

Israeli-Palestinian talks US making progress in breaking deadlock

WASHINGTON, Sept 18: The United States is making 'steady progress' towards an Israeli-Palestinian agreement that would unlock the long-stalled Middle East peace process, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

"We are very hopeful that we will be able to move towards an agreement," Albright said, answering questions after a speech at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, a Washington think tank.

Albright, however, made no prediction as to when she thought an accord providing for an Israeli handover of more West Bank land to the Palestinians might be reached.

The secretary of state was speaking as US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross pursued a mission in the region to try to narrow Israeli-Palestinian differences. Ross said Thursday he would extend his stay by one day, until Saturday.

Although Palestinians have

said Ross has had no success in bringing the sides closer together, Albright said he had made "some progress," she gave no details.

Albright noted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat would be attending the UN General Assembly session in New York next week and she would be meeting them.

She said the format and venue of that meeting, or meetings, had yet to be decided.

Israel and the Palestinians are haggling over a US proposal for Israel to withdraw from another 13 per cent of the West Bank in return for tougher Palestinian measures to crack down on guerrilla violence.

Although US officials refuse to discuss the details, differences are believed to centre on the nature of the Palestinian security measures and an Israeli demand that some of the land it hands over should be held as a "nature reserve."



Queen Elizabeth II inspects an honour guard with Sultan Hassanalkhalid of Brunei upon her arrival at the Sultan's palace in Bandar Seri Begawan Thursday. — AP/UNB photo

Queen pays her respects to Islam

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Brunei, Sept 18: Queen Elizabeth II slipped off her white pumps, donned a white prayer robe and gingerly padded about one of the most magnificent mosques in modern Islam on Friday, reports AP.

The queen began her second day of her state visit to this oil-rich sultanate, a former British colony on the northern tip of Borneo island, by paying respects to Islam. Most of the 312,000 people in this tiny Southeast Asian kingdom are Muslim.

Wearing a blue, wide-brimmed hat and floor-length prayer robe designed for her back in London, the queen was escorted through the Jame' Asr Hassanalkhalid Mosque.

In the cavernous male prayer room, some 150 men sat crossed-legged on their golden prayer rugs in identical black felt "songkok" caps and embroidered sarongs as the queen strolled behind them, in her stocking feet. Her gloved hands clasped, the queen softly inquired about the gold-plated Arabic calligraphy of Quranic verse carved into the white Ital-

ian marble. The mosque covers 20 acres, with 29 marble domes and 29 white marble steps, symbolising Sultan Hassanalkhalid, the 29th Sultan of the 600-year-old Bolkhiah dynasty.

The queen walked through the lower courtyard to visit hundreds of children — girls in pink Muslim head scarves and boys in black caps — kneeled in front of wooden stands cradling tiny Qurans.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and his new wife, Gaynor Regan, were among those in the queen's entourage, all in stocking feet, the women in black prayer robes.

Zaini Ali, the mosque architect who escorted the queen, said she was most impressed by a compulsory pre-marital counselling class.

"She was jumping up and down, she was so excited," said the British-trained architect. He said the queen turned to Cook and said, "We should try something like this."

The Church of England does not require marriage counselling. The children of the royal couple — celebrating their

50th wedding anniversary this year — have been plagued by divorce, perhaps the most infamous between Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana.

Zaini may not have known his comments would raise gleeful eyebrows among the British press on the tour. The tabloids have skewered Cook for recently leaving his wife of 28 years and marrying his former aide.

It's the royal couple's first state visit to Brunei since 1972, 12 years before the sultanate gained full independence from the United Kingdom.

Earlier in the day, the royal couple watched the Alliance Parade of the Royal Brunei Land Forces and the British Army Royal Gurkha Rifles. Begpipers played a selection of Scottish tunes similar to the Queen's own piper who plays outside her window at Buckingham Palace.

The Queen clearly enjoyed the military parade and tapped both feet in time with the music. Prince Philip, who upon arrival Thursday forgot that pointing with the index finger is considered bad manners in Brunei, kept his hands firmly clasped in his lap.

