

Arafat says no to war, talks peace

Israel occupies another West Bank town as death toll mounts

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat pleaded for "no more war" with Israel and said he accepted a proposal made by former US president Bill Clinton as a framework for a peace deal, according to an interview published Friday.

"Enough is enough," Arafat told Israeli daily Haaretz, repeating a phrase used recently by US President George W. Bush. He said he supported an initiative by a number of prominent Palestinians who published an advertisement against the suicide bombings.

He said unspecified "foreign" forces were exploiting young hopeless Palestinians and encouraging them to commit attacks in exchange for money. He said two families of suicide attackers from Jenin had received 30,000 dollars each from these foreigners. He also said his advisers were amazed that Israel has not taken steps against the radical groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, preferring to focus its military campaign against the Palestinian Authority and Arafat's Fatah faction.

The interview was the first time Arafat had declared his acceptance of the Clinton proposal.

That plan, which Arafat has repeatedly been criticized for rejecting in the past, envisions an Israeli withdrawal from much of the territory captured in the 1967 Middle East war, shared Palestinian-Israeli control of Jerusalem and land swaps that would allow 80 percent of Jewish settlers in the West Bank to remain there.

It also calls for an equitable solution for Palestinians who fled or were driven from their homes in the war that followed creation of the Israeli state in 1948. It proposes that right of return be granted only to those who qualify for it on humanitarian grounds and that others receive financial compensation.

Arafat said he agreed with border corrections and territorial exchanges, and that he was proposing to accept Israeli sovereignty over, and access to, the Western Wall and the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem's Old City.

The Palestinian leader said he believed it was possible to reach peace with hardline Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who has vowed never to negotiate with the Palestinian leader.

Arafat said he would not rule out a much-vaunted US proposal for the creation of a temporary Palestinian state but said he had not yet received any information from Washington on the idea.

He also said he had not ruled out a plan put forward by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Palestinian parliamentary chief Ahmed Qorei, which includes the declaration of a Palestinian state to be followed by negotiations on borders, Jerusalem and refugees.

During the interview, which took place at Arafat's battered headquarters compound in Ramallah, the Palestinian leader said work had already begun on reforming his security services, a key demand from Israel and the United States. He said

he was ready to cooperate with Israeli security, on condition that they let him reorganise his own security services.

Meanwhile, Israeli tanks stormed into another West Bank city Friday, pursuing a new policy of grabbing Palestinian land in retaliation for violence hours after a gunman shot dead five Israelis in a Jewish settlement.

The move on Nablus was followed shortly afterwards by a skirmish in the Gaza Strip, when border guards killed three Palestinians after being attacked near the Erez crossing point into Israel.

It also came as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat issued a call for "no more war" and said he believed he could reach a peace agreement with hardline Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

But the latest violence has forced US President George W. Bush to delay his much-anticipated announcement of a new Middle East strategy for fear his words would fall on deaf ears.

A dozen tanks and armoured vehicles penetrated more than a kilometre (nearly a mile) into the eastern part of Nablus, while other armoured units headed for the town from other directions, according to Palestinian security officials.

The army was already occupying five autonomous West Bank towns -- Jenin, Qalqilya, Beitunia, Bethlehem and Tulkeram.



Supporters of India's opposition Congress Party take part in a farmers rally in New Delhi on Friday. Thousands of farmers protested against police opening firing at a demonstration in Haryana state earlier this month where eight farmers were killed. They also demanded that the government waive their outstanding power and water bills and release their union leaders from prison.

Top Abu Sayyaf leader slain in Philippines

AFP, Manila

A senior leader of al-Qaida linked Muslim rebels, who kidnapped three Americans, was killed Friday during a high seas shootout with the Philippines military.

Military officials said the body of Abu Sabaya -- who had a five million dollar bounty on his head -- was fished out of the Sulu Sea along with those of two of his men after the dawn clash with an elite Navy Special Warfare Group (SWAG) unit.

Marine Colonel Juancho Saban identified the other dead men as Abu Musa and Ibnu Hajam.

Four other gunmen were arrested after the navy sunk their boat off the coastal town of Sibucu on Mindanao island, the military added.

President Gloria Arroyo hailed the military "for their continuing determination and tenacity to finish off the Abu Sayyaf."

ROK president's second son arrested

AFP, Seoul

Prosecutors on Friday arrested the second son of South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung on charges of corruption, officials said.

The arrest of Kim Hong-Up, 52, was made after a Seoul court approved the prosecution's request for his emergency detention, court officials said.

