

Sharon slams school attack in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon yesterday condemned an attack on a Palestinian school in the West Bank which left five wounded, saying there was no difference between "good" and "bad terrorism".

"There is no good terrorism and bad terrorism. Every act of terror is terrorism," he said during a cabinet meeting. "These acts do harm to Israel."

Five Palestinian children were lightly wounded when a bomb went off Tuesday in the toilets of their school in a village south of the West Bank town of Hebron.

A second bomb was found in the school and neutralised by army sappers.

According to the Israeli media, the first bomb was packed with 10 kilograms of explosive, and its design indicated it was an attack perpetrated by extremist Jews.

Israel public radio said the army suspected right-wingers from nearby Jewish settlements of having planted the explosives.

An investigation into the incident is being carried out by a special Israeli police unit responsible for investigating acts committed by Jewish extremists.

The unit was set up two years ago at the start of the intifada, or Palestinian uprising.

Signs of water on planets light years away

AFP, Paris

Italian astronomers believe they have glimpsed water, a building block of life, in the atmosphere of planets that are light years from Earth, New Scientist says.

The team reported their findings at a workshop in Austria this week, saying they had found telltale microwave emissions, called masers, that can emanate from atmospheric water when it is bathed in infrared light from a nearby star.

"This would be a historic discovery -- the first detection of a prebiotic molecule in an extrasolar planet," Cristiano Cosmovici, of the Institute for Cosmic and Planetary Sciences in Rome, was quoted by the British weekly as saying.

Using a 32-metre (100-foot) radio telescope near Bologna, Cosmovici's team looked for maser emissions among 17 stars that are suspected to have planetary systems or cosmic clouds.

Three planetary systems are producing the emissions, they say.

The best signs are coming from three planets around the star Upsilon Andromedae, located about 50 light years from Earth, that are "gas giants" like Jupiter -- huge balls of swirling gas, rather than rocky planets like Earth.

There is also evidence for water, albeit weaker, from three planets that orbit two stars which are much closer to Earth: Epsilon Eridani, a Sun-like star that is 10 light-years away, and Lalande 21185, a "red dwarf" about eight light years away.

The report is carried in next Saturday's issue of New Scientist.

Cosmovici's research has been given a cautious welcome by the small club of astronomers who specialise in searching for "exoplanets," as planets that other solar systems are called.

"This result is astonishing if it's true," exoplanet hunter Geoff Marcy at the University of California at Berkeley said.

He and others noted that the existence of water did not necessarily mean that a planet was capable of hosting life, especially among gas giants likely to have no solid or liquid surface.

About 100 exoplanets have been discovered so far, and the tally is rapidly increasing as astronomers craft more sophisticated techniques for detecting them and divining possible secrets about them.

3 die as planes collide in midair in California

AFP, Los Angeles

Three people were killed when two small tourism airplanes collided in midair Tuesday near San Diego, California, authorities said.

A single engine Mooney M-20 collided with a Beechcraft Duchess about 1.5 kilometers (0.9 miles) north of a landing strip in Carlsbad, California, according to police and the Federal Aviation Administration.

The two pilots and a passenger were killed instantly.

The planes crashed in an unpopulated area.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian children hurl stones at an Israeli tank after clashes erupted in the al-Amari refugee camp at Ramallah on Tuesday between security forces and stone-throwers. One soldier was lightly injured by a molotov cocktail.

New tremor of violence shakes West Bank

ME quartet adopts EU roadmap to peace

AFP, AP, Jerusalem

A new tremor of violence shook the West Bank yesterday, as two Israelis, a Palestinian militant and a suspected collaborator were killed, just hours after the international diplomatic "quartet" on the Middle East adopted an EU roadmap to create a Palestinian state by 2005.

An Israeli civilian was killed and another slightly hurt when Palestinian militants opened fire on a vehicle near the Jewish settlement of Shaqad in the northern West Bank, Israeli military sources said.

