

Israel pledges pullout from West Bank

Abbas, Sharon end first meet with positive note

THE GUARDIAN, Jerusalem

Israel last night promised to withdraw its forces from the centres of Palestinian cities in the West Bank after a three-hour meeting between the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers in Jerusalem.

The second meeting in two weeks between Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas was hailed as "beneficial" and "positive" by both sides ahead of next week's summit with George Bush.

Bush has been stepping up the pressure for peace in the Middle East and in an interview with Le Figaro published this morning warns that Israel must take real steps towards that end.

"I am absolutely determined to carry on [the peace process] to the bitter end because US foreign policy is not limited to defending its own interests ... We want peace," Reuters quoted Bush as saying.

"This region will only have

peace if it has freedom. For the Palestinians, this means the creation of a state. A Palestinian state must be viable. The expansion of (Israeli) settlements is a contradiction to our efforts to create a Palestinian state."

During last night's meeting to discuss the road map, the Middle East plan sponsored by the international community, Sharon told Abbas, known also as Abu Mazen, that as a measure of good faith he would unilaterally end the two-week-old closure on the West Bank by Saturday and allow some Palestinian workers to enter Israel.

He renewed promises that Israel would ease some restrictions on roadblocks around Palestinian towns, release some prisoners and withdraw from West Bank city centres, according to Israeli and Palestinian officials.

In return, Sharon demanded that Abbas "act decisively to stop terrorism ... dismantling terror organisations, arresting terrorists, confiscating illegal weapons,

stopping incitement and creating an atmosphere of peace", according to a statement from Mr Sharon's office.

"The prime minister emphasised that only after liquidation of terrorism and a real struggle against it will it be possible to achieve the hoped-for peace," it said.

"The redeployment of troops is dependent on the relentless fight against terrorism," Sharon's spokesman, Raanan Gissin added.

The meeting took place hours after two of the main Palestinian militant groups, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, said they would consider a total ceasefire when they meet Abbas next week.

Abbas has said he expects to deliver a ceasefire: "My assessment is that by next week I will arrive at a ceasefire agreement with Hamas," he told the daily Yedioth Ahronoth.

Mahmoud Zahar, a Hamas leader, said the organisation was willing to discuss ending attacks in

Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. "Up to this moment we have no fixed conditions," he told Israel Radio.

"These conditions will be agreed upon by all the Palestinian sides. If Abu Mazen succeeds in achieving our national goals, Hamas will discuss the issue of a ceasefire."

Abdullah Shami, a leader of Islamic Jihad, said his group was willing to consider an indefinite ceasefire "if the enemy is committed to not targeting our people as well as releasing Palestinian prisoners".

Hamas supports a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and what is now Israel while Islamic Jihad believes in a united Islamic state encompassing all Muslim countries.

But al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a militant group affiliated with the Fatah faction of the Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat, issued a statement which cast a shadow on peace efforts.



PHOTO: AFP

Protestors wearing G8 heads of state masks on Thursday lead a demonstration in Lausanne, of about 10,000 people against the G8 and globalisation, at Lake Lemman, facing the eastern France town of Evian, host to the G8 meeting scheduled for June 1-3.

World leaders gather for party in St. Petersburg

REUTERS, St. Petersburg

World leaders gather in Russia on Friday to mark the 300th birthday of the old Czarist capital, a glittering occasion many hope will help dispel lingering rancor over the Iraq war.

It will be the first time all the key players in the bitter debate over the US-led Iraq invasion will be together since the war began in March.

The three-day celebrations in St. Petersburg -- its palaces and canals spruced up with a \$1.5 billion renovation some critics say Russia can ill-afford -- comes just days before the world's seven largest industrial economies and Russia hold their annual G8 summit in France.

Friday's arrivals in St. Petersburg include British Prime Minister Tony Blair, fresh from a trip to Iraq, and his main opponents over the war there -- French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

Blair was the first Western leader to visit post-war Iraq, where he dismissed renewed controversy over the reasons for toppling the government of Saddam Hussein.

US sees infiltrators entering Iraq as it fails to restore calm

AFP, Baghdad

US President George W. Bush acknowledged lawlessness was gripping Iraq but insisted US forces were making progress in the new battle to establish order, as the occupying US-led coalition claimed religious hardliners from abroad were trying to destabilise the country.

Meanwhile, the debate raged on over whether US and British intelligence exaggerated evidence of Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction in order to win public support to launch the war to topple Saddam Hussein's regime.

Bush, speaking to journalists ahead of a week-long tour to Europe and the Middle East, said Thursday lawlessness in Iraq was inevitable and that it would "take a while" to restore calm.

