

Foreign powers support suicide bombers: Arafat

Palestinian state remains 'only solution' for peace: EU

REUTERS, London

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat said Palestinian militants carrying out suicide attacks in Israel were being supported by international powers.

Asked in an interview with CNN if he would do everything possible to stop the suicide bombers, Arafat said: "No doubt. This is my policy from the beginning. Although, there are some -- I don't want to say their names -- some international powers supporting this."

Arafat refused to answer when asked if the foreign powers were Iraq or Iran -- which the United States accuses of supporting terrorism. Both countries deny the US charges.

Palestinians are waging a 19-

month-old uprising against Israeli military occupation in much of the West Bank and Gaza Strip outside their main towns and refugee camps which had obtained autonomy under an initial peace process frozen since 2000.

At least 1,345 Palestinians and 473 Israelis have been killed in the violence, marked by Palestinian bombings and ambushes and Israeli army incursions into self-rule zones.

Arafat said that after a leader of the militant Islamic group, Hamas, praised the latest suicide bombing near Tel Aviv which killed 15 people, Palestinian security forces arrested 24 Hamas leaders and members.

He said he still did not know who was behind that attack.

Israel has reportedly shelved for

the time being an assault on the Gaza Strip, widely anticipated after the bombing. Israel at the end of March launched an offensive on the West Bank and besieged Arafat in his compound for weeks after an earlier spate of suicide bombings.

In Brussels, the Spanish presidency of the European Union on Monday criticised an overwhelming vote by Israel's Likud party to block the creation of a Palestinian state.

Speaking to reporters in Brussels, Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique said a Palestinian state remained "the only solution" to the Middle East conflict.

The 2,600-member central committee of the right-wing Likud party, led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, voted overwhelmingly late Sunday against the establishment

of a Palestinian state.

"It is a pity," said Pique on his way into a meeting of EU foreign ministers, "because all of us know that the only solution to this conflict is to create a Palestinian state that is viable from the economic and territorial point of view."

The 15 EU foreign ministers were on Monday to consider the fate of 13 Palestinian militants released last Friday from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem after a 39-day Israeli army siege.

The 13 spent the weekend in a beachfront hotel in Cyprus, where government officials expect them to be transferred by the middle of this week to countries which have agreed to take them in, including several EU states.

Chirac declares war on terrorists in tribute to bomb victims

AFP, Cherbourg, France

President Jacques Chirac declared yesterday there could be no sanctuary for terrorists as he paid tribute to the 11 French naval workers killed in a suicide blast in Pakistan.

"This crime is monstrous. Those responsible will be punished. There can be no sanctuary for the terrorists. It is a war that we have embarked on and we will pursue, without respite, in France and overseas," the president told some 10,000 mourners at a ceremony in the northern port town of Cherbourg.

The 11 Frenchmen, eight of whom lived in the Cherbourg area, were naval engineers working in Karachi on a joint submarine project under a 1994 defence deal between Paris and Islamabad.

Three Pakistanis were also killed and 12 other French naval workers injured in the incident last Wednesday when a suicide bomber drove a car packed with explosives into a minibus outside the Sheraton Hotel in Karachi.

"My determination, like that of the government, is total. We will not give in to either threats or blackmail," Chirac told the sombre crowd.

"This is a fight for democracy and liberty. It is a fight by France, Europe, United States and their allies," Chirac said.

"On our territory and everywhere in the world our intelligence services, our police, our gendarmes are mobilised to protect the security of our compatriots."

Chirac, Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie and other government officials attended the non-denominational memorial service.

In a solemn moment, the president placed posthumous Legion of Honor awards on each of the 11 coffins, watched by the victims' families.

"France is in mourning, Cherbourg is grieving," the president said. "I acknowledge the courage of these men, their devotion, their exemplary professional competence. I want to express the gratitude of the nation, which will never forget them."

Among those who attended were 3,000 employees of the Direction des Constructions Navales (DCN), the defence ministry shipbuilder where the victims worked.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attack but Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf asserts it was launched in retaliation for Pakistan's support for the global war on terrorism.

He has launched a nationwide crackdown on Pakistani extremists that has led to more than 400 detentions since Wednesday.

The bodies of the French men, aged between 27 to 52, were flown home at the weekend, arriving at an airport outside Cherbourg on Sunday and laid out in a chapel at a military hospital.

Local businesses, some with windows draped in black cloth, and schools observed a minute of silence in honour of the victims and remained closed during the ceremonies of remembrance.

The private funerals and burials of the eight men from the Cherbourg area are expected to take place immediately following the ceremony.

