

# Israel turns to talks table

## Bush sees progress in ME

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and newly appointed Palestinian finance minister Salam Fayad held the first such talks in months in Jerusalem late Monday, as President George W. Bush said some "progress" had been made towards reforms in the Palestinian Authority.

The meeting at an undisclosed location was the first contact in more than two months between cabinet ministers from the Palestinian Authority and Israel, which has occupied most of the West Bank since June 19 after a series of deadly Palestinian attacks.

Peres' office was quoted as telling public radio the ministers notably discussed an international project to collect funds for the Palestinians.

It also said their talks will be followed by a series of other meetings.

Palestinian officials had said earlier that new Palestinian interior minister General Abdel Razaq al-Yahiya would also take part in the meeting with Peres, but the radio said they would meet separately on Tuesday.

In Washington, Bush said: "I believe some progress is being made towards the institutions that I have talked about that are necessary for a Palestinian state to emerge which will give us all confidence in its ability to fight off terrorist activities."

The president said in a White House news conference it was also important for Palestinian institutions to emerge to ensure that foreign aid was properly spent and that a valid judicial system could develop.

"What is very important is that those institutions evolve and grow so that the true will of the Palestinian people can be reflected in the government and (that) institutions grow and evolve so that there is in fact separation of power," he said.

"So that all the hopes of the Palestinians don't rest on one person, and I believe that we are making some progress there."

Bush said in a key speech on the Middle East last month that the establishment of a Palestinian state was conditional on new leadership emerging not tainted by terrorism, in the culmination of his strategy of marginalising Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

The US president also said he would call upon Israel to halt incursions in Palestinian areas of the West Bank launched after a spate of suicide bombings, "as security improves," but declined to define when exactly the withdrawal should occur.

With signs of renewed dialogue between the two sides, France and Russia revived calls for an international conference on the 21-month crisis that has left more than 2,000 people dead and the peace process in tatters.

And US officials said plans were underway for foreign ministers from the international diplomatic "quartet" on the Middle East -- the United States, European Union, UN and Russia -- to meet next week at the United Nations.

"We're looking at seeing if we can't schedule a quartet meeting at the minister's level in New York on the 15th of this month, a week from today," US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

The sudden rekindling of diplomatic efforts came as Israeli commentators called for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to come up with a political initiative to capitalise on the lull in violence that has accompanied his three-week invasion of the West Bank. The Israeli army's top brass meanwhile predicted that Arafat's days at the helm of the Palestinian Authority were numbered, with popular Palestinian opinion likely to nudge him out within six months and allow a new leadership to emerge, the Israeli daily Haaretz said.

# New AIDS drugs for rich

REUTERS, Barcelona

Drug firms unveiled more progress in developing innovative AIDS therapies at the international AIDS conference on Tuesday, highlighting a gulf in care between rich and poor.

Most of the sophisticated new treatments will be priced out of the reach of developing countries, where 95 per cent of those infected by the virus live.

Experts also dampened speculation that the holy grail of an effective vaccine against AIDS could be less than five years away, warning that developing protection against the killer virus would be a long haul.

A stream of new antiretroviral drugs in recent years mean AIDS is no longer an automatic death sentence, but it continues to claim millions of lives in poor countries where expensive combination therapy is available to only a few.

As AIDS activists clamoured for cheaper versions of these drugs for all, Western pharmaceutical companies held out glimpses of yet more sophisticated treatments, offering hope to patients who have developed resistance to existing medicines.



PHOTO: AFP  
Bernhard Schwartlander (R), director of the World Health Organisation HIV/AIDS programme, delivers a speech as Malaysian human rights activist Irene Fernandez (L) and Ugandan AIDS activist Milly Katana (2ndR) listen during the 14th World AIDS Conference, in Barcelona on Monday. The man pictured second on left is unidentified.



PHOTO: AFP  
Children play in a flooded street under rainfall in Guwahati on Monday. Lashing rains triggered fresh mudslides, which submerged further villages in India's northeastern state of Assam, where already some 765,000 people have been rendered homeless.

# Villagers flood neighbours to save themselves

AFP, Guwahati

Flood-threatened villagers in India's northeastern Assam province have been maliciously cutting away dykes by night so that neighbouring villages are flooded and their own are spared, officials said Tuesday.

In the worst-affected Dhemaji district, some 465 kilometres (290 miles) from the state capital Guwahati, villagers had ventured out at night with spades and crowbars to cut dykes away from upstream villages, Flood Control department officials said.

