

Israel extends closure of PLO HQs for 6-month

Israeli F-16s bomb Nablus, Arafat ready to negotiate peace

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has extended for six months the closure of Orient House, the unofficial PLO headquarters in east Jerusalem which it occupied after a bloody suicide attack in August, a statement said Thursday.

The official statement said that Internal Security Minister Uzi Landau had ordered the building to be kept closed after consultation with police and security chiefs "to preserve Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem and in light of the ample evidence of illegal activities taking place there."

He added that it would only be allowed to reopen "when it is clear that it houses no political activity."

Orient House was the unofficial office of the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the eastern sector of Jerusalem which Israel occupied and annexed in 1967.

Israel claims the whole of Jerusalem as its capital, while the Palestinians want the eastern half as the capital of their future state.

Meanwhile, Israeli warplanes bombed the West Bank city of Nablus early Thursday after a Palestinian gunman went on a shooting spree at a Jewish settlement, gunning down a woman settler and her baby, as well as a soldier, before being killed himself.

Israeli F-16s dropped three bombs on the headquarters of the

Palestinian governor of Nablus, in the West Bank, an AFP correspondent said.

The flurry of violence came just hours after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon left on a high-profile visit for Washington in a bid to further isolate Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, whom he has branded "irrelevant" and kept in isolation in the West Bank town of Ramallah for two months.

Sharon is expected to ask US President George W. Bush to seek an alternative to Arafat, whom Israel blames for anti-Israeli attacks, including the one Wednesday night on the Hamra plantation in the Jordan Valley.

Moreover, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said he was hoping for an initiative from the United States to relaunch the search for peace with Israel, in an interview with the Chinese news agency Xinhua published Thursday.

"We are looking for the United States because they are the co-sponsors of the peace process, which was started by President George W. Bush's father," Arafat said in his offices in the West Bank city of Ramallah, where he has been blocked since December 3 by the Israeli army.

"We hope President Bush, the son, will complete it," he continued. "For this, we are looking for a big and strong role from the American administration," added Arafat, who is coming under strong pressure from the United States to end ongoing violence.



PHOTO: AFP
Sonia Gandhi (L) chats with late Jitendra Prasad's wife Kanta Jrasada (R) in Shahjahanpur during her pre-election tour on Wednesday. Punjab and three other states, including the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh will go to the polls from February 13.

Stars on stage for Indian state polls

AFP, New Delhi

Key Indian state elections which begin next week and could test the stability of the central government, promise a heady political mix of caste, religion and nationalism, spiced with the participation of film stars, eunuchs and known criminals.

More than 121 million people will be able to vote in the four states going to the polls from February 13 - Manipur, Punjab, Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh.

All eyes will be on the last state, Uttar Pradesh -- India's Hindu heartland, the most populous state in the country and far and away the most important in political terms.

"One who rules UP (Uttar Pradesh), rules New Delhi," runs the political maxim that looks like being sorely tested this time around.

Opinion polls suggest that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party will not only lose control of the state but also its position as the largest single party in the local legislature.

With more than 166 million people, if Uttar Pradesh were independent it would be the sixth-largest country in the world, with a massive Muslim community and an electorate riven by the issue of caste.

The polls indicate a hung parliament, with the largest number of seats going to the Samajwadi (Socialist) Party, whose main vote banks are Muslims, as well as impoverished lower-caste farmers and labourers.

The BJP, which only enjoys around two percent of the crucial Muslim vote in Uttar Pradesh, has clearly decided to cut its losses and use the current military face-off with Pakistan to appeal to voters' patriotism.

India and Pakistan have massed an estimated 800,000 troops on their shared border since a December attack on the Indian parliament, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militant groups, triggered a sharp escalation in military ties between the nuclear rivals.

BJP campaign rallies have been liberally peppered with anti-Pakistan rhetoric and warnings that only the BJP is capable of countering the terrorist threat posed by Islamic extremists.

BSF detains top militant in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian border guards in Kashmir said Thursday they had arrested a top separatist militant leader who had planned to carry out landmine and grenade attacks in the disputed region.

