

Arafat promises to work for unconditional truce

Global leaders condemn suicide blast

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said Saturday he was ready to do "whatever is necessary" for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire.

"We are ready to make the utmost effort to stop the bloodbath among our people and the Israeli people, and to do whatever is necessary for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire," Arafat told reporters.

Arafat promised the effort would be "real and effective and through joint efforts in order to enable a return to the negotiating table and to implement the recommendations of the Mitchell report."

The report by the Mitchell committee into eight months of violence between Israelis and Palestinians recommended an immediate ceasefire as well as confidence-building efforts aimed at resuming peace negotiations.

Meanwhile, world leaders expressed horror Saturday at the suicide bombing in a Tel Aviv night club that left 17 Israelis dead, calling for restraint and urgent peace efforts.

The Palestinian Authority, accused by Israelis of being responsible for the bombing, also condemned the attack and called for restraint all round.

US President George W. Bush was among several

world leaders to condemn the bombing, while Russia, France and Germany stressed the need for an end to violence and urgent work for peace.

"I condemn in the strongest terms the heinous terrorist attack in Tel Aviv this Sabbath evening," Bush said in a statement.

"There is no justification for senseless attacks against innocent civilians. I call upon Chairman Arafat to condemn this act and to call for an immediate ceasefire."

Moscow condemned the bombing as "criminal."

Russia "resolutely condemns this inhumane and criminal action," sources at the foreign ministry told Interfax, adding that the need for a political solution to the eight-month spiral of violence in the Middle East had "never been as urgent as it is now."

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder also urged Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to keep working for peace, while condemning the attack saying: "Nothing justifies such an act."

French President Jacques Chirac added his condemnation.

Reaction from the European Union was expressed by the Swedish EU presidency, which issued a statement condemning the attack "in the strongest possible terms."

Philippine town turns into war zone amid mass kidnapping

AFP, Lamitan

A town on this southern Philippine island turned into a battlefield Saturday as government troops besieged Abu Sayyaf Muslim kidnappers who occupied a hospital and seized another batch of hostages to defend themselves.

Abu Sayyaf fighters had stormed the Fe Torres Memorial private hospital and St Peter's church in the predominantly-Christian town of Lamitan on Basilan island just before dawn Saturday.

They boasted they had grabbed 200 hostages at the hospital, the largest in Lamitan, the second

largest town in Basilan.

Among the fresh hostages in the hospital were parish priest Father Cerilo Nacorda, who was kidnapped by the same group in 1994, a doctor and patients, local officials said.

The Abu Sayyaf were fleeing a military assault launched at Lamitan's neighbouring Tuburan town on Friday, aimed at freeing 20 hostages snatched from a resort off Palawan island last Sunday.

Four of the 20 hostages escaped Saturday as the battle raged between soldiers and the guerrillas. Three American hostages seized from the resort were still in the hospital.

Abu Sayyaf snipers positioned on rooftops and the church steeple fired at troops on the ground. The military said six soldiers had been killed since Friday.

A MG-520 military helicopter gunship riddled the hospital with bullets, forcing the Abu Sayyaf to take cover as four armoured personnel carriers moved into the town to support the troops.

Two of the armoured cars had flat tyres, punctured by rebel bullets.

The body of one Abu Sayyaf leader, "Commander" Yusof, was found sprawled outside the hospital.

Marriage with a dangerous prisoner

FROM THE MIRROR ONLINE

Britain's most dangerous prisoner Charles Bronson married in prison yesterday - then serenaded his bride.

He gazed lovingly into divorcee Saira Rehman's eyes during the ceremony before stunning guests by bursting into Louis Armstrong's hit song What a Wonderful World.

The wedding has taken place after a whirlwind romance. His bride started writing to him before Christmas and has met him only four times - though she says she was "drawn to him like a magnet".

Asked on the way to the wedding why she was marrying Bronson, Saira said: "Wouldn't you?"

And her 10-year-old daughter, Sami, said: "He is a big teddy bear."

Bronson, 48, is serving a life sentence. He has kidnapped a prison librarian and spent 23 of his 27 years in prison in solitary confinement. Over the years he has taken a string of hostages in 10 jail sieges, attacked 50 prison officers, and caused pounds 500,000 worth of damage in rooftop protests.

Saira, celebrating her 31st birthday, arrived at Woodhill Prison, Milton Keynes, in a white stretch limousine. The divorcee was dressed in a stunning traditional Asian gold and red wedding dress.

She said after the morning wedding: "It was brilliant. We are just happy - very happy. I feel great on top of the world."

