

Arafat, Mubarak discuss 'explosive' ME situation

Sporadic violence continues in Palestinian territories

AFP, Cairo

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak yesterday discussed the "explosive" situation arising from Israeli settlements and assassinations, Egyptian officials said.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mussa told journalists following the meeting here that the Palestinians could not be "blamed for the violence expected" in response to their leaders.

Arafat and Mubarak discussed the "explosive situation and the provocative measures taken against Palestinian civilians," Mussa said.

"It is obvious the situation is extremely dangerous, with the resumption of settlement building, the killing of a number of Palestinian officials, and the increasing of the (economic) blockade," Mussa said.

"All this adds to the difficulty of the situation," he said.

"The increase in violent measures against Palestinians will bring a reaction and this is the normal," he added.

"It's a series that once started will not end. It's an action and reaction. The Palestinians cannot be blamed for the violence that is expected to result," Mussa said.

Iyyad Hardan, the military leader of Islamic Jihad in the northern West Bank town of Jenin, was blown up Thursday while standing in a public telephone booth, a killing the Palestinians said was an Israeli "assassination."

Hardan was the second Islamic Jihad activist to be slain in four days fol-

lowing warnings by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government that it would go on the offensive against those it suspects of "terrorism."

Arafat, who arrived here Saturday from the Jordanian capital Amman, met Mubarak and Egyptian officials before leaving for a meeting with the secretary general of the Arab League, Esmat Abdel Meguid.

They were also to discuss the results of Mubarak's April 2-5 visit to the United States and his talks with President George W. Bush.

Mubarak had urged the US administration to take a more active role in bringing Israel and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table and in efforts to end the violence.

Arafat was here with a high-profile delegation including Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat, international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath and Abu Rudeina.

In Jerusalem, Israeli radio reported that Mubarak had told Israeli minister Shimon Peres in a telephone call that he would ask Arafat to work towards bringing calm and a relaunching of the peace process.

Meanwhile, Palestinian fired mortars at two Israeli military positions overnight, an army spokesman said yesterday, as scattered violence was reported around the Palestinian territories.

Palestinians fired a shell on an army position at the Jewish settlement bloc Gush Katif in the southern Gaza Strip. They also launched two shells at a military post in the northern Gaza Strip by the Erez border crossing with Israel, the spokesman said.

Ex-Pak minister jailed for corruption

XINHUA, Islamabad

An Accountability Court in Punjab province of Pakistan has convicted Sheikh Ejaz Ahmed, former provincial minister for labour and manpower, to 14 years of imprisonment on charges of assets accumulation through corruption, said a report by the Associated Press of Pakistan on Saturday.

The accused has also been disqualified for 21 years to hold any public office as well as been imposed a rigorous fine of 47.7 million rupees (about 770,000 US dollars) while his Mitsubishi Pajero worth of 3.8 million rupees forfeited to the State.

Sheikh Ejaz Ahmed indulged into corrupt practices and accumulated assets on his own name and names of his dependents and associates during his incumbency, the report said.

His bank transactions, properties and other transactions for which he cannot account for properly include foreign exchange bearer certificates of 21.7 million rupees, purchase of 290,730 US dollars, bank transactions of 40 million rupees and the Mitsubishi Pajero worth 3.8 million rupees.



A young boy takes part in a leftist anti-government demonstration led by the main opposition Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninists in Kathmandu yesterday. Over 60,000 leftists participated in a demonstration demanding the resignation of Nepalese Premier G.P. Koirala. The demonstration also coincides with the historic downfall of the autocratic partyless Panchayat system yesterday.

Thailand vows to hunt down militants behind blasts

AFP, Hat Yai

Thai authorities yesterday vowed to hunt down Muslim militants suspected of carrying out two bomb attacks in the country's south which left one child dead and dozens injured.

Security forces in the predominantly Muslim provinces bordering Malaysia were on high alert after the explosions which rocked a railway station and a hotel carpark Saturday.

Army Chief General Surayudh Chulanon warned the blasts might be the first strike in a new terror campaign mounted by separatist guerrillas who carried out a similar wave of bombings in the 1990s.

"It's possible that there will be more bombs, but we don't have any details yet," he said.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra Sunday travelled to Hat Yai, the biggest city in the south, to inspect damage caused by the first bomb which exploded on a crowded railway station platform.

2 ex-ministers, 30 others held in swoop on Iran's opposition

AFP, Tehran

Iran has arrested around 30 more liberal opposition members, sources said yesterday, just two months before voters go to the polls for one of the most closely watched presidential elections in the nation's history.