Hong-Up is accused of taking 2.28 billion won (1.85 million dollars) from businessmen in return for influence-peddling.

Hong-Up's younger brother, Kim Hong-Gul, has been also detained on similar charges.

The scandals have badly tarnished the image of President Kim, who took office in early 1998 on a pledge to fight graft.

Europe to declare itself polio-free

AFP, United Nations

The 51 countries of Europe are expected to declare themselves free of poliomyelitis this week, a milestone towards a polio-free world by 2005, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said Thursday.

The announcement is expected to be made in Copenhagen on Friday by the European Regional Commission for Certification of Poliomyelitis Eradication, an independent body of international public health experts.

Europe will be the third geographical region to certify that it has had no indigenous cases for three years, following the Americas, in September 1994, and the Western Pacific, in October 2000.



Lakshmi Sahgal, the presidential candidate of India's left parties, waves to supporters before filing her nomination papers at Parliament House in New Delhi on Friday. The eighty-seven-year-old feminist and freedom fighter filed her nomination papers to contest next month's presidential polls in India against hot favourite Abdul Kalam, architect of the country's missile program.

US immigration visa seekers on decrease

AFP, Washington

The number of foreigners seeking US immigrant visas using a lottery that ensures diversity in the applicant pool fell 38 percent from last year in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the State Department said this week.

The department said it received only 6.2 million valid entries for the 2003 "diversity immigrant visa lottery" in the October 2001 application period, compared to 10 million

valid entries submitted in October 2000 for the 2002 lottery.

About 2.5 million applicants were disqualified in the 2001 lottery, about a half-million fewer than in 2000, the figures showed.

The disparity may be partly attributed to a decline in applications from Middle Eastern nationals, amid fears over an anti-Arab or anti-Muslim backlash in the United States after September 11, suggested the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Fate of Colombo-LTTE direct talks uncertain

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition Friday warned that proposed peace talks between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels may not take place and the country could slide back into conflict.

Former foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said there were no signs that an agenda had been prepared for the negotiations due to take place at a neutral venue in Thailand.

Kadirgamar, who handled the previous government's peace process with the rebels, told reporters both Colombo and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have started trading allega-

tions. "The process of allegations and counter allegations is taking centre stage," Kadirgamar said. "One cannot discount the possibility that the parties will never sit down to talks."

His remarks came a day after the government admitted delays in launching the formal talks aimed at ending decades of ethnic bloodshed that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

Kadirgamar, a member of parliament from President Chandrika Kumaratunga's opposition People's Alliance, said his party was not seeking a place at the talks as it was unaware of the agenda for the negotiations.

Pakistan takes on terrors Indian troops kill 10 rebels, Kashmir official shot dead

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has intensified its crackdown on extremist groups after last week's deadly car-bomb attack outside the US consulate in Karachi, arresting dozens of suspected militants and placing police on the "highest alert" for further assaults, officials said Friday.

Security sources said a series of arrests of people with suspected links to banned militant groups were made in southern Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital, and central Punjab.

Around 700 suspected extremists had already been detained following a grenade attack in March

on a church in Islamabad's diplomatic enclave that killed five people.

The crackdown continued after a car-bombing outside Karachi's Sheraton hotel in May killed 14 people.

However progress has been slow in identifying the people behind the attacks and there have been no arrests of people believed to have directly participated in them.

In the latest round-up police arrested suspected hardcore members of the outlawed sectarian Sunni group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and the outlawed Kashmiri separatist group, Jaish-e-Mohammad, the sources said.

Indian troops kill 10 rebels, Kashmir official shot dead

AFP, Srinagar

Indian security forces shot dead 10 Islamic separatist militants, while suspected rebels killed an official from Kashmir's ruling party, police said Friday.

Personnel of the National Rifles, the Indian army's counter-insurgency wing, gunned down three militants at Kaimoh village, near Bandipora township, 60 kilometers (38 miles) north of Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

Police said the firefight erupted when soldiers were trying to defuse a landmine planted by militants. "As the troops started defusing it, the militants opened fire, resulting in a retaliation by the troops," the police spokesman said.

"Three militants were killed while others fled the area." The army, backed by counter-insurgency police, shot dead two more militants in a separate encounter overnight in an adjoining village.

In Wadipora, a village near Handwara 85 kilometers (50 miles) north of Srinagar, suspected militants shot dead an official of Indian Kashmir's ruling National

Conference. Ghulam Rasool, who served as a block president for the ruling party, was shot dead inside his house, police said.

