

Chretien ends decade today as Canadian PM

AFP, Montreal

Jean Chretien was to stand down today as prime minister of Canada, leaving his place, after a decade in power, to his longtime rival Paul Martin.

Chretien, who will be 70 next month, led the Liberal Party to three successive general election triumphs since 1993, to establish himself as one of the country's longest-serving prime ministers.

But a government clearout now looms, as Martin is more conservative and doubts are being raised about many of Chretien's policies.

Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister John Manley already knows he will not be retained. The makeup of the new cabinet is being kept secret however until Martin and his ministers are sworn in by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson.

Chretien sacked Martin as finance minister in June 2002 because his rival was too openly campaigning for Canada's top post. But once Chretien announced in August 2002 that he would retire, Martin was always the favorite to take over and he has been prime minister in waiting for several months.

Martin and his team will immediately find a lot of unfinished business waiting however.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian rescue personnel transport a wounded man into the hospital in Rafah refugee camp, southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Five Palestinians were killed and 10 wounded during an Israeli army incursion. During the operation backed by helicopters, Israeli troops encircled two houses seeking Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists.

'Sharon's go-it-alone peace plan is a recipe for disaster'

5 Palestinians killed in Rafah as Israeli army hunts militants

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli leader Ariel Sharon's reported go-it-alone peace plan is a recipe for disaster, Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie said in an Israeli newspaper interview published yesterday.

"The conflict would continue, fires would burn, terror would increase and no one would gain. It would be a bad mistake to force a settlement on us. We will not accept it," Qurie told the mass-circulation Maariv daily.

Violence, meanwhile, erupted in Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip, where three Palestinians -- a gunman and two civilians -- were killed during battles with an Israeli incursion force of 20 armored vehicles, medics said.

An Israeli military source said troops on a mission to detain a wanted man had returned fire toward gunmen who attacked them. Local medics said at least eight Palestinians were wounded.

Bloodshed has stalled a US-backed peace "road map" and

Palestinians fear Sharon's ideas -- put forward as a unilateral alternative if the plan fails -- would leave them a shrunken state inside an internationally condemned Israeli barrier.

Sharon has publicly raised the possibility of uprooting some isolated, hard-to-protect Jewish settlements, leading to speculation he would then chart the borders of a Palestinian homeland along the barrier dipping deep into the West Bank.

"If Sharon wants to remove the settlements, fine. We will not stop him from taking down Netzarim," Qurie said, referring to a settlement on the edge of Gaza City whose stand-alone location makes it an apparent candidate for removal.

"(But) you cannot build a fence on our land, put us into cages like chickens and hope for the best. It will cause a disaster," Qurie said.

Israel says the West Bank barrier, still under construction, of razor wire fencing and concrete walls is necessary to stop Palestinian suicide bombers from reaching its cities.

"If you want a fence, fine. Build it on the Green Line," Qurie added, referring to the de facto border between Israel and the West Bank before the 1967 Middle East war, which would give Palestinians more territory.

"In that case, we would be prepared to share the construction costs with you."

Foreign ministers from both sides said bilateral talks could still resume with a meeting between Sharon and Qurie if terms are right.

"I think it is possible," Qurie said, referring to chances for a peace agreement with Sharon. "There has to be an immediate return to the negotiating table."

The interview appeared a day after Yuval Shteinitz, head of parliament's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, said Sharon had outlined a "long-term redeployment" as an alternative to a peace deal and it was accepted by most lawmakers of their Likud party.

Support by the right-wing party would be crucial to pushing through any such proposal. For

decades Sharon, a former general, has championed settlements as key to Israel's security.

Maariv reported Wednesday the "Sharon plan" would mean evacuating five smallish settlements by next summer.

AFP adds: Five Palestinians were killed Thursday in a major Israeli operation to hunt down militants in southern Gaza, as Palestinian premier Ahmed Qorie warned Israel of a flare-up if the construction of a controversial barrier was not halted.

Israeli troops backed by helicopter gunships thrust into the refugee camps of the town of Rafah in an incursion launched before dawn to capture wanted leaders from the Hamas and Islamic Jihad hardline groups.

According to military sources, the troops wrapped up the operation shortly before noon (1000 GMT) after capturing a member of Islamic Jihad, wanted over arms smuggling through tunnels running under the nearby border with Egypt.

Special Iraq tribunal to try Saddam in absentia

REUTERS, Baghdad

A special Iraqi court will try Saddam Hussein in absentia for crimes against humanity, if the fugitive dictator is not caught or killed, and bring key members of his regime before the tribunal, officials said on Wednesday.

Officials from the Iraqi Governing Council told a news conference US officials had agreed to hand over top Saddam loyalists in detention to face trial by an Iraqi tribunal formally established on Wednesday.

"Saddam Hussein will be accused and charged with committing crimes against humanity and the Iraqi people. He will certainly come under the jurisdiction of this court," said Ahmad Chalabi, a senior member on the US-backed Governing Council.

American officials hope prosecuting Saddam's top lieutenants will bolster support for the Governing Council and convince Iraqis the old regime will not return.

