

## Palestinian authorities battle to keep hardliners in check

### Another group ready to join truce if prisoners freed

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian authorities battled to keep the fledgling peace process afloat Friday by arresting the alleged perpetrators of a rocket attack on a Jewish settlement and holding talks with the radical Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements.

Four members of the Popular Resistance Committees were detained overnight in connection with a rocket attack on Kfar Darom settlement in the Gaza Strip that led to Israeli authorities temporarily reimposing a roadblock on the main highway through the territory.

The attack triggered an official protest from Israel, whose troops withdrew from most of Gaza on Sunday after receiving security guarantees in an accord with the Palestinians.

Four major Palestinian militant groups -- including Hamas and Islamic Jihad -- called a halt to anti-Israeli attacks on Sunday, but other splinter groups have continued to carry out acts of violence.

Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas fought hard to persuade the groups to agree to a truce which remain sceptical about his efforts to force peace with the Israelis through the framework of the US-backed roadmap.

Abbas met with senior Hamas figures here late Thursday and was due to hold a similar round of talks with Islamic Jihad leaders at around 6:00 pm (1500 GMT) on Friday.

Both Hamas and Islamic Jihad deny Israel's right to exist and have officially rejected the roadmap, although their agreement to halt attacks is seen as vital for it to have any chance of success.

"We will hear from Abu Mazen (Abbas' nom de guerre) about the developing situation and about his meeting with (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon" last Tuesday, senior Jihad official Mohammed al-Hindit told AFP.

"We will ask him to stop Israeli aggression and continue in his efforts to release all prisoners."

Hamas said their meeting with Abbas late Thursday was "posi-

itive".

Abbas met for two and a half hours with top Hamas official Ismail Abu Shanab, considered a moderate figure with the movement, and Mahmud Zahar.

Zahar welcomed a statement by Abbas in which he said Israel must "free Palestinian prisoners and withdraw its forces not only from Gaza, but from all Palestinian territory reoccupied" since the intifada broke out in September 2000.

An official Palestinian source said the aim of the meetings was to "move forward the inter-Palestinian dialogue and strengthen the truce".

Israelis remain deeply sceptical that the truce, which comes attached with a raft of conditions, will last.

The headline Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, threatened Thursday to scrap the truce after one of its members was killed in a gunfight with Israeli forces.

A survey carried by Israel's top-selling Yediot Aharonot daily on Friday found that 62 percent of those polled do not believe Palestinian militant groups will respect the truce.

But Israeli army chief of staff Moshe Yaalon predicted Thursday that an end was in sight to the 33-month-old cycle of violence, which has killed nearly 3,400 people.

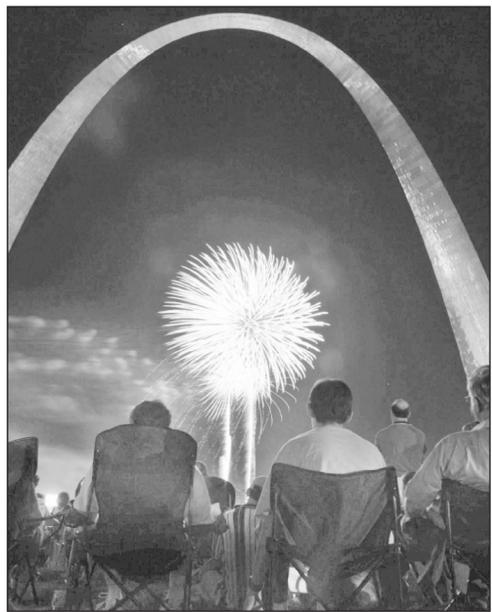
He also said that "in the light of the resistance shown by the Israeli people and the heroic struggle of the Tsahal (the Israeli army) against terrorism we can announce that we have won".

Moreover, the head of the Palestinian Popular Resistance Committees, which carried out recent attacks in the Gaza Strip, said his group was ready to declare a truce if its detained militants were released by Israel.

