

Abbas, Rice call for ME truce

AFP, Jericho

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas united yesterday in calling for a fledgling Middle East truce to be extended into a comprehensive ceasefire.

Following West Bank talks ahead of a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem, Washington's top diplomat praised the moderate Palestinian leader for his efforts in bringing about a five-day truce in Gaza.

"Thank you also for the efforts you have made to bring about the ceasefire that is now in effect in Gaza and that we hope will be consolidated so that it can be extended because we would hope in time for a comprehensive ceasefire," Rice told a joint news conference with Abbas in Jericho.

Under the terms of the ceasefire, which came into effect on Sunday in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian armed groups agreed to halt rocket fire against the Jewish state in

exchange for an Israeli troop withdrawal from the territory.

"We talked about the truce that has taken effect in the Gaza Strip and we hope it will be extended to the West Bank," the Palestinian leader said.

The truce, which has largely held, aims to halt five months of fighting between Israelis and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip which has left some 400 Palestinians and three Israeli soldiers dead in the territory.

Rice heaped praise on the moderate Abbas for what she called his "extraordinary efforts" in trying to create a Palestinian unity government with radical Islamists Hamas that Abbas declared had reached a "dead end".

"She said they had discussed 'how we can intensify our efforts to support our commitment towards progress on a two-state solution.'"

"The creation of a viable, independent, democratic Palestinian state that can live side-by-side in peace with Israel would be not just a remarkable achievement but a just

achievement," Rice declared.

The Abbas-Rice talks came just hours after US President George W. Bush reiterated his support for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and gave a ringing endorsement of Abbas, whom he said enjoyed the world's support.

"There is no question that if we were able to settle the Palestinian-Israeli issue it would help bring more peace to the Middle East and therefore our government is focused on helping develop a two-state solution," Bush told a news conference in Amman after crisis talks with the Iraqi prime minister.

"Abu Mazen (Abbas), who I believe wants there to be a Palestinian state living side by side with a peace in Israel, deserves the support of the world and he deserves support in peeling his government away from those who do not recognise Israel's right to exist," he said, alluding to radicals Hamas.

Washington has insisted the key to breaking Israeli-Palestinian stalemate lies with efforts by Abbas to sideline the Islamist group, which

has controlled the Palestinian government since winning elections early this year.

The European Union, Israel and the United States have imposed a devastating aid boycott on the government because Hamas has refused international demands to renounce violence or recognise Israel's right to exist.

Abbas has been trying for months to negotiate a national unity government with the backing of Hamas, but he told the Jericho news conference that the talks had "unfortunately reached a dead end".

"This is very painful for us because we know how badly the people have been suffering over the last nine months," he said.

During her talks with Olmert, Rice is expected to ask him to elaborate on a speech he made Monday offering a series of concessions to the Palestinians if the ceasefire holds, a new Palestinian government accepts international conditions and a captured Israeli soldier is released.



Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas sits across the table with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (R) during a meeting in the Palestinian West Bank oasis town of Jericho yesterday. Rice arrived from Jordan and swept into a meeting with the moderate Palestinian leader and his senior aides ahead of scheduled talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem later.

3 die as Dalits riot in Maharashtra

AFP, Mumbai

At least three people died and dozens were hurt Thursday as low-caste Hindus rioted in the western Indian state of Maharashtra over the vandalism of a statue of their leader, police said. A mob representing a political faction of what are locally referred to as Dalits (Oppressed) targeted buildings and vehicles to protest the alleged vandalism several days ago of a statue of their late leader, BR Ambedkar, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

"We have arrested dozens of these rioters across the state," Maharashtra police chief PS Pasricha said, confirming three deaths but not the cause.

He also said there was sporadic street violence Thursday in Mumbai, the country's financial capital, related to the incident.

Violence was also witnessed in several other towns in Maharashtra as protesters hurled stones and burned buses and other transport, police said.



Indian HIV positive children greet former US President Bill Clinton (C) as chairperson of India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government Sonia Gandhi (R), French Minister of External Affairs Philippe Douste-Blazy (2-L) and Indian Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss (L) look on during the launch of the National Paediatric HIV/AIDS Initiative at Lady Hardinge Medical College in New Delhi yesterday. Clinton said in India his foundation had negotiated agreements to lower the price of HIV-AIDS treatment for children in poor countries.

Pakistan denies urging Nato to accept Taliban

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday rejected a "distorted" British media report that its foreign minister was urging Nato countries to accept the Taliban and set up a new coalition government in Kabul.

The Daily Telegraph said on Wednesday that the minister, Khurshid Kasuri, had told his counterparts in some Nato countries at private briefings that the Taliban are winning the war in Afghanistan and Nato is bound to fail.

"The Foreign Minister's comments have been distorted and misrepresented," the Pakistani foreign ministry said in a statement.

"The Foreign Minister did not say that the Taliban were winning the war in Afghanistan and Nato was bound to fail nor has he advised any country against sending more troops," the statement said.