Initial reports said the victims were Druze Arabs, a community who unlike other Arab Israelis serve in the army.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, claimed responsibility for the ambush.

Israeli police also discovered the charred corpse of an Israeli man who had been shot in the head and left on a rubbish dump

on the eastern outskirts of Jerusalem, Israeli public radio reported.

The man was identified as David Buhbut, 67, from the Jewish settlement of Maale Adumim, in the West Bank between Jerusalem and Jericho. He had been reported missing the day before.

In an attempt to capitalise on the lull in violence, top diplomats from the so-called Middle East quartet held intensive talks on the issue on Tuesday in New York.

Top diplomats from the quartet -- the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations -- agreed to the outline of a EU plan to defuse the crisis and create a Palestinian state.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and current EU president, Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moeller met with various officials from the region for consultations before adopting the plan.

The first phase of the three-

stage proposal calls for sweeping Palestinian security reforms and an Israeli withdrawal to positions held before the start of the intifada.

It also calls for an Israeli-Palestinian security agreement to be concluded ahead of Palestinian elections in January. As part of the first phase, the quartet called for a ministerial-level meeting of aid officials to be held in November to assess the humanitarian conditions of the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, Israel turned down a Palestinian offer to halt attacks on civilians as the first stage of a gradual truce, and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said that he would settle for nothing less than a "total cessation" of violence.

The dispute over the terms of a truce came as Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Palestinian Planning Minister Nabil Shaath met Tuesday with senior Mideast mediators, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

In the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces blocked a main road, cutting the strip in half.

India, Pakistan trade fire over Kashmir border

More ruling party activists killed in polls-related violence

AFP, Srinagar

Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged fire over their de facto border in Kashmir yesterday, while eight people, including two ruling party activists, were killed in violence linked to ongoing elections, police said.

Police charged that Pakistani troops opened "unprovoked fire" at Indian forward positions in the Keran sector of the northern Kupwara district.

The Pakistani troops fired small arms and artillery, which was returned by Indian troops, said police, who did not report any casualties.

Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have deployed one million troops to their common borders since December, when gunmen allegedly linked to Pakistan attacked the parliament in New Delhi.

India has demanded Pakistan halt rebels from entering its zone of Kashmir, particularly during the controversial assembly elections.

Meanwhile, a police spokesman said militants yesterday shot Ali Mohammad Dar, an activist for Indian Kashmir's ruling National Conference party, in the summer capital Srinagar. He was taken to hospital, where he died.

Another activist of the ruling party, Ghulam Rasool Mir, was shot dead by suspected militants in downtown Srinagar.

The deaths take to 27 the number of pro-election activists killed since

India announced dates for the polls August 2. Seventeen of the dead have been from the National Conference, which is seeking another term in the four-round election that closes October 8.

Separatist parties are boycotting the polls, the first phase of which was held on Monday with authorities recording a turnout of more than 47 per cent.

More than 36,500 people have died in Kashmir since the eruption of an armed insurgency in the scenic region. Separatists put the death toll twice as high.

Srinagar, along with the districts of Jammu, Budgam and Kathua, go to polls in the second phase on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, two civilians were killed when they strayed into the crossfire of a battle between Indian security forces and militants in the northern district of Baramulla, police said. One rebel also died in the clash in the village of Kohlinar.

In Pulwama district south of Srinagar, a soldier of India's paramilitary Border Security Force died overnight in a grenade explosion, police said.

And in the southern Rajouri district, a militant and an Indian army soldier were killed in separate encounters overnight and Wednesday, police said.

Rajouri and Baramulla were among the five districts that went to polls on Monday amid sporadic violence.

US forces arrest 6 in Kandahar

AFP, Kabul

US forces in the southern province of Kandahar have arrested six Afghans after shots were fired near one of their patrols, a US military spokesman said yesterday.