12 militant leaders held in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Sept 18: Indian security forces arrested a dozen separatist leaders today in the troubled Indian region of Kashmir, amid a general strike called after troops opened fire on a local school, reports AFP.

All shops, businesses, banks and schools in the summer capital Srinagar heeded the strike call by the All Party Hurriyat (freedom) conference — an umbrella grouping of 30 Kashmiri separatist groups.

The protest followed an incident Thursday in which paramilitary troops hunting for Muslim guerrillas, strafed a schoolyard in Baramulla district, 25 miles north of Srinagar.

Two people, including a schoolchild, were killed in the shooting, while another 15 — many of them pupils — were injured.

Today's arrests came as a dozen leaders of separatist groups defied a government ban to march through the streets in protest against the shootings.

Among those picked by police was freedom conference chairman Ali Shah Geelani.

BRIEFLY

Floods hit power supply in India: Flooding in western India threatens power supplies in the north, the Times of India reported yesterday, AP says from New Delhi.

The supply point of a 1,700 km natural gas pipeline was affected by the flooding in western Gujarat state, the newspaper reported. Supplies were cut off Thursday morning to several natural gas-fueled power plants in northern Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state.

Gunmen kill 18 in Mexico: Gunmen yanked three families from their beds, lined them against a wall and shot at least 18 men, women and children to death near a popular Baja California resort, reports AP from El-Sausal, Mexico.

At least two people were seriously wounded in the attack at dawn on Thursday. Police have a witness in protective custody, a 15-year-old girl who hid under a bed during the slaughter. The attorney general of Baja California state, Marco Antonio de la Fuente Villarreal, shied away from stating a motive for the killings during a Thursday afternoon news conference.

ROK food aid for DPRK: Five South Korean civic groups will send 1 billion won (dollar 719,000) worth of free food to hunger-stricken North Korea by mid-October, government officials said Friday, AP reports from Seoul.

Shipments of 2,510 tons of corn, 200 milk cows and sugar and powdered milk will begin Monday, said the Ministry of National Unification, a government agency in charge of relations with North Korea. For the first time, the civic groups will give the aid directly to North Korea, the ministry said. In the past, all aid has been delivered through UN agencies or the state-controlled Red Cross.

2 hanged in Singapore: Singapore hanged two men yesterday for drug trafficking, a prison official said, Reuters reports from Singapore.

Singaporean Loh Kim Cheng, 31, and Malaysian Mohd Arif bin Mat Rifin, 39, were sentenced to death for drug trafficking in 1997 and 1996 respectively, the Central Narcotics Bureau said in a statement. The city-state executed 16 people in 1997 for various offences, at least 10 of them for drug trafficking.

Jiang Zemin to visit Japan: Chinese President Jiang Zemin plans to make an unprecedented state visit to Japan this year, Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura said yesterday, AFP says from Tokyo.

Jiang's visit was originally scheduled for September 6 to 11 but was postponed due to China suffering its worst floods in more than four decades. It will be the first official visit by a Chinese head of state to Japan.

6 killed in China mine blast: Six investigators were killed and 23 injured when unlicensed miners set off dynamite to stop them probing an illegal gold mine, the China Daily reported yesterday, AFP says from Beijing.

The miners protesting illicit shafts in the Wenyu gold mine central Henan province set off 312 kg of explosives as the team was battling through barriers protecting the tunnels.

Tibetan refugee killed in Nepal: Nepali police fired on Tibetans fleeing their homeland, killing one man and injuring another member of the group, Nepali officials said yesterday, Reuters reports from Kathmandu.

A group of 52 Tibetans clashed with police at Katari village, 260 miles east of Kathmandu, on Tuesday after crossing into Nepal, said Umesh Dhakal, assistant chief district officer. Police said the fleeing Tibetans had attacked the police with stones and dagger-type weapons which they swung on the end of ropes after they were confronted by a security patrol. "The police had to fire in self-defence," police inspector Santosh Chudal said.

2 Rwandans get death penalty: Two Rwandan men received the death sentence Wednesday for genocide and crimes against humanity during the 1994 civil war in the central African state, prosecutors said Thursday, AFP reports from Kigali.

