

US pressure can't sway Israel: Sharon

Powell postpones talks with Arafat

AFP, Washington

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon delivered another implicit rebuke to the United States Friday, pledging not to allow any country to force decisions on Israel that might affect its security. But a new opinion poll indicated the Israeli leader might be beginning to lose the battle for the hearts and minds of Americans as he continues to refuse to heed US calls for a prompt withdrawal from Palestinian territories. "Nobody will force upon us any decisions or resolutions that might affect our future," a defiant Sharon told CBS News in an interview. "This nation is strong. Much stronger than our enemies believe," he added. The statement came after a day of talks in Jerusalem between Sharon and visiting US Secretary of State Colin Powell, in which the US envoy sought assurances of a quick Israeli pullout from Palestinian territories. Sharon characterised the talks as "friendly" but said bluntly he did not believe any agreement with the Palestinians was possible as long as Yasser Arafat remained their leader.

"First I don't believe that one can reach peace with Mr. Arafat," argued the Israeli leader. He said the Palestinian leader had been offered unprecedented concessions by former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak during their 2000 meeting at Camp David but turned them all down and instead "adopted a strategy of terror." "With him we cannot reach any settlement, therefore I believe that it should have been an effort to find somebody else with whom it would be possible," Sharon stated. The Israeli leader also made clear that foreign governments that continued to recognise Arafat as the Palestinian leader only delay finding a solution to violence in the Middle East. "As long as leaders from all around the world would like to meet him, embrace him, talk to him, as long as that is happening it will take longer to find somebody that will be ready to replace him," Sharon said. Powell had been planning to meet with Arafat, who remains besieged by Israeli troops in his Ramallah headquarters, on Saturday. But the meeting has now been postponed following another suicide bombing in Jerusalem on Friday. The White House stepped up its pressure on Arafat in the

wake of the blast, with presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer arguing that "today would be a particularly apt day" for the Palestinian leader to publicly denounce terrorism. Siding with Israel, the administration of President George W. Bush also gave the cold shoulder to appeals by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who suggested earlier Friday deploying an international force in the Middle East. Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Colin Powell postponed a planned Saturday meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat following a suicide bombing in Jerusalem that jolted his crucial Middle East peace mission. "In light of today's developments, the secretary will not be meeting with Chairman Arafat Saturday," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said about 10 hours before the talks had been set to be held in the besieged West Bank town of Ramallah. However, he stressed to reporters that Powell was not abandoning his mission and said the secretary could meet Arafat at a later date "if conditions permit."



A coalition of groups dubbed the Metropolitan Muslim Federation wave signs during a rally in support of Palestinians on Friday at the Times Square in New York. Speakers criticised the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.



'Baywatch' babe engaged to marry Kid Rock

AFP, Los Angeles

Former "Baywatch" babe Pamela Anderson is engaged to marry her bad-boy rocker boyfriend Kid Rock, her publicist announced Friday. "She's engaged to Kid Rock; she's thrilled," Marleah Leslie said, adding that the musician popped the question to the 34-year old blond bombshell in the Las Vegas desert, east of here, on Thursday night. The long-haired rocker drove Anderson out into the desert after performing a show in the glitzy desert oasis and went down on one knee and presented her with a ring, several entertainment websites

Iraq delays talks with UN due to ME crisis

REUTERS, United Nations

Iraq put off next week's talks with the United Nations on the return of arms inspectors, saying it wanted to keep the world's focus on the Middle East crisis, Iraq and a UN spokesman said on Friday. The talks between UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri were planned for April 18-19 to discuss for the second time this year the return of inspectors. They last spoke on March 7. No new date has been set but Iraq's UN Ambassador Mohammad Aldouri said he expected the delay would be short, perhaps only until the end of April. "We don't want to divert public attention from the Palestinian problem for a relatively small issue of a dialogue with the United Nations," he told Reuters. "What we have is a dialogue with the United Nations, but there, they have a war," he said. The UN arms inspectors left on the eve of a US-British air strike in December 1998, meant to punish

