



PHOTO: AFP  
Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (R) shakes hands with Dutch Foreign Minister Jozias van Aartsen on Tuesday in Gaza City. Van Aartsen is on a Middle East tour to discuss the Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

## Army chief warns Wahid not to dissolve parliament

AP, Jakarta

Indonesia's army chief warned President Addurrahman Wahid not to dissolve parliament as a way of preventing his impeachment, the official Antara news agency reported yesterday.

Wahid, however, immediately denied that he has any intention of dismissing the legislature.

Gen. Endriartono Sutarto, the army's chief of staff, said any attempt by the embattled head of state to close down the legislature would only worsen Indonesia's ongoing political crisis.

"We strongly suggest that he does not do that," Sutarto was

quoted by Antara as saying.

Media reports have claimed that Wahid threatened on Saturday to dissolve the assembly, impose martial law and call snap parliamentary elections.

Sutarto said the military had a duty to advise the president not to pursue a course of action that would be against the aspirations of the Indonesian people, Antara reported.

Sutarto has been sharply critical of Wahid in the past. Other military chiefs have not commented on the reports.

At the state palace, Wahid was asked by reporters whether he was planning to move against the assembly.

"No," Wahid replied. "This is just people gossiping. If you believe it, it is your own fault."

Pressure has mounted against Wahid since the parliament last week issued a stinging censure that accused him of graft and incompetence and opened the way for his impeachment.

Many lawmakers now want popular Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose party is the largest in the legislature, to take over the presidency.

It was unclear whether a meeting of the leaders of parties in the parliament would go ahead on Friday as originally reported in the media.

## 2 Israelis stabbed to death near Bethlehem

AFP, Jerusalem

The bodies of two Israeli youths, stabbed to death, were discovered early Wednesday near the Teqoa West Bank settlement east of Bethlehem, military sources said.

The two victims, who lived in the area, had been reported missing late Tuesday.

The Israeli army launched a search and found the bodies in the morning, the sources said.

The deaths bring the overall toll to 518 from the fighting in Israel and the Palestinian territories since late September, when the Palestinian "Intifada", or uprising, began.

The vast majority of those killed have been Palestinians.

The body of another Israeli settler, who had been shot and stabbed, was found in the West

Bank on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's top political adviser Osama al-Baz urged the United States on Tuesday to "get busy" with the Middle East peace process to avoid a dangerous escalation in the region.

Baz complained that the US has been "backing Israel all the way."

"We call upon the US to activate its role and to get busy seriously with the situation in the Middle East," he told foreign journalists in Cairo.

He warned that without efforts to end the spiral of violence between Israel and the Palestinians that began over seven months ago, "terrorism" would spread to the rest of the Middle East and that extremist Muslims from around the world might try to infiltrate Israel to carry

out attacks.

"We hope that the international community will do its part in order to persuade the parties to get back to the negotiating table and ... prevail on Israel to stop the excessive and exaggerated unwarranted actions," Baz said.

"What is needed now is a daring effort in order to stop the deteriorating situation before it becomes too late and gets out of the hands of the (Palestinian) leadership," he said.

The Egyptian presidential adviser said Egypt was "satisfied" with the current European role in the peace process.

On Monday, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mussa said the European Union 's efforts for a settlement in the Middle East crisis were "insufficient".



PHOTO: AFP  
British Conservative Party leader William Hague (C) with his wife Ffion starts his election campaign trail in Watford on Tuesday. British Prime Minister Tony Blair called a general election for June 7.

## Blair calls polls on June 7

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair comes face to face with opposition leader William Hague Wednesday for the first time since calling a June general election.

Blair will trade verbal blows with Conservative leader Hague in the House of Commons for the first time since calling a June general election.

On Tuesday, Blair called a general election for June 7, firing the starting gun for a four-week campaign his ruling Labour Party looks set to win convincingly.

The date had been an open secret for at least the past month, after Blair was forced to forego his earlier preferred date of May 3 because of the foot-and-mouth disease crisis in British farms.

A newspaper opinion poll

published Wednesday said Labour was on course to increase its 1997 election winning majority of 179 seats to more than 250.

The NOP poll of 1,000 voters in the Daily Express gave Labour a 20 point lead over the Conservatives, in line with recent surveys.

It said 51 percent of voters backed Labour while 31 percent supported the Conservatives. Meanwhile, 13 percent of voters came out in favour of the Liberal Democrats, Britain's third biggest party.

At the last election four years ago, Labour won 418 seats in the 659-member House of Commons, giving it the biggest majority of any party since World War II and ending 18 years of Conservative domination marked largely by the Thatcher era.

## 54 miners feared dead in Chinese mine blast

AFP, Beijing

Up to 54 miners are feared dead after an explosion ripped through a coal mine in northeastern China, state media reported Wednesday.

State television said the blast at the Number One Mine of the Lanshan Coal Company in Hegang, a town in Heilongjiang province, happened in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

It said nine people had been confirmed dead and 45 others were missing.

An official at the colliery said a rescue operation was still under way to find the missing miners, but he refused further comment.

China is the biggest producer and consumer of coal in the world, and it has an appalling safety record

in its mines.

The official death toll from mine accidents last year was more than 5,300 although independent analysts estimate 10,000 Chinese miners die each year.

There have been several major mining accidents reported in the state media in recent months.

At least 47 miners were killed in an explosion at a coal mine in north-west Shaanxi province on April 6, while 37 miners were killed in a gas blast at a mine employing prison labour in Heilongjiang in February.

