



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian girl walks with her brothers on dirt which formerly was an olive grove, past a barbed wire fence on the edge of the West Bank town of Bethlehem (background) on Monday. These children and their parents along with two other families whose homes are closer to the Jewish settlement of Gilo on the southern edge of Jerusalem, have been cut off from their Palestinian neighbours by the fence being built by the Israeli military. According to them, the military has also cut off their water and electricity. In early June the Israeli Defence Ministry unveiled plans for a 350-kilometer security fence surrounding the Palestinian self-rule West Bank and parts of Jerusalem.

Israel steps up diplomatic drive to dump Arafat

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's defence minister will pitch its case for banishing Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat from peacemaking to Egypt's president on Monday but may elicit only a polite hearing from the key Arab world player.

Israel has sought to overcome doubts abroad about its call for Arafat's removal by leaking intelligence about alleged new graft in his circle, internal dissent and what it calls his flagging grasp of reality -- all denied by Palestinian leaders.

Washington backs Israel's position that Arafat stands behind suicide attacks on Israelis -- another charge denied by the Palestinian president -- and its demand that he be replaced by reformers for talks envisaging Palestinian statehood to resume.

The war of words shadowing 21 months of Middle East conflict has heated up ahead of key talks set for Tuesday between the "Quartet" of would-be peace brokers -- the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia -- that will focus on President Bush's vision of a final settlement.

A senior Israeli political source said the meeting between Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak fitted in with Israel's effort to convince the international community, "and especially the Arab world," that Arafat must leave the political stage for diplomacy to revive.

European powers including Russia do not share that view.

And Mubarak has said that only Arafat, the reigning icon of Palestinian nationhood ambitions since the 1960s, wields the gravitas among Palestinians to pin down peace with Israel.

Egypt's role in Middle East diplomacy is important as it was the first Arab state to sign a peace accord with Israel, back in 1979, and has been a pivotal ally of the Palestinian Authority.

The Quartet will receive the foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan, the only other Arab state to make peace with Israel, in New York on Tuesday as well.

Mubarak has repeatedly voiced concern that no viable Israeli-Palestinian peace looks possible with Sharon and his right-wing Likud party in power.

Ben-Eliezer heads the centre-left Labour Party, main partner in Sharon's "national unity" coalition formed to marshal the Israeli public behind tough military action in response to a Palestinian uprising for independence now in its 21st month.

Many in Labour believe Arafat has backed suicide attacks on Israelis and must go.

But they also feel Sharon's crushing military approach to Palestinian violence has impeded diplomacy by souring ordinary Palestinians on the idea of negotiated peace and boosting militant fighters at the expense of Palestinian moderates.

Given Ben-Eliezer's prime ministerial ambitions, analysts detected a partisan domestic angle to Ben-Eliezer's talks with Mubarak -- an effort to outflank Sharon on peace issues.

Ben-Eliezer is the latest in several Labour leaders to be invited to Egypt for talks in the past week, reflecting Cairo's traditional preference for Labour over Likud, although it made peace with a Likud-led Israel back in 1979.

The Labour party has grown uneasy with Sharon's agenda of overwhelming force against a Palestinian uprising that began in September 2000 after talks on a Palestinian state stalled.

Palestinian towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, territories Israel took in the 1967 Middle East war, were granted self-rule by a Labour-led Israeli government under interim peace deals in 1994-95.

But they were occupied, with 700,000 Palestinians locked down under curfew, by the Israeli army last month with the expressed goal of preventing further suicide bombings.

Pearl killer threatens retaliation, Pakistan braces for backlash

AFP, Karachi

The British-born Islamic militant sentenced to death for the murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl Monday threatened retaliation as Pakistan braced itself for a violent backlash.

"We shall see who will die first, either I or the authorities who have arranged the death sentence for me," Sheikh Omar -- whose full name is Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh -- said in a message read out by his lawyer shortly after sentencing.

"The war between Islam and kafirs (non-Muslims) is going on and everybody should show whether he is in favour of Islam or in favour of kafirs," the statement added.

His threats came as Pearl's former employers in the United States welcomed the convictions.

In a brief statement issued early Monday, the Wall Street Journal

said it continued to seek justice for the murder.

"We continue to mourn Danny Pearl," said Steven Goldstein, vice president of Dow Jones and Company, publisher of the newspaper.

"And we continue to hope that everyone responsible for his kidnapping and murder will be brought to justice. Today's verdict is one step in that direction," Goldstein said.

In Pakistan, Omar's threat underlined fears which have prompted authorities to bolster security in the southern city of Hyderabad, where Omar was sentenced in a special anti-terrorism court, and the nearby port of Karachi, where Pearl was abducted.

