

400 civilians massacred in DR Congo

AFP, Kigali

Around 400 civilians have been massacred in the northeastern Ituri region of the strife-torn Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the past three days, a rebel movement backed by Rwanda said, demanding an international investigation.

In a statement to AFP in Kigali, the Congo Rally for Democracy (RCD) said it "denounces large scale massacres of civilian populations around Bunia perpetrated by the RCD-ML (RCD-Liberation Movement) of Mbusa Nyamwisi allied with the forces of the Kinshasa government."

The RCD-ML, a small rebel group backed by Uganda and a rival to the mainstream RCD, controls the far northeast of the DRC near the borders with Sudan and Uganda where there is recurrent tribal violence, especially between the Hema and Lendu tribes.

Hezbollah had plans to attack US, Israeli ships in Singapore

AFP, Singapore

The radical Shiite Muslim Hezbollah militia group were planning to bomb US and Israeli ships in Singapore five years ago, local reports said over the weekend.

Five Singaporeans were recruited by the Middle Eastern group for special classes held here and in the Malaysian state of Johor, the Internal Security Department (ISD) told local media.

The five men were asked to take pictures of the US and Israeli embassies but they refused and subsequently left the group, the Sunday Times reported.

Mick Jagger tops chart of knighthood

AFP, London

Rolling Stone Mick Jagger is set to receive a British knighthood for services to music, newspapers here reported Sunday.

The 58-year-old rocker could be formally told of his gong as early as next week, when Queen Elizabeth unveils her birthday honours list, according to The Sunday Times.

"Old Rubber Lips" would follow in the footsteps of Beatle Paul McCartney, Elton John and Cliff Richard as a music star with the title "Sir" before his name.

War hysteria won't derail Oct polls: Musharraf

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has said that the India-Pakistan crisis would not derail a general election planned for October, according to a report Sunday.

"It is very certain there will be an election. We will have an elected government," he told Malaysia's New Straits Times in an interview in Islamabad last week.

"Like I said, this will be the label of democracy. The essence of democracy is already there in Pakistan. We'll put the label in October."

Musharraf said he expected a "de-escalation" in hostilities from the two nuclear-armed rivals, to be followed by a dialogue to resolve the long-standing Kashmir dispute.

"I am very optimistic that if whatever discussions we had are accepted, then things should move in a better direction," he said.

"The response that I'm expecting is de-escalation followed by the initiation of a dialogue on Kashmir."

But the general was speaking before Pakistan airforce jets late Friday shot down an unmanned Indian reconnaissance craft, which threatened to ruin talks for the nuclear powers after nearly a month of high tension.

Musharraf has said the chance of war was "receding" as both sides realised that war was "extremely costly."

He called for sincerity and flexibility to resolve the dispute over Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both, and has already sparked two of the rivals' three wars.

"If we carry on badgering each other with whatever we have been saying for 50 years, we carry on with the conflict. If there is sincerity and we show flexibility, we can solve the problem," he said.

"We're prepared to be bold, we're prepared to be courageous here for the sake of permanent peace if there be a similar courage and boldness from the other side."

India has demanded a crackdown following several attacks mounted by what it says are Pakistan-based militants in Kashmir and elsewhere in its territory.

Musharraf described himself as a "totally self-made man" and said his military training had helped him cope with the "pressure-cooker situations" in his job.

"I have never asked anyone for anything and I think I've been getting the best from the army always," he said.



French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin casts his vote on Sunday in the central French town of Chasseneuil-du-Poitou for the first round of legislative elections as centre-right supporters are tipped to win a governing majority.

Karzai sets sight on Loya Jirga to talk on his terms

AFP, Kabul

The new shape of Afghan politics should begin to emerge Monday as delegates from across the nation meet to choose a new government with Hamid Karzai seen as a shoe-in to continue as the nation's leader.

The selection of a head of state will be one of the first tasks on the agenda for the 1,551 delegates who will gather in a massive marquee at Kabul Polytechnic for a meeting scheduled to last for seven days.

But the traditional Afghan grand assembly has been preceded by a sustained bout of horse-trading that could mean the main issues are

wrapped up in the first few days.

Karzai, the head of the six-month interim administration that was installed at last December's Bonn conference, has yet to formally declare his candidacy as head-of-state but has said he will agree to continue if nominated.

