

Gulf states warn US, back Palestinians

Arabs echoing calls to use oil weapons

AFP, Dubai

The Gulf monarchies are lining up openly behind the Palestinians against Israel's "savage aggressions" and reminding their leading ally, the United States, of its major interests in a region where calls are echoing to use oil as a weapon.

Pro-Palestinian protests have become a regular occurrence on the streets of the conservative Gulf, and always pass off with the tacit blessing of the authorities.

The protests, notably in Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, are marked by campaigns to collect donations for the Palestinians, whose 18-month uprising against Israel is avidly monitored on Arab satellite television stations.

Dubai Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum donated a further 5.4 million dollars Tuesday as part of a fund-raising campaign in the Gulf emirate for urgent Palestinian

relief.

Sheikh Mohammed, who is also defence minister of the United Arab Emirates, on Sunday said Washington no longer had any excuse not to halt Israeli aggression.

Similar fund raising has been launched in Saudi Arabia, where the government on Monday reiterated a call for the United States to put pressure on Israel to withdraw from Palestinian territories.

"We deplore the US president's denunciation of Palestinian resistance, but such an attitude does not surprise us," the Riyadh-based Al-Bilad newspaper said Tuesday.

The paper -- which, like the rest of Saudi media, reflects the official line -- echoes the frustration felt within the kingdom at the US stance on the Middle East, despite the Saudi peace initiative.

Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz was the architect of a peace proposal of normal

ties with Israel in exchange for a return of all Arab land captured in 1967 that was adopted at the Arab summit in Beirut last week.

George W. Bush's administration is sending "the wrong signals" to Israel by failing to tell Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to act to end the violence, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal told France 3 television Monday.

Bahrain's King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa bluntly warned that Washington's interests in the region could be jeopardised if it did not intervene.

"We urge the United States to intervene immediately to obtain the end to the escalation of Israeli violence and to avoid exposing US interests in the world and Middle East to danger," said the king, whose country hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and is ranked by Washington as a major non-NATO ally.

Musharraf vows new era of ties with Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf vowed to write a new chapter in relations with Afghanistan and help wipe out "terrorist sanctuaries" in the region Tuesday on his first visit to Kabul since the fall of Islamabad's former Taliban ally.

Musharraf held talks with new Afghan interim administration chairman Hamid Karzai before they held a joint press conference in the presidential palace where the Pakistan leader promised that Pakistan would never work against the interests of Afghanistan.

"I'm extremely glad that I see Kabul in the hands of a new government which is trying to bring new conditions to Afghanistan, to bring normalcy back into Afghanistan and to bring the general grandeur of this place back to Afghanistan and to Kabul," the Pakistani general said on his first visit here since he seized power in a military coup in 1999.

"We will assist him (Karzai) all the way in whatever he wants to do here... It is in a total spirit of brotherhood, of brotherliness, that I come here to this country."



PHOTO: AFP
Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai (L) shares a joke with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (R) during a press conference in Kabul on Tuesday. Afghanistan and Pakistan pledged to cooperate on wiping out "terrorist sanctuaries" in the region as Musharraf made his first visit to Kabul. Others in the picture are unidentified.

'Ne Win's relatives to be charged with treason'

AFP, Yangon

Former dictator Ne Win's daughter, son-in-law and three grandsons are to be charged with high treason -- an offence punishable by death -- for attempting to mount a military coup, a junta official said.

Myanmar's deputy military intelligence chief, Major-General Kyaw Win, told reporters late Monday that the family of the one-time autocrat, now aged in his 90s, had also committed serious economic crimes.

"We will charge them not only with high treason but with economic offences," he said, adding that they were suspected of smuggling vehicles from Thailand and illegally selling mobile telephone handsets.

Early last month the junta arrested Ne Win's son-in-law Aye

Zaw Win and his three sons, accusing them of having plotted to overthrow the current military regime which has been in power since 1988.

Since then Ne Win and his daughter Sandar Win have been under virtual house arrest at their heavily guarded Yangon residence, but Kyaw Win said she would be taken into custody without delay "when the time comes".

Kyaw Win said Ne Win remained in good health despite his advancing age and was being cared for by his daughter, a medical doctor in her 50s.

"We are still providing him with needed medicine and his daughter, Dr. Khin Sandar Win, is still looking after him," he said. "(But) we believe she is the key player in the scenario for the coup which has now backfired," he said.

India brands 2 Islamic groups as 'terrorist'

AFP, New Delhi

Two Islamic militant groups battling Indian rule in Kashmir have been branded as "terrorist" organisations under a controversial law passed by parliament last week, an official said Tuesday.

