

# Bethlehem church siege ends

## US denies deal to sideline Arafat

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's siege of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity was ending Friday, as the 123 Palestinians who had been holed up inside for 38 days exited the Christian holy site one by one after a deal was reached to evacuate them.

By 10:15 am (0715 GMT), the Palestinians had all quit the church, which is built over the site believed by Christians to be the birthplace of Jesus.

However, 12 peace activists who had slipped into the church last week to serve as human shields were refusing to leave, the Israeli army said.

The first Palestinians to leave the church were 13 militants on Israel's most-wanted list and described as "terrorists" who are to be sent into exile.

They were taken to Ben Gurion airport and put on a British military plane bound for the nearby Mediterranean island of Cyprus, from where they will eventually be sent to various European countries.

Last-minute snags over where they would go had delayed the end to the standoff, but Cyprus announced late Thursday it would host them until that could be sorted out.

At 7:00 am (0400 GMT), the men started to come out through the church's low doorway, passing through Israeli security controls and boarding an awaiting bus.

They were followed by 26 more Palestinian militants, considered less dangerous by Israel, who were to be sent to the Gaza Strip.

Once the two groups boarded separate buses, they were taken to the Jewish settlement of Gush Etzion, near Bethlehem, for identity checks.

The men slated for exile pulled up at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport three hours later.

They then boarded a Royal Air Force Hercules that had flown in earlier from an RAF base in Cyprus. It took off for Cyprus' Larnaca airport at 12:10 pm (0910 GMT) and is expected to land at 1:14 pm.

The 26 others, escorted by Israeli soldiers, reached the Erez border crossing into the Gaza Strip at 11:30 GMT (0830 GMT), an AFP correspondent said.

It had been previously reported that they would be jailed in Gaza, but within minutes of their arrival a Palestinian security official said they would be neither tried nor jailed.

"They have arrived in part of Palestine and they are free in their homeland," Colonel Saleh Dardona told reporters at the Erez crossing point from Israel.

"They will not be held, not even for an hour, nor will they be judged," he said.

According to another Palestinian security official, the 26 would initially be taken to the Palestinian Authority's youth ministry building in central Gaza and remain there for an unspecified time.

The siege was the last battle zone in Israel's six-week invasion of the West Bank that aimed to crush Palestinian militants.

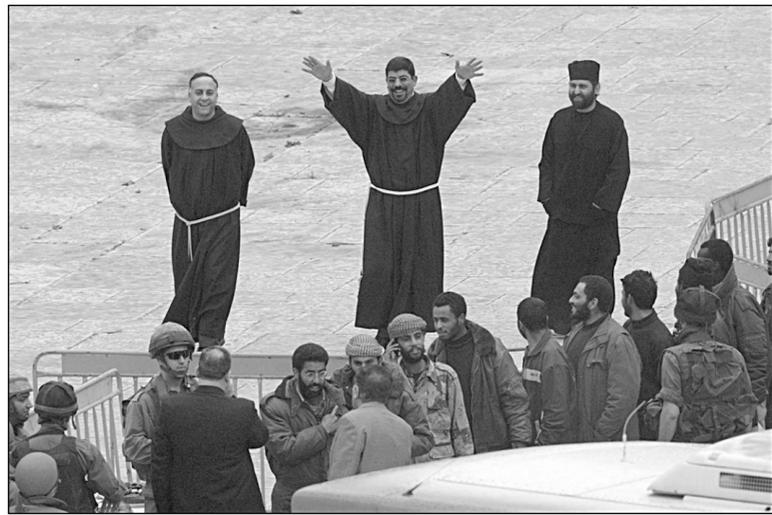
Meanwhile, President George W. Bush denied Thursday that he had agreed with Israel to sideline Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and urged the Jewish state to show caution in its coming reprisal for a suicide bombing.

Talk of such a deal is "not an accurate reflection of what went on in the Oval Office," where he met late Tuesday with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the president told reporters.

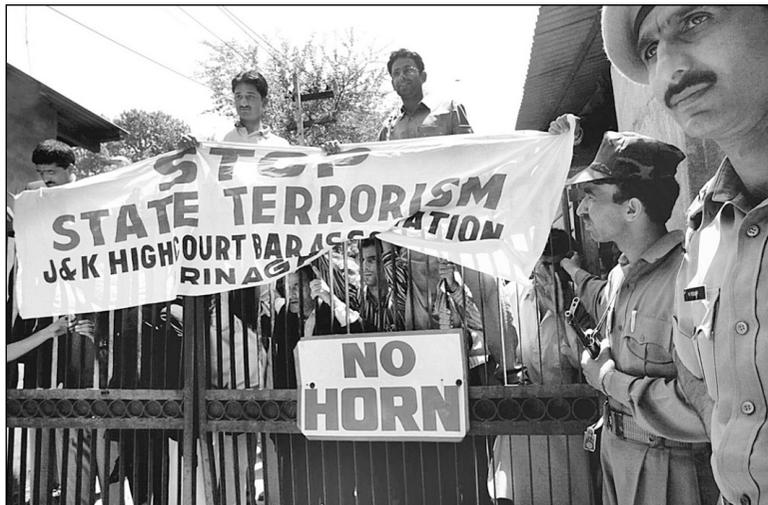
Bush's comments came in response to a question about reports quoting Israeli officials as saying he had agreed to Sharon's push to marginalize Arafat, provided the Palestinian Authority chairman were neither hurt nor exiled.

