



A Palestinian youth throws a stone at an Israeli tank in the West Bank town of Nablus yesterday. The Israeli army started scaling back its forces in Jenin after an operation that killed one of the most wanted Palestinian militants in the West Bank.

Israeli army scales back Jenin operations

Palestinian cabinet meets on "roadmap" to peace

AFP, Ramallah, West Bank

The Palestinian cabinet met yesterday to provisionally approve a peace "roadmap" drawn up by the top world officials, as Israel scaled back its operations in Jenin after killing one of the most wanted Palestinian men in the territories.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and his cabinet were to approve the blueprint which provides for a Palestinian state by 2005 but were also to insist that January elections be presidential as well as legislative.

The cabinet was also set to reject US demands that Arafat appoint a prime minister.

The outline, which would allow for a de facto Palestinian state to be established next year with temporary borders, says only that legislative elections should be held next January.

The Palestinians insist that presidential elections, in which

Arafat is tipped to be re-elected, be held at the same time. Israel and Washington want to see Arafat dumped, and fear early presidential polls could give him a new mandate.

The cabinet was also set to shun calls for a prime minister, a move aimed at circumscribing Arafat's presidential powers after Washington accused him of failing to prevent anti-Israeli attacks.

The Palestinians also want to see clearly set-out timetables and mechanisms allowing for a progression from one phase of the plan to the next, as well as for UN observers to be deployed to oversee the whole process.

The plan, based on a US blueprint, was drafted by the so-called Middle East "quartet" made up of the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia, and was presented last month to regional leaders by US envoy William Burns.

Israel has expressed strong reservations about the plan, which it fears could establish a Palestinian state without the strict Palestinian security and administrative reforms it insists have to be carried out before any progress can be made on the peace front.

Israeli Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who will face off against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the right-wing Likud party's primary elections on November 28, has openly slammed the plan and said it will not be on the agenda until after an anticipated US war with Iraq.

Sharon has been more cautious in his criticism to avoid ruffling the feathers of Israel's key US ally, although even his aides have expressed strong concerns.

Israel will hold its own general elections in January, in which right-wing parties are tipped to come out on top.

Meanwhile, Israel landed a

heavy blow against the radical Palestinian group Islamic Jihad Saturday when it killed its top leader for the headline northern region of Jenin.

Israeli troops who have been hunting down a Jihad cell responsible for killing at least 31 people in Jenin surrounded the hide-out of 32-year-old Iyad Sawalha and killed him after he tried to resist arrest.

Sawalha was blamed for masterminding two attacks in which Islamic Jihad suicide bombers drove cars laden with explosives into crowded buses in the north of Israel, causing carnage, on June 5 and October 21.

The army said that after killing the group's regional leader and arresting or shooting most of the rest of the cell, it was reducing its presence in Jenin, where headline groups have groomed suicide bombers who have caused havoc inside Israel, just across the Green Line boundary.

Firefighters battle more than 100 bushfires in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Bushfires were threatening homes in the Australian state of Queensland yesterday as the country's east coast sweaters in the worst fire conditions in decades.

The Queensland Fire and Rescue Service said firefighters were battling more than 100 bushfires. One of them destroyed five homes near Herberton and Clifton Beach in the state's north and Springbrook-Numbinah in the state's south-east.

In neighbouring New South Wales state, 3,000 firefighters were battling more than 100 bushfires. One of them destroyed five homes near Mittagong, about 100 km south-west of Sydney. In Sydney's west, one bushfire destroyed a chemical factory and another cut power to a water filtration plant, threatening water supplies to outlying suburbs.

Lanka govt out of danger

Muslim allies return to parliament

AFP, Colombo

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was reassured of his majority in Sri Lanka's parliament Sunday when Muslim allies called off a boycott following progress in peace talks with Tamil rebels.

Eight of the 12 legislators from the island's main Muslim party had been boycotting the assembly since last month to demand assurances on Muslims' rights in the peace process.

"We called off our boycott of parliament after the prime minister gave us the necessary assurances," said A.L.M. Athallah, the leader of the dissident faction of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC).

The opposition had claimed Wickremesinghe had lost his

majority with the SLMC boycott. The Muslim party is crucial to the premier's government, which has a slender two-seat majority in the 225 member parliament.

Wickremesinghe has faced heated criticism from President Chandrika Kumaratunga -- whose People's Alliance is in opposition in parliament -- over the peace process which the prime minister revived when he took power in December 2001.

Muslims have long complained of harassment by the Tamil Tigers in areas under rebel control and the dissident SLMC lawmakers had asked for a separate Muslim administrative unit and special security in the multiethnic eastern province.

