

Arafat acts in arms smuggling case

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has dismissed a senior officer and issued arrest warrants for two more over a boatload of arms seized by Israel earlier this month, the Palestinian news agency WAFA said Monday.

"On the recommendation of the commission of inquiry into the affair of the Karine A, president Yasser Arafat has dismissed General Fuad al-Shubaki and issued arrest warrants against two other officers, General Fathi al-Razem and General Adel Awadallah al-Moghrabi, who are abroad," WAFA said.

Shubaki, in charge of the finances of the Palestinian security services, and the two other officers of the Palestinian navy, were named by Israel as being involved in the smuggling.

Arafat himself has denied any knowledge of the case, to the disbelief of both Israel and the United States. France and Russia have also demanded explanations

from him.

Israel says its forces boarded the Karine A in international waters in the Red Sea on January 3 and discovered 50 tonnes of weapons being sent to the Palestinians by Iran, which has also denied involvement, with the assistance of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement.

US Vice President Dick Cheney said in a television interview on Sunday that Washington had seen evidence that Arafat was directly implicated.

Asked about Arafat's denial in a letter to President George W. Bush, Cheney said: "We don't believe him."

US officials had until then said Palestinian Authority officials were involved in the smuggling attempt but Cheney's comments marked the first time Arafat himself was implicated.

"He has been implicated now in an operation that puts him working with a terrorist organisation, Hezbollah, and Iran, a state that's devoted to torpedoing the peace process," the vice president added.



A detainee from Afghanistan wipes himself down as another detainee looks out from his enclosure at Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba on Sunday. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld toured the controversial facility, which is holding 158 detainees from the Afghan conflict.

US won't treat al-Qaida inmates as POWs

AFP, Us Naval Base At Guantanamo Bay

US leaders expect little change in the status of 158 suspected terrorists captured in Afghanistan and Pakistan and held here, even as they debate what to do with them.

Officials said Sunday the men detained here will not be treated as prisoners of war and security concerns will rule their living conditions.

"They are not POWs. They will not be determined to be POWs," Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said.

"These are the most dangerous, best-trained vicious killers on the face of the Earth," he added.

A decision on the prisoners' status is expected after administra-

tion officials meet Monday to discuss the issue, said General Richard Myers, chairman of the US military's joint chiefs of staff.

Vice President Dick Cheney confirmed Sunday a debate was underway within the administration of President George W. Bush over whether the men held as "unlawful combatants" should be accorded rights given captured soldiers under the Geneva Convention.

After an hour-long visit to Camp X-Ray, where 158 captured Taliban and al-Qaida fighters are being held under extremely tight security, Rumsfeld and a group of US senators flatly denied any ambiguity in the prisoners' status and rejected criticism of how they are treated.

Pak Jamaat leader freed

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani provincial government Monday released Islamic party leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed after detaining him amid protests against the US-led war in Afghanistan, a party spokesman said.

The Jamaat-i-Islami leader spent nearly three months in detention and was released on medical grounds by the authorities in North West Frontier Province, party spokesman Mansoor Jaffar said.

Ahmed was detained on November 4 as he led protests against the US-led military operation in Afghanistan and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's decision to cooperate with Washington in the war against terrorism.

Sept 11 survivor caught in Jerusalem bombing

AFP, Jerusalem

A survivor of the September 11 attack on New York's World Trade Center was injured in Sunday's first suicide attack by a Palestinian woman, the Jerusalem Post reported Monday.

Mark Sokolow, 43, who fled his office on the 38th floor of the WTC's south tower after a suicide pilot crashed a hijacked jetliner into the building, was hospitalised with face and leg wounds received in the blast while visiting downtown Jerusalem with his family.

Sokolow had left a shoe store with his wife and two teenage daughters and was waiting for a cousin when the female bomber

blew herself up, raining shrapnel and shattered glass down on the main street.

Sokolow said he went on automatic, "getting up and walking and then running," after the blast knocked him down and left him with shrapnel wounds in his cheek and right leg, the paper reported.