"Now there is no question there is lawlessness inside of Baghdad and regions north of Baghdad," he said.

But "we are making progress on all fronts," he added. "A lot of Iraq is improving from the pre-war conditions and that's important to

know."

Bush's remarks came as US troops continued to face sporadic attacks, apparently from remnants of Saddam's regime, with several being killed.

Top military commander Lieutenant General David McKiernan said Thursday extra troops might be sent to tackle the continuing strikes by "regime holdouts" in western Iraq.

The struggle to restore stability in Iraq took a new twist Friday when the governing US-led coalition said Islamist hardliners were pouring into Iraq in a bid to destabilise the country, in what appeared to be a clear warning to Iran.

"Fundamentalists under foreign command have entered Iraq with aggressive intent and it is in the interest of the Iraqi people to help the coalition," the coalition said on its Baghdad radio, without specifying from where they came.

The report asked Iraqis to inform the coalition of the whereabouts of any infiltrators.

Washington has already warned Iran, which shares a long border with Iraq, against sending agents

into the country or using its influence with Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority to spark opposition to US and British forces.

"There is clear evidence of the Iranians trying to put in place a mechanism for them to exert influence," the top British official in Iraq John Sawers told Britain's visiting Prime Minister Tony Blair on Thursday.

In recent days Washington has stepped up its criticisms of Iran, accusing it of harboring senior members of the al-Qaeda network and voicing repeated concern over its alleged bid to develop nuclear weapons.

Speculation grew Friday that the public was misled over Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction programs, with senior politicians in London and Washington cited in the British press saying that unprecedented intelligence blunders could be to blame. "This could conceivably be the greatest intelligence hoax of all time. I doubt it, but we have to ask," Jane Harman, the senior Democrat on the US's House Select Committee on Intelligence, told The Times newspaper.

Blair urges Europe, US to heal divide

AFP, Warsaw

British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Friday urged Europe and the United States to heal the divide caused by the Iraq war, telling them that the world was entering "a crucial time."

"It is a moment either for reconciliation or for drifting apart," he warned in a speech in Warsaw during a brief visit to Poland.

Pointing to people on both sides of the Atlantic who wanted the two continents to forge separate destinies, Blair told dignitaries at Warsaw's Royal Castle he was "determined to fight" for a joint future.

"The real questions is: can we

recognise a sufficient convergence of interest to rebuild this transatlantic alliance and strengthen it? I believe we can," he said.

He was speaking during a brief stopover in the Polish capital, before heading for St Petersburg, where he was to attend celebrations to mark the 300th anniversary of Russia's former imperial capital.

After that he was to go on to the annual gathering of G8 world leaders this coming weekend in the French Alpine town of Evian.

With the European Union deeply divided over the Iraq war, transatlantic ties have recently come under strain, with EU heavyweights France and Germany, who led opposition to the war, irked at eastern Europe's staunch backing

for the US hardline stance. Blair told European critics of the Iraq war that issues such as terrorism and weapons proliferation "are the modern security threats: they threaten Europe as much as the United States."

Blair said any disagreement must be managed carefully and should not "explode into a diplomatic dogfight."

At a news conference during his Warsaw visit he dismissed as "completely absurd" suggestions that western intelligence agencies invented evidence of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction to justify the war in Iraq.

He said he had "no doubt at all" that weapons would be found in the

end.

However the British leader also had stern words for the more belligerent voices in Washington saying that they should recognise Europe wanted "to be America's partner, not its servant."

Poland, a NATO member which is on course to join the European Union on May 1, 2004, contributed about 200 troops to the Iraq war.

As a reward, the central European nation of 38.3 million people has been given responsibility for ensuring security in a sector of post-war Iraq between Basra and Baghdad as part of the stabilisation force being put in place by Washington and London.

US troops kill 2 civilians in Iraq checkpoint

AFP, Washington

US troops firing a tank-mounted machine gun killed two civilians and injured two others late Wednesday in the Iraqi town of Samarra when they tried to drive through a military checkpoint, the US Central Command said Thursday.

News of the shooting came as the US military announced it was investigating another incident Monday in Samarra, about 60 km north of Baghdad, in which three young men were allegedly shot and killed by US troops.

Foreign envoys in Iraq have no diplomatic immunity: US

AFP, Washington

Foreign diplomats in Iraq no longer enjoy diplomatic immunity or any of the privileges they were accorded under their accreditation to Saddam Hussein's former regime, the US State Department said Thursday.