"Our investigation teams have got information that some groups are planning on creating security problems in Karachi and Hyderabad," Inspector General

Syed Kamal Shah, police chief of southern Sindh province, told AFP after the verdict was announced.

"A security blanket has been ordered across Sindh, as any complacency to risk precious lives and property is unaffordable," Shah said.

Pearl was abducted in Karachi on January 23. Prosecutors told the court that Omar had lured the Wall Street Journal reporter to a restaurant on the pretence of setting up an interview.

Pearl was investigating links between Pakistani militants and alleged British shoe-bomber Richard Reid at the time.

Islamic militants, outraged at Pakistan's support of the US-led ouster of the Taliban in Afghanistan and its alliance with the United States in the broader war on terror, have been waging a violent campaign across the country.

Parliament spells out support for Saddam

AFP, Baghdad

The Iraqi parliament, meeting Monday in a special session to discuss US threats against Baghdad, pledged its full backing for President Saddam Hussein and his steps to defend the country.

MPs said in statement released at the session's end that they were "fully behind the command of President Saddam Hussein and support all steps he has taken or will take in the future to defend the security of Iraq, its independence and its national regime."

They blasted the "aggressive policy of the American administration and Congress, engaged in a hostile campaign against Iraq to change its national regime and install a government in their pay."

India votes to pick up president

AFP, New Delhi

Indian politicians Monday cast ballots to elect the country's new president, who was nearly certain to be the architect of the country's missile arsenal, Abdul Kalam.

All major political parties except for communist groups have agreed to vote for Kalam, a Muslim who began his career selling newspapers and went on to spend 43 years in India's defence and space industries.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani were among the first to cast their votes in the seven hours of polling. The ballots will be counted by Thursday, according to parliamentary officials.

India has a special electoral college to pick the largely ceremonial post of president, which includes members of state legislative assemblies and the lower house of parliament.

Kalam is opposed by the 87-year-old communist-nominated candidate Lakshmi Sahgal, who raised a women's battalion for the Indian National Army in Singapore which fought against India's British colonial rulers during the 1940s.

"It is nice that there is a contest," a confident Kalam told reporters at parliament.

Kalam was nominated last month by the ruling coalition led by Vajpayee's Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after intensive talks between the government and the opposition failed to find a consensus candidate.

The incumbent president, Kocheeril Raman Narayanan, is due to complete his five-year term on July 24.

Kalam is seen as a politically correct choice as he belongs to the minority Muslim community. The BJP's reputation was badly scarred by anti-Muslim violence this year in the western state of Gujarat, the largest state controlled by the party.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian nuclear scientist Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (L) is greeted by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee during the presidential election in parliament in New Delhi on Monday. Though the monsoon session was adjourned as soon as it started, MPs cast their vote to elect a new president. Kalam is widely tipped to win the post.

Chirac survives attempt on life

AP, Paris

French officials credited spectators and police for thwarting an assassination attempt on President Jacques Chirac by a neo-Nazi who pulled a rifle from a guitar case during the annual Bastille Day parade.

The man fired at least once from a fully loaded rifle as Chirac, riding in an open-top jeep about 50 yards away, was reviewing troops at the start of a pomp-filled military parade to celebrate France's national holiday Sunday.

Cries of alarm sprang out from members of the crowd along the tree-lined edge of Paris' Champs-Elysees, near the Arc de Triomphe. At least one spectator grabbed the gun and turned it upwards. Caught by police, the man tried to turn the gun on himself.

Paris police said the man was 25 years old and a member of "neo-Nazi and hooligan" groups. LCI television and a police officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, both identified him as Maxime Brunerie. LCI reported that he was once connected to the far-right group of Bruno Megret, a former lieutenant of National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen.

The police officer said the gunman was also linked to a far-right student group, the Groupe Union Defense, and had a history of psychiatric problems. Police transferred the man to a psychiatric facility for testing, where he