"As soon as the villagers see that the strong river current is threatening to breach the embankment or dyke protecting their village, they invariably go in small groups to breach the spur some distance away from their area at night," one official said.

"When a portion of the embankment is breached, the course of the river changes, resulting in heavy flooding of the villages. Local people

are caught unawares."

There have been at least a dozen such incidents -- known as "public cuts" -- in the district in the last fortnight.

"You save your own village at the cost of others. This bizarre practice has been going on for a long time, and it is very difficult to guard every inch of the embankment to avoid such artificial breaching," Dilip Saikia Sonowal, a local lawmaker told AFP.

Some 765,000 people have been left homeless by the flooding in the east of the country, most being housed in temporary camps or schools, according to officials.

Small groups of people, meanwhile, are cashing in on the situation, earning up to 5,000 rupees (about 100 dollars) a day by tricking motorists into becoming stranded, Sonowal said.

The locals, mostly youths, wait alongside vulnerable sections of the flooded highways for cars and other vehicles to approach, most of them coming from the adjoining Arunachal Pradesh state.

"Once the vehicle approaches the breached road, the youths deceive the driver by saying many cars have already managed to go before them," Sonowal said.

Unsuspecting drivers then try their luck but invariably become stranded and have to beg the youths for help.

Meanwhile, the flood situation continues to be grim with the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries flowing above the danger levels in various places.

"The situation is still critical, with heavy rains and swollen rivers continuing to cause misery to the people," Assam Flood Control Minister Nurzamal Sarkar told AFP.

Hundreds of rescue workers, including police and paramilitary soldiers, were distributing relief material and food to flood victims in Dhemaji district.

# Inspector charged with plot to kill Musharraf

AP, Karachi

Pakistani police on Tuesday charged a military man with attempting to assassinate President General Pervez Musharraf.

Inspector Wasim Akhtar, of the paramilitary Rangers, was to appear in court on charges of attempted murder in connection with an April 26 attempt to kill Musharraf, Karachi police official Azad Khansaid.

Akhtar had been assigned to provide security to the President who was in the southern port city of Karachi to campaign for a "yes" vote on his referendum to extend his term as Pakistan's president.

According to the police chargesheet which was seen by The Associated Press before being sealed, Akhtar's job in the assassination plot was to notify his accomplices of Musharraf movements.

A small pickup truck packed with 227 kgs of explosives was parked about one km from the airport on Karachi's Shahr-e-Faisal Road.

Akhtar allegedly telephoned his accomplices when Musharraf's entourage left the airport. They waited for his vehicle and as it passed the explosive-laden truck they hit the remote detonator. But it failed.

They later retrieved the vehicle and used it nearly two months later on June 14 to kill at least 12 Pakistanis and injure 50 others in a powerful explosion outside the US Consulate in Karachi.

Two of Akhtar's alleged accomplices -- Mohammed Hanif and Mohammed Imran -- have been charged in connection with that bombing as well as with attempted murder in the failed assassination. The three men are to appear in court later today.

Hanif, Imran and a third man, Sheikh Mohammed Ahmed, are members of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen al-Almi, Maj Gen Salahuddin Satti of the Rangers said yesterday.

The organisation is a splinter group of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, or Movement of Holy Warriors, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist group whose members fought in Afghanistan and Kashmir, said provincial police chief Syed Kamal Shah.

# Africa Union starts its journey

REUTERS, Durban

Africa launched a continent-wide union on Tuesday to try to end poverty and war, pledging a home-grown program of clean government to end human rights abuses and attract foreign investment.

"We are saying we are not begging for assistance any more. It is in everyone's interest to help develop Africa," South African deputy foreign minister Aziz Pahad said of the formation of the 53-nation African Union (AU).

The first assembly of heads of state of the AU approved the establishment of a Peace and Security Council that will have powers to deal with conflict and security issues under AU auspices.

The leaders attending a summit

in the South African resort city of Durban will later move to a sports stadium to stage the public launch of the AU with marching bands, tribal dancers and a helicopter flypast.

The AU, which replaces the ineffectual Organization of African Unity (OAU), aims to replicate the European Union in fostering prosperity and democracy through social, economic and regional integration.

Unlike the OAU, the AU will have the right to intervene in member states in cases of war crimes and genocide.

Despite progress in ending long wars in Sierra Leone and Angola, belligerents from Liberia to Sudan, including both Congos and the Great Lakes region, are still playing havoc.

Diplomats and some delegates said prospects for promoting democracy appeared uncertain at best as some African leaders came to power through unconstitutional means and many remained reluctant to embrace accountable and transparent government.

