

EU urges immediate access of NGOs to Palestinians

Israel hijacked campaign against terrorism: Patten

AFP, Madrid

The European Union on Saturday called on Israel to grant non-governmental organisations immediate medical and humanitarian organisations should be able to see Palestinians, in line with a UN Security Council resolution adopted unanimously overnight Friday to send a fact-finding mission there.

The council expressed concern at "the dire humanitarian situation of the Palestinian civilian population" and in particular at reports from the Jenin refugee camp of an unknown number of deaths and destruction.

Resolution 1405 emphasised "the urgency of access of medical and humanitarian organisations to the Palestinian civilian population".

The EU also noted that the resolution welcomed the initiative of Secretary General Kofi Annan "to develop accurate information regarding recent events in the Jenin refugee camp through a fact-finding team and requests him to keep the Security Council informed".

It asked all parties to the conflict to find a solution to the siege by the Israeli army of the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem where according to a Palestinian negotiator more than 200 people are holed up.

Israeli authorities insist that armed Palestinians in the church, believed

by Christians to have been built over the site where Jesus Christ was born, surrender.

The Israeli army, which has encircled the church since April 2, has claimed there are "more than 30 true terrorists" inside the building along with Palestinian civilians and about 30 monks.

Meanwhile, Israel has hijacked the campaign against terrorism with its devastating military offensive into the West Bank, EU external affairs commissioner Chris Patten said Sunday.

Widespread anger at the Israeli action makes it much more difficult for the international community now to deal with Iraq's Saddam Hussein, who is accused of accumulating weapons of mass destruction, he told BBC television.

Patten condemned deadly Palestinian suicide bombings, but said that Israel's response would not give it peace and security in the long run.

"One of the real tragedies of all this, is that the Israeli government have hijacked the campaign against terrorism, and have given some people the excuse for disengaging from that campaign," Patten said.

"We want a settlement, we want it very rapidly," he added.

"It's going to be much more difficult to deal with Saddam Hussein while that crisis continues."

'India most vulnerable to external risks in Asia'

AFP, Singapore

India is perceived as the most vulnerable country in Asia in terms of external threats, while Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, China and Vietnam are the least exposed, a regional survey showed.

Hong Kong, benefiting from its association with a stable mainland China, got a better score than regional rival Singapore, which is near Indonesia -- one of Asia's most volatile countries, the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC) said.

The US-backed fight against Islamic extremists in the southern Philippines bears watching because its success or failure could shape Washington's role in Asia in the medium term, PERC said in its

latest Asian Intelligence survey and analysis.

The Hong Kong-based PERC surveyed more than 1,000 foreign businessmen in 13 Asian countries asking them how they perceived external threats to affect the business environment in their places of operations.

"The most notable feature of the overall scores was that India was the only country where such risks were perceived to be very high," it said.

"It was vulnerable to fallout from social instability in other countries (Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan) and its diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries (notably Pakistan) were very strained at the time of the survey."

8 more killed in fresh violence in Gujarat

AFP, Ahmedabad

Eight people, including a policeman, were killed and 15 others injured Sunday in fresh violence in Gujarat even as India's Defence Minister George Fernandes was touring the riot-torn state.

A policeman was hacked to death by a mob in the Gomtipur area of Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad and violence soon spread to the Bapunagar and Rakhiyal localities, police and witnesses said.

Another person died after being shot by police in Bapunagar. Six more people died in the three areas of Ahmedabad, although the circumstances were not immediately clear, police said.

Witnesses said policemen refused to go to Gomtipur as they were "scared". Instead the army and the Rapid Action Force, India's riot police, reached the parts of the area where Hindu and Muslim mobs were engaged in street fights.

A curfew has been imposed in Gomtipur.

Fernandes arrived in Gujarat on Saturday and visited relief camps, where some 97,000 people are languishing after losing homes and businesses in India's worst Hindu-Muslim riots in a decade.

The defence minister Sunday met with Gujarat industrialists.

Blasts kill 13 in Philippines

AP, Manila

A bomb exploded in front of a busy department store in the southern city of General Santos on Sunday, killing at least 13 people, officials said.

Two other bombs went off in quick succession near the Radio Mindanao Network office and a bus terminal in this Philippine city. At least 46 people were injured in the series of blasts.

