

PA seeks US, EU help to ease Israeli sanctions

JERUSALEM, Aug 25: The Palestinians have turned to the United States and Europe for help in hopes of easing tough Israeli sanctions and preventing possible military operations by the Jewish state, reports AP.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat sent a letter to US envoy Dennis Ross, European Union representative Miguel Moratinos and other leaders Sunday complaining about Israel's actions. Among his complaints: a blockade of the West Bank town of Bethlehem, the demolition of Palestinian houses and alleged plans to send hit teams into Palestinian-ruled areas.

"We urged them to interfere directly with the Israeli government to put an end to such measures," Erekat told The Associated Press.

The Palestinian Authority also believes that Israel has targeted leader Yasser Arafat and two other prominent officials for assassination, a Palestinian mayor said.

Khassam al-Shaka, mayor of the autonomous West Bank city of Nablus and a member of the PLO's Executive Committee, said Sunday that the Palestinians have a copy of an Israeli hit list that includes Arafat's deputy Mahmoud Abbas and Cabinet minister Intissar al-Wazir.

A Palestinian official in Gaza would not confirm or deny the claim but said reports of Israeli assassination squads were discussed at Arafat's Cabinet meeting Friday.

"The Palestinian Authority is taking the necessary security measures in Palestinian-controlled areas to face the Israeli attempt to kill and assassinate leaders of the Palestinian nation," he said.

Despite the latest tensions, Palestinian and Israeli officials were planning to hold a security meeting Sunday night at an undisclosed location, army radio said. CIA officials were to attend the meeting under an agreement reached earlier this month during a peace mission by Ross. No details on the meeting were immediately released.

Arafat said Saturday that Israel had decided to create a paratrooper unit and special forces "to work in our areas and work against the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian officials."

Neither he nor Erekat gave details about the alleged plans. Israel has denied the existence of such special units.

After a double suicide bombing killed 16 people in Jerusalem on July 30, Israel demanded that Arafat crack down on militants. The Islamic militant group Hamas claimed responsibility for the bombing.

Senior officials said that if Arafat failed to do so, Israeli troops might go into the Palestinian autonomy areas to make arrests — a move sure to inflame the volatile situation further.

On Sunday, David Bar-Ilan, a top adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, called baseless the claims that Israel planned to send troops into autonomous Palestinian areas.

"I consider this nothing but disinformation," Bar-Ilan said. "There is no particular plan at this point, and certainly nothing to warrant this kind of warning."

He added, however, that Israel "reserves the right to apprehend terrorists in areas controlled by regimes which do not act against terrorism."

Israel imposed a blanket closure on the West Bank and Gaza strip after the bombing. The action barred all Palestinians, including 100,000 laborers, from entering Israel.

Israel also enforced an internal closure, preventing Palestinians from leaving their towns and villages. That has gradually been lifted but the Bethlehem area remains under blockade, which keeps the city's 60,000 residents from leaving and most tourists from coming in.

Israel reportedly suspects that the masterminds of the July blast are hiding in Bethlehem, five miles (8 kms) south of Jerusalem.

Palestinian officials said the nearly month-long closure of Bethlehem, the biblical birthplace of Jesus, was killing tourism — the city's main lifeblood.

"The economy is destroyed completely," said acting Mayor Dr. Hanna Nasser. "The city is losing a quarter of a million dollars daily. Why don't they let the tourists enter Bethlehem? They are coming from all over the world."

The Israeli army blocked a dozen tour buses outside Bethlehem carrying Christian pilgrims from Italy until Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai granted them permission to enter, army radio said.

12 killed in separatist violence in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 25: Twelve people were killed today in separatist violence across the troubled Indian state of Kashmir while a political leader escaped an assassination bid, police said, reports AFP.

Police said Muslim separatist rebels ambushed a military convoy in the northern district of Kupwara early today, killing a Major and a soldier.

The rebels identified as Afghans died in the ensuing gun battle.

