

Sharon to accept Palestinian state, but on conditions

Israel fails to sway US to shun Arafat

AFP, Washington

Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon could accept the creation of a Palestinian state, but only once the threat of "terrorism" has been decisively laid to rest, and other conditions met, he said late Thursday, reiterating earlier statements.

"Israel is committed to peace. At the end of the process, I believe that a Palestinian state will be -- we will see a Palestinian state," Sharon told reporters after meeting at the White House with US President George W. Bush.

However, Sharon stressed that a Palestinian state "can be only achieved at the end of a process."

Earlier, the prime minister mentioned a series of conditions he had already outlined several times this month.

He said a Palestinian state could come "after the arrest and the judgement of the terrorists, the dismantling of the terrorist organization, the confiscation of illegal weapons and the end of the campaign of incitement to violence."

Sharon had already gone on the record as favouring the creation of a Palestinian state, causing some grumbling among hardliners in his own Likud Party and extreme-right members of the national unity government.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, on his part, is calling for the prompt creation of a Palestinian state in order to resuscitate the Middle East peace process.

But Sharon has turned down this quick blueprint to statehood drawn up by Peres and Palestine Legislative Council president Ahmad Qorei.

Meanwhile, Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon failed to convince US President George W. Bush to "boycott" Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and rely on other Palestinian leaders for peace negotiations.

After their fourth meeting since Bush took over the White House a year ago, late on Thursday, the two leaders emerged with different views on how the Middle East peace process should evolve.

For Sharon, Arafat "is not and never will be a partner. He's out of play," The prime minister called for an "alternative Palestinian leadership."

Bush, on the other hand, agreed on keeping Arafat under pressure, but stopped short of questioning his credentials as the representative of the Palestinian people.

"I assured the prime minister that we would continue to keep pressure on Mr. Arafat to convince him that he must take serious, concrete, real steps to reduce terrorist activities in the Middle East," Bush said during a joint press conference after his meeting with Sharon.

Before the meeting, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Bush would "make clear that the United States will remain engaged in the region and remain engaged with the Palestinian Authority" headed by Arafat.

But Sharon repeated his views at a press conference after his meetings with Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

"More pressure must be put on Arafat," he said, "because it can accelerate the emergence of an alternative leadership, because Arafat is directly responsible for the suffering of the Palestinian population."

"This process will take a while, but the longer Yasser Arafat remains out of play the quicker it will take," he stressed, suggesting that the Palestinian leader should be circumvented.

"It's possible to speak with other Palestinians like I have done," said Sharon, referring to his first meeting Wednesday with three top Palestinian officials, including Palestine Legislative Council president Ahmad Qorei and the PLO's number two leader, Mahmud Abbas.

"These Palestinians requested that I meet with them again on my return from the United States," said Sharon, adding: "I've accepted it as part of the pressure that must be exerted on Arafat."



Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf (r) shakes hands with visiting Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai at Chaklala airbase in Rawalpindi, some 25 km from Islamabad on Friday. Karzai arrived here for his first visit to the ousted Taliban regime's one-time backers since he took office in December.

Karzai in Pakistan for talks with Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai arrived in Pakistan Friday for his first visit to the ousted Taliban regime's one-time backers since he took office in December.

He was met at a military airport near here by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and other senior officials including Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar, they said.

The two leaders will sit down later Friday for wide-ranging talks expected to include the repatriation of refugees and the treatment of Pakistanis captured while fighting for the Taliban.

Pakistan had been the strongest supporter of the Taliban regime until the September 11 atrocities, blamed on the Afghan militia's "guest" Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network of Islamic militants.

It has since joined the US-led war on terror and pledged its full support for Karzai's transitional government as Afghanistan starts the massive task of rebuilding after more than 20 years of war.

But Islamabad is still regarded with deep suspicion by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance ethnic minority factions which dominate Karzai's six-month transitional cabinet named in December.

Alliance officials have claimed

that senior al-Qaida members, including bin Laden himself, have sought shelter in Pakistan since the US air strikes began on October 7.

Islamabad has dismissed the allegations.

Pakistani foreign office spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan said Thursday that "matters of mutual interest and cooperation will be discussed during (Karzai's) two-day stay here."

Mohammad Sarwar Salahi, of Karzai's secretariat in Kabul, said seven to 10 ministers -- up to one-third of his cabinet -- would be included in the delegation, indicating the importance the Afghan leader attaches to smooth relations with Pakistan.

