



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian boy collects the mangled remains of his bicycle from the rubble of his flattened home in the Rafah refugee camp on Saturday in the southern Gaza Strip, following an overnight Israeli incursion. The Israeli military entered the camp, demolishing a Palestinian home, a car workshop and civilian vehicles parked at the garage.

Sharon's plan to exile suicide bombers' kin draws fire

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the Palestinians were set to resume talks Saturday after a two-week interruption, as pressure grew on Israel to abandon its plan to expel to the Gaza Strip relatives of Palestinian attackers in the West Bank.

The controversial move, which came after two deadly attacks undermined the credibility of Israel's month-old operation in the West Bank, was met by a chorus of condemnations, including from the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

"The Secretary General is disturbed by reports that the Israeli government have again destroyed the homes of Palestinians in the West Bank, and are considering the forcible transfer of relatives of suicide bombers from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

"While he has repeatedly condemned suicide bombings and upheld Israel's right to defend itself, the Secretary-General wishes to make clear that self-defence cannot justify measures that amount to collective punishments."

The plan has also run into opposition from the government's legal adviser, the United States, France and human rights groups, as well as sparking Palestinian fury and threats of bloody retaliation from the radical Islamic group Hamas.

But in a positive sign, a Palestinian official said a high-level meeting between Israeli and Palestinian officials delayed after Tuesday's deadly attack on a Jewish settlers' bus in the West Bank would now be held on Saturday night.

"The Israeli delegation will be led by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and the Palestinian delegation by (Palestinian chief negotiator) Saeb Erakat," the official, who asked not to be named, told AFP.

The army arrested 21 close relatives of Palestinian militants suspected of involvement in anti-Israeli attacks early Friday and threatened to deport them from the West Bank, in what was seen as a sign of Israel's frustration at failing to stop attacks despite a massive West Bank clampdown.

Israeli Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein told the army's chief military prosecutor and security officials expulsions were only possible in cases of "tangible evidence of their direct involvement in terrorist activity," according to Israeli army radio.

US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters, "We believe that these actions will not solve Israel's security problems," and France warned that Israel would be violating the Geneva Convention outlawing collective punishment.

Sharon and Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer voiced "displeasure" at Rubinstein's position, Israeli television reported, arguing that "legal considerations should not prevent indispensable measures from being taken in times of war."

The attorney general would study the cases of the 21 Palestinians arrested, individually, to determine if they were aware of the attacks in advance or applauded them after the event, the television said.

Coming after two deadly Palestinian attacks in as many days, it would be the first time since the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000 that Israel carried out such a step.

The threat drew the Palestinian Authority's wrath, with Erakat saying such expulsions would amount to "a war crime".

Nabil Abu Rudeina, a top aide to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, warned it would lead to further explosions of violence.

Straw sees improvement across LoC

AFP, Islamabad

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw indicated here Saturday that infiltrations by Muslim rebels across the de-facto border in disputed Kashmir had reduced, but said more needed to be done.

"Overall the situation is better than at the end of May across the Line of Control," Straw told a press conference at the end of a seven-hour visit to the Pakistani capital to seek to resolve a seven-month deadlock between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

"I reflected on this (in talks with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Inamul Haq)."

Straw met Haq for three-and-a-half hours, but failed to meet Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

Asked about Indian claims that infiltrations by Pakistan-based Muslim rebels into Indian-controlled

Kashmir were on the rise again, Straw replied: "Obviously more needs to be done."

He refused to divulge further the contents of his talks with Haq.

Straw held a hastily-organised press conference at the air force base outside Islamabad before flying back to New Delhi, where he arrived from earlier Saturday, for further talks with his Indian counterpart Yashwant Sinha.

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw pursued his latest drive to end a seven-month deadlock between India and Pakistan over Kashmir Saturday, holding talks here with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Inamul Haq.

During the talks, Haq refused to budge from Pakistan's position that it had done enough to end military intrusions into Indian Kashmir for India to resume bilateral dialogue.

"Pakistan has conveyed a very

clear message that it is willing to move forward, Pakistan has done a lot, now India has to move forward, and show that they acknowledge the problem," a government official told AFP after the formal talks.

"It can't be a one-sided affair only."

But Straw, who arrived at 10:00 am (0400 GMT) Saturday after talks with Indian officials in New Delhi, has still not been able to secure a meeting with President Pervez Musharraf. He is due to fly back to New Delhi late afternoon.

British High Commission spokesman Colin Hicks denied there was any snub.

"There's no problem as far as I'm aware of, the call with Haq has just gone overtime, they're still having lunch," he told AFP.

But official sources said there was anger in the top echelons of government that successive rounds of international diplomatic media-

tion have still not produced what Islamabad wants most: dialogue with India.

