

International

Wooden gate of Al-Aqsa Mosque set on fire

JERUSALEM, May 14: Arsonists 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 Reuters.

The fire, which caused no injuries, burned a large hole in the Gihannam 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 Shumukil 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 Palestinian call the "nakba" or "great catastrophe" of 1948.

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

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, reports AP.

"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.

The Post is the larger of two English-language dailies in Indonesia and is widely respected. Reports of Suharto's comments were published on the front pages of Indonesian-language dailies.

"President ready to step down" was the headline in Kompas, the country's biggest newspaper.

"There is no problem if the people don't trust me anymore. I won't be an obstacle, particularly if some say I'm paralyzing 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.

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.

Speaking to a gathering of Indonesians in the Egyptian

capital, Suharto said that he was prepared to quit if Indonesia's 200 million people no longer had faith in him.

The former army commander, who rose to power in 1966 and was elected president two years later, is now serving his seventh, five-year term. Before Suharto's re-election in March, his eldest daughter said she wished he would retire so "If I am no longer trusted, that's OK... I will not use the force of arms, right?" the Post quoted him as saying.

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, says AFP.

The militia had advanced a further five kilometres from the town of Ishkoshm captured earlier, the Pakistan-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 Ishkoshm 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 Ishkoshm 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

LUCENA, 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 remain missing, the report said. The boat was en route to the Port of Patnanungan from the town of real on the main island of Luzon.

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.



A rioter, left, runs away while a member of the Indonesian Army douses a vehicle fire with a building fire in the background during riots in Jakarta, Wednesday. Riots continued in Jakarta Wednesday with reports of at least 8 injured and 1 dead. The victim of the riot was hit by a vehicle when rioters started fires and threw rocks at police who returned gun fire and tear-gas. — 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 Reuters.

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.

Indian N-tests US ban hardly constitutes effective response, says Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, May 14: Pakistan said Wednesday the "mandatory" United States sanctions against India over its nuclear tests did not constitute an effective response, reports AFP.

"The invoking of mandatory sanctions under US laws against India hardly constitutes an effective response to Indian provocative actions," Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan told Parliament here.

The India actions will not go "unanswered" by Pakistan, Khan said.

President Bill Clinton said Wednesday the US was imposing economic sanctions on India, adding the Indian nuclear tests "demand an unambiguous response by the United States."

Clinton also talked with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif by telephone from Berlin and urged him to show restraint.

Earlier Pakistan's top defence committee meeting under Sharif vowed to take all necessary steps to counter security threats and the Foreign Office slammed the two latest Indian tests which it said were for "battlefield tactical weapons."

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, reports 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.

There has been no official Israeli reaction since India's new Hindu nationalist government carried out five nuclear test blasts Monday and Wednesday.

Israel, like India, has refused to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Although the government refuses to acknowledge its own nuclear arsenal officially, it is widely believed to have around 200 nuclear warheads developed at its Dimona nuclear facility in the Negev Desert.

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 Reuters.

In a study published in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine, researchers reported that the little blue pill improved sexual satisfaction and enhanced 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

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 call said the United States "feels very strongly that there should be action by the Security Council" opposing the tests and calling on India to sign the two 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."

BRIEFLY

Blast claims 3 in Grozny: Three people were killed and several were wounded Wednesday evening in a powerful bomb explosion in the centre of Grozny, the war-shattered capital of breakaway Chechnya, Russian news agencies reported, AP says from Moscow.

The bomb damaged a car carrying Chechnya's deputy prosecutor-general, Magomed Magomedov, who is heading a team of investigators trying to solve the abduction of Russian envoy Valentin Vlasov, the ITAR-Tass and Interfax news agencies reported. Magomedov was unhurt.

Smoking ban on Japanese airlines: Japan's three biggest airlines have decided to ban smoking on all domestic flights later this year, airline officials said Thursday, AP reports from Tokyo.

Japan Airlines, All Nippon Airlines and Japan Air System will eliminate smoking sections on domestic routes amid growing complaints from customers that smoke wafts into non-smoking areas.

Gene Fowler Jr dies in US: Gene Fowler Jr, son of a legendary US newspaperman, Oscar-winning film director and maker of the cult movie classic "I was a Teenage Werewolf," has died, his brother said on Wednesday, Reuters reports from Los Angeles.