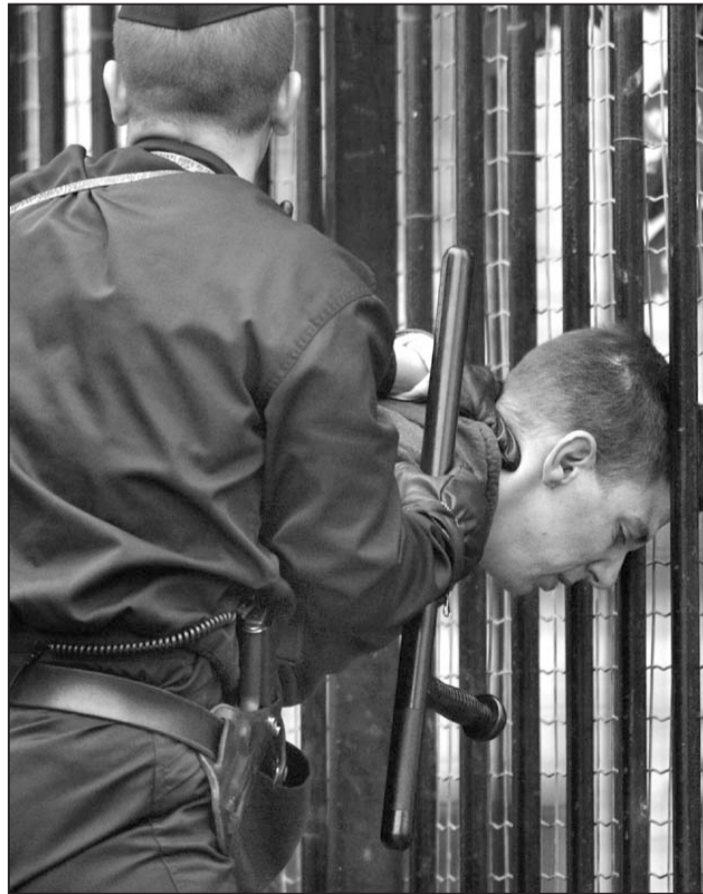


PHOTO: AFP

French police arrest a man who brandished a weapon in the middle of the crowd gathered to watch the traditional Bastille Day parade down the Champs-Elysees in central Paris on Sunday shortly after French president Jacques Chirac passed by at the start of the parade.

Lanka truce monitors to rethink operations

AFP, Colombo

Scandinavians observing a ceasefire in Sri Lanka said Monday they would rethink sea operations after a skirmish with Tamil Tiger rebels.

The announcement, however, coincided with a confidence-building measure ahead of peace talks with the government and Tigers reopening a key highway.

In the latest alleged breach of the five-month truce, the monitoring force said two of its members were held against their will by the rebels on a trawler it had been asked to investigate.

"We have to rethink the concept of operations at sea," Hargrup Haukland, a Norwegian spokesman for the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), told AFP.

The observers have denounced the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for "irresponsible behaviour" over the incident and said the rebels will need to do more to demonstrate their commitment to the Norwegian-brokered peace process.

The Sri Lankan navy had asked the monitors to intervene Saturday after suspecting the trawler, which was off the northwest coast in the gulf of Mannar, was carrying arms for the Tigers.

But the LTTE's political wing leader, S.P. Thamilselvan, said in a letter to the Scandinavian monitors that the Sri Lankan navy had pro-

voked the rebels by attacking the trawler.

"Sri Lanka Navy gunboats had rammed it (the LTTE trawler) despite the presence of the SLMM monitors on board. Our regional commander decided to sail back to the shore. The SLMM monitors were given assurance of their security and brought ashore," Selvan wrote to the chief monitor.

Haukland dismissed the Tigers' account of the incident.

"We believe our monitors more than we believe the LTTE. They were held against their will," he said.

Haukland said the monitors would meet with both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government to further discuss sea operations.

In another reported breach of the ceasefire, Sri Lankan police said Sunday the Tigers had abducted at least six unarmed woodcutters in the northeast of the island and were demanding ransom for their release.

Despite the accusations, high-ranking military officials and LTTE leaders were present Monday as the two sides reopened the A5 highway in a boost to peace talks expected next month in Thailand.

The 176-kilometre (109-mile) A5 highway, which links the central town of Kandy with the eastern town of Batticaloa, had been closed since September 1995 amid fierce fighting.

India awaits govt response to Kashmir carnage

Opposition slams Delhi

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's parliament adjourned Monday without hearing an expected government announcement on its response to a weekend massacre of 27 Hindus in Kashmir by unidentified gunmen.

Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, who visited the scene of Saturday's slayings in a slum in the city of Jammu, had said he would outline the government's next steps in parliament Monday.

But just minutes after opening the monsoon session both houses adjourned until Tuesday in tribute to former parliamentarians who had died since parliament last met.

The two chambers expressed profound regret over the massacre before adjourning. "We deeply mourn the loss of lives of these innocent people and strongly deplore this act of violence," Speaker Manohar Joshi told the lower house. "The house may place on record its deep sense of grief on this tragedy."

It was not immediately clear when the government will detail what steps it plans to take over the massacre.

In the Saturday raid, five attackers -- two disguised in the saffron robes of Hindu holy men -- lobbed

grenades and fired on a crowd listening to a cricket match between India and England. The killers then barged into nearby huts, shooting wildly.

No one has claimed responsibility, but police suspect Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of two blamed by India for an attack on the Indian parliament last December.