"The major problem of the OAU has always been African solidarity -- a club of brother leaders who stand together and who do not condemn, certainly not publicly," said South African political analyst Jackie Cilliers.

"And this is also evident here, because what the leaders are doing is that they are trying to launch a new structure and for that they need solidarity, they need one another, so they are trying to avoid issues that are controversial -- Zimbabwe, for example."

# Ram Temple at any cost: Singhal

PTI, Ranchi

Vishwa Hindu Parishad President Ashok Singhal asserted on Monday the Ram Temple would be constructed in Ayodhya at any cost and "no force can stop us."

"How can the court decide the birth place of Lord Ram?" asked Singhal while addressing a gathering here. He said: "No force can stop us from construction of the temple in Ayodhya."

Commenting on Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, the VHP leader said "he has become a disciple of his students (former Taliban) in the hope of using them against India."

Reiterating VHP's demand for

trifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir, Singhal said "Kashmiri Muslims cannot decide the state's fate. It is the Indian Government which has to decide."

"Hindus in Jammu are being ignored. They are not getting land, rather facing terrorists' attacks. Even Amarnath yatris are not being spared."

Criticising the "so called" secular parties, Singhal said, "Their job is just to criticise and abuse Hindus."

The demand for a ban on Bajrang Dal and RSS by some political parties, he said, "is to prevent Hindus from going for self-defence at a time when some elements are coming with jihadi junoon."

# 'US to use all tools to oust Saddam'

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush vowed Monday to use "all tools" at his disposal to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein but declined to say whether that goal would be achieved by the end of his first term.

Speaking at a surprise news conference, the president said that the world would be a safer place once Saddam had been overthrown and said he was personally engaged in "all aspects" of planning to achieve that goal.

"It's a stated policy of my government to have regime change. And it hasn't changed. And we'll use all tools at our disposal to do so," Bush told reporters.

But the US leader declined to answer the question of whether

regime change in Iraq will be a reality before the end of his first term, in late January 2005, saying: "It's hypothetical."

The Bush administration has repeatedly threatened to topple Saddam's regime, which it accuses of developing weapons of mass destruction.

The New York Times reported Friday that a top secret US military document outlines a massive, three-pronged attack on Iraq by land, sea and air with as many as 250,000 troops and hundreds of warplanes.

Bush, clearly unhappy at the report, which he attributed to some low-level official "flexing some know-how muscle," said that people "shouldn't speculate about the desire of the government to have a

regime change."

But he also indicated that there is no urgency to act and that while the military option is one of a number being considered, there are "different ways to do it."

Meanwhile, Iraq is ready to face up to a US military strike, a senior Iraqi MP said Tuesday, a day after US President George W. Bush vowed to use all the tools at Washington's disposal to change Saddam Hussein's regime.

"The Iraqi people, who have had experience of defending their homeland and independence, are completely ready to foil the aggressive US policy," said Saleem al-Qubaisi, head of the parliamentary committee on Arab and international relations.

# N Korea steps up tensions

AFP, Seoul

North Korea on Tuesday escalated tensions following a naval skirmish last month, insisting that the rival South give notice of when it plans to salvage a patrol boat sunk in the clash.

The North Korean military said it wanted to prevent a new clash but the demand was seen in Seoul as a rejection of the South's demands for an apology for the June 29 incident.

The worst armed skirmish in three years between the two countries left four South Korean sailors dead, one missing and an estimated 30 dead and wounded on the North Korean side.

South Korea plans to salvage the "Chamsuri 357" which went down off Yeonpyeong island in the Yellow

Sea, possibly with the body of the missing sailor. The rich fishing field is claimed by both Koreas.

"The KPA (Korean People's Army) side is not opposed at all to the South side's request to salvage the recently sunken warship," a KPA spokesman said in a statement.

"However, the South side should inform the KPA side of the date and time of salvaging operation, ships and equipment to be involved, their operating waters and other details in advance to prevent unexpected new clashes," he said.

The spokesman asserted that the South Korean boat sank in waters "under the military control" of the North.

But the South Korean navy brushed aside the North's demand, warning it not to obstruct the sal-

# Turkey govt in tatters

REUTERS, Ankara

Ailing Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's three-party government teetered on the verge of collapse on Tuesday after ministers resigned and his party rebelled in the face of possible early elections.

Markets fearful of elections could undermine a \$16 billion IMF-backed crisis plan nervously awaited an announcement from Ecevit on whether he would resign. The IMF said its biggest creditor should stick strictly to its financial targets.

