

# Sharon vows to implement unilateral steps in months

## US warns Israel on imposing solution

AFP, AP, Herzliya

Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon gave notice to the Palestinians Thursday that he would abandon attempts to reach a peace deal and implement his own unilateral measures if they did not meet their commitments to the Middle East roadmap within months.

"We wish to speedily advance implementation of the roadmap towards a quiet and genuine peace," Sharon said in a keynote speech here.

"We hope that the Palestinian Authority will carry out its part. However if in a few months the Palestinians still continue to disregard their part in implementing the roadmap then Israel will initiate the unilateral security step of disengagement from the Palestinians.

"The 'disengagement plan' will be realised only in the event that the Palestinians continue to drag their feet and postpone implementation of the roadmap."

His speech brought immediate

condemnation from the Palestinians with premier Ahmed Qorei saying that he was disappointed by the "threats" while the top aide to veteran leader Yasser Arafat said it amounted to a rejection of the roadmap.

The White House warned that the United States would oppose any "unilateral" moves by Israel that falls outside the terms of the roadmap.

And Sharon also came under fire from Israeli settlers after warning that settlements would be evacuated under the terms of a program of unilateral disengagement.

"The relocation of settlements will be made first and foremost in order to draw the most efficient security line possible, thereby creating this (unilateral) disengagement between Israel and the Palestinians," Sharon said.

Sharon did not name which settlements would go but Bensi Lieberman, president of the Settlers' Council, vowed to battle any such plan.

"If we come to the conclusion that

the prime minister will take unilateral measures which will involve the transfer of Jews and dismantling of communities we will do everything in our power to prevent these measures becoming reality," Lieberman told public television.

Sharon also vowed that Israel would "greatly accelerate" construction of its West Bank separation barrier which has come under fierce international criticism for cutting deep into Palestinian land.

"The rapid completion of the security fence will enable the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) to remove roadblocks and ease the daily lives of the Palestinian population not involved in terror," he said.

Sharon's talk of unilateral measures prompted an angry response from the Palestinian leadership which opposes non-negotiated decisions that might affect their future state and fear any redeployment would be considered definitive by Israel, whether or not it matches internationally recognised borders.

Qorei told AFP that he was pre-

pared for talks with Sharon and insisted that a bilateral agreement remained possible.

AP adds: The United States warned Israel against imposing a solution if peace efforts remain stalled, and the Palestinians called Ariel Sharon's ultimatum unacceptable.

Jewish West Bank settlers, also reacting swiftly to the plan Sharon unveiled Thursday, said the prime minister's idea of moving some settlements was an illusion.

Sharon warned in a speech in this Tel Aviv suburb that the Palestinians had only a few months to make peace or Israel would take unilateral steps to separate itself from Palestinian areas.

Sharon said Israel remained committed to a US-backed road map peace plan. But he demanded Palestinians begin dismantling militant groups, as called for by the plan, or face an Israeli-imposed security border. The road map envisions a Palestinian state by 2005.

## Malvo found guilty in US sniper case

REUTERS, Chesapeake

A jury on Thursday found Lee Malvo, 18, guilty of murdering Linda Franklin, one of 10 people gunned down in a series of sniper shootings that terrorized the Washington, D.C., area last year.

Malvo was 17 when he and his accomplice John Muhammad, 42, roamed the region in an aging automobile, picking off random human targets through a hole cut in the trunk.

Dressed in a light sweater, Malvo sat without apparent reaction as a court official read out guilty verdicts in each of two counts of capital murder, which could mean the death penalty or life in prison without the possibility of parole.

"We are extremely pleased with the verdict," said Bob Meyers, the brother of another of the pair's victims, Dean Meyers, who was shot on Oct. 9, 2002 at a gas station near Manassas, Virginia.

A separate jury last month convicted Muhammad of Meyers' murder and sentenced the Gulf War veteran to death. A judge will review the recommendation and make a final sentencing in February. "We believe that justice has been served," Meyers told journalists outside the court building.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian army soldiers stand guard as a local villager (2-R) goes about his work during their patrol of the Indo-Bhutan border at Darranga, some 100km north of the capital of the Indian state of Assam, Guwahati yesterday. Up to 120 Indian rebels have been killed by the Bhutanese army during a crackdown on rebel camps in the Himalayan kingdom, the Indian army said as the offensive intensified.

