

Europe calls for int'l confce on ME

Israel prevents EU president from talking to Arafat

AFP, Brussels

European Commission President Romano Prodi on Wednesday called for an international conference on the Middle East to bring together the United States, the European Union, moderate Arab countries, Russia, Israel and the Palestinians.

"It is clear that previous mediation has failed and we need new mediation," Prodi told a press conference.

"We need the US, the EU, the UN, moderate Arab states, the Israelis, the Palestinians and Russia around the same table."

Prodi, who was to attend an emergency meeting of EU foreign ministers on the Middle East in Luxembourg later Wednesday, said "there can be no military solution to the crisis...Negotiations are the only way forward."

"The situation is growing worse and worse and we fear there will be more and more casualties," he said.

"Both sides must comply with UN Security Council Resolution 1402, which calls for an immediate cessation of all

acts of violence, including all acts of terror, provocation, incitement and destruction...Both sides have to move immediately to a meaningful ceasefire."

Prodi stressed that Israel "must withdraw its forces from Palestinian cities, including Ramallah."

And he made clear that "the Palestinian Authority, under its elected leader Mr (Yasser) Arafat, is the only valid interlocutor for Israel."

In a thinly veiled reference to an Israeli offer of a "one-way ticket" for Arafat out of his besieged West Bank headquarters, Prodi said he had discussed it with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon "in recent days."

"Sharon told me if I wanted to I could come in and take Arafat out, alone," said Prodi. "I answered that Arafat will leave when he wishes, of his own will and volition. He has chosen to stay. He has even said he was prepared to be a martyr."

"I have to take note," said Prodi, "that after recent steps (by Israel to isolate and sequester Arafat) there has been a tendency for (Arafat's) power to increase rather than decrease...The fact that Arafat is being held prisoner does not

reduce his influence."

Prodi also hit out at recent attacks on Jewish cemeteries and synagogues in Europe, saying, "Nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, can justify the cowardice acts of barbarism..."

EU member states, he said, "must do everything that is in our power to resist anti-Semitism at home...Europe must not tolerate racial discrimination in any form whatsoever."

Meanwhile, Israeli authorities have prevented the Spanish presidency of the European Union from holding telephone talks with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Spanish newspaper El Mundo reported Wednesday.

Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the 15-member EU, tried four times Sunday to call Arafat but was thwarted at each attempt, the newspaper said.

When seeking an explanation from Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the Spanish leader was told: "Mr Aznar, you are trying to contact the head of the terrorists," according to the report.



Clergymen give a branch of olive to an Israeli soldier guarding the checkpoint leading to the West Bank town of Bethlehem on Wednesday in Jerusalem. Israeli forces barred about 200 clergymen from entering Bethlehem to express solidarity with the local population under Israeli occupation since Tuesday.



Mohamad Subieh, Palestinian ambassador to the Arab League, attends a meeting of the 22 member nations' permanent delegates to the Arab League in Cairo on Tuesday to discuss Israel's offensive on Ramallah and other West Bank areas. Arab foreign ministers will hold an extraordinary meeting in Cairo Thursday.

Root causes of terrorism must be dealt with: OIC

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A major Islamic conference on terrorism ended Wednesday with a warning that the global war on terror will fail if the root causes are allowed to thrive.

Delegates refused to label Palestinian suicide bombers as "terrorists" and rejected "any attempt to associate Islamic states or Palestinian and Lebanese resistance with terrorism."

"The war against terrorism will not succeed if the environment that breeds terrorism, including foreign occupation, injustice and exclusion, is allowed to thrive," the declaration said.

The declaration "reject(s) any attempt to link Islam and Muslims to terrorism as terrorism has no association with any religion, civilisation or nationality."

Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar in his closing remarks added that to eliminate the "scourge", the world community must identify and address the root causes. "For every action, there will be a reaction," he said.

The declaration dealt at length with the violence in the Middle East.

It referred to the "legitimacy of resistance to foreign aggression and the struggle of peoples under colonial or alien domination and foreign occupation for national

liberation and self determination".

"We reject any attempt to link terrorism to the struggle of the Palestinian people in the exercise of their inalienable right to establish their independent state with Al-Quds Al-Sharif (Jerusalem) as its capital," it said.

