

Blair convenes Cabinet meet to call for polls

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair convened a special Bank Holiday Cabinet meeting yesterday to sound the battle charge for the June 7 general election he is expected to call within the next 48 hours.

With the date of the election one of the worst-kept secrets in Westminster, Blair was to give his ministers a pep talk on the seriousness of the task to come.

He was to say the upcoming election would need "even more energy and focus than the 1997 campaign," when Labour swept into power on a landslide after 18 years of Conservative domination.

Typically of Downing Street, Blair's comments to the cabinet were leaked in advance.

"In 1997, people were desperate to get rid of the Tories," he was to exhort the cabinet, "but this time around we don't have that advantage."

Serbs, Muslims clash in Banja Luka

AFP, Banja Luka

Hundreds of Bosnian Serbs and Muslims clashed in the northern town of Banja Luka Monday ahead of a ceremony marking the re-building of a mosque which was blown up during the Bosnian war.

An AFP journalist said at least one person was injured when stones and bottles were thrown between crowds of about 200 Muslims and several hundred Bosnian Serbs.

Italian members of the NATO peacekeeping force, SFOR, and police from Bosnia's Serb entity, Republika Srpska, separated the two groups while an SFOR helicopter hovered overhead.

Tear gas was fired into the Muslim crowd forcing some people to leave the area, but it was not known who fired the chemical.

Australia plans new crackdown to send back asylum seekers

AFP, Sydney

Australia is planning legislation to force judges to take a stricter stand in deciding refugee claims amid evidence courts have been excessively generous in interpreting UN rules, officials said yesterday.

The immigration department has found, for example, that Iraqi asylum seekers are six times more likely to be granted refugee status by an Australian court than by a country applying formal UN guidelines.

Courts have refused to disallow claims by people who deliberately make themselves refugees by making inflammatory statements in Australia that would guarantee persecution by a repressive regime in their homeland.

Israel bombs Palestinian territories, baby killed

AFP, Gaza City

A Palestinian baby girl was killed and her teenaged sister seriously wounded in an Israeli bombardment of a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip that left 20 other people hurt, Palestinian hospital and security officials said.

Four-month-old Iman Hajjour was killed by shell-fire when Israeli forces struck at the town and refugee camp of Khan Yunes in the southern Gaza Strip in retaliation for Palestinian mortar attacks on Jewish settlements.

Her sister, Suzanne, 19, was seriously wounded and 20 other people slightly hurt, Palestinian officials said.

The Israeli army said earlier it had responded with shell fire after the settlements of Neve Dekalim et d'Atzmona came under attack with mortars.

Witnesses said the shelling by tanks damaged a school, two apartment buildings and a number of houses.

The baby's death brings to 513 the number of people killed since the Palestinian intifada, or uprising, against Israeli occupation broke out last last September.

Meanwhile, a senior aide to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat denounced yesterday Israeli military incursions into zones under Palestinian autonomous control and called on the US government to press Israel to refrain from further such actions.

Nabil Abu Rudeina said such acts "do not serve peace and stability in the region."

He was referring to Israeli raids Monday on the town of Tulkarem, in the northern West Bank, and a day earlier in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem.

Both incidents resulted in Palestinians being killed or wounded.

These actions have "overstepped ... the red lines" and "defy the American administration, which forced the Israeli army to withdraw from Beit Hanun," Abu Rudeina said.

The reference was to the Palestinian-controlled Gaza Strip locality occupied by Israeli troops on April 17 until a sharp rebuke from the United States and other countries led to the soldiers being pulled out.

"We call on the American administration and the international community to prevent these excesses and the war of attrition being carried out by the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharn against the Palestinian people," Abu Rudeina said.

Referring to Sunday's incursion into Beit Jala, a senior Palestinian security official called for an urgent meeting with Israel after Israeli troops "moved the border 25 metres (yards) into Beit Jala and erected a watch tower."

Ribhi Arafat, Palestinian military liaison with the Israelis in the West Bank, said "we have a right to defend ourselves, and we will not permit the Israelis to penetrate our sovereign territory."

Great train robber Biggs takes flight to justice

AFP, London

Ailing robber Ronnie Biggs was arrested yesterday after returning to Britain to end more than 35 years on the run, bringing to a close one of the longest escapades in British criminal history.

Biggs, 71, touched down at the Royal Air Force base of Northolt, northwest London, at 8:45 am (0745 GMT) in a private jet chartered by the Sun newspaper.

