

Israel agrees to share parts of Jerusalem

Albright steers ME peace talks

JERUSALEM, July 21: Israel has agreed to a US proposal to share sovereignty over certain parts of occupied East Jerusalem with the Palestinians, a Cabinet minister said today, for the first time breaking the taboo of the "indivisibility of the Holy City," reports AFP.

An impasse over the future of the city almost led to the collapse of the marathon peace negotiations at the Camp David US presidential retreat in Maryland, with both Israel and the Palestinians coveting it as their capital.

Minister without portfolio Michael Melchior said Prime Minister Ehud Barak has agreed to a US proposal that Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority could have joint sovereignty over certain areas in the eastern sector which is home to about 200,000 Arabs.

"We are speaking of administrative powers plus signs of sovereignty, a type of joint sovereignty over these districts but excluding the Old City," he told public radio.

The ancient walled Old City, a labyrinth of cobbled streets covering about one square

kilometre (less than half a square mile) is home to sites holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims.

Melchior said Israel could annex to Jerusalem several Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank on the outskirts of the city, including Maale Adumim, the largest settlement.

"There is no question of Palestinian sovereignty over east Jerusalem as this proposal does not put at risk Barak's red lines," he said.

But plans for a divided east Jerusalem have already been rejected by the Palestinians and are also likely to face stiff opposition from the Israeli public.

Israel captured and annexed east Jerusalem in the Middle East war 33 years ago and claims it as part of its eternal undivided capital, a position not recognised by the international community.

"The Palestinians are united in their position on Jerusalem, the capital, that must be returned to its Palestinian owners," Palestinian minister of parliamentary affairs Nabil Amir told official television.

The Palestinians want the

sector as the capital of an independent state they have vowed to declare by September, the deadline for a final peace deal.

On Thursday, Palestinian sources said Israel had proposed dividing east Jerusalem into three sectors -- one under full Israeli control, another under Palestinian control but without sovereignty and a third where the Palestinians had civilian authority but Israel retained security control.

Israel also proposed that the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, be put under the custody of the United Nations and certain Arab and Islamic nations, while the Palestinians would have the right to raise their flag there.

"Arafat rejected all these proposals and insisted on the return of all of east Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state," a source close to the talks said.

An opinion poll published in Yediot found that 70 per cent of Israelis opposed any peace deal with the Palestinians that involved giving up land in East Jerusalem.

And 61 per cent said they did

not think that a "true peace" could be achieved with the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright steered the Middle East peace talks here into their eleventh day, as President Bill Clinton hinted he might be back from Japan earlier than expected.

The US president arrived Friday in Okinawa to attend the Group of Eight summit. He was a day late, after a bit of brinkmanship to keep Israeli and Palestinian negotiators at the table in an effort to reach an accord.

Shortly after his arrival, however, White House spokesman Joe Lockhart told reporters that Clinton might cut short his attendance at the summit.

"We might go back a little early," he told reporters, without saying when the president might depart. He was scheduled to return on Sunday.

Albright, meanwhile, prepared for the eleventh day of intensive Middle East peace talks, resuscitated after their overnight death.

Clinton, Putin hold summit

NAGO, Japan, July 21: US President Bill Clinton and Russian President Vladimir Putin met here today on the sidelines of the Group of Eight summit, reports AFP.

Russia's opposition to the mooted development of a US National Missile Defence (NMD) shield was expected to be at the top of the agenda, as Clinton admitted to reporters before the meeting.

"We discussed it last month (when the two leaders met in Moscow) and I am sure that we will discuss it today," Clinton said.

Washington must decide by the end of this year whether to erect the ballistic rocket shield -- which would shoot down incoming nuclear missiles -- to counter the perceived threat posed by North Korea and hostile states like Iraq and Iran.

Putin will use as ammunition his landmark visit to Pyongyang on Monday during which he won a pledge from North Korea to halt its missile programme.

The isolated Communist state offered to freeze its controversial missile program in exchange for access to foreign space rocket technology.

Putin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin warned on Tuesday during a Beijing summit meeting that the 60-billion-dollar shield would spark a new arms race.

Cops clock Straw's speeding car

LONDON, July 21: British Home Secretary Jack Straw was forced to an embarrassing halt by police who caught his car speeding, the Home Office said today, reports AFP.

According to the tabloid Sun daily, he was being driven at one-and-a-half times the speed limit.

