

Israel suspends ties with PA

Arafat to remain confined for years if necessary: Sharon

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel suspended ties with the Palestinian Authority on Thursday, vowing not to resume contacts until the Palestinians arrested those involved in an alleged plot to smuggle a shipload of arms, political sources said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made the announcement to political supporters at a meeting outside Tel Aviv and said "security cooperation" with the Palestinians would not be affected, the Israeli sources said.

Sharon's move a day after a deadly Palestinian raid in southern Israel and hours after the militant group Islamic Jihad said it would no longer adhere to a halt in attacks on Israelis further clouded US efforts to end more than 15 months of bloodshed.

Israel seized a ship laden with munitions in the Red Sea on January 3 that it said was bound for Palestinian areas on orders of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

Arafat has denied any involvement, and the Palestinian Authority has also rejected allegations linking it to the arms shipment, although US officials said there was compelling evidence against high-ranking Palestinian officials.

"The prime minister said that with the exception of security contacts there will be no contacts with the Palestinian Authority until the arrest of those responsible for the weapons ship episode," an Israeli political source said.

But Nabil Abu Rdnain, a senior aide to Arafat, dismissed the Israeli action as part of a "destructive phase of Israeli policy" and said relations had already ceased since US Middle East envoy Anthony Zinni left the region on Sunday.

It was the latest in a series of Israeli measures apparently aimed at discrediting Arafat and his Palestinian Authority in the eyes of the United States and the rest of the international community.

The Israeli cabinet declared the Palestinian Authority a "terror-supporting entity" on December 4 after a series of suicide bombings. It later cut off ties with Arafat and declared him "irrelevant", to efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Meanwhile AFP adds: Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has threatened to keep Yasser Arafat confined to the West Bank town of Ramallah "for several years" if the Palestinian leader does not meet his demands, Israeli media said Friday.

"Arafat will stay confined in Ramallah, even if it takes several years" for him to arrest militants wanted by Israel, Sharon told a meeting of his right-wing Likud party in Tel Aviv late Thursday.

Arafat has been prevented from leaving Ramallah since a series of suicide attacks in Israel at the start of December, which were followed by massive Israeli reprisals.

Israel tanks are still positioned several hundred metres from his residence there.

Sharon repeated that the restrictions would only be lifted if Arafat arrests militants wanted for assassinating tourism minister Rehavam Zeevi in east Jerusalem last October, and who Israel says are hiding out in Ramallah.

13 killed in fighting in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian security forces Friday shot dead a dozen Muslim separatist militants and a civilian was killed in violence in restive Kashmir, a police spokesman said.

Indian security forces shot dead six militants at Damhal Hanjipora village in the southern Anantnag district during a fierce encounter that also destroyed a residential house, the spokesman said.

He said the fighting erupted after troops ringed the village on a tip-off that militants were present.

At Kapran in the same district two more militants were shot dead during a similar confrontation and a civilian was killed in the cross-fire, police said.