He said a range of issues would be broached during Karzai's talks with Musharraf, with special emphasis on the estimated three million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan.

But Karzai would not sign a "big protocol like a military one" with Pakistan, he said.

Karzai was deputy foreign minister when he fled factional fighting in Kabul in the early 1990s, setting up home in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta where he lived for most of the past decade.

Iran rejects Britain's choice of envoy

AFP, Tehran

Iran implicitly confirmed Friday it has rejected Britain's choice of ambassador to Tehran and voiced surprise at London's decision not to name a replacement.

"The Foreign Office reaction is surprising. It's a country's right to accept or not an ambassador of another country," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid-Reza Assefi said, quoted by Iran's official news agency IRNA.

"It's the right of a country to make its decision known. What happened occurs constantly in international relations, without affecting diplomatic relations between the countries concerned," he said.

King Fahd names Grand Mosque Imam as speaker

AFP, Riyadh

King Fahd has appointed an imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Sheikh Saleh bin Hameed, as speaker of Saudi Arabia's consultative Shura Council, the official SPA news agency reported Friday.

Bin Hameed succeeds Sheikh Mohammad bin Jubair, who died last month aged 76 after serving in the post since the Council was inaugurated by the Saudi monarch in 1993.

Like his predecessor, bin Hameed is a prominent member of the influential religious establishment in the oil-rich kingdom.

Nepal seeks extension of emergency

REUTERS, Kathmandu

The Nepal government will seek parliament's approval to extend emergency rule by another three months to fight a bloody Maoist rebellion aimed at destroying the constitutional monarchy, a minister said on Friday.

"The government is determined that the emergency rule should continue for another three months," Communications and Information Minister Jayprakash Prasad Gupta told Reuters.

The state of emergency ends automatically unless a two-thirds majority of the 205-member parliament approves an extension before February 23. The fractious ruling Nepal Congress party does not have enough seats itself to ensure that majority.

Maoists keep construction of highway on hold in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Construction on a Japanese-funded highway in Nepal has been halted indefinitely after Maoist rebels gunned down more than a dozen police posted to the project, officials said Friday.

The Japanese companies working on the highway, which would connect the Kathmandu area and Nepal's southern lowland region, said they were stopping work because of safety concerns for their employees, an official at Nepal's ministry of public works and transport told AFP.

500 rescued from Salang Tunnel snow trap

AP, Salang

Bent under heavy winds and laboring to breathe in the frigid, thin air, international teams rescued about 500 people trapped by an avalanche of snow. Four people died.

The avalanche roared down the Hindu Kush mountains Wednesday and blocked the Salang Tunnel, the world's highest at some 11,000 feet (3,350 meters) above sea level. The tunnel is on the principal route between Kabul and Afghanistan's north and is a key conduit for aid shipments.

Three people suffocated inside the tunnel and the fourth who died was trapped in a car outside, said United Nations spokesman Yusuf Hassan.

About 190 people trapped inside the tunnel, some 130 km north of

Kabul, were rescued early Thursday, according to Mohammedullah Golaga, the Afghan coordinator of the rescue efforts.

Some 300 more were later freed from vehicles buried in the snow outside of the tunnel by rescuers from the HALO Trust, a British-based de-mining group that sent armoured bulldozers to dig out cars, spokesman Gerhard Zank said.

Temperatures fell to 40 below zero. Eighty-nine people suffering from frostbite and dehydration were evacuated to a field clinic at Jabal Saraj, between Kabul and the tunnel, Zank said. Seven were in serious condition and were flown by helicopter to Kabul, he added.

Rescue teams rushed to Salang on Wednesday, but many were unable to pass through the roads,

which were blanketed by huge snow drifts. The de-mining bulldozers were able to drive through the drifts due to their oversized treads, which are covered with thick metal chains.

Teams from the United Nations and the international peacekeeping force also took part in the rescue effort.

Significant snowfalls have hit much of Afghanistan over the past week, precipitation that is much needed in the drought-plagued country but that creates serious problems on the roads.

The bad weather also hampered efforts to learn details of a US missile strike in eastern Afghanistan that may have dealt a blow to the al-Qaida terrorist network.

Norwegians in work to tie down Lankan truce

AFP, Colombo

Norwegian peace brokers were Friday wrapping up meetings here to secure a formal truce in Sri Lanka ahead of face-to-face talks between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels.

Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen held talks with Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe late Thursday on establishing a structured ceasefire with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), officials said.