"We have a future together. I will wait for him as long as it takes."

Instead of champagne, the couple were toasted by the guests with apple juice, before Bronson, 48, was taken back to his cell by 16 armed guards.



Saira in all smile after her marriage with Britain's most dangerous prisoner Bronson.

After the ceremony the party went on to the Manhattan Cafe, in Woolwich, South London, without Bronson - who changed his name from Michael Peterson to that of the Death Wish actor.

The prison service confirmed that the fitness fanatic and his 7st Bengali dancer bride did not consummate the marriage.

Bronson's mother Eira Peterson said of the wedding: "She was totally all over him. I hope it will last. If it makes him happy he's doing the right thing."

"I've not met her before. He thinks she's wonderful. It will help him - he can see the light."

"Everyone's marriage is a gamble. Thousands of women write to him so it must have been what she

said that did it."

Bronson's cousin Loraine Savage said: "It was lovely - they had a kiss and a cuddle."

Friend Eddie Whicker said: "Charlie was as good as gold."

On his website, Bronsonmania, the hardman wrote: "I am in love with an angel. She has sucked out madness and filled me with love."

During the wedding convicted armed robber Bronson and his wife were allowed to cut the three-tier wedding cake - but with a plastic knife.

He has phenomenal strength and holds the world press-up record, as well as claiming to have knocked out a cow.

Bronson's friend Andy Jones, 39, who runs a Crime Through Time museum, was at the service.

He said: "It all went very well. The prison authorities looked after Charlie and his bride."

"Charles wore a black shirt and black trousers, but no tie. He looked a million dollars."

"He was not handcuffed, but the guards stood very near to him while they were exchanging vows."

An evening party was being held for 180 guests at a secret location in the East End of London. Andy added: "Unfortunately Charles won't be at the party, but all the underworld will be there and lots of celebrity figures, too. There will be soap stars from EastEnders."

Wedding guest Ray Williams said: "I have never seen him looking so happy."

Bronson is appealing against his life sentence and his supporters hope he will be released in three to five years.

UN envoy meets Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

UN envoy to Myanmar Razali Ismail met with democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and top members of the ruling junta Saturday during his mission to promote the dialogue they embarked on last year, sources said.

Razali and his entourage arrived in a fleet of three limousines at Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside residence for the late afternoon meeting.

Earlier, the Malaysian diplomat talked with the junta's influential number-three Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt and its minister in charge of economic development Brigadier-General David Abel.

The official press maintained a black-out on Razali's visit and no details on the discussions were immediately available. However, sources in Yangon said the envoy may see both Aung San Suu Kyi and Khin Nyunt again before he leaves on Monday.

Razali's four-day visit comes as the historic dialogue between the two sides on Myanmar's political divide, which he helped initiate last October, appear to have hit a road bump.

Diplomatic sources in Yangon have said that splits appeared within the regime when the talks reached a critical decision-making phase, and that some elements have balked at the prospect of introducing democratic reforms.

The junta's decision to allow Razali into the country after a break of five months has raised hopes that he will be able to breathe new life into the national reconciliation process which could end four decades of military rule.

There are also hopes that the generals in Yangon will take the opportunity to shed some light on the direction and intent of the talks, which have so far been held under conditions of strict secrecy.

"I do hope that his present visit will signal the start of a full-fledged dialogue or come out with something really positive at the very least," said one analyst in Yangon.

In another sign that the talks may have got back on track, Aung San Suu Kyi met with senior officials in the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) twice last month, on May 13 and 17, according to official sources.



PHOTO: AFP

King Birendra of Nepal and Queen Aishwarya who were killed along with nine members of the royal family by their son, Crown Prince Dipendra late Friday during a family dinner at the Royal Palace in Kathmandu.

World condoles massacre

AFP, Kathmandu

Britain and India led the condolences in the wake of the massacre of the Nepalese monarch and several members of his family which has stunned the landlocked Himalayan kingdom.

Britain's Queen Elizabeth and her son Prince Charles said Saturday they were "deeply shocked and saddened" by the incident, while India announced three days of state mourning.

Sri Lanka, Singapore and Thailand also expressed their sorrow over the deaths of King Birendra, his wife Queen Aishwarya and other members of the Nepalese royal family.

The tragedy occurred on Friday night during the family's weekly dinner at the royal palace in Kathmandu. According to palace officials, Crown Prince Dipendra

shot dead his parents and several other relatives in a fit of rage before turning the gun on himself.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair also expressed his sympathy for the Nepalese people for their "deepest tragedy", stressing Britain's long-standing links with the country, notably via the elite Nepalese Gurkha regiment, which has long taken part in operations with the British armed forces.

