



PHOTO: AFP

Jemima Khan (C), wife of Pakistani sports star-turned-politician Imran Khan, leads a protest rally in Islamabad against Israel on Thursday. The rally was organised by the women's wing of Khan's party Tehreek-i-Insaaf (Justice movement) in which activists chanted slogans against Israel and demanded of the European Union to impose sanctions against Israel. Jemima Khan after the protest rally handed over a memorandum to the EU representative.

Israel losing int'l support: UK

Bush lacks magic wand on ME: White House

AFP, London

Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw warned Thursday that Israel was losing international support because of its incursions in the West Bank, adding that these had strengthened the authority of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

"As friends of Israel we are saying: this is doing you no good, you are losing friends and supporters and understanding around the world," Straw told the BBC.

"And what's more, there's no evidence ... that this tactic of moving into the occupied territories is delivering the peace with security" that Israelis want.

Straw added: "One of the paradoxes of the situation, and why we think there is no effective (Israeli) strategy here, is that although the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority has unquestionably been significantly destroyed, the authority of Yasser Arafat has paradoxically been increased as a result of the action which has been taken in recent weeks."

The British foreign minister said his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres had told him in a telephone conversation

Wednesday that the country's armed forces will "probably" withdraw from Palestinian territories "in the next week or so".

Straw said he had insisted the Israeli army should pull back "immediately".

"Shimon said to me, 'We are going to do this, we are starting it, we will probably do it in the next week or so'."

"I told him it was not good enough," the British minister added.

Straw was asked by the BBC how Britain could justify pressing Israel to end military operations in the West Bank while at the same time voicing support for possible US military action against Iraq.

He replied: "Of course, I understand that the current level of violence in Israel and the occupied territories greatly complicates dealing with Iraq."

"Do I think the manufacture and propagation of weapons of mass destruction by the Iraqi regime is therefore a less urgent matter for the international community? The answer to that is an emphatic no."

Straw added that he did not support imposing sanctions on

Israel. The European Parliament Wednesday called on the 15 EU member states to impose sanctions amid growing frustration over Israel's military operations.

But Straw said: "I don't believe that sanctions are the answer and I have yet to see anybody who proposes that they (sanctions) are going to somehow get the parties to the negotiating table."

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush cannot wave a "magic wand" to get Israel to withdraw from Palestinian territories and will not use sanctions to get Israel to do so, the White House said Wednesday.

Asked whether Bush might use Israel's annual three-billion-dollar US aid package as leverage to force it to heed his repeated appeals for a troop pull-out, spokesman Ari Fleischer firmly replied: "The answer to that is no."

The spokesman also denied that Israel's refusals and the failure of Palestinians to crack down on anti-Israeli violence -- another unmet Bush demand -- were "a matter of a personal prestige" for the US leader.

Ban on LTTE must go before any negotiation: Prabhakaran

Tigers committed to peace, but still not ready to give up arms

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Thursday welcomed remarks by the top Tamil rebel leader that he was committed to Norway's peace bid even though he was not ready to give up arms immediately.

Hours after Tamil Tiger chief Velupillai Prabhakaran held his first press conference in 12 years, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said he believed the Oslo-backed peace process could be escalated.

Wickremesinghe saw as a "positive indication" the willingness on the part of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to talk about the setting up of an interim administration for war-ravaged areas.

Prabhakaran told reporters in his northern stronghold of Kilinochchi that the rebels would not join any discussions unless a 1998 ban on the LTTE is lifted.

Prabhakaran said only when a permanent solution to the long-running conflict was reached would the LTTE consider "giving up all forms of violence."

The government and western



Velupillai Prabhakaran

diplomats in Colombo, 325 km south of Kilinochchi, had expected Prabhakaran to make a more dramatic announcement Wednesday.

Instead Prabhakaran reiterated his group's demand for a separate state called Eelam for the Tamil minority in the island's northeast, even though Colombo has made clear the highly emotional issue was non-negotiable.

"As far as the demand for Eelam is concerned, the LTTE has not

made any decision so far, whether to give up the demand or to accept an alternative because the negotiations have not started," Prabhakaran said.

Wickremesinghe said his government was seeking ways to balance the LTTE's demand for a lifting of the ban in the context of the international crackdown against terrorism.

"But the positive indication is that the LTTE is willing to sit down and talk. We will have to look at that positive aspect... The peace process can be intensified after yesterday's comments by Prabhakaran," Wickremesinghe said.