Efforts to rebuild the country have been thwarted in part by an insurgency the US military blames on Saddam loyalists and foreign fighters. Two more US soldiers were killed in northern Iraq on Wednesday.

Amnesty slams British anti-terrorism law as perversion of justice

AFP, London

Human rights group Amnesty International yesterday attacked British emergency internment laws, introduced in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, as a "perversion of justice".

"This legislation has created a Guantanamo Bay in our own backyard," Kate Allen, Amnesty's director for Britain, told the Independent newspaper, referring to the US military base in Cuba.

In a hard-hitting report, Amnesty said that the emergency legislation adopted by Britain had created a "shadow" criminal justice system for foreigners suspected of being "terrorists".

By allowing foreign nationals to be locked up indefinitely without charge or trial, the government had failed to meet international standards, Amnesty claimed.

Its report, entitled "UK: Justice Perverted under the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001", examined the laws that have led to 14 people being detained at high-security prisons.

Six of the terrorist suspects will have been in detention for two years on December 19, said Amnesty.

"The Act is discriminatory -- there is one set of rules for British citizens and another for nationals of other countries," the group claimed.

"If there is sufficient evidence to warrant holding these individuals indefinitely they should be charged and tried in proceedings which meet international fair trial standards. Otherwise they should be released."

Amnesty also had misgivings about the workings of the Special Immigration Appeals Commission, which was set up to allow the men to appeal against

their detention.

Amnesty said the commission appeared to have accepted evidence obtained through the torture of suspects detained by the US at Bagram air base in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay.

"By indicating that they are prepared to rely on evidence extracted under torture, the UK legal process has effectively given a green light to torturers," the rights group charged.

Guantanamo Bay is the site where more than 660 people picked up during the US "war on terror" are being held. The United States does not consider them prisoners of war and is holding them indefinitely without setting trial dates.

Meanwhile, Britain's prison service has admitted that its officers subjected jail inmates to sustained beatings, mock executions, death threats and racist abuse, the Guardian newspaper reported yesterday.

Fourteen prisoners were seriously assaulted by officers in Wormwood Scrubs prison in west London, the Guardian said, in what it described as the biggest abuse scandal in a British jail in modern times.

The left-wing daily said it had seen court documents in which the prison service admitted that the detainees suffered at least 122 separate instances of assault between 1995 and 1999.

The Prison Service had also settled a further 32 cases without admitting the prisoners' claims of violence were true, the newspaper said.

It reported that in one of the worst incidents, an Irish inmate was pinned on a bed and choked as eight officers beat him, with one shouting for the victim to call him "English master".

CIA plans to set up Iraqi spy agency

REUTERS, Washington

The United States plans to set up an Iraqi intelligence service to spy on groups and individuals inside Iraq that are targeting US troops and civilians. The Washington Post reported yesterday.

Citing unidentified US officials, the Post said the CIA plans to set up the new service with help from Jordan. Two members of an Iraqi exile group are at CIA headquarters in Virginia this week to work out details of the new program, the Post said.

Iraqi Interior Minister Nouri Badran, a secular Shiite Muslim, has been selected to head the service initially, the Post said. Badran has worked with the CIA over the past decade to incite coups against Saddam Hussein.

Parents of US soldiers seek early return of their wards from Iraq

AFP, Washington

Just back from a one-week visit to Iraq, a group of parents with children stationed in the war-torn country said it is high time the troops came home, pointing to the growing frustration Iraqis seem to feel at their presence.

Medea Benjamin, one of the trip's organizers, said the general message the families received throughout their visit was: "Thanks for getting us rid of Saddam Hussein. Please get out now."

"They want to see an end of US occupation and see the US troops

leave," she added, highlighting a sentiment shared by many soldiers' parents.

"Iraqis are becoming very frustrated," said Mike Loperchio, whose son is stationed in Fallujah.

"The term 'resistance' has become a real term. The longer we stay, the more it will become real," said John Grant, a Vietnam veteran.

Fernando Suarez del Solar, who visited the place where his son was killed in March, said "seeing the faces of Iraqi children, I understand what my son died for -- to give them a future."

EU braces for summit on constitution

AFP, Brussels

The European Union is bracing for a make-or-break summit starting today aimed at hammering out its first-ever constitution, amid warnings that failure could plunge the expanding bloc into a full-blown crisis.

Even seasoned EU watchers admit that the Brussels summit, scheduled to last two days but which some fear will turn into a marathon of bare-knuckle haggling through the weekend, could push high-stakes brinkmanship to the limit.

"We cannot, alas, rule out a fiasco," said Polish Foreign Minister Wlodzimirz Cimoszewicz, whose country is set to fight tooth and nail along with Spain to retain generous voting rights they won only three years ago.

Other key bones of contention range from the composition of the European Commission to the powers of a new EU president and whether the new EU charter should refer to God. Britain is pushing hard to retain its veto on foreign policy decisions, a particularly sensitive issue after the divisive Iraq war.