The Indian government said it was profoundly moved by the massacre and had sent its heartfelt condolences to its northern neighbour.

"The government and people of India are stunned and deeply shocked at the tragic and untimely demise of his majesty the King of Nepal, her majesty the Queen and other members of the royal family," Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said in a statement.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said he was deeply shocked to learn of the "heart-rending tragedy" and announced he would dispatch a representative to attend the funeral ceremony for the slain royals.

A foreign affairs spokesman in Singapore also expressed the city-state's sorrow over the tragedy.

"We are shocked and saddened at the news of the tragic death of the King and Queen of Nepal and other members of the Royal family. We wish to convey our heartfelt condolences to the Royal family and the people of Nepal."

Sri Lanka's main opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is currently touring India, said in a message to Koirala that he was saddened to learn of the "untimely death" of King Birendra and others in the royal family.

47 feared dead as ferry sinks in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Some 47 people are missing and feared dead after an inter-island ferry carrying 84 passengers sank in waters off the Indonesian island of Sulawesi last week, a delayed report said Saturday.

The Jakarta Post quoted a port administrator as saying the ferry, the four-tonne Restu Ilahi, went down Sunday off the small port of Palipi, after ramming into a flotilla of floating logs.

No rescue efforts had been undertaken, the Post quoted Albar Yahya, the administrator of the nearby port of Majene, 300 kilometers (186 miles) south of the port city

of Makassar, as saying.

Yahya said, "I reported the incident to the Makassar Search and Rescue Head office on May 30, but I have received no response so far," Yahya said.

Palipi Port task force chief, Muhammad Nasir, told the Post the passengers included seven children.

He said five of the survivors including the captain had been found by Palipi fishermen on Friday and that the other 32 survivors had been located on the coast of the nearby district of Polmas.

Loggers in many areas float their logs down rivers and in the sea to move them from one port to another.

Wahid swears in security minister, dy police chief

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid swore in a new top security minister and a deputy national deputy police chief on Saturday, following up a snap cabinet reshuffle widely seen as trying to save himself from impeachment.

Wahid also released his national police chief from his duties after he refused to resign, and threatened to slap insubordination charges against a resentful police force if it did not accept the new deputy as their commander.

The swearing in followed a cabinet reshuffle Friday, which also saw the ouster of Attorney General Marzuki Darusman amid five other changes.

Wahid first swore in new coordinating minister for politics, social and security affairs, Agung Gumelar, a retired general to replace outgoing Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Vice President Megawati

Sukarnoputri, who stands to replace Wahid if he resigns or is ousted and usually swears in officials in place of the 60-year-old blind president, was conspicuously absent from the ceremony to appoint Gumelar, one of her allies. Megawati was not consulted by Wahid over the reshuffle, a presidential aide has said.

Wahid personally swore in the new deputy police chief, Commissioner General Chaeruddin Ismail, despite a decree abolishing the post.

Armed forces chief Admiral Widodo Adisucipto and the heads of the navy and air force attended Gumelar's swearing in, but left the palace before Ismail was sworn in.

In the decree appointing Ismail, Wahid also decommissioned National Police Chief General Suroyo Bimantoro who refused to relinquish his command.

West Bengal CM seeks working ties with Delhi

PTI, New Delhi

West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee on Friday said the Left Front government in the state must have working relation and not confrontation with the center and described his current visit to the capital as very fruitful.

We must have a working and friendly relation with the government (center) and no confrontation, he told reporters in response to questions on his visit to Delhi during which he met President K.R. Narayanan, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Home Minister L K Advani.

Describing his visit as very fruitful, he said during his courtesy call on the President he drew his

attention to the effects of WTO agreement on agriculture and small industries. He also invited Narayanan to visit the state.

The Chief Minister said he told Vajpayee that the center should not wind up the public distribution system as a large number of poor people depended on it in most states including West Bengal.

He opposed closure of eight PSUs in the state and the move to close 54 coal-mines. He also said move to withdraw the Kolkata-Singapore Indian Airlines flight was not good.

To a question, the Chief Minister said the state would try to attract private investment from other parts of the country and abroad.



PHOTO: AFP

Baroness Thatcher meets reportedly Britain's oldest Tory voter, Violet Starke, 108, during her visit to Brackenlea Rest Home at Shawford near Winchester on Saturday. The Baroness praised William Hague and said he was a great parliamentarian to whom she lent her full support and said Hague measured up well to Gladstone, who was Prime Minister when the 108-year-old was born.