

US blocks action on Israeli 'wall'

Palestinians vow to press on against fence with UN

BBC ONLINE, REUTERS, United Nations

The United States has vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israel's controversial West Bank barrier.

The draft, introduced by Arab states, declared that the structure was illegal under international law and that construction must be halted.

Israel says the barrier is necessary to protect Israeli civilians from attacks by Palestinian gunmen and suicide bombers.

Other international mediators had been urging Israel to end construction of the fence.

But President George Bush had merely called the barrier a "problem".

The vote came at the end of a day-long, bitter debate, with Israel's UN ambassador Dan Gillerman clashing with Palestinian observer Nasser al-Kidwa.

"The establishment of the expansionist conquest wall by the occupying power (...) is a crime of the same magnitude as a crime against humanity," Mr al-Kidwa said.

Mr Gillerman retorted: "No lie is so bold and audacious as the one which pretends that Israel's actions occur in a vacuum and are not in response to years and years of terrorism."

Most of the countries taking part in the debate criticised the construction of the barrier, saying it will inflame tensions.

Angola, Chile, China, France, Guinea, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Spain and Syria voted in favour of the resolution.

Bulgaria, Cameroon, Germany and Britain abstained. The US was the only one vote against the draft.

Seeking to sidestep a fresh US veto in the UN Security Council, the Palestinians have vowed to press on with their drive to try to prevent Israel from building a security fence deep into the West Bank.

Palestinian UN envoy Nasser al-Kidwa said Arab states would now take his draft resolution to the 191-nation UN General Assembly, where the United States, Israel's closest ally, has no veto and the Palestinians enjoy strong support.

While Security Council texts can carry the force of international law, assembly resolutions simply represent the will of the international community.

Russia unhappy with new US resolution on Iraq

AFP, Moscow

Russia remains dissatisfied with the latest US draft resolution on Iraq and believes the United Nations should not vote on the proposal in its current form, a foreign ministry official said yesterday.

Russia believes that "in its current form, (the resolution) should not be put to a vote," the Interfax news agency quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Yuri Fedotov as saying.

He said disagreements remained over "two or three key issues."

Russia along France and Germany had earlier proposed a series of amendments that would establish a more dominant role for the United Nations in Iraq.

The three nations, which opposed the US-led war on Iraq, are also pressing the United States to present a more concrete timeline for when Iraq would win back its sovereignty.

But Fedotov said that Washington has not taken Moscow's concerns into full account in its latest draft, which provides no timeline for Iraq's independence, and keeps US control over the military operation.

"We recognise that (the United States) took additional steps in favour of the position of Russia and other UN Security Council members," Fedotov said.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian women chant slogans as Iranian human rights activist, feminist lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi speaks upon her arrival at Tehran's Mehr-Abad airport Tuesday. Ebadi was given a hero's welcome from thousands of fans as she returned to Iran

Shirin Ebadi says fight for rights will go on

Iran's Nobel laureate gets hero's welcome

AFP, Tehran

Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi yesterday shrugged off Iranian government warnings and criticism from hardliners, vowing her struggle for democracy and human rights would continue.

"I will not change the way in which I work. The awarding of the prize showed that this method is a good one," said the 56-year-old jurist and first Muslim woman to win the prize.

Although Ebadi said she had no desire to enter politics -- some fans have even tipped her as a future political leader -- Ebadi did tell authorities "to respect its international engagements regarding human rights".

She also said she would also continue to stand behind dissidents, another one of her campaigns that has angered members of Iran's powerful religious right.

"The defence of those facing political accusations has always been a priority, and this will continue," the petite and softly spoken jurist told reporters. She also repeated her "hope" for all political prisoners to be freed.

Ebadi, who was given the prize last Friday for her efforts to promote democracy and human rights, was welcomed by thousands of fans as she returned to Iran late Tuesday.

Some 10,000 people, a majority of them women, descended on Tehran's Mehrabad airport for her homecoming, with bumper-to-bumper traffic bringing an area around the airport to a standstill.

Many in the crowd shouted political slogans, echoing Ebadi's calls for political prisoners to be set free, and chants directed against embattled reformist President Mohammad Khatami who earlier Tuesday poured scorn on the value of the prize.

Most of the women were also wearing white headscarves. An organising committee, set up by supporters of Ebadi to plan festivities for her return, had called on women to make the symbolic gesture of wearing white rather than the usual black preferred by the Islamic regime.

While in Paris -- where she had been for a short visit when the prize was announced -- Ebadi had again angered hardliners here by not covering her head as Iranian law demands.

Earlier, President Khatami broke four days of silence over her prize win, warning her to "pay attention" and pouring cold water on her achievement.

"Obviously I am pleased that a compatriot has achieved such success," Khatami said on emerging from parliament. But, in comments that stunned observers, Khatami added: "The Nobel Peace

Prize is not very important, the ones that count are the scientific and literary prizes.

"I hope that Mrs Ebadi, who comes from a religious family and has expressed her love for Islam, will pay attention to the interests of the Islamic world and of Iran, and not allow anyone to exploit her success."

Echoing comments already heard from Iranian hardliners, he added there were "political criteria" behind the Nobel committee's decision.