"Someone grabbed me, and people started pulling me away and then into an ambulance. The whole time I kept thinking, 'Where is my family, where is my family,'" Sokolow was quoted as saying.

Sokolow's 12-year-old daughter was wounded in the right eye, while his wife and 16-year-old daughter sustained minor injuries from flying shrapnel. They were all taken to different hospitals.

Half a million demonstrate for politician in Madagascar

AFP, Antananarivo

At least half a million people demonstrated Monday in Madagascar's capital where a general strike began to support presidential candidate Marc Ravalomanana's claim that he won an outright victory in a December election.

Many carried banners declaring: "A second round: never," echoing Ravalomanana's refusal to fight a run-off with the incumbent president Didier Ratsiraka, an AFP journalist at the scene reported.

Assam on high alert after militant attacks

AFP, Guwahati

Federal troops went on high alert Monday in India's northeastern state of Assam following a series of attacks by separatists in which two policemen were killed and 26 others wounded, officials said.

"We have put our forces on maximum alert across Assam in view of the attacks by militants," state police chief, Hare Krishna Deka, told AFP.

Militants of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) triggered a powerful landmine blast Sunday killing two policemen and wounding four more close to

Assam's provincial capital Guwahati.

The dead include Guwahati deputy superintendent of police, Debojit Pathak, and his driver.

ULFA rebels also exploded a landmine on a paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy in eastern Assam's Golaghat district, wounding at least 12 soldiers, five of them critically.

In another incident in eastern Assam, militants triggered a remote controlled bomb planted inside a shop in Karbi Anglong district, injuring some 12 civilians Sunday night.

EU FMs mull sanctions on Zimbabwe

AFP, Brussels

European Union foreign ministers on Monday mulled possible sanctions against Zimbabwe amid concerns at how crucial March elections challenging President Robert Mugabe's 22-year grip on power will be run.

At a meeting at which they meet with Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's controversial prime minister cum foreign minister for the first time, they were also set to discuss a tougher EU stance on sharply escalating violence in the Middle East.

The question of sanctions against Zimbabwe arises ahead of crucial presidential elections set for March in the southern African nation, a vote the West generally hopes will oust what it considers to be the repressive regime of Mugabe.

Britain, the former colonial master of what used to be Rhodesia, was pressing hardest for all-out sanctions, with Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to reveal a "short, fixed timetable" to the meeting and to the Commonwealth's Ministerial Action Group on Zimbabwe on Wednesday.

Eleven children threatened Monday to commit suicide at a detention centre for asylum seekers, but Prime Minister John Howard said he would never back down on his hardline immigration policy.

His tough stance came despite appeals by Catholic church bishops and the Red Cross for the government to look again at the mandatory detention of asylum seekers.

The bishops urged the government to "hear the cries for help and to heed the disquiet of the community" while the Red Cross said detainees were in crisis and their behaviour was caused by despair.

Robert McDonald, a member of a lawyers group assisting asylum seekers at the Woomera Detention

Delhi rejects Pak talks offer

Indian shelling hurts 8 in Azad Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Monday rejected Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's offer of peace talks or a cooling of military tensions.

"Our neighbour keeps inviting us for meetings and talks but I ask them, what do we do with the meeting if we have to meet to fight once again? It is better to remain separate," Vajpayee was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India at an event in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh.

On Saturday Musharraf sent a message to Vajpayee marking India's annual Republic Day, saying he wanted "good neighbourly relations" with India.

"I would like to reiterate our readiness to engage in a serious and sustained dialogue with India to commence together a journey of peace and progress," he said.

Since a December 13 attack on parliament in New Delhi, which India blames on Pakistan-based militant

groups, tensions between the two countries have been extremely high and some 800,000 troops from both sides are deployed along their borders.

In a landmark speech earlier this month, Musharraf launched a crack down on Islamic extremism and outlawed five radical groups, including two blamed by India for the parliamentary attack. Since then 2,000 alleged militants have been arrested.

But New Delhi has refused to enter into talks with Islamabad, insisting further visible steps should be taken to eliminate terrorism before dialogue can begin.