The move comes weeks after authorities effectively closed down the main opposition party, the Iran Freedom Movement (IFM), in the run-up to the June 8 polls, for which President Mohammad Khatami has yet to declare his candidacy.

In a statement carried late Saturday on state radio, Tehran's revolutionary court said more arrests had been made of people working against the regime both in Tehran and the provinces, without giving further details.

Odyssey racing toward Mars

AP, CAPE CANAVERAL

NASA's Mars Odyssey spacecraft took off on a six-month 286 million-mile (460-million-kilometre) journey to the Red Planet accompanied by prayers from scientists seeking redemption after back-to-back failures.

"Excited, elated, relieved, all at the same time. It's been a year of sleepless nights," NASA's Mars program director, Scott Hubbard, said following Saturday's liftoff.

Ed Weiler, head of NASA's space science program, called the launch "absolutely fantastic." But he cautioned: "It's only a first step."

"This mission doesn't really get shown to be successful until about six months from now when we go into orbit," Weiler said. More than two years of geological surveying will follow in a quest for water on or just beneath the Martian surface.

Weiler noted that the previous two Mars launchers also went well, and that it wasn't until the spacecraft reached Mars in 1999 that they fizzled. As a result the approximately 100 scientists gathered at the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station for Saturday's liftoff, while exhilarated, were reluctant to celebrate too much.

"Instead of popping champagne, I popped a Pepsi," Weiler confided. "When we get all the science down in two years, that will be the champagne."

NASA program scientist Jim Garvin said everything was magnified for this launch, including his nerves. His hands shook as he read a prayer seconds before liftoff that was written by an Air Force chaplain expressly for Mars Odyssey. "Grant us you help to succeed and surmount any obstacles," the prayer implored.

Two hours later, Weiler was still trying to calm Garvin "this is the start of our new program," Garvin said. "It's return to Mars... we want to get there."

Every thing went well as the Delta rocket lifted off at the appointed moment of 11:02 am, carrying Mars Odyssey though a stunningly clear aquasquy.

An on-board camera showed the launch site, then the cape, then the Florida coast growing smaller as the rocket climbed higher. Another camera panned on the golden-coloured Mars Odyssey at the top of the booster, coasting hundreds of miles above earth and eventually spinning away.



Visitors look at a government-sponsored exhibition in Colombo yesterday showing alleged atrocities committed by the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front activists in past years. The show was arranged to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the JVP's first armed uprising, which was eventually put down by the government. The JVP has recently entered the political mainstream and won 10 seats in the October 2000 parliamentary elections.

7 US servicemen, 9 Vietnamese killed in chopper crash

AFP, Hanoi

Former foes Hanoi and Washington were united in grief yesterday as they pledged to work together to establish the cause of a helicopter crash which killed seven US servicemen and nine Vietnamese nationals.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was swift to express sadness at the loss of Vietnamese and American personnel while Vietnam's foreign minister sent his condolences to the families of the US victims.

The aircraft burst into flames and blew up in the north-central province of Quang Binh Saturday afternoon while on a mission to prepare for the recovery of Americans missing in action from the Vietnam War, Vietnamese officials said.

It was the first tragedy in America's 16-year-old joint programme with Vietnam to account for US servicemen still listed as missing from the war.

"The helicopter burst into flames and blew up at 4.15 p.m. (0915 GMT) Saturday," a provincial military command spokesman said, citing an official report.

The accident happened in the commune of Thanh Trach in Bo Trach district, just 700 metres (yards) from Vietnam's main coastal highway.

Emergency teams were on the scene within just 45 minutes.

A district commander said the search operation had proved relatively easy because of perfect weather conditions and the relative lack of tree cover at the accident site on Hon Bung hill, 12 kilometres from the district's main town.

The bodies were all located overnight but were so badly charred that identification was proving difficult.

The seven Vietnamese nationals who died in the crash were mainly civilians, officials revealed.

They comprised three flight crew from a small state-owned regional airline, four aircraft technicians, an official from the foreign ministry's North American affairs department and a senior officer from the defence ministry here in Hanoi.

Indians hail FM's meeting with Bush at White House

AFP, New Delhi

Indian officials and media yesterday hailed a visit to Washington by Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh as path breaking, but experts urged caution saying more time was needed to assess ties under the new Bush regime.

Jaswant Singh, who also holds the defence portfolio, said he was "more than satisfied" after an unscheduled meeting with US President George W. Bush on Friday in Washington.

The Indian media said the impromptu 40 minutes meeting in the middle of a crisis sparked by the US spy plane collision with a Chinese fighter jet, showed that Bush wanted to closely work with India.

