

Israeli ratification of peace accord

Palestinians reject conditions, file official complaint

JERUSALEM, Nov 12: After several postponements, the Israeli government has narrowly approved the latest Mideast peace accord calling for withdrawal from parts of the West Bank. But the ministers attached several conditions that were immediately rejected by Palestinian officials, reports AP.

The stipulations, and a threat to annex West Bank land if the Palestinians do not comply, did not ease the concerns of one of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's key constituencies — right-wing Jews who live in settlements in the West Bank.

The settlers rejected the Cabinet's decision on Wednesday and said they would take as much West Bank land as they could before Israel begins its promised troop withdrawal.

Under the deal, signed last month in Washington, Israel is to begin a phased withdrawal from 13 per cent of the West Bank on Monday in return for Palestinian security measures against Islamic militants.

Wednesday's vote had been delayed several times, in part

due to a suicide bombing in Jerusalem by an Islamic militant last week.

Netanyahu adviser David Bar-Illan said the pullback would likely not begin for at least another week, following a parliamentary vote scheduled on Tuesday.

Approval in the Knesset is necessary for Israel to begin the withdrawal. With the conditions set by the Cabinet, the fragile deal will likely face more obstacles before it is carried out.

The Cabinet will meet before each stage of the phased pullback to vote on whether the Palestinians were meeting Israel's security demands. If not, ministers would have the option to halt the process by voting against the next phase.

Netanyahu said the agreement would stop altogether if the Palestinian National Council, the Palestinian parliament-in-exile, does not hold a formal vote by mid-December to revoke clauses in the PLO founding charter that call for Israel's destruction.

Under the agreement, the PNC is to convene to reaffirm

changes it voted on in April 1996 and does not mention a vote.

Any additional pullback would turn over no more than one per cent of the West Bank to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's control.

And at a news conference following the vote, Netanyahu said Israel "reserves the right" to annex large chunks of the West Bank if Arafat makes good on a threat to declare independence next May.

Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan in 1967. The Palestinians, who make up the vast majority of the West Bank population, hope to establish an independent homeland in the territory.

Palestinian officials said the conditions were violations of the accord signed in the presence of US President Bill Clinton in Washington on October 23.

"We spoke to the American administration and filed an official complaint regarding the conditions. We asked Netanyahu before to stop the threats and conditions, but he chose threats, which means he

does not want there to be trust between us," said an angry Saeb Erekat, a senior Palestinian official who helped negotiate the accord.

After seven hours of debate Wednesday, eight of 17 ministers voted in favour of the condition-riddled deal. But five ministers abstained and four voted against it, a move that showed the allegiances are with the settlers and not the prime minister.

But in a boost for Netanyahu, hawkish Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon voted for the deal. Sharon's refusal to reveal where he stood on the accord before the vote led to speculation that he would abstain.

Calling himself the father of settlements, Sharon appealed to the right wing to trust the accord and said the government would continue to expand Jewish settlements. As housing minister in the early 1990s, Sharon oversaw a dramatic expansion of settlements.

Today, the government was to begin accepting contract bids for a new Jewish neighbourhood on a disputed Jerusalem hilltop.



An Israeli right-wing demonstrator wears a Clinton mask on Wednesday as he demonstrates in Tel Aviv along with thousands of other right-wing Israelis against turning over parts of the West Bank to Palestinian control following the ratification of the Wye accord by the Israeli government. The Israeli Cabinet, following some US prodding, ratified the peace agreement with the Palestinians on Wednesday, setting the stage for an Israeli troop withdrawal from 13 per cent of the West Bank by the end of January. — AP/UNB photo

Candidate for Delhi state assembly killed

NEW DELHI, Nov 12: The assassination of a candidate for the Delhi state assembly — apparently the first political killing before local elections later this month — is straining relations in the ruling coalition, reports AP.

Ved Singh, who had defected from the governing Bharatiya Janata Party to run for the smaller Samata Party, was gunned down Tuesday night just 300 meters (yards) from his home as he was ending a day of campaigning. Two associates were badly wounded.

The Election Commission suspended the race for the seat in Singh's constituency.

Voting for the Delhi assembly is one of four state elections to be held November 25, in the first test of the public mood since Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party took office in March.

Defence Minister George Fernandes, leader of the Samata Party, was quoted as calling the slaying a political murder, and said he would discuss it with Vajpayee. His party demanded an investigation of BJP politicians allegedly linked to the case.