Musharraf and Vajpayee met briefly on the sidelines of a South Asian regional summit in Kathmandu in early January in their first talks in more than six months.

But both leaders downplayed the significance of their 10 to 15 minute meeting.

Meanwhile, at least eight civilians were injured Monday when Indian forces shelled border villages in the Pakistan-controlled zone of the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, an official said.

No mercy for Speight, says Fiji prosecutor

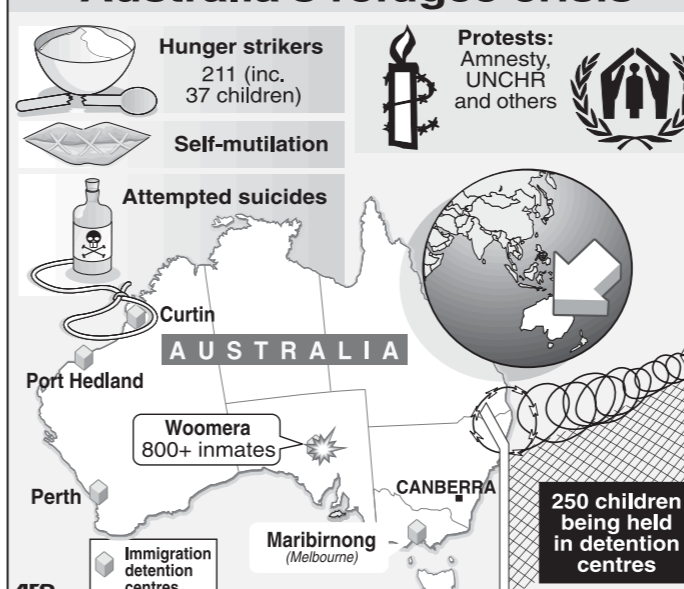
AFP, Suva

There will be no mercy for coup leader George Speight, Director of Public Prosecution Joe Naigulevu told Monday's Fiji Times.

He was reacting to reports that Speight and 12 others were set to strike a bargain in which in return for dropping a treason charge they would plead guilty to lesser charges.

Speight and 12 others were charged with treason following a May 2000 armed insurrection of parliament in which then prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government were held hostage for 56 days.

Australia's refugee crisis



11 striking migrant children threaten suicide in Australia

AFP, Woomera

Eleven children threatened Monday to commit suicide at a detention centre for asylum seekers, but Prime Minister John Howard said he would never back down on his hardline immigration policy.

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The bishops urged the government to "hear the cries for help and to heed the disquiet of the community" while the Red Cross said detainees were in crisis and their behaviour was caused by despair.

Robert McDonald, a member of a lawyers group assisting asylum seekers at the Woomera Detention

Centre, said 11 children had vowed to kill themselves after making a suicide pact.

"Their condition is very stressed, very wound up, they are wanting a response from DIMA (the immigration department) and they are getting more and more agitated to act," he said.

"They have said, 'We want immediate action or we will do it.' People (at the centre) are very worried, people are a bit nervous, I'm sure people are trying to say, 'Don't do anything.'"

The children, mostly Afghans, are aged between 14 and 17. They were considering either jumping on razor wire, slashing themselves with sharp implements or ingesting some sort of fluid, McDonald said.

16 killed in Borneo landslide

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

At least 16 people were killed and four were seriously injured in a landslide in Malaysia's Sarawak state on Borneo island, police said Monday.

Rescue teams were trying to reach others still trapped before dawn in the Simunjan district about 160 kilometres (100 miles) from the state's capital Kuching, state police commissioner Mohamed Yusof Jaafar said.

He told the Bernama news agency the landslide followed heavy rains in the area over the past two days and that the full extent of the disaster had yet to be determined.

A district police spokeswoman told AFP the victims were believed to be sleeping in their longhouse when it was hit by the landslide, but had no further details.

New Zealand wants more immigrants

AFP, Auckland

New Zealand considers refugees an asset, not a liability and wants to take in more, Prime Minister Helen Clark said Monday.

