

Israeli withdrawal from WB cities 'a beginning': Bush

Powell gets tough with Israel amid Arab anger

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush described Israel's pullout from two Palestinian West Bank towns early Tuesday as "a beginning," in an interview published in The Wall Street Journal.

"That's a beginning," Bush told the daily during an interview on economic matters that was sidetracked to the Middle East crisis as news arrived that the Israeli military was beginning to withdraw from Qalqilya and Tulkarem.

Hours earlier, in a speech in Knoxville Tennessee, a clearly irritated Bush said that he expected Israel to pull out of the West Bank without delay.

The president told The Wall Street Journal that he was confident the Israeli withdrawals would continue.

Bush also said that when Secretary of State Colin Powell visits the region at the end of this week, he would have "full latitude" to meet with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

On Monday, Powell called Israel's promise to pull out of Qalqilya and Tulkarem "encouraging"

but not enough.

"Let us hope that this is not a little bit of this and a little bit of that, but the beginning of a pullback," Powell told reporters after meeting Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz in Morocco.

"We'll just see what happens in the days ahead but this is an encouraging sign. I'm pleased that (Israeli) Prime Minister (Ariel) Sharon has made this decision and I hope it's the beginning of a full withdrawal," Powell said.

An Israeli military spokesman in Jerusalem on Tuesday said Israeli troops had completed their withdrawal from Qalqilya and Tulkarem, but would continue to surround both places.

The spokesman stressed that military operations were continuing in other West Bank areas. The army also launched a new operation in the village of Dura, south of Hebron "to capture wanted Palestinians and to seize arms."

Besides sending Israel a tough message, Bush in Knoxville indicated he was also losing patience with Arab leaders who have failed to condemn terrorism.

"I meant what I said to the Prime Minister of Israel. I expect there to be withdrawal without delay. And I also meant what I said to the Arab world, that in order for there to be peace, nations must stand up, leaders must stand up and condemn terrorism, terrorist activity," Bush said.

"There is a mutual responsibility to achieve peace, and it's going to require leadership on both sides. And the United States is firmly committed to achieving peace, and is firmly committed, I am firmly committed, to what I expect from both parties."

Meanwhile, given a first-hand taste of Arab anger over the plight of the Palestinians and faced with blunt questions US Middle East policy, US Secretary of State Colin Powell opened a high-stakes regional peace bid here Monday on the defensive.

Eager to assuage concerns that President George W. Bush has given a free hand to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to retaliate against Palestinian attacks, Powell delivered several stern messages to Israel to begin pulling back from its offensive in the West Bank.

UNSC resumes debate on ME crisis

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council is to resume debate Tuesday on an Arab request for another resolution calling on Israel to withdraw from the West Bank, as Israeli tanks pulled out of two towns.

US ambassador to the United Nations, John Negroponte, rebuffed the request late Monday, saying it was "time for leadership on the ground and in the region. We do not need any more resolutions, we need full implementation of the existing ones."

He was speaking Monday in a public debate, the council's fifth meeting since March 30, when it adopted Resolution 1402, calling for an immediate ceasefire and a withdrawal of Israeli forces.

Negroponte noted that a "high-level diplomatic effort" was underway in the face of both sides' failure to comply with the new resolution, with US Secretary of State Colin Powell in the region to seek a peace deal.

After the meeting closed, however, Israel announced it had pulled out its troops completely from the Palestinian West Bank

towns of Qalqilya and Tulkarem.

However, a military spokesman in Jerusalem said both places would continue to be surrounded, and stressed that military operations were continuing in other West Bank Areas, announcing a new

operation in Dura, a village south of Hebron, "to capture wanted Palestinians and to seize arms."

US President George W. Bush, who on Monday had toughened his stance on Israel's military occupation, called the pullout from

Qalqilya and Tulkarem "a beginning," in an interview with The Wall Street Journal.

Bush told the leading US economic daily that he was confident the Israeli withdrawals would continue.

7 Bodo rebels killed in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

At least seven tribal separatists have been killed and three paramilitary soldiers critically wounded in separate encounters in India's troubled northeastern region, officials said Tuesday.

A police spokesman said security forces late Monday shot dead three militants of the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in a village just outside the Assam state capital Guwahati.

