

'Arabs want world to adopt Saudi peace proposal'

AFP, Beirut

The Saudi-sponsored Arab proposal for peace with Israel should be adopted by the world community to make it international in scope, a top Palestinian official said here Saturday.

"We are going to seek to get the Arab initiative adopted by the United States, Europe and Russia and by the UN Security Council in order for it to become an international and not just an Arab initiative," he told reporters.

Qaddumi, who acts as the Palestinian Authority's foreign minister, was speaking after a meeting with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, who is hosting representatives of a special Arab League committee due to convene here later Saturday over efforts to push the Arab peace plan forward.

"The atmosphere is very positive, and we are acting for the reactivation of the Arab initiative," said Qaddumi.

"There will be meetings with the concerned parties, and by that we

do not mean Israel, but the parties who will help us in that direction, namely the Europeans, the United Nations, Russia and the United States," he said.

In a statement, Lahoud said he had asked the committee to "draw up a strategy of action and a work plan that would give the Arab initiative top priority after Israel tried through its war on the Palestinians to put the initiative on the side."

He also called on the committee "to present the Arab peace initiative as the sole choice, if the great powers, mainly the United States, are determined to seek peace."

Lahoud chaired the Arab summit held in March in Beirut which adopted a Saudi proposal offering normal ties and security to Israel in return for its withdrawal from Arab lands captured in the 1967 Middle East War.

Foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, as well as Arab League chief Amr Mussa, are set to attend Saturday's meeting.

India weighs both military, diplomatic options

AFP, New Delhi

Furious over a brutal massacre in Kashmir, India is weighing longer term options likely to include a mix of military and diplomatic pressure on its nuclear rival Pakistan, analysts said Saturday.

A day after the renewed tensions were debated in parliament, Indian and Pakistani troops continued to exchange mortar fire over their border in disputed Kashmir.

At the same time, in New Delhi, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was chairing a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) to mull what "appropriate" steps India might take.

"What I see is a very angry (Indian) nation," said former foreign secretary S.K. Singh.

"I see the opposition completely backing the government which is preparing for not just a short-term but a long-term, more complex solution. This could mean many things and may not strictly include military and/or diplomatic steps."

Singh, a former envoy to Pakistan, said Tuesday's massacre in Kashmir where three allegedly Pakistan-backed Islamic militants gunned down 32 people, mostly wives and children of army men, exposed the failure of what he called "Americo-Pakistani" diplomacy.

"Till now, we thought a solution would come out of the 'Americo-Pakistani front.' We don't think that anymore. India is angry," Singh said.

Since the September 11 attacks, the Americans have counted on Islamabad's support for their war against terrorism in Afghanistan. They

have repeatedly asked New Delhi to exercise restraint, particularly after militants stormed the Indian parliament in December killing 14 people.

India blamed the attack on Pakistan-based extremists and immediately massed hundreds of thousands of troops on its border while simultaneously unleashing a string of diplomatic sanctions against Pakistan.

Intense American pressure has so far been able to stave off a full-blown military conflict between the two South Asian nuclear rivals, but this may not work for much longer.

"I can see that the Americans now understand what kind of Pakistan they are dealing with. I think they understand much better now," Singh added.

Tuesday's massacre took place as US assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs Christina Rocca was holding talks in New Delhi.

On Friday, US ambassador to India Robert Blackwill met India's Home Minister L.K. Advani and the State Department is now due to send deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage to New Delhi.

The US feels that any Indo-Pakistan conflict would not only be a global security concern but would also undermine the war against terrorism.

In the Indian parliament Friday, political parties cut across party lines to call for "concrete" steps against Pakistan.

Advani assured that "appropriate action" would be taken to avenge the death of family members of army men.

"I can only say that the government understands the seriousness of the situation," he said. "We cannot announce it (our response) in the house, but we will take the right decision after consulting the army experts... our reply should be decisive."



Indian soldiers retaliate firing by Pakistan forces in Samba sector in Jammu region on Friday. India and Pakistan continue to exchange gunfire across their border on Saturday.

US spy plane crashes in S Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

An unmanned US spy plane has crashed east of the southern military base of Jacobabad which is being used by US forces in Pakistan, police said Saturday.