"What is an accurate reflection of my opinion is that Mr. Arafat has let the Palestinian people down. He hasn't led. And as a result, the Palestinians suffer," the US leader emphasized.

Bush welcomed as "positive" reports that Arafat has arrested over a dozen Hamas members after the radical group claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing near Tel Aviv Tuesday that killed the bomber and 16 other people.



Franciscan Father Ibrahim Faltas (C), one of the negotiators, waves after the last Palestinian man, who emerged from the Church of the Nativity after a 38-day standoff, joined the queue of fellow Palestinians waiting to board an Israeli bus at Manger Square on Friday in the West Bank town of Bethlehem. The 123 Palestinians holed up in the church since April 02 left the building early this morning, Israeli military sources said.



Policemen (R) stand guard as lawyers shout slogans at a court gate in Srinagar on Friday. The lawyers protested against alleged excesses by the security forces in Kashmir and the on-going attacks on Muslims in India's Gujarat state.

## UK to support US attack on Iraq only with UN backing

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has told senior members within his party that Britain would only support US military action against Iraq if it had the backing of the United Nations and after consultation with its European allies, a report said Friday.

Blair made his promise during a private meeting with members of the Labour party's ruling national executive committee (NEC), according to The Independent, which did not give the date of the gathering.

Britain, along with its closest ally the United States, is calling on Baghdad to readmit UN arms inspectors to verify that it no longer has weapons of mass destruction.

However, Washington has also threatened to attack Iraq regardless of what the UN does to convince Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to accept a return of inspections mandated by the Security Council.

"Our policy is to divest Iraq of

weapons of mass destruction, not to divest Iraq of Saddam Hussein," The Independent quoted a senior British source as saying in response to Blair's promise.

In a report of the NEC meeting circulated to Labour grassroots activists, committee member Tony Robinson said colleagues were "to some extent reassured" by the prime minister's words, "particularly his categorical statement that he won't do anything without UN backing or consultation with our European allies".

"My own impression was that he was implying that a large part of the bellicose rhetoric currently flying around is being deployed in order to get Saddam to the negotiating table," added Robinson, quoted by the broadsheet.

Blair last month warned that a time may come when Saddam must be toppled, but stressed that such a decision would be made in a "sensible" and "measured" way.

## India withdraws warrants against Naga rebels to pave way for peace talks

AFP, Guwahati

The government in India's north-eastern state of Nagaland has withdrawn arrest warrants against two exiled separatist leaders to pave the way for peace talks, officials said Friday.

The two leaders of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, were placed on top of the Nagaland government's "most wanted" list after the rebel group ambushed the motorcade of Chief Minister S.C. Jamir in 1999.

Jamir survived the attack.

"We have decided to withdraw

the arrest warrant against Swu and Muivah so that they can visit India for peace talks with the federal government emissaries in India itself," Jamir said.

The NSCN, which is fighting for an independent tribal homeland, entered into a ceasefire with the Indian government in August 1997 and has held several rounds of peace talks in Southeast Asian cities to end a five-decade insurgency.

The last round of talks between the NSCN leadership and the government's chief interlocutor K. Padmanabhaiah was held over the weekend in Chiangmai in northern Thailand.

## Children demand action, not words from world leaders

AP, United Nations

They heard plenty of promises from world leaders who vowed to improve their health, education and rights or simply provide them with food. But children attending the U.N. children's summit demanded one thing: action.

As the three-day meeting approached its end on Friday, children from around the world spoke out about AIDS and other diseases, the 120 million children who don't go to school, and governments that fail to respect children's rights.

"Most leaders just pay lip service to children," Bernice Akuamoah, a 15-year-old from Ghana, said during a rare dialogue between African leaders and African children. "They come and they say all these nice things and we expect them to happen, but that's a whole other matter."

Meanwhile, delegates from more than 180 countries were meeting behind closed doors, wrestling with a final summit document that is to set out new priorities and goals in efforts to improve the lot of children worldwide over the next 15 years.