The BJP and the Samata Party are allies in the national politics, but competitors in local politics. The Samata Party is one of the 19 parties in the ruling coalition, controlling 12 of the partnership's 276 seats.

Vajpayee urged to restore strength of army in Tripura

NEW DELHI, Nov 12: Left party leaders on Wednesday demanded Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's intervention to restore the strength of army in Tripura warning that the situation in the state was extremely serious, reports PTI.

General secretaries of CPI-M and CPI, Harkishan Singh Surjeet and AB Bardhan who met the prime minister, urged him to "reassess the gravity of the situation and intervene personally to ensure that more security forces are immediately despatched."

The prime minister assured them that he will do whatever is necessary in the matter, a CPI-M statement said.

The two leaders also demanded augmenting of paramilitary forces in the state and said while 18 battalions of the BSF were needed to patrol the 824 km international border, only half the strength was available.

After the BJP-led government came to power at the centre, two of the three army battalions stationed in the Left Front-ruled Tripura were withdrawn, the statement said.

Surjeet and Bardhan told the prime minister that there was steep rise in extremist attacks on innocent people in the recent past.

AZT protects babies from AIDS virus

BOSTON, Nov 12: The drug AZT appears to protect babies from catching the AIDS virus from their mothers, even if treatment begins only after birth, reports AP.

AZT is already the standard medicine to prevent maternal transmission of the AIDS virus. Typically, doctors give the medicine to mothers during their last 14 weeks of pregnancy as well as to babies for six weeks after birth.

However, sometimes the full course of treatment cannot be given, often because HIV-infected women do not seek prenatal care. So doctors at the New York State Department of Health in Albany reviewed medical records to see what happened when AZT was started late.

They found that even the shorter treatment cuts the risk substantially. Even if treatment began only at birth, this reduced the chance of catching the virus by two-thirds.

The study, directed by Dr. Nancy A Wade, was published in Thursday's issue of the New England Journal of Medicine.

Key party defects to opposition

Turkish govt on brink of collapse

ANKARA, Nov 12: The minority government was on the brink of collapse Thursday after a key party defected to the opposition camp over a privatisation scandal, reports AP.

Deniz Baykal, leader of the Republican People's Party, was to file a no-confidence motion on Thursday against Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz. Two other opposition parties lodged no-confidence motions a day earlier, accusing Yilmaz of abuse of powers and ties to organised crime. The no-confidence motions were not expected to be debated before next week.

A businessman linked to the mafia claimed Yilmaz interfered in the privatisation of a state-run bank by pledging him loans that would ensure that his was the highest bid.

Yilmaz has maintained that he wanted to keep the mafia out of the deal and was trying to get the highest price possible from the sale.

Yilmaz has repeatedly said he would not resign. However, with no hope of surviving opposition moves to bring him down, it was unclear he would

change his mind and quit.

"I am a minority government. I cannot resist, if Baykal withdraws support that is the end of the government," Yilmaz said early Thursday speaking on private Kanal D television.

The Republicans are toppling," Daily Hürriyet headlined while Milliyet newspaper said: "The premier is in trouble."

It was also unclear who would be appointed to replace Yilmaz's government until elections scheduled for April. Daily Sabah suggested President Suleyman Demirel would appoint an interim government of independent, non-partisan figures.

Yilmaz came to power in July 1997 after the military pressured an Islamic-led government out of office for its anti-secular policies. With the backing of the Republicans, Yilmaz has since then been campaigning against radical Islam and organised crime at the urging of the military.

Turkey has witnessed the collapse of three governments since the last elections held in 1995.

Diplomatic solution preferred

Baghdad must comply with Annan's proposal: UNSC

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 12: The UN Security Council strongly backed UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's appeal to Saddam Hussein to immediately resume cooperation with UN weapons inspectors, reports AP.

US Deputy Ambassador Peter Burtleigh, the current council president, said Wednesday that all 15 members would prefer a diplomatic solution over military action to force Saddam to comply.

But subsequently — in comments made in his role as acting US ambassador — Burtleigh said that "the ball is in Iraq's court" and emphasised that Annan's statement means Iraq must cooperate.

The United States has threatened airstrikes unless Iraq resumes cooperation.

Iraq has said it will not cooperate with inspectors from the UN Special Commission, known as UNSCOM, until the Security Council begins to lift an embargo imposed after Iraq forces invaded Kuwait in 1990, sparking the Gulf War.