"It was another season in Indo-US relations," said a report in the Times of India, which was headlined "When Bush led Jaswant into the rose garden," describing the meeting in the Oval Office.

Newspapers highlighted that no pressure was exerted on India to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty on nuclear weapons during the talks and Singh reciprocated with promises that India will refrain from nuclear proliferation.

The media noted that Singh, who had so far steadfastly declined to plead for lifting of US sanctions on India, had been forthcoming with US officials in outlining reasons why the punitive move should be repealed.

Many of the US-led sanctions on India, imposed after it conducted nuclear weapons tests in 1998, were waived by former president Bill Clinton. Remaining sanctions include restrictions on lending by international financial institutions and on foreign investment in India's military.

However, foreign policy experts said it was too early to call the Jaswant's visit a diplomatic coup.

"This is a knee-jerk reaction from the Indian media and the Government of India saying that everything is going to be fine here onwards," said Chintamani Mahapatra, an associate professor in American studies in New Delhi's prestigious School of International Studies.

"Nothing for certain can be said about the course of Indo-US relations, although our foreign and defence minister Jaswant Singh was well received in the Pentagon state department as well as the White House," he added.

Mahapatra said a serious assessment could only be made when real issues come up for bilateral dialogue such as the insurgency in Kashmir and other more contentious nuclear issues.

Clinton opens instt in India named after Hillary

AFP, Rampur

Former US president Bill Clinton yesterday visited the sleepy Indian village of Rampur in the northern Uttar Pradesh state where he opened a technology institute named after his wife Hillary.

A tight ring of security was thrown around Rampur, about 190 km from the Indian capital New Delhi, where hundreds of people had gathered to welcome Clinton who arrived at the village late in the afternoon.

"I am very happy that the institute has been opened in my wife's name," he told the gathering for the inaugural function of the Hillary Clinton Centre for Multimedia Technology. Hillary was recently elected Senator for New York.

The village people garlanded him and performed a folk dance in his honour.

He also inaugurated another institute for technology at the village, as well as an education centre named after him.

'2,000 people in Kashmir committed suicide'

AFP, Srinagar

More than 2,000 people, mostly women and teenagers, have committed suicide in the insurgency-hit Kashmir state over the last ten years, a newspaper reported yesterday.

"An average of 15 persons kill themselves each month making it one case of suicide every alternate day," the daily Greater Kashmir paper said, quoting a study conducted by Bashir Dabla, head of the sociology department in Kashmir University.

"Women are the most vulnerable and make up for 77.41 per cent of the victims," the paper said.

It said the high incidence of suicides in the Indian part of the divided state stemmed from the violence and economic backwardness. An armed separatist insurgency has claimed more than 34,000 lives in the last 12 years in Kashmir.

Brezhnev-Stalin's grandsons join hands to stir Communists

AFP, Moscow

Andrei Brezhnev, grandson of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, was one of four candidates standing in Russian gubernatorial elections yesterday in the central Tula region, media reported.

Brezhnev, general secretary of the All-Russian Communist Political Movement, was standing against incumbent Governor Vasily Starodubtsev and two other candidates, the ITAR-TASS news agency said.

His grandfather Leonid ruled the Soviet Union as Communist party leader from 1964 until his death in 1982.

The grandson of Leonid Brezhnev's predecessor Joseph Stalin, Yevgeny Djigashvili, has also embarked on a political career in his native Georgia, creating a "New Communist Party".

Two other gubernatorial elections were also in progress, in the Amur region in Russia's Far East and in the Yevenki Autonomous Area in central Siberia.

Thousands take to streets demanding Koirala to quit

AFP, Kathmandu

Tens of thousands of people gathered yesterday for a demonstration in the Nepalese capital calling on the embattled Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala to quit, witnesses said.

The demonstration was led by the main opposition Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML), followed by four other left-wing parties, who demanded Koirala quits over his alleged involvement in a controversial deal to lease an aircraft from Lauda Air of Austria. Koirala has denied any wrongdoing.

Organisers estimated that more than 100,000 people attended although eyewitnesses put the number at around 60,000.

Riot police vans preceded and followed the demonstrators but the march passed off peacefully and there were no arrests, police said.

The demonstrators chanted slogans like "Stop political killings", "Stop terrorism" and "Let us protect democracy, maintain law and order."

The nearly a mile-long demonstration caused major traffic congestion in Kathmandu for more than an hour.

The NCP-UML had called the demonstration Sunday to mark the 11th anniversary of the downfall of the autocratic partyless Panchayat system. The party bussed in many of the demonstrators from districts outside Kathmandu.