Police said they received an anonymous call claiming 18 bombs had been planted around the largely Christian city of 800,000 people in the predominantly Muslim south.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. But in the past, police have suspected the Abu Sayyaf, a Muslim rebel group believed to have ties to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, and the fundamentalist

Moro Islamic Liberation Front of setting off bombs here.

General Santos is about 130 miles from Basilan island, where the Abu Sayyaf has been holding an American missionary couple and a Filipino nurse hostage for nearly 11 months. About 160 U.S. Special Forces troops are on the island to train Filipino troops assigned to crush the rebel group.

City councilor Eduardo Leyson III said a bomb exploded in a pedal-powered cab parked in a line about 10 yards in front of the Gensan Fitmart department store in the city's Christian district. Reports of another nearly simultaneous blast appeared to be incorrect.

The blast shattered the store's glass panels. Blood was spattered around the parking area. Most of the casualties appeared to be pedicab drivers, shoppers and bystanders.

Muslims slam Kashmir CM for support to BJP

AFP, Srinagar

Muslims in Indian-administered Kashmir Sunday criticised the state's chief minister Farooq Abdullah for his continuing support to the BJP-led federal government, which they see as "anti-Muslim".

"As a Muslim he should have distanced himself from the Hindu radical groups governing India presently," said Imtiaz Khan, a 28-year-old bank employee.

Abdullah's ruling National Conference (NC) party is part of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's coalition and his son Omar Abdullah is India's junior foreign minister.

Khan believes Abdullah should have condemned the BJP for the communal violence in western state of Gujarat which has killed 850 people, mostly Muslims.

"Like other secular Indian leaders Abdullah should have demanded the resignation of Gujarat chief minister," said Reyaz Dar, a student.

Opposition parties, led by Congress, are demanding the dismissal of Gujarat Chief Minister Narinder Modi, who also belongs to the BJP party, because they say he did not do enough to prevent the violence.

Palestinians can have "a friend" in US: Powell

AFP, Washington

The Palestinians can have "a friend in the United States" including assistance in rebuilding their economy and society if they relinquish violence, Secretary of State Colin Powell said yesterday.

"Israel is strong, and Israel has a strong friend in the United States. But the Palestinians can have a friend in the United States as well," Powell said on Fox News Sunday.

"We want them to achieve what they want -- a state. President Bush is the first president who went before the United States and spoke its name -- Palestine," Powell said.

Koizumi makes surprise visit to war shrine

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made a surprise visit to a controversial war shrine Sunday by bringing forward the pilgrimage in a bid to avoid possible diplomatic strains with China and South Korea.

"Visiting the Yasukuni Shrine was to express my respect and gratitude for those who had sacrificed their lives for the country," Koizumi told reporters after the visit.

The Tokyo shrine, a symbol of Japan's wartime imperialism, honours 2.5 million war dead including 14 designated as Class A criminals by the Allies in the trials that followed World War II.

Koizumi argued Sunday's visit was aimed to avoid upsetting Japan's neighbouring countries.



PHOTO: AFP
US singer Michael Jackson performs during the taping of the "American Bandstand 50th...A Celebration" show on Saturday in Pasadena, California. The show will be aired on May 3.



PHOTO: AP

Demonstrators gathered near the White House in Washington on Saturday to peacefully protest everything from US policy in the Middle East to globalisation and corporate greed.

Thousands protest US admin's pro-Israeli bent in ME conflict

AFP, Washington

In the largest pro-Palestinian demonstration ever in the United States, tens of thousands of protesters gathered here Saturday to condemn what they saw as the US administration's pro-Israeli bent in the Middle East conflict.

Waving signs equating Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon with Nazi leader Adolf Hitler and wearing the traditional Arab headdress, or keffiyah, crowds massed on the Ellipse in front of the White House to voice their disapproval of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and US Middle East policy.

Police estimated that around

50,000 people took part in the peaceful protest although organisers, a coalition pro-Palestinian pressure groups, put the figure at 100,000.

Saturday's pro-Palestinian demonstration was billed as an answer to a mass protest by a reported 100,000 supporters of Israel Monday at the US Capitol, where speakers linked the Israeli offensive against the Palestinians to the US-led war on terror.