Straw's Cabinet position means he is nominally in charge of the country's police forces.

But that counted for little when his official Jaguar car was spotted going at 165 km per hour on a motorway in western England.

Straw was not driving. He was sitting in the back. Instead, his chauffeur was booked for speeding and could face a ban.

Ironically, the Jaguar was an "unmarked police car," according to the Home Office. More embarrassingly, the driver was a Special Branch policeman.

A Home Office spokesman confirmed that his official car had been stopped, saying that police were still investigating and it would be inappropriate to comment further.

Delhi, Beijing to hold talks on nuclear proliferation

NEW DELHI, July 21: Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan arrives in New Delhi today to begin talks with Indian leaders aimed at narrowing differences over nuclear and missile proliferation and a 40-year-old border dispute, reports Reuters.

Tang is the highest ranking Chinese official to visit since India's nuclear tests in May 1998 soured ties.

He will hold talks with his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh and call on Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Saturday.

The visit is part of a high-level dialogue which seeks to improve understanding between the two countries, a foreign ministry spokesman said.

A key area of concern for New Delhi was "credible, published reports" of Chinese missile transfers to arch-rival Pakistan, the spokesman said.

India has consistently pointed the finger at China, with whom it fought a border war in 1962, for helping Pakistan's nuclear and missile programmes.

The New York Times newspaper recently reported that US intelligence agencies, in a series

of classified briefings to Congress, had described how China stepped up the shipment of specialty steels, guidance systems and technical expertise to Pakistan.

"It is a matter on which our concerns remain," the Indian spokesman said when asked if Chinese missile assistance to

Gunmen kill two Guatemala Indian activists

GUATEMALA CITY, July 21: Three masked gunmen shot and killed a Guatemalan Indian peasant leader and his secretary yesterday after ambushing their car some 30 miles (48 km) west of Guatemala City, police said, reports Reuters.

"They shot them at point-blank range," said Cristobal Morales, police spokesman for Solola department, where the attack occurred.

Jose Alfredo Quino and Maria Elena Mejia, both Maya Indians, were members of the Regional Coordination of Integrated Cooperatives (CORCI), a peasant organisation working to resolve land disputes in the area.

Pakistan would figure in talks with Tang.

Islamabad has since denied US reports on missile collaboration with China and said it ran an independent programme.

China has also denied its involvement and has urged India to honour a United Nations Security Council resolution that asks both New Delhi and Islamabad to roll back their nuclear and missile programmes.

India and Pakistan conducted tit-for-tat nuclear tests in May 1998, earning worldwide ire and sanctions.

Boundary dispute

Indian officials said progress in resolving a boundary dispute with China would be reviewed in Saturday's talks.

Diplomats and military officials from two sides have made slow progress in resolving disagreements over the 4,500-km Himalayan border that divides the world's two most populous countries.

Both India and China are committed to seeking a fair, mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question," the spokesman said.

threats of civil war.

Newly named as president, Iloilo is insisting a more prominent role in government for Speight's allies, but interim Prime Minister Garase is opposed.

On Friday Speight spoke ahead of a series of meetings at the Centra Hotel in the capital Suva, where most of the international media are staying.

He would give little away about meetings between the army, his allies and the proposed interim administration.

There is mounting speculation here that the army will reimpose martial law, first declared on May 29 after Speight's supporters rioted through Suva looting ethnic Indian businesses, if the impasse continues.

The country's only hydroelectric power station remains in rebel hands and the northern town of Labasa is in anarchy with Speight supporters controlling the army base.

Speight, unhappy with the proposed administration, managed to postpone its appointment this week with

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The final line-up will be announced as soon as possible and in the meantime (Prime Minister) Laisenia Garase and his caretaker cabinet are conducting the affairs of the nation," he said.

On May 19 Speight seized parliament in the capital Suva and held elected prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government hostage for 56 days, claiming to be acting in the name of ethnic Fijians.

He has demanded, and been granted, the overthrow of ethnic Indian Chaudhry, a state where political power is reserved for ethnic Fijians and an amnesty for him and his men.

But a yawning power vacuum has developed over the make-up of the future government.

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Constitutional democracy finished in Fiji: Speight

SUVA, July 21: The leader of Fiji's coup George Speight today insisted constitutional democracy in the Pacific nation was finished as he entered talks on the make-up of the country's future government, reports AFP.

