

AU, UN ink deal on first phase of 'hybrid' Darfur peace force

AFP, Addis Ababa

The African Union and United Nations have agreed on the first phase of transforming the cash-strapped AU peace mission in Sudan's Darfur region into a "hybrid" AU-UN force, officials said Sunday.

Amid lingering questions over Khartoum's readiness to accept UN participation in a joint peacekeeping operation, UN and AU officials signed a memorandum of understanding here Saturday for phase one of the plan, they said.

The agreement formalizes the provision by the world body to the African Union force known as AMIS of a so-called "Light Support Package" of logistics and communications to assist in their patrols in the troubled Darfur region.

## Israel, Palestinians agree on Gaza ceasefire

Rocket attacks pose a threat to fledgling truce

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel ordered restraint yesterday after Palestinian militants fired a salvo of rockets at the Jewish state, violating a fledgling ceasefire less than two hours after it took effect in the Gaza Strip.

The rocket strike threatened the ceasefire agreement that came into effect at dawn and in which militants promised to halt rocket attacks in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal from the impoverished coastal territory.

The Israeli army completed its withdrawal from Gaza shortly after dawn, a military spokeswoman said.

The armed wings of the ruling Islamist Hamas movement and the

radical Islamic Jihad, both of which signed on to the ceasefire accord, each claimed responsibility for the rocket attacks which hit the Israeli town of Sderot shortly before 8:00 am (0600 GMT), causing no casualties.

The attacks, which were quickly condemned by both the Hamas-led government and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, marked an inauspicious start to the ceasefire, which came into play at 6:00 am (0400 GMT).

But Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, vowing restraint and patience in the coming days, said he had ordered the army not to respond to the attacks.

"We will show restraint and patience in order to give the

ceasefire a chance," said Olmert, speaking at the inauguration of a school in the Bedouin town of Rahat in southern Israel.

"I took into account the possibility that ceasefires do not materialize immediately to their fullest extent without any violations," he added. "There are violations on the Palestinian side, but I instructed the security establishment not to respond."

Olmert said he was optimistic the ceasefire would soon be extended to include the West Bank.

Abbas condemned the rocket attacks and ordered Palestinian security forces to deploy across the northern Gaza Strip to prevent further violations of the ceasefire,

according to senior Palestinian security officials in Gaza.

Palestinian prime minister and Hamas leader Ismail Haniya, meanwhile, insisted the ceasefire agreement stood and said the circumstances surrounding the morning's rocket strikes were being reviewed.

"There is a renewed commitment to the (ceasefire) agreement," Haniya told reporters in Gaza City after speaking with faction leaders.

Contradicting his reassurances, however, Islamic Jihad renounced the ceasefire after Israel launched fresh operations in the West Bank overnight, a spokesman for the group's armed wing Suraya al-Quds told AFP.



President of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapakse (L) is watched by Indian Minister of Panchayati Raj, Youth Affairs & Sports, Development of North Eastern Region Mani Shanker Aiyer as he waves after arriving in New Delhi Saturday. Rajapakse is on a five-day official visit to India.

## Pakistan sees progress in glacier talks

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan's foreign minister said Saturday progress had been made in talks with India towards demilitarisation of Kashmir's disputed Siachen glacier, but political will was needed to clinch a final deal.

Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, said Pakistan's position on the Siachen glacier was clear.

"We understand that there has been a lot of progress. It requires some meetings and given the

political will, it should be resolved," he said.

Kasuri will hold informal talks with Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee over lunch on Monday, the first meeting between the foreign ministers of the rivals in more than a year.

"I had said that given the political will, it can be resolved in a few weeks or few days," he told reporters on his arrival in New Delhi, according to the Press Trust of India news agency.

Kasuri was referring to similar comments made earlier this month in an interview with India's NDTV news channel, which Indian newspapers reported had been dismissed by the Indian foreign ministry.

Thousands of Indian and Pakistani soldiers stand eyeball to eyeball atop the Siachen glacier, which overlooks China and India, and where the icy temperatures, altitude and accidents have claimed more lives than enemy fire.