Tatien Iyamuremye and Evariste Nroroye were also found guilty by a court in the northern town of Ruhengeri of illegal possession of weapons and of involvement in a number of murders. The pair were said to have used their positions as local administrators at Nyarutovu in Ruhengeri province to oversee the massacre of Tutsis.

Britain had hand in Mahatma's killing?

NEW DELHI, Sept 18: India's ruling Hindu nationalists have suggested in an article in their party magazine that independence hero Mahatma Gandhi's murder was a British plot, reports AFP.

The cover story of the latest edition of BJP Today suggests that Gandhi, who was shot dead by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu fanatic, in January 1948, was the victim of a plot by British intelligence agents.

The article claimed that Godse, who said he murdered Gandhi because the latter was pro-Muslim, could have been a British "puppet".

The article, written by R Chandrachud, a journalist and a close friend of Gandhi's son, who edited the mass-circulation Hindustan Times daily at the time, said there was a "mystery" of two British men present at the spot where Gandhi was killed.

"Two British consular men were there with their cameras active," he wrote, adding that efforts to trace them the same day for a photograph of the murder drew a blank.

According to Chandrachud, the British High Commission said none of its staff were present at the meeting, and he later learned that the pair had left for London by a BOAC flight on the night of the murder.

"But may be it is not too late to check now. The immigration records in Palam (New Delhi's airport) could be gone through for flights leaving that night to London."

Chandrachud argued that the possible British motive was to prevent Gandhi from visiting Muslim-majority Pakistan, which was partitioned from Hindu-dominated India at the time of independence in 1947.

"At this crucial juncture in Indo-Pakistan relations, in which Whitehall was deeply interested, such a visit could thwart all their carefully drafted plans to keep the two new states at loggerheads all the time, so that they could be mediators."

Chandrachud concludes that "nothing is too diabolical" for the British intelligence, adding: "To get round to Godse through their friends would be child's play for them."

Taliban accuse Iran of killing 56 Afghan refugees

ISLAMABAD, Sept 18: Afghanistan's Taliban army accused Iran on Thursday of killing 56 Afghan refugees living there, reports AP.

Calling the killings "an inhuman act" the Taliban's Radio Shariat broadcast urged the international community to censure Iran.

The accusations come as Iran's armed forces are amassed along the border with Afghanistan and the Taliban army threatens to retaliate to an Iranian assault with medium-range Scud missiles.

The radio broadcast also urged religious leaders from throughout the country to meet in the Afghan capital of Kabul next week to review the current situation and how to defend the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Tensions between the two uneasy neighbours soared following the killing of Iranian diplomats by Taliban troops during last month's takeover of the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif.

The Taliban blamed the

killings on renegade soldiers. But the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office in Pakistan says it has received scores of eyewitness reports that indicate thousands of people were killed in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Most of the dead are believed to have been Shiite Muslims.

The Taliban army, whose soldiers are mostly Sunni Muslims, like most Afghans, is fighting a northern-based alliance which includes Hezb-e-Wahadat, a party of Shiite Muslims. While a minority in Afghanistan, Shiite Muslims are the majority in neighbouring Iran.

The Taliban say that Iran has been arming and training its Shiite Muslim enemies, while Tehran and the Afghan opposition say Pakistan is giving massive amount of weapons and training to the Taliban troops.

The Taliban is seeking UN mediation in the standoff. However, the religious militia has refused to apologise for the killings or hand over an esti-

mated 40 Iranians it is currently holding in Southern Kandahar, its headquarters.

Meanwhile, Iran's foreign minister warned his Pakistani counterpart in Tehran Thursday that Iran was under pressure to launch a military strike in Afghanistan, Iranian television reported.

Kamal Kharrazi urged the Pakistani foreign minister to make sure the Taliban militia in Afghanistan took steps to ease the pressure, the broadcast said.

Iranians have been clamoring for their government to act since the Taliban admitted last week to killing the eight Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist in Mazar-e-Sharif on Aug 8.

Pakistan's Sartaj Aziz flew to Tehran on Thursday for talks aimed at defusing the tension.

