

Peres slams call to expel Arafat from territories

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres denounced Saturday a growing call among Israel's mainstream right-wing to expel Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat from the occupied territories.

"It is easy to say that Arafat should be expelled, but he was elected by the Palestinians and we must not appear as if we are the ones who choose the leader of the Palestinian people," Peres said on public radio.

"Those who want to get rid of him, could soon find themselves dealing in his place with Hamas and Islamic Jihad as we found ourselves dealing with Hezbollah in Lebanon," Peres said.

Peres was referring to the two

most powerful radical Islamic groups in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the main challengers to Arafat's authority, and to the fundamentalist Hezbollah movement in Lebanon.

"Those who demand this type of solution are acting in a fit of rage. We must act with prudence and continue to demand of Yasser Arafat that he move firmly against terrorism," Peres said.

He also noted Arafat's campaign since December to arrest Palestinian hardliners.

"It is impossible to deny that Yasser Arafat has deployed efforts in the anti-terrorist war, but it has not been sufficient enough," he said.

Several ministers from rightwing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud party called for

Arafat's expulsion from the Palestinian territories after the shooting incident in a ballroom late Thursday night in northern Israel that left six Israelis dead.

In response, Israeli warplanes bombed the governor's office in the West Bank town of Tulkarem, destroyed Palestinian broadcasting offices and sent more tanks to surround Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah, where the Palestinian leader has been under virtual house arrest since December 3.

A high-ranking official from Sharon's office told AFP Saturday that the retaliatory strikes "aimed to put pressure on Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority so that they decide to battle against terrorism as they are supposed to do."



US Secretary of State Colin Powell (left), Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (center) and Madam Arju Deuba (right) posing for photographs before dinner at Baluwatar in Kathmandu on Friday.

Powell visit gives Nepal a morale boost to fight Maoist rebellion

AFP, Kathmandu

A visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell to Nepal has encouraged the government in its battle against Maoist rebels, analysts and politicians said Saturday.

Powell, who made a brief stop over in Kathmandu on Friday and Saturday, was the highest-ranking US official to visit the small Himalayan kingdom in more than 30 years.

"We fully acknowledge the government of Nepal's right to protect its citizens and institutions from terrorist attacks," Powell said after talks with Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba.

But he did not promise concrete aid to help Nepal combat the

Maoist rebels, who have been fighting to overthrow the constitutional monarchy since 1996.

In November the government declared emergency rule to combat renewed violence by the guerrillas and branded them as terrorists after they broke a four-month ceasefire and backed out of peace talks. Altogether more than 2,300 people have died in the violence since 1996.

Kapil Shrestha, professor of political science at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, said the visit of such a high-profile US government figure would send a strong signal to the Maoists that the government would not back down in its fight.

Laden probably dead: Musharraf

AFP, Kabul

September 11 terror suspect Osama bin Laden has probably died of kidney failure but the United States cannot yet claim total victory in Afghanistan, according to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

Musharraf's comments came in an interview broadcast as Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai began an international foray -- including a crucial conference of donors in Japan next week -- to win help for the virtually bankrupt administration.

The three-month old military campaign in Afghanistan, launched in retaliation for the September 11 terror attacks on the United States, has wound down after December's ousting of the hardline Taliban

regime and the dispersal of the al-Qaida organisation the Taliban had protected.

But a key US aim of capturing al-Qaida head bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar has not been achieved.

Musharraf said it was likely bin Laden was dead, although other possibilities were he could be hiding in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

"I give the highest priority now, to be frank, that he's dead, for the reason that he is a patient. He's a kidney patient," Musharraf said in a CNN interview broadcast Friday.

"And I know -- we know -- that he'd donated two dialysis machines to Afghanistan. One was specifically for his own personal use and the other for general use."

"I really don't know whether he's been getting that treatment in

Afghanistan now. And the photographs that lately have been shown on television show him extremely weak. I would give the first priority that he's dead," he said.