"The Al-Badr and the Jamiat-ul-Mujahedin have been declared terrorist organisations under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA)," a home ministry spokesman said.

The two groups are the first to be declared terrorist organisations under POTA, which came into force on March 26 and gives security agencies wide-ranging powers to deal with "terrorism," the spokesman said.

"Both groups will be subject to all provisions of POTA," he said.

POTA gives the police sweep-

ing powers to arrest, interrogate, intercept communications and detain suspects for up to 90 days without trial.

Opposition parties and human rights groups said the law was "draconian" and was liable to be misused. But it was pushed through by the government in a rare joint session of parliament.

The government had earlier declared four other militant groups in Kashmir -- the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahedin, Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Al Umar Mujahedin -- as "terrorist" outfits under the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance which was in force previously.

India accuses Pakistan of arming, funding and training Islamic militant groups, battling New Delhi's rule in Indian-Kashmir, a charge Islamabad denies.

CPJ slams Israel for curtailing freedom of press

AFP, Amman

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) accused Israel of curtailing the freedom of journalists trying to cover its military offensive in the West Bank, a statement said Tuesday.

"Barring journalists from conflict areas constitutes censorship," CPJ executive director Ann Cooper said in the statement, adding that journalists have a "duty" to cover the Israeli military campaign against the Palestinians.

"We are deeply disturbed by Israel's evident desire to prevent journalists from witnessing its current activities on the West Bank," the statement said.

The CPJ noted that at least two journalists, an American and an Palestinian, were wounded by Israeli gunfire since Friday while many others were barred access or expelled from Ramallah, where Israel has laid siege to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

VHP pushing for economic boycott of Muslims

Gujarat riot toll tops 800

AFP, Ahmedabad

Muslims in India's western state of Gujarat, where sectarian violence has claimed more than 800 lives, are living not just in fear of their lives but their livelihoods as well.

Hardline Hindu organisations have launched a campaign through chain letters, circulars and pamphlets urging Hindus to withdraw their custom from all Muslim businesses in the state.

"If we have to change the mentality of a Muslim then we have to put such economic pressure on him," explained Jay Shah, the local general secretary of the militant Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) in Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad.

"Unless they suffer economically, they will not cooperate. If they want to live in India then they must behave as good Indian citizens," Shah said.

The worst Hindu-Muslim clashes

in India in nearly a decade erupted in Gujarat at the end of February following a Muslim attack on a train carrying Hindu activists.

The backlash that followed saw Hindu mobs rampaging through cities and towns across the state, burning, looting and killing Muslims in their homes. Although the scale of the violence has since come down, isolated incidents are still being reported on a daily basis.

While it is too early to judge the effectiveness of the economic boycott, some small and medium-sized Muslim businesses are already noticing a drop-off in Hindu clientele.

"We opened our restaurant only two days back. On the whole, we are doing lower business than on a usual day and swe have more Muslims walking into the restaurant than Hindus," said Mohammad Patel, managing director of the Moti Mahal restaurant.

"But this could just be because of

the continued tensions in the city, rather than the anti-Muslim circulars that are doing the rounds," Patel said.

Gujarat, which has a large Muslim community, has a history of Hindu-Muslim tensions, although these have traditionally been excluded from business dealings in what is India's most affluent state.

Usmanbhai Gani Rewadiwala, whose dyeing and printing factory was burnt down by a Hindu mob on February 28, said the well known business pragmatism of Gujarat would prevent the economic boycott taking root.

Moreover, the death toll from sectarian violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat over the past five weeks has topped 800, an official said Tuesday.

The additional secretary for law and order in Gujarat, P.S. Shah, said 804 people had been killed in the Hindu-Muslim violence, including 131 shot dead in police firing.



PHOTO: AFP

(Clockwise from L) Head of the political bureau of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Farouk Kaddoumi, Palestinian ambassador to Malaysia Ahmad El-Farra, Indonesian Minister of Justice and Human Rights Yusril Ihza Mahendra and Indonesian ambassador to Malaysia Hadi Wayarabi Alhadar chat in a corridor outside the venue for the Organisation of the Islamic Conference on terrorism in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday.

Islamic states reject 'terror' label for Palestinians

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Islamic countries meeting here Tuesday rejected "any attempt to associate Islamic states or Palestinian and Lebanese resistance with terrorism", according to a draft declaration.

The declaration also rejected "any unilateral action taken against any Islamic country under the pretext of combating international terrorism" -- an apparent reference to a possible US attack on Iraq.