Baghdad for not cooperating with the weapons experts. They have been barred from returning since then to check if Iraq has any weapons of mass destruction programs, key to lifting UN sanctions imposed shortly after Baghdad's troops invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Chief UN spokesman Fred Eckhard announced that "the secretary-general's talks with Iraqi officials, which had been scheduled to take place next week, have now been postponed at the request of the Iraqi delegation." Iraqi officials "indicated to us that they did not want anything to distract from the attention being given the problem in the Middle East," he said, adding that discussions were going on to find a new suitable date. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has been trying to curry favour in the Arab world, presumably to get support against the United States which has threatened to topple his government, although such action does not appear imminent.

Rescue workers search rubble for survivors Afghan quake toll rises to 50

REUTERS, Kabul

Aid workers were searching the rubble of several villages in northern Afghanistan on Saturday for people who might have been buried by the second earthquake to strike the Nahrin district in less than three weeks. Afghan officials said three villages damaged in quakes which killed some 1,000 people last month had been reduced to rubble in Friday's quake, which killed at least 50 people. "Three villages have been totally razed to the ground around Nahrin," Afghan official Homayoun, who like many Afghans uses only one name, said by satellite phone from the region. "Reports we have indicate that people may have been trapped beneath collapsed buildings and also there are small villages about which we have not heard at all," he said. "So the prime task of agencies today is focusing on assessing the damage, the needs of the people

and seeing if they can find any survivors," he added. He said the worst hit areas were Dawabi, Panj Sheryan and Khoja Hijran near Nahrin, a district centre in Baghlan province. Dawabi is some 30 km southeast of Nahrin and aid officials said there were more than 50 villages within 25 km of the epicenter. Many buildings in the area were destroyed in the earlier quake and people were already living in tents. Homayoun said aftershocks from the tremor, which Pakistani seismologists said were felt as far away as Kabul 160 km to the south and Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, rocked the area for many hours after the quake. The seismologists said Friday's quake was about the same intensity as the tremors late last month that caused extensive damage because they were fairly shallow. They, too, were followed by waves of aftershocks which hampered rescue work in an area littered with landmines laid during years of war.

Nepal assesses losses after Maoist attack

Schoolboy killed in Nepali village

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government was under pressure Saturday to start talks with the Maoists after the rebels launched one of their deadliest attacks in the six-year insurgency. Thousands of the ultra-leftist guerrillas early Friday overran three police posts in the southwestern jungle district of Dang, killing 84 policemen in the most devastating attack by the rebels in two months. Another 41 policemen were injured in the raids, 13 of whom were still in serious condition Saturday, said state home minister Devendra Raj Kandel. Five policemen were unaccounted for. The Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist, the main opposition in parliament, said the government should resume talks with the Maoists immediately without preconditions. "After so many killings, with the economy shattered completely, the

government should start a dialogue immediately with the Maoists, even if they do not lay down their arms," Siddhi Lal Singh, a member of the party's central committee, told reporters. But Information Minister Jaya Prakash Gupta ruled out any renewed dialogue with the rebels. "There is no question of dialogue with the Maoists unless they hand over arms they have looted and follow the path of peace," Gupta said. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba launched talks with the Maoists after taking office in July. But negotiations stumbled over Maoist demands that the monarchy be scrapped and the rebels broke the truce in November, prompting the government for the first time to deploy the army against them. Since then some 1,200 people have been killed, on top of 1,800 who had already died since the rebels unleashed their "people's

war" in 1996. One of the police posts toppled in the assault Friday had been set up around the provincial residence of Home Minister Khum Bahadur Khadka, who was immediately dispatched to the area to assess the damage and report back to parliament. Meanwhile, a teenage boy was killed and three others injured Saturday by a bomb, planted in a Nepal village by suspected Maoist rebels, a senior home ministry official said. The bomb exploded as four schoolboys were returning after picking up government identification cards from the district office in Khadpo, some 390 km northwest of Kathmandu. The official said the boys noticed the Maoists' red hammer-and-sickle flag flying near the area of the blast.

