

Death of Israeli girl fuels more violence

Israel agrees to 'limit' strikes on militants

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Palestinian gunmen killed an Israeli girl on a road near the West Bank, feeding a cycle of violence that has battered a peace plan US Secretary of State Colin Powell will try to rescue in a new Middle East visit.

The attack on a car near Kibbutz Eyal in central Israel late on Tuesday was launched shortly after Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas failed in another bid to persuade militants to call a truce with Israel.

Medics said the dead girl was aged seven and identified two people wounded in the attack as her five-year-old sister and father. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the shooting which the army said was carried out by Palestinians.

"We have re-emphasised that resistance is a legitimate right of our people," Mohammed al-Hindi, a senior Islamic Jihad official, said

after Abbas sat down with representatives of 13 militant factions for three-and-a-half hours in Gaza City.

Ismail Abu Shanab, a senior leader of Hamas, said a cease-fire was still under discussion.

More than 50 people have died in tit-for-tat Israeli-Palestinian attacks since Abbas, President Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon affirmed a peace "road map" at a summit in Aqaba, Jordan, on June 4.

Facing the prospect of the collapse of the most ambitious Middle East peace plan in more than two years, the United States said Powell would come to Israel on Friday to mediate.

Meanwhile Israel has agreed to curb "track-and-kill" operations against Palestinian militants in a deal struck with US officials to help them salvage a new peace plan torn by violence, security sources said on Wednesday.

After more than 50 people were killed in a rash of attacks and counter-

attacks last week, Washington demanded restraint to enable confidence-building steps required of each side by the "road map" plan launched by President Bush on June 4.

But security sources said Israel would now target only militants identified as likely to carry out a suicide bombing or other attack imminently, not top political figures.

"We have undertaken to limit our track-and-kill operations to terrorists who are definitely 'ticking bombs'.

When it comes to more borderline cases such as Rantissi, who is in a command position, we will hold fire as much as possible," one Israeli security source told Reuters.

"This is to demonstrate to all sides that Israel is serious about giving the current round of talks the best chance of succeeding and forestall Palestinian charges of 'sabotage'."

The deal was worked out by Sharon's chief of staff, Dov Weisglass, in the latest of a series of

trips he has made to the White House to resolve disputes over a peace plan Sharon's right-wing cabinet endorsed only under US pressure.

It envisages the creation of a Palestinian state in Israeli-occupied territory by 2005 after a dismantling of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and a Palestinian crackdown on militants sworn to destroying Israel.

Security sources denied Israeli media reports the policy would apply for just six weeks. "This is not for a set period of time, nor is it linked to any action or inaction on the part of the Palestinian (authorities)," one said.

Anxious not to see the most ambitious Middle East peace plan in more than two years ruined by vengeful violence, Bush decided to dispatch Secretary of State Colin Powell to the region on Friday to mediate -- his second trip in a month.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian women sit amid the rubble of their demolished house in Rafah refugee camp in the southern of Gaza strip yesterday. Israeli army troops demolished three houses in the area as Egyptian envoys failed to achieve a breakthrough in talks with Palestinian militants aimed at arranging a ceasefire with Israel and salvaging a US-backed peace 'roadmap' plan battered by violence.

Pakistan says it's not preparing for war

If India takes one step, we'll take two: Musharraf

AP, Islamabad

A day after Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee accused Pakistan of preparing for a fourth war, a senior Cabinet minister on Wednesday said that Pakistan wanted no such conflict, and welcomed further steps toward peace between the two countries.

"We are not preparing for a fourth war against India. We do not want it," Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said in Islamabad.

Vajpayee told a gathering in Madhya Pradesh on Tuesday that "Pakistan has lost three times in wars. It is preparing to lose a fourth time."

Ahmed further said that Pakistan did not have hostile designs against any country. "We want peace, but if war is imposed on us, then we know how to defend ourselves," he said.

Meanwhile Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf welcomed statement by Indian Deputy PM L K Advani that compromises have to be

made by both India and Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir issue, President Pervez Musharraf has said if New Delhi takes one step, Islamabad is willing to take two to normalise relations.

In an interview to BBC Asia Today programme telecast on Wednesday, Musharraf, who is currently in London, said he was willing to meet India more than half way.

Musharraf said he was "very glad he (Advani) said that he is prepared to make compromises. If India takes one step we are ready to two steps towards peace".