The declaration calls for a United Nations conference "to formulate a joint organised response of the international community to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations".

The draft declaration was obtained by AFP on the second day of a special meeting on terrorism by

foreign ministers of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference here.

The search for a definition of terrorism was one of the main objects of the OIC meeting called by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in the wake of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

Mahathir had proposed a simple definition of terrorism as "attacks on civilians" in his opening address, and specifically included Palestinian suicide bombers as "terrorists".

Mahathir, who heads a Muslim-majority country which firmly supports the Palestinians against Israel, said: "We cannot hunt down terrorists until we agree who they are and we cooperate in the hunt."

But a Middle Eastern delegate, who requested anonymity, told AFP that speeches behind closed doors Tuesday made it clear that many countries objected to Mahathir's definition.

Lebanon's foreign ministry secretary general, Mohammad Issa, told AFP he did not agree with the inclusion of Palestinian suicide bombers as terrorists.

"Our view is that we need to differentiate between terrorism, which we condemn strongly, and national resistance to liberate a country from foreign occupation," he said.

HK starts deporting abode seekers back to China

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong authorities Tuesday began to deport abode seekers back to mainland China, slamming the door on further negotiations despite protests by hundreds of people here.

Deputy Security Secretary Michael Wong insisted in a statement the government would start repatriations "as appropriate" adding the removal of the abode seekers who lost an appeal for permanent residency was "legitimate and necessary".

"The Hong Kong government will take restrained but firm action to remove claimants in batches in an

orderly fashion," said Wong.

Ruling out any amnesties or extensions, he repeated an appeal to abode claimants to stay calm and accept their fate in a rational and peaceful manner.

An unconfirmed report said one man was deported Tuesday after he reported to the immigration office at the former Kai Tak airport. The report could not be immediately confirmed with immigration authorities.

Wong's comments came as hundreds of mainland Chinese abode seekers and their relatives Tuesday staged a new protest march, after a three-month grace period expired at midnight Sunday.

US in the line of fire at UN disarmament conference

AFP, Beijing

The United States faced condemnation Tuesday for growing unilateralism in arms control issues at the first UN-sponsored disarmament conference since Washington named potential nuclear targets in a leaked defence review.

Some participants criticised Washington directly for ploughing ahead with its own diplomacy since the September 11 terrorist attacks, while others lamented a general global trend away from collective security.

"The calamitous events of

September 11 should only serve to redouble our efforts, not to divert them," UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs Jayantha Dhanapala said in his opening address.

"(But) our collective efforts (at arms control and disarmament) are hindered by the rise of unilateral actions... that jeopardise common efforts," he said, without specifying any guilty parties.

The three-day international conference, entitled "A Disarmament Agenda for the 21st Century", is jointly sponsored by the Chinese government and gathers

around 40 arms control experts from 20 countries and regions.

Besides nuclear disarmament, participants will also discuss defence doctrines, disarmament and the UN, a potential space arms race, missile proliferation and missile defence and conventional weapons.

The United States has faced recent international pressure over a series of moves such as its decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and a veto of a biological weapons treaty late last year.

Denmark seeks tough EU asylum rules

AFP, Copenhagen

Denmark's right-wing government is hoping to use its upcoming EU presidency to adopt new asylum laws to stem the tide of refugees into Europe, its immigration minister said in a newspaper interview published Tuesday.

Bertel Haarder, minister for Refugees, Immigrants and Integration -- and the architect of restrictive immigration proposals being debated in parliament -- said the introduction of common asylum regulations would be a top priority when Denmark takes over the EU presidency on July 1.

Haarder told the conservative newspaper Berlingske Tidende that he wanted regulations to prevent refugees from demanding asylum in several EU member states at the same time.

"What is essential is that the

rules are based on minimum standards that conform with international conventions," said Haarder, also European affairs minister.

Denmark's right-wing government, the first in 80 years, last month came under fire from the United Nations over immigration policy after it announced in January a slew of proposals aimed at reducing by the thousands the number of foreigners allowed into the country.

Around five percent of Denmark's 5.3 million strong population are immigrants.

Haarder said he would propose that the EU recognise more safe haven countries outside the EU where asylum-seekers could be sent immediately without risk of expulsion to their country of origin.



PHOTO: AFP

A Nepalese Army soldier guards a school while parents and guardians wait outside to collect their children at the start of school exams in Kathmandu on Tuesday. Although Maoist rebels postponed a five-day nationwide general strike, the army tightened security at schools all over the country as a precaution on Monday. Some 250,000 students attended the school exams.