

Palestinians call for UNSC meet on Israeli strikes

Extensive missile attacks on Gaza, 5 policemen killed

AFP, Gaza City

The Palestinian Authority has called for a meeting of the UN Security Council after lodging a protest over the latest Israeli attacks, which it warned could destroy international efforts to revive the peace process, a top aide to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said yesterday.

"We have asked through our representative in the UN Nasser al-Kidwa for a UN Security Council meeting following the Israeli escalation in the Palestinian territories," Arafat aide Nabil Abu Rudeina said.

"The Palestinian Authority has lodged an urgent protest with the UN Security council following the Israeli attacks last night (in the Gaza Strip) and killing of five policeman," he added.

Israeli helicopters hammered Palestinian targets across the Gaza Strip overnight, including Arafat's offices, leaving some 15 Palestinians injured, witnesses and hospital officials said.

Palestinian officials also said five policemen were killed at an Israeli army roadblock near the West Bank town of Ramallah, when Israeli soldiers opened fire on them for no reason.

"We condemn very strongly these attacks against our people. President Arafat and the Palestinian leadership are holding the necessary contacts and consultations with Arabs and the international community," Abu Rudeina

added.

"These dangerous attacks will hit the whole region and will destroy all international efforts to revive the peace process."

Meanwhile, Israeli helicopters fired missiles overnight Sunday into Palestinian targets across Gaza, including those close to Yasser Arafat's offices, in the most extensive attack in seven months of violence.

The Palestinian leader emerged unhurt from the wave of strikes against security buildings, armoured vehicles, administrative offices and other targets along the Gaza Strip, security sources said.

Hospital sources added that 15 people were hurt, none of them seriously. Three or four were hurt during strikes on the sprawling sea-front security base and compound where Arafat lives, works and receives foreign dignitaries.

"President Arafat was in his office working normally and following the attack," a security source told AFP, adding Arafat was unhurt by pinpoint strikes on armoured vehicles just dozens of meters (yards) away.

Earlier Israeli army destroyed a Palestinian police station near the northern West Bank town of Tulkarm overnight Sunday, a military spokesman said Monday.



PHOTO: AFP

Members of Bangladeshi rock group 'Miles' perform during 'United for Gujarat', the first ever South Asian rock concert in New Delhi on Sunday. Apart from Miles, Pakistani rock group 'Junoon', Indian groups 'Euphoria' and 'Silk Route' took part in the concert held in aid of the earthquake victims in Gujarat. Over 20,000 people were killed when a massive earthquake devastated Gujarat on January 26.

Unity for a noble cause

REUTERS, New Delhi

Four South Asian rock bands came together for the first time in the Indian capital to raise funds for victims of an earthquake that hit India's western Gujarat state earlier this year.

Indian banks Euphoria and Silk Route, Pakistani group Junoon (Obsession) and Bangladeshi rock band Miles shared the stage in front of hundreds of fans in New Delhi on Sunday evening.

The 'United for Gujarat' concert was held to raise money for victims of the earthquake that devastated the state in January, killing at least 30,000 people and leaving tens of thousands homeless.

"If all of us can stand on the same stage and play together and have no animosity against each other why can't they (politicians) do the same," Euphoria's singer Palash Sen told reporters.

Neighbours Pakistan and India have long been bitter rivals.

5 Irian Jaya independence leaders put on trial

AFP, Jayapura

The subversion trials of five high-profile independence leaders from the remote Indonesian province of Irian Jaya, dubbed a political exercise by critics, opened under tight security here yesterday.

Among the five was Theys Eluay, the charismatic head of the pro-independence Papua Praesidium, who remained defiant despite facing life imprisonment, according to his lawyers.

Dressed in a maroon blazer carrying a picture of Christ and purple checked trousers, he was the first to stand before the three judges in the small white-walled courtroom in Abepura, an outer suburb of the provincial capital, Jayapura.

2 police officers join Kashmiri militants

AFP, Srinagar

Two police officers discarded their uniforms, joined a Muslim separatist outfit and vowed to fight security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said yesterday.