Police were waiting for him, and 20 minutes later he was arrested for being "unlawfully at large," a Scotland Yard spokesman said.

The arrest warrant was executed on board by Detective Chief Superintendent John Coles, head of the police serious and organised crime squad.

Police said Biggs would appear at a west London magistrates' court later in the day. First, he would be examined by a police doctor.

Macedonian army kills 20 Albanian rebels

AFP, Lipkovo

The Macedonian army killed 20 ethnic Albanian guerrillas in fighting early Monday near a northern village which the military's big guns have been pounding for four days, an army spokesman said.

The shooting broke out when a security patrol came across a guerrilla position near the village of Lojane, said army spokesman Blagoja Markovski.

He said there were no casualties among the soldiers.

Markovski said that operations were under way against the self-proclaimed National Liberation Army (NLA) around the village of Slupcane, at the centre of the combat zone just west of the city of Kumanovo.

Flash floods leave 32 dead in Iran

AFP, Tehran

Thirty-two people were killed and several others were missing after heavy flooding hit northeast Iran, the state news agency IRNA reported yesterday.

Another 50 people were injured while more than 200 houses were demolished in the flash floods Sunday which hit the northeastern city of Bojnurd in Khorassan province, IRNA said, adding the casualty toll was expected to rise.

Some 2,500 head of cattle have drowned and several villages have been cut off in the region around Bojnurd, it said.

Helicopters have been sent to the scene to provide aid, while the Red Crescent Society has sent over 200 tents, 1,000 blankets, tons of rice and other food products to around a dozen affected villages.

Megawati ready to lead coalition to break standoff

AFP, Jakarta

Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri is ready to lead a coalition of parties to break the stalemate over Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid's position, a report said Monday.

Megawati, who leads the Indonesian Democracy Party for Struggle (PDIP) has received mounting public support as the most likely candidate to replace Wahid, who is facing rising pressure to resign or be ousted.

"In various informal meetings, the chairperson of the PDIP has indicated her readiness to lead, if a coalition between political parties takes place, and if that is the solution to overcome the stagnation in political dialogue," House Speaker Akbar Tanjung said.



PHOTO: AFP  
Lesley Turner, Miss Ireland 2001 poses in her evening gown during the Miss Universe 2001 Presentation Show at the Ruben Rodriguez Coliseum in Bayamon, Puerto Rico on Sunday.

Pope prays for peace

AFP, Quneitra

Pope John Paul II prayed yesterday for "peace in the Holy Land and in the world" in a ruined church in a ghost town on the Syrian Golan Heights, a symbol of the Middle East conflict.

He also extended his prayers to the victims of violence in the Gaza Strip, where a four-month-old Palestinian baby was reported killed Monday by Israeli shellfire.

"From this place, so disfigured by war, I wish to raise my heart and voice in prayer for peace in the Holy Land," the said in the Greek Orthodox church in the town of Quneitra, rushed by the Israelis in 1974.

"True peace is a gift from God," the pope added.

"We pray to you for the peoples of the Middle East. Help them to tear down the walls of hostility and division, and to build together a world of justice and solidarity."

"We pray for the civil leaders of this region that they may strive to satisfy their peoples' rightful aspirations and educate the young in the ways of justice and peace."

"We pray for the followers of all religions," he said, calling for them "to grow in friendship and to live



PHOTO: AFP  
Syrian Greek Catholic Patriarch Zakka (L) offers a gift to Pope John Paul II at the Syrian Orthodox Cathedral of Damascus on Sunday.

together in harmony."

After the prayer, the pope blessed and watered an olive tree, symbol of peace, outside the church, and caressed the cheeks of a baby among the crowd who greeted him.

Before leaving Quneitra, he spoke to representatives of the United Nations observer force on the Golan, telling them, "Your presence is a sign of the international

community's determination to be of assistance in bringing closer the day of harmony between the peoples, the cultures and religions of the area."

Thousands of local people, many of them displaced from their original homes by the Israeli occupation of most of the strategic heights, were on hand to welcome the pope as he arrived in blustery weather in a black Mercedes.

Heat wave claims 36 in Pakistan

AP, Karachi

A blistering heat wave has killed at least 36 people in different parts of Pakistan during the weekend, doctors and police said yesterday.

In some parts of the country temperatures soared to 50 Celsius (122 Fahrenheit).

