

Sharon to take power amid bomb threats

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon has completed his political jigsaw, putting together a coalition government with the avowed aim of ending an almost six-month-old bloody Palestinian uprising.

Police urged Israelis today to beware of suicide bombers after a Palestinian killed himself and three Israelis on Sunday on a crowded street in the heart of the coastal town of Netanya.

The death of a Palestinian gunman in a battle with Israeli troops late on Sunday brought the toll to at least 342 Palestinians, 65 Israelis and 13 Israeli Arabs killed since the uprising erupted in late September amid deadlocked peace talks.

Palestinian hospital sources said the gunman, Osman al-Baeawi, was killed during an exchange of fire with Israeli soldiers on a road bypassing the West Bank city of Jenin.

Sharon signed up the 17-seat ultra-Orthodox Shas party for his "national unity" coalition on Sunday, ensuring a majority in the 120-seat Knesset to assure parliamentary approval of his governing coalition by a self-set Wednesday deadline.

Waiting in the wings is the militant Islamic group Hamas, which has threatened to unleash 10 suicide bombers as soon as Sharon takes power.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the Netanyahu bombing, in which an 84-year-old man, his niece and a 70-year-old woman were killed and at least 68 people wounded.

An Israeli mob beat up and seriously injured a Palestinian man near the scene of the bombing. Police arrested one person and were hunting for three involved in the attempted lynching.

C-4 plastic explosives caused fire in Thai PM's plane

AFP, Bangkok

A blast which gutted a Thai Airways jet that Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was scheduled to board was caused by a bomb containing C-4 plastic explosives, Thai officials said Monday.

The confirmation that the weekend blast was caused by a bomb came as Thaksin called for international investors to remain calm and urged the media not to jump to hasty conclusions about plots involving "internal politics."

"Don't speculate yet about the purpose of the bomb, and don't speculate that it has to do with internal politics," said the prime minister who earlier alleged the incident appeared to be an assassination attempt.

Defence Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh said investigators found the blast which tore apart the Boeing 737-400 at Bangkok's domestic airport on Saturday was caused by a powerful type of plastic explosive known as C-4 and was likely the work of highly-trained experts.

The explosion killed one member of the cabin crew and injured seven others.

"It was high powered C-4 which tore into the ground (under the aircraft) and blew off the roof," the defence minister said. "It was small, just a quarter of a pound."

C-4 is American-made, extremely powerful, has almost no odour and is difficult to detect using X-ray machines. Its Soviet-bloc equivalent, Semtex, was used by terrorists to down Pan Am flight 103 in 1988 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

70 feared dead in Portugal bridge collapse

AFP, Entre-Os-Rios, Portugal

More than 70 people were missing and feared dead Monday after a bus and two cars plunged 50 metres off an ageing bridge as it collapsed into the swollen river Douro in northern Portugal, witnesses said.

Infrastructure Minister Jorge Coelho accepted personal responsibility for the collapse of the 115-year-old bridge that linked the towns of Castelo de Paiva and Entre-os-Rios and resigned Monday. His resignation was immediately accepted by Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres.

Witnesses quoted by the Lusa news agency said a pillar of the metal bridge collapsed at 9:10 pm Sunday (0310 BST Monday), sending some 80 metres of the structure crashing into the river below.

A bus carrying 67 passengers and two cars which were crossing the bridge also went plummeting into the torrent.

One male body was retrieved by rescuers. Local residents quoted by Lusa said several other bodies had been seen in the river.

The bus was returning to Castelo de Paiva after taking tourists to see almond trees in blossom in the Douro valley region, firemen said. It was not

immediately known whether foreign tourists had been in the bus.

More than 50 rescuers from the fire service and the maritime police working with five boats were hampered by the darkness and fog and called off rescue operations due to lack of visibility.

Leticia Malta, in charge of the emergency centre in Oporto, told Lusa the chances of finding survivors were "practically nil" given the strong current that could have swept the victims far down-river.

Castelo de Paiva Mayor Paulo Teixeira told private SIC television that he had been warning the government for a long time that the bridge, crossed by 1,600 vehicles per day, "did not offer basic safety conditions." A new bridge had been planned.

Minister Coelho told a news conference soon after the tragedy: "My decision is irrevocable. After the serious accident that has occurred I admit that I am no longer able to continue to carry out my functions."

The prime minister's office quoted Guterres as saying: "It is a very dignified attitude by someone who had no personal responsibility in this tragic accident."

The bridge, 200 metres long and three metres wide, was built in 1886.

Mori survives no-confidence

LDP may opt for alternative leadership

AP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori survived his second no-confidence vote in Parliament yesterday, but a string of scandals and the stumbling economy were expected to force the hugely unpopular premier to resign soon.

The lower house of Parliament voted 274-192 to defeat the no-confidence motion submitted earlier in the day by four opposition parties. Mori, whose Liberal Democrats hold a majority in the chamber, defeated a similar measure in November.

The vote gave Mori's enfeebled government a respite, but it was expected to be brief. Speculation was rife that he could step down as soon as this week as the LDP readies for its annual party convention March 13 and searches for a successor.