Lanka assures India of power sharing with Tamils

REUTERS, New Delhi

Sri Lanka's president assured giant neighbour India on Wednesday that he was pushing for a power-sharing deal with the Tamil Tigers to help bring peace to the island despite signs of an escalating civil war.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's attempt to allay New Delhi's concerns over the worsening ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka came during talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the last day of a five-day visit to India.

"We have conveyed our longstanding position on the need for a negotiating political settlement that is acceptable to all sections of Sri Lankan society," foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Samra told reporters.

"In response, the Sri Lankan president has explained the steps

that he is taking through the all-party representatives committee for arriving at a devolution package which could then lead to a political settlement of the ethnic problem," he said.

Rajapakse's government has been seeking to forge unity in the Sinhala-majority south of the island to push for peace with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and end a civil war that has killed more than 67,000 people since 1983.

About 3,000 of those deaths have come this year alone as a rash of military clashes, aerial bombings and ambushes have left a 2002 truce in tatters.

Last month, Sri Lanka's ruling and main opposition parties signed a pact that envisaged arriving at a joint approach to dealing with the rebels politically.

But increased violence and failed peace talks with the Tigers in Geneva have undermined their push for peace.

Those efforts suffered a fresh blow this week when LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran said he had no option but to return to war to seek an independent ethnic homeland.

The Indian government has been facing protests and pressure from its own Tamil population in the south of the country to do more for the mainly Hindu Tamils in neighbouring Sri Lanka.

But New Delhi has remained largely silent, wary of involvement in a messy conflict and mindful of a disastrous experience when it last got involved nearly two decades ago.

Cambodia vows to end arms flow to LTTE

REUTERS, Phnom Penh

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has promised to cut off the flow of weapons from his country to Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels, his spokesman said on Thursday.

"He asked Sri Lanka to trust Cambodia that no more weapons would enter Sri Lanka," Khieu Kanharith quoted Hun Sen as telling visiting Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranasinghe Wikremesinghe.

Hun Sen also promised to exchange intelligence with Colombo to help curb the flow, Khieu Kanharith, who attended the meeting, told reporters.

The Cambodian leader admitted for the first time last year that arms were smuggled out of the country, still emerging from two decades of war, to guerrillas in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Myanmar.

Bodies pile up in Iraq as Bush meets Maliki

AFP, Baghdad/amman

Baghdad's overflowing morgues welcomed another grim daily harvest of bullet-riddled corpses yesterday as Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki met US President George W. Bush and vowed to halt the violence.

Iraq security officials said they had recovered the bodies of 58 murder victims in Baghdad over the previous 24 hours -- a US spokeswoman confirmed 49 -- while a mass grave holding 28 corpses was found north of the city.

These latest victims of Iraq's vicious sectarian conflict formed a gloomy backdrop to a crisis meeting in neighbouring Jordan between Bush and Maliki, whose embattled unity government has been undermined by the bloodshed.

Bush took the opportunity to hail Maliki as a strong leader, denying reports that the White House was

losing confidence in its key ally, and both leaders vowed to bring the sectarian fighting to an end.

"He's the right guy for Iraq. We're going to help him, and it is in our interest to help him, for the sake of peace. He is a strong leader and wants a free and democratic Iraq to succeed," Bush told a joint news conference.

For his part, Maliki said he had won an agreement from Bush that he will be allowed to take control of Iraq's security forces more quickly than had been planned to allow him to fight the insurgency in his own way.

Currently the bulk of the fledgling Iraqi army comes under the day-to-day control of a US-led coalition, which also has 150,000 American troops.

"We have agreed and we were clear on the need to speed up the transfer of security responsibilities to the Iraqi forces," Maliki said.

Nevertheless, Bush explicitly ruled out setting a timetable for US forces to head home, a move which will anger Maliki's increasingly vocal opponents.

Six ministers and 30 lawmakers loyal to the radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr suspended the role in Maliki's coalition on Wednesday to protest that the meeting with "the criminal Bush" was taking place at all.

After the summit, one of the deputies said Sadr's bloc -- the largest in the 275-seat parliament -- was reaching out to other groups on both sides of the sectarian divide to build an anti-American alliance.

"We are endeavouring to form a national front inside parliament to oppose the occupation," Salih al-Agaili told AFP.

Palestinian problem the main ME issue

Jordan tells Bush

AFP, Amman

Jordan's King Abdullah II on Wednesday told US President George W. Bush that solving the Palestinian problem was the paramount issue facing the Middle East and examined with him the "dangerous" situation in Iraq, a court statement said.

During a meeting at the Raghadan palace, the king "urged President Bush to reactivate the peace process through helping the Palestinians and the Israelis resume negotiations", the statement said.

The king stressed that "the world realises now, more than ever, that any alternative to this would be a continuation of the cycle of violence in which both Israelis and Palestinians are the losers," the

statement said.

The decades-long conflict must be resolved through "international resolutions and an Arab peace initiative leading to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state side by side with Israel," the king said.

