

International

Arafat visits Israel for secret meet with Barak

JERUSALEM, Sept 17 : Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat made a rare visit to Israel for a secret overnight meeting with Prime Minister Ehud Barak to advance negotiations on a final peace accord.

"It was a positive and important meeting," a Palestinian official told AFP on Friday.

The main aim of the meeting was to create a suitable grounding for fruitful and positive talks on the final status (of the Palestinian territories) and implementation of interim agreements," he said.

Israel and the Palestinians formally launched final status negotiations at a ceremony on Monday with the aim of reaching a comprehensive peace agreement by September 2000.

But the Palestinian official

said the meeting, held near Tel Aviv, was not a negotiating session but more of a general discussion.

"It was a positive meeting," said Barak's advisor David Zisso, declining to give more details about the encounter.

It was the first time Arafat has been in Israel since he paid a condolence visit to Leah Rabin, the widow of former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin who was slain by a right-wing extremist in November 1995.

The two leaders last met on September 13 for the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh accord in Egypt, which paved the way for the launch of the final status talks and ended a 10-month impasse in peacemaking.

Israeli radio said Barak had telephoned Levy on Friday morning to apologise for not informing him, saying it was the result of a "technical" error.

Russian police find 4 tonnes of explosives

Two dead in St Petersburg blast, minister rules out terror link

SAINT PETERSBURG, Sept 17 : Two people died in an explosion in a block of flats in Russia's second city, but interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo on Friday quickly ruled out a link with a wave of bomb attacks which have left almost 300 dead, reports AFP.

Police were quoted by the Itar-Tass news agency as saying that the blast was caused by a bomb, with the strength of 4-5 kilograms (10 to 12 pounds) of TNT which exploded just before midnight on the sixth-floor of the building.

An AFP correspondent on the scene saw the bodies of two pensioners at the site of the blast and police confirmed that the toll stood at two. NTV television initially reported that four people had been killed.

The blast in the port district happened just before midnight (2000 GMT) on the sixth-floor of the building, but Rushailo insisted the explosion was "absolutely not linked" to five bomb attacks across Russia since August 31.

This incident is not part of the chain of bombings," ITAR-TASS quoted him as saying following a meeting of the government.

Initial reports after the blast late Thursday suggested it might have been caused by a gas leak but police were quoted by ITAR-TASS as saying that a bomb had gone off.

Rushailo said the explosion was probably an accident, noting that a jerrycan of petrol (gasoline) stored in a neighbouring apartment had also erupted, adding to the force of the blast.

However, he also noted that the editor of a Saint Petersburg newspaper who was politically active lived in the building, suggesting that the blast may have targeted him.

Two pensioners aged 60 and 70 years old died in the explosion, police told AFP. The three injured people were treated for burns, emergency officials said.

Whatever the cause, the latest explosion further jangled Russian nerves set on edge by four massive bomb attacks on residential blocks since September 4, an unprecedented campaign of terror which has left 291 people dead.

It came less than 24 hours after an enormous truck bomb devastated a housing estate in the southern city of Volgograd, killing 17 people and wounding scores more.

The attack came amid a nationwide security clampdown

across Russia's 11 time zones ordered by President Boris Yeltsin, who Thursday vowed to face down the terrorists, pledging "they will not break us."

No group has yet claimed responsibility for Thursday's attack. But an unidentified caller to ITAR-TASS on Wednesday claimed two previous attacks in Moscow and a third in Dagestan on behalf of the little-known Dagestan Liberation Army.

The caller, who spoke with a Caucasus accent, said two blasts at Moscow apartment blocks and a devastating car bomb on a military hostel in Dagestan were a "warning" to Moscow to halt its month-long campaign to crush separatist Muslim militants in the southern Russian republic of Dagestan.

Earlier, two Chechens were arrested in Moscow for alleged involvement in the deadly bomb attacks on the Russian and the provincial city of Volgograd since September 4.

Close to 300 people have died in four blasts at apartment blocks in Moscow, the southern Russian republic of Dagestan and the provincial city of Volgograd since September 4.

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A firefighter stands on the balcony of an apartment after an explosion ripped through the building in St. Petersburg Friday. Two people died in the blast, three were injured, but Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo on Friday quickly ruled out a link with a wave of bomb attacks that left almost 300 dead.

—AFP photo

99 pc of Algerians support peace plan in referendum

ALGIERS, Sept 17 : Algerian voters overwhelmingly supported President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's peace plan at a referendum Thursday, with 98.63 percent of votes cast in favour of the scheme, interior minister Abdelmalek Sellal announced, reports AFP.

A total of 14,591,064 people voted "yes" in the referendum with just 202,151 no votes cast.

The final turnout rate in the referendum was put at 85.06 percent of the 17.5 million eligible voters, the minister said earlier Friday.

