



Debris is removed from the scene following a suicide attack that destroyed a bus in the southern outskirts of Jerusalem on Tuesday. Nineteen people were killed and over 40 others were wounded in the rush hour blast aboard a bus travelling from the Jewish settlement of Gilo on Jerusalem's southern outskirts toward the city centre. The radical Islamic group Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack in a phone call to the AFP.

Suicide bombing hardens Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

The bloody bombing of a bus here Tuesday hardened Israeli attitudes towards the Middle East peace process at a critical juncture when the United States was preparing to announce its new strategy.

The attack was also likely to strengthen Israel's resolve to finish building a massive security fence along the West Bank, a project that has drawn bitter Palestinian criticism and a cool US reaction.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was outraged as, for the first time since taking office early

last year, he personally inspected the scene of the attack in southern Jerusalem that killed at least 18 passengers.

Surrounded by hundreds of security guards and police, Sharon derisively dismissed the idea of creating at least a provisional Palestinian state, one of the options US President George W. Bush is considering.

"It would be interesting to know what kind of Palestinian state they are talking about," Sharon belted out at the site of the attack in southern Jerusalem that was claimed by the radical Palestinian group Hamas.

"What we are seeing today is the continuation of Palestinian terrorism, and we must fight this terrorism, and that is what we are doing," he said.

Sharon was to meet later with top security aides to discuss a response.

Uzi Landau, the minister for internal security, also said the latest attack should be a lesson for Washington.

"If President Bush makes a mention of a future Palestinian state, this will be a clear contribution to future terrorism," he said.

US reopens Karachi consulate

AFP, Karachi

The US consulate in Pakistan's southern city of Karachi reopened Tuesday after last week's bomb attack but only American citizens were allowed to enter, a consulate official said.

"Today (Tuesday), our full American and Pakistani staff are back at work and the consulate will begin resuming normal operations, but for the near future the consulate building will only be open to the American citizens," spokesman John Kincannon told AFP.

The American Center inside the consulate, a cultural and information source with a library, will remain "temporarily closed" to the public, he added.

Violence mars voting in PNG: 4 killed

AFP, Port Moresby

Four men were killed and dozens injured when supporters of rival candidates clashed in gunfights at polling booths in Papua New Guinea on Tuesday, witnesses said.

The battles at polling stations in the central highlands town of Mount Hagen forced business to close.

A nurse at the Mount Hagen General Hospital said four men died of axe, knife and bullet wounds and "dozens" were injured.

"The fighting's still going on," she told Australian Associated Press. "The place is so tense - many didn't vote."

Storm brewing over Time article questioning PM's leadership

AFP, New Delhi

A storm was brewing Monday among Indian political leaders and government officials over a Time magazine article questioning Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's ability to lead the nuclear-armed nation.

"It is baseless and ill-advised. It is a completely biased and ill-informed article," foreign ministry spokeswoman Nirupama Rao said.

Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani, the cabinet number two, blasted the article.

"It is malicious. I am surprised. It is a bundle of untruth," Advani told the Press Trust of India.

Chinese flood toll tops 500

AFP, Beijing

The death toll in severe floods around China earlier this month has risen to more than 500, official sources said on Tuesday, as the country braced for further downpours.

In the worst-affected province of Shaanxi, north China, torrential rain from June 8 to 10 caused devastating floods which killed a confirmed 152 people, the state China daily newspaper said.

Another 300 missing "are not expected to be found alive", acting governor of the province Jia Zhibang told the newspaper, up from 266 thought to be missing late last week.

China is bracing for a summer of potentially disastrous floods, with regions around the Yangtze River warned on Monday that imminent heavy rain could cause further inundation.

India says no to pullback

REUTERS, New Delhi

India has no immediate plans to pull back troops from its border with Pakistan although tensions between the nuclear-armed rivals are easing, officials in New Delhi say.

In Washington, U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said the possibility of a conflict between the two countries had decreased, but several risks remained.