In contrast, the president's brother and reformist party leader Mohammad Reza Khatami told parliament that "the Nobel Peace Prize is one of the most honorary and most influential prizes, and we are grateful to the Nobel committee for awarding this prize to an Iranian citizen."



PHOTO: AFP

A man reads a newspaper profiling Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei, yesterday in Guangzhou, south China. In the first words ever from space by a Chinese astronaut, commander Yang said "I feel good, see you tomorrow", after takeoff aboard the Shenzhou V spacecraft launched on a Long March CZ-2F rocket from the Jiuquan Launch Centre in northwest China.

Excitement marks China's first manned space mission

AFP, Beijing

Passers-by stopped in their tracks, commuters brought their bicycles to a halt and those on lunch breaks postponed meals as people learning of China's first manned space flight glued their eyes to television screens.

Few knew that the launch was scheduled yesterday morning as China's state-controlled media had downplayed coverage in the run-up to the 9am (local time) lift-off.

But soon after the official China Central Television began a delayed broadcast of the launch from northern Inner Mongolia with astronaut Yang Liwei on board, small crowds began gathering near giant television screens outside shopping malls.

One man could not keep his eyes off a screen outside the Wonderful supermarket in central Beijing and nearly ran his cycle into a car.

"I feel very proud," said He Wei, a Beijing man, watching the

Shenzhou V blast off on the super-market's screen.

"This shows our country's scientific capabilities are rising. I want our country to be as strong as possible because then we can stand up a little straighter."

Russia, which sent the first man into space more than 40 years ago, congratulated China for accomplishing the same feat yesterday and joining the elite space club alongside itself and the United States.

"We welcome this development and congratulate China for joining the club of space powers that have their own manned space programs," ITAR-TASS quoted the first deputy of the Russian space agency Nikolai Moiseyev as saying.

Pakistan yesterday hailed long-time ally China's launch of its first manned flight into space, saying it brought pride to Asia.

"This is no doubt a very important milestone in the progress and advancement made by China in

space technology," General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's President, wrote to his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao.

The launch "brings pride to China as to the Asian continent," he said in the letter which was distributed to media organisations.

China's first astronaut, Yang Liwei, 38, who blasted into space yesterday, has spent 10 years training for the mission that made his country the third in history to send a man into orbit.

Speaking to mission control the lieutenant colonel in the People's Liberation Army said he was feeling good and the flight was going well, the official Xinhua news agency said.

"I feel good, see you tomorrow," Yang was quoted as saying.

Yang's words at 9:34am (0134 GMT) came some 34 minutes into the historic mission and as Chinese space administrators declared the launch "a complete success," state press said.

Liberia's new leader says "war is over"

AFP, Monrovia

Businessman Gyude Bryant was sworn in as Liberia's new interim leader on Tuesday and vowed to turn the page on the war-torn west African country's bloody past.

"My people, the war is over," Bryant said after taking the oath of office, two months after the flight into exile of disgraced president Charles Taylor, who was at the centre of two wars over the last 14 years.

The new president in turn administered the oath of office to his vice president, Wesley Johnson, at the gold-domed parliament building that dominates the capital Monrovia.

"We have faith in our future and the determination to succeed," said Bryant, 54, who will lead a 21-member government divided out under an August peace pact among Taylor loyalists, rebels, the political opposition and civic groups.

"Liberians will be urged to forgive one another," said the soft-spoken Bryant, who is seen as an independent player in Liberian politics.

"We are not asking anyone to

forget."

Dressed in a dark suit, Bryant said in his inauguration address after taking the oath of office before Supreme Court Judge Gloria Scott that his priorities would be disarming combatants from all sides and rebuilding Liberia.

He also said he considered himself to be on a "rescue mission" and would strive to improve the living standards of his countrymen.

From November 1, monopolies on rice, gasoline products and other essential goods will be dismantled, he said.

"This exorbitant cost of living is unacceptable and shall be abolished," Bryant said.

He also vowed to fight corruption, adding: "There will be zero tolerance for corruption in this administration."

And he pledged a commitment to peaceful relations with neighbouring Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast.

Bomb defused outside police station in Belfast

REUTERS, Belfast

British Army explosives experts have defused a firebomb left outside a Belfast police station by dissident republicans opposed to the Northern Ireland peace process, security forces said on Wednesday.

The dissident group Continuity IRA said in calls to local media that it had planted the incendiary device, which was left in a car near a north Belfast police station on Tuesday night.

"If it had exploded it would have created a large fireball, killing or seriously injuring anyone in the immediate vicinity," said Chief Inspector Colin Taylor.

"Certainly it would have caused serious damage to property. It was a totally indiscriminate and reckless act."

The incident occurred as talks aimed at securing Irish Republican Army (IRA) disarmament and rescuing delayed elections reached a critical phase, with President Bush's special envoy to Northern Ireland Richard Haass in attendance.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf delivers his keynote address at the special leaders forum of the 10th summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Countries (OIC) in Putrajaya, Yesterday. A sense of siege pervaded this designer-city of domes and spires as the world's Muslim leaders gathered for a summit opening 16 October in the shadow of a war on terrorism which many see as a war on Islam.