"On specific information, a joint team of police and army soldiers raided a village house where the rebels were hiding. There was a heavy exchange of fire for more than 30 minutes in which three NDFB militants were shot dead," a police official said.

The NDFB is fighting for an independent homeland for the Bodo tribe in Assam.

In another incident, four tribal separatists were killed in a fratricidal gunbattle in Tripura.

Police said a group of heavily armed militants of the banned All Tripura Tiger Force rounded up five members of a rival group and shot them at close range. Four were killed while one sustained serious injuries.



PHOTO: AFP
Prince Charles looks at the Queen Mother's coffin as it comes out of Westminster Hall in London on a gun carriage on Tuesday for the funeral ceremony at Westminster Abbey. Following the service the Queen Mother will be buried at Windsor Castle.

Britain says farewell to Queen Mother

AFP, London

The funeral of Britain's Queen Mother, who died 10 days ago aged 101, began Tuesday in London's historic Westminster Abbey in the presence of the royal family and more than 2,000 invited guests.

Her coffin, draped in the Queen Mother's personal royal standard and surmounted by her crown and a wreath from her daughter, Queen Elizabeth, was carried into the abbey by eight pall bearers in ceremonial military uniform to the solemn strains of a choir.

Britain was paying a final farewell to its Queen Mother Tuesday, after more than a week of mourning, in a royal funeral marked by pomp and ceremony the likes of which have not been seen for a generation.

To the sound of 128 pipers, her coffin was taken to the splendour of London's historic Westminster Abbey for a funeral attended by more than 2,000 people and broadcast live on television and radio.

As well as the royal family, the VIP guest list included 25 foreign royals, the prime ministers of Britain and three other Commonwealth countries, and US First Lady Laura Bush.

Before the service, starting at 11:30 am (1030 GMT), the abbey's tenor bell was tolled every minute for 101 minutes, echoing the years of the Queen Mother's life.

Thousands of people gathered outside the abbey -- some having camped there since Sunday -- to grab a view of the ceremony.

Indo-Pak troops exchange fire, 13 militants killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Thirteen Muslim separatist militants and two civilians were killed overnight and into Tuesday in Indian-administered Kashmir, as Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged fire, police said.

The Indian army shot dead four militants who tried to enter from Pakistani Kashmir over the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border that divides the Himalayan region between the nuclear powers.

They were among a dozen militants caught infiltrating the LoC in the southern Rajouri district, police said.

"When they were asked to surrender they opened fire, which was returned," a police spokesman said, adding four militants died in the

fighting while the others fled back to the Pakistani zone.

Police said the bodies of the four were still lying near the LoC as Pakistani troops opened fire on Indian positions, preventing the Indians from removing the bodies.

Pakistani troops also shelled villages in the neighbouring Poonch district for some 30 minutes overnight, but there were no casualties, police said.

Meanwhile, a civilian was killed and 10 others injured Tuesday in a grenade set off by suspected militants at Bidder village near the health resort of Kokernag, some 70 kilometers (42 miles) south of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

Police said the grenade was aimed at an army patrol, but missed its target and exploded among people waiting for a bus.

Another civilian was shot dead by suspected militants near Handwara township, 85 kilometers (52 miles) north of Srinagar.

In the Poonch district, the army backed by counter-insurgency police killed three militants, who were identified as members of Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Lashkar is one of the two Pakistan-based groups India blamed for a December 13 attack on its parliament that left 14 dead.

India and Pakistan have amassed nearly 800,000 troops along their shared borders since the attack.

Pakistan has banned the two outfits allegedly behind the incident and has arrested many Islamic extremists. But India says it is awaiting more action from the Pakistanis.

EU urges Nepali Maoists to lay down arms

AFP, Kathmandu

The European Union urged Nepal's Maoist rebels Tuesday to cease the "appalling brutality" of their armed campaign to oust the government and resume peace talks.

In a joint statement, EU ambassadors in Kathmandu asked "the Maoists to lay down their arms and return to the negotiating table to join Nepal's political mainstream to resolve the country's political and economic problems."

The Maoists broke a four-month ceasefire in November after three rounds of talks with Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's government deadlocked, particularly over rebel demands that the constitutional monarchy be scrapped.

The EU envoys expressed "shock and unequivocal condemna-

tion" of what they said was an expansion of Maoist attacks against civilians.