Fowler, who would have been 81 in two weeks, died of natural causes at his Hollywood Hills home on Monday, Will Fowler told Reuters. During his career, Fowler edited or directed more than 100 movies and TV shows, winning a Golden Globe, four Emmys and an Oscar for the documentary "Seeds of Destiny" which he made while serving as a lieutenant in the US Army special services in the second World War.

11 Thais to be prosecuted: Eleven Thais freed after being taken hostage by ethnic guerrillas in Myanmar will be prosecuted by Thai police for illegally crossing the border, a military official said Thursday, AP reports from Bangkok.

Gen Chamlong Phothong of the Thai Third Army said police will take action against the 11 who entered Myanmar to conduct illegal logging activities.

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 Ishaq 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 federal 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.

The march was led by 12 aid organisations, including Pakistan Human Rights Commission and Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy.

The country's leading nuclear scientist, Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, earlier said Pakistan has the capability to carry out a test and was waiting for the green

light from the government. A New York Times story, quoting American officials, reported Thursday that Pakistan is preparing for an underground nuclear test that could take place as early as Sunday.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub said the Indian leadership had gone "berserk" and warned that the explosions will not go unanswered, although he stopped short of saying Islamabad would answer in kind.

China

China issued a stern condemnation of India's latest round of nuclear tests yesterday, and called on the international community to pressure India to stop developing nuclear arms.

The Chinese government is deeply shocked and strongly condemns this behavior," the foreign ministry said in a faxed statement.

"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 finalising further steps to punish India for its second nuclear tests in three days, a Foreign Ministry official said Thursday that Japan will urge other leaders at the G-8 summit to join in coordinated efforts to punish India and discourage its competitors.

Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto told Parliament India's second round of tests Wednesday "forced us to decide to take additional steps."

Hashimoto's comments came amid growing public outcry in Japan against the tests, with hundreds of atomic bomb survivors and peace activists holding vigils in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

News of India's second tests came only hours after Hashimoto had announced sanctions for Monday's first round of tests: a suspension of loans worth about 40 billion yen (30 million dollars).

Additional sanctions "should take into consideration that India's new round of tests came right after our (previous) protests," said Hashimoto on Japan's state-run NHK television.

The additional measures are expected to include not only

Malaysian capital.

It is really unfortunate because I think our focus is on economic development, Anwar said.

Malaysia on Tuesday condemned India's earlier underground nuclear tests and said they were a serious setback to efforts to control the spread of nuclear weapons.

Australia

Australia yesterday suspended all non-humanitarian aid and defence links with India and also called off visits by ministers and senior officials. Prime Minister John Howard said.

Canberra would also register its strong opposition through International Community.

"We are very, very deeply concerned about the possibility of a nuclear arms race," Howard said.

Australia gives about 20 million dollars (13.4 million US dollars) a year in non-humanitarian aid to India.

The decision followed a snap meeting of the National Security Committee.

"It will mean that our defence attach will be withdrawn from New Delhi, that Australian defence force officers training in India will be withdrawn, and likewise Indian officers training in Australia will be asked to leave," Howard said.

All proposed defence-related visits, including calls by ships and aircraft, will also be cancelled.

Dalai Lama

India should not be pressured by developed nations to get rid of its nuclear weapons, the Dalai Lama said.

"India has proved it is no longer an underdeveloped nation, and it should have the same access to nuclear weapons as developed countries, the 1989 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize said.

Although the Dalai Lama stressed that he continues to work for peace and nuclear disarmament, he said that developed nations should not tell Third World countries what to do with their weapons.

"I think nuclear weapons are too dangerous."

Therefore, we have to make every effort for the elimination of nuclear weapons," the Dalai Lama said in a news conference.

"However, the assumption of the concept that few nations are OK to possess nuclear weapons and the rest of the world should not that is undemocratic."

The Dalai Lama, the exiled leader of Tibet's Buddhists who lives in India, also said he was sure that India would join in complete nuclear disarmament if other nations did the same.

India set off two more underground nuclear explosions Wednesday, the fifth since Monday, president Bill Clinton has ordered tough new sanctions as punishment for the test blasts in an effort to stop a new nuclear arms race.