Some 3,000 dockyard workers in Brest on the northwestern coast of France were also expected on Monday to march from their dockyard to the town's centre in a gesture of homage to the victims.

Nepal rebels set fire to Sanskrit university

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Some 500 Maoist rebels stormed a Sanskrit University in west Nepal, set the building on fire and destroyed office records, an official said yesterday.

District officer Mathur Prasad Yadav told Reuters that the guerrillas snipped telephone lines and overpowered the night guard of the Mahendra Sanskrit University in Dang in west Nepal late on Saturday before setting the building ablaze.

"No one was injured in the incident," Yadav said, adding that several office rooms had been destroyed.

The rebels, who are fighting to topple the constitutional monarchy in the world's only Hindu kingdom, oppose the teaching in schools of Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language.

Nepal mobilised its troops against the guerrillas last November after the rebels walked out of peace talks and attacked police posts and government installations.

British journalist arrested in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani military intelligence agents are interrogating a British journalist of Indian descent who was arrested on a visa infringement at the Afghan border three days ago, police said yesterday.

They said Amardeep Bassey, a reporter for the Sunday Mercury newspaper, was detained on Friday as he tried to cross from Afghanistan through the Torkham checkpoint west of here.

He had earlier gone to Afghanistan from Pakistan without obtaining an exit stamp on his Pakistani visa, raising suspicions about his activities, police said.

Police alleged he had crossed into Afghanistan illegally with the help of two local tribesmen, who were also arrested.

They said he was being held at a police lockup in Landi Kotal near Torkham and was under interrogation.

Russian space station roof collapse kills 6

AFP, Moscow

A Russian emergency services have discovered the bodies of six of the space station workers killed at the weekend when a roof collapsed at the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, the Russian emergency ministry told Interfax on Monday.

Eight people are thought to have died when the 70-metre (200-foot) roof at one of the cosmodrome's hangars gave way on Sunday while they were carrying out repairs.

Seven of the victims were Kazakh nationals, while the eighth was from Belarus, Kazakhstan's emergency ministry told RIA Novosti.

Russian space agency spokesman Sergey Gorbunov declined Monday to speculate on the causes of the roof collapse at the assembly tower used for preparing and testing the Soviet-era space shuttle Buran ("Snowstorm").

"It is difficult to say anything specific for the moment. An investi-

gation into what happened must be carried out by the government commission, which flew out to the cosmodrome this morning," Gorbunov said.

The commission is headed by Russia's science and technology minister, Ilya Klebanov, and space agency chief Yuri Koptev.

The Baikonur cosmodrome, which was constructed in the 1950s and is located in the former Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan in Central Asia, is the world's oldest working space launch site.

Baikonur is used for commercial and military satellite launches and sending manned rockets to the International Space Station (ISS).

Nearly three quarters of all Russian satellites and more than half its military satellites are launched from Baikonur.

The cosmodrome's latest guest was South African space tourist Mark Shuttleworth, the 28-year-old Internet millionaire who set off on a 10-day journey to the ISS from Baikonur last month.



Emergency workers search for bodies at the collapsed building in Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan yesterday. Russian emergency services have discovered the bodies of six of the space station workers killed on Sunday when the 70-meter roof at one of cosmodrome's hangars collapsed while they were carrying out repairs. Eight people are thought to have died in the accident.

'US intensifying talks with Iraqi opposition'

REUTERS, Washington

Senior US officials have stepped up talks with Iraqi opposition groups, including some which were not invited in the past, as the Bush administration presses on with efforts to topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

In one meeting, a White House official, a CIA official and other members of a US team met secretly last month in Germany with leaders of two Kurdish parties, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, the Post said, quoting sources familiar with the gathering.

One source identified the White House official as retired Gen. Wayne Downing, the deputy national security advisor for combating terrorism, the Post said.

The Post said the meetings were to determine what role Iraq's opposition would play in an bid to

remove Hussein and to develop ties with opposition groups other than the Iraqi National Congress, a London-based umbrella group that has been the focus of US policy toward Iraq for the past decade.

The meeting in Germany was to determine what military and intelligence capabilities the Kurdish parties -- based in northern Iraq -- could contribute to the effort to oust the Iraqi president and how they would be protected, the Post reported.

The Kurds, who are divided into two parties, threw their lot in with the United States in the Gulf War in 1991 but were brutally crushed by Hussein's forces because of the absence of US backing.

Downing also met two months ago with a delegation of Iraqi exiles who claimed to have strong ties with elements in the Iraqi military and central provinces, which strongly support Hussein.