The Norwegian embassy here in a brief statement underlined its role as a third-party facilitator but said a solution to the long-running conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives must be found by the parties themselves.

"Norway will continue to assist

the parties in the process, but has no position as regard substantive elements of a future negotiated settlement between the parties," the embassy quoted Helgesen saying late Thursday.

The Sri Lankan government and Tamil rebels have raised the prospect of an early breakthrough saying there was a greater understanding between them since the peace process was revived in December.

"There is tangible evidence of that understanding on the ground," Constitutional Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris said.

As part of confidence building on both sides, the Tigers and troops were Friday removing mines planted along two key roads in the north and the northwest of the island to open a safe passage for civilians.

The de-mining process which began Wednesday is being

observed by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Officials close to the peace process said the Norwegian delegation which is due to leave late Friday appeared hopeful of finalising an agreement in line with a draft prepared by Oslo after talking to both sides.

The Norwegian delegation arrived here Thursday after talks with the LTTE's London-based chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, who had described the discussions as "cordial and productive."

Both Colombo and the Tigers have proposed amendments and additions to the truce draft, said Peiris, one of the two ministers directly involved in the peace drive which is supported by the United States, Britain and neighbouring India.

Beauty contest, but for beast

AFP, Dubai

A camel beauty contest, the first of its kind in the United Arab Emirates, was held in Abu Dhabi Thursday with a bounty of 100,000 dirhams (27,000 dollars) and trophies at stake, newspapers reported Friday.

Faraj bin Hamuda, a member of the UAE's National Federal Council, said the aim was to mark "the respect and love the UAE people have for camels," their best companion in the pre-oil era, and pass on that feeling to the younger generation.

Owners of the winning camels collected prizes awarded in four categories -- adults, individuals, under two years, and camel studs, Khaleej Times reported.

Camels are a favourite in the Gulf region, where camel racing is a popular sport and good racers often fetch huge sums.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) shakes hands with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov (L) at Vajpayee's residence in New Delhi on Friday. Klebanov has been holding talks with top Indian officials aimed at paving the way for several billion dollars worth of defence deals that could alter the strategic balance in the region.

India, Russia to sign military protocol

AFP, New Delhi

India and Russia were expected to sign a wide-ranging military protocol on Friday, paving the way for several billion dollars worth of defence deals that could alter the strategic balance in the region.

The protocol, to be signed by visiting Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov and Defence Minister George Fernandes, is also likely to steer the long-time military allies away from simple supply and acquisition towards the area of defence joint development and production.

"Russia is willing to go beyond the sale and lease of hi-tech weapons," Klebanov said on Wednesday.

For the moment, however, the focus is still very much on acquisitions.

Klebanov's four-day visit has

involved intense negotiations for the lease by India of two Russian nuclear submarines and two TU-22 long-range strategic bombers, as well as the purchase of the aircraft carrier, Admiral Gorshkov.

The submarine lease is especially significant. India's neighbour and rival Pakistan has no such vessels, and China's nuclear submarines are extremely outdated.

If agreements are reached on all the leasing proposals, as well as the carrier purchase, the total cost to India could be in excess of three billion dollars.

The two-billion-dollar cost of the 44,000-tonne Admiral Gorshkov would include the vessel, the price of a modernisation programme underway in Russia's northern port of Severodvinsk and the training of Indian crew members.



Princess Anne (R) is led by the director of the Antarctic Heritage Trust, Nigel Watson, into British explorer Robert F. Scott's Terra Nova Hut at Cape Evans in Antarctica on Friday. Princess Anne is on a three-day visit to the world's driest, coldest and windiest continent for the centenary celebrations of the arrival to Antarctica of Scott and the launch of an international appeal to restore four historic huts of the early Antarctic explorers.

Jospin slams US unilateralism

AFP, Paris

France's Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin added his voice Friday to the growing criticism from Europe of US foreign policy, calling on Washington to broaden its contacts with the rest of the world and not to become fixated on the war on terrorism.

"One cannot reduce the problems of the world to the single dimension of the fight against terrorism -- however vital that might be -- nor can one rely for solving them on the dominance of military methods," Jospin said.

"Our conception of the world aims at building a more balanced international community, a safer and fairer world. This conception is

based on a multilateral approach," he said.

The prime minister was speaking in Paris at a conference of European parliamentarians on international money-laundering.