Prabhakaran in his two and a half-hour press conference singled out Wickremesinghe for praise for his "bold steps towards peace".

But the rebel leader made clear the LTTE would not renounce its armed struggle soon and asked Colombo to come up with a substantial offer that recognises the Tamil minority's right to a homeland, nationhood and self-determination.

US to supply arms to fight Maoists: Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal said Thursday the United States was willing to provide military assistance to the kingdom to root out Maoist rebels.

"The US has agreed in principle to provide Nepal with military hardware and is assessing the need," Foreign Secretary Madhu Raman Acharya said on his return from Washington.

A foreign ministry official specified that the United States had made no "concrete offer" during the visit

but said it was open to provide assistance.

By treaty Nepal must rely primarily on India for its military purchases. The government has been fighting a six-year Maoist insurgency that has taken on new intensity since November, when the rebels broke a four-month ceasefire.

Acharya, who met with Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca and other State Department officials, said Nepal and the United States had agreed to enhance cooperation.

8 Afghans killed in fighting over trade route to Iran

AFP, Islamabad

Eight militiamen were killed and several others wounded when Afghan interim administration forces recaptured a key trade route to Iran, a report said Thursday.

The forces of Abdul Karim Barohi, governor of southwestern Nimroz province, launched the offensive against two rebel commanders near the Iranian border overnight, the Afghan Islamic Press

(AIP) reported.

Rebel commanders Abdul Jalil and Abdul Rahman had earlier taken control of the road from Iran at Guldana and Deh Sheikh, and they were demanding a share of the government's customs income.

"The fighting left eight people dead, seven from Jalil's forces and one from the governor. Many were wounded from both sides," a local tribal leader told AIP.

23 killed in Philippines ferry fire

AFP, Manila

Twenty-three people were killed and at least 48 were missing after a ferry caught fire at sea in the Philippines on Thursday, the ship's operator said.

The tragedy was the latest in a long line of shipping disasters that have claimed thousands of lives in the Philippines over the past 15 years.

Survivors said the blaze started when the cargo hold of the Maria Carmella ferry caught fire early Thursday while the ship was in Tayabas Bay, sending panicked

passengers jumping into the sea without life-jackets as smoke entered the upper decks.

As of 6:00 pm (1000 GMT), the number of those confirmed dead had reached 23, said Eugene Aguilar, the spokesman for Montenegro Shipping Lines, the ship's owner.

Out of the 243 passengers and 47 crewmen listed on the manifest, some 219 have been rescued from the vessel, which was en route to Lucena city from the central island of Masbate.

It was possible, however, that more people could have been aboard the ferry than was in the

manifest. The ferry has an authorised capacity of 334.

Aguilar said it was possible that those missing could have been picked up by several vessels who joined in the rescue effort.

Many of those who perished panicked and jumped into the sea without life-jackets, said Lucena coastguard chief Lieutenant Commander Elpidio Gunio.

The vessel was already approaching Lucena's Dalahican port when the fire started, he said, adding "we could see the smoke billowing and we immediately responded."

BJP, Cong summon party meets

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party is preparing for a crucial leadership conclave Friday that is taking on the air of crisis-management talks after a series of electoral setbacks and sectarian riots in Gujarat state.

The three-day meeting of the BJP's national executive, its highest policy-making body, will be held in the western beach state of Goa and attended by all top leaders, including Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani.

The session is being seen as an introspection camp on all that went wrong in the past year and a half.

The nationalist party considers itself to be in its worst crisis period, as its fortunes have plummeted over the

past 18 months.

The image of Vajpayee as a moderate took a bashing with an outburst of sectarian violence in the western state of Gujarat, while Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha has been facing a wave of resentment over his "anti-middle class" budget that cut down a tax rebate from 20 to 10 percent.

Meanwhile, spurred by recent successes in state and municipal polls, India's main opposition Congress Party will meet here Friday for a two-day special conclave to chalk out strategies for the next general elections.

Party president Sonia Gandhi, the chief ministers of 14 Congress-ruled states as well as a host of senior leaders will take part in the session in Guwahati, capital of the northeastern state of Assam.

PPP, PML battle for survival as Musharraf cements grip

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's two major political parties are facing a desperate struggle for survival as military ruler General Pervez Musharraf tries to cement his grip on power, analysts said.

Musharraf this week launched a massive campaign drive ahead of a referendum on April 30 to decide whether he should stay as president, in a bid to legitimise his rule with a mandate from the people.

