

# Halt Israeli assault on Palestinian cities

## Security Council under fresh Arab pressure

AP, United Nations

The Security Council came under renewed Arab pressure to get Israel to end its assault on Palestinian cities, and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan proposed sending an international force to monitor an Israeli withdrawal.

For the third time in less than a month, the Arab bloc demanded that the 15-member council adopt a resolution ordering Israel to pull back from areas it has occupied since late March in what it calls an offensive against terrorism.

The council approved the first two resolutions but the United States says it will veto the third if the Arabs go ahead with their demand for a vote on Friday. US officials say there should be more action by the parties in the region rather than words in New York.

The resolution now being

debated demands an immediate Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian cities, an end to the siege of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and a UN investigation into the deaths and destruction in the Jenin refugee camp. It also demands immediate implementation of the earlier resolutions and calls for "an international presence" on the ground.

In an attempt to get wider support, Britain circulated an alternative resolution that calls for implementation of previous resolutions, demands humanitarian access to Palestinian civilians, and asks Anna to establish an independent commission to investigate events in the Jenin refugee camp. But diplomats said the United States appears to be sticking to its opposition to any new resolution.

At an open Security Council

meeting Thursday afternoon, nearly all 30 nations whose envoys spoke - except Israel -- demanded an immediate Israeli withdrawal and expressed grave concern about the plight of Palestinian civilians, especially in Jenin.

The meeting will continue Friday, and a vote is expected afterward.

Nasser Al-Kidwa, the Palestinian UN observer, accused Israel of the "wide-ranging massacre" of women and children in Jenin. "The war crimes committed by Israel are part of a premeditated plan not only to destroy the Palestinian Authority but ... the present and future of the Palestinian people," he said.

Israel's deputy ambassador Aaron Jacob countered that what happened in Jenin was "an intense gunbattle" between Israeli soldiers and armed Palestinians, adding "the real massacres here are committed by the suicide bombers." He said the

question that needs to be answered is how civilian areas "became centers of terrorist activity."

At Thursday's open meeting, Al-Kidwa and many other speakers also supported Annan's call for deployment of a multinational force to halt the escalating Israeli-Palestinian violence. But Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon immediately rejected the ideas, saying "Israel cannot accept international forces here."

US Ambassador John Negroponte said he wouldn't comment on an international force because the Bush administration is reviewing Mideast policy following Secretary of State Colin Powell's trip to the region. But he reiterated the US position that "any arrangement of this kind would have to be with the mutual consent of the parties most affected."

## Milan plane crash on skyscraper

# Pilot wanted to commit suicide

AFP, Rome

The pilot of the plane that crashed into Milan's tallest building killing himself and two others was a failed businessman who wanted to end his life, his son said in comments in Friday's daily La Repubblica.

The paper quoted Luigi Fasulo's son Marco and a friend, identified only as Franco, who both insisted the incident Thursday that immediately raised the spectre of a new September 11-type attack was a suicide.

"What do you mean an accident? It was a suicide, a suicide, I'm telling you. There were people who wanted to ruin him, to destroy him financially, so he committed suicide," Marco Fasulo said, without elaborating.

The friend Franco, meanwhile, recounted his last conversation with the pilot on Sunday. "I am ruined, they used up everything I had, it's a group located here, they got more than a million dollars (1.1 million euros) from me," the friend quoted Luigi as saying.



PHOTO: AFP

Smoke continues to billow as a bird flies by the damaged Pirelli skyscraper after a small Piper tourist plane smashed into the 25th floor of the building in downtown Milan on Thursday. At least three people were killed, including the pilot, and some 30 others injured were hospitalised. The pilot, Swiss-Italian Luigi Fasulo, 66, had taken off from the Southern Swiss town of Locarno and was a member of the local flying club, Swiss television said. An Italian aviation official said the plane reported technical problems before hitting the skyscraper.