"We reject any attempt to associate Islamic states or Palestinian and Lebanese resistance with terrorism which constitutes an impediment to the global struggle against terrorism."

"We condemn Israel for its escalating military campaign against the Palestinian people, including the daily brutalisation and humiliation of its civilians."

Pak Cabinet approves referendum plan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani cabinet ministers Wednesday unanimously approved the holding of a national referendum on extending President Pervez Musharraf's term of office for five years.

An official statement said a joint session of the cabinet, provincial governors and the National Security Council of military chiefs unanimously agreed to hold the referendum on "important national issues".

It said Musharraf would address

the nation on Friday to "take the people into confidence on the details of the referendum".

An aide to Musharraf earlier Wednesday told AFP the cabinet meeting would decide on Musharraf's plan to hold a referendum on his presidency after general elections scheduled in October.

General Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1999 and named himself president in June last year.

He briefed newspaper editors Saturday on his plan to let the people decide if his title should be

extended for five years.

"I want to know whether or not the nation requires me," he was reported as saying.

The referendum has been condemned by opposition and religious parties on the grounds that it is unconstitutional.

The president, who is also armed forces chief, is expected to formally announce a date for the referendum on Friday, with the aide saying it was likely to be held in early May.

Pearl murderer challenges Pak judge

AFP, Karachi

A lawyer for British-born Islamic extremist Sheikh Omar, charged with the kidnap and murder of US reporter Daniel Pearl, filed a petition Wednesday requesting his trial judge be changed.

Two days before the trial is due to begin in this southern city, Omar's lawyer moved an application in the High Court complaining that Judge Arshad Noor Khan was not competent to try the case.

Lawyer Abdul Waheed Katpar said Khan should not have been appointed to conduct the trial because he had already presided at an earlier hearing in which Omar confessed to kidnapping the Wall Street Journal reporter.

Russia's top security official meets Indian counterpart

AFP, New Delhi

Russia's top security official Vladimir Rushailo began talks with his Indian counterpart Brajesh Mishra in New Delhi on Wednesday, officials said.

Rushailo, who arrived Tuesday, said his discussions in India would centre on the international security situation, illegal drug trafficking and religious extremism.

He was carrying a letter from Russian President Vladimir Putin for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, an Indian official said.

Minute's silence in House for Queen Mother

AFP, London

The British parliament observed a minute's silence Wednesday at the start of a special session to pay tribute to the Queen Mother after her death at the weekend aged 101.

Prime Minister Tony Blair led the way, praising her life and service for country and Commonwealth.

He said she had been "part of our lives, inspired our country, aroused its respect and affection and for whose service and life we give our most profound thanks."

Murder trial of Kennedy clan member begins

AFP, New York

The trial of a young member of the Kennedy clan for an alleged murder committed 25 years earlier began in a Connecticut court Tuesday with the selection of a 12-member jury.

Michael Skakel, now 41, is accused of clubbing to death Martha Moxley with a golf club more than 25 years ago, when he was just 15. Skakel could face life in prison should he be convicted, as he is to be tried as an adult, not a juvenile.

5 burned to death in Gujarat

'Riot victims languishing without proper food, sanitation'

AP, Ahmedabad

Five members of a Muslim family were burned to death when a Hindu mob set fire to houses in western Gujarat state, police said Wednesday, declaring the death toll from five weeks of religious violence had reached 815.

The attack took place late Tuesday, when a huge mob of Hindus set fire to three houses in Abhasana village, 80 kilometers south of Ahmedabad, the state's largest city, said Vikas Sahay, the superintendent of police for the region.

He said the bodies of the five dead, including two women and a child, were found by firefighters early Wednesday, a day before Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was due to visit the state.

Sahay said that 42 Muslims in the houses suffered burn injuries and were hospitalized in the nearest town,

Dethroj.

Tens of thousands of Indians made homeless by Hindu-Muslim riots in the western state of Gujarat endure harassment and lack adequate food, sanitation and medical care at relief camps, Amnesty International said Wednesday.

In a report on India's deadliest Hindu-Muslim communal strife in a decade, the London-based human rights organisation called for an authority to protect the camps other than Gujarat's police, which "failed to intervene during the violence and sometimes even actively connived with the attackers."

More than 800 people -- most of them Muslims -- have died since riots broke out following a February 27 attack by a Muslim-led crowd on a train carrying Hindu activists.