"If (the future government) will be very, very different from the constitutional democracy. Commonwealth-style you've seen in the last 30 years," he said. "That is out, that's finished."

Fiji's President Josefa Iloilo warned, meanwhile, that continued divisions among ethnic Fijians vying for power after Speight's race-based coup were frustrating the naming of a new government.

Following day-long rumours that he had died or was critically ill, Iloilo made an address to the nation Friday to explain his failure to swear in a new government, as planned on Wednesday.

He said with Fijians breaking into separate regional

groups, he wanted a cabinet to unite the nation, and that would take time to finalise.

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US Senate okays food, medicine sales to Cuba

WASHINGTON, July 21: The US Senate late Thursday approved a bill authorising the sale of food and medicine to Cuba, officials said, reports AFP.

The House of Representatives meanwhile voted on amendments to a spending bill which, by withholding funding for enforcement, would likewise allow the sales of food and medicine to Cuba and would also end restrictions on travel to the island by US citizens.

The two votes are further steps towards a unified bill which would relax US sanctions against Cuba, the draft of which has been under negotiation between the two chambers.

The Senate measure, included in a bill on budgetary allocations for the agriculture sector, was approved by 79 votes in favour and 13 against.

A similar bill had been approved by the Senate last year by 70 votes to 28, but was subsequently defeated in the House of Representatives.

The House of Representatives, also late Thursday, approved two amendments to a Treasury spending bill which will have the effect of removing

restrictions of US citizens travelling to Cuba, and on the sales of food and medicine to Cuba.

An amendment removing federal funding for the enforcement of the ban on food, medicine and agricultural products exports to Cuba was approved 301-116 and an amendment removing funding to enforce the travel ban was approved 232-186.

A far broader amendment, proposed by Democratic Representative Charles Rangel, would have invalidated all US sanctions against Cuba, by similarly withholding funding. It was outvoted by 241 votes to 174.

The two votes Thursday are an important step in the drafting of a unified bill, which would relax US sanctions against Cuba, which have been in force for 38 years.

The House of Representatives is proposing a bill which is far more restrictive than that favored by the Senate.

The House initiative was proposed by Republican Representative George Nethercutt, who along with the other 218 sponsors, represents states with heavy agricultural industries.

Suicide bomber planning to blow up oil depot held AI slams torture in Lanka

COLOMBO, July 21: Sri Lankan police have arrested a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber who was planning to blow up an oil storage depot in the capital to commemorate the "Black July" anniversary, state media reported today, says AFP.

A man believed to be a "Black Tiger", or suicide bomber of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was arrested in Colombo's Mutwal commercial area on Thursday, the Daily News said quoting police.

The Sinhalese-language Dinamina newspaper said the man was trying to create carnage in the capital to mark the July 1983 riots in which between 400 and 600 people, mostly minority Tamils, were killed by majority Sinhalese.

The July 1983 riots marked an escalation in the island's drawn out Tamil separatist war and the LTTE is known to mark the anniversary with devastating attacks.

Last July the Tigers assassinated a moderate Tamil legislator here and in July 1996 overran a key military base in the north-east of the country after

killing over 1,200 soldiers. Six days later they bombed a commuter train in the capital, killing 70 people and wounding over 600.

The Daily News quoted police as saying that they had found three cyanide capsules on the man who was arrested following a tip-off.

The Tamil Tigers were blamed for destroying the two main oil storage depots in the capital in October 1995.

Meanwhile, torture by government forces in Sri Lanka has become more widespread following the introduction of new emergency laws by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Amnesty International said.

In its latest report on Sri Lanka released Thursday, the international human rights group said that the number of reports of torture had increased since the emergency laws were tightened on May 3.

"In addition, the methods of the torture reported appears to have become more severe than before and there have been at least two reports of detainees dying in custody as a result of torture," the organisation said.

US rules out arming anti-Taliban alliance

WASHINGTON, July 21: A senior US official on Thursday ruled out offering development or military aid to the northern alliance battling Afghanistan's Taliban, despite mounting frustration at the staying power of the fundamentalist militia, reports AFP.

Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Karl Inderfurth told a congressional committee the United States was committed to providing food and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, including in areas not under the Taliban's control.

But he said it would not heed calls, including some from within Congress, to offer development assistance or other support for the opposition, which said last week it was locked in fierce fighting with the Taliban north of the capital, Kabul.