The sharply worded debate on the motion in Parliament was further humiliation for a prime minister whose support ratings have fallen to under 10 per cent.

"A person like you could be described with the phrase, 'He doesn't know what shame is'," said



Yukio Hatoyama, the leader of the largest opposition party, the Democrats.

The LDP-led three-party coalition, in turn, criticised the opposition for paralysing the government with political jockeying and distracting officials from pressing national issues, such as the economy.

"This is an attempt to plunge politics into chaos, taking people's lives and the economy hostage," said Koji Omi, an LDP lawmaker, as opposition lawmakers heckled him.

The political quagmire comes at a tough time for Japan. Stock prices have fallen to a 15-year low, unemployment is at a record high, and officials are worried about a string of trends that show recovery from a decade-long slowdown may have stalled.

The LDP is worried that Mori's unpopularity could severely damage it in upper house elections coming up in July, and is eager to find a more popular replacement. The party is in the minority in the chamber and controls it only with the cooperation of coalition partners.

An especially poor showing by the LDP in July could strengthen an expected campaign by the opposition to push for snap elections in the more power lower house.

In a joint statement Monday explaining the submission of the no-confidence motion, opposition parties blamed Mori for the country's troubles, criticised him for a series of scandals that have tarnished his one-year administration, and called his leadership "confused."

Taliban chief firm on destroying statues

AFP, Kabul

Taliban chief Mulla Mohammad Omar used the Eid-ul-Azha festival Monday to urge the Muslim world to support the destruction of ancient Buddhist icons and unite behind his vision of Islam.

The reclusive war veteran and "Islamic scholar" said the annihilation of Buddhist statues in Afghanistan would proceed despite vehement international condemnation and protests from Islamic states.

He said the statues, including the giant ancient Buddhas in the central province of Bamyan, were only "one per cent" of Afghanistan's historical heritage.

Omar also dismissed the global outcry as a "drama" which should be transparent to Muslims with "common sense."

"Now that we are destroying false idols, the world has made a drama out of this. The Muslims of the world, particularly Afghan Muslims, should use their common sense," the Taliban militia's Radio Shariat quoted him as saying.

Fiji police storm coalition meeting, detain leader

AP, Suva

Police broke up a meeting Monday of the five-party coalition of deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and detained a top leader who is a candidate to head a government of national unity.

Eight police officers entered the hall and took into custody Tupeni Baba, a former government minister. As he was taken to the Suva Central Police Station, Baba told reporters he was not being arrested.

"No, no, no, it's just a discussion, we want to make sure we can have another meeting," he said.

Police spokesman Inspector Sera Bernhard told The Associated Press that Baba was detained for questioning for holding a meeting without a permit.

The police action comes as Fiji's political factions scramble after last week's Court of Appeal ruling that an interim government imposed by the military following a May 19 coup was illegal.

The court ordered the 1997 multiracial constitution restored, and said acting President Ratu Josefa Iloilo must recall parliament and vacate his office by March 15.

Chinese PM vows to continue campaign against Falungong

AFP, Beijing

Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji said Monday Falungong had become a tool for hostile domestic and overseas forces, and he threatened "severe punishment" for the banned spiritual movement's leaders.

But in a speech to the annual plenum of the Chinese parliament, the National People's Congress, Zhu also called for a forgiving attitude to rank and file Falungong practitioners who have merely been "taken in."

"We need to continue our campaign against the Falungong cult, and further expose and condemn the anti-human, anti-social and anti-science nature of the cult, which has become a tool for domestic and overseas forces hostile to our socialist government," Zhu said.

"We need to mete out severe punishment to the small number of criminals while making unremitting efforts to unite, educate and rescue the vast majority of people who have been taken in."

The Chinese premier also urged continued combat with "legal means" against "religious extremist



forces," "cults, and illegal activities carried out under the guise of religion."

As Zhu delivered his speech to the 2,870 NPC delegates gathered at the Great Hall of the People facing Beijing's Tiananmen Square, there was intense security around the Square to prevent any protests by the Falungong.

As Zhu gave his speech last year, police rounded up scores of Falungong followers who held a protest under the giant portrait of

Mao Zedong at the northern end of the Square, within sight of the Great Hall.

Last year Falungong followers from around the country flocked to Beijing before and during the 10-day meeting to formally petition against the banning of the movement. Thousands were detained and prevented from lodging protests.

No protest or arrests were seen Monday, but Falungong officials and human rights groups said police had rounded up many known practitioners and hauled them off to "study sessions" to prevent them converging on the square.

Tight security has also made it impossible for Falungong followers to get to the square or even to Beijing, the group's Hong Kong spokeswoman Sophie Xiao said.

On Monday, hundreds of soldiers, uniformed and plainclothes police officers stood guard all around the Great Hall and the nearby Zhongnanhai leaders' compound, where 10,000 Falungong members staged an unprecedented protest in April 1999 in a move that triggered the ban.



PHOTO: AFP

Armed activists of a Shiite group leading a funeral procession of the firing victims in Pakistani eastern city of Sheikhopura yesterday. Eleven people were shot dead when six gunmen in two groups opened fire at a Shiite shop and a gathering at a Shiite graveyard in Sheikhopura on Sunday.

