the Islamist movement.

"I categorically deny that president Abbas has rejected any of the candidates put forward by Hamas, including Mohammed Shubair," Palestinian Authority spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

Quoting "informed sources", a website close to Hamas earlier reported that Abbas was opposed to Shubair after the United States, Israel and "certain Arab parties" rejected the independent academic

as "too close" to the Islamists.

Abbas made his position clear to Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, head of the current Hamas government, during talks in Gaza City late on Thursday, the Palestinian Information Centre said.

The 60-year-old Shubair, a clinical biologist and former president of the Islamic University in Gaza City, is considered close to Hamas but never joined the party that thrashed Abbas's secular Fatah party in a January election.

Harangued by journalists while leaving a Gaza City mosque following the main weekly Muslim prayers, Haniya refused to comment, other than calling his talks with Abbas late Thursday "good and positive".

"The joint Hamas-Fatah committee will meet again today to continue consultations on the unity government," the premier added.

One Palestinian official who refused to give his name, however, earlier called Thursday's talks between Abbas and Haniya "unsuccessful".

Sources quoted by the Palestinian Information Centre accused Fatah elements of trying to use "all means" to "sabotage" efforts to form a unity government.

Palestinians are trying to form a unity administration to end a crippling Western aid freeze imposed after the Hamas-led government took power in March refusing to renounce violence or recognize Israel and past peace deals.

Earlier Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has said he is opposed to a large Gaza offensive in retaliation for Palestinian rocket attacks, which nearly five months of operations have already failed to stop.

"We should remember that this is not a war with a 'quick fix' solution," Olmert told reporters on his way home from the United States.

"Those who repeatedly mention 'Defensive Shield' (a huge 2002 operation in the West Bank) as an example, and demand that a similar operation be carried out in the Gaza Strip, must remember that terrorism has never ended, and terrorism continues in the West Bank to this day," he added.



A young Palestinian boy watches people inspecting a damaged house destroyed by an overnight Israeli airstrike on the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Lahia town yesterday.

