

Palestinians appeal for Euro-Arab summit

Israel keen to resume talks: Peres

AFP, Cairo

A Palestinian official called Thursday for a European-Arab summit on the "deteriorating situation" in the occupied territories in a bid to counter what Arabs see as US bias toward Israel.

"Euro-Arab summit on the deteriorating situation could put pressure on the US administration to adopt a fairer and more objective stand on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Ahmed Abdel Rahman, secretary general of the Palestinian cabinet, told Egyptian state radio.

"European security is linked to that of the Middle East," he said in the broadcast which was carried by the state-run Middle East News Agency.

"Insecurity in the Middle East will affect the European continent," the official said.

Palestinian international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath, following a tour of Europe, said European countries had made a "positive change" in their position and that they for the Jordanian-Egyptian peace initiative.

The initiative calls confidence building measures to end the violence and restart peace talks.

Abdel Rahman meanwhile denounced Wednesday's meeting of the Israeli security cabinet in the West Bank Jewish settlement of Ofra as "a clear violation of the Palestinian territories."

Meanwhile, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said here that Israel was "seriously and sincerely anxious to re-enter into negotiations" once violence from the Palestinian side had stopped.

He was speaking after an hour-long meeting Wednesday with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, during which the two discussed the peace initiative sponsored by the Egyptian and Jordanian governments, and what Powell referred to as the "controversial issue" of the expansion of existing Israeli settlements.

Peres reminded reporters that the Israeli government – headed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon – had adopted a policy of no new settlements. Any Palestinian demands on existing ones could be discussed "around the negotiating table," he said.

Sharon meanwhile was chairing a meeting of the Israeli security cabinet in the West Bank settlement of Ofra, where a settler was killed in a Palestinian ambush Tuesday.

It was a symbolic location – the first time a security cabinet meeting had been held in the occupied territories – and Sharon after the meeting promised a hard line against Palestinian "terror."

"If Arafat does not deal with terror, we will deal with terror," Sharon said. "We have an interest in preventing an escalation. But we haven't used all the possibilities to bring an end to terror. And these things we will do."



President Gloria Arroyo (L) shakes hands with jailed ex-president Joseph Estrada (R) in his specially built prison cell located in Fort Santo Domingo, a police special forces training camp south of Manila yesterday. Arroyo made the visit to check on his treatment and inspect conditions in his prison cell. Estrada is facing charges of plunder. He stands accused of amassing \$80 million US dollars during his two years in office. At extreme left is Estrada's son, San Juan town Mayor Jinggoy Estrada who is also jailed for plunder.

Arroyo visits Estrada in jail, aides rule out deal

'State of rebellion' to be lifted next week, senator indicted for rebellion

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo paid her jailed predecessor Joseph Estrada a surprise visit yesterday, but aides ruled out a political deal following bloody protests by the former leader's followers in the capital.

Arroyo left the fortress-like conditions clamped around Malacanang palace, scene of deadly rioting earlier this week, and flew by helicopter to a police training camp outside Manila at noon to inspect Estrada's cell and check on his health.

Arroyo "shook hands with Estrada" but they did not discuss political matters, Press Undersecretary Roberto Capco told reporters.

"She just visited," Capco said of the 30-minute trip. "She talked with them to see if they are well-provided

for with the basic amenities and to check on his health condition."

Estrada is confined with his son and co-defendant Jose Ejercito at a specially-built prison home about 70 km south of Manila pending his June 27 trial for plunder, a crime punishable by death.

Capco said Roman Catholic Cardinal Ricardo Vidal, a close friend of Estrada, had arranged the visit.

Arroyo has declared a "state of rebellion" in Manila and ordered the arrest of 11 opposition leaders and other persons she blamed for masterminding the mob that stormed her official residence before dawn Tuesday.

Arroyo foes organized the attack on the palace as part of a plot to set up a junta with Estrada as a "puppet" leader, Vice President Teofisto Guingona told foreign diplomats

Thursday. Meanwhile, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo will on May 7 lift the "state of rebellion" she enforced on the capital Manila to quell violent riots, senior aides said.

National Security Adviser Roilo Golez said the declaration would be lifted even if some of those who allegedly plotted to topple Arroyo had not yet been arrested.

Another report says, Philippine state prosecutors have filed rebellion charges against opposition Senator Juan Ponce Enrile alleging he had a leading role in a mob attack on President Gloria Arroyo's official residence, officials said Thursday.

Chief state prosecutor Jovencito Zuno said government lawyers asked a lower court to deny bail to Enrile, who was arrested Tuesday shortly after Arroyo called out the army to quell the street violence.

India hopeful of early lifting of US sanctions

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha said yesterday he was hopeful the United States would lift economic sanctions against India soon to strengthen bilateral trade.

Sinha, who recently visited the US, said all the signals seemed to be positive.

"I did not note a desire on the part of the US administration to lift the sanctions."

The economic sanctions were imposed in the aftermath of New Delhi's shock nuclear tests in May 1998, which saw Indo-US relations plummet to an all time low.

Last month, former US ambassador to India Richard Celeste, told Indian media that the sanctions against India were likely to be lifted in three to six months.

He had said India's statements

pledging a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing and a no first use of nuclear weapons were "very important to the Bush administration."

While weighing the impact of the US slowdown Sinha said the Indian economy would in all probability feel a minor shock.

"While it will have some impact, it will not be severely impacted," Sinha added.

He said the better than expected performance of the US economy in the first quarter was a sign the slowdown would not last long.

India's booming IT industry has been affected by the US slowdown and most of the leading domestic software firms have issued profit and revenue warnings for the current fiscal.

Pakistan not informed of India's biggest war games plan

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan said on Wednesday it had not received advance notice of India's biggest military exercises in more than a decade, planned to be launched this week near the Pakistani border.