But she told Radio New Zealand that refugee numbers would not be increased immediately as support services and processing needed to be improved.

Currently New Zealand settles 750 refugees annually, taking people referred by the United Nations.

In addition last year New Zealand took 130 of the Middle Eastern asylum seekers rescued by the Norwegian ship Tampa in the Indian Ocean. Australia refused them entry, and instead sent the bulk of them to the remote Pacific island of Nauru for processing.

All but one of the 130 Tampa people have been declared legitimate refugees and are now living in the community.

"Overall refugees are an asset to a community, not a liability," Clark

said.

She declined to comment on the crisis in Australia, where a refugee hunger strike and lip-sewing protest has spread to four detention centres.

Some of the protestors have been held for two years in tough conditions, likened by some rights campaigners to concentration camps.

"The New Zealand government does not get involved in commenting on Australia's internal politics," Clark told Radio New Zealand.

"In respect of the detention centres Australia has to sort that out themselves. In the case of the Tampa we reacted to a unique situation."

Clark added New Zealand's overall refugee intake was proportional to Australia's.

New Zealand will hold a general election later this year, but Clark said she did not believe the refugee intake would become an election issue as it did last year in Australia.

Afghan leader appeals for help

6 Arabs killed in US raid on Kandahar hospital

AFP, Washington

Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai urged Afghans living in the US to help in his nation's reconstruction, vowing to return the rule of law and guarantee foreign investment.

But barely one hour after his address at Georgetown University here, US special forces reportedly stormed a hospital in Kandahar where several armed al-Qaida fighters had been held up -- a sign of the continuing instability in Afghanistan.

American soldiers had taken command of the streets around the Mirwais hospital, where a fire had broken out after at least one explosion rocked the building during the night, an Afghan intelligence officer said.

The Pentagon has refused to confirm the operation, and the outcome was unknown.

As many as six members of alleged terror mastermind Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network have been holed up in a wing of the hospi-

tal since the Taliban fled the city in late 2001.

Nasratullah Nasrat, a provincial intelligence officer in Kandahar, said "The Americans have blockaded the area and they're not letting anybody get close. I don't have more details for the time being. Only American troops can be seen around the hospital."

Meanwhile in Washington, Karzai, wearing traditional garb and his trademark lamb fur hat, passionately appealed to Afghan expatriates to help the motherland in time of need.

"You are the ones who are trained, you're the ones who are academics," he said, addressing some 4,500 flag-waving people.

"Come back to your country and we will welcome you," he added to thunderous applause and cheering from the audience.

Karzai said he saw good times ahead for war-torn Afghanistan because people were tired of fighting and wanted a peaceful future, and said he was determined to