A police spokesman told AFP that Majid Bhat and Riyaz Ahmed who worked as special police officers deserted the force stationed in Kashmir's Kulgam district, some 70 km south of the state capital Srinagar.

Meanwhile, a spokesman of the powerful Kashmiri Hizbul Mujahideen militant outfit confirmed that the two had joined them.

3 Maoists killed in Nepali clash

AFP, Kathmandu

Two women were among three Maoist rebels killed after fighting with police inside a school, police said yesterday.

Police recovered hand-made bombs and other weapons from the insurgents after the encounter on Sunday in the Surkhet district, 460 km southwest of the capital.

"Three rebels including two women wearing special camouflage uniforms worn by the insurgents, were killed when they clashed with police inside a school premises at Tatopani village in Surkhet, Sunday afternoon," police said.

New Assam CM for truce with rebels

AFP, Guwahati

The new chief minister of the troubled Indian state of Assam promised on Monday to offer separatist rebels a unilateral ceasefire in order to end two decades of violence.

Assam Congress Party president, Tarun Gogoi, who will take control of the administration in the northeastern state later this week after winning the provincial elections on Sunday, said ending "long years of violence" would be his top priority.

"We are seriously in favour of offering a unilateral ceasefire to give the militants a chance to come to the negotiating table for a political discussion to solve long years of violence and killings," said Gogoi.

"We are not in favour of solving insurgency with military force but would like to hold unconditional peace talks," Gogoi added. "But we shall not allow lawbreakers to go scot-free and they would be dealt with a firm hand."

Insurgency-related violence escalated in Assam ahead of the state elections on May 10.

Both the state's powerful rebel groups -- the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) -- had called for the boycott of the elections.

Almost 70 political activists lost their lives in a string of militant attacks in the run up to the polls.

Vajpayee gets red-carpet welcome in Malaysia

AFP, Putrajaya

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee received a red-carpet welcome to Malaysia Monday as officials signed an initial deal to swap palmoil for a huge railway contract.

Vajpayee, who heads a 135-member delegation including 75 top corporate leaders on a business-oriented visit, was welcomed by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and a military guard of honour at the new administrative capital of Putrajaya.

They held private talks before witnessing the signing of several agreements and memoranda of understanding (MOU), including an MOU on the railway deal which is worth between 1.3 and 1.5 billion

dollars.

The contract is for the double-tracking and electrification of 300 kilometres (186 miles) of line from Malaysia's northern city of Ipoh up to the Thai border.

Malaysia hopes to pay for the five-year project through annual Indian imports of up to 1.6 million tonnes of its palmoil.

Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar told reporters payment details were still being worked out.

"Both sides agreed it would be on counter-trade basis... we are looking at the configuration on how palmoil should be traded, whether in raw or crude form, and how we could collaborate on the refinery side," he said.

Blair begins 2nd round of polls campaign

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair began the second week of Britain's election campaign yesterday by appealing to voters to ignore issues of personality and look at his government's record on the economy.

Smarting from a first week in which the press rounded on his style as phoney and contrived, Blair said his ruling Labour Party was the only one able to deliver economic stability and a fertile environment for business.

The economy should be Labour's trump card at the June 7 general election, with polls showing that voters trust it more than the opposition Conservative Party to manage

the economy properly.

"Labour today is the party of business and enterprise," Blair told BBC radio.

"We are running a stable economy and there is now a chance of this country enjoying a stable economy for the first time in decades."

He said this achievement was more important than what he called the "trimmings and trappings" of the election campaign, an attempt to deflect criticism of his style and sleaze scandals surrounding two Labour officials.

"I think these big policy questions, the substance questions, are the issues on which we are strong," he told BBC radio.

Prison children are outcast in Pakistan

AFP, Karachi

Five-year-old Aisha has lived with her mother in Karachi Central Prison since 1997.

"This is my home," said the docile girl, who was just three-months-old when her mother was arrested in a kidnapping case before being sentenced to life imprisonment.

Aisha and her mother are not alone. There are some 300 mothers in the Karachi prison -- convicted of crimes ranging from drugs to murder -- who are allowed by request to continue to raise their children behind bars.

