

Israel mulls moving settlers

AP, Jerusalem

Under an emerging plan to dismantle settlements, Israel is considering moving Gaza Strip settlers to West Bank areas that Israel wants to annex under a final peace deal, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's spokesman said Friday.

Sharon -- who announced earlier in the week plans to dismantle 17 Gaza Strip settlements and some West Bank communities in the next two years -- is looking at several options and will present them to US officials, spokesman Assaf Shariv said.

Sharon's ideas have outraged his traditional right-wing and settler supporters, some of whom accuse him of timing the announcement with a bribery investigation.

Police questioned Sharon for a second time Thursday, and Israeli media reported that the top investigator believes there is not enough evidence to indict the prime minister.

Sharon's "disengagement plan" won't be complete for another two to three months, and moving Gaza settlers to the West Bank is one of several options being considered, Shariv said.

Two US envoys are to arrive in Israel in the coming weeks to discuss the plan with Sharon, Shariv said. Later in February or in early March, Sharon hopes to travel to Washington to present his ideas to President Bush.



PHOTO: AP

A partial view of the unauthorized Israeli Jewish settlement outpost of Mitzpeh Yitzhar.

Vice Premier Ehud Olmert, Sharon's top deputy, said he told Secretary of State Colin Powell during a meeting in Washington on Thursday that Sharon's "disengagement plan" would not come in place of a peace deal that would include the establishment of a Palestinian state in some of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

A survey found that 52 percent of

Israelis support dismantling all Gaza Strip settlements and 58 percent want to see isolated West Bank settlements removed. Thirty-six percent oppose the evacuation of Gaza settlements, while 31 percent oppose the removal of West Bank communities, according to the poll.

Sharon first made his ideas public in December, outlining a

plan under which Israel would impose a boundary with the Palestinians. Sharon has said he will only move ahead if there is no progress on the US-backed "road map" peace plan.

Some 7,500 Jewish settlers live scattered among 1.3 million Palestinians in the crowded Gaza Strip.

Turf battle in Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

In the Gaza Strip, members of the rival security services of Police Chief Ghazi Jabali and Gaza strongman Mohammad Dahlan exchanged fire Thursday at Gaza police headquarters, and 11 police officers were wounded. One, a 22-year-old serving under Jabali, died of his wounds, hospital officials said.

Jabali, who was not hurt, called it an attempt to assassinate him, but a rival security service dismissed it as a "misunderstanding."

Turf battles among more than a dozen security agencies have flared into violence repeatedly in the past. Israel and the United States have demanded the squabbling agencies be united under a single Cabinet minister to facilitate a campaign against violent groups like Hamas, but no such steps have been taken.

Iraq power hand-over date in doubt

AFP, Washington

The US plan for handing sovereignty back to Iraq is increasingly likely to undergo a major change, and may even be rolled back until early 2005, The Washington Post reported Friday.

The newspaper, quoting US officials, said members of the Bush administration have been crafting dramatic "new ideas" in a bid to bring a smooth end to the US-led occupation.

"The Bush administration still publicly clings to its transition plan, but a UN team scheduled to arrive in Iraq as early as Friday has been given a free hand to present its own blueprint for the country's political transition if it determines elections cannot be held by June in Iraq," the Post said.

CIA chief defends US Iraq weapons intelligence

REUTERS, Washington

CIA Director George Tenet, in his first public defense against criticism that US intelligence on Iraq was flawed, said on Thursday that while analysts had concluded Baghdad had weapons of mass destruction they never called that an "imminent" threat.

Tenet fired back in a speech at Georgetown University at critics who said the White House pressured intelligence analysts to skew their findings to support an intent to go to war.

"They (the analysts) never said

there was an 'imminent' threat," Tenet said. "Rather, they painted an objective assessment for our policymakers of a brutal dictator who was continuing his efforts to deceive and build programs that might constantly surprise us and threaten our interests."

Tenet added: "No one told us what to say or how to say it."

President Bush did not use the word "imminent" to describe the threat from Iraq leading up to the war, but called it a "grave and gathering danger."

Administration officials in making the case for a pre-emptive strike

said the United States could not afford to wait until the threat was on its doorstep.

Democrats who are trying to win the White House away from Bush in this year's presidential election seized on Tenet's comments as a sign that the administration had hyped the threat from Iraq.

