

Palestinians take charge in Gaza

BBC ONLINE

Palestinian police are taking control of northern and central parts of the Gaza Strip, after a crucial Israeli troop withdrawal.

The Israeli army removed the main checkpoints on the main north-south highway, allowing free movement along it for the first time in more than two years.

The two sides are discussing an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank - as required by the US-backed peace plan known as the roadmap - after three main groups of Palestinian militants declared a ceasefire.

However, in fresh violence on Monday, a man was killed in the northern West Bank.

The al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades - linked to one of the groups that

supported the truce - said it had carried out the attack.

Palestinian cabinet minister Yasser Abed Rabbo welcomed the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

"Ending the [Israeli] occupation is the main goal of the Palestinian people," he told the BBC.

Officials on both sides held further talks on Monday to arrange an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

Palestinian security officials said Israel had agreed to withdraw from Bethlehem on Wednesday.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will meet his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas, widely known as Abu Mazen, on Tuesday, to discuss further implementation of the roadmap, Israeli radio said.

The al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades,

an offshoot of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, said it carried out Monday's attack on a car near the town of Jenin.

Although Fatah has agreed to the truce, the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades has not.

Fatah joined the main militant groups, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, in declaring a suspension of attacks on Sunday, raising hopes of an end to 33 months of fighting between Israel and the Palestinians.

The breakthrough followed intense efforts by the United States administration in recent weeks to try to get both sides to press ahead with the peace plan.

Palestinian Authority police forces on Monday took over security responsibility for the Gaza Strip's main highway.

Only one Israeli checkpoint remains, outside the isolated Jewish settlement of Kfar Darom.

A bypass track was opened to allow Palestinian motorists to get around Kfar Darom without hindrance, Israeli officials say.

The BBC's David Chazan in Gaza says the pull-out has generated a lot of optimism, as many people on both sides are battle-weary.

However, our correspondent adds, the hopeful mood amongst Palestinians in Gaza is tinged with caution - they have seen many a peace plan come and go, only to be followed by a return to conflict.

Ali Zaanen, a Palestinian whose farm near the northern town of Beit Hanoun was destroyed by Israeli troops, on Monday watched the arrival of the police convoy without excitement.



Palestinian General Saeb al-Ajuz (R), commander for the northern Gaza Strip, instructs his men as they set up a new Palestinian checkpoint near the Israeli settlement of Netzarim in Gaza City on Monday. The Israeli army removed all major checkpoints in the Gaza Strip early Monday allowing free movement for Palestinians along the trans-Gaza north-south highway for the first time in more than two years.

3 Pak militants to die for killing French engns

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani court Monday sentenced three Islamic militants to death for plotting a May 2002 suicide car bomb attack that killed 11 French naval engineers.

"In light of the evidence and statements of 42 prosecution witnesses, the case against Asif Zaheer and Mohammad Bashir, and Mohammad Sohail who was tried in absentia, has been proven," Judge Feroz Mehmood Bhatti told a special anti-terrorism court set up inside Karachi's Central Jail for security.

"Hereby they are sentenced to death for an explosives act, murder and terrorism."

Zaheer and Bashir, dressed in traditional long smocks over trousers, were calm as the judge read out the verdicts and sentences.

Prosecutors said they were among seven people who planned the attack, in which a Toyota Corolla sedan packed with 140 to 150 kilograms (300-330 pounds) of explosives and driven by a suicide bomber was rammed into a bus carrying the French naval engineers on the morning of May 8 last year.

Israel to boycott BBC over broadcast on N-arms

ANI, Nicasia

Tel Aviv will sever ties with the BBC as a mark of protest against a repeat broadcast on non-conventional weapons said to be existing in Israel.

The programme, broadcast for the first time in March in Britain, was re-run on Saturday on a BBC channel that is aired all over the world.

The boycott decision over the weekend was made by Israel's public relations forum, formed of representatives from the Prime Minister's Office, the Foreign Ministry and the Government Press Office, according to Pak Tribune quoting Online News.

The manner of enforcement will be something like this: no government assistance to BBC producers and reporters, and no interviews by Israeli officials to the British network. On top of that, the Press Office will make it difficult for BBC employees to obtain press cards and work visas in Israel.



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (R) receives Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw in Tehran on Monday. Straw arrived in Iran, immediately expressing concerns over human rights and the country's suspect nuclear programme, but the Islamic republic offered him a defiant response.

