

## Arafat's political future increasingly in doubt

AFP, West Bank

The political future, even the personal safety, of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was in doubt yesterday after Israel said it had stopped doing business with him and put him under virtual house arrest.

Israeli officials insisted they were not gunning for Arafat, but an Israeli missile slammed into compound only metres away from his office overnight, and Israeli tanks and troops took up positions nearby on Thursday.

King Abdullah II of Jordan meanwhile said in an interview that "the Israelis are talking seriously about an alternative to Yasser Arafat and saying that his successor, whoever that may be, would be better than him."

He told the Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat, "We have the feeling that this is a serious intention, and we fear that events are leading toward a civil war in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip."

Israel announced overnight that it was severing all ties with Arafat, calling him "irrelevant," and pledging to go into Palestinian areas itself to hunt down "terrorists."

The French afternoon daily Le Monde quoted Landau as saying he did not rule out sending Arafat back to Tunis, where the Palestine Liberation Organisation was based before the 1993 Oslo partial peace accords.

"Up to now Israel has done very little to eradicate terrorism. Our security forces are far from having thrown in their full weight," Landau told Le Monde.

"The destruction of Israel is written in the genetic

code of the Palestinian Authority. We have to take much harder measures against it," he said.

"Today he (Arafat) is already stuck in Ramallah, like a pariah, unable to budge," Landau added.

Palestinian security sources said Israeli helicopters had fired a rocket close to Arafat's office compound in the West Bank overnight while he was in the building. The rocket hit "a reception area ... located about 20 metres from the president's offices," one source said, saying Arafat was unhurt.

The raid was part of a series of air strikes on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip following an ambush on a bus Wednesday that killed 10 Israelis. While the attack was the last straw for Israel, Washington still appeared to be backing him, as is the Arab community and the European Parliament.

"We consider President Arafat to be the leader of the Palestinian people," US Assistant Secretary of State William Burns said on a trip to Damascus.

In Cairo, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher said Arab states were consulting each other over a meeting planned before the weekend to back Arafat.

French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine also said it was "an error not to treat the Palestinian Authority as a partner for peace negotiations."

In Strasbourg, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on the European Commission to continue supporting the Palestinian Authority and its institutions.

## Arafat aide warns Israel against "playing with fire"

AFP, Gaza City

A top aide to Yasser Arafat warned Israel on Thursday that any attempt to harm the Palestinian leader was tantamount to "playing with fire" and would have severe repercussions for the Jewish state.

"We warn Israel against playing with fire," Nabli Abu Rudeina said in a rare outburst of anger, accusing Israel of declaring an "official war" on the Palestinians.

"Any attempt to harm President Yasser Arafat is an attempt to harm the Palestinian people and will not pass without Israel paying a very heavy price," he told AFP.

He called on the US government "to put an end immediately to this aggression and to Israeli policies which will only lead to more violence."

The Israeli government announced after an emergency security cabinet meeting that it was severing all ties with Arafat, calling

him "irrelevant" and pledging to go into Palestinian areas itself to hunt down "terrorists."

The decision came after Israel launched its largest air strikes yet by F-16 fighter-bombers overnight after a bus ambush by Palestinian hardliners killed 10 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, while two Palestinian suicide bombers injured four in a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip.

"Any attempt to overstep the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organisation is doomed to failure," Abu Rudeina said.

Earlier he accused Israel of having launched "an official war" on the Palestinian administration and people.

"The Israeli government led by (Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon has indeed started launching an official war against the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people," Abu Rudeina said.



Medics assist a victim of a terror attack on a bus in Emmanuel on the West Bank on Wednesday. Ten Israelis were killed and around 30 others wounded when Palestinian militants ambushed an Israeli bus near a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, according to the latest army toll.



An injured policeman arrives at the hospital after gunmen stormed parliament and began shooting on Thursday in New Delhi. About half a dozen suspected militants launched a daring assault on the Indian parliament, triggering a shootout with security forces in which some 12 people were killed.

## Pakistan tightens border to prevent escape of Laden

AFP, Peshawar

Some 4,000 Pakistani troops have fanned out opposite Afghanistan's White Mountains in a low-key military buildup to prevent the escape of Osama bin Laden and his followers, officers said Thursday.

Regular army and tribal paramilitary forces, backed by helicopter gunships, have been deployed along a 40 kilometre (25 mile) stretch of the tribal belt in northwestern Pakistan, they said.

The mountainous, semi-autonomous region sits opposite the Tora Bora cave complex in eastern Afghanistan, where hundreds of troops from bin Laden's Al-Qaida organisation have been making a desperate last stand.

Hammered relentlessly by American B-52 bombers and Afghan tribal forces, some of the Al-Qaida militants have been trying to escape into Pakistan and may have already done so, US officials have said.

A US magazine, the Christian

Science Monitor, reported Wednesday that bin Laden had managed to cross into Pakistan with the help of local Pashtun tribesmen.

The newspaper quoted a Saudi financier and senior member of Al-Qaida, named Abu Jaffar, as saying only bin Laden's 19-year-old son, Salah Uddin, remained at the Tora Bora base.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, dismissed the report.