"We are ready to talk with the Palestinian political leaders and, if Israel starts releasing our militants, we will immediately announce a truce like the other groups," Jamal Abu Samadana told AFP.



Palestinians watch an Israeli APC in the outskirts of the West Bank town of Nablus on Thursday. The Israeli army's chief of staff, General Moshe Yaalon, claimed victory against Palestinian militants as he predicted that an end was in sight to the 33-month cycle of violence.



People watch fireworks at the Arch in St. Louis during Independence Day celebrations in St. Louis, Missouri on Thursday.

## No let-up in Iraqi attacks for US Independence Day

AFP, Baghdad

Independence Day saw no respite for US troops from the ongoing violence in Iraq as one soldier was killed and 10 were injured in separate incidents overnight.

And with angry protests expected in flashpoint cities following Friday's weekly prayers, the American day of celebration was not looking much like a holiday in prospect for many of the troops on the ground.

In an apparent bid to appease local feeling in the town of Baquba, the Americans released a Shiite Muslim leader whose arrest had sparked a mass demonstration and promises of further trouble if he were detained longer.

The dead soldier, from the 1st Armored Division, was shot and killed by small arms fire while protecting the Baghdad Museum, US Central Command said.

He was in the gunner's hatch of a Bradley armoured vehicle at a guard post in the Rushafa neighborhood when he was hit.

Ten other soldiers were wounded in a mortar attack near

the town of Balad, around 75 kilometres (45 miles) north of Baghdad.

"Ten soldiers were wounded in the mortar attacks against logistical support units near Balad," Specialist Nicole Thompson told AFP, lowering the number from the original 19 listed.

In Baquba, northeast of Baghdad, two people were detained overnight following protests in the town triggered by the arrest of the Shiite leader.

But Sheikh Ali Abdul Karim Madani, who was arrested early Thursday in a raid on his house by around 100 US soldiers backed by armoured vehicles and helicopters, was released early Friday.

Baquba residents, who were out in force in protest on Thursday, had planned a mass demonstration for Monday if the cleric was not released by then.

A charged atmosphere also prevailed in Fallujah, Ramadi and other nearby towns north of Baghdad that have been the scene of regular attacks on US troops, ahead of weekly prayers at noon.

## India getting reluctant to send troops to Iraq

AFP, New Delhi

India is growing more reluctant to join any international peacekeeping force in Iraq because of increasing attacks on US troops there and lack of consensus at home, officials said Friday.

Fears of Indian troops getting sucked into combat have dimmed hopes of any agreement on the thorny issue, as Indian political parties Friday reiterated warnings against acceding to requests of the United States to deploy personnel.

"We are now given to understand that our government has not made up its mind and is looking around because it is just not keen on sending troops to Iraq," a highly placed source from Defence Minister George Fernandes' Samata Party said.

"Fernandes too is not particularly keen and it seems the government is marking time because of the lack of a national consensus on sending troops," the party source told AFP.

## US slaps sanctions on Chinese, DPRK firms for arms sales to Iran

AFP, Washington

The United States on Thursday imposed sanctions on five Chinese firms and a North Korean company for arms sales to Iran that it said could "make a material contribution to weapons of mass destruction or missiles."

The punitive measures, announced by the State Department, were imposed on the final day of a visit here by a senior Chinese diplomat, Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who had been meeting with US officials to discuss North Korea and more general non-proliferation issues.

Department officials said the sanctions had not been discussed with Wang during their meetings but that China had been informed of them "through diplomatic channels" last week.

"The penalties were imposed... for the transfer to Iran in the first half of 2002 of equipment and technology listed on multilateral

export control lists or otherwise having the potential to make a material contribution to weapons of mass destruction or missiles," spokesman Richard Boucher said.

The sanctions are provided for in the Iran Nonproliferation Act of 2000. Some 15 entities from a number of countries are now subject to US sanctions under that act, Boucher said.

The exact nature of the items sold was not disclosed.