Musharraf also declared that there had been a victory in Afghanistan after the ousting of the Taliban government.

"I think there has been a victory, but the total victory has not been there, because al-Qaida is on the run. Maybe some elements are still there but gradually they will be mopped up."

Because Omar and bin Laden had not been captured and their fate was unknown, "to that extent I wouldn't give 100 percent success."

In Washington, the Bush administration said it was unable to confirm or deny whether bin Laden was dead.

Pak press labels Powell visit 'inconclusive'

AFP, Islamabad

US Secretary of State Colin Powell's efforts to ease tension in South Asia and restart dialogue between Pakistan and India were labelled "inconclusive," by Pakistani newspapers Saturday as troops remained massed along the border.

The expectations before Powell's peace mission to Islamabad and New Delhi this week was that he would defuse tensions and possibly point the way for a resolution of the Kashmir issue, the Frontier Post said in an editorial.

"The evidence at the end of the tour is inescapable that none of these expectations have really

been met," it said, adding that "the threat of war, although lessened, has not entirely vanished."

Powell drew "comparatively conciliatory remarks" from Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh "but the troops deployment remains a fact of life on the ground, with its concomitant risks and dangers."

Pakistan and India have massed 800,000 troops along their common border since last month's attack on the Indian parliament blamed by New Delhi on militants allegedly backed by Islamabad.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has since outlawed five militant organisations, including two accused by New Delhi of being

behind the attack, but India has ruled out an immediate pull back of its forces.

After discussing the military face-off with Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Powell left the region saying he was "very encouraged" that a solution would be found.

But The Nation newspaper said peace in the region was contingent on resolving the "core issue of Kashmir" and further pressure would be needed on New Delhi to bring about bilateral negotiations.

"The fact that the first round of talks between Mr Powell and Mr Singh remained inconclusive indicates that India has yet to see the light of reason," it said.

Fresh killings undermine truce in Nagaland

AFP, Guwahati

Six people have been killed during gang warfare in India's northeastern state of Nagaland in a setback to an ongoing ceasefire aimed at ending 55 years of separatist insurgency in the region, officials said Saturday.

The six were rebels belonging to two factions of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) who engaged in a fierce gun battle Friday near the village of Tenyphie, 20 km from Dimapur, the commercial hub of Nagaland.

The gunbattle ended only after the army arrived at the scene, police said. Soldiers detained one rebel and seized an M-16 assault rifle. The police recovered more than 70 empty AK-47 rifle shells.

"The two sides were engaged in a shootout near a paddy field that lasted for more than 30 minutes that led to the death of six activists of the S.S. Khaplang faction of the NSCN," a police official said by telephone from Dimapur.

Both the NSCN factions, one led by Khaplang and the other by guerrilla leaders Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, are fighting for an independent tribal homeland.

Aid agencies see mounting relief crisis in Afghanistan

AFP, Islamabad

The desperate humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is alarming UN and non-governmental organisations who say people in some areas have been reduced to eating grass to survive and others have not had access to medical care for more than a decade.

About six million Afghans do not have access to basic needs, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), with respiratory infections multiplying in winter and each year 15,000 people die from tuberculosis and 85,000 children with diarrhoea go untreated.

At least another six million, in a

country of about 25 million people, depend "entirely" on food aid, according to the World Food Programme spokesman in Islamabad, Khaled Mansour.

He put the rate of acute malnutrition in Afghanistan at 10 percent and said chronic malnutrition was as high as 50 percent.

Although the situation was being stabilised in towns, aid agencies said it was particularly worrying in remote mountain areas in the north, northwest and central Afghanistan, scarred by 23 years of war and three years of drought.

The terrain is difficult at the best of times, and worse in the harsh winter snows, preventing humanitarian agencies from carrying out

effective assistance, Mansour said.

"Residents in 50 districts of the country don't have access to care, neither local nor humanitarian," the WHO spokesman in Islamabad, Lori Hieber-Girardet, said.

"In some regions, villagers unable to look after themselves must travel long distances in difficult conditions made even worse by winter" to reach a medical centre.