With the state media and a vast system of local councils at his disposal, and with opposition voices muzzled by a ban on political rallies, the general who seized power in a

coup in 1999 looks set to win his bid to stay on.

Politicians have condemned the move as a flagrant breach of the 1973 constitution, which will have grave consequences for the next civilian government after general elections scheduled for October.

"It is illegal and unfair that General Musharraf is using the state machinery at public expense to advance his political agenda while denying to the opposition a chance to go to the people and say that the referendum is unconstitutional," said Farhatullah Babar, a spokesman for the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

But without former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, the main political parties appear powerless to launch any serious challenge to the Musharraf juggernaut.

"Two people who represent about three-quarters of the electorate are not around to make a public campaign against the government," said political analyst Mohammad Afzal Niazi.

"Without their leaders these parties are not in a position to either stop the referendum or build electoral pressure on Musharraf."



PHOTO: AFP

Medics stand by the body of a person who was blown to pieces in an unexplained explosion in the southern West Bank city of Hebron on Thursday, witnesses said. Several people were injured in the blast, which Palestinian police said could have been caused by the accidental detonation of explosives by the unidentified person.

US pushes for Indo-Pak talks to defuse tension

XINHUA, New Delhi

Visiting United States Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca urged India and Pakistan here on Wednesday to have "some dialogue" to help defuse tension between the two countries.

Emerging from talks with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and other senior Indian officials, Rocca expressed her concern over the three-month military stand-off between the two neighbors.

"Anytime that you have two

armies fully mobilized and ready to strike, the spark factor is always a possibility," she told the media here.

"We remain concerned about possible accidental hostilities caused by whatever the spark may be," said the US official, who arrived here from Islamabad on Tuesday morning for a two-day visit.

"We are continuing to urge that there be some dialogue in order to help defuse some of the situation and to reach some kind of a stable situation in South Asia in general," she added.

During her talks with Singh, she said, they discussed the regional

situation, war on terrorism, India's security environment and US arms licensing processes and procedures.

The two sides also discussed United Nations peace-keeping operations, cyber terrorism, military-to-military exchanges between the two countries, security challenges in South Asia in general as well as ways to promote bilateral defence cooperation.

Terming her meeting with Indian officials as "productive," she said relations between New Delhi and Washington were "very solid."

Kashmir CM seeks more troops to quell rebellion

AFP, Srinagar

The chief minister of Indian Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, Thursday urged New Delhi to send more troops into the disputed region to quell a separatist rebellion.

"I will urge the home minister (Lal Krishna Advani) to send more troops to my state to quell the rising militant violence," Abdullah told the state-owned television network Doordarshan.

Violence has stepped up in the Himalayan region since mid-March, coinciding with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's announcement he would visit the

troubled state shortly.

Abdullah said he was perturbed by this week's massacre of seven Hindus and five Muslims in the mountains of the southern Jammu region.

He blamed the massacre on Muslim rebels who have been fighting Indian rule since 1989. No group has claimed responsibility for the killing.

"We need more troops to protect innocent lives in the higher reaches of Kashmir," Abdullah said.

"This is the demand of the people living in these vulnerable areas," he said. "We can't let these people die and fall prey to the militants."

US a 'safe haven' for torturers: Amnesty

AFP, Washington

The United States is a safe haven for torturers from other parts of the world who are fleeing justice, Amnesty International charged in a report released here Wednesday.

The US government admits that up to 1,000 suspected torturers may have entered the country, but has not prosecuted any of them despite the passage in 1994 of a law permitting the prosecution of acts of torture, the London-based rights group charged.

US authorities have failed to press charges even though they have been notified of the identities of several suspects and the evi-

dence against them, the group said.

"Despite the presence of at least 150 suspected torturers in the United States, in eight years the US government has failed to prosecute a single individual for committing torture, opting instead to ignore, deport or cover up the problem," said William Schulz, the executive director of Amnesty International USA.

The report names 13 people who entered or reside in the United States who have been accused of torture and other human rights violations in Cuba, Somalia, Guatemala, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Haiti, Honduras and Chile.



PHOTO: AFP

Airport personnel work to free an American Airlines 767 from electrical cables after the jet rolled through a perimeter fence onto a public road at Los Angeles International Airport on Wednesday. The plane was parked near a maintenance hanger was empty when it ploughed slowly through the airport fence. Airport officials speculated that the incident could have been caused by a faulty parking brake.