As Ecevit's grip on power slips after two months of illness -- stirring conflict and exasperation in his coalition and party -- an alternative government could be hard to find.

"We just don't want to blow the IMF program in such a critical

period. I hope a few of the parties realize it will create a very unpalatable environment if the IMF says it's going to suspend the program," said Hakan Avci at Global Securities.

Financial markets and mainstream newspapers looked to some form of arrangement allying Husamettin Ozkan, who resigned from government and Ecevit's party on Monday, Foreign Minister Ismail Cem and Economy Minister Kemal Dervis, father of IMF rescues.

"The market is looking for possible combinations of parties to make a coalition. Anything including Cem and Dervis would be positive," Emin Ozturk, economist at Bender Securities, said.



PHOTO: AFP  
A file photo dated July 1 shows from L-R Deputy Prime Minister Husamettin Ozkan, coalition partners leader of the Nationalist Movement Party Devlet Bahçeli, Premier Bulent Ecevit and Motherland Party leader Mesut Yilmaz during a press conference in Ankara. A wave of massive resignations by ministers and parliament members led by Husamettin Ozkan, the right-hand man of ailing Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit rocked Turkey's jittery political scene on Monday.

# Bomb attack on Delhi school: 2 hurt

AFP, New Delhi

Two persons were injured Tuesday in a bomb blast on one of the Indian capital's most prestigious schools, officials and witnesses said.

Witnesses said a student and a worker of the Delhi Public School's (DPS) Noida branch were hit by shrapnel when an unidentified attacker hurled an explosive device in the fortified school's main lobby.

"Both were hit by glass shrapnel and the injuries are not serious," said DPS receptionist Raji Sethi, who witnessed the bomb attack.

"I saw something being thrown in and then there was a blast, a huge fire and then lots of fumes," she said.



PHOTO: AFP  
Director General of the paramilitary Ranger Major General Saluddin Satti addressing the press conference, as two Islamic militants accused in the car-bomb outside the US consulate stand next, in southern Karachi on Monday.

# Hunt on for accomplices of Karachi bombers

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani investigators launched a hunt Tuesday for at least 13 accomplices of three Islamic militants arrested in connection with the suicide bomb attacks on the US consulate and French naval engineers here.

"We have launched a massive hunt for the arrest of other accused involved in the US consulate blast and other major terrorist activities," Sindh province police chief Brigadier Mukhtar Sheikh told AFP.

"The hunt is on and parties are looking for the group's possible hideouts as a result of interrogation of the three arrested suspects."

The paramilitary Rangers on Monday announced the arrests of

three militants who had confessed to planning the June 14 suicide car-bomb attack on the US consulate, which killed 12 Pakistanis, and produced two of the militants at a press conference.

All three are from the Harkat-ul-Mujahedeen-al-Alami, an offshoot of the banned Kashmiri militant outfit Harkatul Mujahedeen, Rangers chief Major General Salahuddin Satti said.

Police said two of the militants had also admitted to carrying out reconnaissance surveys of the French engineers' bus route and the Sheraton hotel, where a suicide attack on May 8 killed 11 French engineers and three Pakistanis including the suicide bomber.

# Indian politicians flayed for rejecting clean up moves

AFP, New Delhi

Indian legal experts Tuesday slammed political parties for brushing aside a Supreme Court ruling making it compulsory for poll candidates to reveal any criminal cases pending against them.

The experts, supported by the media, said the rejection revealed the attitude of national and regional parties to the Supreme Court and their reluctance to boot out criminals from the nation's electoral system.

At least two dozen MPs in the national parliament have criminal cases pending against them while some of India's 30 provincial legisla-

tures boast of scores of lawmakers with long police records.

More than 700 politicians elected as members of state legislatures have criminal cases pending against them.

"I am pained by this development. It shows they care little about a candidate's past, whether he was a criminal and committed 100 robberies is of no consequence," said S.R. Maheshwari, director of the Centre for Political and Administrative Studies, an independent think tank.

"Their first instinct is self survival and aggrandisement. They will not make a decision which could compromise their authority," he added.

National political parties said Monday the court did not have the constitutional muscle to forge laws and argued only parliament possessed the powers for a comprehensive law to inject cleanliness into electoral practices.

The court in May ruled that poll contestants will have to disclose criminal cases pending against them as well as their assets, liabilities and their level of education before standing.

Tamil Nadu state's chief minister, Jayalalitha Jayaram, had to quit because she was convicted on corruption charges.