A deal on nagging hostilities

between the Tigers and Muslims was reached last week at the second round of peace talks in Thailand between Wickremesinghe's government and the guerrillas.

"The parties agreed to establish peace committees at the community level in order to facilitate the resolution of local problems, contribute to inter-ethnic communication and reconciliation and promote respect for human rights," the Norwegian peace brokers said in a statement. The peace talks were attended by the SLMC leader, Rauf Hakeem, who is ports minister.

More than 60,000 people have died in Sri Lanka in three decades of bloodshed between Tamil separatists and the majority Sinhalese community.

India scraps outdated jets

BBC ONLINE

The Indian Air Force is to phase out an old version of the Soviet-made MiG-21 fighter. The jet has been involved in at least 250 crashes since 1991. More than 100 pilots have died flying the F-L version of the MiG-21 during this time.

The bad safety record has earned the MiG-21s the nickname of "flying coffins". The decision to phase out the jet follows a meeting on Friday between the Indian Defence Minister, George Fernandes, and senior members of the Indian Air Force.

Officials have blamed the accidents on a number of factors, including outdated technology and the unavailability of spare parts.

India has been involved in protracted negotiations with various countries for the purchase of new jet fighters since 1983.



India has seen many jet crashes in recent years.

It is reported to have narrowed down the choice to British Hawk fighter jets. But the \$1.6bn deal has not yet been finalised.

Senior air force officials say they are hopeful of acquiring new jet trainers before the end of the current financial year in March 2003.

Eminem gains critical acclaim in movie debut

AFP

Slammed as a misogynist and homophobe, spurned by puritans, five-time Grammy award winner and music phenomenon Eminem seems headed for his usual controversial success with his movie debut in "8 Mile".

The movie, loosely based on his real life, is a tale of an aspiring hip hop artist, an impoverished white rapper with an insatiable rage battling the odds to make it big in a rapidly declining Detroit.

Helped perhaps by the fact that the director of "8 Mile" is Academy Award winning Curtis Hanson Eminem's screen debut has been roundly praised by critics.

Entertainment Weekly compares his "impassive delicacy" and pent-up anger to a "hip hop James Dean." Los Angeles Times says "the actor has something of the quality of an updated James Dean."

But Eminem has been most



compared to a latter-day Elvis Presley -- for the good and the bad.

Black rappers contend he is the Elvis Presley of hip hop, a white man who stole a scene once the exclusive domain of black artists.

But the 28-year-old Detroit native has gotten dodgy press as well, with personal problems and brushes with the law. He was placed on a two-year probation for pistol-whipping a man seen kissing his then-wife, Kimberly, outside a nightclub.

Sonia silent on prime ministerial hopes

HINDUSTAN TIMES, Mount Abu

Congress president Sonia Gandhi evaded questions on her prime ministerial prospects and her son Rahul Gandhi's entry into politics. But she made it clear that the Congress's aim was to secure a majority on its own at the Centre, though it was not opposed to the idea of forging a coalition with like-minded parties.

"That is not the question we need to address now," she said in response to a question on how close she was to becoming the prime minister after having invested nearly five years in active politics.

Sonia Gandhi was upbeat about the Congress's prospects: "I think we have done fairly well. I think there is still room to work more and to make a greater effort."

Sonia Gandhi admitted that the party will have to discuss the issue of strengthening its organisation in

UP, Bihar and some other major states.

The Congress president also sought to clear the confusion on the party's stand on entering into a coalition at the Centre.

She mentioned the Panchmahri declaration, which charted a roadmap for the party in 1998, and said while the ideal situation for the Congress would be to come to power on its own at the Centre, it did not "have a closed mind".

The Congress, she said, was open to aligning with secular and like-minded parties.

Giving a clear signal to the Samajwadi Party, which has tried to link the issue of a Congress-SP understanding in Gujarat with the Congress's stand in UP, Sonia Gandhi stressed that while the party was ready to work with secular groups to defeat communal forces in the state, it was "not in the game of breaking governments".

Police believe Bali bombers still in Indonesia

REUTERS, Bali, Indonesia

Indonesian police yesterday said they believed around 10 people who carried out the Bali bomb attack were still in the country, adding that a man who had admitted his involvement in the blasts faced the death penalty.

Deputy national police spokesman Edward Aritonang also said a man being questioned for selling explosive materials to Amrozi, the Indonesian who has confessed, was now a suspect for selling the products, but this was not linked to the Bali probe.

"Police are hunting for people believed connected to the bombings. They number around 10 and were the field operators," Aritonang said, adding that while they could have fled the country, police were convinced they were still in Indonesia.

Aritonang made no comment on

who might have ordered the three bomb blasts on October 12 or who planned the attacks.

