

Israel mulls unfreezing PA funds as talks gather pace

Reforms to bog down if Israel maintains siege: Arafat

AFP, Jerusalem

As tentative talks between Israel and the Palestinians pick up speed, Israel said Wednesday it is mulling releasing some of the 400 million dollars in frozen Palestinian taxes being held by Israel to restart the crippled Palestinian economy.

Palestinian officials said that after the first talks between Israel's dovish Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and new Palestinian ministers, a larger meeting of senior security, political and economic officials could be held early next week.

While hopes rose that the diplomatic initiative could be getting back on track, sporadic violence flared in the territories, with an Israeli soldier seriously injured in clashes in the Gaza Strip.

An Israeli official said the government was considering unblocking the Palestinian Authority taxes and customs revenues frozen by the Jewish state during since the conflict erupted in September 2000.

The move was discussed by Peres and new Palestinian finance minister Salam Fayad in their first meeting on Monday, as a possible way to tackle the economic crisis in the Palestinian territories where overall unemployment is more than 40 percent and rising.

"We are considering this move, but it has not been finalised, there is no agreement," said the Israeli official, who asked not to be named.

He said Israel was examining ways of establishing a mechanism to ensure that the money was not siphoned off to militant groups or to pay Palestinian security forces also involved in attacking Israelis.

"It was at the request of the Palestinians, but it is to the benefit of both sides to see the Palestinian economy recover. But on the other hand, we want to be sure that the money does not serve other purposes, like terrorism, either directly or indirectly," said the official.

The money is largely customs duties collected on goods being shipped into the Palestinian territories through Israeli ports.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has said he is seeking ways to relieve the harsh conditions that almost two years of violence have created in the Palestinian territories, and which has been exacerbated since Israel invaded the West Bank three weeks ago.

Moreover Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority warned Wednesday it will be unable to continue security and other reforms if Washington fails to pressure Israel into lifting its siege of Palestinian land.

"The key is in Washington's hands," information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo told a press conference in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

He said Arafat had sent a message to the so-called quartet of the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations warning that continuing reforms "will not be possible if Israel continues the siege."

2nd son of ROK president indicted

AFP, Seoul

Prosecutors on Wednesday indicted a second son of South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung on charges of corruption and tax evasion as Kim apologised afresh over the scandal engulfing his family.

Kim Hong-Up, 53, who was arrested last month, was charged with receiving a total of 2.58 billion won (2.2 million dollars) from six companies through influence peddling.

The second of Kim's three sons was also accused of avoiding tax by declaring 2.2 billion won (1.8 million dollars) from businesses including the Hyundai and Samsung groups as political "donations," prosecutors said.

Hong-Up's younger brother, Kim Hong-Gul, 38, has also been jailed on graft and tax-evasion charges.

In one case, Hong-Up allegedly received through a friend, who has also been arrested, 750 million won between December 2000 and May 2001 from a vice president of a business group who was seeking to avoid arrest for fraud.



A man holding his dog in his arms walks in muddy water covering the city of Oogaki in Gifu prefecture, central Japan on Wednesday. At least one person was killed, one missing and four others injured as Typhoon Chata'an churned towards Japan's Pacific coast after leaving at least 70 dead in Micronesia and the Philippines.

Benazir gets 3-year term

Latest conviction is a ploy tied to Oct polls: PPP

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani court Tuesday convicted former prime minister Benazir Bhutto of absconding after she failed to return from overseas to answer charges of corruption.

The accountability court in Rawalpindi sentenced Bhutto, who lives in self-imposed exile in London and Dubai, to three years' hard labour and ordered the seizure of her property.

Benazir was convicted of failing to appear for trial to answer charges that she received kickbacks for granting a licence to a Dubai-based company, ARY Gold, to import gold to Pakistan in December 1994.

The case, which had been pending against her since 1998, was transferred to the accountability court set up by the government of President Pervez Musharraf, who deposed Benazir Bhutto's successor Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup in October 1999.

The co-accused in the case included Bhutto's jailed husband Asif Ali Zardari, ARY's Haji Abdul Razaq and the commerce ministry's former secretary, retired Brigadier Aslam Hayat Qureshi.

State-run Associated Press of Pakistan said the alleged permission for monopolistic status for ARY was "in consideration for the payment of commission and kickback to Zardari and Benazir".

It said an amount of 10 million dollars was transferred in October 1994 by ARY Gold to the account of Capricorn



Trading Inc., an offshore company owned by Benazir's husband.

According to APP, Bhutto avoided a summons issued by the court in January this year. It was re-issued by the court registrar in March through the Pakistani embassies in Dubai and London.

Meanwhile, the party of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto cried foul Wednesday over a new conviction against her leader, charging it was part of an alleged drive by the military government to keep her from contesting October elections.

