

Hezbollah rejects Saudi peace plan

REUTERS, Beirut

Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrilla group rejected on Thursday a new Middle East peace initiative by Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdullah, saying the Palestinians were capable of defeating Israel through armed struggle alone.

"The choice of jihad (holy war) is capable of winning a big victory in Palestine," said a faxed statement from the Shi'ite Muslim group.

"Even if we want to discuss the territories occupied in 1967, it is possible to regain them without paying a heavy political price like normalization with the enemy," said the statement, which did not refer directly to Abdullah's initiative.

Abdullah's proposal, which he floated in a New York Times article in mid-February, calls for Israel to withdraw from all the land it occupied in the 1967 Middle East war in return for the Arab world's recognition of Israel.

Syrian and Iranian-backed Hizbollah waged a war of attrition that helped end Israel's 22-year occupation of south Lebanon in May 2000 and which Israel believes has inspired the Palestinians in their uprising against Israeli occupation.

Sharon's popularity hits new low

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's popularity in Israel dropped to a new low in an opinion poll published yesterday that showed that a majority of the public is dissatisfied with his performance for the first time.

Commentary accompanying the Maariv newspaper-Media Watch survey said a surge in attacks on Israelis by Palestinian militants and a "pale speech to the nation" last week in which Sharon addressed security issues have wounded him.

Fifty-three per cent of those polled said they were dissatisfied with Sharon's performance compared with 42 per cent that expressed satisfaction and five per cent that had no opinion.

"For the first time since his election, a majority of the public is dissatisfied with Sharon," commentator Chemi Shalev wrote in Maariv. "He has not kept his promises, met expectations or delivered the goods."

Space shuttle Columbia blasts off

AP, Cape Canaveral

Space shuttle Columbia and a crew of seven blasted into orbit yesterday on an arduous mission to renovate the Hubble Space Telescope after a one-day wait for warmer launch weather.

Columbia vaulted into clouds just before dawn as Hubble was passing more than 350 miles above the Gulf of Mexico and heading toward the Florida peninsula. The round-around-the-world chase should end Sunday.

The launch was surrounded by extraordinarily tight security to guard against possible terrorist attack. F-15 fighter jets were on patrol, and a no-fly zone was in force within 35 miles of the launch pad.

Commander Scott Altman waved as he and his crew boarded the heavily guarded van for the ride to the pad. "The crowd goes wild, hey!" Altman shouted. The crowd, while enthusiastic, consisted of just 25 space center employees, fewer than usual because of security concerns.

DNA test free man after 19 years

AP, Houma, La.

A man who spent 19 years in prison for a rape he did not commit was freed Thursday to testify against his younger brother, implicated by the same DNA tests that freed his sibling.

Clyde Charles, 49, tried to invoke his Fifth Amendment right against self incrimination when he was called to testify against his brother, Marlo, 46. But because he had already been granted immunity, Charles could not refuse to testify, prosecutor Mark Rhodes argued.

After a meeting in the judge's chambers, Clyde Charles returned to the stand to answer questions about the 1981 rape of a 26-year-old nurse in a clover field in rural Terrebonne Parish.

Clyde Charles acknowledged that more than 20 years ago his lawyer raised the possibility in court that it was really his younger brother who was the rapist. But Charles told the court he could not account for his lawyer's tactics.

"I did not tell him how to do his job," Charles said.

DNA tests unavailable when Clyde Charles was arrested in December 1999 indicated he could not have been the rapist.

Annan demands Israeli pullout from refugee camps

IPS, United Nations

Thursday's Israeli military invasion of Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank drew sharp criticism from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who called for the immediate withdrawal of all troops.

"What distresses me this time," he said, "is the large number of Palestinians reported dead or injured as a result of incursions into refugee camps by the Israel Defence Force."

The raids, in the West Bank town of Nablus, claimed the lives of 11 Palestinians, with more than 100 injured, according to early estimates.

Battle tanks and helicopter gun ships supported the attacks, described as the fiercest since the current Palestinian uprising began in September 2000. The United Nations remained virtually paralysed in the face of continued Israeli attacks, and Annan called on the invading Israeli military forces to "withdraw from these camps immediately."

"I implore both sides to refrain from further actions which may endanger yet more civilians lives," he added.