The Security Council maintains the embargo won't be lifted until UN inspectors cer-

tify that Iraq has eliminated its weapons of mass destruction.

Annan on Wednesday called the council's offer to conduct a comprehensive review of UN resolutions "a genuine opportunity" to move toward lifting sanctions.

"The comprehensive review will map out the remaining steps, provided Iraq cooperates, thus allowing them to see light at the end of the tunnel," he said in a statement.

"This would be good for the Iraqi people, for the region and for the world," he said.

Annan cut short a trip to North Africa and was to return to UN headquarters Thursday.

Russia requested the emergency council meeting after 233 UN personnel were pulled out of Iraq early Wednesday because of the possibility of US airstrikes to compel Iraq to resume cooperation with UN inspectors.

Russia, China and France had been angry that the council had not been informed immediately of UN weapons inspector Richard Butler's decision to suddenly withdraw the entire inspection team from Iraq.

But UN security coordinator

Benon Sevan told the council that prior evacuations of UN personnel were not publicised, according to diplomats at the closed meeting.

After the council meeting, Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov said his concerns were allayed.

There are circumstances under which the programme managers have to think about the safety of the people who work under their authority," he said.

The council didn't discuss any new diplomatic initiatives. But British Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock told CNN earlier that "the diplomatic move isn't dead yet." Still, he said a military solution is now "a serious option."

Iraq says it will not cooperate with weapons inspectors until the council commits to a timetable to lift economic sanctions.

The council is sharply divided over the use of force against Iraq. The United States and Britain maintain that they can take military action, based on previous UN resolutions. Russia and China insist that fresh council approval is needed.

Indonesian army chief appeals for restraint after clashes

JAKARTA, Nov 12: Military chief Gen. Wiranto appealed for restraint on Thursday after clashes pitting student protesters against riot police and government-backed civilian guards, reports AP.

Even as he spoke, students gathered for a third day of demonstrations against a meeting of Indonesia's highest legislative body, which has pledged to overhaul a rigid political system.

Activists are skeptical that the People's Consultative Assembly is willing to shake off its legacy as an authoritarian instrument of former President Suharto. The former army general quit in May after riots and protests against his 32-year rule.

Violence erupted on Wednesday when a car carrying student activists plowed into a group of riot officers, injuring nine and prompting enraged soldiers to fire warning shots and club protesters.

Wiranto apologised for the

beatings of several protesters and three local news photographers. Urging restraint on all sides, he pointed out that the military was not the only culprit.

"Some of my subordinates were victims in the incident," he said at a news conference.

The male driver of the car, a student from the prestigious University of Indonesia, was arrested. His family said he had panicked and accelerated into a soldiers' barricade after officers rapped on his car with sticks.

At another protest Wednesday, two female students were hospitalised in serious condition after they were run down by a car. Privately owned RCTI television quoted witnesses as saying military personnel were in the vehicle.

On Thursday, security forces closed off roads around the green-dome Parliament, where the assembly is meeting to draw up rules for general elections in 1999. Some 30,000 police and soldiers are on duty in the capital this week.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II smiles to war veterans during the ceremonies commemorating the 80th anniversary of the end of World War I, on Wednesday in Paris. — AP/UNB photo

Fate of disputed Kuril Islands to dominate Russia-Japan summit

MOSCOW, Nov 12: The fate of the disputed Kuril Islands was in the balance on Thursday as President Boris Yeltsin prepared to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and reportedly deliver his long-awaited response to Japan's proposals to resolve the conflict, reports AP.

The four islands north of Japan and known in that country as the Northern Territories were once held by Tokyo but have been controlled by Moscow since the end of World War II. Both nations claimed ownership, and the dispute is the main reason the two haven't signed a formal peace treaty for the war.

Former Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto presented new proposals for ending the dispute when he and Yeltsin met in Japan in April. The proposals have not been made public. Media reports have said Tokyo suggests taking over the islands legally but allowing Russia to retain control for some time.

Yeltsin has long stalled, but is expected to finally give an answer when he meets with Obuchi behind closed doors on Thursday, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

The Kremlin does intend

to disclose the proposal or Yeltsin's response, ITAR-Tass said.

During their summit in Krasnoyarsk in November 1997, Yeltsin and Hashimoto pledged to make the utmost effort to sign a peace treaty by 2000. But Japan wants the treaty to spell out the status of the Kurils.