"It lost control at 3:30am (2030 GMT) and crashed 26 kilometres (16 miles) east of Jacobabad in a place called Dilmurad," a police officer in Jacobabad told AFP.

"We have no reports of casualties," he said.

Residents said the drone fell on farmland in Behram Khosro village, but there was no loss of life or damage to property.

"I can only confirm that an unmanned US plane has crashed in the area near Dilmurad. There is no loss of life. We are gathering further information," said Deen Mohammad Baluch, police chief of Sukkur district near the crash site.

Chirac launches tirade against US unilateralism

AFP, Madrid

French President Jacques Chirac launched a bitter attack on US unilateralism late Friday, accusing Washington of harming emerging and developing countries through its trade and agriculture policies.

"We discussed unilateral measures which have recently been taken by the US government, first in the steel sector, then wood and recently in agriculture," Chirac said at the end of a summit of EU and Latin American leaders in Madrid.

"We strongly regret this unilateralism which is totally contrary to a balanced and clear view of the world," the French leader added.

US policy, he continued, went against the agreements reached at the UN development conference in Monterrey, Mexico in March.

US Senate okays enlargement of NATO

AFP, Washington

The US Senate Friday overwhelmingly endorsed extending NATO membership to countries in eastern and central Europe.

By a vote of 85 to six, senators approved the Freedom Consolidation Act of 2001, which authorises the release of 55 million dollars in military aid to seven countries currently seeking NATO membership.

The House of Representatives approved the bill in November.

Nine countries are currently in line to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania.

Bush lauds Asian-American community's contributions

PTI, Washington

US President George W Bush has hailed the contributions of the Asian American community "as a story of great achievement and success," pledging to "run down" the elements who threaten the nation's freedom and diversity.

"I am proud to be the President of a diverse nation, a nation with 13 million Americans of Asian and Pacific island heritage," he said on Friday in a speech at the White House marking the Asian and Pacific heritage month.

Stating that the Asian American community provided a bridge to an "incredibly important part of the world," he said "the history of Asian Pacific Americans is really a history of great patriotism, people who were willing to sacrifice."



East Timorese residents look at an Indonesian Landing Ship Tank bringing presidential cars and presidential security guards for Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri's upcoming visit to East Timor, at Dili's port on Saturday. The ship is a reminder of Indonesian's harsh 24-year rule over East Timor, a memory still strong even though many Timorese want to move on now that the tiny territory is on the verge of getting its independence on May 20.

E Timor readies for huge independence party

AFP, Dili

After more than 450 years of oppressive foreign rule, East Timor is preparing a huge party to celebrate its accession to nationhood.

The tiny territory of 750,000 people will become the world's 192nd independent nation at the stroke of midnight Sunday (1500 GMT Sunday).

Between 100,000 and 200,000 people -- the same rough estimate as the number who died during the Indonesian occupation -- will pack a lakeside area for a gala seven-hour program of religious, cultural and symbolic ceremonies ending with the independence declaration.

"It's very much a Timorese show," said Australian artistic director Ignatius Jones.

The same will go for the whole country, after the United Nations lowers its blue flag Sunday night to end a unique 32-month exercise in nation-building.

Outgoing chief administrator Sergio Vieira de Mello promised Friday that the UN would never abandon "its child."

A smaller successor mission, comprising troops, police officers and about 100 civilians, will stay on for two years. International donors have promised 360 million dollars in new aid over the next three years for what will be Asia's poorest country until oil and gas revenues start flowing.

But East Timorese themselves will face the daunting task of lifting the nation out of poverty, developing a viable economy and healing the wounds left by the 24-year Indonesian occupation.

Indonesia invaded the former Portuguese colony in 1975, following a green light from the United States.

An estimated 100,000-200,000 died in the early years of the occupation, many from starvation or disease, as a guerrilla war was waged against Jakarta.

'Iraq had no choice but to bow to new UN sanctions'

AFP, Nicosia

Iraq had no choice but to agree to a new UN sanctions regime, the Middle East Economic Survey (MEES) says in its Monday edition, noting that the unusual speed of acceptance suggested Baghdad is seeking to avoid a US military strike.

