

US to continue efforts to end ME violence

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary of State Colin Powell vowed on Saturday the United States would keep working to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, telling Arab-Americans the stakes were too high for Washington to disengage.

Powell sought to dispel a perception that President George W. Bush and his Cabinet were pursuing a more hands-off approach to the Middle East, saying: "We will be engaged. We will not rest because the stakes are too high."

Addressing more than 700 people at an Arab American Institute Foundation dinner, Powell said he remained in close contact with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on a nearly daily basis.

"One can become frustrated. One can say it's easy to walk away from this, to lose hope," he said. "But we cannot walk away. We must not walk away, and we will not lose hope."

"President Bush will not turn away, and neither will I," he added.

The secretary said the United States was sponsoring security talks between the Israelis and

Palestinians, and was working with Egypt and Jordan on a plan to resume peace talks.

"We are deeply engaged on a daily basis to try and lower the level of violence and restore hope and trust between the two sides," Powell told the group's annual Khalil Gibran "Spirit of Humanity" Awards dinner.

He said removing barriers to trade and improving access to jobs were vital steps toward resuming peace negotiations.

Powell did not directly address the final report of a commission led by former US Sen. George Mitchell about violence in the region, underscoring only Washington's desire to help the two sides end the violence and resume peace talks.

The State Department on Friday emphasised the importance of continuing security cooperation talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

Powell said the Palestinian people had "suffered greatly" in the past months, and the violence also was exacting a heavy toll among Israelis, but it was in the interest of both sides to end the violence and return to negotiations.



PHOTO: AFP

First tourist in space

US space tourist Deni Tito (C) gestures after landing close to the Kazakh town of Arkalyk (some 300 km from Astana), yesterday. The world's first-ever space tourist Dennis Tito hailed a trip to paradise after the US millionaire and two Russian cosmonauts successfully landed back on earth.

'Pro-Estrada forces remain a threat in Philippines'

AFP, Manila

Forces allied to jailed ex-president Joseph Estrada remain a continued threat to national security despite a failed siege on the Philippine presidential palace last week, a senior intelligence official said yesterday.

"We are still waiting for their next try. We're ready for them even if they are also well-armed," the official who requested not to be named said. "So long as the other leaders are out

there, we cannot be sure what they're up to."

Meanwhile President Gloria Arroyo announced yesterday the lifting of a week-old "state of rebellion" declared in the Philippine capital to quash an alleged coup and assassination plot by the opposition.

"It's effective midnight tonight. I am lifting the order declaring a state of rebellion in Metro Manila," Arroyo said in a nation-wide address on government television.

Four people were killed while more than 100 were injured in street battles that erupted as Arroyo called in the troops and police to disperse some 50,000 rabid Estrada supporters who stormed the palace last Tuesday.

Several Estrada allies and supporters were ordered to be arrested, including Senator Juan Ponce Enrile and ex-ambassador to Washington Ernesto Maceda.

ULFA rebels kill four in India's Assam state

AFP, Guwahati

Federal troops shot dead four separatist militants in India's north-eastern state of Assam, taking the toll in pre-poll violence to 52 in the past month, official sources said yesterday.

An army spokesman said a group of heavily-armed separatist rebels belonging to the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) late Saturday night challenged troops in western Assam's Barpeta district, 140 kilometers from provincial capital Guwahati.

"The militants were hiding inside a house and when the soldiers surrounded the place, the ULFA rebels challenged them. In the ensuing encounter four cadres were killed," the spokesman said.

"A few of them managed to escape. We recovered three AK-47 rifles, two Chinese-made grenades, and a huge cache of ammunition."

The four dead militants were part of a 40-member ULFA hit squad constituted to foment violence ahead of provincial elections in Assam on May 10, the army official

added.

In another incident, unidentified gunmen kidnapped two relatives of ULFA's key leader, Paresh Baruah, from eastern Assam's north Lakhimpur district Saturday.

"Unidentified gunmen came and took away two brothers-in-law of Paresh Baruah from their village home at gun point," a police official told AFP by telephone.

"It appears to be a case of kidnapping," the official added.

ULFA militants are accused of killing up to 48 political activists in the run-up to the elections.

Most of the casualties were either members of the ruling Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) or Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"The fight will be between the ballot and the bullet and the people, who want peaceful polls, have no sympathy for these killers," Vajpayee told journalists in Guwahati Saturday night, after addressing an election rally.



PHOTO: AFP

A boy peeps through the legs of Syrian police to get a look at Pope John Paul II as he arrives at the Mariamiyeh Greek Orthodox church in Damascus on Saturday, on the first day of his four-day visit to Syria.