"This is the logical solution acceptable on the Arab and international levels," he said.

And solving the Palestinian crisis "will contribute to solving other problems in the region," he added.

For his part, Bush reiterated Washington's "commitment to a two-state vision" and said "the appropriate conditions must be found and all attempts aimed at obstructing the peace process ended," the palace said.



US President George W. Bush (R) speaks during a joint press conference with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki at the Four Seasons Hotel in Amman, Jordan yesterday. Bush praised Iraq's embattled premier as the "right guy" for the job and said US forces would stay in Iraq "to get the job done".

US unveils citizenship test focused on values

AFP, Washington

The US government yesterday unveils a new citizenship test that focuses more on American values and principles than on historical trivia.

The test, which will be piloted in 10 cities beginning next year, aims to ensure immigrants seeking to become American citizens can answer questions on the meaning of democracy or the Bill of Rights rather than about who wrote the Star Spangled Banner or the colours of the American flag.

"The intention is to make the citizenship test more meaningful, not more difficult," Shawn Saucier, a spokesman for the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) agency, told AFP.

"The current test does not gauge a person's adherence to the US Constitution or an immigrant's understanding of our civic values and what it means to be a US citizen."

Saucier said 140 questions will be tested on some 5,000 volunteers who can retake the regular test if they fail. The questions will eventually be narrowed down to 100 before the new test is fully implemented in 2008.

Among the new questions, Saucier said, are:

--Why does the US have three branches of government?

--Name two rights that are only

for US citizens.

--Name two cabinet level positions.

--Name one important idea found in the Declaration of Independence.

John Keely, of the Centre for Immigration Studies, a non-profit research organisation based in Washington, welcomed the changes saying they would add substance and integrity to the citizenship process.

"The existing exam had atrophied into something meaningless," he said. "Just as we expect those getting a driver's license to actually get into an automobile and operate it proficiently, there is an analogy that simply knowing that American pie is popular in the US or what colours are our flag doesn't demonstrate one's fluency with the United States."

Immigrant advocacy groups, however, are wary of the changes and fear they will constitute another hurdle for immigrants already facing a substantial hike in the 400-dollar citizenship application fees and a longer processing period.

"Right now the immigration process is very unclear, very complicated and there is no indication that this test is going to make it less complicated or more equitable," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition.

Red Cross 'deeply shocked' by violence against Iraqi civilians

AFP, Geneva

The International Committee of the Red Cross said on Thursday it was "deeply shocked" by the ongoing attacks against Iraqi civilians, and warned that the violence prevented it from addressing the concerns of the civilian population in a meaningful way.

George Comminos, head of operations for the Middle East and North Africa, said civilians "were paying the highest price for the conflict," and that the attacks fuelled the spiral of violence.

He said that according to local media, over 7,000 civilians had been killed in the months of September and October alone, and over 42,000 families had been displaced since February 2006.

"Regardless of the complexity of the issues at stake in the Iraqi conflict, it is unacceptable and contrary to the most basic principles of humanity and law to target persons not participating in the hostilities," Comminos said.

He said the ICRC was engaged in a wide range of activities in the country, from prison

visits to supporting medical and sanitation infrastructure, but that this was "only piecemeal in the face of the immensity of the needs."

"The overall insecurity in the country, the fact that ICRC's presence on the ground, and movements across the country are limited, do not allow the direct and meaningful response to the protection needed by the Iraqi population," he said.

Comminos refused to be drawn on whether the situation could be described as a 'civil war'. Since June 2004, the Red Cross has defined the fighting in Iraq as a "non-international armed conflict", he said.

He said the organisation was in contact with the Iraqi government, US, British and other foreign forces, and "more than a dozen" non-state actors, and called on all parties to do their utmost to protect civilians.

He conceded that it was "far more complex when it comes to the multiplication of non-state actors" in Iraq, than in other conflict zones where the Red Cross operates.

Thousands of civilians flee Myanmar army attacks: HR group

AFP, Bangkok

Thousands of civilians have been forced to flee their homes and trek for days after attacks by the army in military-run Myanmar's Karen state, Human Rights Watch said yesterday.

The New York-based watchdog said it had received reports that 200 people seeking refuge from fighting had reached the Thai border, while 3,000 were still making the dangerous journey, often without adequate food.

"The Burmese army is driving thousands toward the border with Thailand and herding villagers into squalid relocation sites or into the jungle away from their ruined homes and dying crops," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch (HRW). The report comes after the International Committee of the Red Cross was this week ordered to shut down all its five field offices outside Yangon, one of which is in eastern Karen State where the attacks are said to be taking place.

Fighting involving the Karen National Union (KNU), the oldest and largest rebel force still battling the Myanmar's military regime, has escalated since February in the country formally known as Burma.

HRW said that a year-long military offensive against the ethnic minority rebels in Karen state had displaced 27,000 civilians, with at least 45 civilians killed by government forces.