"While Baghdad is still insisting on the principle of sanctions being lifted rather than amended, it had little choice but to accept the latest changes, given the fact that all 15 members of the Security Council -- including Russia and Syria -- voted in favour of it," the weekly says.

"But what is significant about Iraq's response to the 15-0 sanctions vote is its timing."

Official reaction to UN decisions has in the past taken several

days or more, but this time the response came well within 48 hours of Tuesday's vote on Resolution 1409 in New York.

"The unusual speed and clarity of the Iraqi response suggests that Baghdad is reacting to diplomatic moves, initiated by Russia, to try to avoid a new confrontation with the Security Council, a development that could eventually trigger a US military attack on Iraq to try to change the regime in Baghdad."

Iraq announced Thursday it had decided to "deal with" Resolution 1409 in conjunction with the oil-for-food program that allows the import of essential goods in return for crude exports.

The resolution seeks to free up the delivery of humanitarian supplies while maintaining the arms embargo imposed on Iraq along

with trade sanctions when it invaded Kuwait in August 1990.

MEES also saw a deal between Washington and Moscow.

"Russia appears to have been persuaded to drop its demand for a mechanism for the gradual easing of sanctions after the US in early May agreed to release around 700 million dollars worth of contracts on hold to Russia."

Iraq accuses the United States and Britain of holding up contracts worth billions of dollars which are vetted by the UN sanctions committee under the current oil-for-food arrangements.

"It is also understood that there is an understanding between the US and Russia that Iraqi-Russian oil deals will be honoured if there is a change of regime in Baghdad," MEES adds.

Arafat links elections to Israeli pullout

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat linked the holding of new Palestinian elections with an Israeli withdrawal from occupied lands in a move that could delay a sought-after programme for government reform.

In the latest West Bank violence, an armed Palestinian infiltrator entered the city of Ramallah, wounding the settlement's security officer who then shot the attacker dead.

Settlers have been a frequent target of Palestinian militants in their 19-month-old uprising against occupation in a bid to drive them off lands the Palestinians seek for a state.

Earlier on Friday, Arafat cast doubt over the date of future Palestinian elections, saying a ballot could be held "as soon as we

camp near Nablus.

Palestinian sources said two Palestinian boys were killed in the raids.

Israeli army and police said the Palestinian infiltrator entered the city of Ramallah, wounding the settlement's security officer who then shot the attacker dead.

Settlers have been a frequent target of Palestinian militants in their 19-month-old uprising against occupation in a bid to drive them off lands the Palestinians seek for a state.

Earlier on Friday, Arafat cast doubt over the date of future Palestinian elections, saying a ballot could be held "as soon as we

will finish this occupation (of) our land."

It was not immediately clear whether he was referring to a complete end to Israel's decades-old occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arafat raised the possibility of new elections -- last held in 1996 -- earlier this week along with reforms and Palestinian lawmakers said they should take place by early 2003.

A Palestinian official, asked to clarify Arafat's remarks, said the condition for holding elections was a more limited Israeli army withdrawal from all positions it had occupied since the start of the uprising in September 2000.

Nepal moves to extend state of emergency

BBC, Kathmandu

The Nepalese Government will seek parliament's approval next week to extend emergency rule by another six months.

King Gyanendra called a parliament session for 23 May - two days before the current six-month period, under which security forces have mounted an offensive against Maoist rebels, runs out.

The move came after Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba failed on Friday to secure the support of opposition parties for an extension to the emergency.

A senior leader of the main United Marxist-Leninist opposition group, Yubaraj Gyawali, accused the government of abusing its emergency powers.

Powell accuses Europeans of bashing US

AFP, London

US Secretary of State Colin Powell has delivered a sharp attack on European political leaders, accusing them of "bashing" America's war on terrorism, Britain's Guardian newspaper reported Saturday.

Contrary to the views of many in Europe, US foreign policy under President George W. Bush had been a resounding success, Powell said in an interview with the left-of-centre British daily.

Powell said that European criticism of Bush's "axis of evil" speech in January, seen by many observers as marking the start of a decline in US-European relations, had been misplaced.

"The president said 'axis of evil' and it was amazing what happened after that in terms of the criticism that came our way," Powell said.