

Minister urges Israel to escalate raids, brands Arafat war criminal

Sharon to annex settlements if Palestinians declare state

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's Public Security Minister Uzi Landau yesterday called Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat a "war criminal" and urged the government to escalate its attacks against the Palestinian Authority until life becomes "unbearable."

Landau, a hardline member of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government, said Israel should present Arafat as "the partner of (Iraqi leader) Saddam Hussein" in a repetition of previous comments.

"He is someone who gives his men the green light to place the crosshairs of their rifles on 10-month-old infants, who dispatches mortars to harm one-year-old babies -- all in all, a war criminal, for whom a case should already be prepared by which to put him on trial in an international court of law," he told army radio.

Israel overnight launched a raid deep into Palestinian-ruled territory in the Gaza Strip, bombing buildings in the Khan Yunis refugee camp it suspected of serving as bases for mortar attacks against Jewish settlements and army posts.

Israel has sharply stepped up its offensive against the Palestinians since late March, following a string of deadly anti-Israeli attacks and a spate of mortar shelling in Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and nearby Israeli territory.

One Palestinian policeman was

killed in the shelling and another 24 Palestinians wounded, according to medical sources.

"I want to see this operation as the very tip of the beginning of this struggle, and will of course demand that the government (pursue) this policy of hitting at them all the time, everywhere, and not necessarily just where the mortars are," Landau said.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said in an interview published yesterday that he would annex Jewish settlements in occupied territory if the Palestinians unilaterally declared an independent state.

Sharon, the hardline former general who took office just over a

month ago, also said in an interview with the Haaretz newspaper that he has no intention of evacuating settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, even under a deal with the Palestinians.

"I do not see any reason to evacuate any settlements. So long as there is no peace, we will stay sitting there. If after some time, God willing, there will be peace, there will certainly be no reason to prevent them from staying there," he said.

Sharon, who led a massive settlement drive as a minister in previous right-wing governments, said Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat would be making a "major mistake" if he unilaterally declared an independent state.

China yesterday hoped to cement its 'all-weather' relationship with Pakistan as the two close allies prepared to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

The Chinese side believes that the good neighborly relations between the two countries will be further strengthened and developed, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said while announcing the upcoming visit to China by Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdusattar.

Sattar will visit Beijing from April 16 to 19 at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart Tang Jiaxuan to finalise plans to celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations, Sun said.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of China-Pakistan diplomatic relations, he noted. China and Pakistan will mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties on May 21.

The Pakistani Foreign Minister's visit to China is an important part of the activities to celebrate the establishment of bilateral relations, Sun added.

China to cement 'all-weather' ties with Pakistan

PTI, Beijing

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Pakistani police woman drags an activist of ethnic Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) who was observing hunger strike over water shortages in southern Sindh province in this port city of Karachi yesterday. Around 30 hunger strikers including women were arrested by the police as they defy the official ban on rallies and demonstrations.

German nuclear shipment blocked by protesters

AFP, Garm

A train carrying nuclear waste from Germany was held up yesterday in this northwestern French town after activists chained themselves to railway tracks to prevent it reaching a reprocessing plant.

The train was blocked for several minutes at the Caen railway station by dozens of Greenpeace protesters, at least four of whom had chained themselves to the tracks.

The activists were quickly dispersed by police and several of them were detained.

The heavily guarded shipment, bound for reprocessing at the French plant in La Hague, has met similar protests since it left Germany Tuesday evening.

It was forced to stop for about an hour late Tuesday near the French border after protesters also chained themselves to the rails forcing police to cut them free with metal cutters.

Space legend lives on as Russia remembers Gagarin

AFP, Gagarin

Russians above a certain age can remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard that Yuri Gagarin had died.

And as with US president John F. Kennedy, the circumstances of the cosmonaut's death are shrouded in uncertainty, giving rise to outlandish conspiracy theories.

Forty years after his flight around the earth -- mankind's first giant step -- and 33 years since his premature death in a training accident -- the Gagarin legend remains intact in Russia, even among the nation's youth.

The carpenter's son from the collective farm who became the first man in space has been adopted by rock groups such as Crimea Underground, whose "Gagarin, I loved you" celebrates the love of Gagarin's widow Valentina, or the Moscow Grooves Institute who have dubbed his voice into their techno confessions.