The penalties have been imposed against the Taian Foreign Trade General Corporation of China, the Zibo Chemical Equipment Plant of China, the Liyang Yunlong Chemical Equipment Group Company of China, China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO) and the China Precision Machinery Import/Export Corporation (CPMIEC).

The North Korean firm was identified as the Changgwang Sinyong Corporation.

## 'Pakistan not facing US pressure to snub nukes'

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan is not facing any US pressure to freeze its nuclear programme, the country's Foreign Minister Khurshid Mohammad Kasuri said in Islamabad on Friday.

Reacting to media speculations in this regard, Kasuri said there was no truth to it as Islamabad's nuclear programme was and would always be defensive in nature.

Pakistan carried out its nuclear tests for strategic reasons only he said, adding that Islamabad's threat perceptions were not imaginary.

Pakistan wanted peace with its neighbours, and this was only possible if a minimum deterrent remained in place, he was quoted as saying by Online News.

Nuclear programme is Pak's strength: Musharraf

In France, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf also told a gathering of overseas Pakistanis that the country's nuclear and missile programme were its strength.

"Our nuclear and missile programmes are our strength. No one can even think of entering into any deal on such national honours," he was quoted as saying to gathering of overseas

Pakistanis in Paris, France.

On doubts raised by world leaders over the real objectives of Pakistan's nuclear programme and its possible transfer to countries such as North Korea, he said: "I expressed my agreement with their apprehensions. Pakistan does not wish to or plan to transfer nuclear technology to anyone."

On international terrorism, he said: "I told them Pakistan is also against it and has rather been subjected to it. I explained to them that it has been Pakistan's consistent policy that it deplores terrorism in all its forms."

## US breaching Geneva Conventions over Iraq N-plant: Greenpeace

AFP, Baghdad

Environmental group Greenpeace accused US-led authorities in Iraq Friday of breaching international law and refusing to allow United Nations experts to assess contamination at a nuclear plant near Baghdad.

The group says it has detected worrying levels of radioactivity in schools and homes around the Tuwaitha nuclear plant, around 20 km east of the capital, but that the coalition refuses to recognise the problem.

The head of the group's Iraq investigation team, Mike Townsley, said the US-led occupation authority was breaching the Geneva Conventions "by failing in its responsibility to ensure the public health of the Iraqi people".

The conventions lay out the legal obligations of an occupying power, as well as the rules of war and treatment of prisoners.

Townsley said that coalition authorities were ignoring what he called an urgent environmental health crisis caused by a "frightening array of radioactive material".



Activists of the six-party Islamist alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) shout anti-government slogans during a demonstration in Islamabad on Friday. Islamic activists across the country took to the streets voicing anger over moves by the government to curb their opposition MPs by challenging their educational qualifications in the courts.

## Another 'earth' in Milky Way?

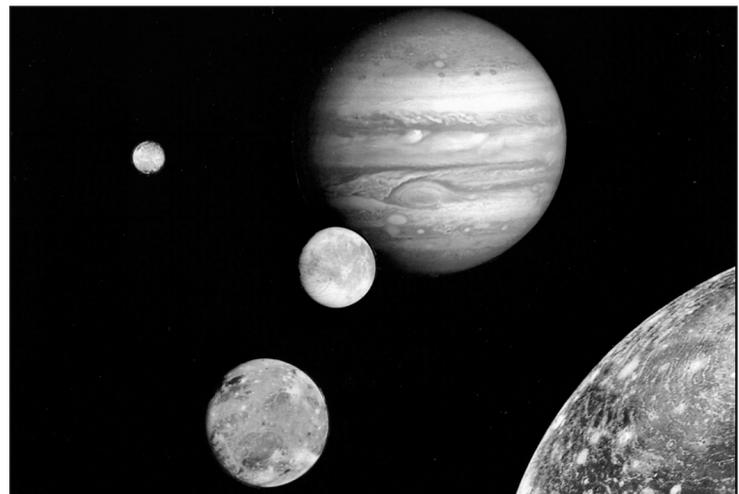
AP, Paris

Astronomers say they have found a Jupiter-like body circling a distant star in a planetary system like earth.