Farooq Ahmed Beig, a chief organiser and field commander of the Islamic Front militant group, was arrested overnight Wednesday by members of the Border Security Force (BSF) from a hideout in the Kashmiri summer capital, Srinagar.

"We conducted the raid on specific information," BSF deputy inspector general Rajinder Bhullar told reporters.

Hun Sen rules out becoming next king

AFP, Siem Reap

With his tongue in his cheek, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen ruled out becoming this country's next monarch on Thursday saying such a job would get in the way of his golf game.

Speaking for the first time in public since his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) dominated historic local elections, Hun Sen said he was bemused by reports comparing him with Cambodia's revered monarch after he refused to vote.

Left Front opts for media whip

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

West Bengal's ruling Left Front has taken to the familiar recourse of blaming the media in a bid to control the storm set off by Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's remarks about some unaffiliated "madrasahs" in the state.

But even in pointing finger at the Left parties' favourite whipping boy the mediawhat came as a little surprise is that the Left Front Chairman Biman Bose, belonging to the Chief Minister's CPI(M) party, did not even spare the party daily "Ganashakti".

Bose told reporters in Kolkata on Wednesday that the press, including "Ganashakti," had misquoted Bhattacharya. But then Bose has blamed the media for what it did not quote the Chief Minister as saying but what were interpreted by some as saying.

Bhattacharya's remark, made at a news conference on the day American Center was attacked in Kolkata on January 22, that some "unaffiliated" madrasahs in West Bengal were centres of 'anti-national' activities and the government has evidence of this and cannot allow this to go on.

The Chief Minister's remarks snowballed into a controversy as they came under attack from the entire Opposition in West Bengal, including Congress and Trinamool Congress, a section of his own party as well as allies of Left Front and Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind whose activists had taken a big rally in Kolkata three days ago.

Despite the criticism, Bhattacharya had stuck to his view till

Wednesday when after a meeting of Left Front constituents Biman Bose came out with a spin of the Chief Minister's utterances that was aimed at suppressing the controversy.

Bhattacharya's remark about unaffiliated madrasahs and that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency was behind the attack on the American Center and terrorist activities in parts of West Bengal certainly brought to fore differences between him and Left Front allies and the CPI(M) politburo.

Ever since Left Front came to power in West Bengal in 1977, there has been two power centers in the state in the state secretariat (Writers' Building) and the other 32 Alimuddin Street (CPI-M headquarters). The tussle for supremacy between the two centers had been witnessed in the past, especially between Jyoti Basu and renowned Marxist leader Pramod Dasgupta, on a number of key issues.

It was only after Dasgupta's death that Basu consolidated his grip over the party and pushed his way through most of the time. But even Basu had at times to reckon with the politburo and Alimuddin Street.

After all, it was the politburo which had scuttled his own desire to become the Indian Prime Minister at the head of a coalition government in 1996.

It was, therefore, but natural that Buddhadeb Bhattacharya too would have bow down to the Left Front rather than carrying things beyond a certain point.

News Analysis

Bhattacharya's utterance that some madrasahs were not affiliated to the Madrasah Board and that they were teaching only theology and Urdu and not the general curriculum was something none in the Left Front would have grudging in normal circumstances. But the Front was apparently aware of the fact these would not go down well especially in view of the fact that Panchayat polls in the state were just a year away.

Secondly, Bhattacharya's accusing finger at the ISI came at a time when CPI(M) politburo member Sitaram Yechuri had said, soon after the attack on the American Center, that Indian Home Minister L K Advani jumped the gun in talking about the Pakistani intelligence agency's involvement in the incident.

Thirdly, the Chief Minister had been favouring enactment of a special anti-terrorism law in West Bengal on the line similar to that

Russia backs India in crisis with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

Visiting Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov stood squarely behind India on Thursday in its military face-off with Pakistan, and backed a CIA assessment that the two South Asian rivals were dangerously close to war.