The government has launched a campaign to shut thousands of coal mines, especially small and dangerous ones, to avoid overproduction, falling prices and to improve the industry's safety record.

## Human mission to Mars by year 2020

AFP, Washington

A human space explorer will be able to fly to Mars no later than the year 2020 and visit other planets of the Solar system in the following decades, the top US space official announced yesterday.

In an address reminiscent of late US president John Kennedy's 1962 speech announcing a mission to the Moon before the end of that decade, National Aeronautics and Space Agency Administrator Daniel Goldin said the United States would be able to send a man to Mars in no more than two decades.

Before the year 2011, the United States planned to send a landing craft to Mars and collect samples of its surface, according to the NASA chief.

## Indian troops on alert ahead of polls in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Indian troops were on maximum alert in the restive northeastern state of Assam to guard against attacks by separatist militants ahead of Thursday's state polls, officials said.

A state government spokesman said at least 75,000 police and paramilitary soldiers were deployed across Assam to ensure "violence-free" polling.

Attacks by militants, who have called for a boycott of the polls, have claimed the lives of 60 people since April 4, including that of an election candidate from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Another 175 people have been injured in 180 separate attacks in the past month in the oil-and timber-

rich state.

The violence has been spear-headed by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an outlawed militant group fighting for an independent homeland.

Authorities have declared at least 13,000 of the total 17,600 polling centres in Assam as vulnerable to militant attacks.

"We have taken all possible security measures to hold a violence-free election," Assam's Director General of Police Hare Krishna Deka said.

Army columns have intensified counter-insurgency operations in militant strongholds of western and northern Assam, and have been maintaining a strict vigil along the porous Indo-Bhutan border.



PHOTO: AFP  
(L to R) Prince Laurent, Princess Mathilde, Queen Paola, King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, Queen Fabiola, Queen Silvia, Princess Astrid, Prince Lorenz and King Albert II arrive for the gala dinner at the Royal Palace in Laeken on Tuesday. Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia are on a four-day state visit to Belgium with their daughter Victoria.

## US seeks explanations for double blow at UN

AP, United Nations

Stung by a double blow to it's UN stature, US diplomats past and present are trying to explain what went wrong for the United States in crucial votes last week that left them off important international panels for the first time.

Although the United States believed it had the support going into a series of votes Thursday at the United Nations, it lost seats it has held for years on the UN Human Rights Commission and the International Narcotics Control Board.

"A lot of these votes come from countries that aren't friendly to us, a lot of it comes because the Europeans now vote as a group for themselves and we need an ambas-

sador here who can take charge of things," former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told AP.

The lack of a permanent US ambassador has been suggested by some diplomats as a reason why US lobbying efforts to retain its spots may have failed.

Others have pointed to frustration over international issues such as President George W Bush's decision to pull out of the 1997 Kyoto treaty to curb global warming and his intention to build a new missile defense system, sounding the death knell of the 1972 treaty on missile defense, regarded by many countries as the basis for nuclear arms stability.

That came on top of the Clinton administration's rejection of the treaty to ban land mines, the US

Senate's 1999 refusal to ratify the nuclear test ban treaty and more recent coolness toward the creation of an international criminal court.

Acting US Ambassador James Cunningham would not address those suggestions Tuesday.

Instead, he reiterated US disappointment over the voting and said that America would "pursue our efforts in the UN system and outside on human rights and on combating drugs and we will do that through all the instruments at our disposal."

Bangladesh Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury, whose country is on the Security Council, said one of the messages from the vote is that the United States should make a greater effort "to be an international player where views of other nations count."

## Asian media still evolving

AFP, Singapore

The role of the media in Asia is still evolving and will eventually adopt unique Asian characteristics rather than the full press freedom of the West, a regional media conference was told Wednesday.

Even in countries where the media is subjected to tight regulations, there would be increased freedom of expression over the next 25-30 years as Asia establishes itself as an economic powerhouse, the panel said.

"The role of the media in each Asian country will evolve. It is not a static situation. Even in China, I dare say it's not a static situation," Tommy Koh, Singapore's ambassador at large, said.

"I think the parameters of freedom of expression will broaden. Tolerance as a virtue will be increasingly accepted and practised even," he said in the opening session of the three-day News World Asia conference.

But there were dangers engaging in full freedom of expression, such as in the United States where freedom of speech included the right to indulge in hate speech, Koh said.

"We often live in very plural societies whether in Indonesia or Singapore. And we have to be extra careful not to hurt the sensitivities of compatriots of another religion or another race," he said.

"And this is where the western media is not very good."

Koh said he doubted a uniform media model would emerge in Asia because of the vastly different stages of development in each country

## Indian chopper with minister missing

PTI, Itanagar

A Pawan Hans Helicopter with seven passengers including State Education Minister Dera Natung and senior officials of the union and the state government on board has been missing since Tuesday morning.

Official source here said the chopper was on a special flight, which left here at 11 AM for Rupa in West Kameng district and Seppa in East Kameng district and was scheduled to return at 4 pm.

## UN to close 4 political offices in Afghanistan

REUTERS, United Nations

The United Nations this month intends to close a network of political offices in Afghanistan as demanded by the ruling Taliban but leave open its bureau in the capital Kabul, a UN spokesman said on Tuesday.

The closure of four offices in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Mazar-i-Sharif is to take place by May 20 in retaliation for the shut-down of the Taliban's New York office by the United States in the line with UN sanctions against the group.

The news was related earlier this month to the UN special envoy, Frances Vendrell, who is trying to negotiate a peace settlement between the Taliban and its Northern Alliance opponents.