## Maoists, Nepali govt fail to finalise interim constitution

REUTERS, Kathmandu

A peace process aimed at ending Nepal's decade-old Maoist insurgency suffered a setback on Sunday when government and rebels failed to finalise an interim constitution and parliament as agreed in a landmark pact.

Earlier this month, the two sides agreed to set up an interim constitution and form a provisional parliament on Nov 26. They also agreed

to set up an interim cabinet to allow the rebels to join the mainstream government on Dec 1.

But both parties now say they are running behind their ambitious timetable, which was agreed on Nov 8.

"We suspect there could be some moves to delay the entire peace process," senior Maoist leader Dinanath Sharma, a rebel negotiator, told Reuters.

## Lanka seeks border patrols with India

AFP, New Delhi

The visiting Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse yesterday sounded out India on joint patrolling of their maritime border in a bid to halt smuggling and cross-border terrorism.

Rajapakse, who began a five-day working visit to India Sunday, told reporters he planned to talk to Indian leaders about strengthening patrols along the Palk Straits, the narrow strip of sea that divides the two nations.

"I will be explaining my position to

them, we want joint patrolling with India in the sea because not only arms are being smuggled into our country, but drugs are also coming," Rajapakse said.

"If Tigers get stronger, that will be also be a threat not only to Sri Lanka but also to the world," Rajapakse said after laying a foundation stone for the Indo-Sri Lanka Human Rights Centre here.

Asked whether he would open negotiations with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Rajapakse said he had been strongly advocating talks from the day he

assumed power a year ago. Rajapakse's administration had two rounds of talks which ended in failure, but both the Tigers and his government have vowed to uphold a Norwegian-arranged 2002 truce that is holding only on paper.

LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, who marks his 52nd birthday Sunday, is set to make a policy statement at the end of his "heroes' week" celebrations Monday commemorating some 18,742 rebels killed while battling troops.

## Evict occupiers

Ahmadinejad to ME, Afghans

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called Sunday for the peoples of the Middle East and Afghanistan to join forces in driving out foreign occupiers.

"The Iraqi, Lebanese, Afghan and Palestinian people must be helped. By helping each other, we can expel the occupiers," Ahmadinejad said in a speech to the Islamic volunteer Basij militia, broadcast on state television.

"The people of the area can guarantee security. The presence from foreigners causes conflict," he

added.

Iran is an ally of the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government, the Palestinian government run by the Islamist movement Hamas, and of the powerful Shiite group Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Tehran had repeatedly called for the withdrawal of US forces from its neighbours Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Just look at Iraq," Ahmadinejad said in the speech near the shrine of the Islamic republic's founder, the late Ayatollah Khomeini. "Since the corrupt foreigners arrived in Iraq, there has been nothing but corruption and death."

## Blasts rock Baghdad despite curfew

AFP, Baghdad

A series of explosions rocked the Iraqi capital yesterday even as fearful civilians kept off the streets on the third day of a curfew imposed to rein in bloodletting that has killed hundreds.

Throughout the night, Baghdad rang with the sounds of mortars and occasional bursts of gunfire as rival neighbourhoods exchanged salvos of shells.

In the mixed Sunni-Shia village of Haswa just south of the capital, a car bomb ripped through a popular market killing eight people and wounding 28 others, security officials said.

The agricultural belt south of the capital, inhabited by Shia villagers

and Sunni tribes, has become notorious for sectarian battles that have engulfed the areas surrounding Baghdad.

Even as the capital was locked down for the third straight day, blasts reverberated through the deathly silence as most civilians stayed home.

The authorities have said the curfew imposed on Thursday after the deadliest bomb attacks in Iraq since the US-led invasion of 2003 would not be lifted before Monday morning.

But Bassim Ridha, advisor to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, said that limited movement for government and military vehicles would be permitted from Sunday.



Iranian lawyer and Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi (C) holds a banner showing a photograph of Indian Nobel Peace Prize 2005 nominee, from Chanu Sharmila as she leaves a ward of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi yesterday. The lawyer, in India to promote women's rights, said Saturday nations with nuclear capabilities should spend money to stop exploitation of women instead of making bombs.