

2 Palestinians killed in West Bank

REUTERS, Hebron

The Israeli army killed a senior Palestinian intelligence officer and an associate yesterday in a West Bank raid targeting suspects in attacks on Israelis, a spokesman said.

He said troops also arrested 14 wanted Palestinian militants in an overnight swoop on villages in parts of the West Bank handed to Palestinian rule under interim peace deals in the 1990s.

Israeli troops reoccupied Palestinian-ruled towns in the West Bank last month in an offensive the government said was aimed at rooting out militants blamed for a wave of suicide bombings in a Palestinian uprising launched 19 months ago.

The army has pulled out of the towns but continues to encircle them and stage ad hoc raids in what it calls an effort to seize leftover suspects and pre-empt further suicide attacks.

An army spokesman said troops raiding the southern town of Halhoul early on Tuesday shot dead Khaled Abu Knaam, local commander of the Palestinian Authority's General Intelligence Apparatus, and another officer, Ahmed Abdel Aziz Zomareh.

He said both were wanted for "many attacks against Israelis" in the Hebron area of the southern West Bank and were shot when they ignored orders to halt and tried to flee from a house that troops had surrounded.

Palestinian security sources said the men were surprised in the beds at about 3 am as three tanks, eight armoured vehicles and about 15 soldiers surrounded the house.

The army said a third man belonging to Force 17, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's personal guard, was arrested and a fourth escaped.

Sierra Leone goes to polls

AFP, Freetown

Some 5,000 polling stations opened across Sierra Leone yesterday for the first presidential and parliamentary polls since the end of the west African nation's bloody 10-year civil war.

Voters were queuing up outside polling stations in the capital Freetown after they opened at 7 am.

President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, who is widely tipped to win the presidential poll, was one of the first of the country's 2.3 million eligible voters to cast a ballot.

The run-up to the polls has been by far the most peaceful in Sierra Leone, which has suffered repeated electoral violence, coups and a bloody civil war launched by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group.

Tuesday's elections are the first since the formal end of the war in January. Up to 200,000 people were thought to have died, thousands had their limbs amputated or were kidnapped, raped or forcibly enrolled to fight.

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group, which disarmed after a peace pact signed last year, is contesting the elections as the RUF party (RUFFP).

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan sent a message to Sierre Leone's citizens appealing for them to cast their ballots in the "spirit of peace and tolerance," describing the election as an "important landmark."

Myanmar frees 9 opposition members

REUTERS, Yangon

Military-ruled Myanmar released nine members of the pro-democracy opposition from jail yesterday, the first political prisoners to go free since their leader Aung San Suu Kyi emerged from house arrest last week.

The junta said in a statement the nine were all members of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which won the country's last elections in 1990 but has never been allowed to govern.

"They are all in good health and reunited with their respective families," the statement from the office of the military spokesman said.

After mounting international pressure, Suu Kyi was released from 19 months of house arrest on May 6 and has called for immediate substantive talks with the military government aimed at political reform.

She has also said her top priority was the release of her NLD party members still in jail. More than 1,000 are still in Myanmar's jails, according to Amnesty International.

Secretive reconciliation talks between the military and NLD began in late 2000, but have yielded few concrete results beyond the release of Suu Kyi from house arrest and the release of some 250 party members from various jails.

Palestinian state still on agenda despite Likud vote

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and US leaders signalled that a Palestinian state was still on a Middle East peacemaking agenda, despite a vote by Sharon's right-wing Likud party never to accept one.

Israeli troops killed two Palestinian intelligence officers and arrested 14 militants early on Tuesday in further raids into Palestinian West Bank towns targeting what the government calls suspects in attacks on Israelis.

While Sharon confronted a party leadership challenge and Washington sought his assurances over the Likud decision, Yasser Arafat toured West Bank cities for the first time in five months and told Palestinians they would win a state.

But the Palestinian president skipped a visit to the devastated Jenin refugee camp, where he risked a hostile reception by Palestinians who say they owe their loyalty to Islamic militants and demand reforms.

"To Jerusalem we are headed. Jerusalem is the capital of our independent state of Palestine, never mind who agrees or does not," Arafat told a crowd in Nablus in the northern West Bank.

Israeli soldiers killed a regional Palestinian intelligence commander, Khaled Abu Knaam, and a subordinate in an overnight swoop into the Palestinian-ruled town of Halhoul in the southern West Bank, an army spokesman said.

The army arrested 14 more wanted Palestinian militants in four other West Bank towns and villages, he said.

Palestinian security sources said Abu Knaam and his aide were surprised and killed in their beds. The army said they were killed when they tried to flee.

Palestinian official Saeb Erekat said the outcome of the Likud meeting showed Israel's true intentions and would compound Palestinian frustration in their 19-month-old uprising against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Capitalising on a relative lull in violence, the White House said on Monday that President Bush would keep pushing for the creation of a Palestinian state.

Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke by telephone with Sharon about the issue en route to a NATO meeting in Iceland.