Carter meets Castro on landmark visit

REUTERS, Havana

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, on an historic visit to Cuba to try to patch up four decades of feuding with the United States, met on Sunday with the top echelons of the island's communist government.

Carter was warmly welcomed in Havana by President Fidel Castro and applauded by American tourists for his efforts to bridge the political gap between two nations only 90 miles apart.

President Fidel Castro, 75, dressed in a dark business suit instead of his usual military fatigues, met Carter at Havana's airport and praised him for attempting a rapprochement with Cuba during his 1977-1981 presidency despite the Cold War.

Castro later hosted a dinner for Carter at the government headquarters in Havana's Revolution Square, attended by his top ministers and the president of the

National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon.

"It is no secret that for almost a century there have not been optimal relations between the two states, and they still are not," Castro said in welcoming remarks at the airport broadcast live by Cuban television.

"However ... in the four years of your tenure as president, you had the courage to make efforts to change the course of those relations," he said, standing before U.S. and Cuban flags fluttering together in the breeze.

Castro said Carter was free to meet with whoever he wanted, including opponents, and visit biotech research facilities that the U.S. government last week charged were developing biological weapons.

Carter, 77, a critic of the 40-year U.S. trade embargo imposed on Cuba, is the most prominent American and the first former president to visit Cuba since Castro took power in a 1959 revolution.

5 lakh Afghan refugees return home

AFP, Islamabad

More than 500,000 Afghan refugees have returned to their homeland from neighbouring Pakistan since the beginning of March, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) said yesterday.

UNHCR Pakistan representative Hasim Utikan said the movement represented a "historical groundswell" and called on the international community to honour its pledges of aid after the collapse of the Taliban regime last year.

"If the refugees believe in their country's future, we expect the donors to financially support this impressive vote of confidence," he said in a statement.

"What we need now is funds both to continue the repatriation operation smoothly and to start reintegration and rehabilitation in Afghanistan, so the returnees can start to rebuild their lives immediately and do not lose faith."

54 dead as India reels under heat wave

AFP, New Delhi

At least 54 people were reported dead yesterday as an intense heat wave gripped most parts of India with temperatures rising to an unseasonal 47 degrees Celsius (117 degrees Fahrenheit).

In the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, at least 50 people have succumbed to heat-stroke over the past week, the Press Trust of India reported, quoting state relief commissioner D.C. Rosaiah.

Four children aged between two and four also died due to sunstroke in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, the agency said.

While India generally experiences a sweaty May and June, hot winds from the western desert state of Rajasthan and adjoining Pakistan were making temperatures soar even higher than usual, said H.R. Hathwar, director of the Indian Meteorological Department.

The highest temperature recorded Sunday was in the northern state of Haryana next to New

Delhi, where the mercury hit 47 degrees Celsius.

"The temperatures in the past week have been at least three to five degrees above normal" in parts of northern, central and eastern India, Hathwar told AFP.

Hathwar said the seasonal rains this time of year in northern India had failed to come.

The hot winds were also causing temperatures in southern India to shoot up, with 46 degrees Celsius (114 degrees Fahrenheit) recorded in Andhra Pradesh state.

In New Delhi, the highest temperature Sunday was 44 degrees Celsius (112 degrees Fahrenheit), three degrees above normal.

"According to our calculations, there will be some respite for the people of Delhi and some northern areas in the next 48 hours as we expect some dust storms," Hathwar said.

However, other parts of the country would continue to experience high temperatures until monsoon rains arrive in June, he said.

Pakistan has not stopped backing militants: India

AFP, New Delhi

India charged Monday that Pakistan is an "epicenter of Islamic fundamentalism" and has not stopped support to separatist guerrillas in disputed Kashmir -- a key condition set by New Delhi to end a five-month border standoff.

The defense ministry, in its annual report for 2001-2002, said Pakistan "remains unwilling to give up its strategy of confrontation, violence and deception towards India."

"Pakistan has been found to be an epicenter of Islamic fundamentalism and her actions had added a new dimension to state-sponsored terrorism," said an excerpt of the report released to the media.

It alleged that New Delhi's arch-enemy has "all along been the primary source of supply of arms and ammunition to Kashmiri militants and is sponsoring terrorism in other parts of India too."

Nuclear-armed India and

Pakistan have massed an estimated million troops at their borders since a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament that New Delhi says was carried out by Pakistan-based Islamic militants.

Pakistan has since banned the two movements India held responsible for the assault and launched a campaign against Islamic extremism.

But New Delhi has refused to pull back its forces until Islamabad takes action on a list of alleged militants based in Pakistan and ends backing for separatists battling since 1989 to end Indian rule in Muslim-majority Kashmir.