Karzai's quest, however, could be complicated by Zahir Shah who, while ruling out any attempt to reclaim the throne from which he was ousted 29 years ago, has said he would agree to accept the post of head-of-state if nominated.

But the 87-year-old is also a keen supporter of Karzai and has said it is "essential" that his fellow ethnic Pashtun remains head of

government, envisaging the role of head-of-state as little more than ceremonial.

Candidates for the position will require 150 written nominations and Zahir Shah could come under pressure not to run and affect Karzai's campaign.

Former president Burhanuddin Rabbani could also throw his hat into the ring, but with little realistic expectation of victory even if he can muster 150 nominations.

The Loya Jirga is also tasked to select the "key personnel" in the new cabinet under the terms of the Bonn accord, but precisely what constitutes key personnel is, in theory, left up to delegates.

Errant Priests pay price

AFP, Washington

The US Roman Catholic Church has removed 218 priests from their positions this year because of allegations of child sexual abuse, although at least 34 known offenders remain in church jobs, the Washington Post reported Sunday.

Citing a survey it conducted of Catholic dioceses across the United States, the Post reported that at least 850 US priests have been accused of sexual misconduct with minors since the early 1960s.

The numbers -- considerably higher than previously disclosed, according to the daily -- reflect the breadth of the continuing scandal rocking the Catholic Church in the United States.

The figures also underscore a

lack of reliable statistics on the church's sex abuse problem, with Catholic officials interviewed saying that because it is a decentralised institution of autonomous dioceses, the church has no way of compiling those figures, the Post wrote.

The report comes as some 300 active US bishops head for Dallas this week to debate and vote on a mandatory policy toward priests accused of sexual misconduct.

The newspaper conducted its survey by contacting each of the 178 mainstream Roman Catholic dioceses across the United States.

Ninety-six dioceses responded and 82 did not.

Of those that did respond, few provided information on financial settlements, the Post wrote.

Chirac eyes majority as France goes to polls

AFP, Paris

French voters went to the polls Sunday for the first round of parliamentary elections, with centre-right supporters of President Jacques Chirac tipped to win a governing majority in the National Assembly.

Chirac is hoping to consolidate his May 5 presidential win over far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen by retaking a majority in parliament, ending five years of uneasy "cohabitation" with a left-wing prime minister.

Polling stations opened around the country at 8:00 am (0600 GMT) and the last in major cities were to close at 8:00 pm, with early projections of the results due immediately afterwards.

Recent opinion polls have given the pro-Chirac parties -- the Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP) and the Union for French Democracy (UDF) -- a clear lead over the Socialists and their allies, who have controlled the National Assembly since 1997.

The Socialists (PS) are still reeling from the shock defeat of former prime minister Lionel Jospin in the first round of the presidential election, at the hands of Le Pen.

Following Jospin's subsequent retirement from politics, the Socialists have struggled to regain momentum, lacking a clear leader and failing to create alliances in key electoral districts with other left-wing parties.

'Lankan peace hinges on India'

AFP, Bangalore

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe began a pilgrimage in this southern Indian city Sunday saying that his peace process at home would not succeed without India's help.

Wickremesinghe arrived here Saturday on his way to the Indian capital to meet with government and opposition leaders and seek their support for the Norwegian-backed peace process, Sri Lankan officials said.

"Holding discussions with Indian authorities on the implementation of the peace process in Sri

Lanka at this juncture will be critically important," Wickremesinghe's office said in a statement.

"It would not be possible to make our journey towards peace a success without the blessings of India," the statement said.

"We feel it is encouraging to find that the Indian opposition as well as the government is committed to a fair political solution to our problem."

Wickremesinghe is to travel to New Delhi Monday and is due to meet with the Indian President K. R. Narayanan and opposition leader Sonia Gandhi. He will hold

talks with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Tuesday and return home the next day.

It is Wickremesinghe's second visit to India in six months. Shortly after coming to power at the December parliamentary polls, he travelled to New Delhi before entering into a truce with Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who were initially armed and trained by New Delhi in the 1980s, were outlawed in May 1992 after the outfit was held responsible for the slaying of former premier Rajiv Gandhi.