Annan also expressed serious concern that some of the Israeli military attacks have continued without any due respect "to the immunity of humanitarian facilities, including those of the United Nations."

In the last 48 hours, five Israelis and 16 Palestinians have lost their lives in escalating violence in the Israeli-occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

So far, the 17-month-old Palestinian uprising has claimed a heavy death toll on the Palestinian side: more than 1,000 killed. Some 288 Israelis have died.

Annan's appeal notwithstanding, the United Nations has remained helpless in the face of increasing military attacks by the Israelis against a spate of suicide bombings by Palestinians.

A meeting of the UN Security Council Tuesday, called specifically to discuss the Middle East crisis, ended without any tangible results, although ambassadors from 30 of the 189 UN member states spoke.

Faced with the threat of a US veto, Arab countries held back a draft resolution demanding "the immediate cessation of all acts of violence, provocation and destruction, as well as the return to the positions and arrangements which existed prior to September 2000."

Since September 2000, the Israelis have isolated the Palestinians and barred their movement outside the occupied territories. According to the UN Relief Works Agency (UNRWA), there are 72 permanent Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank now, and nine in Gaza.

The draft resolution, which never reached the Council, emphasised that "there is no military solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict."

It also reaffirmed the need for an "Israeli withdrawal from the territories it occupied in June 1967 and for establishing normal relations among all states of the region based on mutual recognition and respect."

This is in conformity with a recent proposal by Saudi Arabia for collective Arab recognition of Israel in return for Israel's withdrawal from all occupied territory, including the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, all of which were annexed by the Israelis after the Six Day War in 1967.

The resolution also called for international involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, a proposal strongly opposed by both Israel and the United States.



An Israeli tank enters a refugee camp at Balata in West Bank on Thursday. PHOTO: INTERNET

US set to send troops to Yemen

REUTERS, Washington

The White House has approved a mission to send hundreds of US troops to Yemen to train and advise Yemeni forces hunting remnants of the al-Qaeda network, the Wall Street Journal reported Friday.

The newspaper cited a senior military official as saying the mission would be similar to the U.S. military effort in the Philippines, where more than 600 US soldiers are involved in anti-terror exercises with local forces.

The paper quoted unnamed officials as saying the mission was approved after a month-long debate within the Bush administration about the size of the al Qaeda presence in Yemen and how the United States should respond.

As in the Philippines, U.S. soldiers will not be involved in combat missions in Yemen, officials said. Rather, the U.S. soldiers in Yemen will "train with, assist and advise" troops from Yemen's Republican Guard.



A volunteer distributes food to the Hindu devotees who came to support the building of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, yesterday. Thousands of Hindu zealots have been arriving in Ayodhya ahead of the proposed start of construction for the Ram Temple on March 15. PHOTO: AFP

China expels 4 from govt body for graft

REUTERS, Beijing

China's top government advisory body has expelled four people for serious economic offences ahead of its annual meeting this weekend, the People's Daily Web site said yesterday.

The standing committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which opens its annual session on Sunday, kicked out Wang Meiyue, Liu Deyuan, Bai Shangxian and Jin Shuzheng yesterday, the Web site said.

A CPPCC spokesman said he could not confirm the report but an announcement would be made in state media in the next few days.

Separately, the China Youth Daily said a former deputy governor of the northern province of Hebei, Cong Fukui, was put on trial on Thursday in the city of Zhangjiakou for taking bribes. It gave no further details.

Kumaratunga calls for review of ceasefire agreement

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president called for a review of a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday, saying that some of its clauses were inconsistent with the country's sovereignty.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga referred to a clause that gives the Norwegian chief of the Monitoring Mission absolute power to decide the "actual line of control" if a dispute arises over areas claimed by both the rebels and the military.

"This is the first time in the history of post-independent Sri Lanka that a foreign government is being authorised to draw demarcation lines on the soil of Sri Lanka," Kumaratunga said in a letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

"The submission of such matters to the binding authority of a single

individual appointed by a foreign government appears to be wholly inconsistent with the sovereignty of the people of Sri Lanka," she said.

A copy of the letter was faxed to news organisations by her office in Colombo, the capital.