In a separate incident Taj Mohiuddin, a leader of the main opposition party in the state, survived an attempt on his life in Srinagar when gunmen opened fire at his car.

It was a narrow escape, one of the bullets brushed by his coat, a spokesman for Mohiuddin's Congress Party said.

Police said six other militants and two civilians died in other incidents across Kashmir.



Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto (2nd L) is all smiles as he shows a way to visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) upon arrival at Hashimoto's official residence for their luncheon meeting Monday.

Now it's men's turn in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 25: Having banned Muslim women from entering beauty contests, religious officials in Malaysia have now forbidden men from taking part in body-building competition, reports AP.

Under Muslim rules, women can expose only the hands below the wrist, the legs below the ankle and the face, while men are not supposed to show parts below the navel and above the thighs.

But over the years many Muslims have participated in beauty contests and body-building events without punishment. It is unclear why religious officials want to act now.

The rules surfaced as a controversy last month when two Muslim women were arrested while participating in a beauty contest and charged in the religious court. They were fined 1,200 ringgit (dhs 430) each.

The ruling on body-building was disclosed in a letter from state Religious Affairs Department's chief enforcement officer Osman Ibrahim to the Sarawak Bodybuilding Association, The Star daily newspaper said Monday.

Bujang Jaham, 37, one of three Muslims who planned to take part in body-building competition next month in the Sarawak state capital of Kuching, 870 kilometres (540 miles) southeast of Kuala Lumpur, said he will defy the ban.

BRIEFLY

Typhoon 'Zita' kills 3 in China:

Typhoon Zita killed three people in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong and injured 345 people, a newspaper reported Monday. AP reports from Beijing.

The typhoon, which hit Guangdong on Friday and later moved to Guangxi province, caused 3.6 billion yuan (dhs 433 million) in damage and destroyed housing equivalent to 30,600 rooms, the China Daily said. It said three people were killed Friday in the town of Zhanjiang, but did not give any details. More than 54,000 people were evacuated as the storm flooded fish and shrimp ponds and destroyed banana, sugarcane and other crops, the newspaper said.

Acid attacker gets life-term in China:

A man who blinded his wife by throwing acid in her face has been sentenced to death in the northeastern city of Shenyang. In a case that has alerted local leaders to the problem of abused women, AP says from Beijing.

After suffering abuse from her often drunken husband throughout their 17 years of marriage, Liu Cuiyun decided in January to file for divorce, the state-run newspaper China Women's News reported Monday. Liu Weiwei retaliated by attacking her on her way home from work, the report said. After hearing of Liu Cuiyun's case, local women's federation officials began lobbying the police, prosecutors and courts to do more to protect abused women, it said.

Holiday resort closed in Israel:

The Club Med Holiday Resort in northern Israel closed on Sunday, several weeks before the end of the summer season, for fear of *Katynusha* rocket attacks by guerrillas in Lebanon, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

"The staff want to leave," Director Philip Abraham told Israel's Channel One television. "Their family phoned and the staff are afraid." Holidaymakers at the Mediterranean seaside resort packed up in disappointment after the French and Italian staff insisted on going home.

2.5m pirated VCDs seized in China:

Chinese authorities have shut down 42 illegal video disk production lines in the southern province of Guangdong and seized 2.5 million pirated audio and video products, a newspaper said Monday. AP reports from Beijing.

China is trying to stamp out widespread piracy of movies, music and computer software under pressure from its trading partners to protect patents, copyrights and other intellectual property. The seizures in Guangdong, which borders Hong Kong, took place since last winter during an official crackdown, the China Daily said.

Quake rocks Quetta:

An earthquake measuring 5.3 on the Richter scale rocked southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta and adjoining areas late Sunday, but no casualties or damage to property were reported, officials said, AFP reports from Quetta.

4 Indians sentenced in UAE:

An Islamic court in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has sentenced four Indians to a public lashing for possessing pornographic films, newspapers reported Sunday. AFP reports from Abu Dhabi.