"There were shots fired yesterday morning in the vicinity of Kandahar, a patrol went out, located the people responsible for firing and recovered weapons and communications equipment," Lieutenant Colonel Roger King told AFP.

"The fire may have been targeted at the patrol, it is not clear," he said, adding that no fire was returned and no one was injured.

An earlier report from the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) news agency said the six were held in a joint search for al-Qaida fugitives in Bande Taimur town, 60 kilometres west of Kandahar.

According to King, it was not clear whether the men were linked to the al-Qaeda terror network. "We haven't got to that stage in the analysis yet," he said.

Kandahar was a stronghold of the country's former Taliban regime. A US-led military operation last December ousted the regime for sheltering al-Qaida.

AIP said troops also arrested last week the former governor of the southwestern province of Nimroz, Mullah Sher Mohammad Malang. The reason for the arrest was not clear.

Turnout in Kashmir polls put at 47.28pc

AFP, Srinagar

India yesterday put the final turnout in the first phase of elections in violence-wracked Kashmir at more than 47 per cent, terming the result as more than expected.

"The final turnout after opening the diaries of the presiding officers of all the 23 segments that went to polls on Monday is 47.28 per cent," said Pramod Jain, Kashmir's chief electoral officer.

"The turnout was more than expected," added his deputy, PS Jamwal.

Officials said intelligence agencies had forecast a 35-per cent turnout because of threats by rebels, who reject New Delhi's rule over the Muslim-majority territory and had vowed to kill anyone participating in the polls.

In the last election for the Kashmir assembly in 1996, turnout for the five districts that voted Monday was 61.1 per cent. Turnout for the whole of Kashmir in that election was 57.63 per cent.

At the end of the nine-hour polls Monday, Jain had put turnout at 43.6 per cent but said it was expected to rise by a few percentage points after election officials give their final figures.

A number of voters interviewed Monday by AFP said security forces had coerced them into voting, and separatists charged that India inflated the turnout figure

by a last-minute drive to get people to polling stations.

Of the districts voting Monday, Kargil, a far northern Himalayan district, recorded turnout of 75.89 per cent, followed by Kupwara at 55.39.

The figures for the southern Poonch and Rajouri districts were 52.40 and 44.40 per cent respectively, while the lowest turnout was in northern Baramulla district at 39.99 per cent.

The highest turnout was 78.79 per cent in the Zaskar segment of Kargil, while the lowest, 7.83 per cent, was recorded from Baramulla district's Sopore segment, a stronghold of detained hardline separatist leader Syed Ali Geelani.

Voter turnout in the Buddhist-dominated Leh district was also up for the first round but its two candidates were unchallenged.

Meanwhile, India's media hailed a 47-percent turnout in the first phase of Kashmir assembly elections, terming it a decisive response against Islamic insurgency in the restive Himalayan region.

A number of newspapers noted that the response of Kashmiri people to the polls -- despite a boycott by Kashmir's main separatist political alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) and threats of violence by Islamic rebel groups -- "showed they had it in them to fight back".

Benazir's case adjourned

AFP, Karachi

A Pakistani court yesterday adjourned a case brought by former prime minister Benazir Bhutto to challenge a law which bans her from standing in next month's general election.

The Sindh provincial high court adjourned the hearing till October 2, just eight days before the election.

Bhutto, who has been living in self-exile in London and Dubai since 1998, was disqualified under a law which President Pervez Musharraf introduced last month as part of his controversial constitutional amendments.

It bars "absconders" -- people who fail to appear in court cases -- from standing.

Bhutto's lawyers had argued Tuesday that the law is biased and politically motivated and that Musharraf, who seized power in an October 1999 coup, had no power to introduce it.

"Amendments made by the Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf are ... unconstitutional and specifically targeting Ms Bhutto," lawyer Kamal Azfar told reporters Wednesday.

The five-judge court adjourned the case so it can hear petitions filed by several other rejected candidates.

Election authorities last week rejected Bhutto's application to contest two seats because she had been convicted of absconding twice this year.