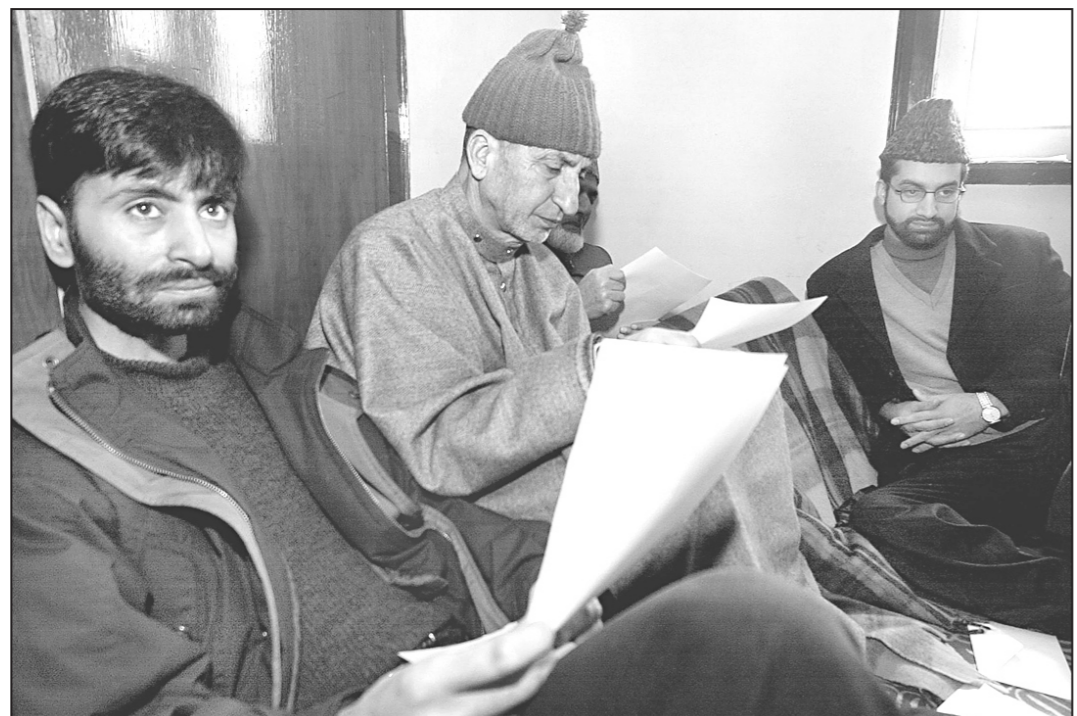
stamp out banditry and corruption and create all the necessary conditions for foreign investment.

Karzai offered former Afghan nationals willing to return home the benefit of dual citizenship, saying, "You can come here and be there too. You can do both."

Meanwhile, six suspected al-Qaida members were killed in a raid by US forces on a hospital in southern Afghanistan Monday after a series of explosions rocked the building, the Afghan Islamic Press reported.

"Smoke is still billowing out of the hospital. The attack is not over yet and the hospital is still under siege," a provincial government spokesman was quoted as telling the Pakistan-based private news agency.

Sporadic explosions and gunfire were reported throughout the morning and early afternoon following the initial attack at about 6:30 am (0100 GMT). US and Afghan troops had sealed off all surrounding streets.



Senior Hurriyat leader Yasin Malik (L), chairman of All Parties Hurriyat Freedom Conference (APHC) Abdul Gani Bhat (C) and head priest Moulvi Omar Farooq attend a meeting at APHC headquarter in Srinagar on Monday. Kashmir's main separatist alliance leaders met to discuss the situation in the insurgency-wrecked state.

APHC meets to discuss Kashmir situation

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's main separatist alliance met Monday to discuss the situation in the insurgency-wrecked state, officials said.

The meeting of the seven-member executive council took place at the headquarters of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) -- an alliance of two dozen separatist political groups -- in Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

"The meeting will take stock of the prevailing situation, particularly with reference to the fast changing scenario after Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's January 12 speech," the spokesman said.

Musharraf vowed to crack down on extremists groups, including those fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, following the December 13 attack on parliament in New Delhi, which India blames on Pakistan-based militant organisations.

Tigers warn civilians against contacts with troops

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels Monday warned civilians they would be punished as "traitors" if they had contacts with security personnel despite an ongoing truce with the government.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in posters at refugee camps in the north of the island, said Tamil civilians should not have relations with troops, government intelligence agents or other Tamil groups.

"We regret to inform that those who violate this order will be treated as traitors and punished accordingly," said the posters written in Tamil and put up at refugee camps overnight.

In the past Tiger rebels have gunned down those who they considered to be "traitors" to their struggle for an independent homeland called Eelam for the minority Tamils concentrated in the island's northeast.

Local military officials said the posters were dated November 21, 2001, more than a month before the Tigers began observing their truce, but the warnings were put up on Monday.

Government forces have reciprocated the ceasefire which both sides have said they hope will be extended into a formal cessation of hostilities agreement before February 24.

Military officials in the north of the island said groups of Tiger guerrillas were entering into areas held by the military, canvassing for support and seeking recruits and money from Tamil civilians.

The defence ministry has also reported several cases in which arrested Tiger rebels had to be freed after they threatened to commit suicide.

Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris warned last week there could be violations of the truce.

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