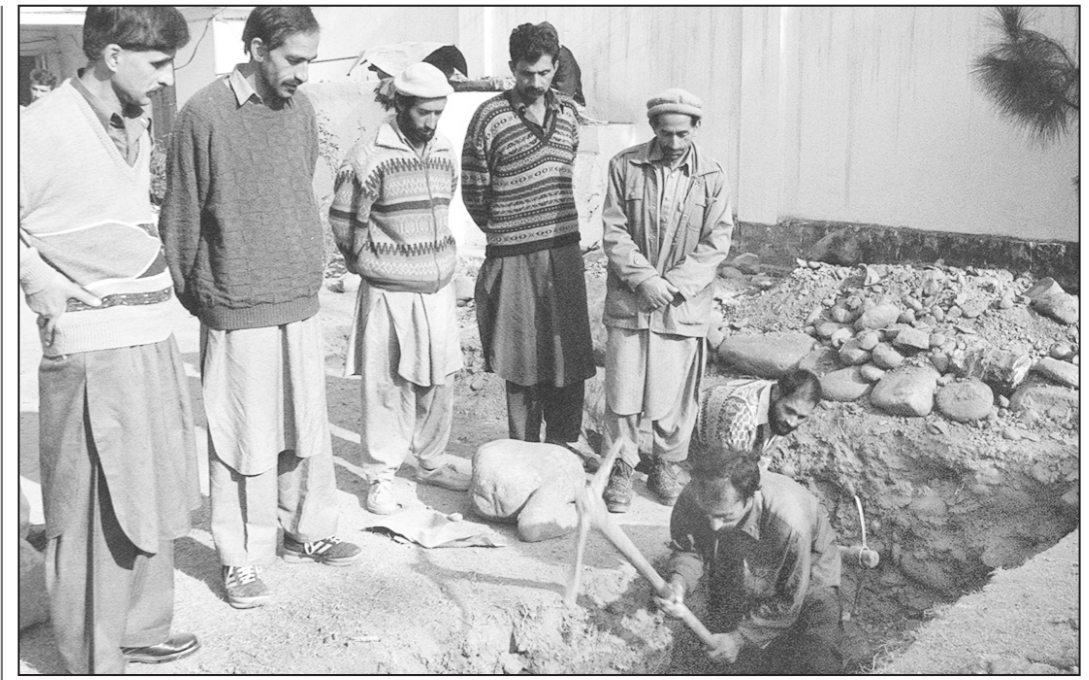


PHOTO: AFP
Kashmiri residents living close to the Line of Control (LOC), the de facto border between Pakistan and India, dig trenches at their home near Chakoti, some 60 kilometers from Muzaffarabad, the capital city of Pakistan-administered Kashmir on Thursday. Civilians living near the LOC have been taking extra precautions following the latest flare-up in the decades-old dispute between Pakistan and India over Kashmir.

US plane crash in Pakistan an accident, says Rumsfeld

REUTERS, Washington

The fiery of a US military refueling plane into a mountain in Pakistan, in which seven Marines died, appeared to be accidental and not due to enemy fire, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Thursday.

"My understanding is that there is no evidence that it was anything other than an aircraft crash," Rumsfeld said at a Pentagon news briefing.

The KC-130 refueling plane crashed on Wednesday near Shamsi, Pakistan, while trying to land at a base used by American forces fighting in Afghanistan.

An initial military investigation of the crash had found "no evidence that it was anything other than a crash into that ridge line," Rumsfeld said.

Musharraf under pressure to act against militants

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf was under intense international pressure Friday to use a televised address to the nation to crack down on terrorists and extremists to cool fears of a war with India.

A senior Pakistan official, who did not want to be named, said Musharraf would most likely make the speech on Saturday, although no final date had been set.

The international community is looking to Musharraf to outline plans to tackle militant groups operating from its soil which India has blamed for a deadly December 13 attack on its parliament.

"The hopes for decisive action from Musharraf took on new urgency Friday after India's army chief said the military situation between the nuclear-armed rivals was serious and "there is scope for a limited conventional war."

"When two countries mobilize their forces and place them on the border, it is not normal. The situation can comfortably be described as serious," General S. Padmanabhan told reporters.

"To say that there is scope for a limited conventional war is a truism. Yes it is there, but it all depends on the circumstances," he said.

Both sides have massed troops on their border in the disputed territory of Muslim-majority Kashmir, after relations touched a new low following the parliament attack.

The government of Indian premier Atal Behari Vajpayee has been pressuring Musharraf to take a harder stance against the separatist groups it blames for the suicide attack.

This week US Secretary of State Colin Powell said he thought the speech would be "a powerful signal to his nation, and to India and to the rest of the world."

"But it's not just a speech; we will be looking to see what additional action he has taken. I believe he has taken quite a bit of action in recent months but, as you well know, the Indians believe more action is required, and we will see what happens in the days and weeks ahead."

HK abode-seekers to take case to UN

AFP, Hong Kong

Mainland Chinese abode-seekers who failed in a legal battle to secure the right to live in Hong Kong are planning to appeal to the UN, their lawyer said Friday.

The Court of Final Appeal (CFA), Hong Kong's highest court, ruled Thursday that only around 500 of the more than 5,000 claimants would be entitled to permanent residency here. The rest would have to be deported back to the Chinese mainland.

The drawn-out and increasingly complex legal battle ensued after Beijing overturned a lower court decision in January 1999 which said any child with one Hong Kong parent was entitled to stay.

Thursday's ruling has also called into question Beijing's influence on Hong Kong's legal affairs, despite the former British colony being promised broad autonomy since its return to Chinese rule in 1997.

Lawyer Krista Ma, whose law firm Pam Baker and Company represents the majority of the abode applicants, said they would now petition United Nations General Secretary Kofi Annan "in the next few weeks".

The petition would call on Annan to urge Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's government to grant residency status to more of the claimants on the grounds that they had been unfairly deprived of their human rights.

EU considers imposing sanction on Zimbabwe

AFP, Brussels

The European Union opened high-stake consultations with Zimbabwe on Friday that could determine whether the 15-nation bloc imposes sanctions on President Robert Mugabe's government.