"We believe that this is part of the government's drive to push Benazir Bhutto out of politics, out of the electoral contest," said Pakistan People's Party spokesman Farhatullah Babar.

An accountability court on Tuesday convicted Benazir -- who lives in self-imposed exile in London and Dubai -- of failing to appear for trial on corruption charges.

Pearl murder trial ends

AFP, Hyderabad

The Daniel Pearl murder and abduction trial concluded here Wednesday in a Pakistani anti-terrorism court and a verdict was reserved for next Monday, lawyers said.

"The trial is over and the verdict will be announced on Monday," a defence lawyer told AFP by cellphone from inside the court, which has been set up inside a high security prison in this southern city.

The trial of four men accused of murdering and abducting the Wall Street Journal correspondent began on April 22 in Karachi, the violence-infested port city where Pearl was kidnapped on January 23.

It was moved to Hyderabad prison some 100 kilometres (62 miles) north-east of Karachi on April 30 for security reasons.

The trial had reached its 12th week when prosecution and defence lawyers wound up their final arguments Wednesday.

(Chief prosecutor) Raja Qureshi has concluded his final

arguments and the trial is over now," the defence lawyer said, requesting anonymity.

Journalists have been barred from the closed-door trial.

The defence has accused the prosecution throughout the trial of framing witnesses, fabricating evidence and giving false accounts of the arrests of the four suspects.

The prosecution has alleged that the chief defendant, British-born militant Sheikh Omar, was seen meeting Pearl outside a Karachi restaurant on the day he disappeared. It has also accused his three co-defendants of sending emails containing photos of Pearl in captivity and threats to kill him.

Pearl had been on his way to interview an Islamic militant for a story on links between Pakistani militants and the alleged shoe-bomber, Richard Reid, when he was abducted.

A gruesome video depicting Pearl's decapitation by unknown assassins was sent to the US consulate in Karachi on February 22.

Typhoons kill 77 in Asia-Pacific

More devastation to come

AFP, Hong Kong

The death toll from a week of typhoons in Asia and the Pacific reached 77 on Wednesday as Japan, Taiwan and the tiny island of Guam braced for another beating.

At least another 38 people were missing, including 31 mountain climbers sheltering from heavy rains and landslides in Taiwan.

In Japan, a middle-aged fisherman and a 14-year-old student were missing amid heavy rains as Typhoon Chata'an neared its Pacific coast.

Chata'an claimed 40 lives last week when it devastated Chuuk atoll in the Federated States of Micronesia. It then killed another 30 people in the Philippines.

Filipino civil defence authorities said Wednesday another four people were missing and 41 were injured, with many areas north of Manila still flooded.

Chata'an had weakened Wednesday as it approached Japan but heavy rains and winds were still strong enough to wreak havoc on the nation's main island of Honshu.

The Japanese fisherman was missing after being stranded on an islet in a river in Gifu, some 250 kilometres (160 miles) west of Tokyo, according to the National Police Agency said.

The 14-year-old student was unaccounted for after falling into a river in Oita on the southern island of Kyushu, the agency said.

The typhoon has so far grounded at least 99 flights and delayed four international flights while forcing the cancellation of 71 bullet-train runs along the Pacific coast.

Japan's Meteorological Agency said the eye of the typhoon was expected to reach its Pacific coast between Tokyo and Nagoya about midnight (1500 GMT Wednesday).

The typhoon's centre was 260 kilometres (160 miles) south of Japan's central coast at 4:00 pm (0700 GMT) and it was moving at a speed of 35 kilometres (22 miles) per hour.

The force of Chata'an was diminishing but it was still packing winds of up to 108 kilometres per hour (67 miles per hour).

Meanwhile one man drowned and 32 people were missing as torrential rains and strong winds from tropical storm Nakri lashed Taiwan on Wednesday.

The body of the dead man, a 51-year-old fisherman, was found after he drowned off southeastern Taitung county.

Authorities had mounted searches for 31 mountain climbers, in two separate groups in central Nantou and northeastern Ilan counties, who had not been heard from since Nakri hit the region.

The storm, downgraded from a typhoon when it passed through the Philippines, was also hampering search efforts for a Chinese fisherman who went missing after he jumped from his burning vessel off southern Kaohsiung port on Tuesday.

Humans overconsuming Earth's resources: WWF

AFP, Gland

Human beings are living in a state of "ecological overshoot" consuming the Earth's natural resources at a much faster rate than they can be replenished, the conservation organisation WWF International said on Tuesday in Gland, Switzerland.

In its "Living Planet" report, which is published every two years, WWF establishes an index for the "ecological footprint" of humans, and an assessment of the state of natural resources including plant and animal life, and the state of forests and oceans.