The most serious divisions were over an effort to include a reference to the plight of Palestinian children and over language on family planning, children's rights, and "reproductive health" that some conservatives interpret as advocating abortion.

During the African discussion, Lipsy Ndwandwe, 17, of Swaziland, said children are united on what they want from their leaders. "We as children of Africa came together and agreed on things, but you leaders that we are supposed to look up to are not able to do that," she said.

Adam Maiga, a 15-year-old girl from Uganda, called for an end to

"demagoguery," bluntly telling the presidents and prime ministers: "You have parliaments, but they are used as democratic decorations."

In the dialogues between children and leaders from Africa and other regions, protocol was not always respected: A teen-age moderator referred to Mauritania's prime minister as "the one from Mauritania," while Australia's minister for children was upgraded to "your majesty."

In a dialogue between Asian leaders and children, it was the turn of the heads of delegations to ask the questions.

The minister of women's affairs and social security of the Maldives, Rashida Yoosuf, asked the children what they considered child labor.

Rattana Lay, a teen-ager from Cambodia, immediately thought of prostitution. "It is the worst kind of child labor," she said.

## Nepal rejects Maoist truce offer

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government on Friday unleashed fresh attacks on a Maoist rebel stronghold in the west of the kingdom after flatly rejecting the guerrillas offer of a one-month ceasefire.

The rebels, battered by an eight-day blitz that officials say has left at least 850 of the ultra-leftists dead, said they would observe a one-month ceasefire from May 15, expressing hope "the country can take a new political turn."

But Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, speaking in New York late Thursday, said he had no faith in promises by the rebels, who in November broke a four-month ceasefire initiated by the premier and resumed their armed campaign with a new ferocity.

"Unless they lay down arms and denounce violence, we can't trust them," Deuba, attending a UN special session on children, told CNN.

"They are killing innocent people. They betrayed, they boycotted the peace talks six months ago," he said.

"They have to apologise," Deuba said. "This (the ceasefire offer) does not mean that they are sincere."

Deuba has gained new confidence from the heavy

losses inflicted on the rebels and said he secured strong support during meetings this week in Washington.

US President George W. Bush's administration has already asked Congress to approve 20 million dollars in military aid to the embattled kingdom.

Deuba, who has strongly backed the US military campaign in Afghanistan, has fashioned his crackdown on the Maoists as part of the global "war on terrorism."

Nepalese army helicopters Friday attacked Maoist positions in the Gaam area of Rolpa, the remote district high in the mountains of far northwestern Nepal where the Maoists in 1996 declared their "people's war" in 1996 to topple the constitutional monarchy.

The army has devastated three guerrilla camps in Rolpa in the past week and is now trying to take over a fourth, which defense ministry sources described as a Maoist "citadel" that has been a key rebel base for six years.

"Taking that citadel would be a crushing blow to the Maoists," a defence official said in Kathmandu.

Officials say close to 1,000 people, most of them Maoists, have died in the offensive, which would constitute nearly one-quarter of the deaths in the six-year insurgency.

## Manohar Joshi elected Lok Sabha speaker

PTI, New Delhi

Shiv Sena leader Manohar Joshi was on Friday elected Speaker of the Lok Sabha by voice vote.

"I declare Manohar Joshi has been chosen Speaker of the House," Deputy Speaker PM Sayeed announced after the voting.

The resolution for 65-year-old Joshi's election was proposed by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and seconded by Home Minister LK Advani.

Eleven similar resolutions were moved by Union Ministers George Fernandes, Sharad Yadav, Murasoli Maran and Omar Abdullah and Shiv Sena member Anant Geete and Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee.

## Hizbul Mujahedin faces worst internal discord

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's top Muslim rebel group is witnessing its worst internal discord since it was launched some 13 years ago to end Indian rule over the Himalayan territory.

The crisis in Hizbul Mujahedin came into the open Saturday when the group's Pakistan-based supreme commander, Syed Salahuddin, sacked three senior commanders: Majid Dar, Asad Yazdani and Zafar Abdul Fateh.

Indiscipline was cited as reason for their ouster from Hizbul, which Indian security officials say is the most active separatist militant group in the Himalayan region with the strength of between 3,000 to 4,000 cadres, mostly local

Kashmiris.

The discord deepened when Fateh refused to accept the decision by Salahuddin -- Kashmir's most wanted man.

Several other leading Hizbul fighters have sided against Salahuddin, including the divisional commander for north Kashmir, Abu Obaid.

Hizbul's Pakistan-based command council sacked Obaid late Thursday along with another senior commander Asgar Ibni Rehman.

"They have been expelled for opposing the expulsion of the former chief commander of operations and two other commanders," Salim Hashmi told reporters over the phone.