Britain rules out any attack against Iran

Tehran to invite IAEA chief for nuke talks

AP, London

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw on Monday said there are no circumstances under which Britain would agree to an attack against Iran, which is under pressure to allow more intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities.

Straw, who was finishing a two-day visit to Iran on Monday, told BBC radio that Iran could not be compared with its neighbour Iraq in terms of political system or danger posed to the region, although US President George W Bush has called Iran part of an axis of evil.

Straw said that no one knew if Iran was developing nuclear weapons, and added that he would urge Iranian President Mohammad Khatami later on Monday to allow more intrusive inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities by the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency.

"What we...are proposing is

that they (the Iranian authorities) have to sign up to an additional protocol which provides for more intrusive inspections," Straw said.

"The first consequence if they fail to sign up will be that they are not able to make progress on other issues," including a planned trade agreement between Iran and the European Union, Straw said.

However, when asked if he believed there were no circumstances in which Britain would agree to an attack on Iran, Straw replied, "Yes, and I can conceive of no such circumstances."

Reuters adds: Iran will shortly invite International Atomic Energy Agency Chief Mohammed ElBaradei to Tehran to discuss its nuclear program, the Middle Eastern country's official news agency reported on Monday.

"Iran is going to invite ElBaradei soon to visit Iran to hold talks to remove technical

problems," IRNA quoted Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary General Hassan Rohani as saying during a meeting with visiting British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw.

Straw was on a visit to Tehran to urge Iran's government to sign up for tougher inspections of its nuclear facilities immediately and unconditionally.

Meanwhile, Iran's clerical leaders on Monday showed no signs of giving into mounting international demands they open up their suspect nuclear programme to tougher UN inspections, despite warnings by visiting British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw of economic consequences.

Straw, in Iran for his fourth visit in just 19 months, told the Islamic republic to "unconditionally" sign an additional protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that would allow the UN's atomic energy body to carry out surprise probes of nuclear facilities.

VHP not to marginalise BJP on Ayodhya

PTI, Nagpur

Opposing construction of any mosque within approximately 44 km, of Ram Temple in Ayodhya, the VHP on Monday said its criticism of Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani was in a "particular" context and it did not intend to marginalise BJP on the issue.

"The VHP would stick to three points, temple at Ayodhya at any cost, welcome to any unconditional discussion or negotiations and no mosque within 14 km territory of temple in Ayodhya", VHP General Secretary Praveen Togadia told reporters here.

On VHP's attack on BJP leaders, he said criticism against Advani was in a particular context.

He also said VHP's criticism was not against BJP as such but against NDA which has no Hindutva agenda and there was no question of marginalising BJP.

Asserting that there was nothing new in VHP's demand for a central legislation for constructing a mosque in Ayodhya, he said VHP had

asked for it in July 2002 as it was a "legal" and "civilised" solution to the vexed issue.

"We equally believe in legislature and judiciary and are open to approach Parliament" on the construction issue, he said.

The firebrand leader said VHP would mobilise support for a legislation in Parliament for constructing temple.

The high powered committee of VHP religious leaders would meet in Delhi on July 11 to chalk out programme to further intensify the mass movement and agitation for constructing Ram temple in Ayodhya, Togadia said.

The Delhi meeting would be decisive for finalising the Ram Temple issue and would polarise the supporters and opponents of temple movement, he said.

BJP on Sunday rejected VHP's demand for resignation of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his deputy L K Advani, if they fail to bring in a legislation for the construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya, saying it is not on NDA agenda.

Be flexible on Kashmir as on Tibet: Musharraf

PTI, Islamabad

Describing Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as a "man of peace", Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf on Sunday said he hoped the "flexibility" India had shown on Tibet during the Indian leader's recent China visit happened in the case of Kashmir also.

"The flexibility India has shown on Tibet is a welcome sign. One can only hope it happens in the case of Kashmir too," Musharraf said during his visit to Los Angeles in an interview aired by Pakistan's Geo TV.

In the joint declaration signed by Vajpayee and his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao earlier this week, India agreed that the Tibetan Autonomous Region was part of the territory of the People's

Republic of China.

But Vajpayee clarified on Friday that the statement laid emphasis on Tibet being an autonomous region, and maintained that there was no ambiguity or inconsistency in India's position on Tibet, and that the joint declaration between the two countries only contained "in a better way" India's consistent stand on the question.