Gulf states call for restraint in Indo-Pak standoff

AFP, Jeddah

Gulf Arab states on Saturday urged India and Pakistan to show self-restraint and give diplomacy a chance to resolve the crisis between the nuclear capable neighbours.

India and Pakistan "should show maximum self-restraint to help give a chance to efforts of a de-escalation" of the crisis, Omani minister of state for foreign affairs, Yusef bin Alawi, said at the opening here of a meeting of foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

"That would open the way to a political action aimed at preserving the security and stability of the region," said Alawi, whose country holds the annual chair of the group of Gulf Arab oil monarchies.

The Omani minister added that "the GCC's contacts with India and Pakistan are continuing ... to avert a military confrontation."

Alawi also hailed last month's visit by Emirati minister of state for foreign affairs, Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed al-Nahyan, to Iran, which occupies three Gulf islands claimed by Abu Dhabi.

Britain plans camps for Indo-Pak refugees

AFP, London

Britain has earmarked disused military bases for the accommodation of thousands of refugees entering the country should war break out between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, a newspaper here reported Sunday, quoting government officials.

"If there is large-scale war then millions of people will be displaced and, for historical and cultural reasons, we must assume that a large percentage would wish to come to Britain," The Sunday

Telegraph quoted a Home Office official as saying.

"We have to be prepared for a large number of people coming in a short space of time and that is why we have drawn up these contingency plans to use former military bases," he added.

The Home Office has drawn up plans to house up to 5,000 refugees at three former bases in rural northern England, said the paper. Should need arise for greater accommodation, 10 more government properties are lined up to be used as emergency holding centres.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians carry two of three bodies of Palestinian men killed earlier in the day during their funeral procession through the streets of Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday. The three Palestinian men died when a bomb they were carrying exploded near an electronic barrier at Sufa, that separates the region from Israel. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attempted attack.

Myth or miraculous cure?

AFP, Hyderabad

Half a million asthma patients have descended on the southern Indian city of Hyderabad in the hope of a miracle cure offered every year to anyone willing to swallow a live fish stuffed with medicines.

The city's Bathini Goud family distributes the famed medicine free to anyone who takes the trouble of coming here on an auspicious day which falls only once a year, coinciding with the arrival of monsoon rains.

The yellow-paste medicine, the ingredients of which are kept secret by the family, is stuffed into the mouth of a two-to-three-inch long "murrel" fish and then dropped down the gullet of the patient.

The family members say the fish's movement clears the phlegm in the patient's windpipe as it makes its way down to the stomach, where the medicine is digested.

"To be effective, this cure must be taken at least three years in a row along with a special diet for 45 days," family patriarch Bathini Viswanath Goud told AFP.

"If all these instructions are carefully followed, we can guarantee a 100 per cent cure for any patient, no matter how bad the asthma."

"The magic formula" was gifted to an ancestor by a Hindu saint in return for his generous hospitality, family members claim.

"We use water from a specially blessed well in our ancestral home to make the medicine. The rest of the ingredients are kept secret because we do not want anyone to start commercializing this remedy," says Goud.

He claims the ancestor who was given the formula was warned that the remedy would lose its potency if anybody tried to exploit it commer-

cially. Hundreds of thousands of people, who vouch for its efficacy, gather here from all over India for their dose, brushing aside the skepticism of modern doctors.

"I was once a chronic asthma patient and couldn't survive without steroids. Then, someone told me about this treatment. I have been coming here for six years now and I don't need any other medication," said Partho Dey from the eastern city of Calcutta.

People brave rain, shine and even camp overnight to get a place ahead in the queue which grows longer by the year.

"It has been a long journey and a long wait, but in the end it is a small price to pay for a lifetime of relief from a chronic illness," says asthma patient Manisha Gulati who is here on her second trip from the western metropolis of Bombay.

Arafat sits on sidelines as Bush talks ME peace

AFP, Ramallah

As US President George W. Bush pursues efforts to resolve the Middle East crisis, meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, one key player, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, remains on the sidelines.

Bush saw Mubarak on Friday at Camp David and is to have talks with Sharon for the sixth time in 15 months on Monday at the White House. But he has yet to meet Arafat, whom he has strongly criticised for failing to stop anti-Israeli attacks by Palestinian radical groups.

The US president will come under further pressure from Sharon to rule Arafat out of the equation altogether as a negotiating partner on the grounds that he is "encouraging terrorism."