Martial law 'on its way out' within days, says Thai FM

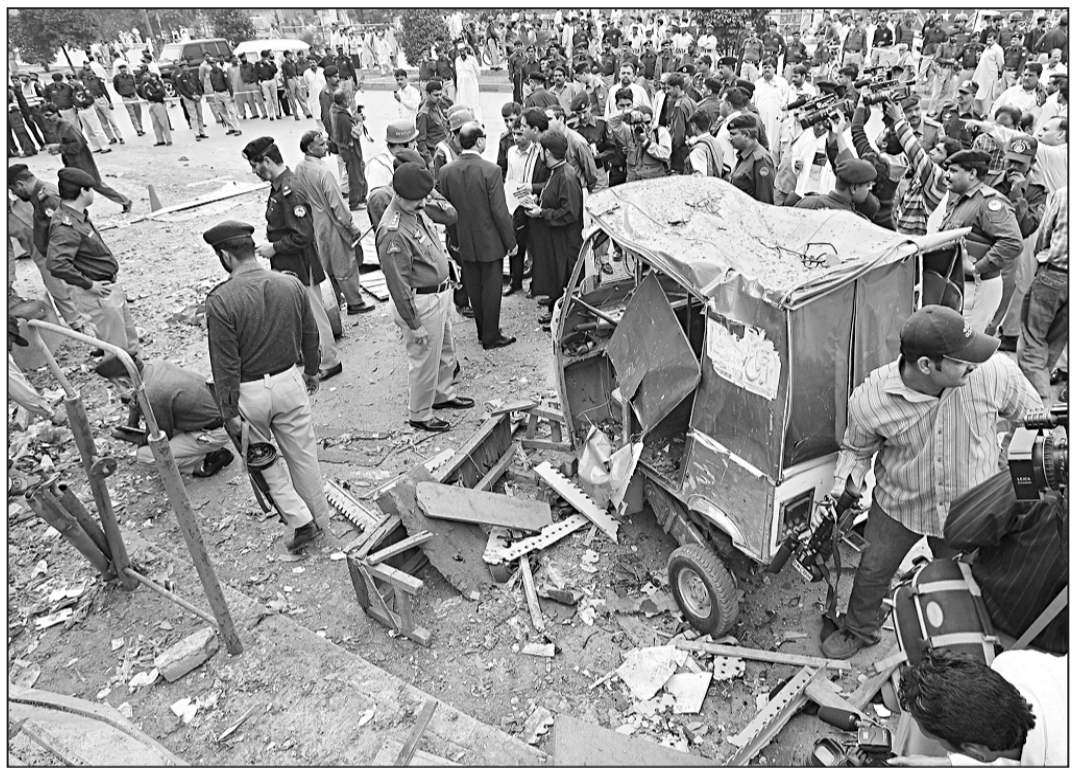
AFP, Hanoi

Thai Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram said yesterday that martial law, imposed after the kingdom's bloodless September 19 coup, was "on the way out" and could be lifted within days.

"Let me talk about this month as being a possible goal to achieve," Nitya said of lifting martial law, including restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly. "I think it is a matter of days rather than weeks."

The kingdom's military-installed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont arrives in the Vietnamese capital Hanoi Friday for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit, under the shadow of martial law and the recent putsch.

"People are concerned about what is happening in Thailand," Nitya told AFP of his meetings with fellow Apec foreign ministers in Hanoi.



Pakistani police officials examine a blast site after a bomb explosion in Lahore yesterday. The powerful bomb exploded near a police station in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore, killing at least two civilians and wounding more than a dozen.

Pakistan still aiding militants, says India

REUTERS, New Delhi

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee said the government had "reasonable" evidence of Pakistani state backing for Islamist militants who organise attacks in India, two days after the nations finalised a joint anti-terrorism panel.

Mukherjee told NDTV in an interview aired on Friday that New Delhi had information pointing to the involvement of Pakistan's government in recent violence in India.

"So, therefore, we do feel that we have reasonable evidence, good evidence that there has been some involvement of some of the (Pakistani state) organisations," Mukherjee said.

Mukherjee's comments came after the top foreign ministry officials from the two countries met in New Delhi this week for their first formal talks in nearly a year.

India pressed Pakistan on what it

says is the involvement of Pakistani militant groups in recent attacks in Indian cities, which have left more than 200 people dead.

But in a move seen as a step forward in their cautious peace process, the two nuclear rivals put the final touches to a panel to tackle terrorism through the sharing of information.

Peace moves, which began in January 2004, were stalled by deadly train bombings in Mumbai in July which some Indian officials have said were executed by Pakistani militant groups with the help of disaffected Indian Muslims, and plotted by Islamabad's military spy agency, the ISI.

In October, India's National Security Adviser MK Narayanan said Delhi had good but not clinching evidence against the ISI.

Mukherjee said India continues to harbour suspicions about the role of Pakistani government agencies.

"I do not know whether any country of the world will say that I have sanctioned a terrorist activity ... no state can declare that terrorism is the accepted policy of the state," he told NDTV.

New Delhi has long accused Pakistani of supporting Muslim rebels fighting Indian rule in disputed Kashmir, while Islamabad says it is doing all it can to curb cross-border infiltration by Pakistan-based militants.

Pakistani officials say New Delhi is too quick to blame Pakistan without evidence when an attack takes place in India, hurrying the delicate peace process.

Both countries came to the brink of war in the summer of 2002 after New Delhi blamed Pakistani militants for an attack on its parliament in December, 2001.

50 people killed in Afghanistan floods

AFP, Herat

Flash floods caused by heavy rains have killed nearly 50 people in western Afghanistan with 60 more missing, the Afghan health ministry said yesterday.

Forty-seven bodies had been recovered after floods hit the western province of Badghis on Thursday, health ministry official Ahmad Shah Shokohmand told AFP, citing information forwarded by provincial health authorities.

The bodies were being kept in a mosque in Balamurghab, a town about 30km from the border with Turkmenistan, Shokohmand said.

The governor of Badghis, Mohammad Nasim Tokhi, had said earlier that at least 13 people, including children, had drowned while nearly 100 more were missing.

The floods washed away villages along the Murghab River, he said, warning that thousands of people were still in danger.

18 Tigers killed in fresh skirmishes

AFP, REUTERS, Colombo/ Geneva

Sri Lankan troops killed at least 18 Tamil Tiger guerrillas in three separate confrontations in a restive eastern province, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The clashes were in the district of Batticaloa on Thursday, the ministry said.