Kashmir ceasefire threatened by militant attacks

AFP, Srinagar, India

The Indian government's unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir has been rocked in the past week by a series of daring attacks on the security forces by Muslim militant groups.

The ceasefire was extended 11 days ago for a three-month period to give all parties in the conflict time to work for peace, but the reaction of the militant outfits has been anything but dove-like.

Just one day after the ceasefire extension was announced, militants detonated a bomb under a police jeep, killing six police officers and one civilian in the Kokarnag region, south of the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

On March 1, an Indian army colonel was among seven people killed in two separate militant ambushes on security convoys. Brigadier Vikram Singh was badly injured in one of the attacks.

The following day, four pan-Islamic guerrilla groups -- Lashker-e-Taiba, Jaishe Mohammed, Hizb-e-Mujahdeen and Hizb-e-Islami -- jointly ambushed a police patrol and killed 17 policemen in Kashmir's southern Jammu region.

It was the largest number of casualties suffered by the police in a single attack.

In the latest incident, four Indian soldiers were killed early Sunday when a two-man militant suicide squad attacked an army camp in Kashmir's Baramulla district.

While the government in New Delhi has vowed that peace efforts in Kashmir will not be derailed by headline militants opposed to the process, the patience of the security forces is clearly wearing thin.

Kashmir police chief Ashok Suri said the militants had used the ceasefire to "regroup and consolidate their position" in the state's urban areas and carry out hit-and-run attacks.

"None of the militant outfits have accepted the peace initiative declared by the Indian government and they are continuing attacking soft targets," Suri said.

Gurpreet Gill, inspector general of the paramilitary Border Security Force said the security forces were in danger of losing the upper hand they had gained in most militant-infested areas before the ceasefire.

"They (militants) are dominating the area more than we are," Gill said.

One police intelligence official who declined to be identified voiced concerns of further militant activity around the Eid festival, which begins tomorrow.

"Militants are once again present in large numbers in several towns, and we are expecting more attacks on the security troops position as they are hell bent on derailing the peace process," the official said.

India first suspended counter-insurgency operations against Kashmir militant groups on November 28 for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The ceasefire has since been extended three times.

But the truce has been rejected by all the armed separatist groups engaged in the 12-year rebellion in Indian-administered Kashmir, which has claimed more than 34,000 lives.

Abdul Gani Bhat, the chairman of Kashmir's main separatist alliance the All Party Hurriyat Conference, said the government in New Delhi had to go further than simply extending its ceasefire.

"The ceasefire needs new subsequent steps to start serious talks ... we cannot live only on good intentions and bold steps," Bhat said.

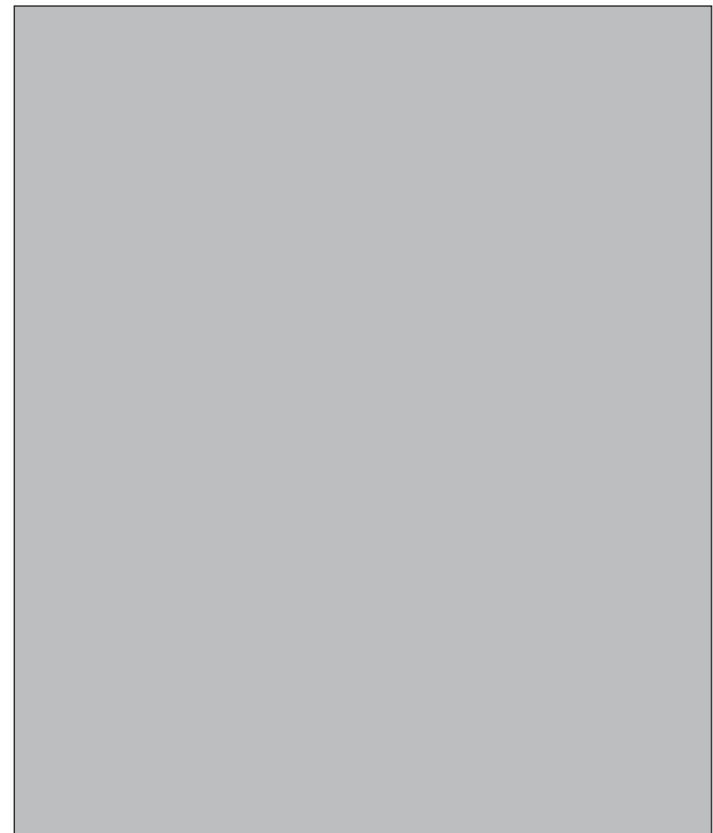


PHOTO: AFP



Former first lady Nancy Reagan (C) is applauded as she enters the stage at the Newport News shipbuilding yard prior to the christening of the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) aircraft carrier on Sunday in Newport News, Virginia. The ship, named after the former president, was christened on the 49th anniversary of former President Reagan and Mrs. Reagan's marriage and it is the last Nimitz class nuclear aircraft carrier being built.