"It's highly unlikely. Or to put it another way, I think it's wrong," the official said.

Washington has indicated it still believes bin Laden is in Afghanistan, but it has not put its finger on exactly where he is hiding.

"We have a feeling that some (Al-Qaida) have made it through to Pakistan. I will not say what has happened to them but this is a very minute percentage of people," US-led coalition spokesman Kenton Keith told a press conference in the Pakistani capital on Wednesday.

## UK trying to shape up peace force for Afghanistan

AP, United Nations

Britain is trying to put together a multinational force and make sure the Afghans approve it before formally announcing that it will lead a UN-backed effort to help provide security when a post-Taliban government takes power in Afghanistan on December 22.

Western diplomats said the British government is expected to make a formal announcement on Friday.

"We need more discussions for a day or two" with the United States and others, Britain's UN Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock said Wednesday.

"The important thing is getting the coalition together and having a reasonable response from the Afghans."

The UN Security Council must then adopt a resolution authorizing the force. Some Western diplomats

said the council could act late Friday, but a vote might be delayed until the weekend or early next week.

The top UN envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, who has just been in Kabul, will brief the council on Friday, Mali's UN Ambassador Moutari Ouane, the council president, said late Wednesday.

The five permanent Security Council members -- the United States, Britain, Russia, China and France -- were continuing negotiations Wednesday on the text of the resolution, diplomats said.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell called Tuesday for a UN resolution to be passed "as soon as possible."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who shared this year's Nobel Peace Prize with the United Nations, said in the traditional Nobel

address to the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm: "I'm not sure they will be on the ground before the 22nd of December, but we are going to do whatever we can to get the forces there at the earliest possible time."

Annan's envoy Brahimi, discussed the security force with the foreign minister in the interim government, Abdullah, earlier this week in Kabul.

"I think the response that we're getting is fine on the principle, but there will be some discussion of the details," Greenstock said. "They want quite a small contingent before December 22."

The initial force is likely to be about 1,000 troops but the force could grow to about 5,000 troops, depending on what the Afghans and Brahimi recommend, the diplomats said.

## US MPs fire warning shots at Iraq

AFP, Washington

As US forces inch closer to victory over the Taliban and the terrorist Al-Qaida network in Afghanistan, lawmakers here on Wednesday fired warning shots at Iraq over its suspected development of weapons of mass destruction.

"We are confronting a very serious threat -- something that is literally a matter of life and death," warned House International Relations Committee chairman Henry Hyde as he introduced a

resolution expressing concern over Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's failure to comply with UN weapons inspections.

According to the resolution, Iraq's refusal to allow UN weapons inspectors immediate, unconditional, and unrestricted access to facilities and documents "presents a mounting threat to the United States, its allies, and international peace and security."

In other words, Hyde said, Hussein's ability "to reconstitute his nuclear weapons program, his

biological weapons program, his chemical weapons program, and his long range missile program has not been constrained by international inspectors."

"There is every reason to believe that Saddam has taken advantage of the absence of inspectors to revive these weapons programs."

"The events of September 11th demonstrate the severity of this threat to the United States, and indeed to all civilised countries," Hyde stated.

## US House okays package to fight bioterrorism

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a package of measures totalling more than 2.65 billion dollars that are aimed at combating bioterror threats to the nation.

The House voted 418-2 Wednesday in favour of the bipartisan bill, which provides for additional government spending on improved health care, increased stockpiles of smallpox vaccines and improved protection of US food and drinking water.

"That we are no longer immune to the threat of bioterrorism is abundantly clear," Republican Representative Billy Tauzin, one of the two authors of the bill, said in a statement.

"In a post-September 11th world, it's critically important that Congress strengthen our public health infrastructure at the national, state and local levels to better protect the American people."

## Lankan peace hopes hang on partnership of rivals

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lankans voted overwhelmingly last week for peace and economic change, but that mandate now hangs on a tense and often testy relationship between the president and her new prime minister.

Chandrika Kumaratunga of the defeated People's Alliance (PA) will retain the sweeping powers of executive president until 2005 while her arch-rival Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National

Party (UNP) controls a hostile parliament.

Their ability to work together will determine how the country tackles its 18-year ethnic war, an economy growing at its slowest pace the three decades and chronic political instability.

"Far too much depends on the personalities occupying these positions," Kethesh Loganathan, a political analyst at the Centre for Policy Alternatives, said on Thursday.

## B-1 bomber crashes in Indian Ocean

AFP, Washington

The four member crew of a B-1 bomber was rescued at sea Wednesday after their supersonic aircraft went out of control and crashed in the Indian Ocean, the first loss of a US warplane in the military campaign in Afghanistan, US military officials said.

"We had multiple malfunctions, the aircraft was out of control and we had to eject," Air Force Captain William Steele, the B-1 pilot, said from a US destroyer shortly after he and his crew were plucked from the sea.