The four were watching a film on video when police raided their home in the northern Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah near the strategic Hormuz Strait. One will be flogged 80 times and deported after a month imprisonment while two will get 50 lashes each and the other 40.

Noted French leftist politician dies:

Noted leftist politician Jean Poperen, a Socialist Party activist and long-time lawmaker who twice served as minister, died over the weekend in Paris. He was 72. AP reports from Paris.

Poperen, hospitalized for seven months after a fall that put him in a coma, died Saturday, according to France Info radio. Poperen, also a historian, "marked the whole spectrum of the leftist movement ... because he was a man of action but also a man of reflection," said former Socialist Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy on French radio. Leftist politicians lauded Poperen for his conviction and his aptitude for debate.

9 more die in Jamaican jail riot:

Nine more prisoners accused of being homosexuals were killed and seven injured in inmate clashes at a maximum security penitentiary in Kingston, AP reports from Kingston.

Saturday's violence raised the casualty toll in recent prison violence to 16 deaths and 20 injured. The clashes began Wednesday at the General Penitentiary in Kingston and the St. Catherine District Prison in Spanish Town after the country's corrections commissioner said guards and prisoners should be issued condoms.

Mir's crewmen move to next stage of repairs

MOSCOW, Aug 25: The crew of the Mir space station got to work Monday on the next stage of repairs to the damaged spacecraft, working to complete an overhaul begun Friday with a difficult spacewalk, reports AP.

During that mission, Anatoly Solovoyov and Pavel Vinogradov carried out critical repairs meant to restore the battered, 11-year-old space outpost to a near-normal power level following a collision with a cargo ship in June.

On Monday they and American colleague Michael Foale were expected to test the power system and restart equipment disconnected during Friday's venture.

Solovoyov and Foale were also preparing for the next spacewalk — scheduled for Sept. 3 — by reading manuals and watching videos, said Mission Control spokeswoman Irina Manzhilina.

Manzhilina called Monday an "ordinary working day," and said the three were in good health following two days of rest over the weekend.

The cargo ship collided with the Mir's Spektr module, puncturing it and forcing the crew to seal it off. Electric cables linking the Spektr's solar batteries to the rest of the station's power system were disconnected in the process.

Wearing spacesuits, Vinogradov and Solovoyov reentered the de-aerated module Friday and disconnected 11 electric cables linking the Spektr's solar batteries with the rest of the station's power system.

Fighting intensifies in Cambodia

CHONG CHOM PASS, Aug 25: Heavy shelling erupted Monday inside Cambodia between strongman Hun Sen's troops and resistance forces who appeared to be slowly dispersing in the face of an overwhelming enemy, reports AP.

Six wounded resistance fighters loyal to deposed co-prime minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh were evacuated across the border to hospitals in Thailand from their last stronghold at O'Smach, under assault for nearly two weeks by Hun Sen's army.

Leng Pui, 18, hit by shrapnel when a mortar round fell on a temple where he was staying, said Ranariddh's forces at O'Smach, a border village, numbered about 2,000 three weeks ago but had since scattered and dwindled to about 1,000.

"Hun Sen's soldiers are countless," Leng Pui said. "I'm not scared. I'm not afraid. It doesn't matter how many there are. I am loyal to Ranariddh, and I think we can win."

Hun Sen toppled Ranariddh in a bloody coup July 5-6 and chased the prince's smaller, under-equipped forces to the edge of northern Cambodia before they made a stand at O'Smach, where they have clung to high ground ringed by mines.

Hun Sen ordered his men to take the bastion by Aug. 15, but it has held out longer than expected and repeated claims by his regime that it has fallen have proven untrue.

Sam Rainsy, a prominent opposition politician who fled Cambodia after Hun Sen's takeover, in a statement Monday praised the "heroic resistance."

"O'Smach may fall at any time because even steel can be pierced," Sam Rainsy said. "But there are likely to be many other O'Smachs all over Cambodia which will show the determination of the Cambodian people to resist tyranny."