"There is significant pressure on the Iranian authorities to resort to military means to avenge the crime," Kharrazi told Aziz, the television reported.

Clinton testimony US House judiciary body yet to approve release of videotape

WASHINGTON, Sept 18: The House Judiciary Committee is trying again to approve release of more information on President Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky following furious arguments over whether to make available phone sex conversations and other lurid material, reports AP.

Exhausted committee members bolted out of their day-long, closed-door meeting Thursday, acknowledging that in Friday's meeting, they likely would have to endure another round of bitter partisanship over the most graphic, salacious material submitted to Congress by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

Starr got so bogged down in debating and defeating Democratic proposals on party-line votes Thursday that members never got to discuss release of Clinton's videotaped, Aug 17 grand jury testimony. The tape is considered the key item in Starr's referral of "substantial and credible" information that may indicate impeachable conduct.

With a 21 to 16 committee majority, Republicans have left no doubt they will use their muscle to override Democratic objections and bring the testimony to the nation's television screens.

While Chairman Henry Hyde, a Republican, characterized debate inside the room

Clinton testimony

as "strongly partisan, vigorously partisan," the nastiness spilled over to disagreements beyond arguments over what material to release.

Top House Republicans demanded an FBI inquiry into an alleged "systematic attempt to intimidate" Hyde and other lawmakers, and the agency pledged to take "appropriate steps" in response. Republicans have blamed the White House for an online magazine story exposing a sexual relationship between Hyde and a married woman in the 1960s. Presidential aides denied involvement.

Senior Committee Democrat John Conyers wrote Hyde a letter, protesting the chairman's acting without his knowledge to seek a copy of Clinton's videotaped deposition in Paula Jones' sexual harassment lawsuit, which the president gave Jan. 17. Hyde sent a letter signed only by himself to US District Judge Susan Webber Wright in Little Rock, Arkansas, asking for the tape, and later told reporters he expects it ultimately will be made public. The judge's law clerk said she was making arrangements to comply.

Clinton's attorney, David Kendall, said in a statement that Starr had earlier refused a request to destroy the Aug. 17 videotape after it was viewed by a grand juror who was absent for the president's testimony. "The only purpose for preserving the tape was to ensure its public release and embarrass the president."

Starr, in response, said he would not comply with this request. Federal law required us to transfer to the House... the videotape, along with all other substantial and credible information that President Clinton had committed perjury and other felonies. We cannot and will not destroy evidence of a crime."

Democrats and Republicans argued vigorously Thursday over Republican attempts to release more salacious material than the Democrats wanted, according to House officials from both parties who were familiar with the discussions.

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Sanctions should target Iraqi leadership, not people: Annan

CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts, Sept 18: As Iraq inchted toward a new crisis with the United Nations on Thursday, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said he would prefer sanctions target the country's leadership, not its people, reports AP.

Annan made the remark at Harvard University after a student told him the UN sanctions were killing babies and asked when the UN Security Council would lift them.

The question came after Annan gave a speech on the world economy to a capacity crowd at Harvard's Memorial Hall. Two men unfurled a red and white banner from the balcony reading: "Welcome Mr Annan, help lift sanctions on Iraq."

Annan said he knows that economic sanctions can be "blunt instruments" and added that the UN could come up with "much more targeted sanctions that are meant to influence the behavior of the leadership" rather than affect the masses.

But Annan said the world should not forget why Iraq was

being punished in the first place. He added he was doing his part to try to keep the current crisis from escalating by keeping a dialogue open.

On Thursday, Annan also dismissed charges by former American arms inspector Scott Ritter that Iraq would be able to reconstitute its biological and chemical weapons capability and deliver a weapon of mass destruction within half a year of the end of UN weapons inspections.

Annan said he stands by the view of his inspector, Richard Butler, that Iraq can successfully comply with the UN demands. He said that Ritter was less qualified to make such judgements because he was familiar with only a small part of the operation.

"We have to put things in context," Annan said. "What we are trying to do is continue disarmament. We're trying to get Iraq to cooperate until we can certify that it can't threaten and reconstitute its programme."



Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is presented with a ceremonial bow and arrow by supporters at this residence in New Delhi Thursday. — AP/UNB photo

Iraqi Kurdish factions agree to power-sharing

WASHINGTON, Sept 18: Leaders of the two main Kurdish factions in Iraq have agreed to a power sharing arrangement after hostilities between the two groups left more than 3,000 people dead, reports AFP.

The agreement, sealed by a ceremonial handshake between Massud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, comes after six months of mediation by Washington, Turkey and Britain, signatories to a 1994 ceasefire between the factions.

"Our people are looking forward to having a united, democratic, federative Iraq," Talabani said at a State Department press conference.

Barzani, who heads the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), have clashed since 1994 over control of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The power-sharing agreement, described by the official as a "transitional phase," will pave the way for elections in 1999 establishing a regional assembly for the territory, the State Department official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Gunmen kill city official in Karachi

KARACHI, Sept 18: Gunmen today killed a senior municipal official in an ambush in Pakistan's violence-plagued port city of Karachi, police said, reports AFP.

The assailants gunned down Farid Ahmed Sheikh, a director at the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC), in the main business centre, they said.

Police said the attackers intercepted the car of 32-year-old Sheikh at a traffic signal, while he was on his way to work. Describing it as a "targeted killing" police said another employee sitting next to him was injured in the attack.

The murder of Sheikh, who was the brother of a senior journalist working for the country's largest circulated Urdu-language daily, Jang, was the third KMC official slain here this month.

Epilepsy no longer ground for divorce in India

NEW DELHI, Sept 18: Epilepsy will no longer be a ground for divorce or for annulling marriage, the union cabinet decided last night, reports PTI.

The cabinet, which met under chairmanship of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, approved a proposal for further amending the Marriage Laws (amendment) Bill, 1997, in parliament.

An official spokesman told news persons that amendments had become necessary in the marriage laws with the passage of time.

Under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 and Special Marriage Act, 1954, epilepsy was a ground for divorce as it had been equated to a certain form of insanity.

However, government has been receiving representations from eminent doctors, members of parliament and experts saying that equating epilepsy to insanity amounted to great injustice to people suffering from the ailment.

LTTE's truce for immunisation campaign

COLOMBO, Sept 18: Sri Lanka's separatist Tamil Tiger rebels have declared four "days of tranquility" in the embattled northeast to facilitate a polio immunisation campaign, UNICEF said, reports AFP.

UNICEF said Thursday its Colombo office had received a letter from the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), agreeing to observe September 18-19 and October 23-24 as "days of tranquility" to facilitate the campaign.

The LTTE's letter was in response to a request from Colin Glennie, UNICEF representative in Sri Lanka, a UNICEF Statement said.

Off the Record

And now in paperback...

NEW YORK: Picture a cold winter's night at home, the fire burning, hot cocoa steaming and you with plenty of time for a good book. How about curling up with a copy of the Kenneth Starr report?

It's available, of course, in paperback. The 445-page report detailing the relationship between President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky has already been posted on the Internet, printed in newspapers and quoted around the clock on TV and radio, reports AP.

But people are paying as much as \$10 for a paperback copy and more than 1 million have been printed. Gene Taft, a spokesman for PublicAffairs, which is printing copies of the report, said the book is "flying off the shelves."

'Gangster' way of seeking justice!
ISTANBUL: "Don't hire a lawyer, hire a judge," is a popular Turkish slogan for those with legal problems, reflecting the widespread disillusionment with Turkey's judiciary, reports AFP.

But many aggrieved citizens nowadays find that hiring a gangster is a faster and cheaper way of seeking redress for perceived injustices.

Although politicians are fond of stressing that Turkey is ruled by law, a recent poll showed that less than 10 per cent of the population shared this conviction.

Some 3.5 million cases are currently underway in Turkish courts, according to court of appeals judge Naci Unver, involving 10 million defendants and plaintiffs.

"This means that one out of six people in the street is currently involved in a legal struggle," Unver said.

Criminal trials drag on for an average of 191 days, according to government statistics, with some murder cases exceeding the 20-year limitation period.