Several rock groups are lined up to take part in a special concert in Moscow concert devoted to Gagarin on Thursday, the 40th anniversary of his flight.

"Gagarin has become a myth. His heroism is indisputable. He could even be canonised," said Boris



Yury Gagarin Nazarov, the Moscow Grooves vocal list.

Gorbarko, said "it was like a religious cult, his admirers used to follow him around everywhere."

The enthusiasm that Gagarin's flight aroused among Russians bordered on a personality cult.

Films and songs were dedicated to him. A huge monument was erected in his honour. His photograph was sold at news-stands and was to be found pasted as a lucky charm on taxi-drivers' windscreens around the country.

Gagarin's death at the age of 34 plunged the country into mourning, with people crying openly in the street, and lent a melancholy note to all subsequent celebrations of his flight.

The official secrecy that surrounded the investigation into the crash in which he died, almost certainly an accident, allowed all kinds of rumours to flourish, including one according to which he had been murdered by the KGB because he had lost his faith in Communism.

Some said that his death had been faked, some that he had been captured by extraterrestrials.

Ivan Rubtsov, a member of the commission set up in March 1968 to look into Gagarin's death, said last month that at least 20 possible explanations for the accident had been examined.

VHP to train 3 lakh youths to fight Pak terrorists

PTI, Jammu

Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has said it will recruit 30 lakh Bajrang youths and train three lakh of them to fight Pakistan-sponsored militancy in the country.

We will recruit 30 lakh Bajrang youths and train three lakh of them throughout the country from September this year to fight fundamentalist outfits sponsored by Pakistan, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir, international general secretary of VHP Parveen Bhai told reporters here.

The remaining 27 lakh youths would be trained in phases, Bhai said.

The training would be imparted from 28 different places with 10,000 youths each taking part in these, he said, adding, after that they would be sent to different states for performing their duties.

Nearly 50,000 youths would be recruited from Jammu and Kashmir alone for the training, he added.

Lankan govt pins down support for budget vote

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's ruling party has secured the support of all its allies to resist an opposition attempt to engineer defections ahead of a crucial vote in Parliament yesterday, political sources said.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga who met leaders of the minority Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), has secured their firm backing for the government, the sources said.

Press reports here said Wednesday the government has offered two junior ministry positions to smaller allies to keep them within a shaky coalition and defeat opposition moves to bring the government down.

A senior government minister who declined to be named said the coalition had comfortable numbers in parliament and was confident the budget vote would pass without difficulty.

He said about five junior ministries may be offered to coalition partners as well as to members of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which is the main constituent in the coalition to fill existing vacancies.

Kumaratunga went to parliament Tuesday to meet legislators ahead of Wednesday's vote on the 2001 budget, officials said.

The main opposition United National Party (UNP) and the

Marxist JVP or People's Liberation Front had boycotted a banquet hosted by her on Monday in a sign of troubles ahead.

The UNP said it had never been invited to such a banquet by Kumaratunga in the past six years and felt the move was a thinly disguised attempt to garner support for Wednesday's key vote.

"Every time the president opens her mouth, she attacks us," UNP chief whip Tyrone Fernando said. "We don't think the invitation to us was extended in the right spirit."

State media said Monday intelligence agencies had uncovered a plot to bribe ministers, and backbenchers and topple the government which has a slender four-seat majority in the 225-member assembly.

Five leading businessmen had offered millions of rupees in cash to ministers, deputy ministers and other ruling party legislators to stage a mutiny, the state-run Daily News said.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's ruling party is set to offer more jobs to coalition partners in a bid to prevent defections that could bring the government down during a key vote yesterday, officials said.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga who met leaders of the minority Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), has reportedly offered two junior ministry posts to them.

Maoist rebels kill Nepali Congress official

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels have killed the treasurer of a ruling Nepali Congress district committee for belonging to the Democratic Party, reports said yesterday.

The Maoists shot dead Tanahu district committee treasurer Bishnu Prasad Jamar Kattel in Dalajpani, 180 km west of Kathmandu, while he was travelling on a bus, the "Himalaya Times" said.