The two-time former premier, who is facing several corruption charges, left the country shortly before her conviction in a graft case in 1998.

The Supreme Court later threw out that conviction and ordered a retrial.

Bhutto was convicted of absconding for failing to return to Pakistan to appear at the retrial and for failing to appear at a separate graft hearing.

Bhutto heads the Pakistan People's Party, Leaders of the other main opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League-N, have also been barred from standing in the polls.

Koizumi regrets slow Japanese response to kidnap crisis

AFP, Tokyo

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi admitted yesterday that Japan had been too slow in dealing with the kidnapping of its citizens by North Korea, amid public anger over the confirmation that eight kidnap victims have died.

"I think there are points for which the government must repent," Koizumi told reporters, when asked to react to Pyongyang's admission that most of the Japanese taken to North Korea were no longer alive.

His comments one day after his historic summit in North Korea came as the Japanese government, and the foreign ministry in particular, was strongly criticised for failing to resolve the abduction cases sooner.

Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi, on a trip to Washington, defended her ministry and insisted it had done its best.

The kidnap issue "came to a painful and unthinkable conclusion. I am mortified that it came to this," Kawaguchi told reporters.

Kawaguchi said Japan would press North Korea to explain details of the deaths of the victims, whom North Korea acknowledged it snatched in the 1970s and 1980s to use as language teachers for spies.

Koizumi is due to meet the families of all the kidnapped Japanese nationals on September 27 to tell them what was discussed at the summit.

Iraq, terrorism to top EU-Asia summit agenda

AFP, Brussels

Leaders of the EU and Asia meet in Denmark Sunday with the fight against terror and North Korea as key topical themes, along with broader debate about economic and political cooperation.

The crisis over Iraq will likely be discussed at the two-day ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) summit, while Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi will brief his colleagues on his recent historic visit to Pyongyang.

The fight against terrorism will be a major theme of this ASEM, the fourth such gathering of the 15 EU states and the leaders of 10 Asian countries which is held every two years.

The EU says it hopes ASEM can avoid discussing the battle against

terrorism in narrow military terms.

On Monday morning the proposed main theme is the "international situation in the aftermath of 11 September and new security issues," according to Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

Later Monday the leaders, meeting informally without advisors, will discuss the global economic situation as well as the outlooks for their respective regions.

The senior EU source again stressed the desire to avoid purely military solutions to terrorism, but instead to work on the causes.

The other key topical theme will be Koizumi's historic visit to Pyongyang on Tuesday, when he met North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il.

EU foreign envoy Javier Solana

yesterday welcomed the watershed talks in Pyongyang, which yielded promises from the Stalinist state that it would halt missile tests.

"I welcome the decision to move towards the normalisation of relations between Japan and North Korea," he said.

"I also warmly welcome the news that North Korea is to extend its moratorium on ballistic missile testing, and its assurances that it will honour the commitments it has made on its nuclear programme."

Non-governmental organisations (NGO) are holding a parallel summit to ASEM, calling above all for it not to be limited to purely promoting trade.

"This is not development or poverty reduction at all. ASEM 4's core motivation is economic," said Shalmali Guttal of the Focus on the

Global South organisation.

Other NGOs hope that the EU and Asia can join forces to fight the United States' perceived unilateralism in the fight against terrorism.

"I hope they come up with some alternative to the US imposing its strategy on the whole world," said Pol Vandevort, of the organisation 11.11.11.

The Copenhagen meeting will be attended by all EU leaders except German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who is contesting legislative elections this weekend, said a presidency spokesman.

The Asian countries represented -- Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam -- will mostly be represented by their leaders.



PHOTO: AFP
Patriot anti-missile batteries are seen deployed in the Kuwaiti desert on Tuesday as part of Kuwait's defensive strategy in case of a US military strike against Iraq. Some 10,000 US troops are currently based in Kuwait.