Straw, on his third peace mission to South Asia this year, made clear in New Delhi Friday that he would be telling Islamabad to permanently end the flow of Pakistan-based Muslim rebels across the de-facto border in Kashmir into Indian territory.

The Himalayan region is divided by a Line of Control (LoC) between the South Asian rivals. It is claimed by both, and has been the source of two of their three wars.

Islamabad insists the incursions have stopped, and vehemently rejects Indian claims to the contrary.

The issue of incursions is at the heart of the seven month stand-off between the nuclear-armed rivals since a deadly attack on the Indian parliament in December. New Delhi blamed Pakistani-based rebels fighting Indian rule in Kashmir.

Riots rock Gujarat: 2 killed

AFP, Ahmedabad

Two people were killed and eight injured when police opened fire to disperse a rioting mob in the sectarian-violence hit western Indian state of Gujarat, a police spokesman said Saturday.

A group of Hindus and Muslims clashed in Rahaia Darwaja Chowki area of Viramgam, about 70 kilometres (43 miles) north-west of Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad late Friday after thugs set fire to a wayside shop, he said.

Lanka seeks US backing for talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe left Saturday for a five-day visit to the US where he will hold talks with President George W. Bush on the peace process with the Tamil Tiger rebels.

Wickremesinghe will also discuss bilateral issues when he meets Bush on Wednesday, according to his spokesman, Gyrika Perusinghe.

The trip marks the highest-level visit between the countries since 1984, when then Sri Lankan president Junius Jayewardena was received at the White House by Ronald Reagan.

US asks Musharraf to fulfil polls promises

PTI, Washington

The United States has said it expects Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to live up to his election commitments as it is important that the country moves towards democracy.

Responding to a query by a reporter that whether the US has "actually asked Musharraf not to fiddle around with the Constitution," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said, "I don't think that we have actually addressed it in that fashion."

"What we have said is that it is very important to carry through on election commitments, that the election in October that he plans on having is part of an overall process

of movement towards democracy, and that overall process remains very important to us," he said.

"So we would expect to continue to see steps, including the elections, along that road," he added.

Musharraf has set general elections for October 10.

Meanwhile, stating that restoration of democracy in Pakistan was in the US interest, Washington has said that amendments proposed by President Pervez Musharraf should be consistent with the existing Pakistani Constitution.

"We have made clear that full restoration of democratic civilian rule in Pakistan is very important to US," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters on Friday.

"If (Musharraf's proposed constitutional) amendments come into force, it should be in a way consistent with the existing Pakistani Constitution," he said.

"It is for Pakistanis to determine their government, and it is critically important that this determination be made in a manner that is transparent, fair and acceptable to the Pakistani people."

But Boucher did not give specific comments on the proposed amendments.

"We have not commented on the specific Constitutional changes proposed by President Musharraf. These are still out for public comment and President Musharraf has said that he intends to take these comments into account," he said.

DNA tests confirm body is Pearl's

AFP, Islamabad

DNA tests conducted earlier this year confirmed that a dismembered body discovered near the southern city of Karachi was that of slain US journalist Daniel Pearl, a Pakistani police officer said Saturday.

The mutilated body was dug up on May 17 from a shallow grave near a blood-stained hut on the outskirts of Karachi, where Pearl vanished on January 23 while investigating Islamic militants. A detained militant led police to the site.

5 killed in Peru disco fire

AFP, Lima

At least five people died in a fire at a popular night-club in the Peruvian capital Lima early on Saturday, according to local media reports.

The fire broke out at the Utopia dance club, located in a commercial centre in the southern part of the city.

Authorities said some 1,000 revellers were on the premises when the blaze erupted, and it was feared that the number of casualties was likely to climb.

Car bomb blast kills 1 near Jaffa mosque

AFP, Jerusalem

One man died when a car exploded near a mosque in Jaffa early Saturday, Israeli police said, adding that the blast was likely to be of "criminal" origin.

The car blew up near Ahmadiya mosque in the Arab part of Jaffa, a town near Tel Aviv where Jews and Arabs live side by side.

Chirac holds talks with Putin

AFP, Sochi

French President Jacques Chirac on Saturday had breakfast with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in this Black Sea resort town before heading back home after a one-day informal summit.

The talks on Friday sought to boost ties between France and Russia that were strained over criticism from Paris over the war in Chechnya and a dispute between the European Union and Russia over Kaliningrad.

Bush to take on terror regimes

AP, Fort Drum

After watching Army helicopters drop troops and howitzers from a steel-blue sky, President Bush answered a soldier's shout of "Let's get Saddam!" with a promise Friday to defeat the "mounting danger" of terrorist regimes.