Kattel, who was also the district committee chairman of the government sponsored "Bishweswar with the poor programme," was on his way to attend a meeting at a secondary school when the incident occurred.

Police have launched a manhunt for the six Maoists who fled into the nearby jungle after the incident.

Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Ram Chandra Poudel condemned the killing, which comes in the wake of a series of bloody attacks by the Maoists, and accused them of trying to destroy the country.

Manila seeks truce with Communists

AFP, Manila

The Philippines asked Communist guerrillas yesterday to agree to a nationwide ceasefire ahead of peace talks later this month, government chief peace negotiator Silvestro Bellosaid.

The decision came after a meeting of President Gloria Arroyo's top national security and military advisers, Bellosaid.

"We will recommend to the NDF (National Democratic Front) the declaration of a bilateral ceasefire," Bello told reporters.

Islamists wind up mass rally in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

A mass rally of Islamists was due to wind up here yesterday after three days of bitter anti-West speeches and pledges of support for the Taliban militia in Afghanistan.

Organisers said around one million people, mostly members of Pakistani fundamentalist parties but also clerics and teachers from abroad, had attended the conference but witnesses put the numbers at around 200,000.

The gathering, convened by Pakistani fundamentalist group the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, marks the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Sunni Muslim school of Deoband.

Witnesses said it had turned into a mass rally in support of the puritanical Taliban Islamic militia,

which controls most of neighbouring Afghanistan, as well as indicted terrorist Osama bin Laden.

Some 200 speakers had addressed the conference since it began Monday, with many making calls for jihad, or holy war, against Western powers who are accused of trying to undermine Islam.

The Taliban, followers of an ultra-conservative line of the Deoband school, are condemned internationally for widespread human rights abuses and their backing of alleged terrorists such as suspected US embassy bomber bin Laden.

A recorded speech from Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, in which he condemned the "infidel world" for conspiring against Muslims, was played amid reverential silence Wednesday.

Malaysia detains opposition workers under tough law

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police confirmed yesterday they have arrested seven opposition supporters under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) and said more arrests would be made.

Asked how many more people would be arrested, the national police chief Norian Mai told a press conference: "That's a secret."

Norian, reading a statement, said the seven "Reformasi" (reform) supporters were detained Tuesday and Wednesday "because there was information about their involvement in an activity which could endanger the security of the country."

He said they planned to launch "large-scale street demonstrations in a militant way ahead of the 2004 elections."

The ISA allows indefinite detention without trial.

Supporters of jailed ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim planned to present a memorandum on his treatment to the human rights commission on Saturday, April 14.

They call the date "Black 14" since it marks the second anniversary of Anwar's sentencing on April 14, 1999, for abuse of power.

Norian said the event could have turned into a riot.

From January 6 to April 4, he said, some 20 activists had held 12 secret meetings to persuade the public to take part in militant street demonstrations.

Vajpayee to persuade MPs not to paralyse parliament

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee hopes to meet opposition lawmakers at the weekend to try to persuade them not to disrupt the upcoming session of Parliament over an arms scandal, a spokesman said yesterday.

India's Parliament was paralysed for eight working days last month by opposition lawmakers demanding the resignation of Vajpayee after a "sting" operation on the defence establishment by journalists from an Internet Website.

"It was decided by the government that an all party meeting be convened to request the opposition to allow parliament to function,"

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spokesman Vijay Kumar Malhotra told Reuters yesterday.

"After all, Parliament is the essence of a democracy and debate should be allowed," Malhotra said.

He said the meeting probably would be held on Saturday.

Reporters from the Web site, www.tehelka.com, posing as arms dealers, secretly filmed a string of politicians, defence bureaucrats and military officers apparently taking money to swing a fictitious arms deal.

The footage was aired on TV last month.

The scandal rocked the government and led to resignations of the BJP president as well as the party

chief of a key ally of the ruling coalition. The Defence Minister, George Fernandes, also quit last month over the scandal but denied any wrongdoing.

The scandal led to shouting matches between opposition lawmakers and government deputies in both houses of Parliament.

The budget session of parliament reconvenes on April 16 after a three-week recess and the government is keen to ensure that proceedings go smoothly as pending legislation is piling up.