Saddam refuses to take less 'extremist' stand on ME

AFP, Baghdad

President Saddam Hussein said that Iraq refused to bow to foreign pressure, including from some fellow Arab countries, to take a less "extremist" stand on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, press reports said yesterday.

"When we say it is up to the Arabs to liberate Palestine and that the Iraqi army stands ready at the front of the line, we know that the colonial powers will put even more pressure on Iraq," he said in remarks carried in Baghdad newspapers.

"There is no room for concessions on these principles," Saddam reportedly told a group of Arab delegates to a conference in the Iraq.

Zhu begins Nepal visit

AFP, Kathmandu

Chinese premier Zhu Rongji was given a ceremonial welcome as he arrived in Nepal Monday for a three-day official visit expected to boost trade between the two countries.

Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala marked the arrival of Zhu and his wife Lao An with a red carpet welcome at the airport in their honour along with a guard of honour by the Royal Nepal Army and a 19-gun salute.

American ambassador Ralph Frank, Nepalese army generals, ministers, senior government and judicial officials were on hand to welcome the Chinese dignitaries, witnesses said.



PHOTO: AFP

Philippines President Gloria Arroyo casts her ballot at a polling station in her home town of Lubao, Pangpanga province on Monday. Polling opened in Philippines congressional and local elections seen as a referendum on Arroyo's fledgling administration.

Violence mars polls in Philippines

Manual counting begins

AFP, Manila

Millions of Filipinos voted in tense elections yesterday seen as a test of the fledgling government of President Gloria Arroyo after the ousting of former leader Joseph Estrada, as violence pushed the death toll to 80.

The congressional and local elections has been billed as a proxy ballot box battle between Arroyo and her now jailed predecessor.

Despite tight security, four new killings were reported in separate attacks on election day, pushing the death toll to 80 in the country's bloodiest elections in recent memory.

In scenes ranging from the tense to the chaotic and the sombre, Filipinos swamped voting centres across the nation of 7,100 islands picking candidates for the senate and house of representatives, as well as governors and mayors.

Arroyo, who has campaigned for her People Power Coalition, cast her vote at a school building in her family's home province of Pampanga north of Manila under the glare of the world media.

Her jailed, disgraced rival Estrada, toppled in an uprising in January and awaiting trial for corruption, cast his vote under heavy guard at a hospital in Manila where

he was undergoing medical checkup.

Soldiers barred journalists from watching Estrada cast his vote.

In contrast, Arroyo smiled broadly and waved to supporters as she strode into the voting center. She called for close monitoring of the elections and urged voters to vote "for the future of the nation."

"I have exercised my right as a citizen," she said in a brief statement after voting.

Meanwhile, a tedious manual count began Monday shortly after polling closed across the Philippines for congressional and local posts, officials said.

However, the Commission on Elections (Comelec) will only release the official results in about two weeks.

Unofficial results following a "quick count" by the church and business backed watchdog National Movement For Free Elections (Namfre) may be known within seven days, said Namfrel chairman Jose Concepcion.

Failure to implement computerized voting due to lack of funds has left the Southeast Asian nation with the traditional manual tally of votes, officials said.

Berlusconi coalition secures majority in Italian polls

AFP, Rome

The right-wing coalition headed by controversial media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi has secured an outright majority in Italy's lower house of parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, projections showed yesterday.

According to projections by the Abacus polling institute, the six-party House of Freedoms alliance won between 330 and 365 seats in the 630-member house, where the absolute majority is 316 seats.

The projections were welcome news for Berlusconi's alliance, which emerged victorious over the outgoing center-left in weekend elections but which had appeared unsure of securing a parliamentary majority in either the lower or upper house

according to earlier results.

The Abacus projections gave the center-left Olive Tree headed by Francesco Rutelli between 250 and 280 seats in the lower house.

The Reformed Communists could win between six and 12 seats and the independent anti-corruption party headed by Milan judge Antonio di Pietro between zero and six seats.

In Italy, the Chamber of Deputies shares power with the Senate, which has 315 seats.