Archeologists warn of threat to Moenjodaro

DPA, Islamabad

Archeological experts in Pakistan have warned of threat posed by sub-soil salt and water to Moenjodaro, a 5,000-year-old historical site in southern Pakistan, included in the UNESCO World Heritage list, Pakistan's Dawn newspaper reported yesterday.

"Heavy concentration of underground salt and airborne salt were posing a serious threat to the Moenjodaro relics," the paper said, citing an expert's opinion at an archeology seminar held by University of Peshawar, in north-western Pakistan.

Floods kill 20, affect thousands in Thailand

AFP, Bangkok

About 20 people have died and thousands have seen their homes damaged or destroyed in flash floods and landslides that beset northern Thailand late last week, the Civil Defence Department said yesterday.

The flooding that began early Friday has claimed the lives of 19 villagers and injured 30 others in the northern Thai province of Phare where a total of 7,870 people from 1,574 households felt the effects of the disaster.

In neighbouring Sukothai province, where 1,258 people were affected, one person has been reported killed.

The water level was dropping yesterday as relief crews moved into help victims of the flooding caused by two days of heavy monsoon rains.

On Saturday, local authorities began distributing emergency food rations and drinking water to help some 4,137 people affected by the disaster, which struck in the early

hours of Friday in a valley in Phare province.

Estimates of the number of missing varied, with the public health ministry saying Friday that staff on the ground reported 61 people unaccounted for while the interior ministry said it knew of 30 missing.

Phare governor Anukul Kunawong earlier said the residents of Wang Chin district had scattered, making it hard to determine how many villagers had gone missing.

"The number of missing is still uncertain as while many have already returned after the flash flood receded, some went to stay with their relatives," he said.

Anukul has blamed the tragedy on logging that has destroyed forests in the area.

"Wang Chin is a district surrounded by mountains and the Wieng Kosai national park," he said. "This has clearly happened because of excessive depletion of the forests."



PHOTO: AFP

Assistant Choreographer Marco De La Cruz works with Oxana Kalandyrets, Miss Russia 2001, on her opening number on Saturday at the Westin Rio Mar in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico, for the May 11 Miss Universe Competition.

Israel rebuffs Palestinian call for summit

Shootings, bombings on in Gaza, West Bank

AP, Jerusalem

At least 12 Palestinians were injured by Israeli tank fire yesterday, including a 5-year-old boy who was hurt seriously, when the army returned fire on Palestinian gunmen shooting at Israeli motorists.

The heavy gunbattles in the town of Beit Jalla, just south of Jerusalem, and elsewhere in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip came as Israel rebuffed Palestinian calls for a Mideast peace summit.

Also, an explosion went off in the Israeli coastal city of Petach Tikva, injuring one woman lightly, and the army said that what appeared to be mortar shells landed near the town of Sderot, just outside the Gaza Strip.

The most intense fighting was in Beit Jalla. The Israeli army said it fired tank shells toward the Palestinian gunmen, who were shooting at a road linking Jerusalem to Jewish settlement in the West Bank.

At least 12 Palestinians were hurt, according to the hospital in Beit Jalla. The area has been the scene

of regular gunbattles between Palestinian gunmen and Israeli troops.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat called Saturday for a Mideast summit to discuss the findings of a US-led commission investigating the violence. Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Israel would only agree to meeting once the violence ends.

"It can't happen as long as there is still shooting. Either there is shooting or there are talks," Peres said in an interview with Israel's Channel Two Television.

The Mitchell Commission that investigated the violence submitted a draft of its report Friday. Diplomatic sources in Washington said it blamed neither Israelis nor Palestinians directly for igniting the violence.

The report also said Israel should freeze settlement construction in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but did not recommend sending an international force to the region, as Palestinians have been demanding.

Each side blames the other for the more than seven months of

bloodshed that has claimed the lives of 433 people on the Palestinian side and 72 people on the Israeli side.

According to the Haaretz newspaper, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon plans to ask his cabinet for 1.5 billion shekels (dhrs 375 million) increase in funding for Jewish settlements.

Haaretz said the ongoing violence is apparently behind Sharon's decision to request the additional money. Jewish settlements have been under frequent attack in the Israeli-Palestinian fighting.

The Palestinians who hope to establish a state in the West Bank and Gaza, view settlements as one of the main obstacles in achieving peace with Israel.

Also Sunday, a legal compromise appeared to emerge over whether Sharon could continue to dispatch his son an envoy to Arafat.

The Supreme Court ruled that Omri Sharon would have to get permission from the attorney general each time he is sent on such a diplomatic mission.