The pro-Palestinian protesters came from across the United States, including chapters of Muslim American Societies from New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Virginia and Michigan, the Muslim

Public Affairs Council, the Islamic American Institute and the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

While Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz spoke at Monday's pro-Israel rally, there was no representative of George W. Bush's administration at Saturday's pro-Palestinian protest.

Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, a Democrat from Georgia, was due to address the crowd at the Capitol and the protesters heard a tape message of jailed former Black Panther member Mumia Abu-Jamal in support of the Palestinian cause.

Low turnout marks first round of French presidential polls

AFP, Paris

Turnout in the first round of France's presidential election yesterday was heading for a record low after lacklustre campaigns by frontrunners President Jacques Chirac and rival Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin failed to inspire voters.

The low turnout and opinion polls showing strong support for fringe candidates were seen a slap in the face for the two men, who have ruled France together in a prickly "cohabitation" government since 1997.

By midday (1000 GMT), 21.41 percent of the 40 million registered voters had cast their ballots, down from the 22.52 percent recorded in the 1995 poll. Paris had the lowest turnout to midday since similar elections in 1965.

Opinion polls taken last week showed that up to one in three voters might abstain.

Chirac and Jospin have run France together since the left's 1997 election victory drove the president's

rightwing supporters from power and left him the lame-duck head of state ruling alongside a Socialist-led administration.

In a repeat of their 1995 duel, they have presented broadly similar programmes promising anti-crime measures, tax cuts and a strong role for France in Europe and the world.

The last polls published before polling day predicted Chirac would win about 20 percent of the first round vote, slightly ahead of Jospin.

The next best placed candidate is veteran extreme-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen who is on course for around 13 or 14 percent of the vote, confirming that even at 73 and after four previous bids he is still an electoral force.

Behind him come Laguiller, 62, left-wing nationalist Jean-Pierre Chevenement, 63, Communist Robert Hue, 55, and Green Noel Mamere, 53. All can expect around six percent of the vote, according to the last polls.

'China opposes US military presence in C Asia, ME'

AFP, Tehran

Chinese President Jiang Zemin, winding up a visit to Iran, has said his country opposes the US military presence in Central Asia and the Middle East, Iranian state radio reported Sunday.

"Beijing's policy is against strategies of force and the US military presence in Central Asia and the Middle East region," Jiang said after talks here late Saturday with former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Turning to the Middle East, he accused Israel of "not having implemented UN resolutions" calling for its withdrawal from Palestinian territories and criticised "US support for Israel's policies," Tehran Radio

reported.

"One of the primary issues for China is to protect developing countries from the pretensions of the United States," he said, while calling for "a lasting peace in Afghanistan which has been torn by war."

Jiang, who arrived Thursday on the second visit by a Chinese head of state to Iran since its 1979 Islamic revolution, hoped the mission would "open a new chapter in bilateral relations to the benefit of regional and international peace and stability." The Chinese leader also met President Mohammad Khatami on Saturday and was to wind up his visit on Sunday after a visit to the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, the late founder of the Islamic

republic of Iran.

Jiang and Khatami discussed the situation in the Middle East and weapons of mass destruction, the Iranian president's office said in a statement.

"Iran wants a world without weapons of mass destruction, and while respecting agreements on production and proliferation bans, we reserve ourselves the right to have defence means at our disposal," Khatami said, quoted in the statement.

The United States has repeatedly accused Tehran of seeking to acquire the technology to produce weapons of mass destruction, including from countries such as China.

US military experts tour Maoist areas of Nepal Troops kill 8 Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

US military experts Sunday toured parts of Nepal wracked by a Maoist insurgency to advise the government on ways to put down the rebellion, officials said.

At least a dozen experts led by a US colonel are visiting the far western district of Rolpa, where the Maoists launched their "people's war" in 1996, according to sources in Nepal's government and the US embassy.

There was no official announcement of the visit, which marks the first time foreign military experts have toured Maoist-dominated regions since the insurgency broke out.

Meanwhile, at least eight Maoist rebels were shot dead by security forces in eastern Nepal as they tried to plant a bomb, police said Sunday.

The rebels were killed late Saturday as they planted explosives to blow up a bridge over the Sindhu river in Sindhupalchowk district, police said.

The Maoists, who have been fighting to overthrow Nepal's constitutional monarchy since 1996, have launched numerous strikes against the kingdom's infrastructure, including bridges, roads and power plants.