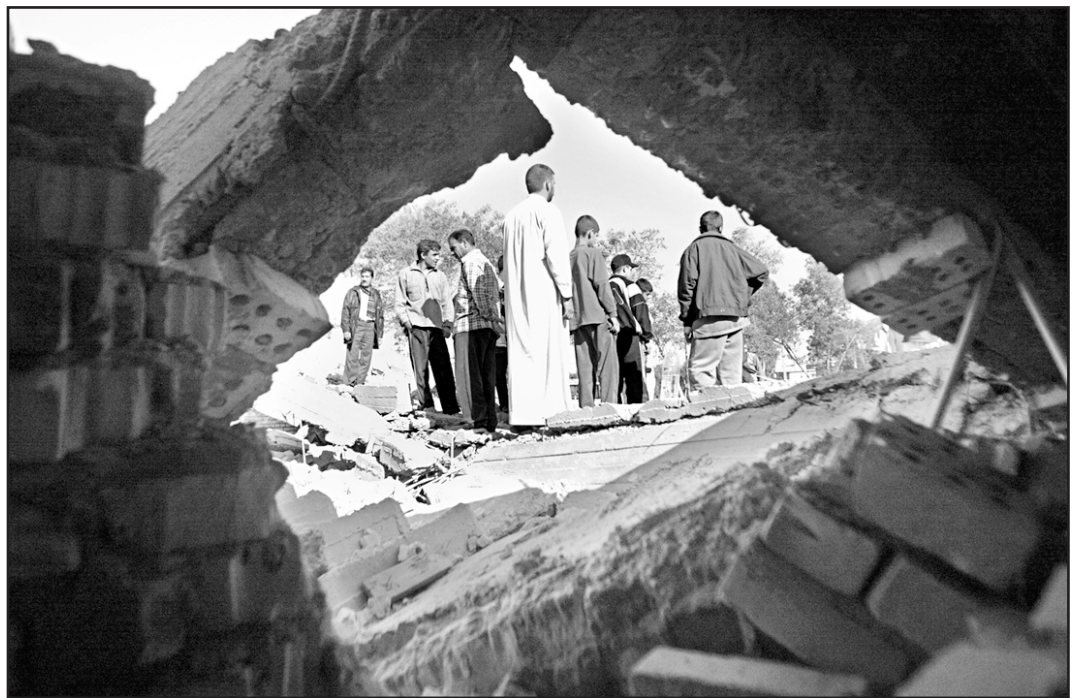


PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi civilians stand on the debris of a homeless shelter, which was hit in a pre-dawn bombing raid in Baghdad yesterday. The building collapsed onto families sleeping in the west Baghdad compound of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) killing one woman and wounding eight other people.

# US to pour more troops into Iraq

## Iraqi WMD search group reduced to 40 experts

AFP, Baghdad

The United States said Thursday it will pour more troops into Iraq after another US soldier died there in a roadside ambush, and Russia agreed to consider reducing Iraq's crippling debt.

Senior defense officials said Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld approved the deployment of an extra brigade of the elite 82nd Airborne Division to Iraq next month and extended the tour of duty of another brigade to maintain combat power as other forces are rotated out.

The deployment will increase the total size of the US force in Iraq by a couple of thousand troops over a three month period during which the entire force is to be replaced with fresh units, the officials said.

"It is a spike, no question about it," said one official. "But it will provide some capability during the transition period that Abizaid

thought was important."

General John Abizaid, commander of the US Central Command, had asked for the deployment of the 82nd Airborne's 1st Brigade after deciding that an infantry brigade of the Washington National Guard that was to have deployed to Iraq in January needed more training.

The latest US casualty in Iraq came as a top US general warned that insurgents fighting the US-led occupation were increasingly targeting Iraqi civilians and security forces.

The fatality brought to 199 the number of US combat troops killed in Iraq since President George W. Bush declared major fighting over on May 1, according to an AFP count.

US troops killed two people and captured 86 others during anti-insurgency operations Thursday in the flashpoint town of Samarra.