At least 30 people, many of them children died in southern Sindh province. Most of the deaths were the result of heat stroke and dehydration. Scores more people are in hospital receiving treatment, said officials of southern Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital.

The hottest area in the country was interior Sindh. Most deaths were reported in Kheirpur, Jacobabad and Hyderabad. In Kheirpur alone seven people died, doctors said.

The scorching heat so early in the year bodes badly for the remainder of the year. For Pakistan, which is in the grip of a severe drought in its southern Sindh province, this is a disaster.

The lack of water has ruined crops and contributed to the high death rate, said Saeed Ahmed Somroo, a professor at Sindh University.

Pakistan is bracing for one of its hottest years. In some parts of Sindh and southwestern Baluchistan there has been no rain in more than one year.

Pakistan will lose millions of dollars in lost agricultural revenue because of poor wheat and cotton crops, the result of the drought.

"We are praying for rains," Sabeen Hasan, a university student, said in the port city of Karachi. "This heat wave has really become torturous."

Pentagon to abandon two-war strategy

AP, Washington

Defence Secretary Donald H Rumsfeld is ready to unveil a new military strategy that, among other things, would formally abandon the two-major-war measure that has been used to determine the size of the military for a decade, the Washington Post reported.

The paper said in Monday editions that Rumsfeld is scheduled to meet with President George W Bush this week to seek final approval for the new strategy, said to involve some of the biggest changes in the US military in a

decade.

Rumsfeld has been working on the reorganization plan since the Bush administration took office in January and the final version will be the blueprint for budget proposals outlining defense spending for the next several years.

The Post quoted unidentified Pentagon officials as saying a two week campaign on defense issue raised by the new plan will culminate with a May 25 address by Bush at the Naval Academy where he will lay out what one called "the vision of where we need to go as we move into the 21st century."

Japan to boost immigration controls

AFP, Tokyo

Japan announced more resources to combat illegal immigration yesterday, admitting that a man believed to be the son of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il may have sneaked into the country in the past.

The man, who reportedly identified himself to Japanese authorities as Kim Jong-Nam, was deported to China on Friday following a three-day detention here for using a false passport.

"It is unknown whether or not he himself had actually entered Japan, but his passport showed records of entry," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda told a regular press conference.

Noting the possibility that the junior Kim had made previous visits, the government spokesman added: "If so, the entry was in complete violation of our law."

ETA rebels kill Spanish politician ahead of polls

AFP, Zaragoza

A regional leader of Spain's ruling Popular Party was shot dead Sunday in an attack blamed on Basque separatists, just one week ahead of regional elections in the Basque country, police said.

They said Manuel Gimenez Abad, 53, was shot twice in the head by a masked attacker using a 9mm calibre pistol at 17:15 local time (1515 gmt) in the centre of Zaragoza, the capital of the northern Aragon region.

Paramedics tried unsuccessfully to revive the politician, who had no security escort. The attacker fled on foot.

7x2

7x3

6 more killed in pre-polls violence in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

At least six people were killed overnight in election-related violence in India's troubled Assam state, while police averted a disaster by defusing a powerful bomb at the main railway station.

An Assam police spokesman told AFP that the bomb planted at the state capital Guwahati's busy station was suspected of being part of a pre-election terror campaign by separatist militants.

"The timebomb was definitely planted by militants to create panic and spread violence ahead of the May 10 assembly elections in Assam," he told AFP.

He said at least six more people were killed Sunday, taking the death toll in pre-election violence over the past month to 58, with more than 150 others injured, most of them political workers.

Angolan rebel attack leaves 100 dead

AFP, Luanda

An attack by UNITA rebels in Caxito, north of the Angolan capital, at the weekend left 100 people dead and 100 others missing, state television reported yesterday.

The Angolan army said two soldiers and five police officers were wounded during the attack on Saturday by the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

Television images on Monday showed the corpses of civilian victims being buried.

Rebels who attacked Caxito, just 60 km north of Luanda, torched cars

and riddled buildings with bullets, including the state radio headquarters, the army said.

Although Angola's civil war has raged almost non-stop since its independence from Portugal in 1975, attacks are rare so close to the capital.

A non-governmental organisation in Caxito, the People's Aid for the People (ADPP), said one of its teachers, Diogo Manuel, was killed at a school.

In a statement issued on Sunday, UNITA rebels claimed to have killed 37 government soldiers and police in the attack, and seized large quantities of weapons.