



A heavy cloud of smoke bellows from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's besieged compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah as Israeli soldiers stand guard on Saturday. Israeli tanks were just 10 meters from Arafat's office after the army destroyed every other building in his headquarters overnight, detaining 19 of their occupants.

Palestinian leadership urges halt to attacks inside Israel

Fears grow over Arafat's fate

AFP, Gaza City

The Palestinian leadership called on all factions to halt their attacks against civilians inside Israel in a statement released here Saturday as Yasser Arafat was under Israeli siege in his West Bank headquarters.

"The Palestinian leadership is opposed to all attacks against civilians, be they Israelis or Palestinians. It is today reiterating this position of principle and calls on all Palestinian forces to halt armed attacks against civilians on Israeli territory."

The statement followed back-to-back suicide attacks which killed nine people, including the bombers, on Wednesday and Thursday, prompting the renewed Israeli siege of Arafat's Ramallah headquarters.

The bombings were claimed by Islamic militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad but Israel blamed the Palestinian leader's "inaction".

The leadership statement said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was using attacks by armed Palestinian groups as a "pretext to repress our people and incite Israeli and world opinion against the Palestinian cause."

Following the suicide blasts in Umm el-Fahm, northern Israel, and Tel Aviv, the Palestinian leadership issued a statement condemning attacks on Israeli civilians but without calling for them to end.

Israeli troops moved into Arafat's compound late Thursday and have systematically demolished all the buildings inside except the Palestinian leader's own offices.

Arafat, blamed by Israel for all suicide attacks, has also in the past called for them to end, but Hamas and Islamic Jihad have rejected his appeals and sworn to continue their fight.

Saturday's statement added that "peace and security are possible for the Israelis but they will never be achieved by military force."

It accused Sharon of "seeking the surrender of the Palestinians and the destruction of the Palestinian Authority."

It also deplored the fact that Israel "is ignoring resolutions of the United Nations and is determined to perpetuate its occupation of the Palestinian territories and continue its settlement policy, at a time when the international community is demanding that Iraq implement such resolutions."

Meanwhile, fears grew for the fate of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat late Friday as the Israeli army tightened its grip on his besieged headquarters here, arresting 20 Palestinians who surrendered from inside the battered compound, Palestinian security source said.

The move came as the UN Security Council was preparing to discuss a Palestinian request for an emergency meeting to discuss the siege.

Troops, who assaulted the compound late Thursday following the second suicide bombing in Israel in two days, were continuing to demolish what was left of the buildings there late into the evening.

Earlier, witnesses reported hearing four explosions in the vicinity, with some suggesting they had come from tank fire.

And an overhead passageway linking the building housing Arafat's personal quarters to another containing a reception room was destroyed, totally cutting Arafat off, the sources said.

The men arrested, including members of the Palestinian security forces, had been in the reception room, the sources added.

Details of what was happening were difficult to obtain because the army had declared the compound a closed military zone.

Following the arrests, an AFP correspondent nearby heard another strong explosion in the vicinity of the destroyed overhead passageway, as well as machine-gun fire.

Earlier in the day, a policeman in Arafat's office building was shot dead by a sniper, and four other Palestinians, including a woman and two teenagers, were killed during Israeli raids in the Gaza Strip.

There were also a number of other incidents in the Gaza Strip in which five Israeli soldiers and at least 10 Palestinians were wounded.

Iraq's no to new UN resolution

Russia hints at making compromise on strike

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq will not accept a new UN resolution that would impose fresh conditions on disarmament, an official spokesman said Saturday after President Saddam Hussein chaired a leadership meeting.

"Iraq will not deal with any new resolution that would run counter to what was agreed upon with the UN secretary general," Kofi Annan, he said.

Foreign Minister Najji Sabri briefed Saddam and his aides on the meetings he held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in New York.

Sabri gave Annan a letter on Monday saying Iraq was willing to

allow the unconditional return of UN arms inspectors after a hiatus of nearly four years, but the United States is pushing for a tough new Security Council resolution on disarmament.

AP adds: Russia is leaving the door slightly open to compromise as the Bush administration insists on a new UN resolution to threaten Iraq with war if it does not disarm.

Russia's decision could turn on whether it gets new and convincing evidence that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is building up stockpiles of dangerous weapons.