Nervous financial markets had eased Monday ahead of the expected announcement from Advani. The benchmark Indian share index was down 1.21 per cent in midday trade.

"Investors are just hoping that tensions with Pakistan won't escalate due to the latest attack," one bond trader said.

Pakistan, which India accuses of backing Islamic militants fighting Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir state, condemned the killings, which it said were aimed at stoking tensions between the neighbours.

South Asia's nuclear powers have been locked in a military standoff since the parliament attack, fuelling fears of war. The two countries have fought three wars -- two over Kashmir -- since they were formed in 1947 when Britain split the subcontinent.

Pakistan denies supporting anti-

Indian militants and has vowed to stop rebels slipping across the border.

Some analysts had warned another major attack could force India to take military action against rebels sheltering across the frontier, but the government's public comments have so far been relatively muted and analysts expect a restrained response.

Meanwhile, opposition parties rounded on the Indian government Monday over the weekend massacre of 28 shantytown residents in southern Kashmir, accusing the ruling coalition of failing to provide protection for residents of the disputed state.

Jammu, Indian Kashmir's winter capital, meanwhile, came to a virtual halt Monday as citizens staged a one-day general strike in protest at the massacre, claiming they felt vulnerable after the latest bloodletting.

The attack occurred late Saturday when militants disguised as Hindu holy men entered the Qasim Nagar shantytown near Jammu and blazed away with automatic weapons and lobbed grenades at the Hindu slum dwellers.

US Afghan campaign to last for years: Wolfowitz

AFP, Bagram Airforce Base

The US campaign in Afghanistan will last for years with more than half of the Taliban leadership still intact, US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said Monday.

Wolfowitz told US troops at this coalition air base that the campaign against al-Qaida and Taliban fighters would "continue as long as it takes" as he drew a parallel with the decades-long face-off against the Soviet Union.

"It's going to be a long struggle. Maybe not as long as the Cold War, but it does not hurt to think (in terms of) the Cold War."

Wolfowitz, who was due to hold talks later with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, praised the "remarkable" achievements of the US-led coalition since the campaign began last October.

But he also said that the former Taliban regime and its al-Qaida allies remained far from finished.

"We have taken out maybe half of the top al-Qaida and almost half of the Taliban leadership," he said.

Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden still remains at large along with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar more than eight months into the campaign.

Wolfowitz's visit to Bagram coincided with the start of a high-level probe headed by US Major General Anthony Przybyslawski into a US bombing raid on a wedding party in central Uruzgan province two weeks ago which left scores dead.

Wolfowitz expressed regret at the loss of civilians in the raid but insisted that the bombing had been prompted by the belief that terrorists were active in the area.

"We have no regrets about going after terrorists or people who harbour terrorists. We really have very little doubt that there were (such people in that area). It was a combat zone and bad things happen in a combat zone."

Asked if incidents such as the Uruzgan bombing could alienate Afghan people, Wolfowitz stressed "the fundamental principle that we are here as an army of liberation."

Przybyslawski said the 12-man inquiry team, which also features an Afghan major-general in an observer's role, would work "to prevent these types of situations from ever occurring (again) during this combat operation."

Spain warns Morocco

EU hints at reprisals over island row

AFP, Madrid

Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar warned Morocco on Monday that Spain would not allow Rabat to maintain a troop presence on a disputed Mediterranean island close to the Moroccan coast.

"Spain will not accept a fait accompli," said Aznar in a state of the union address before parliament.

On Thursday Rabat dispatched a dozen soldiers to the uninhabited island of Perejil, off the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, bordering Morocco, as part of an effort to clamp down on illegal immigration and terrorism.

But Madrid maintains that the soldiers who raised two Moroccan flags on rocky outcrop, known as Leila in Morocco, are violating Spanish sovereignty and has

demanding that they be withdrawn.

Aznar said it was "essential to return to the status quo before the occupation of the island", adding that Spain would step up diplomatic efforts to compel Rabat to leave Perejil.

He added that his government had sent the message to Morocco that it wanted "intense diplomatic relations that can only be based on mutual respect".

Meanwhile, the European Union hinted Monday that it may be prepared to slap sanctions against Morocco if it refuses to heed calls for the withdrawal of its troops from a disputed Mediterranean island.

European Commission president Romano Prodi told Morocco that there was "unfailing solidarity between EU members" before calling on Rabat to withdraw its soldiers from the island of Perejil.



PHOTO: AFP

Swedish Crown Princess Victoria (R) receives flowers from admirers at the royal summer palace of Solliden on the Baltic Island of Oeland, Sweden on Sunday. Some 1,500 admirers had waited since morning by the palace gates to congratulate the princess on her 25th birthday.