Some 200 rocket, mortar, and artillery shells were fired by both sides Sunday, the heaviest exchanges in two weeks of combat.

Four of the rounds landed in Thailand, prompting Thai forces on full alert to send up warning flares to the Cambodians to keep the shelling on their side of the frontier.

Slightly lighter mortar exchanges erupted around dawn Monday, with both sides firing scores of shells by noon. No rounds landed inside Thailand.

Maj Gen Chirakak Promrakorn, chief of Thailand's northeastern Suranaree Task Force, handed amulets to his soldiers and reporters at Chong Chom Pass to protect them from injury.

The amulets bore the images of Thailand's most revered Buddhist monk, Luang Phor Khooon Parissutho, and King Taksin, a powerful 18th century warrior successful against the Cambodians.

Leng Pui, the wounded soldier, acknowledged that the resistance had received help from Khmer Rouge guerrillas based further west in Aliong Veng. The guerrillas were mainly laying mines, he said.

20 hurt as trains collide in northern Japan

TOKYO, Aug 25: Two trains crashed head-on at a railway station in northern Japan Monday, injuring at least 20 passengers, police said, reports AP.

Yoshitaka Narita, a local police spokesman, said the injured were taken to a nearby hospital.

The cause of the collision at Tachita Station on the Konan Railway at about 1:40 pm (0440 GMT) was still under investigation, Narita said.

The railway links Hiroaki and Kuroishi, both cities in Aomori Prefecture (state). Hiroaki is 526 kilometres (326 miles), northeast of Tokyo.

2 Lankan soldiers killed in Tiger attack

COLOMBO, Aug 25: Tamil Tiger rebels bombed a town in eastern Sri Lanka on Sunday killing two soldiers as thousands of troops elsewhere dug in after heavy fighting which killed 437 on both sides, officials said, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) kept up a barrage of mortar bombs at the main military headquarters in the town of Batticaloa but several neighbouring Tamil villages were also hit, officials said.

They said the 233-brigade headquarters, was targeted on Monday surprise attack in Batticaloa, 303 km east of

Colombo, adding 60 people were wounded including 18 soldiers.

Military sources said the late evening attack was probably launched from a lagoon island in the district.

The Tiger attack came as thousands of government soldiers kept up a major offensive against the LTTE in the north of the country where both sides have lost 437 in fresh fighting since Tuesday.

Over the weekend, fighter jets bombed targets of the LTTE while ground forces used artillery to neutralise rebel mortar. Positions in the island's north, the defence ministry said in a statement.



US popstar Michael Jackson (L) with guitarist Jannifer Batten during his performance in Helsinki Sunday.

Armed men storm town hall, police station in Philippines: 2 die

MANILA, Aug 25: About 18 heavily armed men stormed a town hall and police station in the central Philippines, killing two guards, the Mayor said today.

Mayor Prudente Solter told Reuters that unidentified men simultaneously attacked the two buildings just after midnight on Sunday in Bansud on Mindoro island, 200 km (124 miles) south of Manila.

The armed men peppered the facade of the newly constructed municipal hall with bullets," he said.

The attackers, who killed two guards at the town hall, eventually fled after a brief gunfight with police.

Authorities are still trying to work out the motive for the raid and who was behind it.

Veerappan releases all 8 hostages

MADRAS, Aug 25: An Indian outlaw suspected of murdering 130 forest and police officials and more than 200 elephants released all eight hostages he was holding in the dense forests of a southern state, a journalist said Sunday, reports AP.

The outlaw, Koose Munusamy Veerappan, had earlier demanded a ransom of 50 million rupees (dhs 1.5 million) to release the forest guards he had kidnapped last month.

He later gave up the demand and agreed to surrender following negotiations by a journalist on behalf of two state governments that want him to face a court trial.

On Sunday, Nakkheeran magazine's associate editor, A. Kamraj, told The Associated Press that he received a phone call from an informer that the hostages had been released by the outlaw.