India's Tribune newspaper on Tuesday said New Delhi planned to start pulling back troops from the border in six to eight weeks but a Defence Ministry spokesman dismissed the report as speculative.

"No demobilisation unless Pakistan stops cross-border terrorism and infiltration," he said. "There may be some easing of tension here but there are no moves on demobilisation."

Hindu-majority but officially secular India accuses Pakistan, an Islamic nation, of training Muslim militants and sending them into the disputed Muslim-dominated Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir to support a 12-year-old rebellion there.

Pakistan says it gives only diplomatic and moral support to what it calls the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination.

Tensions escalated after a raid on India's parliament in December, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militants. The two countries have since massed a million soldiers on the border.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in an interview published on Monday the two countries had been close to war, even a nuclear war, in late May. He said they had pulled back from the brink after Pakistan's commitment to permanently halt incursions by militants into Indian-ruled

Kashmir.

The two armies have been trading heavy fire across the frontier for more than a month, killing and wounding scores of civilians. But even the firing has started to ease in the past few days, military spokesmen said.

"For the last four or five days the volume of firing has come down comparatively along the border compared with previous weeks," an Indian defence official in Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir state, told Reuters.

Officials in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan Kashmir, said the situation was also returning to normal along the five districts that border Indian-controlled Kashmir. "It's all peace," one official said. "Things are cooling down."

Even though the firing was less intense than before, one civilian was killed and one was wounded in artillery bombardment on Monday night, Indian officials said.

U.S. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld, who visited both India and Pakistan last week, told reporters at the Pentagon on Monday that the intense U.S.-led diplomatic efforts to avert a fourth war between the two countries were bearing fruit.

"There is a clear perception that tensions are easing and the likelihood of a conflict is lessening," he said. "Both nations have taken some initial steps that, while not definitive, are having a positive effect."

But he saw several risks including chances of a "terrorist attack beyond the control of either party which could be misunderstood and conceivably provoke a reaction."

N-deterrent averted war: Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf said Pakistan's first nuclear tests four years ago.

"By testing with outstanding success the delivery systems of our strategic capability, these men validated the reliability, accuracy and the deterrence value of Pakistan's premier surface-to-surface ballistic missile systems of the Haf series, namely Ghauri, Ghaznavi and Abdali," Musharraf said, quoted by the official APP news wire.

Musharraf said Pakistan's nuclear arsenal had brought "strategic balance" to South Asia and had

not bluff," he said, referring to Pakistan's first nuclear tests four years ago.

"By testing with outstanding success the delivery systems of our strategic capability, these men validated the reliability, accuracy and the deterrence value of Pakistan's premier surface-to-surface ballistic missile systems of the Haf series, namely Ghauri, Ghaznavi and Abdali," Musharraf said, quoted by the official APP news wire.

Musharraf said Pakistan's nuclear arsenal had brought "strategic balance" to South Asia and had

prevented India from starting a "limited war".

"Today's heightened international concerns of a nuclear conflict in South Asia, and the hesitation, frustration and inability of India to attack Pakistan or conduct a so-called limited war, bear ample testimony to the fact that strategic balance exists in South Asia," he said.

Bilateral ties have plunged to dangerously low levels in the past few weeks with India and Pakistan massing about one million troops on their common borders after an attack by Islamic militants on New

Delhi's parliament complex in December.

Pakistan test-fired three missiles, two of them capable of carrying nuclear warheads, at the end of last month in a defiant show of strength although Islamabad has repeatedly stressed it wants to find a peaceful way out of the crisis.

"Despite provocations, we have demonstrated this over the last few months: we do not want war, we are for peaceful resolution of all disputes, including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir," Musharraf said.

Americans get heavier than ever

AFP, Washington

The incidence of obesity in the United States has more than doubled since the 1960s and, increasingly, touches a younger and younger demographic, according to a study to be released Tuesday.