The referendum was a test of Bouteflika's "civil reconciliation" program, the cornerstone of which is a law granting full or partial amnesty to Islamic militants who surrender, as long as they are not guilty of "blood crimes" or rape.

24 die as train bus collide in Central Java

JAKARTA, Sept 17 : At least 24 people were killed when a passenger train slammed into a passenger bus in Central Java, an official report said, reports AFP.

Five other people were severely injured in the collision early Thursday at a crossing in the town of Pemalang, about 350 kilometres (218 miles) east of Jakarta, the Antara news agency reported.

All of the victims were from the passenger bus which was dragged 700 meters (yards) away from the crossing by the train that was on way from East Java capital of Surabaya to Jakarta.

It quoted 1st Lt. Muslim of the local police as saying the crossing was left open by the guard who was sleeping when the train was coming.

BRIEFLY

6 die in Guatemala plane crash

Six people died in Thursday when the small plane they were flying in crashed some 280 kilometers north of the capital Guatemala City in Guatemala officials said, AFP reports from Guatemala City.

The plane took off at about 12:00 local (18:00 GMT) from La Aurora international airport in Guatemala City bound for the plantation near the northern town of Coban, Zimeri said. The cause of the crash was not immediately known.

US MIA team leaves for Vietnam

A team of 98 US military specialists leave for Vietnam Friday with hopes of recovering remains that may lead to the identification of American servicemen listed as missing in action in the Vietnam War, a press release said, AP reports from Hanoi.

The team will join Vietnamese counterparts Tuesday to begin joint investigations and recovery operations in 23 provinces and cities during the 30-day operation, the US Department of Defense release said.

Annan for tough measures to protect civilians in war

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 17 : The Security Council resumes debate Friday on a report by Secretary General Kofi Annan urging it to adopt 40 measures to strengthen the UN's capacity to protect civilians in times of war, reports AFP.

"Civilians have become targets in today's conflicts," Annan told the Council when the debate began Thursday.

"Belligerents are increasingly taking care to avoid direct confrontation with each other. Instead their favoured strategy to gain ground is the exercise of terror against defenceless citizens," Annan said.

He warned the Council that "failure to address these issues will erode respect for the Council's resolutions and so diminish the authority of the United Nations as a whole."

The two-day debate had not been scheduled as a decision-making session but a Western diplomat said a draft resolution had been circulated among Council members.

The report recalled that more than half a million people died during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda where "entire families were executed in their homes and whole villages brutalised in

an orchestrated campaign of mass extermination."

In the past two years in Sierra Leone more than 5,000 people had been deliberately mutilated, while in Burundi a quarter of a million people had been killed, the report said.

"We are the end of a century that has seen the creation and refinement of much of the corpus of international law," Annan said.

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The decision was passed by parliament on Thursday but will also have to be approved by the president.

Also agreed was the formation of 32 new districts. Kompas said.

Indonesia currently has 27 provinces, including East Timor which the United Nations does not recognize as Indonesian territory.

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Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi listens to a question during a debate with two other candidates, ex-Liberal Democratic Party secretary general Koichi Kato and former chief policy coordinator Taku Yamasaki, for their presidential race of ruling LDP at the Japan National Press Club in Tokyo Friday. —AFP photo

Obuchi clears debate for re-election

TOKYO, Sept 17 : Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi cleared a key political debate with his two tough rivals on Friday, taking another step forward to his re-election as head of the ruling party, reports AFP.

Obuchi took part in the televised debate, which came ahead of Tuesday's election, with opponents from his Liberal Democratic Party: former party secretary general Koichi Kato and Taku Yamasaki, a former policy chief.

The two candidates criticised Obuchi's plan to form a three-party coalition, saying there was a wide policy gap between the three parties involved: the LDP, the Liberal Party and the New Komeito Party.

But Obuchi replied: "By forming a coalition, we can work hard together and create better ideas, which is our advantage."

Fresh Iraqi incursion in Kuwait

KUWAIT CITY, Sept 17 : Two Kuwaiti guards shot dead along the Iraqi border were killed by "aggressors" who had penetrated well into the emirate's territory before opening fire, press reports said Friday, reports AFP.

But the interior ministry said earlier Friday that Lieutenants Awad Ramadan al-Zafiri and Abdullah al-Matiri were killed by gunfire from Iraqi territory.

The official KUNA news agency said Thursday the pair were killed while carrying out a routine patrol on the Kuwaiti side of the border.

"The two agents were injured by bullets fired from the Iraqi side and died after being flown by helicopter to a hospital in Jahra in northwest Kuwait," it said.

Kuwait's Al-Anbaa newspaper said two other guards were injured in the attack and had been hospitalised. It described the incident as "a new act of piracy committed by the Iraqi regime."

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