Hugh Jones of Liverpool John Moores University said his team had discovered the system, illuminated by a star dubbed HD 70642, some 94 light years from earth. Jones was presenting the finding at a conference at the Paris Astrophysics Institute here on Thursday.

The star is similar to the Sun in structure and brightness and appears to be about the same age. The planet is travelling around the star in an orbital path similar in shape and distance to the one that Jupiter follows around the sun.

The similarities have led the planet-hunters in Jones' team of British, Australian and American scientists to conclude that they have tumbled upon something exciting: the possibility of finding another earth in the Milky Way galaxy.



This NASA file image shows Jupiter (REAR) and its four planet-size moons, called the Galilean satellites, were photographed in early March 1979 by Voyager 1 and assembled into this collage. They are not to scale but are in their relative positions. It was reported on Thursday that Astronomers searching for signs of a Solar System like our own said they had found a planet very similar to Jupiter orbiting a star resembling the Sun, some 90 light years away from the Earth. The planet was discovered by British, American and Australian astronomers using the 3.9-metre Anglo-Australian Telescope in New South Wales. With a mass twice the size of gas giant Jupiter, the planet circles star HD70642 in the constellation Puppis once in every six years.

## Myanmar wants to solve Suu Kyi issue

REUTERS, Tokyo

A top Myanmar official told Japan on Friday that his nation wants to resolve the situation over detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as soon as possible as Tokyo, a top aid donor, kept pressing for her release.

Japan has frozen fresh assistance to impoverished Myanmar to protest against the military government's detention of Suu Kyi and is considering further punitive measures unless she is freed.

Khin Maung Win, a top aide to junta leader Than Shwe, arrived in Japan with a message from him and met with officials including Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda and Deputy Vice Foreign Minister Tetsuro Yano. He is set to meet with Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi later in the day.

"I hope you brought us a good answer," Yano said, to which Khin Maung Win replied: "I did."

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement that he told Yano her detention was only temporary but did not give any details.

## 'US intelligence relied on old data on WMDs'

AFP, Washington

A CIA internal review panel has concluded that US intelligence analysts lacked new, hard information about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction after UN inspectors left Iraq in 1998 and relied on data from the early and mid-1990s in the run-up to the Iraq war, The Washington Post reported Friday.

The newspaper said the Central Intelligence Agency's findings that the biological, chemical and nuclear programs were still being pursued by the government of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in 2003 were based primarily on this old information.

However, despite the fact that the post-1998 evidence was largely circumstantial or "inferential," the panel believes the CIA's conclusion that Saddam continued to have weapons of mass destruction was

likely justified, according to the report.

"It would have been very hard to conclude those programs were not continuing, based on the reports being gathered in recent years about Iraqi purchases and other activities before the war," the Post quotes Richard Kerr, a former CIA deputy director who heads the four-person review panel appointed in February by CIA Director George Tenet, as saying.

Kerr said the prewar intelligence reports given to the Bush administration by the CIA, the Pentagon and State Department contained caveats and disagreements on data underlying some judgments, such as whether Iraq's nuclear program was being reconstituted, according to the paper.

But "on the whole, the analysts were pretty much on the mark," it quotes Kerr as saying.

## Berlusconi apologises for Nazi slur

AFP, Rome

Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi bowed to intense pressure Thursday and apologised to German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder for a Nazi slur against a German MEP, heading off a diplomatic row with Berlin just days into Italy's EU presidency.

A statement from Berlusconi's office said the prime minister made the apology in a telephone call to Schroeder, shortly before he was due to join the 20-member EU Commission for a formal dinner to inaugurate the Italian presidency.

But Berlusconi, who caused outrage with his comment that a German MEP who heckled him should be cast as a Nazi camp guard in a film, maintained his innocence, claiming his irony had been misinterpreted.