More than one in four Americans (26 percent of men, 28 percent of women) are obese, which is calculated based on their body mass index, a ratio of one's height to weight, according to a study by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The study, to appear in the American Annals of Internal Medicine, showed that most of those who were considered obese at the age of 36 were not obese before the age of 20 to 22, even if a great number of them were overweight during their adolescence.

Its publication comes just as US President George W. Bush prepares to launch a series of initiatives to encourage Americans to get off the couch and start to exercise. The campaign kicks off June 22 with a 4.8-kilometer (three-mile) race to which the Cabinet and White House staff have been invited.

First Lady Laura Bush will host a 2.4-kilometer (1.5-mile) walk the same day.

The researchers, in examining the medical histories of 9,179 people born between 1957 and 1964, found that those born later developed obesity nearly 30 percent more quickly than people born in the early years of the age group being examined.

Between 1960-1962, 13 percent of Americans were

obese, which at that time meant that a person weighed at least 20 percent more than his or her ideal body weight.

Less than 40 years later in 1999, 27 percent of Americans were obese.

"Our findings suggest that more focus needs to be placed on the young adult period, with particular emphasis on selected subpopulations," said Kathleen McTigue, an internist at UNC's medical school, which conducted the study.

The researchers also determined, without examining the reasons behind it, that black women or Latinas, had a tendency to become obese more quickly than white women.

Men of Latin-American heritage had the tendency to develop obesity 2.5 times more quickly than their European counterparts, McTigue said. And over the age of 28, black men are 2.2 times more likely to develop obesity than white men.

What makes obesity a particularly pressing problem is the complications it can cause for patients suffering life-threatening illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular illness, strokes or diabetes.

Obesity also has serious consequences for patients suffering from hypertension or high blood pressure, spinal and bone diseases such as osteoarthritis and can complicate pregnancy.

"Early intervention... has the potential to prevent significant illness and should not be overlooked," McTigue said.

'Missile man' files nomination

AFP, New Delhi

"Missile man" A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who is certain to become India's next president, filed his nomination papers Tuesday for next month's contest, the Press Trust of India said.

Kalam, 71, was accompanied by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Home Minister L.K. Advani, Defence Minister George Fernandes and senior politicians of India's ruling coalition when he went to submit his papers to parliamentary officials.

Kalam's nomination to the largely ceremonial post was seconded by Sonia Gandhi, the leader of India's main opposition Congress party, the news agency reported.

Most Indian political parties, except India's Marxists, have promised support for Kalam, which makes it certain that he will be elected president when the present incumbent, Kocheeril Raman Narayanan, completes his five year term on July 25.

He will, however, have to face fiery 87-year-old feminist and freedom fighter Lakshmi Sahgal, put up by the Marxists, for the presidential elections scheduled for July 15.

Kalam was named a candidate last Monday by India's ruling coalition led by the Hindu nationalist BJP party, after hectic negotiations between the government and the opposition failed to arrive at a consensus candidate.

Kalam is seen as a "politically correct choice" as he belongs to the minority Muslim community.

Kalam, who started his life selling newspapers, has worked in India's key defence and space centres for the past 43 years. He retired in November last year.

From 1983 until his retirement, he headed India's ambitious Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme to develop an array of weapons, including short, medium and ballistic missiles.

India has a special electoral college that votes for the president, which includes members of state legislative assemblies and the lower house of parliament.

EU blacklists 2 leading Palestinian groups

AFP, Jerusalem

Two Palestinian militant groups the European Union (EU) added Monday to its terrorist blacklist are leading forces in the Intifada and have carried out a string of devastating anti-Israeli attacks.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, formed as the Palestinian uprising erupted in September 2000, recruits its militants from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah group and operates in great secrecy.

Details on the number of supporters and the group's funding are not known, but according to Fatah sources, the radical splinter group has dozens of armed members, while scores more have offered to join up.

The Brigades, active mostly in the West Bank, was formed after the clashes which erupted on September 29, 2000 near Al-Aqsa Mosque in the east Jerusalem that fuelled the Intifada.