Meanwhile, the US-led Iraq

Survey Group hunting for weapons of mass destruction has had its personnel reduced to under 40, a British newspaper reported yesterday.

The Independent daily said the move showed US President George W. Bush had in effect "washed his hands" of the hunt for such weapons in Iraq.

The survey group has a nominal staff of 1,400 US and British specialists, analysts and translators. But the numbers in the field have been less, with two teams of 20 at most deployed, said the Independent.

"In October, the group's strength dwindled further when Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defense Secretary, ordered many personnel to be transferred to the regular forces to help counter the growing rebellion," said the London-based paper, without citing its sources.

## Saudi Arabia cracks down on Islamists

AFP, Riyadh

Hit by two deadly attacks, Saudi Arabia has launched a massive crackdown on Islamist militants believed to be linked to the al-Qaeda network, but ends the year with no letup in US warnings that terrorists are likely to strike again.

The warnings, the latest of which advised US citizens on December 17 to consider leaving the country, spoke volumes for the downturn in decades-long friendly ties between Washington and Riyadh.

Once Washington's closest Gulf ally, Saudi Arabia has since the September 11, 2001 attacks, in which 15 of 19 hijackers were Saudis, been at the receiving end of criticism from US quarters that its own system, based on a rigorous doctrine of Islam, fosters religious extremism.

Kuwait and tiny Qatar have since replaced Riyadh as nerve centers of the US military presence in the region, as illustrated by their roles in

the US-led war on Iraq, which left Washington in control of that strategically important country and moved Saudi Arabia further down the US ladder.

But Saudi officials are pulling out all the stops to counter both the terror threat which hit home twice this year and claims that they brought it upon themselves.

Hundreds of Islamist extremists, suspected sympathizers of Saudi-born al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden, were rounded up in the wake of three simultaneous attacks on the capital on May 12 which killed 35 people, including eight Americans.

The attacks - which some diplomats here have called Saudi Arabia's "own 9/11" - prompted Saudi leaders, chiefly Crown Prince and de facto ruler Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, not just to strike hard at militants, but also to launch an offensive against the "deviant" thinking of extremists.

## Musharraf to offer alternatives to Kashmir plebiscite

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf is ready to offer alternatives to Pakistan's life-long demand for a plebiscite in disputed Kashmir, Information Minister Sheikh Rashid said yesterday.

"He's not dropping the call for plebiscite," Rashid told AFP.

"He's saying that we can think of certain other things, we have some alternative proposals. He's prepared to offer some alternatives."

While it is not clear that Musharraf has committed to abandoning demands for a referendum, the offer to negotiate on the key platform of Islamabad's Kashmir policy could mark a dramatic turning point in relations between Pakistan and India, just weeks ahead of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Islamabad for the January 4-6 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit.

The minister declined to outline the "alternative proposals", saying only that Musharraf would raise them with Indian leaders when "serious talks" are held.

"He has them in his mind, when there's serious talks he will talk," Rashid said.

Pakistan has demanded Kashmiris be allowed to choose between rule by Pakistan or India since 1948, a year after Pakistan was carved out of India in the partition of the subcontinent.

The demand for a plebiscite has been backed by the United Nations Security Council in several resolutions since 1948.

Islamists were up in arms at the suggestion of backing down on the plebiscite demand.

"Any unilateral decision bypassing the Kashmiri people will not be acceptable to us" Liaquat Baloch, a federal MP and executive of Pakistan's most powerful Islamic party Jamaat-i-Islami told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani activist, a member of the six-party Islamic alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), holds a placard during an anti-government demonstration in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani hardliners started a mass campaign to force President Pervez Musharraf to curtail powers he amassed by amending the constitution. Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup in 1999, appointed himself president in June 2001 while retaining the post of the country's army chief.

# Iran signs protocol on snap nuclear inspection

AFP, Geneva

Iran on Thursday signed up to surprise UN inspections of its nuclear sites in a move hailed as a watershed for Tehran as it tries to fend off accusations that it is seeking nuclear arms.

Iranian Ambassador Ali Akbar Salehi signed an additional protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) at a ceremony at the Vienna headquarters of the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"Iran has turned a new leaf," said IAEA director general Mohamed ElBaradei, who has urged that the accord was the only way for Tehran to prove that its atomic programme is purely peaceful.