Talks will continue at the United Nations, where the United States and Britain are trying to overcome resistance from Russia, China and

France to levelling new demands without proof.

President Bush appealed directly Friday to a reluctant Russian President Vladimir Putin to back a new resolution.

But despite good relations and cooperation against terrorism, Russia held to its view that threats should be deferred at least until UN weapons inspectors take up Saddam's offer to allow a resumption of searches after nearly four years.

Bush gave no sign of giving ground in the diplomatic skirmish, while Russian ministers who called on him at the White House hinted there may be room for compromise.

Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov

said he was willing to explore any evidence that Saddam was pursuing a dangerous weapons program. "Moscow's position regarding a military operation against Iraq will depend on the information given us by the American side," he said.

Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, speaking at the National Press Club, said that after some 7,000 U.N. inspections it was determined Iraq's nuclear and chemical weapons programs had been dismantled. "Only the question of biological weapons remains open," he said.

He also rejected the Bush administration's drive to depose the Iraqi president as a strategy to strip Iraq of weapons.

30 killed in Russian avalanche

AFP, Moscow

At least 30 people have been killed in an avalanche that hit a village in the Russian Caucasian republic of North Ossetia early Saturday, local officials from the Russian emergency services told the RIA Novosti news agency.

The dead lived in the village of Nijni Karmadon in the far south of Russia which was flattened under a wall of rocks, snow and ice, the agency reported. Another 30 people were reported missing in the neighbouring village of Karmadon, located in the far south of Russia.

Earlier, the Ossetia government said that up to 100 people were missing, including Russian actor/director Sergei Bodrov junior.

German parties rally for last push amid furore over Hitler-Bush comparison

AFP, Berlin

Germany's main parties wrapped up their campaigns for Sunday's federal elections confident of victory, but in a mood soured for Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder by an embarrassing Hitler jibe at the United States.

Before addressing 16,000 jubilant supporters in Dortmund, Schroeder wrote an apology to US President George W. Bush after a senior minister reportedly compared the latter's tactics over Iraq to those used by Hitler.

"I would like to say how sorry I am that remarks attributed to the

German justice minister may have hurt you," he wrote in the letter.

"The minister has assured me that she did not say the words attributed to her," he added in the letter, which was made public.

He assured Bush: "I can guarantee that anyone who draws a link between the American president and a criminal does not have a place in my government."

The incident has soured German-US relations, which had already been badly holed by Schroeder's outright refusal to join any US-led attack on Iraq even with a UN mandate.

Pakistani kills 7 Relatives over 'loose morals'

AFP, Islamabad

An enraged Pakistani on Saturday systematically murdered seven members of his family with a shotgun because of what he called their loose morals, a senior police officer said.

Mohammad Nawaz shot dead his two sons, two daughters, one son-in-law, one daughter-in-law and his wife before dawn, Assistant Superintendent of Islamabad Police, Javed Akbar, told AFP.

Nawaz, who surrendered to police, said he had given his victims tranquilisers before killing them one by one.

"He fired 20 cartridges with his double-barrelled shotgun," Akbar said.

4th attempt on Kashmir's lone female minister

11 others killed in surge of violence

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected Islamic militants launched two failed attempts in less than 24 hours on the life of Indian Kashmir's only female minister, police said Saturday, while another 11 people died in a surge of violence ahead of a second phase of voting in the Himalayan state.

Tourism Minister Sakina Itoo survived both attempts but a security force officer died when her motorcade hit a landmine and rebels raked the cars with gunfire Saturday morning, a police spokesman said.

Militants had earlier gunned down two activists of India's main leftwing party -- the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M) -- in the town of Kulgam, 60 km south of Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital.

The rebels also shot dead a member of Kashmir's ruling National Conference party overnight in the village of Dessu, in

Anantnag district.

The killings bring to 32 the number of workers of the parties taking part in the voting who have been killed since the dates of the four-phase elections were announced in early August. Twenty of the victims belong to the National Conference.

Three other people, including a school teacher, were killed elsewhere by militants in Kashmir, while the Indian army said it had shot dead four rebels in the hills of the southern Peer Panjal range Saturday.

The assassination attempt on Itoo was the second in less than 24 hours and the fourth attempt on her life in the past month.

Police said that militants lobbed a hand grenade on Friday night at Itoo's residence in Damhal Hanjipora village of southern Anantnag district.