If early results are confirmed, the Berlusconi-led bloc would not have a majority in the upper house.

Prime ministers need the support of both houses of parliament if their government stands any chance of surviving.

Missile defence shield not finalised: US

AFP, Singapore

The United States said yesterday it had no set plan for a missile defence shield, as a presidential envoy prepared to hear China's opposition to the controversial proposal.

"We do not have a finished plan," said Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly following talks with Singapore leaders during a stopover en route to Beijing.

"Part of the dialogue we will be having with China will be to perhaps allay these concerns that they've expressed about something much grander than what we have in mind."

China has said it firmly opposed a missile defence that violates the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty signed by the former Soviet Union and the United States in 1972, which forbids the development of missile defence.

Russia has also rejected Washington's arguments for

deploying a missile shield.

Kelly said his mission, like others despatched by Washington around the world, was to listen to concerns about missile defence.

"This is a real consultation," he said.

Pressed whether the project could be shelved, Kelly said: "I can't characterise that in percentage terms one way or the other. Obviously all of the comments from all of the countries are being carefully (considered)."

He said the United States was looking at a series of programmes from improvements to the Patriot air defence missile system, due out within two years, to longer-range programmes at least 10 years away.

"The ideas being looked at in Washington include a variety of solutions each with its separate set of costs and opportunities and upsides and downsides and no decisions have been made on any of those things yet."



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala (L) welcomes Chinese Premier Minister Zhu Rongji (C) and Madam Rongji (R) at International Airport in Kathamandu on Monday. Premier Rongji and Madam in Nepal on a three-day official visit at the invitation of Nepalese Premier Koirala.

Get ready for traffic jam in space

AFP, Sydney

A looming traffic jam of space missions to Mars has forced NASA to spend about 10 million US dollars on upgrading its facilities at the Tidbinbilla tracking station near Canberra.

In early 2004 the red planet will be under surveillance by seven invaders from earth, including two rovers from the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Britain's first Mars lander and two orbiters built by Europe and Japan.

Tidbinbilla director Peter Churchill said Monday the tracking station would require extra capacity.

"We are going to be very busy," he said.

"At the moment you could say there's been 15 and 20 different missions that we support.

"The problem here is there's going to be four operating at Mars all at the one time and so one of the things that we're going to do is, instead of using just one antenna to communicate with one space craft, we're using one antenna to communicate with two spacecraft at the same time."

NASA will spend about 50 million dollars upgrading deep-space tracking stations in Australia, Spain and California.

NASA's administrator Dan Goldin has predicted that if his agency was given the order, humans could be on Mars within 20 years.

Basque voters punish ETA allies in polls

REUTERS, Madrid

Moderate nationalists won a crucial election in Spain's Basque region on Sunday as voters punished political allies of the separatist group ETA for its renewed campaign of violence.

A coalition led by the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), which support ETA's goal of independence but wants to achieve it by peaceful means, increased its strength in the 75-seat regional parliament to 33 seats from 27.

The nationalists, who have ruled the northern region uninterrupted for the past decades, failed again to muster a 38-seat majority and must now negotiate backing from other parties to form a new government.

Spl parliament session only option: Megawati

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri said a special session of the National Assembly, which would have the power to impeach the president, was now unavoidable, as a Muslim youth activist said yesterday.

"The MPR (the National Assembly) session is something that cannot be halted, it is part of efforts from the DPR (the lower house) to practice the constitution well," Megawati said, according to deputy chairman of the Muhammadiyah Youth, Najamuddin Ramly.

During a meeting with Muhammadiyah's executive board earlier Monday, Megawati had told

them the special session was now unavoidable after President Abdurrahman Wahid was censured for a second time by the People's Representative Council (DPR) last month.

"After the second memorandum (of censure) the (holding of the) special session can no longer be halted," Ramly quoted Megawati as saying.

He also said that the vice president had answered 'Yes' when asked whether the country's current political problem could only be dealt with by the MPR special session.

The DPR censured the president over two financial scandals on April 30, the second censure since February.