Chavez's ouster draws world criticism

Interim president installed

AP, Caracas

Many Venezuelans accepted Pedro Carmona's installment as interim president as a done deal, but backers of ousted leader Hugo Chavez insisted he was still president, and several Latin American leaders called Venezuela's new government illegitimate. After he was sworn in late Friday, Carmona pledged new presidential elections within a year and moved quickly to sweep away what Chavez had done in his three tumultuous years in office. Carmona dissolved the Chavez-controlled Congress, Supreme Court, attorney general's and comptroller's offices, and

declared a 1999 Constitution sponsored by Chavez null and void. "We can achieve the governability required to improve Venezuela's image," said Carmona, a longtime business leader. "The strongman era has ended." But Carmona's decrees -- and even his installment -- drew immediate criticism. "This is an illegitimate measure by an illegitimate government," said legislator Tania D'Amelio, a member of Chavez's party. She said others from her party planned to go to Congress on Monday to hold session, despite Carmona's proclamations. Mexican President Vicente Fox

said his country would not recognize Venezuela's new government until new elections are held, and the leaders of Argentina and Paraguay called the new government illegitimate. Leader of the 19-nation Rio Group of Latin American countries condemned "the interruption of constitutional order" in Venezuela. There was no immediate response from Carmona or the military high command, which forced Chavez to resign overnight after a 150,000-strong opposition demonstration demanding the president's ouster Thursday ended in bloodshed.



Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf waves to the crowd while wearing traditional dress and turban of South western Balochistan province during a referendum campaign in the provincial capital city Quetta on Friday. 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.

Blaze destroys fencing along India-Pak border

AFP, Jodhpur

A jungle fire in Pakistan spread to the border areas of the western Indian state of Rajasthan, destroying fencing and vegetation, an official said Saturday. A senior officer of the Border Security Force said the fire was started "deliberately" by Pakistani Rangers at around 4:00 pm (10:30 GMT) Friday in a wooded area on "their side, which spread to our side and destroyed the fencing". Fire engines took around three hours to control the fire which burnt down around two-three km of fence

along the Kailash border of Ganganagar district, 350 km from Jodhpur. There were no casualties. Last month, Indian officials accused the Pakistani side of flooding the same area with hundreds of litres (gallons) of water from a canal, to prevent Indian tank movement. "They keep doing these provocative things," the officer said. India and Pakistan have massed hundreds of thousands of troops along their borders since Islamic militants attacked the Indian parliament on December 13.

UK slaps arms ban on Israel

AFP, London

Britain has imposed a de facto arms embargo on Israel for the first time in 20 years, a British daily said Saturday, quoting official sources. The ban covers military equipment that could be used in Israel's continuing operation in the Palestinian territories, The Guardian said. The sources insist Britain has not imposed a formal or complete ban and government officials are not willing to say which sales have been blocked, the paper added. The Guardian said their sources had confirmed that equipment that

would have been cleared before Israel's offensive against the Palestinians is now being blocked. A government official, according to the paper, pointed to British guidelines that arms exports would be blocked if they were for "internal repression" or affected "adversely regional stability in any significant way." The government guidelines also stipulate that arms must not be exported if there was any clear risk "that the intended recipient would use the proposed export aggressively against another country, or to assert by force any territorial claim."

Although Britain is not a major contributor to Israel's armed forces, the government last year approved 12.5 million pounds (20 million euros, 18 million dollars) of military exports to Israel, The Guardian said. According to the paper, this included: demolition charges, general purpose machine guns, small arms ammunition, components for small calibre artillery ammunition, and components for air-to-surface missiles, armoured fighting vehicles, armoured personnel carriers, combat aircraft, helicopters, and tanks.