"We will use diplomacy when possible and force when necessary," Bush told thousands of flag-waving members of the storied 10th Mountain Division, many of whom served in Afghanistan.

In a dusty, scorched-grass field, the president rallied troops from a makeshift stage. His 22-minute speech was punctuated by applause and shouts of "Hoo-ah!" the traditional Army yell of approval.

Bush did not mention Saddam Hussein or Iraq, Iran and North Korea, countries he has said constitute an

"axis of evil," but his audience read between the lines.

"Some parts of the world, there will be no substitute for direct action by the United States. That is when we will send you, our military, to win the battles that only you can win," the president said.

He urged Democrats in the Senate to swiftly pass a huge boost in Pentagon spending already approved by the GOP-led House.

One soldier yelled, "Let's get Saddam!" A thunder-clap of applause and shouts forced Bush to pause.

He did not react directly to the challenge, but renewed his case, opposed by most US allies, for the United States to intervene against oppressive regimes that produce, hide and prepare to use weapons of mass destruction.

Spain seeks to detail deal with Morocco after US mediation

AFP, Madrid

Spanish officials sought Saturday to clinch final details of an accord aimed at ending a bitter territorial dispute with Morocco following a high-powered diplomatic push by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

A government spokesman said Madrid had "the desire and hope for a rapid accord" after Powell made a round of telephone diplomacy Friday with Morocco's King Mohammed VI and Foreign Minister Mohamed Benissas and Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio.

Spain and Morocco have been locked in a heated standoff over the uninhabited Mediterranean islet of Perejil, known as Leila in Morocco, after Rabat sent troops to the rocky outcrop on July 11 which were evicted six days later by Madrid's forces.

Benissas pledged Friday to keep its soldiers off the isle, situated some 200 meters (yards) from the

Moroccan coast, if Spain removed its troops.

But Interior Minister Mariano Rajoy stressed that Madrid required an official response, which has led to a volley of US diplomacy to seal a deal between the feuding neighbors.

Powell spent Friday "working very closely with the Spanish and Moroccan governments on the issues surrounding the island," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

"We remain hopeful that a resolution to these issues can be reached on the basis of returning to the status quo ante," he said.

The United States stepped in after other major international actors lined up on either side of the dispute, with NATO and the European Union supporting Spain while the Arab League and the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) backed Morocco's calls for Madrid to withdraw.

Under the US-brokered deal, Spain and Morocco would agree to remove from the island any "outposts, flags and or symbols of sovereignty", a pledge that would be tantamount to a return to the status quo before the dispute.

The two countries would then follow up with ministerial-level talks to work out a lasting solution to the territorial dispute over the 13.5-hectare (33-acre) island.

In Washington, US officials said late Friday that they were waiting for Rabat and Madrid to give final approval to the agreement which they said was imminent.

"We are waiting to confirm details that we would hope would lead to a resolution," one senior State Department official over clandestine immigration, fishing rights and the disputed territory of Western Sahara.



PHOTO: AFP

Ethnic Albanian women lay flowers in front of the prison in Pristina on Friday. Mothers and wives of the recently arrested members of the Kosovo Protection Corps, the successor force of the Kosovo Liberation Army, gathered in front of the prison to demand the release of their loved ones, and laid flowers in protest at the entrance.

Al-Qaida, Taliban remain a threat in Afghanistan: UN

AFP, New York

Lingering al-Qaida and Taliban fighters remain a threat to stability in Afghanistan, the head of United Nations operations in that country told the UN Security Council on Friday, as he asked for more foreign peacekeepers.

While it is unclear how many members of the radical Islamic groups remain in the country 10 months after a massive US-led offensive, officials must assume that they remain a threat, said Lakhdar Brahimi, the secretary general's special representative to Afghanistan.

"The questions we had six months ago - about how many members of the Taliban and al-Qaida are left in the country and what kind of threat they really pose to the stability of Afghanistan -

remain unanswered," Brahimi said. "Until we have evidence to the contrary, we must assume these groups can still pose a threat."

Brahimi noted that security remained "precarious" in many regions of the country. "In the north, for example, the situation has seriously deteriorated in recent weeks," he said.

Brahimi deplored what he saw as weak international support for an expansion of the international security assistance force, "the one measure that is certain to improve the security situation," as he called it.

"We continue to believe the expansion of ISAF would have an enormous impact on security and could be achieved with relatively few troops, at relatively little cost and with little danger," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Visitors admire hot air balloons of differing shapes during the first balloon festival in Russia called 'The Sky of the Holy Sergiy' in Sergiev Pasad, greater Moscow region on Saturday.