"The protocol is an important tool for establishing confidence... to determine that the Iranian

nuclear programme is totally peaceful... we will have the legal right to inspect all the installations and sites of Iran."

The inkling came two months after the IAEA threatened to present its concerns over Iran's nuclear programme to the UN Security Council, which could impose sanctions.

"This is the opportunity for Iran to break a vicious circle that has been going on for 20 years," ElBaradei said.

Salehi told reporters: "It is a landmark event, I hope that now my country will not be exposed anymore to unfair and politically motivated accusations."

The United States, which has accused Iran of using its civilian nuclear energy programme to secretly develop atomic weapons, said the signing of the additional protocol was just a first step.

"It is welcome that Iran has

made this commitment, but what is important remember is that it is only a first step," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said in Washington.

"Iran needs to bring this into force, needs to ratify this additional protocol that is now signed and above all it needs to implement the programmes that they have agreed to," he said.

Iran had long resisted signing the additional protocol but made an about-face under intense diplomatic pressure in October when the foreign ministers of EU countries Britain, France and Germany visited the country.

Tehran then agreed to sign the additional protocol, hand over full details of its activities and suspend uranium enrichment.

In November the IAEA adopted a resolution condemning it for 18 years of covert nuclear activity.

## Pop King charged with child molestation

AFP, Santa Maria

"King of Pop" Michael Jackson was Thursday charged with sexually molesting a young boy after plying him with alcohol, allegations that could land him a hefty prison sentence.

But Jackson's lawyer hit back at the charges, saying the "King of Pop" was "unequivocally and absolutely" innocent and that he would fight the charges motivated by "money and revenge" with "every fibre of his soul."

Prosecutors near Jackson's fabled Neverland Ranch in California filed nine criminal charges against the beleaguered superstar and included a "special allegation" of "substantial sexual conduct" with a child under 14.

"There are several special allegations ... which, if found true, could make Jackson ineligible for probation and impact the number of years that he could serve in



prison," Santa Barbara District Attorney Tom Sneddon said after filing charges in the town of Santa Maria.

Legal experts said the definition of "substantial" sexual conduct was "rectal penetration, oral copulation, or masturbation."

## US raps Pakistan on religious freedom

AFP, Washington

The United States Thursday rebuked its anti-terror ally Pakistan for failing in "many respects" to protect religious minorities and for passing discriminatory laws that fueled religious intolerance.

The criticisms were contained in the State Department's annual report on international religious freedom, which categorized Pakistan with countries that exhibited state hostility to minority religions.

Pakistan's archrival, India, however, earned broadly good marks in the report, but was accused of failing to counter effectively attacks against minorities.

Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal won mostly good ratings, despite some areas of concern.

According to the report,

Pakistan "failed in many respects to protect the rights of religious minorities, due to both public policy and the government's unwillingness to take action against societal forces hostile to those who practice a different faith."

It said discriminatory laws at national level had fed an "atmosphere of religious intolerance" which contributed to violence against minority Muslim groups and against Christians and Hindus.

"While the government did not encourage sectarian violence, there were instances in which the government failed to intervene in cases of societal violence directed at minority religious groups, particularly Shias," the report said.

Predominantly Hindu India was also accused of failing at times to effectively counter attacks against minority groups.

## Bulgaria okays hosting US military bases

REUTERS, Sofia

Bulgaria's parliament yesterday gave a green light to the possible setting up of US and NATO military bases in the Balkan country as the alliance shifts its focus eastwards.

The chamber passed a declaration, which supported the government's consultations with Washington and other NATO members on working out the details of hosting bases.

Earlier this month the US held a diplomatic road show in nearly a dozen European capitals to unveil its new defense policy, expected to bring base closures in Western Europe and reflect NATO's greater eastward focus since the Cold War ended.

Balkan neighbors Romania and Bulgaria, invited to join NATO next year, opened their airspace to US aircraft heading to the war in Iraq. Bulgaria allowed Iraq-bound planes to refuel at its Sarafovo Black Sea airbase near the port of Bourgas.