

## Wooden gate of Al-Aqsa Mosque set on fire

JEERUSALEM, May 14: Arabs set fire to a wooden gate at an entrance to the compound housing Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's old city late on Wednesday, Israeli police said, reports Reuter.

The fire, which caused no injuries, burned a large hole in the Ghawanmeh gate, one of nine entrances to the compound — known to Muslims as *Haram Ash-Sharif* (noble sanctuary) and to Jews as Temple Mount.

The compound contains the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest shrine, and the dome of the rock.

"We don't know who did it but it was arson," Israeli police spokesman Shumulik Ben-Ruby said.

He said bomb squad experts had found no evidence of explosives. Muslim guards at the compound who put out the fire reported that they had heard a blast outside the gate.

The Palestinian Authority blamed Israeli extremists for what it called an "act of sinful aggression."

It noted that the attack had followed the stabbing early on

Wednesday of a 51-year-old Arab labourer in an ultra-orthodox Jewish neighbourhood of Jerusalem.

The Palestinian leadership holds the Israeli authorities fully responsible for such aggressive escalation against our Palestinian people and their holy places," a statement issued by President Yasser Arafat's office said.

The fire broke out on the eve of planned commemorative marches and other events by Palestinians in Gaza and on the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, to mark 50 years of displacement and dispossession with the creation of the State of Israel.

An Israeli Army spokeswoman said Israeli and Palestinian security officials had met to discuss how to deal with possible disturbances today, the anniversary of what Palestinians call the "nakba" or "great catastrophe" of 1948.

The Israeli Army has barred Israelis from entering Palestinian-ruled areas today as a security precaution.

## Estrada continues lead in Philippine polls

MANILA, May 14: Vice President Joseph Estrada, the main opposition candidate, continued his strong lead Thursday in the Philippine presidential vote count, reports AP.

With about 16 per cent of the ballots counted in the 10-candidate race, Estrada had an imposing 36 per cent of the vote, a poll watchdog group said.

President Fidel Ramos' hand-picked candidate, House Speaker Jose de Venecia, jumped to second place with about 13 per cent. Senator Raul Roco slid to third, slightly behind de Venecia, the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections said.

Manila's influential archbishop, Jaime Cardinal Sin, called on Estrada's rivals to concede defeat.

Sin, who earlier warned that an Estrada presidency would be "most probably disastrous" for the country, issued a pastoral statement saying, "I believe the trend is now clear."

"I am appealing to all those who did not win to bow humbly to the will of the people," he

said.

Estrada, a college dropout who has admitted a history of womanizing, heavy drinking and gambling, has been opposed by many in the country's traditional establishment, including Sin, President Fidel Ramos and former President Corazon Aquino.

The latest tally from the National Citizens' Movement is in line with an exit poll conducted by the respected Social Weather Stations which showed Estrada winning around 39 per cent of the vote.

The hand-tallying of votes is expected to take several weeks.

The actual winners of the races for president and vice president will be officially declared by Congress when it reconvenes May 25.

Estrada's party has protested the slow pace of the count, saying it invites fraud.

The Commission on Elections estimates that about 80 per cent of the 34 million registered voters participated in Monday's polls.

## NA session televised live for 1st time in Hanoi

HANOI, May 14: The National Assembly went live to the nation for the first time Thursday, providing Vietnamese with an unedited — but still controlled — glimpse of their political process at work, reports AP.

One of the three national TV networks provided gavel-to-gavel coverage of four Cabinet ministers being questioned on a variety of subjects. Traditionally, only the opening and closing addresses have been shown, not a working session.

With increased public clamor for official accountability, it appeared to be part of a government effort to open its inner workings at least a crack and show how its style of "rule by consensus" operates.

Interestingly, the coverage came with no fanfare, just a mention in newspapers' television listings Thursday morning.

Viewers who turned in got their first look at the newly renovated Ba Dinh Conference Hall, where top officials sit in front of a bust of revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh.

It wasn't exactly riveting stuff: what officials described as "heated" debate on key topics



The 1998 Miss Universe Wendy Fitzwilliam of Trinidad and Tobago dips in the water on the Waikiki beach in Honolulu, Hawaii, during a photo session Wednesday. The 25-year-old pre-law student beat out 80 other contestants to win the Tuesday's competition. — AP/UNB photo

## Suharto offers to quit if his people no longer trust him

JAKARTA, May 14: President Suharto indicated he is willing to step down if Indonesians no longer trust him to lead the country, which is plagued by economic and political turmoil, a newspaper reported Thursday.