"Russia has always unequivocally supported India," Klebanov told reporters here.

"It is high time for Pakistan to embark on a real course of action and show the world community it is serious about fighting terror."

India and Pakistan have been readied for war -- with an estimated 800,000 troops massed on their common border -- since New Delhi blamed two Pakistan-based militant groups for the deadly December 13 attack on its parliament.

In a landmark speech last month, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf launched a crackdown on Islamic extremism and outlawed five radical groups, including the two blamed by India for the parliament attack. Since then 2,000 alleged militants have been arrested.

India slams Pak charges on HR abuse in Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

India's top leaders hit back Thursday at Pakistani allegations of abuses by security forces in Indian Kashmir, saying a "military dictatorship" had no right to take the moral high ground on human rights.

"There is no democracy in Pakistan," Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told an election campaign rally in the northern state of Uttaranchal.

"There is a military dictatorship there and human rights are being crushed. It has no right to talk about human rights violations in this country," said Vajpayee, whose Hindu nationalist BJP party has made anti-Pakistan rhetoric a key feature of its campaign for elections next week in Uttaranchal and three other states.

Vajpayee's comments, reported by the Press Trust of India, were a response to a speech by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on Tuesday.

Musharraf had said Muslim militants fighting to end Indian rule in Kashmir were rebels against brutal Indian military occupation, not terrorists as portrayed by New Delhi.

CIA warns of terror threat

AFP, Washington

The CIA warned Wednesday that terror suspect Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network continue to present "the most immediate and serious threat" to the United States, which may increase if other terrorist groups close ranks with them.

Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet also made clear that in the future Americans may have to face terrorist organisations and rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction.

"We assess that al-Qaida and other terrorist groups will continue to plan to attack this country and its interests abroad," Tenet told the Senate Intelligence Committee.

He said the group, created by the Saudi-born Islamic militant and blamed for the September 11 attacks, usually has multiple strike plans in the works simultaneously and relies on local cells to implement them.

According to Tenet, al-Qaida has already considered attacks on US soil against high-profile government or private facilities, famous landmarks as well as airports, bridges, harbours and dams.

Pak police hopes to locate Pearl 'within days'

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani authorities said Thursday they expect to locate abducted US journalist Daniel Pearl "within days," although they have still not found four chief suspects in the 15-day-old case.

"We will recover him soon, maybe within days or it could be even sooner," Brigadier Mukhtar Sheikh, home secretary of Sindh province, told AFP.

The Wall Street Journal correspondent has been missing since January 23 when he went to meet an Islamic militant leader in the southern port city of Karachi, the provincial capital of Sindh.

Police have arrested 13 people and identified another four Islamic militants as chief suspects including Sheikh Omar, who they said was a leader of the Jaish-e-Mohammad extremist group.

Three others were named as Mohammad Hashim Qadeer, Mohammad Bashir and Intiaz Siddiqui. They helped arrange an interview between Pearl, 38, and Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, leader of another little-known militant Muslim group, Tanzeem-ul-Fuqra.

However police sources said Thursday they still had no clue as to the whereabouts of any of the four, and Brigadier Sheikh refused to comment on Omar.



PHOTO: AFP
This file picture dated December 29, 2001 shows a local Afghan at the north entrance of the Salang Tunnel, 160 km north of Kabul. A United Nations spokesman said on Wednesday that at least 20 vehicles have been buried in an avalanche of snow near the recently-reopened Salang Tunnel that connects north and south Afghanistan. The spokesman said teams from the International Committee of the Red Cross, the United Nations and the International Security Assistance Force had joined rescue efforts.

250 cars trapped in Salang Tunnel

3 killed in cold as blizzard hampers rescue efforts

AFP, Salang Tunnel

At least three people have died after being trapped in snow at Afghanistan's Salang Tunnel, a UN spokesman said Thursday as a freezing blizzard hampered rescue efforts.

People being freed by rescue workers said as many as 250 cars may be trapped in deep snow at both ends of the Salang Tunnel, a steep pass in the Hindu Kush mountains about 80 km north of Kabul.