PHOTO: AFP

Rescue crews work to extricate victims from a derailed Amtrak Auto Train on Thursday in Crescent City, some 97 km north of Orlando, Florida while Tad, a passenger, stands with his wife Marie and their two young children, Hugh and Shannon, after being reunited following the AMTRAK Auto Train derailment on Thursday. The train, which was carrying 468 people including crew, derailed at the Putnam-Volusia County border killing at least six people and injuring several others.

## 6 killed as train derails in US

AFP, Tampa

An Amtrak passenger train derailed in rural Florida late Thursday, killing six people and injuring more than 200, including 12 seriously, local police said.

The tragedy occurred 96 km north of Orlando at about 5:15 pm (2215 GMT), soon after the Washington-bound train with more than 450 passengers pulled out of the Sanford station.

Ambulances and police cars crowded a highway that runs parallel to the track, as rescue teams hurried to help the injured and move passengers trapped inside the overturned cars.

The identities of the dead have been withheld from the media until immediate relatives are notified.

"At this point, we're still in there, digging for anybody in the train cars, and we're getting these people out

as fast as possible," Captain Keith Riddick, a spokesman for the Putnam County Sheriffs Department, told a Tampa radio station.

The injured passengers were taken to local hospitals throughout north-central and central Florida by helicopters and ambulances.

By 10:00 pm (0200 GMT Friday), all passengers and crew had been removed from the wreck and were receiving medical help if needed, according to Amtrak officials.

Many of the survivor were eager to share their experiences with reporters describing scenes of horror they witnessed in the aftermath of the derailment.

"I rolled over, my bags rolled over, people rolled over me, windows all over the train broke, and everything was just a big mess," Terry Weishaus, a passenger on the train, told a St. Petersburg TV station.

## Colombo-LTTE talks to be held in mid-June

AP, Colombo

The government confirmed on Friday that preliminary talks with Tamil Tiger rebels, originally scheduled for May, will be held in mid-June in Thailand.

The rebels of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil-eelam told a Norwegian delegation in the north-ern jungles on Thursday that the first direct talks in seven years must be delayed.

"The Norwegians have told us that the LTT wants the talks to be held in the middle of June and we have said it is fine with us," said a government official, speaking on the customary condition of anonymity.

"In a complex process like this, nothing can be chiseled in stone. So the talks in May always ran the risk of getting delayed," said the official, who has access to government ministers involved in the peace process.

## India accuses Pakistan of abducting embassy staffer

AFP, New Delhi

India Friday accused Pakistan's intelligence service of having a hand in the abduction of one of its embassy employees in Islamabad.

"We have just received news that one of our High Commission officials was forcefully abducted by a group of Pakistanis this morning just as he was boarding the bus to take him to work," Indian foreign ministry spokesperson Nirupama Rao said.

"This happened in broad daylight. We have of course strongly

protested this abominable incident," she said.

The Indian official was identified by Rao only as "Mr. Khanna". Rao said it was "quite likely" that the ISI was behind the abduction.

India and Pakistan have scaled down the number of officials in their respective embassies in Islamabad and New Delhi following a freeze in diplomatic ties in December.

Both countries regularly trade accusations of mistreating the other's diplomatic staff.

## US de-mining team to start work in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

US-sponsored de-mining will begin in Sri Lanka's embattled northern Jaffna peninsula from Saturday as a sign of Washington's strong backing for the island's peace efforts, the US embassy said.

A 26-member team of de-miners will arrive in the island and head for the Jaffna peninsula to begin a four-month clearing operation, the embassy said in a statement

Friday. US ambassador to Sri Lanka Ashley E. Wills said he hoped the team would be able to secure large areas of land for safe civilian use and help residents of Jaffna return to their normal life.

"This humanitarian de-mining team is a tangible expression of the United States' strong support for the current peace effort underway in Sri Lanka," Wills said.

## Heat triggers explosions in minefields near Pak border

AFP, Jodhpur

The Indian army on Friday evacuated villagers living near densely mined fields near the Pakistan border as rising summer temperatures set off a series of explosions.

Colonel R. Rawal said the army had evacuated some villagers from the border districts of Barmer, Jaisalmer and Bikaner in the desert state of Rajasthan as daytime temperatures climbed to 42 degrees Celsius (108 degrees Fahrenheit).