Hieber-Girardet tells of one pregnant woman, without access to a doctor, nurse or midwife to diagnose that she needed a caesarean. When she found she was unable to give birth she had to travel for three days through the mountains, with the head of her dead baby stuck in her uterus, to reach a clinic.

US anti-terror war stirs HR concerns

REUTERS, Washington/Kabul

US efforts to hunt down terror suspects around the world after the September 11 attacks prompted fresh concern among rights watchdogs on Friday when American troops seized six Algerians in Bosnia.

The leading suspect, Osama bin Laden, is still at large, but Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf sparked a new round of speculation about his fate when he said the al-Qaida leader could have died from kidney failure.

The White House said it would welcome news of the death of the presumed mastermind behind the attacks on the World Trade Centre

and Pentagon that killed about 3,100 people, but said the United States had no idea what had happened to him.

In Sarajevo, the US Embassy said American forces had taken custody of six Algerians detained by Bosnian authorities in October on suspicion of involvement in terrorism but released this week by a local court.

The six are to be transferred to a US internment camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where more than 100 captives from the war in Afghanistan and al-Qaida are already being held.

Human rights groups have criticized conditions at the camp captives are held in chain-link

enclosures and are not accorded prisoner of war status and the seizure of the six men in Bosnia prompted a fresh outcry.

"It's very disappointing," Madeleine Rees, head of the Bosnia office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said of the US action. "It violates the rule of law."

The US Embassy said Washington acted because the six "posed a credible security threat to US personnel and facilities and demonstrated involvement in international terrorism."

In New York, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, without referring directly to the prisoner transfer, said governments should not violate human rights in the war on terrorism.

Hizbul seeks resignation of Kashmiri village heads

AFP, Srinagar

A dominant militant group in Indian Kashmir has demanded the resignation of all elected village heads, a report said Saturday.

The warning came in handwritten posters from the Kashmiri separatist militant group Hizbul Mujahideen, which appeared outside the main mosque in Doda, 220 kilometres (135 miles) south of the state's summer capital Srinagar.

Hizbul strongly opposed village-level elections in Kashmir in 2000, which were held after a gap of 20 years, because they were held under Indian authority.

More than two dozen village heads or deputies have been shot dead by suspected militants since the polls.

"The hand-written posters on Hizbul letter heads appeared on the wall of main mosque asking village heads to resign by February 1," said Kashmir's leading English daily, Greater Kashmir.

"Hizbul posters have also asked people not to attend Republic Day functions on January 26," the newspaper said.

Republic Day is India's annual celebration marking the day it officially became a republic following independence from Britain.

Separatist politicians have called for a strike on the day, while militants have been staging attacks at venues of the official celebrations.

Hizbul is one of several militant groups which have been fighting Indian rule in Kashmir since 1989. More than 35,000 people have died in the violence.



Displaced people from Goma walk on the road to Gisenyi on Friday. Rebels who control Goma called on Saturday for urgent international aid to help rebuild the city, devastated by the eruption of Mount Niragongo, just 10 km north of Goma, early Thursday.

Legal immigrants on rise in US

AP, Washington

Efforts by US immigration officials to reduce backlogs in applications led to more legal immigrants in 2000.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service said Friday that 849,807 people became legal US immigrants in 2000, up from 646,568 in 1999. INS estimates the nation had 1.5 million legal

immigrants in 2001.

Just over 400,000 people became legal immigrants from abroad in each of the years 1999 and 2000. The overall numbers also include people already in the United States who became permanent residents. The latter group -- which INS calls adjustment of status cases -- includes foreign students who married, foreigners in the country on work visas, asy-

lum-seekers and refugees.

"The story of these numbers is not an increase in demand," said INS spokeswoman Eyleen Schmidt. "It's that the INS is turning the corner in getting the backlog in adjustment of status down."

In 1998, the national average waiting time for a green card application to be processed was 33 months. That fell to 12 months last year, INS said.