Replying to a question on India's stand on Tibet, Musharraf told the TV channel that "at Agra, Vajpayee and me had agreed that there could be no peace in the sub-continent without solution of Kashmir. I believe the Indian Prime Minister is a man of peace."

About remarks made by External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha rejecting his proposal for a Middleast type of

"roadmap" on Kashmir with a mediation from a third party, Musharraf said India has been rejecting third party mediation.

"I have given my four point formula of step by step approach. Till India and Pakistan are not sincere in finding a solution to Kashmir, there could be no momentum. Of course Kashmiris have to be involved in any eventual solution", he said.

Addressing a meeting in Los Angeles, Musharraf claimed India is buying weapons from "all round the world" and it should be stopped.

Ruling out a war with India, he said there should be strategic balance in the South Asian region.

He also had a meeting with American think tank Rand Corporation on Sunday.

Indo-Pak ties critical issue for US: Rocca

PTI, Islamabad

Saying that the present Indo-Pak peace process demonstrated "real commitment" by the leadership of both the countries, the US has promised to stay engaged in the region as peace between the two nations has become a "critical issue" for it.

The Bush administration regards "the difficult relationship" between India and Pakistan as "a critical issue for the United States," US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca was quoted as saying in the media here.

"Progress in resolving these long-standing differences will inevitably be slow, but...the initiatives we are witnessing now represent a real commitment by India and Pakistan to continue and build on this process," local daily Dawn quoted her as saying in Washington.

Stating that the US would reinforce the commitment by Pakistan and India to achieve a resolution of their differences, including Kashmir, Rocca said, "there is no more difficult challenge in South Asia, but it is one we will not walk away from."



Pakistan's new Ambassador to India Aziz Ahmed Khan (R) talks with members of the Indian media, after he had walked into India from Pakistan at the Wagah Border Post on Monday. Indian high commissioner Shiv Shankar Menon is expected to take up his appointment in the Pakistani capital Islamabad in mid-July.

4 militants, army officer killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Four commanders of two dominant rebel groups and an Indian army officer were killed in a fierce overnight gunbattle in southern Indian-administered Kashmir, an official said Monday.

Two Indian soldiers, one an officer, and two Indian border guards were also injured in the fighting, he said.

The killings follow a bloody weekend in the disputed state in which 12 soldiers were gunned down in a suicide attack by two Islamic militants, and another 16 people died in various incidents of separatist-linked violence.

The overnight clash took place in the village of Abuhama in the southern Kashmir district of Pulwama, a spokesman for India's Border Security Force (BSF), Tirtha Acharya, told AFP.

Japan to send 1,000 troops to Iraq

AFP, Tokyo

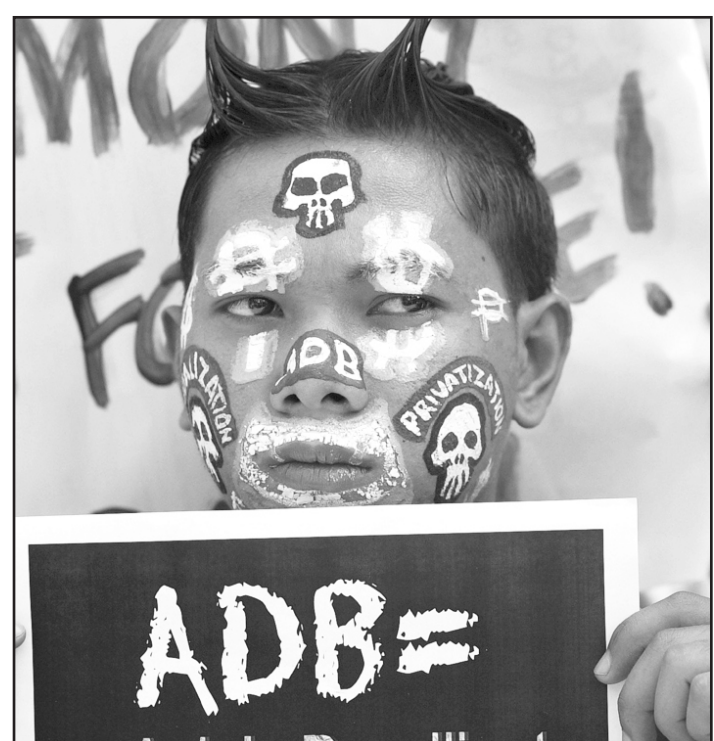
Japan plans to send more than 1,000 troops to Iraq to help rebuild the war-torn country under new legislation expected to pass by late July, a report said Monday.