Main Tamil parties to back Tigers in peace talks

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's mainstream Tamil political parties have agreed to support the Tamil Tiger rebel group ahead of its peace talks with the government to end an 18-year-old separatist war, news reports and sources said. Although the Tamil parties had never opposed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in the past, its open support now is expected to strengthen the hands of the rebels by presenting the minority Tamil

population of Sri Lanka as a united people before the peace talks next month. Fourteen parliament members of the moderate four-party Tamil National Alliance met Friday with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and his close aides in the northern town of Kilinochchi and agreed to work under Prabhakaran, a Tamil web site reported. The TamilEelam News Service, which gives the Tamil perspective of the civil war, quoted the alliance members as saying that they con-

sider the LTTE to be the "sole representative of the Tamil people." The meeting and its outcome were independently verified by The Associated Press from rebel sources in the north. The sources spoke on condition of anonymity. The alliance's four parties have 15 members in the 225-seat parliament who support Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government. That support is expected to continue despite the latest development.

Vajpayee embraces Hidutva following polls debacle

AFP, Panaji

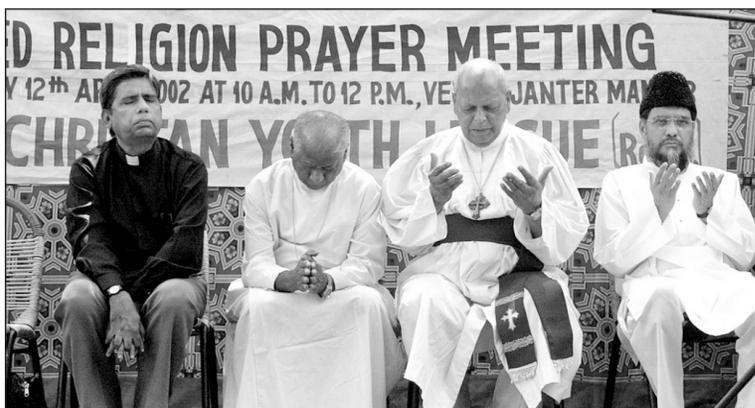
An outburst by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee against Islamic extremism marks a throwback to the headline jargon of his Hindu-nationalist BJP party, belying the premier's image as a moderate among hardliners. After suffering setbacks in four key state elections earlier this year and a virtual rout in New Delhi civic elections, the BJP appears to be going back to its old formula: Hindu revivalism. In remarks to a party conclave here in the western beach state of Goa that shocked the media and much of the public, Vajpayee con-

demned what he suggested was a Muslim disposition toward intolerance. "Hindus stay in millions but never hurt others' religious feelings. But where ever Muslims are they do not want to stay peacefully," Vajpayee said late Friday. "It is happening in Indonesia, Malaysia, everywhere. They (Muslims) stay by threatening and frightening others." But while warning about Islamic militancy around the world, Vajpayee said his party was committed to India's secular traditions. "We have always been secular. We don't believe in religious violence or religious fundamentalism,"

Vajpayee said. The remarks mark a sharp departure in tone for Vajpayee, who earlier this month said he was ashamed as he met Muslims who have been made refugees from communal clashes in the western state of Gujarat. He then urged the government of Gujarat, the largest state still run by the BJP, to treat its citizens without discrimination. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, accused by opposition parties and even some BJP partners of turning a blind eye to the mass killings of Muslims, Friday offered his resignation, but it was rejected by the BJP executive council.



A policeman surveys the scene at the Distillix plant in East Percy Street in the town of North Shields, northern England on Friday after a huge blaze erupted. No reports have yet been received about any injuries.



Hindu, Christian and Muslim clerics pray together for peace during a United Religion Prayer Meeting in New Delhi on Friday. Participants prayed for a stop to communal violence in India where more than 800 people have been killed since an attacks allegedly by Muslims on a train carrying Hindu activists in Gujarat state a month ago.