Hinting that there was a possibility that India and Pakistan could hold talks at a high level during this year, Musharraf said, "I think there will be talks. Pakistan leadership certainly wants it. But it depends on other side, whether they want to extend the other hand also."

He said Pakistan was doing everything possible to prevent armed militants from crossing into

Kashmir but that he could not guarantee a total end to infiltration. "There is no infiltration, absolutely none, no official patronage."

He said efforts to stop cross border terrorism in Kashmir could not be sustained indefinitely. "You cannot keep a military on high alert for a long period and you would not like people to turn their guns against you and undermine your own government because you are selling out, because there is no reciprocity in the situation coming from the other side."

Relying to a question about why talks have been delayed despite Vajpayee's "bold" offer of resumption of dialogue, Musharraf claimed that Pakistan has offered seven confidence building measures (CBMs) instead of India's two.

Pakistan has taken seven steps to promote relations, including moving to establish road and rail links and appoint a new High Commissioner to India, he said, adding India had only taken two steps.

India will release Peter Bleach

AP, New Delhi

India has accepted the UK government's request to release British national Peter Bleach, who is serving a life sentence for air dropping arms and ammunition for a revolutionary group in India seven years ago, a news report said on Wednesday.

The release of Peter Bleach, from Yorkshire, would require clemency from the president, and the government is still working out the procedure in consultation with the law ministry, a newspaper said.

Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani conveyed the Centre's decision to release Bleach to British Prime Minister Tony Blair during their meeting in London on Monday, the newspaper said.

Attempts to confirm the report in New Delhi were not immediately

successful. Advani remained in London.

Bleach and five Russian men were arrested in 1995 and later convicted on charges that they parachuted crates of assault rifles, anti-tank missiles, rocket launchers and thousands of rounds of ammunition over the eastern Indian village of Purulia.

Police said the cache was meant for a revolutionary group. Former president K Narayanan pardoned the Russian accomplices in 2000 after Moscow pleaded that there was little evidence against them and that the sentences were too harsh.

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Powell urges Myanmar to release Suu Kyi

REUTERS, Phnom Penh

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said on Wednesday Myanmar's military rulers must release opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and put the country on a path to democracy.

"Together, we must tell the Burmese leaders to free Aung San Suu Kyi, to free her supporters, and to free the people of Burma by returning democracy to that nation," Powell told a gathering of foreign ministers, according to a senior State Department official.

"For months it has been clear that the rulers of Burma were backtracking on the commitments to open the political process that they made to their own citizens and to the

United Nations," Powell told foreign ministers from the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well 13 counterparts including Japan, South Korea and Russia.

"On May 30, the leadership abandoned all pretence of reform when it attacked the motorcade of Nobel Peace laureate and opposition leader... Suu Kyi," he added.

"Burma is attempting to use its sovereignty as a shield behind which it can violate the fundamental rights of its citizens with impunity."

Powell hailed ASEAN's unprecedented decision on Tuesday to demand Suu Kyi's release, saying this was not interfering in Myanmar's internal affairs but demanding that it "heed the deep

concerns of its neighbors and of the international community."

Suu Kyi, who has spent years under house arrest, was detained again on May 30 after her followers clashed with supporters of the military government during a rural tour.

Pressure to act on Myanmar follows a decision on Monday by the European Union to tighten sanctions on the military government by adding an arms embargo and visa bans and asset freezes on more than 150 officials in the junta.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy swept to election victory in 1990 but was never allowed to rule.

'Kala azar' kills 12 children in Bihar

IANS, Patna

The dreaded kala azar, a tropical disease that attacks the liver and spleen, has struck two Bihar villages, killing 12 children and leaving 12 others critically ill.

All the children, affected over the last fortnight, belong to poor families in the villages of Yujirola and Kujurrola in Bhujipur district. And officials fear the toll could go up.

The dozen children suffering from the disease, which is fatal if not treated, are said to be seriously ill in the absence of medicines and proper medical care.

Kala azar, or leishmaniasis, is transmitted by sand flies and characterised by irregular bouts of fever, weight loss, anaemia and swelling of the spleen and liver.

Local councillor Pardeep Singh Pankaj said most of the deaths took place because of the poor, in fact non-existent, health facilities in the village. The two villages had become a breeding ground for kala azar because of the unhygienic living conditions and the filth all around, he said.

He added: "There is no facility of drainage of dirty and polluted water from the villages. The water stinks resulting in the spread of the disease."