"We have evacuated people living near densely mined areas as the rising heat has set off accidental landmine explosions," said Rawal.

"Some of the landmines get activated because they are not buried very deep in the sand and desert surfaces tend to trap a lot of heat, igniting the fuse of faulty, poor-quality landmines."

Lakshman Meena, the deputy inspector general of the Rajasthan Police, said five landmine explosions rocked Barmer district, killing over two dozen cattle.

## 'I'm not Pinochet Light'

AP, Caracas

The man who dissolved Venezuela's Congress and other democratic institutions during his one-day rule insisted he's not a "Pinochet Light" and acted only to fill a vacuum of power created by Hugo Chavez's temporary ouster.

Pedro Carmona dismissed comparisons to Augusto Pinochet's 1973 CIA-backed coup in Chile. But he admitted he made several errors, including not receiving a confirmed resignation letter from Chavez before he swore himself in as presi-

dent on Saturday.

"I should have had the signed resignation letter in hand," Carmona said in interviews with E1 Nacional and E1 Universal newspapers published Thursday. Chavez insists he never resigned, as several rebellious military officers had claimed.

The 60-year-old Carmona heads Fedecamaras, Venezuela's biggest business chamber. He had previously said he had no interest in political office.

Carmona and Venezuela's largest labor confederation called a general strike against Chavez on

April 9. Two days later, gunfire erupted at a massive opposition march, killing 16. The military ousted Chavez, installed Carmona as head of a transitional junta, then reinstated Chavez on Sunday after a popular rebellion.

Carmona said he agreed to become de facto leader only after repeated calls from military commanders, whom he refused to identify. "After reflection, I made the decision because the worst that could happen would be a vacuum of power," he said.

## US actor Robert Blake held for wife's murder

AFP, Los Angeles

US actor Robert Blake was Thursday arrested for the shooting murder of his wife last year, amid a media frenzy reminiscent of the arrest of former football star O.J. Simpson.

The actor was taken into custody in handcuffs from his daughter's home in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley area and taken to police headquarters under a flotilla of media helicopters broadcasting live pictures across the nation.

Police allege that Blake shot his colourful wife of six months, Bonny Lee Bakley, 44, at close range as she sat in their car parked near a Los Angeles restaurant where they had just had dinner on May 4 last year.

"We believe we have an excellent case. Robert Blake shot Bonny Bakley. It was the weapon ... that was recovered from the dumpster just a few days after the murder," police Captain Jim Tatreau told a late night news conference.

"We believe that Robert Blake had contempt for Bonny Bakley. He felt that he was trapped in a marriage he wanted no part of and, quite frankly, the entire situation was not to his liking at all," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

This May 25, 2001 file photo shows US actor Robert Blake (R) hugging his 11-month-old daughter Rose Lenore Sophie Blake during a brief funeral ceremony in Los Angeles for his slain wife Bonny Lee Bakley. Blake was arrested on Thursday in the killing of his wife, who was shot dead on May 4, 2001 near a restaurant in Studio City, California, where she and Blake had dined.

## Musharraf cuts campaign amid row over spending

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani General Pervez Musharraf has axed rallies ahead of a referendum on extending his presidency, officials said Friday amid accusations that public resources were being abused in the campaign.

Musharraf will now address rallies in only three main cities in the remaining days before the April 30 vote, dispensing with seven planned meetings in major cities, a government spokesman said.

"By reducing the number of meetings the president wants to prevent inconvenience to supporters who may have to travel long distances particularly as the weather is becoming hotter," the spokesman told AFP. He will now address rallies at the northwestern city

of Peshawar, central Rawalpindi and the southern port of Karachi.

Musharraf has addressed several mammoth rallies since announcing the campaign on April 9, the spokesman said, adding that it showed the huge support for the military leader's bid to secure an extra five years as president.

But the decision to reduce the events follows criticism in the press and from opposition parties that administrative machinery and local government resources were being exploited to bus in crowds to see Musharraf.

There have been widespread complaints about buses and vans being commandeered, leaving thousands stranded.