"If I am no longer trusted to lead the country, I will become a sage and endeavour to get closer to God," The Jakarta Post quoted the 76-year-old leader as saying Wednesday in Egypt, where he was attending a summit of developing nations.

Social unrest is on the rise, pushing down the value of the Indonesian currency even as the government tries to implement austerity measures required by the International Monetary Fund in exchange for billions of dollars in aid.

The capital, Jakarta, was hit by riots Wednesday after security forces shot and killed six student demonstrators during an anti-government protest a day earlier. Students vowed to step up their efforts to oust Suharto with more protests Thursday.

"There is no problem if the people don't trust me anymore. I won't be an obstacle, particularly if some say I'm paralysing the life of this nation," the newspaper Republika quoted

the president as saying.

Republika said that Suharto maintained that any political reform in Indonesia must be done according to the national constitution.

Suharto's longtime image of invulnerability has eroded in recent months as Indonesia endures its worst economic crisis in decades and growing discontent among its 200 million people.

Suharto commands the loyalty of the government bureaucracy and the powerful military, but the armed forces and most other segments of an authoritarian grip, delivering economic development but showing little tolerance for dissent.

There was no immediate reaction to Suharto's reported comments from Cabinet ministers.

"I don't believe the statement. It is just political cosmetics," Rais said.

Student leaders planned to

maintain a daily routine of protests in Jakarta and other major cities on Thursday.

The students, who routinely clash with security forces in the streets beside their campuses, have said they will settle for nothing less than the ouster of Suharto.

For the second day, police fired rubber bullets and live ammunition into crowds, badly wounding at least 10 people, student activists said.

After dusk, mobs looted and attacked shops and houses, witnesses said. Chinese people make up a tiny fraction of Indonesia's population but dominate commerce and industry. Many Indonesians resent their wealth and often make them scapegoats in tough times.

Suharto, in the past, has made similar comments about his leadership.

Before standing for a seventh consecutive fifth term earlier this year Suharto ordered the ruling Golkar party to ensure that the people of Indonesia really wanted him to remain in office.

## Taliban seize more areas in Takhar province

ISLAMABAD, May 14: Taliban Islamic militia on Wednesday seized more territory in Afghanistan's north-eastern Takhar province, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported.

The militia had advanced a further five kilometres from the town of Ishkemish captured earlier, the Pakistani-based private agency said.

On another front, at Bangi between Takhar and Taliban-held Kunduz province, the Taliban broke through opposition northern alliance defences late Tuesday, AIP said.

There was no independent confirmation of the report, which said at least 17 troops from both sides were killed Wednesday around Ishkemish and more than 100 opposition soldiers were taken prisoner by the Taliban.

The agency said the Taliban offensive was aimed at capturing the Takhar provincial capital, Taloqan.

On Tuesday official in Taloqan told AFP some 2,000 Taliban troops were in Ishkemish and anti-Taliban forces were reinforcing positions around

the town for another counter-attack.

The northern opposition alliance had sent reinforcements and ammunition from Taloqan to bolster Tajik troops of the Jamiat-i-Islami of former president Burhanuddin Rabbani, witnesses said Tuesday.

## 11 drowned in Philippines

LUZENA, Philippines, May 14: Eleven people drowned and three others were missing after two boat accidents in the Philippines, police and government television reported today, says AFP.

The boat with 64 aboard capsized in shallow waters near the island of Polillo, east of Manila on Tuesday, a police report here said. Six women and a boy drowned and two other passengers were missing. The boat was en route to the Port of Patanangan from the town of real on the main island of Luzon.

## Off the Record

### Bob Dole likes it!

BOSTON: Bob Dole likes it, hundreds of thousands of American men swear by it, and now the first medical study published since approval of the impotence drug Viagra confirms it improves men's sex lives, reports Reuter.

In a study published in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine, researchers reported that the little blue pill improved sexual satisfaction and enhance orgasms with few side effects.

At 37 research centres around the country, more than 800 men took either differing doses of the drug, made by Pfizer Inc., or a placebo pill.

"In the first four weeks of our study, nearly 70 per cent of all attempts at sexual intercourse were successful for the men receiving sildenafil (Viagra) whereas only 22 per cent of the men receiving placebo were successful," said the study's lead author, Dr Irwin Goldstein, professor of surgery at the Boston University School of Medicine.



Top models Claudia Schiffer, left, of Germany, and Kate Moss of Great Britain arrive at the Festival Palace in Cannes on Wednesday to attend the opening ceremony of the 51st International Cannes Film Festival.