Donkey wedding to bring in rain

BBC ONLINE

Residents of India's southern city of Bangalore have married off two donkeys, in the hope that the ancient ritual will usher in good monsoon rains.

Though monsoons have hit southern India, Bangalore is still waiting for its first showers and residents decided to invoke the ritual - detailed in Hindu scriptures - after their prayers failed to deliver.

Two donkeys - the bride Ganga and the groom Varuna - tied the knot at a temple on the city outskirts to loud cheers of about 100 guests, who attended the ceremony.

Rains are crucial in India, as the majority of the country's population of over 1 billion depends on agriculture and farming.

The happy couple - who wagged their tails, oblivious to the community - were married off in a traditional

Hindu ceremony, with the bride clad in a green silk sari with gold zari.

Great attention was also paid to ritualistic details such as the perfect invitation card, the right wedding attire and the freshest flowers.

A traditional band entertained the guests, who sprinkled the newlyweds with flowers. "We are praying for rains. We need rains, hope gods are pleased and it rains in Bangalore today," Manjul, one of the guests, told Reuters news agency.

Only at one point did the groom get restless: when his attendant tied the holy threads around his hind and fore legs. The guests, each of whom contributed to the marriage expenses, were later treated to a traditional meal at the temple.

Before leaving the ceremony, everybody was hopeful it would start raining soon.

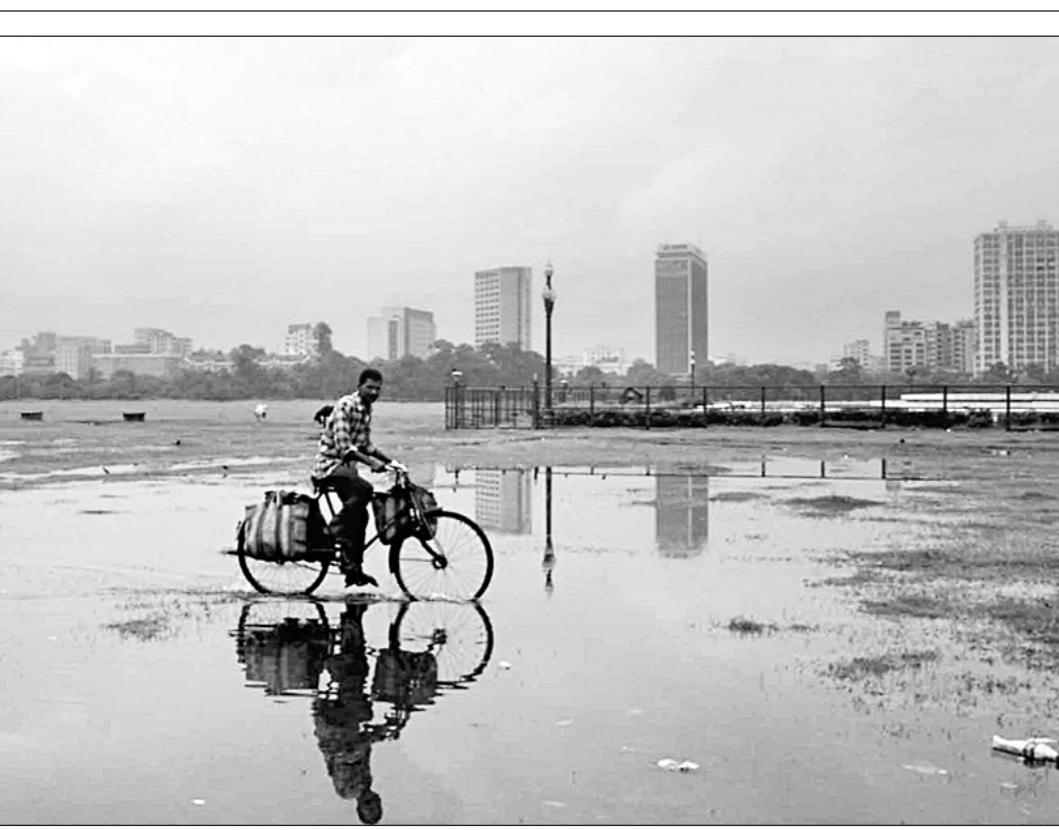


PHOTO: AFP

An Indian man rides his bicycle through a water logged ground due to monsoonal rains in Calcutta on Wednesday. Pre-monsoon rains are hitting the city leading to a drop in the temperature, bringing relief from a savage heatwave that has killed about 1,500 people across the country.