The talks in Brussels were taking place amid growing tension in the southern African nation as it prepares for presidential elections in March.

Asked by reporters on his way into the meeting in Brussels if Zimbabwe could still avoid EU sanctions, Foreign Minister Stan Mudenge replied: "What sanctions?"

"We are having a dialogue," he added, smiling for the cameras.

Mudenge and several fellow ministers had flown into Brussels from Harare barely an hour before the meeting got underway just after 10 am (0900 GMT).

Zimbabwe's ruling party provoked international outcry on Thursday when it pushed through legislation that entrenches Mugabe's power ahead of the March 9-10 presidential vote.

The EU was expected to issue a statement at the end of Friday's meeting, which could be followed either by prompt sanctions or by two months of consultations.

Northern Alliance troops withdrawing from Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Northern Alliance troops are withdrawing from Kabul on the orders of Afghanistan's interim government, a British military spokesman told AFP Friday.

"What the interim administration has said is those people who are from outside Kabul should return from whence they came," said Major Guy Richardson, the British spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

"This from HQ-ISAF perspective is good because they (the interim administration) are taking it a stage further than what is specified in the MTA (military technical agreement)."

Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni on Wednesday ordered the Afghan military to quit Kabul within three days and leave security duties in the capital to Afghan police and an international peacekeeping force.

At Bala-e-hisar Fort southeast of the capital, Jan Mohammad, 38, a deputy to commander Haji Mohammad Almas, told AFP that troops were withdrawing from the centre of Kabul.

"Yes, it's the last day and it will be finished," he said.

Brigadier Mohamad Ghani said most of the troops under his command were withdrawing to Parwan Province northwest of Kabul, and to Logar province to the south.



PHOTO: AFP

Nationalist youths set fire to hijacked cars on the Crumlin road, North Belfast, Northern Ireland late Thursday as serious rioting erupted in the area again, with police and troops under attack by both nationalist and loyalist crowds.

Violence goes on in north Belfast

AFP, Belfast

Hundreds of Catholic and Protestant youths attacked security forces with home-made bombs in a flashpoint area of north Belfast late Thursday as violence erupted for the second night in a row, police said.

"Police and military personnel are coming under sustained attack from both nationalist and loyalist crowds," a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) spokesman said.

Police said around 20 officers had been injured.

At least two blast bombs exploded among police confronted by a 300-strong nationalist crowd in Ardoyne, north Belfast, and large numbers of petrol bombs, acid bombs and other missiles rained down on them.

Al-Qaida prisoners shipped out amid attacks on US troops

AFP, Kabul

Afghan troops were leaving Kabul on Friday, British peacekeepers said, as US troops protecting the first transfer of prisoners from Afghanistan to Cuba fought a shootout with gunmen who infiltrated their base.

US troops came under small arms fire shortly after a C-17 transport plane carrying about 20 Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners took off from a US base at Kandahar airport in the south of Afghanistan for Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The plane left Kandahar undamaged late Thursday, US officers told

CNN, as it was due to arrive in Cuba on Friday.

Meanwhile, the Northern Alliance troops who have occupied the Afghan capital since taking it from the ousted Taliban regime two months ago were leaving the city under the orders of the country's new power-sharing interim government.

The withdrawal was welcomed by the commanders of a British-led international security force which has begun to patrol the city and provide security for the government, which has a six-month mandate to bring peace back to the country.

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has said is those people who are from outside Kabul should return from whence they came," said Major Guy Richardson, the British spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

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13 killed in fresh violence in Aceh

AFP, Banda Aceh

Thirteen people including at least nine separatist guerrillas have been killed in the latest violence to hit Indonesia's Aceh province, the military and rebels said Friday, a day after the government offered "last chance" peace talks.

Soldiers killed at least five suspected rebels of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and wounded several others on Thursday in two skirmishes in the Trumon region of South Aceh, said a military spokesman, Major Ertoto.

Wahid quizzed by police

AFP, Jakarta

Former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid was questioned by police on Friday over allegations that he received nearly two million dollars from an errand son of ex-dictator Suharto in an attempt to buy a presidential pardon.

"There was no such thing," Wahid told reporters afterwards, when asked if he had received 20 billion rupiah (1.9 million dollars) from Hutomo "Tommy" Mandala Putra.

Kashmir CM urges Japan to send tourists to Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah urged Japan to send tourists to the insurgency-wrecked Indian-administered state, an official statement said Friday.