"I think where we draw the line is offering the northern alliance military assistance. I think that that would be a mistake in terms of our policy actively involved militarily once again in Afghanistan," Inderfurth told a subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The United States was a supporter of the Afghan forces

which forced the Soviet Union's Red Army to pull out of Afghanistan after its costly 1979-89 intervention.

Frustration has been mounting in Congress that the US has so far failed to force the Taliban to extradite terror suspect Osama bin Laden.

The wealthy Saudi dissident is suspected of masterminding the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in Africa which killed more than 200 people but the Taliban has refused to hand him over and will not allow him to be tried in a third country.

"We do not want to imply, that as a result of our opposition to the Taliban that we are endorsing the Northern Alliance," he said, adding that the United States wanted to see a broad-based government in the war-ravaged country that would include all ethnic and religious groups.

Inderfurth said the United States feared that the northern alliance, which controls about 15 per cent of the country spearheaded by former defence minister Ahmad Shah Massoud, was too badly split to emerge as a viable alternative to the Taliban.

Human trafficking is financial godsend to int'l mafias

PARIS, July 21: Trafficking in human beings, clandestine immigrants seeking a better life or political asylum, has in recent years become a financial godsend to international mafias, reports AFP.

Human tragedies such as the discovery of the bodies of 58 Chinese in a truck in the port of Dover, southern England, last month show the scale of this traffic, under discussion at a conference attended by ministers and officials from 30 countries in Paris Thursday and Friday.

The international human smuggling is based on a growing demand by people in developing countries.

The only known figures are those for regularisation requests (150,000 in France and Spain, 200,000 in Italy, 400,000 in Greece recently), but the European parliament estimates that 400,000 to 500,000 illegal immigrants enter the European Union every year.

The journey of an illegal is profitable: for a Chinese national to go to the United States, for example, can cost up to 30,000 dollars, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) which last March hit out at a traffic worth 5-7

billion dollars a year.

The cost of crossing a border from eastern Europe or the Mediterranean is put at 500 dollars.

According to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1998 it cost 3,000 dollars to go from the Philippines to Kuwait, or 4,000 to 6,000 dollars from Bangladesh to Germany.

The ICFTU is worried about the increasing number of women among migrants: nearly 500,000 women have left Sri Lanka for the Middle East, while in the Philippines 12 times more women than men emigrate to find work.

For enterprises, often in league with the traffickers, clandestine labour has many advantages: no social security, under-paid and willing to do demanding work. Seasonal and restaurant work especially suits illegal.

But clandestine migration is not only for economic reasons. Many political refugees have no other option but to resort to traffickers, according to the United Nations refugee office (UNHCR), due to the tightening of asylum rules and entry conditions in many countries.

Philippines hostage crisis closer to resolution

4 more captives freed

JOLO, Philippines, July 21: Muslim extremists freed four Malaysian captives early today, raising hopes for a peaceful resolution to a three-month-old international hostage crisis in the southern Philippines, reports AFP.

Abu Sayyaf leader Radulan Sajron handed over Vincent Kwong, Lee Hock Liong, Francis Masangkai and Balakrishnan Nair to government emissaries and a Malaysian representative at a beach near the town of Patikul at dawn, leaving 33 people from six nations still held at gunpoint.

Government officials earlier wrongly identified one of the four as Fong Yin Ken, and his airline pilot father Fong Shau Eha flew to Jolo from nearby Zamboanga city to meet him, only to be disappointed. It turned out the Fong son remained at the Abu Sayyaf

camp.

"It is a big step forward and I'm very pleased about the efforts of Secretary Roberto Avelar (the hostage negotiator) and hope he will be more successful in the near future in bringing the hostage crisis to an end," Malaysian ambassador to Manila Arshad Hussein told AFP.

The four Malaysians, all scruffy and long-haired, were shod in slippers and carried sacks over their backs when they arrived at an army base in Jolo.

"I'm very happy," Kwong told reporters. "It's so very good and I'm very happy."

Asked where his other colleagues were, Kwong said: "I don't know."

His colleague Fong's father was disappointed on learning that his son was not among those freed.

"Bad, bad," he told reporters. "I realised my son is not among them."

He earlier told reporters in nearby Zamboanga city that he has telephoned his family to break the erroneous news of his son's release.

Sabah's former chief minister, Yong Teek Lee, who accompanied the hostages' relatives to the southern Philippines, told reporters he was "optimistic there would be more releases in a short while."