He was the second National Conference official to be gunned down this week.

Later Thursday security forces shot dead three more militants in the nearby village of Hardu, police said.

In a separate incident, police said Indian troops killed two militants in the village of Tris in the northern district of Kupwara, which borders Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

The pair belonged to Kashmir's dominant militant group, Hizbul Mujahedin, and the Pakistan-based group Jaish-e-Mohammad, police said.

India accuse Jaish and another group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, of an attack on its national parliament in December in which 14 people were killed.

The incident triggered a major military stand-off between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, a civilian lost both his legs when he stepped on a landmine in the village of Warsun in Kupwara district, police said.

India awaits Musharraf's action 'Big brothers' help ease tension: Advani

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Friday said that India was awaiting implementation of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's pledges on ending infiltration and terrorism through "concrete, visible and permanent" action on the ground.

This was conveyed by Vajpayee during a ten-minute telephonic conversation with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad during which the two leaders discussed the situation in the region.

Asserting that while India was not for military confrontation with Pakistan, the Prime Minister said the country was determined to resist cross-border terrorism emanating

from that country with resoluteness and determination.

The Prime Minister emphasised that the problems between India and Pakistan are bilateral ones that need to be sorted out by the two countries.

He also referred to the fact that the issue of Jammu and Kashmir was not a "religious" one and that India has a larger Muslim population than Pakistan. He said that less than five per cent of the Muslim population of India lived in J&K.

During the parleys, the Prime Minister conveyed India's clear and consistent position on the current Indo-Pak situation and its unflinching determination to seek a permanent end to cross-border terrorism.

Meanwhile, the lessening of

tension between India and Pakistan was "primarily" due to the stand taken by the big powers United States, Russia and Britain and now it was their responsibility to ensure further progress in this regard, Home Minister LK Advani has said.

"Lessening of (Indo-Pak) tension is primarily because these great powers have now taken a stand.... Now the word is not from Pakistan but from the leaders of these countries which are leading the global coalition against terrorism", Advani said in the "Talkback" programme on Doordarshan.

"We will not judge Pakistan any longer by their words.... we will go entirely by what we perceive on the ground", he said.

Babywalkers don't help babies

AFP, Paris

Babywalkers -- wheeled seats that let infants move around with their feet on the floor -- are a brake on a child's development, doctors say.

Dublin researchers asked the parents of 190 normal, healthy children to record the age at which their baby was able to roll over, sit alone, crawl, stand with support and then walk with support, and finally stand and walk alone.

The 102 infants that used babywalkers experienced delays before they were able to crawl, stand alone and walk independently.

Each aggregated 24 hours spent in the babywalker translated into a statistical delay of 3.3 days before the child was able to walk alone, and 3.7 days before he could stand alone.



Pilot Steve Fossett waves at the chase plane from the capsule of Spirit of Freedom as the balloon floats at 23,000 feet, 650 km east of Sydney, Australia on Friday. Fossett's mission to become the first person to complete a solo circumnavigation of the world by balloon is on scheduled. He is making his sixth bid for the record.

EU talks tough on migration

REUTERS, Seville

European Union leaders have converged on this southern Spanish city to hammer out tough rules against illegal migration into their wealthy bloc.

The 15 leaders are due to start their two-day summit two hours later than scheduled on Friday to allow delegations delayed by a widely-observed Spanish general strike on Thursday to reach the conference centre -- and to let them watch the keenly awaited England-Brazil World Cup match in Japan.

Hours before the summit opened amid tight security, a car bomb exploded on Spain's southern coast about 125 miles from Seville. Local government officials said six people were injured, including two Britons.

The attack bore the hallmarks of Basque separatists ETA.

The EU leaders will discuss reforms to make EU summits more efficient, but they have been spared a potentially embarrassing row with France over reining in its budget deficit after finance ministers crafted a compromise in Madrid early Friday morning.

After recent gains by right-wing populist parties playing on fears of mass migration, the leaders aim to show voters they are getting tough on the estimated 500,000 illegal immigrants entering the 370 million

strong bloc each year. They will adopt an action plan to tighten border controls, set deadlines for adopting a common asylum policy, pledge to speed up the expulsion of rejected migrants and enlist the compliance of third countries in controlling migratory flows.

But they must overcome differences over whether to withhold financial aid to countries that do not cooperate against people smugglers or take back migrants by Europe.

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, whose country takes over the EU's rotating presidency from Madrid on July 1, backed the harder line championed by Spain and Britain.