The report indicates that there is

about 1.9 hectares (4.7 acres) of productive land and sea area available for each human being, but each human is occupying an ecological footprint about 2.3 hectares (5.7 acres), based on a worldwide average.

The report's overall "Living Planet Index" which is derived from survival trends over the past 30 years of hundreds of species of mammals, fish, birds and reptiles, declined by about 37 percent between 1970 and 2000.

"This is a devastating result of what humanity does to the biosphere," Claude Martin, director general of WWF International told journalists.

WWF estimates that human beings are running a huge deficit in terms of renewable resources and living off "natural capital" at a rate that is 20 percent above the earth's capacity to regenerate plant life, or absorb the environmental damage.

It predicts that by 2050, humans will consume between 180 percent and 220 percent of the earth's biological capacity unless governments take urgent action.

"We're calling this state ecological overshoot, because humanity has overshoot the biological capacity of the earth's ecosystems, and we can only live on natural capital for so long," Jonathan Loh, author of the WWF report said.

US deports Pakistanis in secret airlift

REUTERS, Washington

The United States arranged a secret airlift last month to deport 131 Pakistani detainees who had been held for months after the Sept. 11 attacks, The Washington Post reported on Wednesday.

Most of the detainees had been arrested under a US Justice Department program targeting immigrants who have ignored previous deportation orders and who came under scrutiny after the attacks, the newspaper said, citing a Pakistani official.

None of the detainees, 130 men and one woman, appeared to have links to terrorism, US officials told the newspaper.

US officials said the operation was kept secret for security reasons and that the government used a Portuguese charter flight for the airlift because of concerns that a US government jet would be a potential target, the newspaper reported.

US and Pakistani officials arranged the airlift as a way to resolve contentious diplomatic issues that have arisen between the two countries since the Justice Department began detaining immigrants in the United States, the report said.

"The Pakistani government was extremely cooperative in helping us ensure that these individuals were repatriated with safety, speed and dignity," said Karen Kraushaar, a spokeswoman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Asians thin outside, fat inside

AFP, Singapore

Asians may look thinner than Westerners but they have proportionally more fat in their bodies, health experts told a World Health Organisation (WHO) forum Wednesday.

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The latest National Health Survey in 1998 found that only 6.0 percent of Singaporeans were obese, compared with 5.0 percent in 1992.

But the number of Singaporeans with obesity-related diseases was comparable to levels in the West.

While those with diabetes remained at 8.0 percent, 27 percent suffered from high blood pressure while 23.5 percent had high cholesterol levels, according to the 1998 survey.

Yap said the rates "are comparable" to sufferers in developed countries.

The WHO officials met in Singapore to discuss whether Body Mass Index (BMI) is an appropriate indicator of health risks and the possible cut-off points for different regions in the world.

The experts agreed that BMI, which is obtained by dividing weight in kilograms by the square of height in metres, is not an appropriate gauge of a person's health risk because it only measures weight in relation to height.

The standard cut-off for obesity is also too generic for nations across the world with people of different ages, genders and races, they said, citing data from 10 Asian countries.

"BMI is only a screening tool. It alerts you that you might be at risk and you should consult a doctor," Yap said.

Professor Shiriki Kumanyika, of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine who chaired the meeting, said "body fat distribution is not covered in the BMI".

Conspiracy on to label me as child-molester: Jackson

AFP, New York

Self-styled "King of Pop" Michael Jackson on Tuesday accused communications media and a "racist" recording industry of mounting a "conspiracy" to label him a child-molester and to wreck his career.

Jackson, who is currently mired in a bitter public dispute with his recording company Sony Music and its CEO Tommy Mottola, claimed he had been increasingly targeted as his fame grew.

"The minute I started breaking the all-time record sales ... overnight they called me a freak, they called me a homosexual, they called me a child molester,"



"It is all a big conspiracy. I know my race. I just look in the mirror, I know I'm black."

The reclusive pop star has accused Sony of not fully promoting his most recent album, "Invincible," which has posted disappointing sales and been critically panned.

The so-called "music summit" -- Jackson was the only front-rank star to attend -- was held in the Harlem headquarters of Sharpston's National Action Network.

Jackson was there to support an initiative by Sharpston and Johnnie Cochran, known as O.J. Simpson's defence lawyer, to take legal action against record companies they believe have taken advantage of black artists for decades.

Al-Qaida plotted to hit Vatican, targets in Italy

AFP, Rome

Al-Qaida cells based in Italy had planned to attack the Vatican, a US consulate in the country and a church in Venice prior to September 11, the leading Italian daily Corriere della Sera reported Wednesday.