The four were among nine Malaysians, three Germans, two Filipinos, two Finns, two French nationals, two South Africans and a Lebanese kidnapped from the Malaysian resort of Sipadan off Sabah on April 23.

Sources close to the negotiations said the group raised four million dollars in ransom from the eight released hostages.



Freed Malaysian hostages (from L) Vincent Kwong, Balakrishnan Nair, Lee Hock Liong and Francis Masangkai wait for a plane to take them from Jolo to Manila yesterday after they emerged from three months of captivity in a jungle camp of the Abu Sayyaf Muslim extremist group in the southern Philippines. The four Malaysians were turned over to the Malaysian ambassador in Manila and were scheduled to fly home to Sabah later in the day. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

S Korean FM to visit India: South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Jung-binn will visit India later this month to discuss ways to strengthen economic and other ties between the two countries, ministry officials said Friday, AP reports from Seoul.

During his July 30-31 visit, Lee will meet his Indian counterpart, Jaswant Singh, and pay a courtesy call on President Koccheril Raman Narayanan, the ministry said.

Gujrat rain tolls rises to 95: Six more deaths in rain related incidents were reported in Gujrat during the last two days, taking the toll in the current monsoon in the state to 95, PTI reports from Gandhinagar.

Most of the deaths occurred in incidents of drowning and house collapse in the districts, sources added.

Quake jolts Tokyo area: A predawn 6.1 magnitude earthquake shook Tokyo and nearby areas Friday, temporarily cutting off the water supply to nearly two dozen homes, AP reports from Tokyo.

A second quake with a preliminary magnitude of 5.5 struck at 2:16 pm (0516 GMT). No one was injured in either quake. The second quake was centered about 40 kilometers (25 miles) under the seabed in the Pacific Ocean about 140 kilometers (87 miles) southeast of Tokyo, the Meteorological Agency said.

Russian chopper crash kills 19: Nineteen people were killed on Friday when a helicopter crashed during takeoff from an air field in northern Russia, the Air Force said, AP reports from St Petersburg.

The helicopter was carrying 16 parachutists and three crewmen in the region of Levashovo, near St. Petersburg, said Yuri Drobyshevsky, a spokesman for the Air Force. All perished in the crash, he said.

Wahid still the best man for Indonesia: Ramos Horta

BANGKOK, July 21: Embattled President Abdurrahman Wahid is still the best leader Indonesia could have at the moment, East Timorese leader Jose Ramos Horta said today, reports AFP.

He said Wahid, who has faced an increasingly hostile parliament during his 10 months in office, should be allowed to consolidate the country's democratic gains after the fall of former president Suharto.

Ramos Horta told reporters here that he was "saddened and disturbed" by the violence wracking independence-seeking Indonesian provinces, and called for a peaceful solution to the crisis.

He said Indonesia's problems were the result of Suharto's decades of iron-fisted rule, and not the fault of Wahid.

"Gus Dur cannot undo in one day the colossal damage done to Indonesia by 32 years of dictatorship, of abuse by the military," he said, using the president's nickname.

Dilip Kumar gets Rajiv Gandhi award

NEW DELHI, July 21: Cine-star of yesteryear and Rajiva Sabha MP Dilip Kumar will be given the eighth Rajiv Gandhi National Sashdhan Award, reports PTI.

The award is being given to the septuagenarian for his yeoman service to the cause of communal harmony and national integration, a release from Jawahar Bhavan said here yesterday.

Instituted by Congress to commemorate the contribution made by Rajiv Gandhi to promote peace, communal harmony and to fight violence, the award carries a citation and cash of Rs 2.5 lakh.

Former recipients of the award include Mother Teresa, Ustad Bismillah Khan, Lata Mungeshkar and Sunil Dutt.

The award will be presented to Dilip Kumar on August 20 by the Chairman of the advisory committee, Justice A. M. Ahluwalia.

US Senate okays 1st Asian-American Cabinet member

WASHINGTON, July 21: The United States Senate Thursday approved

President Bill Clinton's nomination of Japanese-American former lawmaker Norman Mineta as Commerce Secretary, making him the first-ever Cabinet member of Asian descent, reports AFP.

Mineta replaces William Daley, who left the post to direct Vice President Al Gore's presidential campaign.

"I am proud to add to Norm's string of firsts by naming him the first Asia-Pacific American ever to hold a post in