The rebels plan a five-day nationwide strike from Tuesday to pressure the government to resume negotiations.

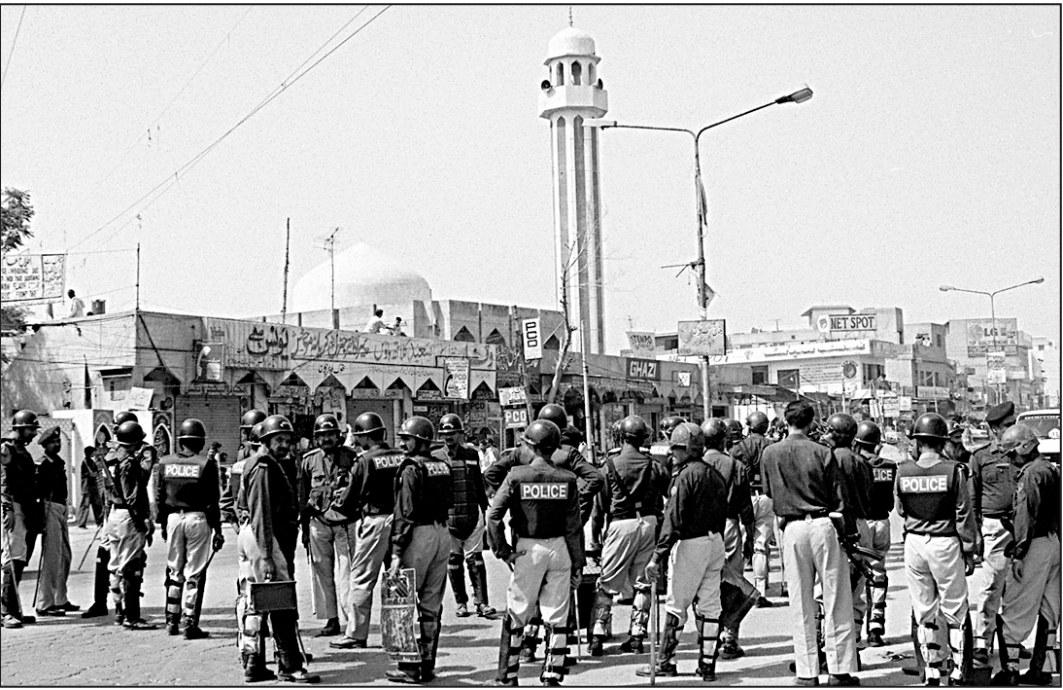


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani police block the road where an outlawed march by members of Pakistan's fundamentalist party Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) was to take place in Lahore on Sunday against General Pervez Musharraf's referendum on extending his presidency. The leader of JI Qazi Hussain Ahmed was arrested by police when he left his party's headquarters to lead a march by hundreds of JI supporters.

Rally against referendum: Pak JI leader detained

AFP, Lahore

The leader of Pakistan's main fundamentalist party was arrested Sunday during an outlawed march against General Pervez Musharraf's referendum on extending his presidency, party spokesmen and witnesses said.

Police placed Qazi Hussain Ahmad under one day's house arrest as he left his Jamaat-i-Islami party's headquarters in the eastern city of Lahore to lead a procession of hundreds of supporters, they said.

Ahmad, whose party is considered the most organised Islamic faction in the country, was able to deliver a short speech to the 500-strong crowd before being taken away.

"Our arrest is a defeat for Musharraf," he said.

"I appeal to you to please disperse peacefully because we are not in confrontation with the police, our struggle is against those who have usurped power."

Police earlier seized Jamaat's vice president Liaquat Baluch in an overnight raid on his Lahore home.

Ahmad and several other Islamist party leaders were arrested last December for staging a campaign against Pakistan's support for the US-led military operation in Afghanistan. They were released last month.

A Jamaat leader said the latest arrests were intended to halt a planned 275-kilometre (171-mile) march from Lahore to central Rawalpindi to protest against the April 30 referendum on Musharraf's presidency.

Police later denied Jamaat allegations that they had used tear-gas to break up a crowd of protesters who tried to make the journey.

Musharraf's government has banned political rallies but is permitting opposition groups to stage one mass protest in Lahore just three days ahead of the referendum.