Pakistan denies that it arms or funds the militants in Kashmir but acknowledges it provides moral and diplomatic support to what it describes as an indigenous self-determination struggle.

At least 35,000 people have been killed in the 13-year-old Kashmir insurgency. Separatists put the death toll twice as high.

Cannes Film Festival begins tomorrow

AFP, Cannes

It's that time of year that the French Riviera sparkles brighter than normal, as cinematic celebrities and powerbrokers converge on the Cannes Film Festival.

The world's top event for showcasing upcoming movies and fixing multi-million-euro deals for cineplexes everywhere is promising considerable star wattage this year when it starts Wednesday.

Perhaps the biggest will be George Lucas, who is to present the fifth instalment of his "Star Wars" series -- "Episode II: Attack of the Clones" -- on Thursday, coinciding with its worldwide release.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg for the 4,000 journalists and hundreds of television cameras roaming the palm-planted beachside main strip of Cannes in search of famous faces, bold wannabes or spectacular stunts.

Sharon Stone is to be the tele-genic face of the jury for the official competition part of the 12-day festival.

David Lynch, the US director of Cannes best director award "Mulholland Drive", will preside over the panel, which will also include Malaysian-born Hong Kong action star Michelle Yeoh.

Woody Allen, who up to now has shunned film festivals and awards ceremonies like the Oscars, has

finally ceded, and his presence is confirmed for the opening film of the festival: "Hollywood Ending".

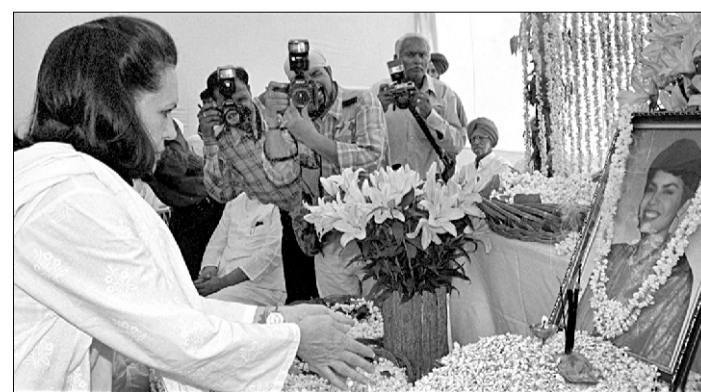
The feature, shown out of competition, is a satire on the US cinema industry as seen through the failing eyes of a director who bears more than passing autobiographical similarity to Allen.

Martin Scorsese will also be there, both as jury president of the official short film competition and to show off a 20-minute excerpt of his "Gangs of New York". The long-awaited, way-over-budget period epic stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Cameron Diaz -- both of whom are likely to follow Scorsese up the red carpet.

The party whirlwind that fills the nights at the festival is to be cranked up to again promote a slew of films, most of which have nothing to do with the official competition and which won't even be seen in cinemas for months.

Cannes' municipal council has been struggling to contain the revelry in recent years after complaints from the town's well-heeled residents.

Thus, while big tents all along the beach will again play host to a string of bashes, the real champagne-popping action takes place outside the city limits: either on the dozens of bobbing yachts anchored in the bay or in the private villas that sit in the hills overlooking Cannes and the sea.



Congress (I) Party President Sonia Gandhi pays her respects in front of a portrait of Ritu Singh, during a condolence meeting in New Delhi on Sunday. Ritu, the daughter of India's former foreign minister and senior leader of the main opposition Congress, Natwar Singh, apparently committed suicide on May 9. Ritu, 30, who was unmarried and worked as a fashion designer in London was found dead at her father's south Delhi home.

Tea may strengthen bones

AP, Chicago

Longtime tea-drinking may strengthen bones, researchers in Taiwan have found.

The benefits occurred in people who drank an average of nearly two cups daily of black, green or oolong tea for at least six years, said the researchers from National Cheng Kung University Hospital in Tainan, Taiwan.

Their results are published in the May 13 edition of Archives of Internal Medicine.

The findings could have broad public health implications, because fractures associated with bone-thinning osteoporosis and

low bone density are a global problem expected to worsen with the predicted increase in the number of older people worldwide.

Some estimates suggest nearly half the US population aged 50 and older is affected by osteoporosis or low bone mass, and the World Health Organization projects that the number of hip fractures could rise from 1.7 million in 1990 to 6.3 million by 2050.

Tea contains fluoride and chemical compounds known as flavonoids that include estrogen-like plant derivatives -- both of which may enhance bone strength, the authors said.