In the letter, Kumaratunga complained that she had not been informed about the truce until just before the government and the rebels signed a ceasefire accord two weeks ago in an effort to end the 18-year civil war that has killed over 64,500 people.

Kumaratunga said she supported the peace process, which has brought the two sides close to their first peace talks in seven years, but concluded that the agreement needs a review after she appointed a 20-member committee to examine the document.

Kumaratunga, who was elected separately from the prime minister, has sweeping powers to sack the

government and suspend Parliament. Her longtime rival, Wickremesinghe, became prime minister after Kumaratunga's party lost the Dec 5 elections.

Kumaratunga remains in overall command of Sri Lanka's 100,000-strong army and had complained earlier that she was not fully consulted about the agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

"It is my constitutional duty as head of state, head of government, head of the Cabinet and Commander in-chief of the armed forces to scrutinise carefully any agreement that might affect the security of our people and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka," the letter said.

There was no immediate comment from the government on Kumaratunga's letter, but Wickremesinghe has denied that he did not inform Kumaratunga about the ceasefire agreement.

'Shadow government' activated for US

AP, Washington

A "shadow government" consisting of 75 or more senior officials has been living and working secretly outside Washington since Sept. 11 in case the nation's capital is crippled by terrorist attack, a senior government official says.

Such an operation was conceived as a Cold War precaution against nuclear attack during the Eisenhower administration but never used until now. It went into effect in the first hours after the terror attacks and has evolved over time, said the official, who spoke Thursday night only on condition of anonymity.

The shadow government plan was activated out of heightened fears that the al-Qaida terrorist

network might obtain a portable nuclear weapon. U.S. intelligence has no specific knowledge of such a weapon, but the risk was great enough to warrant the activation of a plan, the official said.

Under the classified "Continuity of Operations Plan," which was first reported by The Washington Post in its Friday editions, high-ranking officials representing their departments have begun rotating in and out of the assignment at one of two fortified locations along the East Coast.

The Post said the first rotations were made in late October or early November, a fact confirmed by a senior government official late Thursday.

Officials who are activated for the duty live and work underground 24

hours a day, away from their families, according to the Post. The shadow government has sent home most of the first wave of deployed personnel, replacing them most commonly at 90-day intervals.

A government official who spoke to The Associated Press said the groups usually number 70 to 150 people, depending on the level of threat detected by U.S. intelligence.

He said President Bush does not foresee ever needing to turn over government functions to the secret operation, but believed it was prudent to implement the long-standing plan in light of the gathering war on terrorism and persistent threats of future attacks.

The team, drawn from every Cabinet department and some independent agencies, would seek

to prevent the collapse of essential government functions in the event of a disabling blow to Washington, the official said.

The underground government would try to contain disruptions of the nation's food and water supplies, transportation links, energy and telecommunications networks, public health and civil order, the Post reported. Later, it would begin to reconstitute the government.

The government-in-waiting is an extension of a policy that has kept Vice President Dick Cheney in secure, undisclosed locations away from Washington. Cheney has moved in and out of public view as threat levels have fluctuated.

As next in line to power behind Bush, he would need help running the government in a worst-case scenario.

Zimbabwe police arrest opposition supporters

REUTERS, Harare

At least nine members of Zimbabwe's main opposition party were injured on Thursday during a raid in which police said they arrested 38 people who had been involved in a clash with supporters of President Robert Mugabe.

A week before a presidential election that domestic and foreign critics accuse Mugabe of trying to win by intimidation, his government did say it would respect a court ruling that overturned a law barring many Zimbabweans from voting.

The veteran president also told a senior delegation from regional power South Africa, which is increasingly worried about instability in Zimbabwe, that his main rival had not been charged with treason, contrary to earlier police statements.

Former colonial ruler Britain, accusing Mugabe of fostering violence in the campaign for the March 9-10 election, hopes to persuade other Commonwealth countries to impose sanctions on Zimbabwe when their leaders meet in Australia this weekend.

Commenting on Thursday's arrests, police spokesman Wayne Bvudzijena said officers had followed a group of supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change to an MDC office in the capital Harare after they had clashed with the Mugabe supporters, leaving one seriously injured.

New cane for the blind

REUTERS, London

British scientists said on Thursday they had created a cane inspired by bats to help blind and partially sighted people find their stride.