Plane crashes in NZ

AFP, Auckland

Two Britons and two Canadians were among six people killed when a sight-seeing plane crashed into a mountain on New Zealand's South Island on Saturday.

There were no survivors from the crash in the rugged Fiordland sounds, said a spokesman for Air Fiordland, the company operating the tourist flight.

The other victims, a fifth passenger and the pilot, were both from Christchurch, New Zealand. Police identified the pilot as Andrew David Robins, 25, and the passenger from New Zealand as Wayne Leslie Clarke, a 21-year-old student.

The names of the foreigners were not released pending notification of their families.

Indo-Pak war clouds begin to fade

AFP, New Delhi

The threat of war between India and Pakistan is diminishing and a process of military de-escalation could be on its way analysts said Saturday, a day after US Secretary of State Colin Powell ended a peace mission to South Asia.

"Clearly, the war clouds are fading," said C. Raja Mohan, foreign editor of The Hindu newspaper. "We are beginning to look at de-escalation now, a basis for de-escalation has been created."

During brief visits to India and Pakistan this week, Powell sought to calm tensions between the nuclear-armed neighbours which have massed 800,000 troops along their common border since last month's attack on the Indian parliament, which New Delhi has blamed on militants allegedly sponsored by Islamabad.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has announced a crack-

down on Islamic extremism and banned five radical groups. Since then almost 2,000 alleged militants have been arrested.

But India, which has imposed strict diplomatic sanctions on Pakistan including banning overflight rights, insists further visible steps must be taken before a dialogue can begin and is also seeking the extradition of 20 wanted criminals allegedly sheltered by Pakistan.

"Powell seems to have assured India that Musharraf is serious about what he said and India has also made it clear it is willing to go back to the pre-December 13 situation as and when Pakistan responds to its demands," Mohan said.

"I leave here very encouraged that we can find a solution to this troubling situation," Powell said Friday. "...I think we are on a path that could lead to the restoration of

dialogue ... but it will take further action before we can really start walking down that path actively."

Powell proposed a three-stage process for resolving the crisis: a toning down of rhetoric, examination of tit-for-tat diplomatic sanctions imposed in recent weeks and finally a military de-escalation on the border.

Bharat Karnad, from the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research, said while India was still insisting on the handing over of the 20 wanted men before de-escalation could take place, fears of war seemed to be easing.

But he warned that increased US intervention could cause problems.

"We have been consistently opposing any third party involvement but here, unfortunately, we are relying on a third party now."

The US has offered to be a

mediator between India and Pakistan, a proposal welcomed by Islamabad, but strongly opposed by New Delhi, which sees their dispute as a purely bi-lateral issue.

Indian newspapers on Saturday indicated that Powell's peace mission may have helped ease tensions but also warned against growing US intervention in the region.

The Hindustan Times said even though the atmosphere on both sides of the India-Pakistan border may still be the same, Powell "must have felt assured that at least the war clouds which caused so much concern all over the world have disappeared to a considerable extent."

An editorial in The Hindu newspaper said in its effort to de-escalate growing military strains between India and Pakistan the US had managed to carve for itself a "new strategic space" which was "too conspicuous to be missed."

Ex-US radical jailed for 20 yrs

AFP, Los Angeles

Former fugitive revolutionary Sara Jane Olson was Friday sentenced to 20 years to life in jail for plotting to blow up two Los Angeles police cars in 1975 after losing a 27-year battle to remain free.

A Los Angeles judge handed down two consecutive mandatory sentences of 10 years to life to Olson, accused of belonging to the leftist Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) which kidnapped newspaper heiress Patty Hearst in 1974.

Immediately after sentencing the 55-year-old, who lived as a church-going Minnesota housewife for 23 years before being captured by police in 1999, Judge Larry Fidler also arraigned her for the murder Myra Opsahl during a 1975 SLA bank robbery.

The new charge, to which Olson pleaded not guilty, came after she and three former alleged SLA comrades, were arrested in a surprise move Wednesday.