No one has claimed responsibility for the Bali atrocity, which killed more than 180 people, mainly foreign holidaymakers, but suspicion has focused on Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network and Jemaah Islamiyah, a militant Southeast Asian Muslim group.

Officials say the two organisations are linked.

Indonesia's defense minister said on Friday that Amrozi was a member of Jemaah Islamiyah. The minister also said al Qaeda was behind the blasts, which have rocked Indonesia and thrust it into the uncomfortable glare of international scrutiny.

Aritonang said Amrozi faced the death penalty under tough new anti-terror measures brought in by the world's most populous Muslim nation in the aftermath of the Bali

attacks.

Asked about the owner of a chemical shop who had sold Amrozi large amounts of explosives material, Aritonang named him as Silvester Tendean. He said Tendean had been declared a suspect in East Java in relation to permits to sell explosives materials.

Tendean is being questioned in Bali as a witness in the bomb investigation, police have said.

Amrozi owned a minivan that was used as a car-bomb to rip through popular nightclubs along the famous Kuta Beach. His arrest last week marked the first big breakthrough in the probe.

Aritonang said Amrozi, aged 40 and who relatives say fixed motorbikes and made antennas for handphones at his home village in East Java province, had given police a wealth of information.

'Iranian dissident on death row to be freed'

AFP, Tehran

An outspoken critic of the conservative clergy's leading role in Iran, who was sentenced to death last week, will be freed soon as the case had been "settled", speaker of parliament Mehdi Karubi said yesterday.

"I say to his family that (the execution) will not take place and even that with the help of God he will soon return to his family," Karubi told parliament in a speech broadcast on state radio.

He did not make it clear whether he was speaking from personal conviction or some deal had been done to release reformist academic and writer Hashem Aghajari.

"The affair is settled and with the help of God it will soon be over," he added, calling on Aghajari to keep calm amid growing political tension in Iran.

"As a cleric and spokesman for many religious dignitaries whom I have contacted, I express my disgust at this shameful verdict," Karubi said to acclamation from the reform majority parliament.

He claimed that the sentencing of Aghajari Wednesday by a court in Hamedan, western Iran, was "the decision of a single judge."

"Almost every judge, the judicial authorities and religious leaders are against this verdict," Karubi added, saying that it harmed the image of Islam and the Shiite clergy.

He had even received letters from conservatives opposed to the judgement, he said.

The 45-year-old Aghajari, who teaches history at Tehran University and was arrested August 8, was sentenced to death for insulting Islam after he called in a speech for a reform of Shism and advised the faithful not to follow the clergy blindly.

He was also sentenced to eight years in jail, 74 lashes and a 10-year ban on teaching.

Conservative member of parliament Mohammad Abutorabi told his colleagues he was convinced that the verdict would be commuted by a higher court, "by virtue of Islamic mercy."

Afghan women freed from prison

AFP, Kabul

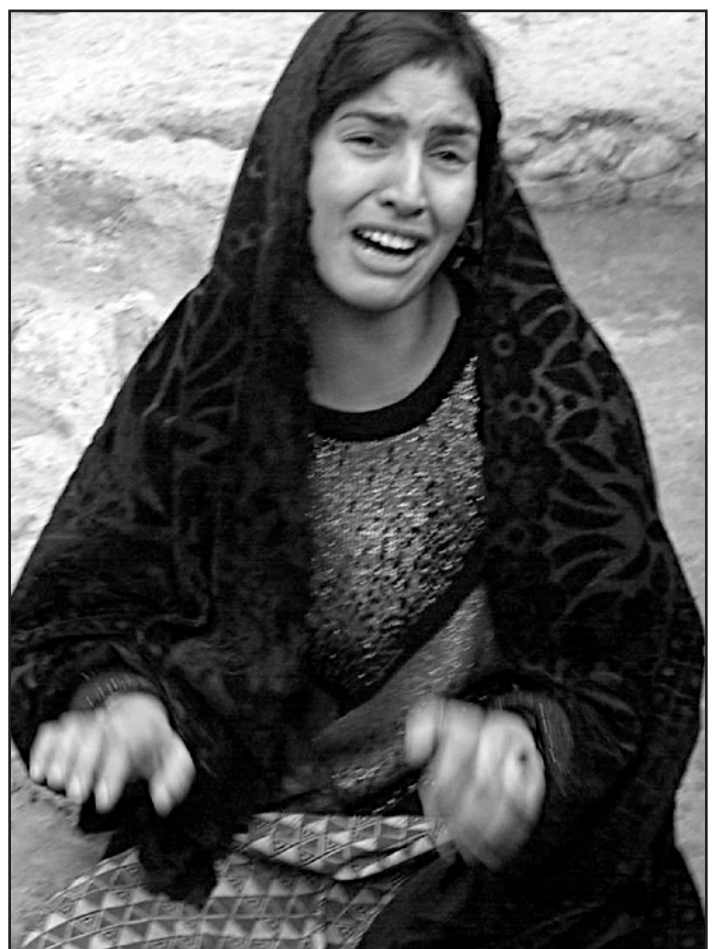
Twenty female prisoners jailed without trial in Afghanistan for minor violations of Islamic moral codes walked free yesterday after a pardon was issued by Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Emotional relatives greeted the women as they emerged from Kabul women's prison at midday, ending an anguished wait that began Thursday when Karzai's gesture, timed to coincide with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, was announced.