"Due to the successful retaliation, troops confirmed that 18 Tigers were killed," the ministry statement said. "Troops were also able to recover a stock of arms, ammunition and war-like materials."

It did not say if government troops suffered any casualties.

The latest clashes came as a British envoy left Sri Lanka after a three-day visit aimed at reviving the island's stalled peace bid. British member of parliament Paul Murphy is expected brief Prime Minister Tony Blair on the outcome of his visit, diplomats said.

The two sides have been trading long-range fire in northern and eastern regions in recent weeks,

further damaging a truce agreed to in February 2002.

An upsurge in fighting in the past year in the island's separatist conflict has claimed more than 3,300 lives.

Meanwhile, uprooted by fighting, 130,000 people in Sri Lanka have been cut off from international assistance and are vulnerable to serious human rights abuses, a Norwegian aid group said on Thursday.

Renewed conflict in the island's north and east between the government and Tamil Tiger (LTTE) rebels has displaced about 200,000 people in all, the Norwegian Refugee Council said.

"The government as well as the LTTE have severely restricted access to conflict areas under their control, thus leaving ... displaced people and other affected populations without adequate international protection and humanitarian assistance," the aid group said in a report.

British universities get guidelines to thwart Islamists

AFP, London

Britain issued new guidelines to universities yesterday on how to prevent Islamist radicals from recruiting students and preaching hatred on campus, London's latest bid to clamp down on militants.

The rules from Higher Education Minister Bill Rammell advise how staff should react if they suspect groups are circulating extremist literature to students or fear radical speakers are coming to campus.

"The guidance provides a recognition -- that I believe must be faced squarely -- that violent extremism in the name of Islam is a real, credible and sustained threat to the UK," Rammell told journalists.

"There is evidence of serious, but not widespread Islamist extremist activity in higher education institutions," he added.

Britain is battling to clamp down on Islamist extremists who authorities fear might be planning new attacks following July 2005 suicide bombings in London in which 56 died, including the four bombers.



Residents look at a building on fire after pro-democracy protesters loot and torch businesses in the Tongan capital Nuku'Alofa yesterday. Six people were killed in the worst ever civil unrest in the tiny Pacific kingdom of Tonga, officials said as a violent pro-democracy rampage sparked political change at a deadly cost.

Sonia outlines India's future

AFP, New Delhi

Ruling Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi yesterday outlined her vision of India's future, not as a traditional military superpower, but as a force for world peace and prosperity.

Sonia Gandhi said she felt "uneasy" with the superpower label increasingly attached to India and the "hegemony ... power politics, military might, conflict" associated with it.

"That's not what we have been all about through the centuries and it certainly is not what I would like India to become," she told a Hindustan Times conference under the banner "India: The next global superpower".

The head of the United Progressive Alliance coalition that runs India recalled how India's independence hero Mahatma Gandhi, "mocked as a half-naked fakir from India by the British, took on the superpower of the day through the mere force of his values and ideas."

"Why should we think of ourselves as a global superpower? Why not instead work towards becoming a global power for peace, prosperity and progress?" said Gandhi, the widow of assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.



"We should not get too obsessed with acquiring superpower status. More and more successes will come our way, they are bound to come our way. They will surely give us the global role that we seek and that we are perfectly equipped to fulfil."

"But we must also concentrate on the basics that still elude lakhs and lakhs (hundreds and hundreds of thousands) of our less privileged and less advantaged countrymen and women."

If India was to be a superpower, it would be "in the true Indian sense", Sonia added.

She said she was "proud" of India's economic performance, with Gross Domestic Product growing at more than eight percent a year.

But the Congress leader underlined the "painful contrasts" in a land of "dazzling prosperity ... and dehumanising poverty."

"We have large sections of our society that have yet to enjoy even the basics of a decent quality of life," she said.

"The successes that we have recorded must not lead to false illusions of grandeur and power ... India's standing in the world will be determined by the extent to which the weaker sections of our society lead a life of security and dignity."

And she warned that if "tangible benefits do not improve soon enough to our people from the changes that are occurring, they will reject our policies."

In a country of "such deprivation", Sonia also called for "a little less conspicuous consumption" among the wealthy and "those of us in public life."

Since India liberalised its economy from 1991, some of the growing numbers of rich have adopted a very public millionaire's lifestyle.

Sonia noted that fewer than 80,000 Indians out of a population of 1.1 billion declared annual income of more than 800,000 rupees (18,000 dollars).