In addition, spokesman Richard Boucher said Washington is advising foreign countries to hold off on a new Iraqi government is in place as "at this point there is really no purpose" for them to be there.

However, the exact status of foreign diplomatic missions -- which are considered part of the

sovereign territory of the country that owns or leases the property -- in Iraq was not immediately clear.

Responding to reporters' questions about a raid on the Palestinian mission in Baghdad and the arrest of three Palestinian diplomats by US forces, Boucher first said that neither the envoys nor the property held any diplomatic status.

"There are diplomats who were previously accredited to the Saddam regime who have been residing in former mission residences who are still there," he said.

"We do not regard those as diplomatic missions, they are accredited to a regime that is no

longer existent and, therefore, their accreditation has lapsed," Boucher said.

"They and their premises don't have diplomatic status," he added firmly.

But after repeated questions about the legality of that position under international law and diplomatic protocol, Boucher then allowed that the missions themselves might still retain some protection.

"Certainly, the accreditation of the people has lapsed," he said. "Whether the property has some residual status, I will see."

3 missions aim at enigma of Red Planet

AFP, Paris

Mars, the planet that has enthralled, frightened or exasperated Man ever since he gazed at the heavens, may be on the brink of surrendering its most tantalising secret.

A billion-dollar volley of space missions, due to start on Monday, may at last answer the question: does life, or the potential for it, exist on the Red Planet?

A bloodied body named after the Roman god of war; the home of "canals" spotted by astronomer Percival Lowell; of terrifying aliens in H.G. Wells' "The War of the Worlds"; or a verdant twin for Earth in Ray Bradbury's "The Martian Chronicles": Mars holds a central place in our imagination of the cosmos.

No other planet has been targeted by so many space probes, not least because Venus, Earth's closest neighbour, is an uninhabitable hellhole with an atmosphere of toxic soup.

But the mission record is littered with disasters, and those few that have succeeded only seem to have swollen the great martian mystery with each turn.

'US, UK claims on Iraq's WMDs may be intelligence cock-up'

Bush, Blair still hopeful of finding banned weapons

AFP, London

As fears grow that the public were misled over Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, senior politicians in London and Washington told the British press Friday that unprecedented intelligence blunders could be to blame.

An unnamed senior British government minister told the left-wing Independent daily that the failure to find weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq would constitute "Britain's biggest ever intelligence failure" and would trigger an overhaul of the security services.

"This could conceivably be the greatest intelligence hoax of all time. I doubt it, but we have to ask," Jane Harman, the senior Democrat on the US's House Select Committee on Intelligence, told The Times.

"It was the moral justification for the war. I think the world is owed an accounting," Harman said.

"My concern is that we did not have enough good intelligence to draw the necessary conclusions that our policy makers need to be completely confident," Peter Goss,

the Republican chairman of the select committee told The Times.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we gave them better information to base their judgements on?" Goss asked.

Their committee has written to George Tenet, the CIA director, asking him to respond by July 1 on several key questions, with a view to holding hearings later that month, the newspaper said.

A copy of the letter, which the Times reported it had seen, asks Tenet whether the intelligence was of sufficient quantity, quality and reliability, how it was analysed, and whether "any dissenting views were properly weighed."

"The committee is interested in understanding how the CIA's analysis of Iraq's linkages to terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda was derived," the letter says, according to the same source.

The right-wing Daily Telegraph said that the issue was far graver for Blair than for US President George W. Bush who presented a far wider public case for war than the British leader did in the House of Commons.

"Blair, desperate for the support of his own party, nailed himself

firmly to the mast of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) and allowed his spin machine to exaggerate the danger to Britain," the newspaper said.

British government officials, quoted in the Financial Times business newspaper, said that British and US military planners were depending on Saddam Hussein's regime using its weapons of mass destruction as proof that Iraq possessed them and were not expecting to mount a wide-scale hunt for a hidden arsenal.

Meanwhile, President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair stuck to their insistence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction before the US-led invasion.

"We discovered weapons manufacturing facilities that were condemned by the United Nations," Bush told reporters in a special interview prior to leaving Friday on a tour of Europe and the Middle East.

"Biological laboratories described by our secretary of state to the whole world that were not supposed to be there, that are a direct violation of the UN resolutions, have been discovered."



PHOTO: AFP

Children play in a tent camp on Thursday for people left homeless by the earthquake, in Dellys about 90km east of Algiers. Another quake measuring 5.8 on the Richter scale hit early Thursday about 60km east of Algiers causing two new deaths. Over 2,200 people died in a massive quake on May 21 whose epicentre was approximately 50 km east of the capital Algiers.