The president has ordered investigations into the cases of 11 other inmates accused of unspecified "honour crimes," with a view to securing their freedom within the next few weeks.

Sunday's release follows international pressure on the Afghan government to improve conditions for prisoners and end human rights violations, which have persisted after last year's fall of the headline Taliban regime.

Many of the women were jailed for having illicit relationships or on minor charges of theft, according to Kabul's security commander Basir Salangi, who said they were being freed because prison conditions did not meet international standards.



Sediqa, one of the women prisoners, pleads for her release from jail in Kabul after the jail warden told her yesterday that she has to stay for another month.

Wind of change sweeps across post-Taliban Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A vibrant city of cinemas, pizza restaurants, beauty salons and gridlocked traffic, Kabul has changed immeasurably in the 12 months since the headline Taliban abandoned the capital they turned into a ghost town.

As troops from the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance resistance movement arrived in the capital early on November 13, 2001, they were welcomed by a warily jubilant population, gradually realising they had seen the last of the oppressive regime.

Some changes were instant, such as men sporting beards made mandatory under the Taliban's harsh interpretation of Islamic sharia law rushing to barber shops to expose their chins. Once-outlawed music was heard across the city.

Other developments have been slower. Women, forced to hide their lives and faces away from the world under the Taliban, have gradually returned to Afghan

society, but many still wear the once compulsory all-encompassing burqa veil.

More visibly, traffic levels have soared in the city. Formerly quiet streets are now filled with fume-belching Toyota taxis, bumper-to-bumper with the gleaming white landcruisers of the United Nations and aid agencies.

Cinemas have opened their doors, playing to packed audiences eager to see their favourite Bollywood stars, and new restaurants have sprung up -- several catering to the burgeoning expatriate population.

Shops have appeared, selling TVs, hi-fi, DVDs and compact discs, while along Chicken Street, Kabul's answer to a tourist trap, grocery shops offer food products from around the world imported via Pakistan.

Kabul's main stadium, used by the Taliban for public executions and amputations, has returned to hosting sports events, and the universally feared religious police are no longer a threat.

Most Kabul citizens have embraced the changes, relishing in freedoms which would once have met with violent punishment.

"For me Taliban time was like a prison, now I can do what I want, wear what I want," said driver Mohammad Doud.

But for many in the city, most of which is still in ruins after 23 years of bitter conflict, there have been few positive changes.

The outbreak of peace has prompted hundreds of thousands of refugees to return to their homeland from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Since their homes have been destroyed, many have crammed into squalid neighbourhoods without running water and electricity.

The UN's High Commissioner for Refugees has already warned of a potential crisis as the city struggles to support a vastly increased urban population as winter advances.

Rents have also skyrocketed in Kabul, a situation unwittingly

exacerbated by foreign non-government organisations willing to pay high prices for the few fully-intact buildings.

Those unable to match the rising prices have headed for the spreading shantytowns, creating a new class of poor and an army of dirty street children, begging or selling the magazines and newspapers of the freshly liberated Afghan press.

Although girls have returned to the schools from which they were barred by the Taliban and women have returned, in small numbers, to the workplace, Afghan females still live in a society dominated by men.

Kabul also remains a heavily militarised city, with the government keen to keep a tight grip on the capital as the rest of the country remains afflicted by sporadic fighting amongst warlords who answer only to themselves.

A series of bomb blasts, blamed on extremist diehards, culminated in an explosion which killed 30 people on September 5 and has

heightened the need for security in the city.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) maintains regular patrols, while soldiers of the Northern Alliance guard major government ministries with ageing Kalashnikov rifles.

But despite the increased security, government officials have lifted a night-time curfew for the first time in 23 years, declaring the city safe enough to do without it.

Despite the monumental problems still facing Kabul, the city is basking in an optimism not experienced for decades.

"Everything has changed since the Taliban. I had to keep a long beard and I couldn't wear the clothes I wanted to," said medical student Wahidullah Masood.

"We weren't allowed to watch TV or listen to music. Now, although it seems there hasn't been much of a change in the economy, life is getting better and people have hope."