"I think we need a mechanism whereby countries agree to take back their own citizens who have illegally come to the EU," he told a news conference in Seville on Thursday evening.

But Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt said the EU leaders also had to tackle poverty, the main cause of migration, by opening up their markets to imports from poorer countries.

"If poorer countries cannot export their goods to our markets, then they will end up exporting their people instead. You cannot say 'no' to both goods and the migrants. It has to be one or the other," Verhofstadt said.

Starvation looms in flood-hit Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Hundreds of thousands of flood-affected people in India's northeastern state of Assam face starvation as food supplies dry up and roads are cut off after heavy rains, officials said Friday.

The Dhemaj district 465 kilometers (288 miles) east of Assam's capital Guwahati has been hammered by flash floods, triggered by monsoon rains, that have submerged at least 50 villages and marooned up to 50,000 people.

"Road communication between Dhemaj district and the rest of Assam has remained snapped since Tuesday with floodwaters overtopping the national highway in at least three places," said Biswanjan Samal, Dhemaj district magistrate. Samal said supplies of essential goods have stopped, leading to a

"crisis-like" situation in the district. "Very soon, the existing stocks would dry up and there would be scarcity of food and medicines, besides petrol and kerosene," Samal said.

"We are particularly worried about the possibility of water-borne diseases breaking out with the hospitals here having virtually no medicines at all."

Samal said medicines worth 2.5 million rupees (51,000 dollars) were urgently required to treat people with symptoms of diarrhoea and fever.

With more heavy rains forecast and flood control officials warning that the river Brahmaputra was rising steadily, the Assam government has put police, paramilitary and disaster management teams on standby to assist civil authorities. The river Jadhoh, a tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra, was still

flowing above the danger mark at various places.

"There have been breaches of embankments in at least three places and many more dykes are being threatened by the gushing floodwaters," district police chief N.M. Haque said.

Haque said hundreds of policemen were checking the major embankments for signs of breaching.

Villagers were sheltering in makeshift camps and in schools with their homes either washed away or inundated by floodwaters, officials said.

"Like each year, the floods have washed away all their personal belongings and properties, including granaries -- all in a flash," said Dilip Saikia Sonowal, a local lawmaker.



Russian-born Miss Universe, Oxana Fedorova takes an HIV/AIDS test on Thursday at the Nyumbani children's home where she visited infected children, during her tour aiming to throw the spotlight on the effects of Aids in Kenya. The test was to demystify the stigma and encourage young people to know their status.

Earth escapes 'big bang'

AFP, Paris

A football-pitch-sized asteroid capable of razing a major city came within a whisker of hitting the Earth on June 14, but was only spotted three days later, scientists said Thursday.

Asteroid 2002 MN, estimated at up to 120 metres (yards) long, hurtled by the Earth at a distance of 120,000 kilometers (75,000 miles), well within the orbit of the Moon and just a hair's breadth in galactic terms.

It is the closest recorded near-miss by any asteroid, with the exception of a 10-metre (33-foot) rock, 1994 XM1, which approached within 105,000 kilometers (65,000 miles) on December 9, 1994, they said.

"2002 MN is a lightweight among asteroids and incapable of causing damage on a global scale, such as

the object associated with the extinction of the dinosaurs," the Near Earth Object (NEO) Information Centre of Britain's National Space Centre said in a press release.

"However, if it had hit the Earth, 2002 MN may have caused local devastation similar to that which occurred in Tunguska, Siberia in 1908, when 2,000 square kilometres (800 square miles) of forest were flattened," it said.

Spokesman Kevin Yates told AFP that the asteroid was only spotted on June 17 -- three days after its flyby.

Had it collided with the Earth, "the most likely thing is that it would have detonated in the atmosphere, creating a blast wave," he said.

"You're talking in the region of 10 megatonnes -- quite a lot of energy to be released in any one place," he said.

The risk of the Earth being hit by an asteroid or comet is very remote, and most objects never come so close as 2002 MN.

NASA's Near-Earth Object (NEO) Program website confirmed the incident and said 2002 MN was spotted by the Lincoln Near Earth Asteroid Research (LINEAR), a project funded by the US Air Force and NASA and located in New Mexico.

The website of the US magazine Sky & Telescope voiced alarm at the near miss.

"What is most shocking is just how close it came to Earth," it said. "Though the exact details of an impact scenario depend on the rock's composition, had it hit the Earth, the event would have been 'Tunguska-like', with a force rivaling the largest H-bombs."