— AP/UNB photo

## Albright, Netanyahu fail to bridge all gaps in talks

WASHINGTON, May 14: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu failed to bridge all the gaps in talks on Wednesday on a US peace plan and will try again at a meeting on Tuesday, Albright's spokesman said, reports Reuter.

State Department spokesman James Rubin said they tried "to overcome the remaining differences and thereby put the Middle East peace process back on track," they will meet on Thursday in a continuation of this effort," he added.

Netanyahu adviser David Bar Ilan said the 90 minutes of talks made some progress, with both sides keen to agree on details of the next Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

There seems to be a constructive desire on the part of both sides to make progress. We all want this peace process to advance, to reach a conclusion with which all sides can live. And I think that within this atmosphere progress has been made, he told Reuters in an interview after the meeting.

The United States is trying to persuade Netanyahu's government to accept a plan that

includes Israel handing 13 per cent of the West Bank back to the Palestinians.

Albright, who has met Netanyahu and Arafat repeatedly over the months, is trying to arrange a summit in Washington between them and President Bill Clinton, and Albright had wanted the summit last Monday but Netanyahu did not accept US terms. Rubin speaking as the talks began, tried not to

raise expectations.

It's hard to be overly optimistic, given the history," he told his daily briefing, but he added, "We remain hopeful" of breaking the 14 month Middle East deadlock.

Albright had stayed on in Washington especially to meet Netanyahu, who is on a lobbying tour meeting Jewish and conservative groups sympathetic to Israel's position.

Rubin, defending Washington from charges of pressuring Israel into a risky agreement, insisted that US leaders had done everything to accommodate the needs of the Jewish state.

AP adds: Rabbi Melvin Glazer has grown weary of the Middle East peace process and the historic rift between the Israelis and Palestinians. He'd like to lock the two sides in a room and walk away.

I want to leave these guys alone and let them solve it. All the US has to do is give the Israelis and Palestinians the strength and courage to know that we're the best friend either one of them has ever had," he said.

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Israel cancels its army chief's visit to India

TEL AVIV, May 14: Israel has cancelled a visit to India by its Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Amnon Shahak, amid international outrage over New Delhi's nuclear tests, an army spokeswoman said today, reverts AFP.

The chief of staff has cancelled his visit to India. The decision was taken in the last couple of days, the spokeswoman said, the visit had been scheduled for early June, she said.

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## UNSC members weigh response to India's nuclear test

UNITED NATIONS, May 14: After a second round of nuclear explosions, China and Japan pressed the Security Council on Wednesday to take a strong stand against India's underground nuclear tests, reports AP.

US Ambassador Bill Richardson endorsed the United States' feelings very strongly that there should be action by the Security Council opposing the tests and calling on India to sign the arms control treaties.

Sweden circulated a draft statement expressing "dismay" over India's nuclear tests and their "possible effects" on stability in South Asia. The draft also calls on India to sign the test ban treaty and the Nuclear

Non-Proliferation agreement. But the draft contained no threat of any international sanctions nor an explicit condemnation of India for conducting the tests.

Council diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said France opposed the use of the word "condemn" in the draft.

Council diplomats conferred privately Wednesday afternoon on the language of the text in hopes of presenting it for approval this week.

On Tuesday, China's deputy UN ambassador, Shen Guofang said his government was "very concerned" over the Indian testing, which "is not conducive to peace and security in that region."

— AP/UNB photo

## Worldwide protest against Indian N-tests continues

World-wide condemnation and strong protests against India for detonating five nuclear devices continued yesterday, report agencies.

### Pakistan

While Indians danced in the street to celebrate the explosion of five nuclear devices, people in neighboring Pakistan were somber Thursday — some calling for an explosion of their own, others urging restraint.

Absolutely Pakistan should show its own nuclear capability... we deserve it," said Saeed Ishfaq Ahmed, a bespectacled man who owns a tire store in the Pakistani capital. "India is not respecting what other countries say so why should we accept what they say?"

But at a peace march through the central capital of Islamabad Thursday India's testing was denounced.

In a prepared statement the demonstrators urged "strictest" international condemnation of India and "categorically opposed demands from within Pakistan to follow the path India has taken."

"It is a strong affront to the efforts of the international community to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons."

"It will bring very serious results to peace and stability in the South Asian region, even in the world. The international community should take the same stand, and strongly require India to stop development of nuclear weapons immediately," the statement said.

China accused the Indian government of blatantly ignoring international opinion in choosing to push ahead with

nuclear weapons development.

It insisted India was trying to make China the scapegoat, by claiming it to be a nuclear threat to justify its own ambitions to dominate South Asia.

### Japan

As officials were finalizing further steps to punish