As a first step, some 500 Ground Self-Defence Force troops, the core of the Japanese mission, are likely to be deployed starting in early October, the Tokyo newspaper said.

The troops are expected to supply fuel and water to US forces and citizens in Baghdad, the daily said, citing a Defence Agency outline on reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

Japanese and US officials plan to discuss the details based on the outline in a meeting Monday, the report said.

The Air Self-Defence Force will send three C-130 transport planes while the Maritime Self-Defence Force will deploy an amphibious ship and a destroyer, according to the paper.



Filipino activists protest outside the Asian Development Bank (ADB) headquarters in Manila, Philippines as the bank held its annual governor's meeting on Monday.

Donors urged to boost aid for anti-terror battle

AFP, Manila

Asian Development Bank (ADB) chief Tadao Chino on Monday urged donor nations to replenish the lender's seriously eroded poverty reduction funds as part of a larger strategy to fight international terrorism and boost the uncertain global economy.

Chino issued the call at an abbreviated ADB annual regional meeting here, which replaced an earlier scheduled conference in Turkey in May that was cancelled by the war in neighboring Iraq.

"Over the past year, optimism and hope have been clouded by uncertainties such as heightened geopolitical tensions and persistent threats of terrorism which have contributed to a slowdown in global economic growth," he said in a speech to governors of the 61-member bank.

"The current global concerns convey a clear message that enduring peace, stability, and prosperity definitely need continued and strengthened investment in poverty

reduction."

Chino announced the bank and its donor-members led by Japan and the United States have agreed to "commence planning" on a four-year funding requirement for the bank's main soft-loan window the Asian Development Fund (ADF), a key aid source for countries with limited repayment capacity such as war-torn Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

"The first meeting of donors (is) expected to take place in October this year in Copenhagen," he said.

Donors committed 610.2 million dollars to the ADF window during the seventh planning program for 2000-2004, plus 179 million dollars in technical assistance funds.

The ADB lent 5.68 billion dollars in 2002, including 1.63 billion dollars in ADF funds.

Chino said donors agreed "that the current level of demand for ADF VII resources exceeds total ADF VII resource availability, and understood the serious resource constraints ADB faces in responding to the development needs of its poorer (developing member countries)."

2 bombs rock Aceh markets

AFP, Banda Aceh

Three people were injured when bombs exploded in the capital of Indonesia's Aceh province early Monday and a third device was found in a hospital emergency ward, police said.

The first blast occurred at the Aceh Shopping Center in Banda Aceh at around 7:00 am, damaging several kiosks but causing no injuries.

The second blast at the nearby Kampung Baru market some 30 minutes later injured three traders, said Banda Aceh city police chief Alfons Tololuhula.

"They were home-made, low explosive, bombs," Tololuhula said, accusing separatist rebels of planting the bombs the previous evening "as a form of terror to scare the population."

A police bomb squad also found a home-made explosive in the emergency unit of the state Zainal Abidin Hospital, witnesses said.

US hunts Saddam's men, senators demand world involvement in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

US troops pressed on Monday with Operation Desert Sidewinder an another bid to suppress opposition to their presence in Iraq, amid moves to secure wider world involvement in rebuilding the country.

Faced with daily attacks on their soldiers, the US military announced its latest offensive Sunday as it carried out more than 20 raids in central Iraq, the bedrock of support for the deposed regime of Saddam Hussein.

Desert Sidewinder, as US authorities have dubbed it, comes on the heels of Operation Desert Scorpion launched on June 15 to root out the guerrilla fighters who have now killed 23 US soldiers since US President George W. Bush declared victory in the Iraq war May 1.

So far, Desert Sidewinder, being carried out by the 4th Infantry

Division and Task Force Ironhorse, has netted more than 60 suspects in the raids along with weapons and military documents believed to relate to the former regime, the US military said in a statement.

"The raids target former Baath Party loyalists, terrorists suspected of perpetrating attacks against US forces and former Iraqi military leaders, and to locate weapons and ammunition caches," the statement said.

The US forces believe Saddam loyalists are conducting a campaign of sabotage, blowing up fuel pipelines and stripping power cables, to turn the tide against the Americans.

The raids unfolded around Samarra, which lies between the capital and Saddam's hometown of Tikrit, a stronghold of Sunni Muslims, many of whom feel threatened by the growing clout of the country's Shiite majority in post-war Iraq.