Iran for UN scrutiny of Israel's weapons plans

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday called on Iraq to abide by all UN resolutions, but demanded Israel also be subjected to scrutiny and sanctions over its weapons programmes.

"Given that we are among the signatories of the treaty banning the development of chemical arms and weapons of mass destruction, we approve of all UN-imposed sanctions related to this," government spokesman Abdulla Ramezanzadeh told reporters.

But he said such sanctions should be applied "without discrimination, and on any country that breaks the rules, notably Israel."

In fresh comments pointed at Washington over its standoff with Baghdad, Ramezanzadeh asserted the Islamic republic was "against all resort to force outside the framework of the United Nations".

"No country should impose its

views by relying on its power," the spokesman said, adding: "The regime of a country must be decided by the people of the country."

For his part, President Mohammad Khatami also piled renewed pressure on Iraq, calling on Baghdad to conform to "all UN resolutions".

"Iraq must conform to all UN resolutions and not only those related to disarmament," he told reporters after a ministerial meeting. "I hope the decision by Iraq (to readmit UN weapons inspectors) will bring an end to the crisis and that the region will not see another war," the president said.

Iran, which is vigorously opposed to any US attack on Iraq, on Tuesday hailed as a "wise and sensible decision" Iraq's move to readmit UN weapons inspectors without condition.

Earlier, state media reported that

Khatami held telephone talks with UN chief Kofi Annan, demanding the world body assume a leadership role in the crisis that has brought the United States and Iraq to the brink of war.

"All measures should be taken under UN leadership," Khatami was quoted as telling the UN secretary general in discussions late Tuesday.

"The UN role in the present situation of growing crisis is very important, and Iran hopes for the issue to be resolved without resorting to pressure and force on Iraqi people," state television quoted Khatami as saying.

Tehran has made all diplomatic efforts with Arab countries in the region to reduce the tensions and risk of a war," he added, calling on Iraq to "abide by international regulations, particularly the UN resolutions".

Officials hint at Al-Qaida presence in SEA

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Intelligence gathered by Southeast Asian security officials has revealed the presence of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida terror-network in the region, a top Thai defence official said yesterday.

"We have co-operated with other countries in intelligence sharing. We have some proof of that," Admiral Narong Yuthavong, supreme commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, told reporters in response to a question.

But the Thai defence chief declined to elaborate, saying: "It is inappropriate to reveal more information."

Narong is in Malaysia for a three-day biannual intelligence meeting with his Malaysian counterpart General Mohamad Zahidi Zainuddin, chief of defence forces.

Mohamad Zahidi said that one of the top issues of the 10th high level

dialogue between Malaysia and Thailand was to identify ways of beating terrorism.

"That is one of the highlights of the meeting," he said. "We want to get rid of any terrorist activities here (in Southeast Asia). Al-Qaida is not the only sole terrorist group."

Of nearly 100 suspected terrorists being held in Singapore and Malaysia, most have been linked to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which is trying to establish a pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia taking in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and the southern Philippines.

JI reportedly has close connections to al-Qaida, and some of the detainees were allegedly trained in Afghanistan when it played host to Bin Laden ahead of the September 11 attacks on the United States.

Indonesia has confirmed the arrest in its territory of Omar al-Faruq, said to be al-Qaida's senior

operative in Southeast Asia.

Intelligence reports quoted by Time magazine this week said that al-Faruq, now being interrogated by the CIA in Afghanistan, had been co-ordinating disparate Islamic militant groups in the region to attack US and allied targets.

Time magazine said it had top-secret intelligence reports in which al-Faruq confessed to plans for "large-scale attacks against US interests in Indonesia, Malaysia, (the) Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam and Cambodia."

The plans included simultaneous car and truck bomb attacks on US embassies in the region "on or near" September 11.

Based on information provided by al-Faruq, the United States believes Southeast Asia now has "the world's highest concentration of al-Qaida outside Afghanistan and Pakistan", Time said.