"The government of Pakistan is therefore watching the situation closely," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

The war games involving both the air and the army are aimed at equipping soldiers to cope with a nuclear, biological or chemical strike, an Indian army spokesman said on Tuesday.

Pakistan had been informed about the five-day exercises which begin on May 5, an Indian army official said.

Pentagon retracts suspension of military relations with China

AFP, Washington

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld Wednesday withdrew a directive suspending military-to-military contacts with China, said a Pentagon spokesman, who blamed the mix-up on a misunderstanding of the secretary's intentions by a lower level official.

The bureaucratic bungle came amid tensions between the United States and China over the collision of a US surveillance plane with a Chinese fighter, Chinese demands for an end to the surveillance flights, and US approval of a major arms package for Taiwan.

The directive suspending the contacts went out in a memorandum

dated April 30 and was signed by

Rumsfeld's senior assistant for

policy, Chris Williams, Pentagon

officials said.

The secretary of defence has directed the suspension of all Department of Defence programs, contacts, and activities with the Peoples Republic of China until further notice, the memo said.

But shortly after news of the memorandum broke, the Pentagon spokesman called reporters in to say that the writer of the memorandum had misinterpreted Rumsfeld's directives.

"The memo called for a suspension of the mil-to-mil program. That is not his intention," said Rear Admiral Craig Quigley.

Rumsfeld's "true intention" was to order all elements of the military-to-military contacts to be reviewed and approved on a case-by-case basis by the Department of Defence, Quigley said.

Asked whether Rumsfeld had read the memo before it went out, the admiral said, "Certainly not."

Quigley was unable to explain how the mistake went unnoticed for two days, except to say "paper moves slowly."

The memo was addressed to the heads of the military departments, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the commanders-in-chief of US forces, the heads of defence agencies and the top civilian leadership.

N Korea promises to keep missile test moratorium

AFP, Pyongyang

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il has promised to maintain a moratorium on missile testing until at least 2003, visiting European Union leaders said yesterday.

Analysts said Kim's vow may be a gesture of reconciliation toward the United States, whose new administration of President George W. Bush has launched a review of North Korean policy.

"We expressed very grave concern about the missile programme," Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson told a news conference after five hours of talks with the North Korean supreme leader.

"Kim Jong-Il said the moratorium on the testing would last until 2003, during which time they would wait and see," said Persson, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency.

Javier Solana, the EU high representative for security and foreign policy affairs, said it was unclear why 2003 had been chosen, but added: "We hope that the moratorium will continue beyond that."

North Korea set international

alarm bells ringing when it test-fired a rocket over Japan on August 31, 1998. North Korea said it was a satellite launch, but Japan insisted it was a ballistic missile test.

The communist state declared its intention to suspend tests in September 1999 when then US president Bill Clinton said the United States was ready to lift some economic sanctions.

Pyongyang insisted the moratorium would be kept as long as missile talks with the United States continued. The North has demanded cash compensation for ending exports of its weaponry.

Russian President Vladimir Putin

said after meeting Kim Jong-Il in Pyongyang last July that North Korea was ready to halt the missile program if the United States or other Western countries provided commercial satellite launches.

When then US secretary of state

Madeleine Albright visited

Pyongyang last November, Kim Jong-Il again indicated that the tests would be halted.

Hundreds of police officers, soldiers and rescue workers were digging through earth and rubble in Chongqing municipality's Wulong county in a desperate effort to find people still trapped inside the collapsed building, the Xinhua news agency said.

Landslide kills 65 in China

AFP, Beijing

The death toll from a landslide that engulfed an apartment building in southwest China had grown to 65 by early yesterday, state media said.

Hundreds of police officers, soldiers and rescue workers were digging through earth and rubble in Chongqing municipality's Wulong county in a desperate effort to find people still trapped inside the collapsed building, the Xinhua news agency said.

Taliban ministers barred from visiting Pakistan

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan stopped four ministers of Afghanistan's hardline Taliban Islamic militia from visiting the country and has tightened security at its frontier dividing the two nations, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The Taliban ministers were coming to Pakistan to attend a conference organized by a radical Islamic party in northwestern Pakistan last month, English-language daily Dawn quoted Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider as saying.

But they were stopped at Torkham, the main crossing between the two countries, and turned back, he said.

This is the first time that Pakistan considered a close ally of the orthodox militia has refused entry to Taliban high officials.

The decision was made in line with UN sanctions that ban supplying weapons to the Taliban and restrict foreign travel by their officials, Haider said.

The UN imposed sanctions on

Pakistan for its support of Osama bin Laden, whom Washington accuses of running a global terrorist network. Washington wants bin Laden to stand trial in the United States or a third country for his alleged involvement in the bombing of its two embassies in East Africa in 1998. But the Taliban refuse to hand over bin Laden, saying that he is a fellow Muslim and a guest.

Pakistan opposes sanctions on the Taliban, but says it will abide by the UN decision.

The anti-Taliban opposition alliance regularly blames Pakistan of providing military and financial assistance to the Taliban, who rule 95 per cent of Afghanistan, including the capital Kabul.

But Haider rejected the opposition charges.

Pakistani nationals belonging to radical Islamic parties have also been stopped from going to Afghanistan and participating in fighting against the opposition, Haider said.

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But they did not, Mahfud said, suggest Haider give in to the calls of his growing number of opponents that he step down.

The Jakarta Post daily quoted Defence Minister Mahfud MD as saying a team of ministers, set up by Haider to help him reply to the centre, had recommended a Cabinet reshuffle to give more power to the major political parties.

"If the option is power sharing, the ministers, especially those in the political, social and security fields, will invite the President and Vice President to rearrange the Cabinet, if the present one is deemed not be effective," Mahfud said.

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