"I believe that our generation carries the responsibility for making sure that the problems that have arisen in this century are solved before it is over and are not shifted to the shoulders of our children and grandchildren," Obuchi told the Russian daily newspaper Izvestia in an interview published on Wednesday.

Tokyo got legal control of the islands now in contention — Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai islets — in a treaty with Russia in 1875. The Soviet Union took them back in the closing days of World War II, a move Japan has protested ever since as illegal.

The islands total only about 4,000 square miles (10,350 square kilometres), slightly larger than the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. The waters around them, however, are rich fishing grounds.

Burundian army express regret for killing civilians

BUJUMBURA, Nov 12: Burundian's army, in a rare apology, expressed regret on Wednesday for killing innocent civilians in an operation to hunt down rebels, reports AP.

The army said early reports indicated 30 people were wrongly killed, but it said investigators would later determine the exact number and who was to blame.

Survivors said the minority Tutsi-led army killed more than 100 mostly Hutu civilians in retaliation for a Hutu rebel attack on a nearby camp for Tutsis.

Rebels attacked the camp at Maramvya, 35 km southeast of the capital, Bujumbura, the night of October 30-31, killing five people, survivors told independent radio Studio Ijamba.

The army said the Force for the Defence of Democracy (FDD) and the National Liberation Front (FNL) were to blame.

"The innocent civilians were killed following confusion when the army was tracking down FDD and FNL armed groups in the region," an army statement said.

The army attack early last week was the deadliest since a third round of peace talks ended in October with little progress.

Myanmar govt has no plans to expel Suu Kyi

YANGON, Nov 12: Myanmar's military government has no plans to expel opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, despite recent speculation it may want her out of the country, a senior junta spokesman said on Wednesday.

"What the man in the street is saying is deal with this problem by getting rid of her," said leading junta spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Hla Min in an interview with AFP.

"This is not a government policy," said Hla Min, who is a senior figure in the government's Office of Strategic Studies.

Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the main opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party and icon of anti-government activists at home and abroad, has been involved in a series of recent standoffs with the authorities after leaving her compound in downtown Yangon.

The NLD won 1990 polls here which the military refused to recognise and has carried out a lengthy campaign for the convening of the elected Parliament.

Some analysts have pondered whether the government will round off a campaign of arrests and detentions of NLD members by forcing Aung San Suu Kyi into exile.

The official media has meanwhile carried strident

calls for her to be deported.

The opposition party in recent weeks has been scores of members resign, evidence, the government claims, of dissatisfaction within the NLD of her leadership.

However, the NLD accused military intelligence of using force and coercion to make NLD members resign, in a letter to senior General Than Shwe last week, which was released late Tuesday.

The letter asks him to see that the action by military intelligence is stopped immediately and strongly condemns the policy.

Hundreds of NLD activists have been detained in recent months and sent to government "guesthouses" in a sweep which could be an attempt to wipe out the party's activities, Myanmar analysts say.

Many of those detained have since been released, but officials said Tuesday that around 300 were still being held. The NLD claims 920 remain in custody.

Hla Min accused the NLD of being unfit to govern and incapable of uniting Myanmar's diverse ethnic groupings.

The military was the only institution able to maintain stability, he said, adding that if ethnic parties were allowed to add their support to the NLD "we would have civil war in the country."

'Impeachment inquiry against Clinton should be abandoned'

WASHINGTON, Nov 12: Several congressional Republicans said on Wednesday attempts to impeach President Bill Clinton were doomed to failure with a key Senator suggesting dropping the effort in favour of criminal prosecution after he leaves office, reports Reuter.

Republican Sen Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania said the impeachment inquiry should be abandoned in favour of criminal prosecution of Clinton after he leaves office in 2001, saying members of Congress were searching for a way out of an impeachment process that was "going nowhere."

Representative Mark Souder of Indiana, a conservative Republican who signed a petition pushing Clinton's impeachment long before the Monica Lewinsky scandal said "there were not enough votes in the house for impeachment."

"I don't believe at this time with the information that I have that I would vote for impeachment," Souder said. He said the inquiry should be halted until there was a case against Clinton that involved more than perjury and sex allegations.



Portuguese Nobel Prize for Literature winner, Jose Saramago holes up one of his books at a press conference at Madrid's Circulo de Bellas Artes on Wednesday during a presentation. The Alfaguara publishing company has repackaged and made available, the whole collection of Saramago's works. — AP/UNB photo