The communist leaders were scheduled to address a public meeting to denounce the Nepali Congress government and to announce other protest programmes to press Koirala to step down.

Beijing under PLA pressure to take hardline on spy plane row

AP, Beijing

China's politically powerful military stepped up pressure for Beijing to take a hardline against Washington in a standoff over a US spy plane. American diplomats said the plane's 'detained crew were in "high spirits" yesterday after receiving e-mails from their families.

Defence Minister Gen. Chi Haotian said Saturday the People's Liberation Army won't let Washington "shirk responsibility," dampening hopes for an early release of the 24 US crew members. The crew has been held on southern Hainan island, where they made an emergency landing after colliding with a Chinese fighter jet.

Chi's stern tone was in contrast to assurances by diplomats and civilian leaders that Beijing sought an early settlement and didn't want the dispute hurt US-Chinese relations. It also added to suspicions that military and security forces the most hawkish segment of the government were obstructing a settlement.

American diplomats on Hainan island were allowed early Sunday to meet for an hour with the 21 men and three women from the US Navy EP-3E. Diplomats saw the crew twice before, on Tuesday and Friday.

"The crew is... in very high spirits. They understand the circumstances under which they are here," said the US Embassy military attache, Army Brig. Gen. Neal Sealock, who saw the crew Sunday.

"We are looking forward to going home. They do offer that they very much appreciate the e-mails that they've been allowed to receive from home," Sealock said without giving any details.

In a positive sign, Sealock said the Chinese gave US diplomats "unfettered access" to the crew during Sunday's meeting. He said he was able to update the crew on efforts to win their release and on news from the outside world, including sports. Previous meetings had been tightly controlled.

Sealock said he has asked permission to see the detained Americans twice daily.

US officials said the two sides were trying to reach a settlement. President George W. Bush was "fo-

Many nations lack mental health policies: WHO

IPS, Geneva

The outcome of international campaigns to reduce mental illness will depend on the policies and programmes governments and health organisations implement, but so far most of the world is unprepared to handle mental health problems, warned the World Health Organisation (WHO) Friday.

The figures on the prevalence of mental illness and brain disorders have not been widely disseminated, but the fact is "the burden is big," stated WHO director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland. "I think the date would surprise many of you," she told a press conference in this Swiss City.

The information the WHO gathered from 181 nations shows that 43 per cent lack policies regarding mental health and 23 per cent have never drafted legislation on the matter.

The United Nations agency's statistics also indicate that in 38 per cent of the countries surveyed, community mental health services do not exist and in 41 per cent the primary health care centres do not offer any sort of treatment for such disorders.

The dissemination of information about the scope of the problem would contribute to reducing the prejudices surrounding mental illnesses and brain disorders, affirmed Brundtland.

The next step is "to use prevention measures, knowledge and also the new interventions that gradually have come into existence over the last two or three decades," said the WHO chief.

These advances "greatly improve the ability to quickly treat and cure many illnesses of this kind."

Mental health experts indicate that 70 per cent of patients suffering from depression can fully recover through treatment with antidepressant medications and psychotherapy.

However, fewer than 25 per cent of such individuals receive treatment, a gap that exists in industrialised and developing countries alike.

The case of schizophrenia is similar because the incidence of relapse could be reduced 60 per cent if the appropriate pharmaceuticals were supplied to the patients, and if their families received adequate training to support them.

But here, too, just 25 per cent of people diagnosed with schizophrenia have access to this sort of assistance, according to the WHO.

Research indicates that 80 per cent of epileptics could lead a normal life with the help of anti-convulsant drugs. But in developing countries, 90 per cent of the individuals with epilepsy do not receive any sort of medical attention.

CPI-M blasts Congress' surrender to Trinamool

PTI, Kolkata

CPI(M) on Saturday lambasted Congress for what it called the national party's "unconditional surrender" to the Trinamool Congress by concluding an "opportunistic" seat understanding for the May 10 assembly elections.

"We can't call it an electoral alliance, but an opportunistic seat understanding," CPI (M) Politburo member and party's state secretary Anil Biswas told newsmen.

Asked to comment on the Congress-Trinamool Congress seat sharing arrangement, Biswas said "it is reprehensible that the Congress has finally surrendered rather unconditionally to the Trinamool Congress and concluded an opportunistic understanding."

Refusing to admit that there was a polarisation in state politics with the emergence of the "new alliance", Biswas said that the "new understanding" did not mention anything about "a common programme" for the people.

Meanwhile, Left Front partners RSP and Forward Bloc said that the CPI (M) should now admit that it had been pursuing a "wrong attitude" towards the Congress which had aligned with Trinamool Congress "once an ally of communal BJP".