The group had gone along with a ceasefire called by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in mid-December, but abandoned the truce following the killing of one of its leaders at Tulkerem in the northern

West Bank on January 14, in a blast blamed on Israel. Since then, it has claimed a dozen deadly anti-Israeli attacks and is the only armed Palestinian group that has resorted to using female suicide bombers.

Israeli military authorities accuse West Bank Fatah chief Marwan Barghout, whose has been imprisoned by Israel since mid-April, of being behind the group's emergence.

The second group added to the EU blacklist, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), has also carried out numerous attacks, notably the assassination of an Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Zeevi.

Its leader, Ahmed Saadat, was arrested by Palestinian security agents in January under Israeli pressure and transferred last month to a West Bank jail with four PFLP militants found guilty by a Palestinian court of Zeevi's slaying.

The arrests were part of a deal brokered by the United States and the EU to end a siege by Israeli tanks and troops of Arafat's headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah in mid-May.



US actor Tom Cruise and his partner actress Penelope Cruz (L) arrive for the premiere of his latest film "Minority Report" at the Ziegfeld Theatre in New York City on Monday.

Malaysia to end amnesty for illegals on July 31

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia has announced it will end an amnesty period for some 600,000 illegal workers on July 31, after which those remaining here will face harsh new punishments including whipping.

Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said changes to Malaysia's immigration law for illegal workers and their employers would take effect on August 1, the official Bernama news agency reported late Monday.

The amnesty period, which has been in place since March 21, enables illegal immigrants, who are mainly Indonesian, to return home without being prosecuted.

"After the date of implementation, enforcement will be carried out and any appeal on the matter will not be entertained," said Abdullah, who is also home (interior) minister.

Under the new law, anyone found guilty of illegal entry or harbouring illegal immigrants would face a mandatory six months in jail and/or up to six

strokes of the cane.

Currently, offenders face up to five years' jail or a fine of not more than 10,000 ringgit (2,632 dollars), but courts mostly impose fines.

Abdullah said 147,502 illegal immigrants had already returned home in response to the voluntary repatriation program.

Malaysia, which is home to some 750,000 legal foreign workers, granted a similar amnesty in 1998.

The government, which has said it aims to deport about 10,000 Indonesian illegal immigrants every month, in January launched an offensive against the illegal immigrants with almost daily arrests.

Malaysia's increasing intolerance of illegal immigrants was also turned against legal workers from Indonesia after two riots in January by textile and construction workers.

The government announced that Indonesians would be hired in future only as domestic helpers and plantation workers.



Caretaker Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (R) talks to Nepal's Home Minister Khum Bahadur Khadka on the second day of the national convention of Nepali Congress in Kathmandu on Monday. Nepal's ruling party looked set on Monday to overturn a decision by the party president to expel caretaker Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba over his decision to dissolve parliament and call early elections.

Colombo-Tigers hold talks

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tiger rebels Tuesday held their second face-to-face talks in a month ahead of formal peace negotiations in Thailand, officials and the rebels said.

The head of the government's "peace secretariat" coordinating the Norwegian-sponsored peace bid, Bernard Gunatilleke, met with rebel leaders in the guerrilla-held Kilinochchi town, rebel radio said.

It said Gunatilleke flew to an area held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the company of two colleagues and a Norwegian diplomat and held two hours of talks.

The LTTE's political wing leader, S. P. Thamilselvan, and Gunatilleke

also held the first round of talks on May 21.

Official sources in Colombo said the two men discussed the implementation of the ceasefire agreement that went into effect from February 23. No further details were available of their talks.

The latest dialogue takes place in the backdrop of moves to arrange formal peace talks at a neutral venue in Thailand this month or in July.

Official sources said the first round of formal talks could be delayed until mid-July as the Tigers and the government were keen to ensure that their memorandum of understanding setting out the ceasefire was fully implemented.