"The prime minister and I discussed the decision made by the Likud (central) committee yesterday (Sunday) and of course he reaffirmed to me that he remains committed to moving forward to achieve that vision that I think most people have of a Palestinian state," Powell said.

Sharon envisages the creation of a Palestinian state at the end of a long peacemaking process. He has said it is premature to talk of a state and has called for major reform of Arafat's Palestinian Authority as a precondition for talks.

Echoing comments made before stalking off the stage at his party convention after the vote, Sharon told Likud legislators on Monday that he, not the party, would set peacemaking policy.

"Two-thirds of the public elected me to make decisions, and I have," he said. "I will not allow internal political considerations or self-serving tricks to determine policy."

The Likud vote marked a victory for former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the incumbent Sharon in a looming battle for the party leadership.



PHOTO: AFP

Photo released by the Palestinian Press Office shows Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat pointing to damage during his visit to the Church of the Nativity in the West Bank town of Bethlehem on Monday, three days after the end of the nearly six-week siege of the sixth-century church by the Israeli army, where some 200 Palestinians had been holed up.

World warming faster than expected: Experts

REUTERS, LONDON

Planet earth is warming up faster than previously expected, the head of a leading climate research institute said on Monday.

Dying forests, expanding deserts and rising sea levels would wreak havoc to human and animal lives sooner than anticipated as global warming was accelerating, said Geoff Jenkins, head of the Hadley Center for Climate Prediction and Research.

"It looks like it will be warmer by the end of the century than what we have predicted," he told Reuters in an interview.

Jenkins said recent revisions showed much greater output of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide than earlier estimated. These gases are blamed for global warming.

Warmer weather will generate more droughts, floods and rising sea levels which many fear will

create millions of refugees from drowning island-nations and possible wars over increasingly scarce fresh water.

Economies are also likely to take a blow as farming, fishing and business will be affected by the change in climate.

A 2001 United Nations' report on climate change forecast that global temperatures will rise two to five degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

But recent data suggest temperatures could rise even higher as a worst case scenario shows four times as much emitted CO2 in the atmosphere from today's levels which Jenkins said is significantly higher than previously expected.

Carbon dioxide is blamed for two thirds of all global warming and is largely produced when burning fossil fuels such as oil and coal.

Despite efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2 percent of 1990's levels during 2008-12

under a global Kyoto pact, the amount in the atmosphere is set to rise as warmer temperatures will curb nature's capacity to absorb the gases, Jenkins said.

Half of all CO2 emissions last in the atmosphere for about 100 years, while the rest is soaked up by seas, land and vegetation.

But the opposite effect may kick in as warmer weather and less rainfall in some places will dry out and kill trees which emit CO2 as they decompose, Jenkins said.

CO2-absorbing microbes in the soil are also set to boost emissions as higher temperatures will fuel their activities which produce the greenhouse gases.

"Instead of helping, they will make global warming worse," Jenkins said.

He echoed a warning from the Royal Society, Britain's national academy of science, that present measures to cut greenhouse gases were not sufficient to avoid the worst effects of global warming.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) shares a joke with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw before the start of the NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Reykjavik yesterday. Talks at the meeting were due to finalise a new accord with one-time adversary Russia.

US, India working to expand defence ties

REUTERS, Washington

US and Indian defence officials hope to accelerate efforts to expand bilateral ties and pave the way to more arms sales at meetings in Washington next week, a top Pentagon official said on Monday.

Defence Undersecretary Douglas Feith, leading the US delegation, said the United States and India already had signed an agreement on securing shared defence information, and were cooperating on naval operations.

In addition, India agreed last month to buy eight Raytheon Co. long-range weapon-locating radars in the first major US-Indian weapons deal in more than a decade, Feith said.

Feith told Indian and US business executives that a dozen sub-groups also were focused on issues from counter-terrorism to coopera-

tive sales and marketing after a first meeting of the US-Indian Defence Planning Group last December.

He said he hoped the group's second set of meetings -- scheduled for next Tuesday and Wednesday -- would cement closer ties between the two nations in a security environment reshaped by the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

"We hope to accelerate our work across the board," Feith told a conference on US-Indian defence trade.

"We have a whole set of items on the agenda, from military to military relations ... joint exercises, defence trade cooperation, general strategic discussions on the region and Asia broadly," Feith told Reuters after the conference.

Feith spoke on the eve of a trip to the region by Christine Rocca, assistant US secretary of state for

South Asian affairs, signaling growing US concern over tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

He underscored the Bush administration's commitment to improving strategic relations with both South Asia nuclear powers, but said Washington wanted to deal with India in its own right, not solely on the basis of the regional conflict.

Both countries have been seen as critical allies in the US war against terrorism.

"It is clear that in the past year, the United States and India have been moving together in the right direction," Feith said. "The United States recognises an interest in looking positively on a much-wider range of activities with India, including the area of defence trade and technology cooperation."

Braille version of 'Sanchayita'

PTI, Kolkata

Freed of the shackles of copyright, Tagore's works have also reached the world of the blind with the release of the Braille version of the noble laureate's book of poems 'Sanchayita'.