Red Cross seeks to cut Asia's disaster toll

AFP, Singapore

Tsunamis, typhoons, landslides, earthquakes -- Asia is the world's most disaster-prone region and from Monday Red Cross and Red Crescent societies will gather here to try to reduce the death toll.

"The four-day meeting in Singapore... will examine ways to cut down on the number of deaths and injuries from disasters and disease in Asia Pacific and the Middle East, while harnessing the power of communities to become more resilient and better prepared for the next time disaster strikes," the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said in a statement.

The meeting of the organisation's societies from the region and the Middle East will also set the Red Cross-Red Crescent humanitarian agenda for the next four years, it said.

Winston Choo, chairman of the Singapore Red Cross, said the gathering allows societies in the region to learn from experiences in responding to disasters "and put forward a regional strategy" to protect vulnerable citizens and improve their lives.

"This year alone, 15 Asian

nations faced severe flooding, landslides and typhoons," Choo said.

Among the topics under discussion will be the humanitarian repercussions of this year's war between Israel and the Hezbollah Shia militia in Lebanon, stopping the spread of infectious diseases, and assistance for vulnerable people in North Korea, the Federation statement said.

"Since 1995, Asia has consistently ranked as the continent most frequently hit by natural catastrophes, accounting for 60 percent of the world's disasters and 78 percent of global disaster-related deaths," it said.

In December 2004, more than 220,000 people died when a tsunami struck Indonesia and other nations around the Indian Ocean, in one of the deadliest natural disasters ever.

Another 74,000 people died and 3.5 million were left homeless from a massive South Asian earthquake in October 2005.

Early this year, an estimated 1,400 people were feared dead when a landslide unleashed a sea of mud that buried a farming village on the Philippines island of Leyte.

EU appeals for end to Nepali violence

AFP, Kathmandu

A senior European Union diplomat yesterday appealed for an end to political violence in Nepal and promised the EU was ready to support a peace deal between the government and Maoist rebels.

"The Nepalese people far too long have lived in an atmosphere of fear," said Pekka Metso, a foreign ministry Asia director for Finland, which holds the EU presidency.

"It is important that impunity should end, law and order be maintained and that civilians live without fear. There can be no place in today's Nepal for abductions, extortion and political violence," he said.

The impoverished Himalayan nation's Maoist insurgents and multi-party government have reached a peace deal that will see the rebels enter the political mainstream in return for placing their army and weapons under United Nations supervision.

The EU is "ready to give all possible support" to the process, Metso said.

A European Commission official also said the EU could provide election monitors for polls, due in

June 2007, to elect a body to rewrite Nepal's constitution.

"We are looking very seriously at things like help with voter education and voter registrations and possibly further down the road, election observation," said James Moran, the European Commission's director for Asia.

During their three-day visit, the EU delegation met officials including Nepal's prime minister and rebel and government negotiators.

Nepal's Maoists and government had been slated to sign the formal peace accord Thursday, but it was delayed as the two sides completed last-minute negotiations.

At least 12,500 people have been killed in the Maoist's decade-long "People's War". The current peace effort is the third time that the two sides have tried to hammer out a deal.

Meanwhile, Nepal's Maoist rebels will remain on the United States' list of foreign terrorist organisations until they give up their weapons, a visiting senior US diplomat said Thursday.

15 killed in Uttar Pradesh as families feud over path

REUTERS, Lucknow

Fifteen people were killed in Uttar Pradesh on Friday as two families fought a pitched battle over the right of passage on a village path, police said.

Eight of the dead were innocent villagers, killed trying to stop members of the feuding families -- armed with guns, axes and iron rods -- from attacking each other in Sitapur district, 150 km north of Lucknow.

Three children and two women were among the dead.

The feud between the two large families dates back to the 1990s, one police officer said.

Legendary Nobel economist Milton Friedman dies

AFP, San Francisco

Top US officials mourned yesterday the death of Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman, whose ideas helped power a conservative policy revolution in the 1980s.

Friedman died of heart failure Thursday at the age of 94 in San Francisco, California, near Stanford University where he taught most recently, friends and associates said.

Friedman won the Nobel prize for economics in 1976 and his thinking greatly influenced former US president Ronald Reagan and ex-British prime minister Margaret Thatcher.