



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.

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

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.

A newspaper opinion poll

Clinton meets Jiang with US, China tensions running high

AFP, Hong Kong

Former US president Bill Clinton held talks with Chinese President Jiang Zemin here Wednesday against a backdrop of serious tensions between Beijing and the new US administration.

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Clinton waved to the press as he left the hotel, the Harbour Plaza, in a black BMW, an hour and 15 minutes after arriving amid tight security.

Jiang, who delivered the opening keynote address on Tuesday to the Fortune Global Forum attended by business and political leaders from around the world, was scheduled to leave Hong Kong Wednesday afternoon after a whirlwind 24-hour visit.

Under Clinton's administration, Washington pushed ahead with a policy of constructive engagement with Beijing and described China as a "strategic partner."

The Bush administration has

taken to describing China as a "strategic competitor" and has taken a tougher line on Beijing.

Relations have been strained by a row over the April 1 collision between a US spy plane and a Chinese jet fighter, a proposed US arms sale to Taiwan and the detention by China of several US nationals.

Clinton and Jiang met on several occasions when Clinton was in the White House.

Clinton made a landmark visit to China in 1998, during which he took part in an unprecedented live television debate with Jiang.

The Bush administration has



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.

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 1, 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 spearheaded 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.

US seeks explanations for double blow at UN

AFP, United Nations

Stung by a double blow to its 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 had 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 shutdown 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.

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