Bats manoeuvre easily by bouncing high-pitched sounds off nearby objects in a process called "echolocation."

Researchers at Britain's Leeds University used this as the model for their so-called "Batcane," which emits sonar waves inaudible to the human ear to help users detect obstacles ahead, around or even above them. Any nearby object triggers a vibration in one of four pads in the cane's plastic handle. As the object gets nearer, the vibration speeds up.

"They will be warned of objects that are just beyond the reach of the conventional white cane," said

Andrew Diston of Cambridge Consultants Ltd, which has developed the cane in conjunction with Sound Foresight Ltd.

Diston said the Batcane would help visually impaired people create a "mind map" of their environment and so encourage independent mobility, particularly in cities.

"There are large numbers of blind people who, as their sight degrades, are confined more and more to their homes," he said. "This will enable people to venture outside, and could generally improve their quality of life."

The Batcane is expected to hit the market in late 2002.

Diston said user trials were underway in Britain, the United States, Canada and Germany, with prototypes to be tested by groups such as Guide Dogs for the Blind and the American Council for the Blind.

Kissinger secretly conceded to China's claim over Taiwan

AFP, Washington

Henry Kissinger secretly conceded to China's territorial claim over Taiwan, said a researcher Thursday at the National Security Archive, which released transcripts of the secret 1971 meeting.

"We now have the full record of that meeting and that what Henry Kissinger said in his memoirs is not accurate," said Michael Evans, a research associate at the Archive.

Kissinger's memoirs said Taiwan was barely discussed in the secret meeting with Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. But the transcripts show the Nixon administration's national security adviser acknowledging Beijing's claim that Taiwan was a runaway province.

Kissinger told Zhou: "We are not advocating a 'two Chinas' solution or a 'one China, one Taiwan' solution."

The Archive is a non-profit group that regularly releases documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

"Without conceding to Beijing's position on Taiwan's status, it would have been most difficult for substantive discussions to continue and a presidential visit would have been most unlikely," said an Archive statement.

Nixon's 1972 trip to China was a foundation of the administration's foreign policy and of Nixon's role as a statesman.

However, the transcripts reveal Nixon's fears that Democratic senators would get to China before him. Nixon's instructions to Kissinger to keep them away undermines the myth that "only Nixon could go to China."

Finn nominated as US envoy to Afghanistan

REUTERS, Washington

US President George W Bush on Thursday nominated a career member of the US foreign service, Robert Patrick John Finn, to be US ambassador to Afghanistan.

Finn is currently a diplomat-in-residence and Ertegun Professor of Turkic Studies at Princeton University. From 1998 to 2001, he served as the ambassador to Tajikistan.

Previously, Finn was the deputy chief of mission at the American embassies in Croatia and Azerbaijan.

Taliban prisoners stage hunger strike

REUTERS, Miami

Nearly 200 al-Qaeda and Taliban prisoners at the US Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, refused to eat some meals on Thursday after guards forced a captive to remove a turban during prayers, military officials said.

Prisoners at the camp are not allowed to wear turbans because they could conceal weapons, said a spokesman for the U.S. military's Southern Command in Miami, which oversees the prison camp operation.

The camp holds 300 prisoners captured in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. Their treatment has drawn criticism from some U.S. allies and human rights groups.

"This morning, 107 detainees refused to eat breakfast," said the spokesman, Capt. Tom Crosson. The protest grew during the day,

with about 190 prisoners refusing to eat lunch, another SouthCom spokesman said.

Crosson said the prisoners were protesting an incident on Wednesday night, when guards forced a prisoner to remove a turban he had fashioned.

"The guards down there asked him several times through translators to remove the turban and from what I understand he didn't immediately but eventually he did. This was in the middle of his prayer session," Crosson said.

He said the prisoners were upset.

"I don't know if it was because they asked him to remove it or because they disrupted his prayer," said Crosson.

There had been no reports of threats against U.S. troops guarding the prisoners nor of injuries, Crosson said.



A man from an aid distribution team uses a stick to control a crowd of Afghan women who gather to get relief in Kabul yesterday. The United Nations is hoping large-scale infrastructure projects initiated with foreign aid will provide the main impetus for the disarmament of Afghanistan's estimated 700,000 militiamen. PHOTO: AFP