The request was made by Abdullah during a meeting with visiting Japanese parliamentarians in Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar Thursday evening, it said.

Islamabad asks US to reduce presence at Pak air bases

AFP, Washington

Concerned over border tension with India, Pakistan has quietly asked the United States to reduce its presence at two of the four air bases it has used there during the war in Afghanistan, The Washington Post said Friday.

In response to the request, the US military have expanded the construction plans for a large airport outside the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, and is also planning to shift operations from Pakistan to other locations, US officials said.

Pakistan first notified the United States it might need its air bases at Jacobabad and Panni to put the Pakistani air force on a war footing when tension escalated with neighbouring India late last month, an unnamed senior Pakistani official told the daily.

"It was such an emergency situation that the Pakistan air force was ordered to move straight into the airports while the discussions with the US officials on

this subject were held later," the official said.

After discussions, an agreement was reached for some US forces to remain in the two air bases, the official said.

"We are now co-sharing the two air bases with American forces," he added.

While confirming the Pakistani account, an US general said the need for bases in Pakistan was already on the decline.

"As we continue to improve the capabilities of the airport at Kandahar, staging from other bases in Pakistan might be less of a requirement for us," he said. "In other words, we could fly from other places directly into Kandahar."

Besides Jacobabad and Panni, the other two Pakistani air bases used by the US military are the Dalbandin airfield, 272 km southwest of Quetta, and the smaller Shamsi airstrip in southwestern Pakistan, where the US air refueling plane that crashed Wednesday killing seven marines was headed.



PHOTO: AFP

Congress (I) Party president Sonia Gandhi (R) and former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Narayan Datt Tiwari (L) wave to the crowd as Uttar Pradesh Congress president Prakash Jaiswal (C) looks on at a rally in Khanpur on Thursday. Crucial state assembly polls will begin in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh in mid-February.

Bush warns Iran

AFP, Kabul

US troops came under small arms fire shortly after a military plane took some 20 prisoners from Afghanistan to a US base in Cuba, as US President George W. Bush warned Iran not to undermine his "war on terror."

In Kabul, authorities said peace had been secured at least in the Afghan capital, but the attack on a key US base in the southern city of Kandahar underscored the instability still wracking the country.

Gunfire erupted at the heavily protected base just minutes after television images showed the heavily sedated prisoners being carried in stretchers to the US military transport plane headed for the US navy base in Guantanamo, Cuba.

Unidentified assailants penetrated the perimeter of the base at the Kandahar airport on foot and

under cover of darkness at a couple of locations and US troops responded with machine gun and small arms fire, Marine Lieutenant James Jarvis told CNN from the base.

Marines at the base and Afghan forces launched a pursuit of the assailants and "are in the process of dealing with that threat," said Navy Commander Frank Merriman, a spokesman at the US Central Command in Tampa, Florida.

"At no time was the aircraft in danger, nor did it perform any evasive manoeuvres," Merriman said, referring to the military transport plane.

The attack came just hours after Bush warned Tehran not to destabilise Afghanistan's post-Taliban interim government, while US forces resumed their bombing of a suspected al-Qaida base in Afghanistan's eastern mountains.

Britain to set up agency to counter bioterrorism

AFP, London

Britain is to set up a national agency to counter the threat of chemical and biological weapons, radiation and the alarming spread of infectious diseases, the British press said Friday.

The national infection control and health protection agency will provide scientific expertise to combat bio-terrorism, such as the anthrax spores sent through the post in the United States, The Guardian reported.

It will also co-ordinate treatments for diseases like malaria and tuberculosis -- which are spiralling because of travel to countries where they are endemic -- as well as new infections such as new variant CJD and flu viruses.

One in 15 British people dies of an infectious disease, according to recent public health laboratory service figures (PHLS), quoted by the paper.

The PHLS is one of four organisations, which will be merged to produce the new agency.

The others are the national radiological protection board, the centre for applied microbiology and research, and the national focus for chemical incidents.

Threat of biological and chemical attack is not the only reason for the initiative, according to government chief medical officer Liam Donaldson.

"When we get outbreaks of disease, we often don't know what's caused them," Donaldson said, at the launch of a strategy document for infectious diseases.

Methods for investigating bacterial infections or environmental pollution are very similar, The Guardian said.

The launch comes as concern grows about the worldwide spread of infectious diseases.

About 30 new diseases have been identified since the 1970s, the paper said, adding that although HIV/AIDS was unknown until the early 1980s, now 40 million people have the virus.