His remarks echoed those of Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine who on Wednesday accused the US of pursuing a "simplistic" foreign policy since the September 11 attacks.

France favoured "all forms of cooperation which allow members of the international community to attack the essential problems together... No country can claim to be able to solve them alone," Jospin said.

Citing as examples international negotiations on the environment,

trade and disarmament, he urged Washington "not to give way to the strong temptation of unilateralism, but to re-engage with us."

He said joint action with the US against terrorism would "continue with determination... but that does not mean we shouldn't reflect clearly on the lessons to be drawn from the events of September 11."

Several European leaders have recently raised doubts about what they fear is a go-it-alone policy being pursued by President George W. Bush, and in particular about his attempts to broaden the war on terrorism to Iran, Iraq and North Korea -- which he branded an "axis of evil."

Troops besiege militants in Kashmir mosque

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops surrounded a mosque in Kashmir on Friday where up to three Muslim militants were believed to have taken refuge during a military operation.

The latest in a series of mosque sieges began early Friday morning in Tootigund village, some 85 km north of the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

"There has been a brief exchange of fire between the two sides twice since the mosque was ringed," a senior police officer told AFP by telephone.

He said the militants, believed to number three, barricaded themselves inside the mosque after security forces cordoned off the village on a tip-off.

On Monday two Muslim militants surrendered to police after a 30-hour mosque siege in the town of Sopore, 50 km north of Srinagar.

On January 9, Indian security forces in Barmada village killed one suspected militant and injured another to end another eight-hour stand-off.

N Korea terms US 'empire of devil'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea on Friday labelled the United States the "empire of devil," despite the Stalinist state's UN representative offering new talks with its Cold War rival.

"Though it has the largest number of weapons of mass destruction in the world, the US is sharply increasing military expenditure," the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said in the latest of a series of daily condemnations of US policy.

"This clearly proves that the US, 'empire of devil,' is posing a grave threat to the world peace and stability."

North Korea's leadership was

infuriated by President George W. Bush's State of the Union speech this month in which he said North Korea was part of an "axis of evil" with Iran and Iraq, building weapons of mass destruction while letting its people starve.

Bush has since unveiled plans for a 379 billion dollar defence budget for 2003 to underwrite the war on terrorism, marking the biggest increase in US military expenditure since the early 1980s.

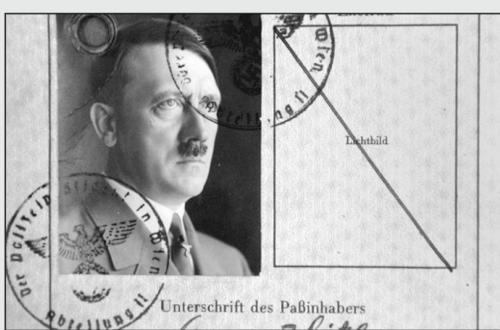
North Korea's UN representative Pak Gil-Yon, meanwhile, said North Korea would hold talks with the United States any time but only without strings attached, South Korea's Yonhap news agency

reported.

"We are always hopeful that the issues would be resolved through dialogue and negotiation," he said. "However, no preconditions should be attached to the negotiations," he was quoted as saying in New York.

Bush said last week he would be happy to talk to the communist state if it pulls back some conventional weapons from the border with South Korea and stops exporting weapons of mass destruction.

South Korea has stepped up diplomatic efforts to ease tensions between the North and the United States amid concerns that the worsening ties could disturb peace on the Korean peninsula.



The faked passport of Adolf Hitler which was made during the Second World War by the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and released to the public for the first time at the Public Record Office in Kew, in London on Thursday.

Hitler's Jewish passport!

AFP, London

In what was probably meant as a little wartime joke, British intelligence operatives drew up a fake passport for German Nazi leader Adolf Hitler marking him out as a Jew.

The passport -- marked with a red J for Jude (Jew) on the first inside page -- also contains an entry stamp from "the government of Palestine" dated July 19, 1941.

It includes the words: "permitted to remain permanently in Palestine as an immigrant."

The passport was in a folder of other fake German documents released Friday by Britain's Public Record Office (PRO) after decades under wraps.

The folder itself is part of a larger release of long-secret files relating to the wartime role of the Special Operations Executive, which was responsible for covert operations during World War II.

Unfortunately, there is no accompanying file to explain why a passport was forged in Hitler's name. Background material is likely to have been destroyed or thrown out since the end of WWII in Europe in 1945.