The grenade landed in the compound but failed to explode. Itoo was not home at the time.

Saturday's attack took place

near Kulgam, while Itoo was on her way to address an election rally.

Four security force personnel were injured in the landmine explosion, one of whom died later in hospital.

"Itoo escaped unhurt in the attack," the police spokesman said.

Observers believe Itoo is being targeted because she has been conducting a very high-profile campaign for re-election to the Indian Kashmir state assembly.

In the earlier two attacks, four people were injured when militants lobbed a grenade at her house, while a security force officer and a civilian were killed when militants ambushed her motorcade with a landmine.

The first of the four rounds of voting was held on Monday in five border districts and authorities recorded a 47 percent turnout. A second round takes place on Tuesday.

India seeks extradition of Mumbai don Salem

AFP, New Delhi

India has formally asked Portugal to deport Abu Salem, gangster and alleged mastermind of the 1993 bombings in Bombay that killed and injured hundreds of people, Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani said Saturday.

Interpol arrested Salem, his girlfriend Monika Bedi and another man in Portugal on Wednesday on charges of carrying fake travel documents.

As many as 60 murder cases are pending against 41-year-old Salem, who in his past nine years as a fugitive created bases in several countries including South Africa, according to India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

Advani told reporters in the eastern city of Bhubaneswar that a note had been sent to the Portuguese embassy in New Delhi and the Indian embassy in Lisbon seeking the deportation of the underworld don.

Advani said if necessary, an assurance may be given to the Portuguese government that Salem, if deported to India, would not be given the death penalty.

Under European extradition and deportation laws, no offender will be

deported to any country that practises capital punishment.

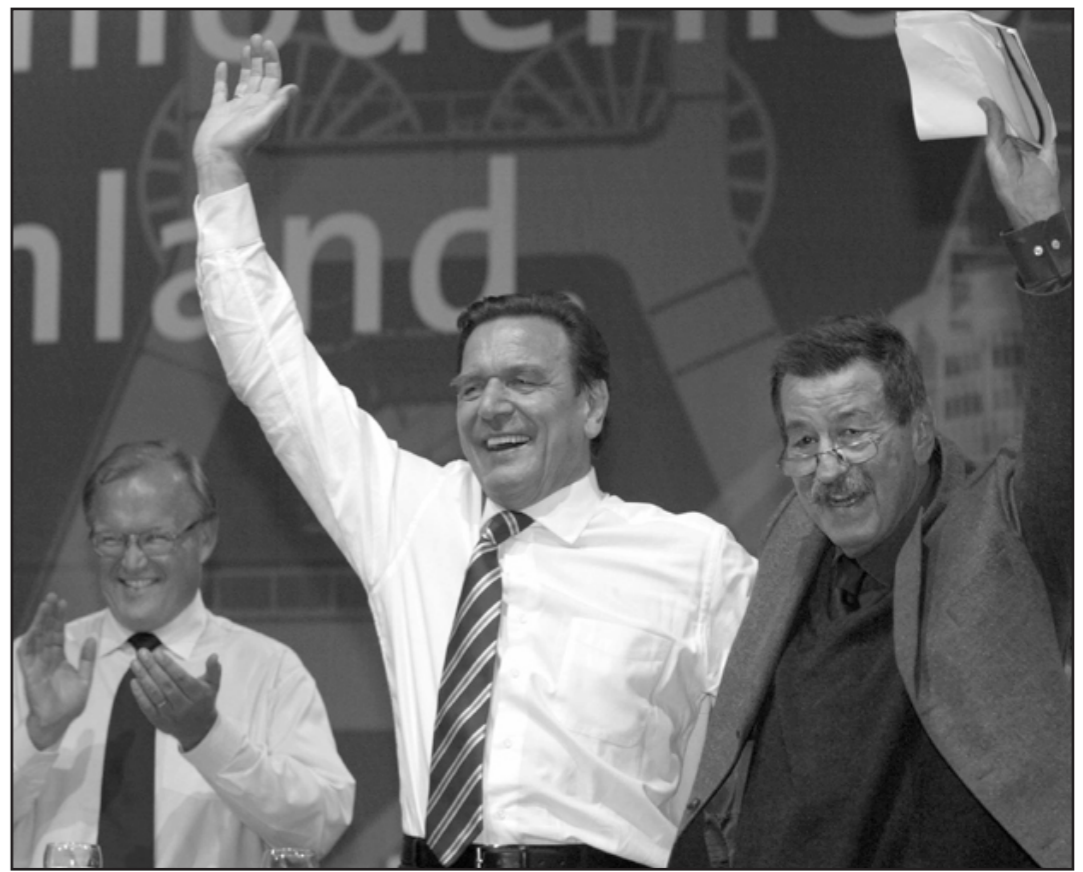
"In this case, it is possible and Indian law permits that the necessary assurance may be given to the concerned government," Advani said, as quoted by the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