Mubarak said Saturday Arafat should be given a chance to carry out promised political and security reforms as well as quell anti-Israeli attacks.

But Bush countered that Arafat "must do everything in his power to stop the violence, to stop the attacks on Israel," adding, "I am disappointed in his leadership. I think he has let the Palestinian people down."

"Arafat is under enormous pressure to reform the Palestinian Authority's administrative and security apparatus, at a time when political discussions are taking place in his absence," analyst Ali Al-Jerbawi said.

Jerbawi, a professor of political science at the Palestinian university of Bir Zeit, added, "Arafat is marginalised, which worries the Palestinians, but I don't think that Sharon will be able to put him aside."

An Arafat aide, Mamduh Nawfal, insisted that while seemingly being pushed further towards the edge the Palestinian leader was still playing a key role on the Middle Eastern stage.

"All Arab steps are being taken in concert with the president," he told AFP.

Arafat aides said Mubarak recently sent his intelligence chief Omar Suleiman to see Arafat and inform him the Egyptian leader's proposal to declare by 2003 a Palestinian state at least over the areas held by the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo agreements.

But Mubarak's plan was rejected by Bush, who did not budge from his position that Palestinian security and reforms must precede declara-

tion of a state and dismissed the idea of a timetable, a move welcomed by the Israelis.

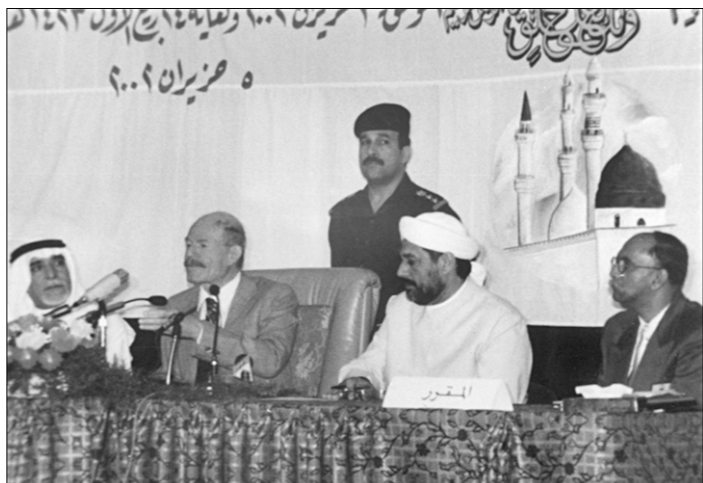
White House officials say Bush is listening to ideas from Sharon and Arab leaders on how to revive the ailing Middle East peace process ahead of a ministerial meeting expected late this summer in Turkey.

The conference, bringing regional representatives to the table with the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia, is still unfocused, with neither a date, a location nor a precise agenda.

Arafat on Friday urged the United States and Egypt to make "immediate" plans for such a meeting, while the Palestinians remain pessimistic about it achieving anything under present circumstances.

"Arab and international efforts will not succeed as long as the US administration does not put pressure on Sharon, who is refusing all political dialogue," Jerbawi said.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat also accused Sharon of planning to destroy Arafat's Palestinian Authority and replace it by a puppet administration in the reoccupied Palestinian territories.



An international symposium on "Problems of the Present Day World and the Teaching of the Holy Prophet (SM)" was held in Baghdad on June 5. Picture shows Iraqi Vice President Izzat Ibrahim (2nd from L) and Major General (Retd) Ibrahim (Extreme R) on the dais at the closing session of the symposium as chief guest and special guest respectively. Maj Gen Ibrahim led a 3-member Bangladesh delegation and presented a paper at the symposium. Two other members were Ahmed Shafi Maqsood and M Humayun Kabir.

Manila sees destruction of Abu Sayyaf

AFP, Zamboanga

A top Philippines general said Sunday the end was nigh for the Muslim Abu Sayyaf kidnap gang after two hostages, including a US missionary, were killed in a rescue bid.

Army scouts were trailing Abu Sayyaf remnants in the nearby southern islands of Basilan and Jolo and the neighbouring province of Zamboanga del Norte where local troops recovered an American hostage, Gracia Burnham, in a firefight with Abu Sayyaf members on Friday.