Chinese dissident suspected to have brain cancer

BEIJING, Aug 25: The family of jailed dissident Wang Dan says he may have brain cancer and has asked prison officials to let him get outside treatment, a human rights group said Monday, reports AP.

Wang, who is serving an 11-year sentence, suffers from severe headaches and has been diagnosed with a stomach disorder, said the Hong Kong-based Information Center of Human Rights and Democracy in China.

Prison officials have twice refused Wang's requests to be examined by cancer specialists, and have not replied to requests to let him seek outside treatment, the group said.

Wang, 27, was one of the leaders of the Tiananmen Square democracy protests in 1989. He was imprisoned for 3 1/2 years after the military crushed the demonstrations.

Off the Record

Man jailed for cyber affair!

CAMDEN: A man who admitted using suggestive computer messages to entice a teen-age girl to send him sexually explicit photographs of herself was sentenced Friday to nearly five years in prison, reports AP.

Paul Brown, 47, of Cleveland, Ohio apologized to a court in New Jersey — where the girl lives — for the cyber affair, before being sentenced to four years and nine months in federal prison.

"It was just bad judgment on my part," he said.

The 14-year-old victim, in a letter read in court by her psychologist, said her life has been destroyed. She said she was forced to withdraw from school and ridiculed by her friends.

"You put me through a lot. Why did you use me like you did?" the girl wrote in a letter addressed to Brown. "Even though I never met you, it seems like you raped me emotionally. It made me feel so ashamed."

Judge Jerome Simandine urged parents nationwide to monitor their children's computer use. Prosecutors say Brown met the then 12-year-old girl on-line in an Internet chat room in early 1995. He used his own name, but posed as a 15-year-old boy, authorities said.

Authorities are investigating on-line relationship Brown allegedly maintained from the midwestern US city with at least five other girls, said Assistant US Attorney Donna A. Krappa. Three live in California; one in New Jersey and one in Illinois, she said.

Brown pleaded guilty in June to a single count of inducing a minor to produce child pornography in the current case.

Bid to reveal the naked truth

OSLO: With their party dropping in the polls leading up to next month's elections, a group of young Socialists has decided to reveal the naked truth, reports AP.

Eight young politicians — men and women — are pictured sans clothing in 70,000 brochures distributed to potential voters.

"The point is to show that people are different. We think the freedom to be who you are is important," said Socialist youth leader Heiki Holmaas, who covered his genitals with his hands in his nude photo.

But opponents say the move won't rescue the party, projected in recent polls to get only 4 per cent of the vote in the September 15 national ballot.

"I can understand why the Socialist youth would want to draw voters' attention to anything but their politics," Bjorn Skaar, leader of the Young Conservatives, was quoted as saying in Friday's Verdens Gang newspaper.

Death toll rises to 105 Fresh violence kills 40 more in Algeria

ALGIERS, Algeria, Aug 25: More than 40 people died and more than 50 were wounded in new violence reported Sunday, bringing the known death toll over the past three days to at least 105, reports AP.

There was no claim of responsibility for the latest violence in an upsurge that began in June and has left nearly 1,000 people dead. But it bore the hallmarks of Islamic insurgents fighting since 1992 to topple the army-backed government.

More than 60,000 people have been killed since the start of the insurgency.

In the latest violence, a bomb attack Saturday morning on a train running between Khemis-Milliana and Algiers killed eight travellers and injured 22 others, according to hospital sources speaking on condition of anonymity.

On Friday, attackers carried out massacres in two hamlets near Djelfa, 200 kms (125 miles) southwest of the capital, killing a total of 30 people and wounding 10 others, hospital sources said.

On Thursday, a truck carrying 40 demonstrators from a march against terrorism was machine-gunned near Medea, south of Algiers, killing three and wounding 22. The march was organised by the nation's main union, the General Union for Algerian Workers.

The deaths came on top of 64 people who died Thursday in a massacre in the rural hamlet of Souane, some 30 kms (20 miles) southeast of the capital.