## Troops put on red alert along Kashmir border after attack

AFP, Srinagar

The Indian army was put on high alert Thursday all along the disputed Kashmir border with Pakistan following an attack on the parliament building in New Delhi, an army spokesman said.

"Troops deployed along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir have been ordered on high alert after the morning attack on parliament," the spokesman said.

"Besides maintaining a tight vigil, the boys have been asked to foil attempts by militants to cross into our side of Kashmir," he said.

The spokesman said the order of "high alert" came from New Delhi after six unidentified gunmen

attacked the parliament building in the capital.

"The LoC is calm. There has been no firing from the Pakistani side," he added.

However, the spokesman said that nine explosions had been reported near the LoC at Kanachak in Kashmir's southern Jammu region on Thursday morning.

"The explosions took place in no-man's land," he said. "They caused no loss of life or property."

Meanwhile, Kashmir's main separatist alliance Thursday condemned an attack on India's parliament and demanded an enquiry to identify the "ugly faces" behind the assault.

## 2 Jews charged in bomb plot against Muslims

AFP, Los Angeles

Two leaders of a Jewish militant group were Wednesday charged with plotting to bomb a series of Muslim targets in Los Angeles, including a mosque and the office of an Arab-American congressman.

The plot was thwarted when the chairman of the Jewish Defence League (JDL) Irv Rubin, 56, and fellow JDL leader Earl Krugel were arrested late Tuesday in an anti-terrorism raid after an informant alerted investigators to the scheme.

The two were allegedly planning to blow up the King Fahd mosque in the Culver City area.

## INS launches crackdown on Muslim students

AP, San Diego

Immigration authorities arrested 10 people in the San Diego area in a first-of-its-kind crackdown on Middle Eastern students suspected of violating the terms of their visas by not being in school.

None of those arrested is suspected of involvement in the September 11 attacks, authorities said Wednesday.

Lauren Mack, a spokeswoman for the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, said about 50 people were being sought in the San Diego area.

The crackdown is believed to be the first of its kind in the United States, Mack said. It is part of the agency's attempt to better track foreign students after it was

revealed that one of the September 11 terrorists, Saudi native Hani Hanjouri, had entered the country as a student.

Authorities began compiling a database of the nearly 600,000 foreign students at US colleges and universities after the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing. But that effort languished amid opposition from school officials who believed it would hurt recruitment and be seen as intrusive.

In recent weeks, INS officials in San Diego discussed the issue with representatives of about 35 schools, including the University of California at San Diego. They checked the records of students from certain nations under government scrutiny.



Hundreds of thousands of Muslim pilgrims throng Makkah's Grand Mosque, Islam's holiest shrine, gathering around the holy Kaaba, late Tuesday to mark the 27th night of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, known as Lailatul-Qadr, the night when the Holy Quran was revealed to Prophet Mohammed in the year 610 A.D. Devoted Muslims spend the night reading the Quran and saying prayers.

## Bush moves to abandon ABM treaty

### Russia, China annoyed by withdrawal

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush told top US lawmakers Wednesday that he will soon notify Russia that he plans to pull out of the 1972 ABM treaty in order to forge ahead with the missile shield Moscow opposes.

Bush has always derided the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty as a Cold War relic and asserted neither it nor resistance from Russia, China, key US allies, or US Democrats would stop him from fielding a missile defense system.

"He thinks that the best way to preserve peace and to promote it is to move beyond the ABM Treaty," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, adding that Bush diplomacy had led to "a real diminution" in opposition to the plan.

Fleischer declined to confirm the

timeframe for Bush's announcement on the six-months notice he is required to give Moscow under the terms of the treaty. Officials who declined to be named said it could come as early as Thursday.

"We have come to the point where we knew we would arrive," a senior US official who requested anonymity said Wednesday. "We're about to give them (the Russians) notice."

Democratic Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle said Bush had informed him of the decision during a White House breakfast told and reporters who worried about the impact on Washington's relations with its allies.

"It undermines the fragile coalition that we have with our allies ... I think that it's going to complicate as well our relations with Russia, with

China, and I think we've got to be very concerned about that," he said.

Meanwhile, the United States has the right to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty but doing so would be "a cause for annoyance" for Russia, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov said during a visit to Brazil.

"They have the right. But a decision like that would be for us a cause for annoyance, if the treaty is truly abandoned," Kasyanov told reporters here on Wednesday.

US President George W. Bush informed leaders of Congress early Wednesday of his decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty.

Moscow would prefer to negotiate amendments to the treaty rather than abandon it altogether, Kasyanov said, citing concern for "strategic stability."

China also expressed "concern" Thursday at President George W. Bush's plan to withdraw the United States from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty and called for talks on the issue.

"We've taken note of the relevant reports and expressed our concern," said Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue.

"China is not in favour of missile defence systems. China is worried about the negative impact," she told a news conference, also calling for a "strategic dialogue" on the issue to avoid harming international disarmament.

Bush told top US lawmakers Wednesday that he would soon notify Russia that he plans to pull out of the ABM treaty and forge ahead with a missile shield opposed by both Moscow and Beijing.