The Chief Minister of eastern Indian state of West Bengal Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, who released the Braille transcription of Tagore's immortal work Monday, presented the first copy to former state advocate general Sadhan Gupta, who is visually impaired, at a function.

Based on a software, 'Bharat Braille', developed by the Webel Mediatronics Limited, a wholly owned subsidiary company of the state-owned West Bengal Electronics Industry Development Corporation, the project marks the beginning of Braille content creation in Bengali language.

WBEIDC Chairman Aloke Mukherjee said the company has printed 200 copies of the Braille version of 'Sanchayita' for donating to all the 32 blind schools in the state.



PHOTO: AFP

Former US President Jimmy Carter (L) speaks during a presentation at the Cuba's top biotech facility, the Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (CIGB), in Havana on Monday. Seated beside President Fidel Castro, Carter publicly pressed Cuban officials for guarantees that their biotechnology transfers could not be put to improper use after an official US charge that Cuba produced biological weapons.

Quake rocks San Francisco

AP, Gilroy, Calif.

A substantial earthquake shook the San Francisco Bay area on Monday, rattling the stands at hockey and baseball games, sending frightened customers running from businesses and briefly clogging phone lines.

No injuries or significant damage were initially reported from the quake, which had a preliminary magnitude of 5.2. But it caused a low rumbling in San Francisco, where it seemed to last for several seconds and get stronger as it went along, and buildings could be heard rumbling in Watsonville, about 100 miles to the south.

The U.S. Geological Service reported that the quake struck at 10 p.m. and was centred 3 miles southwest of Gilroy, outside San Jose.

Danny Sharma, a manager at Rodeway Inn in Gilroy, said the motel shook violently. Coffee pots and glasses were knocked from counters.

"It was the worst one I've ever felt," Sharma said. "The whole building was shaking and there was just this rumbling sound. It was a bad quake."

The quake was immediately followed by four earthquakes centred in the same area with magnitudes ranging from 1.4 to 2.5.

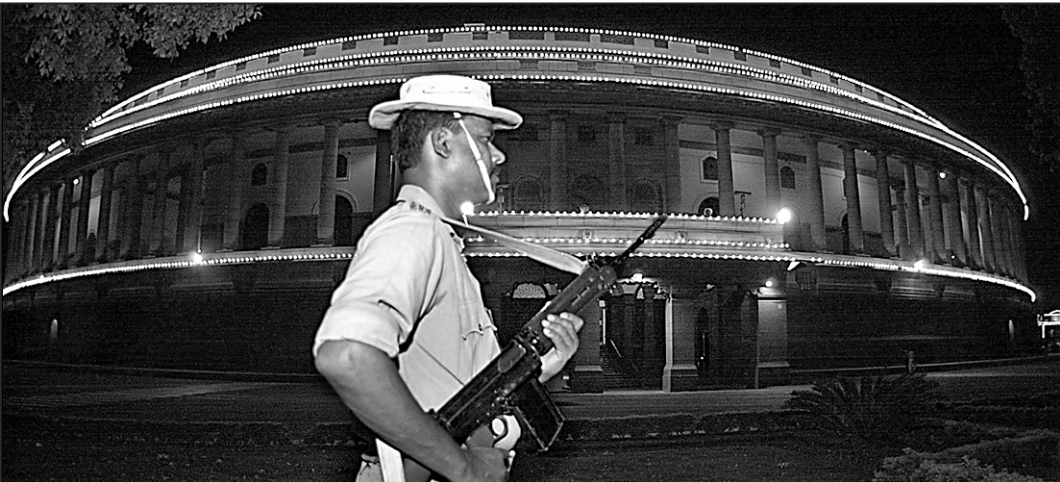


PHOTO: AFP

A security personnel stand guard as Indian parliament lit up to mark the 50 Years of Parliament of India in New Delhi on Monday. The first session of Indian Parliament started on May 13, 1952, and currently 13th session of parliament is on.

Malaysia to sign anti-terror pact with US

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, in Washington this week on a trip marking warmer ties with the United States, will sign an anti-terror pact with his host George W Bush, newspapers reported yesterday.

The New Straits Times, citing Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar, said Mahathir and President Bush would sign a declaration on fighting international terrorism during the veteran

Malaysian leader's four-day working visit. Mahathir has for years been an outspoken critic of the West.

Relations between mostly Muslim Malaysia and the United States were strained when the United States spoke out against the sacking and jailing of Mahathir's rival, former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, in 1996.

But Bahathir, Asia's longest-serving elected leader, has earned US plaudits for tackling suspected Muslim militants since the

September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. FBI Director Robert Mueller in March described his agency's working relationship with Malaysian authorities as a critical part of worldwide efforts to investigate terrorist acts and financial networks.

Malaysia is holding 62 people it suspects of belonging to Islamic militant groups, either homegrown or linked to the al Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden, who is suspected of masterminding the September attacks on the United States.