Ms Sadaf Rizvi claims to have also launched a movement to create awareness among Muslim women about their rights through a newly formed body called the 'Dukhtar-e-Zainabi' (daughters of Zainabi), an organisation named after the Prophet's daughter.

While the lead has been taken by Shia women, Maulana Kalbe Sadiq is hopeful that women of the Sunni sect would also "soon come out to follow course."

"Times are changing," he said, recalling how a decade ago (during the time of his father, the late Maulana Kalbe Abid), a similar move evoked a very poor response. "Only two women came out then. See the difference today. I am sure, we'll draw much more crowds in weeks to come," he added.

The Maulana claims to have seen women coming to mosques to listen to his sermons in the United States.

Clerics here say the move is bound to have repercussions in the Islamic world, both in India and abroad. The Kerala Muslim clergy's reaction to the development is also being watched closely, especially since the decision of the Imam of a mosque in Palayem to allow women to pray had earned the ire of Kerala's 300 other senior priests. The priests had protested outside the Palayem mosque.

Sharat Pradhan writes from Lucknow

Muslim women pray at Lucknow mosque for equal rights

Muslim women in this city have taken the lead in securing equal rights under Islam by offering prayers at the mosque in the Asafi Imambara, the 213-year-old edifice that is one of Lucknow's most prominent landmarks.

A group of nearly 100 Muslim women decided to converge at the Asafi Imambara mosque on Friday, August 15. That however, was a low-key and quiet affair with no prior announcement.

But the very next Friday, August 22, the attendance swelled to 150 and news, at last, broke out. Women of all ages — from 16 to 70 — thronged the mosque, shedding their earlier inhibitions and willing to defy any opposition.

Spearheading the movement is doughty eighteen-year-old Sadaf Rizvi. "The whole idea was mooted during the course of the recent agitation over the 'Azadi' procession (taken out by the Shia sect of Muslims) that was banned in the state."

"Women turned out in large numbers to defy the government's ban on this Shia procession, together with men belonging to the community," she said. The demonstrations had led to arrest of hundreds of men and women.

"We, therefore thought that when we are acceptable as equal partners in agitations and demonstrations, why couldn't we participate in the Friday 'namaaz' in a mosque," the college-going Ms Rizvi pointed out.

Her fiery determination inspired many other women. Ms Hamida Rizvi, a 50-year-old school teacher, was impressed by the young student's initiative and readily chose to join her, followed by Mrs Shamsi, a middle-aged housewife.

Educationalist Huma Zaidi said, "This should have started long ago. After all women freely offer 'namaaz' along with men when they go for the Haj to Mecca and Medina."

And this time the women have the full backing of a senior clergyman. Maulana Kalbe Sadiq, a renowned Shia cleric and vice president of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, is encouraging the trend.

The Maulana told IANS, "Initially I was surprised when I saw a group of women flocking to the Imambara mosque last Friday. But I welcome it. After all, women go to mosques in Iran, Saudi Arabia and women do it at Haj time."

Recalling an incident from Islamic history, the Maulana narrated how "Prophet Mohammed himself was quoted as mentioning an incident when, during the course of a 'namaaz', he suddenly began to complete his 'namaaz' rapidly.

"When he was asked why he did so, the Prophet replied that he had noticed a woman placing her infant on the floor (so she could offer prayers) and that he did not want the baby to take the pain for long. Therefore he rushed through the prayer (implying that women used to pray in mosques in the Prophet's time). The Maulana sees no better argument to support his acceptance of women offering prayers in the mosque."

"Their participation in the Friday 'namaaz' will have a far-reaching impact on the life of Muslim women," the Maulana said, adding "You see,

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the 'namaaz' on Fridays is different from that on other days. That is the day for sermons as well and so it will offer women an opportunity to know about their real rights and save them from getting misguided by fundamentalist maulanas, who remain too dogmatic in their approach."

The Maulana claims to have seen women coming to mosques to listen to his sermons in the United States.

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