But Spain's and Poland's voting rights -- secured at a December 2000 summit in Nice whose spectre will hang over the Brussels talks -- have emerged as the central sticking point blocking agreement on the historic EU charter.

The weekend summit is the climax of nearly two years of constitution-making to get the EU's creaking institutions in shape for its biggest enlargement yet next year, when the bloc will expand from 15 to 25 members.

Car explodes near Italian synagogue

AFP, Rome

A car exploded near a synagogue in the northern Italian city of Modena early yesterday, police said, adding that the driver, believed to be a Jordanian, was killed.

According to police, the man had set himself on fire in the vehicle -- believed to be fuelled by liquid propane gas -- triggering the blast.

It was not known if there were any other casualties as a result of the explosion.

Authorities said that windows in the surrounding area had been blown out by the blast.

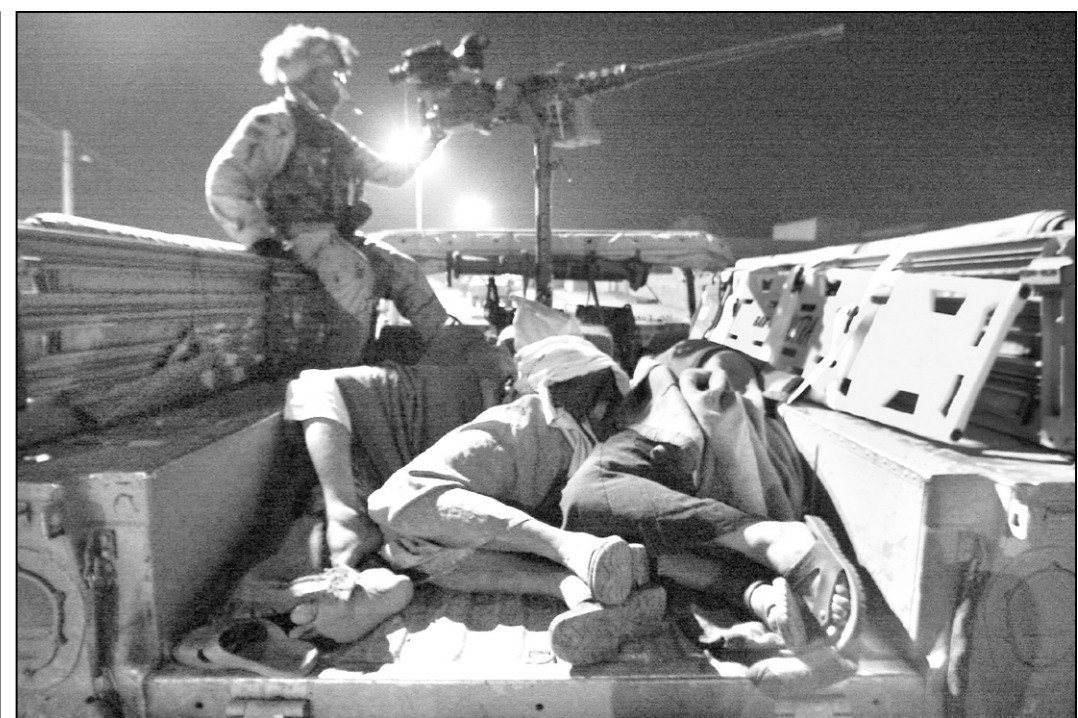


PHOTO: AFP

Three Iraqi detainees await inside a Humvee military vehicle during a raid in the area by US troops, on outskirts of Tikrit, 180km north of Iraq's capital Baghdad early yesterday. US soldiers from 1-22 Battalion of the 4th Infantry Division captured three suspected leaders of anti-coalition cells and seized grenades, explosives, mortar rounds, homemade bombs and other weapons from the garden of a house they raided.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian human rights activist and Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi (R) receives the Nobel Peace Prize from the Nobel Committee's chairman Ole Danbolt Mjoes during a ceremony in Oslo's city hall Wednesday.

Nobel prizes awarded in formal ceremony

AFP, Stockholm

The 2003 Nobel winners for Literature, Medicine, Physics, Chemistry and Economics were officially handed their awards in Stockholm by King Carl XVI Gustaf Wednesday.

The formal ceremony, traditionally held in Stockholm's Concert Hall, was to be followed by a gala banquet for 1,300 guests at city hall.

It came after the award of the Peace Prize across the border in Norway, the only prize traditionally given not in Stockholm, but in Oslo.

Robert F. Engle and Clive W.J.

Granger won the Economics Prize, the Chemistry prize went to Peter Agre and Roderick MacKinnon and the Physics prize was awarded to trio consisting of Alexei A. Abrikosov, Anthony J. Leggett and Vitaly L. Ginzburg.

Paul C. Lauterbur and Peter Mansfield jointly won the Nobel Prize for Medicine.

South African writer J.M. Coetzee was honoured with the Nobel Literature prize. After Coetzee won the prize in October, there had been some doubt whether the reclusive writer would make the journey, his first trip to Sweden.