Another difficulty may be that India does not have an extradition treaty with Portugal, home ministry sources said.

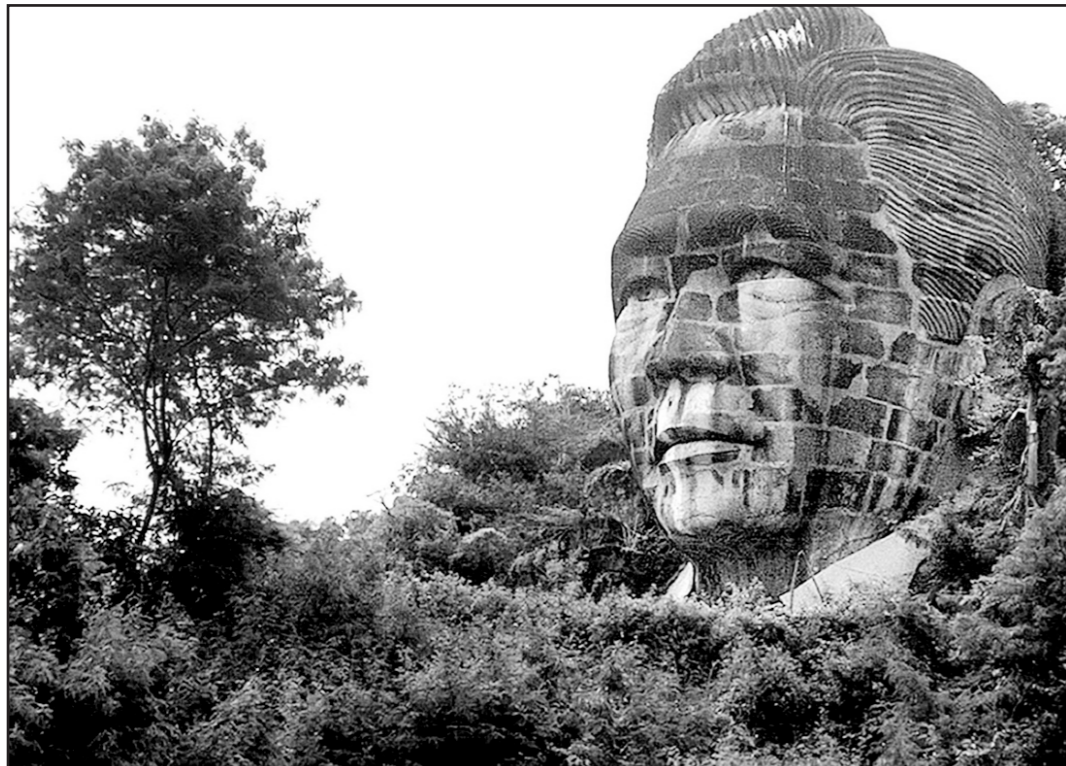
A team of officials from the CBI -- India's premier investigative agency -- was due to leave for Lisbon to pursue the case, the sources said. Advani said Salem and the others had been remanded in custody in Lisbon for three months. During this period, the CBI will make all efforts to get the gangster, he said.

"I am hopeful this work will done and he will be produced before a court in India to face the charges against him," he said.

Police in the northern city of Bhopal have become the latest to issue warrants against the gangster, issuing arrest warrants for Salem and Bedi in a murder and fake passport case respectively, PTI said Saturday, adding no details of the cases.



German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (C), German author Gunter Grass (R) and Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson (L) greet supporters at a rally in Dortmund on Friday. Schroeder's Social Democrats face Christian Union alliance (CDU/CSU) candidate Edmund Stoiber in Sunday's general election.