According to media reports, eight bills are pending in the lower house and over 30 have to be taken up. In the upper house, 13 bills are held up. These include bills dealing with corruption among govt officials.

27 killed in S African bus accident

AFP, Durban

At least 27 people, including five children, were killed and 59 others hurt when a bus overturned early yesterday in South Africa's eastern KwaZulu-Natal province, a traffic official said.

Provincial transport spokesman Collin Govender told AFP the accident occurred when the bus plunged 70 metres (230 feet) down an embankment near the town of Kokstad, about 250 km south of Durban, at dawn.

"Some of the passengers are still trapped in the bus. We don't know how many (more) are dead," he told AFP.

SC orders clean-up of Yamuna

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court has ordered a clean-up of New Delhi's main Yamuna river heavily polluted by industrial and domestic waste by March 2003, the Hindustan Times said yesterday.

The court earlier set another tough environment deadline requiring all public transport vehicles in Delhi to convert to non-polluting compressed natural gas (CNG) by April 1, 2001 order.

"It is shocking that the government can't ensure supply of clean water in the capital," a three-judge bench of the apex court was quoted as saying in a joint pronouncement.

The judges said the pollution in Yamuna river, which is New Delhi's main source of water, has deprived citizens of their constitutional right to clean water.

Unchecked construction of illegal slums and huts on the banks of the river was a major contributor of pollution, they added.

"The hut dwellers are encouraged by the politicians to stay on," they said.

The bench directed the Delhi state government to file an affidavit in the court outlining in detail the steps to be taken to improve the water quality ahead of the 2003 deadline.

New Delhi is one of the world's most polluted cities and its water and air are both heavily contami-

nated due to emissions from industries, automobiles as well as wastes from households.

The court order relating to the conversion of petrol run vehicles to environment-friendly compressed natural gas led to a transport meltdown in the Indian capital last week.

But the situation eased a bit after the deadline was extended from April 1 to April 15.

Meanwhile, the Delhi state gov-

ernment has sought a way to ease the situation by proposing to a federal government expert panel that ultra low sulphur diesel be used as an alternative fuel in addition to gas.

Newspapers said the decision was taken at a meeting Tuesday between Delhi state Chief Minister Sheila Dixit and Petroleum Minister Ram Naik.

Rwanda orders arrest of ex-PM for genocide

AFP, Kigali

The Rwandan government has ordered the arrest of former prime minister Pierre Celestin Rwigema, accused of participating in the 1994 genocide, top prosecutor Gerard Gahima announced.

"The accusations against him do not date from today, he has been accused since 1996, only the case against him was not yet complete," Gahima told reporters here late Tuesday.

The 47-year-old former official is accused of distributing firearms and grenades to members of an extremist Hutu militia in the Kigali suburb of Biryogo in order to carry out massacres of Tutsis.

The allegation has been confirmed by the testimony of former head of Biryogo sector, Amri Karekezi, who has been sentenced to death.

Karekezi claimed that Rwigema, who was in charge of security in Biryogo, coordinated the hunting down of Tutsis by issuing lists of those to be killed.

Charges against Rwigema include genocide and crimes against humanity, Gahima told journalists.

Between 500,000 and 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered between April and July 1994.



A 2000 September filer shows a couple of boatmen making their way past toxic effluents floating in the Yamuna River in New Delhi. India's Supreme Court has ordered a clean up of the Indian capital's main river by March 2003 which is heavily polluted by industrial and domestic wastes.

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FOR REGISTRATION PLEASE CONTACT :

Mr. Saad, Mr. Hyder, Tel: 8611891-5
 Fax: 8613470, E-mail: bcl_mkt@bol-online.com
 Mr. S. M. Waesh, Tel: 9567846, 9667236
 Fax: 9550030, E-mail: waesh@flora.agni.com
 Mr. Pronab Kumar Saha, Tel: 8021647-8
 8021544 ext. 119, Fax: 8020814, Mobile: 017-630441
 E-mail: pk.saha@grameensoftware.com
 Mr. Nazrul Jamil, Tel/Fax: 8313647
 E-mail: actitd@bangla.net

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