"These attacks apparently reveal the pattern of Maoist violence against the Nepalese people. Taking hostages on punitive basis, torture, execution and other acts of appalling brutality were designed to terrorise the general public for their (the rebels') political goals," they said.

The statement also condemned recent Maoist attacks on drinking water reservoirs and communication and food storage facilities.

"The attacks can only be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to undermine the development of Nepal and the economic livelihood of her ordinary people," it said.

Tigers open political office ahead of talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels Tuesday opened a second political office in a government-controlled area, following the opening of the first such bureau last week.

The latest office was opened to a large gathering in the eastern port town of Trincomalee, 257 kilometers (159 miles) from the capital Colombo, residents said.

The Tigers' entry into mainstream politics is in line with a Norwegian-brokered truce deal, signed between the Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the rebels on February 22.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last week opened their first political office at

Vavuniya, 260 kilometres (160 miles) north of Colombo.

Under the truce deal, the LTTE is allowed to take part in political activity in areas held by government forces in the island's war-ravaged northern and eastern regions.

Tuesday's opening came ahead of a Wednesday press conference by Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, his first in 12 years. The LTTE leader will talk to reporters in rebel-held Kilinochchi in northern Sri Lanka.

The LTTE and the Sri Lankan government are set to enter face-to-face talks next month in Thailand to clear the way for a political settlement to end decades of fighting that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

Yemen threatens to expel US ambassador

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party on Tuesday accused US ambassador Edmond Hull of "interfering" in domestic affairs and threatened to expel him.

"Since he was appointed (last September), ambassador Edmond Hull has behaved like a high commissioner, not like a diplomat in a country which is opposed to any form of interference" by a foreign state, said the Al-Mithaq weekly, a GPC mouthpiece.

"Edmond Hull adopts a very haughty behaviour, far-removed from his diplomatic duties, when he speaks to certain Yemeni officials," the newspaper added.

Hizbul mulls action against NC over new anti-terror law

AFP, Srinagar

A leading Kashmiri militant group threatened Tuesday to strike the state's ruling party for its support of India's controversial new anti-terrorism law critics say unfairly targets Muslims.

"Hizbul Mujahedin is contemplating some effective and decisive actions against the ruling National Conference for its alacrity in enacting POTA," the group's spokesman Junaid ul-Islam said, referring to the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The National Conference's five MPs are part of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's coalition government, which is led by the Hindu-nationalist BJP party, and supported the law in a rare joint session of parliament last month.

POTA gives police sweeping powers to arrest, interrogate and detain suspects for up to 90 days without trial and to intercept suspects' communication.

"For the people who know the art of becoming human bombs and killing themselves inside the camps of their enemies, this law is useless," Islam wrote in the Urdu-language weekly Chattan.

"Instead, it will add to our dedication and commitment."

Islam did not specify what action the militant group planned to take.

"Up to date we have been restraining harsh measures against the National Conference, but now we have decided to take action," he wrote.

Vajpayee calls for Asian security framework

AFP, Singapore

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Tuesday called for a comprehensive security framework in Asia, which hosts the world's largest standing armies and four nations with nuclear weapons.

Non-military threats to social stability from population growth, massive poverty, food shortages, health problems and environmental degradation have made the need for such a wide-ranging framework more vital, he said in a speech at the annual Singapore Lecture.

Vajpayee said Asia has "seven of the 10 most populous countries in the world, the largest standing armies, four declared nuclear weapons states and several missile producing and exporting states."

China, India, Pakistan and Russia all have nuclear weapons in their arsenals.

Asia's political and cultural diversity provides an additional volatility, Vajpayee said at the address, organised by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and attended by diplomats, academics and government officials.

He said that while Asia was projected to account for 57 percent of the world's gross domestic product in the next 25 years, the region remained vulnerable to a recurrence of economic problems.

"The management of the unpredictable behaviour of this economy is also a problem with security implications," he said.

The Indian leader also cited threats from sea piracy, cybercrime, trans-national crime and drug trafficking.



PHOTO: AFP
Commuters try to board a Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) bus on Tuesday in New Delhi after thousands of polluting diesel busses were banned on the street by a Supreme Court order. Tens of thousands of commuters had a harrowing time trying to reach their work places while schools remained shut for a second day with no sign of the crisis ending soon.