Quoting Rome police working for the anti-terrorist force DIGOS, the paper said that al-Qaida cells had been ordered to call off the attacks "two months before September 11".

"At that time, three terror attacks were being planned," the paper added.

Italian police had learned of the plans after receiving information from a mole who had infiltrated an al-Qaida network based in London.

In a report dated May 24, the

police said the plan, still in its initial stages, was being set up to attack "a US target in Europe or the Vatican".

According to the paper, the Italian cell did not at the time possess the arms required for the operation which had been "probably ordered by Osama bin Laden".

Police suspect that Khalifa Mohamed Moussa Ahmed from an Algerian Islamist organisation to be one of the heads of the Rome-based cells.

The man, also known as "Mohamed the Libyan", had been spotted by police in a Venice church in May 2001 "where he had taken a number of photographs".

The church is regularly frequented by US citizens, the paper said.

Turkish PM hints early polls

AFP, Ankara

Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit admitted for the first time in a newspaper interview Wednesday that elections could be brought forward after a wave of resignations left him isolated and exacerbated the country's economic woes.

Ecevit's concession came after more than 30 legislators, including six ministers, defected from his Democratic Left Party (DSP) in the past two days and his own coalition partners threw their weight behind calls to bring elections forward from their scheduled date in 2004.

In the interview to the mass-circulation Milyet daily, Ecevit reiterated his view that early elections would disrupt efforts to battle a severe economic crisis and meet EU demands for reforms to join the 15-nation bloc.

But the 77-year-old head of government said that his far-right coalition partner, Devlet Bahceli of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), told him elections were inevitable.

"I believe early elections would be wrong, but if they

become compulsory under these circumstances, we will have to comply," Ecevit told the newspaper.

"We, the three chairmen (of the governing coalition) may determine a new election date. This may not be April 2004, but another date brought forward," he added.

However, the prime minister said he saw no need for him to resign.

"Bahceli said that I should continue as prime minister regardless of the number of seats the DSP has in parliament," Ecevit said.

The veteran leader came to his office Wednesday -- for the first time in 67 days -- to chair a cabinet meeting which is likely to be dominated by the crucial situation of the coalition and election talk.

Ecevit has been away from his office due to health problems since early May.

The defections -- triggered by Ecevit's rejection to step down and spearheaded by Husamettin Ozkan, his former right-hand man -- have ended the DSP's majority in the 550-seat parliament and put in second place after the MHP.

Powell plans South Asia trip

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Colin Powell said Tuesday he expects to visit South Asia before the end of this month to keep up the pace of the diplomatic drive to cool tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

Powell's visit will be the latest leg of a marathon diplomatic shuttle, which has seen top officials from the United States and its allies travel to South Asia amid fears the two arch-rivals could stumble into a nuclear war.

His announcement comes as tensions between India and Pakistan, which eased somewhat in recent weeks, started to heat up

again amid a new war of words over Kashmir.

"We have worked very hard to keep this thing from blowing up, boiling over on us," Powell said at a Senate Foreign Relations committee hearing.

"I've spent an enormous amount of time on the telephone with the two sides, spoke to (Pakistani) President Musharraf again yesterday, spoke to the new Indian foreign minister on Sunday.

"Deputy Secretary of State Armitage did yeoman work when he went over, Secretary Rumsfeld when he went over, I expect to be visiting there before the end of the month," Powell said, referring to the

Nepal relaxes conditions for talking to Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's caretaker home minister on Wednesday softened conditions for holding talks with Maoist rebels, saying the government would negotiate with the guerrillas if they stopped demanding an assembly that would redraft the constitution.

Previously, the government had said it would talk to the Maoists only if the rebels surrendered their weapons.

"We never said we were closing the door on dialogue. But the Maoists should agree as a precondition to talks to give up their

demands for a constituent assembly election," caretaker home minister Khum Bahadur Khadka said in a speech at Nepal's police headquarters in Kathmandu.

Rebel demands for such an assembly were the main stumbling block in three rounds of talks Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's government held with the rebels in 2001.

The Maoists, who took up arms against the government in 1996, said during negotiations they were ready to "defer" their long-standing demands that the monarchy be abolished.



US President George W. Bush (C) stands with US comedian Bill Cosby (L) at a ceremony awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian award, in the East Room at the White House on Tuesday in Washington, DC.

Saved from slavery

AFP, New Delhi

Police on Wednesday freed 60 people including more than a dozen children who were being kept in slave-like conditions by a mine contractor in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, a report said.

The Press Trust of India said police raided the Chonda coal mine near Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh state after receiving a tip-off from the Bandhua Mukti Morcha (Bonded Worker Liberation Front) non-governmental organisation.

The freed children told police the mine contractor only gave them a handful of flour and some salt to eat. The adults received no wages.