Initial reports suggested an avalanche or mudslide had struck the area but rescue workers at the scene Thursday said strong winds appeared to have blown snow onto the road, trapping commuters.

United Nations spokesman Yusuf Hassan said three people had "suffocated" in the tunnel and an unknown number remained in cars buried two days ago.

Hassan told AFP that around 100 people had been rescued so far from the northern end of the tunnel but he did not know how many remained trapped.

Dozens of people were freed Thursday morning from the southern end, including children who seemed barely conscious, according to an AFP reporter at the scene.

Sayed Nasir, a doctor working with a Swedish non-governmental organisation, was in one of the first cars freed and described two nights of freezing temperatures with nothing but his car heater to keep warm.

"At least one boy has frozen to death and two other children are in danger of dying. People are showing signs of frostbite on their fingers. Many have been trapped for two days and two nights," he told AFP at the tunnel's southern end.

"People don't have enough clothes with them and are running out of petrol. Many people are in real danger of dying unless they can be rescued soon."

He said he believed around 50 cars were trapped on the southern side of the tunnel and possibly as many as 200 on the northern end, but this could not be confirmed.

"The problem wasn't so much the snow as the severe wind. It was so cold one couldn't stand outside for more than two minutes," he said, adding that no cars appeared to be buried as earlier feared.

"I didn't know these were my hands. I lost all feeling. Many people haven't eaten for two days."

Teams from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have been asked to join rescue efforts.

The number of people trapped was not known, but the route is mainly used by buses, minibuses and trucks plying the roads between Kabul and the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

The 3.2-kilometre (1.9-mile) tunnel is around four kilometres above sea level, making it the highest passage of its kind in the world.

Serbs to issue ultimatum to war crimes fugitives

AFP, Banja Luka

The government of the Serb entity in Bosnia plans to give all war crimes suspects from its territory 30 days to hand themselves in, or face the loss of certain guarantees if they are arrested later, a Bosnian Serb official told AFP Thursday.

Sinisa Djordjevic, an advisor of Bosnian Serb Prime Minister Miladin Ivanic, made it clear that the ultimatum concerned all fugitive war crimes suspects who came from the Republika Srpska (RS) entity, including former war leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic.

"All publicly indicted war crimes suspects, no matter if now on RS territory or somewhere else -- although we have no information that any are in the RS now -- will be given 30 days to surrender," he said.

Only those who surrendered through the RS government, and within the deadline, could expect the Bosnian Serb government to provide them with guarantees, which could be important during any trial before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), he said.

Djordjevic said the measure was not yet in effect, but it would be submitted to an upcoming meeting of the RS cabinet, which is to take place in the coming five or six days.

Immigrants to Britain must learn English

AFP, London

New immigrants to Britain will have to pass tests in English and swear an oath of allegiance, according to controversial government proposals unveiled Thursday by Home Secretary David Blunkett.

In an article in the tabloid daily newspaper The Sun, Blunkett said he did not want people making no attempt to fit in with the British way of life or "abusing our laws and rules."

The minister wrote that the proposed scheme would provide "an end-to-end system of induction, registration, accommodation and removal centres to track and deal with asylum seekers at every stage."

It would also apply to immigrants coming to Britain under a proposed "green card" work system.

Under his plans, people applying for citizenship would have to learn about British society and its institutions and attend language lessons, he said in the article.

"People will then need to show they can speak the language reasonably well and have grasped the basics of citizenship," he wrote.

It would help them play a full part in society, getting jobs and access to public services.

At the heart of a formal ceremony, at which they would be officially granted citizenship, would be an oath of allegiance, Blunkett said, which would "spell out our rights and duties, as well as allegiance to the Queen."



PHOTO: AFP
Nigerian Foreign Minister Sule Lamido (R) leads British Prime Minister Tony Blair out of the presidential lounge of the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, late Wednesday shortly after Blair's arrival in Abuja for a one-day visit to Nigeria.