Y'slavia ready to hand over war crimes suspects

AFP, Belgrade

Yugoslavia was preparing on Tuesday to hand over indicted war criminals to the UN tribunal in The Hague, seeking to avoid a repeat of the international isolation and sanctions it endured during Slobodan Milosevic's regime.

The federal government of Yugoslavia -- which comprises Serbia and Montenegro -- decided at an extraordinary meeting on Monday to "cooperate fully" with the tribunal, apparently bowing to US pressure after Washington froze 40 million dollars in aid.

Domestically, the screws were also tightened on Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica by political rivals after he refused to authorise the surrender of more suspects to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

Afghan faction opposed to restoration of monarchy

AFP, Paris

The most powerful faction in the Afghan interim administration is opposed to any restoration of the monarchy by former king Mohammed Zahir Shah, Afghan diplomats said Wednesday.

Zahir Shah is scheduled to return to Kabul this month after 29 years in exile to preside over a Loya Jirga, or grand tribal assembly, that is to choose an 18-month transitional government in Kabul.

He has reaffirmed he does not intend to return as king, and is willing to take on any role chosen for him by the Loya Jirga.

PNG landslide kills 8

AFP, Port Moresby

A landslide north of Papua New Guinea's capital Port Moresby has claimed at least eight lives and left more than 20 people missing, local media reported Wednesday.

The bodies of eight people were dragged from mud and debris left behind when the mudslide struck a village in Morobe Province.

The Poster-Courier newspaper reported that 22 people were still missing after the landslide occurred at around midnight on Monday in the Wantoat region of the Markham district.



Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri (2nd-R) shakes hands with Indian President K.R. Narayanan (L) as his wife Usha Narayanan (L) and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee look on, during an official welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi on Wednesday. Megawati is on the last leg of a four-nation Asian tour.

Tamil Tigers meet peace brokers ahead of talks

AFP, Colombo

Top Tamil Tiger guerrillas have opened discussions with Norwegian peace brokers to prepare for historic talks in Thailand with the Sri Lankan government, rebel radio said Wednesday.

Norway's ambassador to Sri Lanka, Jon Westborg, travelled to an area of the island's north held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on Tuesday to meet the chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham.

The clandestine Voice of Tigers radio said their talks were aimed at

preparing the ground for direct talks with the Sri Lankan government next month.

Rebel radio also said Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen would travel to the rebel-held Wanni region on April 17 for talks with Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran.

Last week, Helgesen announced in Bangkok that Thailand had agreed to host the negotiations between the Tigers and the Sri Lankan government.

"Both parties to the conflict have agreed in holding the talks in

Thailand. The places and dates for commencement of the talks are yet to be decided by the parties and Norway," Helgesen said.

Meanwhile, the Scandinavian team monitoring a bilateral truce between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE announced that it was ready to accept complaints.

The monitors, known as the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission and headed by retired Norwegian army general Trond Furuohovde, set up an office in Colombo and were in the process of opening offices in embattled regions.

Arafat's envoy urges India to help break impasse

AFP, New Delhi

A special envoy from Yasser Arafat urged India Wednesday to help break the impasse in the Middle East, where the Israeli military is besieging the Palestinian leader in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

Hani al-Hassan, who arrived in New Delhi over the weekend, met Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee

and urged him to lobby Israel to end the siege of Arafat it launched after a spate of suicide bombings.

Describing relations between Indians and Palestinians as brotherly, the envoy said the expectation from countries like India was "always more."

"We want India to play a role in the Middle East," al-Hassan said.

Governor's office set on fire in Ambon: 50 hurt

AFP, Ambon

Almost 50 people were injured in the eastern Indonesian city of Ambon Wednesday in the worst outbreak of violence since a Muslim-Christian peace agreement in February, witnesses and hospital staff said.

Trouble began with a bombing in the city, which prompted angry crowds from both faiths to gather at the governor's office. The office was

set ablaze, stones were thrown and police and troops fired warning shots to disperse the crowd.

Security forces contained the two groups in separate areas as firefighters tackled the blaze. It was not clear which side started the fire.

At least 37 people were rushed to the general hospital in Ambon, a doctor who identified herself as Conny said. She could not give details of their condition.