The abandoned and deteriorating six-storey high monument of the late deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos remains standing in La union, northern Philippines on Saturday, as the rest of the nation marks the 30th anniversary of Marcos's declaration of martial law on September 21, 1972. Marcos, who erected the bust in his honour, was toppled in a popular revolt in 1986 and died in exile in 1989. The remains of Marcos lies unburied in his hometown in nearby Ilocos norte province.

Ivory Coast troops, rebels set for 'ferocious' battle

President vows to crush foreign-aided coup

AFP, Abidjan

Ivory Coast soldiers Saturday took up positions for a "ferocious" attack on renegade troops holding the key city of Bouake as the rebels roped in young civilians to fight with them and warned of a crushing response.

Informed sources said a convoy of armoured vehicles carrying senior military officials Saturday left Abidjan and was rolling towards Bouake, the country's second city, still held by mutinous soldiers two days after a failed but bloody coup bid.

They gave no details. The number of reinforcements already sent to Ivory Coast's political capital Yamoussoukro in the Bouake region and due to move on to the town was not clear either.

Defence Minister Moise Lida Kouassi told AFP: "We will engage in a ferocious battle" on Saturday in Bouake, about 400 km north of Abidjan.

"Our goal is to liberate the country no matter what the cost."

Thursday's failed coup bid left at least 270 people dead and 300 injured in the economic capital of Abidjan, an Ivorian military source said late Friday.

The uprising broke out simultaneously in Abidjan, Bouake and the northern town of Korhogo. The rebellion was quashed in Abidjan but Korhogo, near the border with Burkina Faso, was also in the hands of rebels on Saturday.

Meanwhile, Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo vowed to hunt down those behind a failed coup attempt here, while renegade soldiers still held two key towns to the north on Saturday, notably the second city Bouake.

President Laurent Gbagbo rushed home from a trip to Italy to resume the reins of power on Friday following the uprising launched the previous day. He hinted that a foreign power may have been behind the attempted coup which was quickly snuffed out in the main city Abidjan but left rebels reportedly in charge elsewhere in this West African nation.

US to propose NATO quick strike force

REUTERS, Washington

The United States will ask NATO in Warsaw next week to create a quick strike force of up to 20,000 troops to conduct military operations anywhere in the world, the Pentagon said on Friday.

The NATO Response Force, with a core of some 5,000 troops that could be deployed in seven to 30 days, will be outlined by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Tuesday at the opening of a two-day meeting of alliance defence ministers in Poland, a senior Pentagon official said.

The official, who asked not to be identified, told reporters the force would include land, naval and air components with high-tech weaponry in a plan sparked by last year's Sept. 11 terror attacks on America.

Washington hopes the proposal will be discussed and carried forward to a summit of NATO heads of state in November in Prague for approval, along with a planned overhaul of alliance military capability and cumbersome Cold War

command structure. "It will take some years to do this," the official said.

"They (NATO countries) would get a responsive force that could deal very quickly across the full spectrum of conflict with a variety of potential contingencies -- ranging from small things such as a non-combatant evacuation situation all the way to high-intensity conflict."

The force would have many components and could give NATO -- which has so far played only a minor direct role in the U.S.-led war on terrorism -- a large number of small and highly mobile units for risky missions in far-flung trouble spots.

"I think there is no question that 9/11 and the need for NATO to think about problems out of its traditional area of operations is one of the things that sparked this," the Pentagon official said.

He noted that NATO foreign ministers took a major decision in May that the alliance needed forces capable and sustainable wherever the alliance might need them to deal with terrorist and other threats.

"It is an ability that NATO today does not have and we think it has a lot of merit," the official said. "As you know, NATO has been kind of reticent to deal with out-of-area operations."

The Pentagon official stressed that the force was not designed to compete with a plan by the European Union to develop its own Rapid Reaction Force of up to 60,000 troops and, in fact, would complement the EU force.

"Forces that could be developed by NATO for use in a European rapid reaction force could also be usable in this NATO force," he said.

The NATO force would use secure and deployable communications; protection from nuclear, chemical and biological attack; guided weapons and would have its own airlift capability.

As seen by the United States, the core of the NATO force would be about the size of a U.S. military brigade of up to 5,000 troops. But the overall strength would be that of an American division of around 20,000 troops.