"Today, the CIA Director, George Tenet, admitted that the intelligence agencies never told the White House that Iraq posed an imminent threat," Sen. John Kerry who is running for president said, "But that's not what the Bush White House told the American people."

Al Arabiya airs Qaeda tape

REUTERS, Dubai

Dubai-based satellite station Al Arabiya on Friday aired parts of a video apparently showing al Qaeda militants preparing for a bomb attack that killed 18 people in Saudi Arabia in November.

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, has been battling a tide of militancy since May when triple suicide bombings killed 35 people, including nine Americans, in Riyadh. Officials have blamed al Qaeda for both the May and November attacks.

The videotape showed fighters training and making explosives against a background of religious chants often heard in promotional videos of the al Qaeda network.

Al Arabiya said the 90-minute tape, which described the men as Saudi nationals, had been released on an al Qaeda website.

The excerpts showed the faces of the two suicide bombers who allegedly carried out the November attack, while others were masked. Saudi Arabia said in December it had arrested a suspect in the bombing and seized a large cache of weapons.

Dr Qadeer Khan faces life under siege

AFP, Islamabad

The man who made Pakistan a nuclear power may have escaped a jail term for leaking the country's atomic secrets but could spend the rest of his life under virtual house arrest, officials said.

The warning came as details emerged of how disgraced one-time hero Abdul Qadeer Khan ran a shady underworld network from Dubai with contacts in three continents, trading in nuclear centrifuges and atomic bomb blueprints.

But despite receiving a presidential pardon from Pervez Musharraf on Thursday after admitting to handing over atomic data to Iran, Libya and North Korea, Khan will remain under tight security, unable to move around at will.

"It is a conditional pardon and Khan knows he would be jailed if he tries to proliferate again in any way," a senior government official involved with the investigation into the scandal told AFP on Friday.

Rumsfeld: US-Europe ties back to normal

AP, Munich

US relations with Europe were badly strained by the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, but Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld says trans-Atlantic ties have returned to being "fairly normal."

Setting out Thursday on a three-nation European tour that started in Munich, Rumsfeld said in an interview that differences between allies are inevitable, and he dismissed suggestions that a major diplomatic effort will be required to mend fences.

Rumsfeld was attending a meeting of NATO defense ministers on Friday. On Saturday he planned to attend the yearly Munich Conference on Security Policy, which attracts officials, analysts and military leaders from around the globe.

Throughout NATO's 55-year history, he said, the trans-Atlantic relationship "has gone from little difficulties to things better, from little difficulties to things better -- it's been a pattern over my entire adult life-

time."

"I would say the relationships right now are fairly normal."

Rumsfeld also said that although NATO may get more involved in Iraq at some point, "Its first task really is to do well (in) the Afghanistan task" of leading the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul, the Afghan capital, and managing civil aid teams in several provinces.

Rumsfeld said he expected Iraq to be a major topic of discussion during his two days in Munich. On Sunday he is scheduled to travel to Zagreb, Croatia, followed by meetings in London on Monday.

When speaking at the Munich conference a year ago, Rumsfeld was critical of Europeans who favored giving United Nations inspectors more time to determine whether Iraq possessed chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. Delay, Rumsfeld said, "could well make war more likely, not less, because delaying preparations (for war) sends a signal of uncertainty instead of a signal of resolve."

Almost a month later, US forces invaded, toppling Saddam Hussein's regime. So far, no weap-

ons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq. The head of the US search team, David Kay, told Congress last week that it appears that the administration's prewar claims were erroneous.

The political backdrop to Rumsfeld's return to Munich is the Bush administration's struggle to get past the divisiveness and mistrust that remain between US allies over the Iraq war and Bush's handling of its aftermath.

France, Germany and Belgium -- all NATO members -- strongly opposed going to war last year, and the French and German governments are against committing NATO troops to Iraq in a peacekeeping role.

France and Germany also were angered at Bush's decision to prohibit them from bidding on postwar reconstruction contracts financed by the US government. The White House later said it was reconsidering its position, but there has been no announced decision allowing French or German companies to bid.

McCain picked for Iraq intelligence probe

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush is expected to name Sen. John McCain, an Arizona Republican, to a bipartisan commission that will investigate flaws in US intelligence used to justify the Iraq war, Republican sources said.

The panel would report back next year, after the November election. No such event was included on the president's official schedule for the day, although last-minute additions are typical of this administration.

Claims that Iraq had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction were the main reason cited by Bush for the war, in which more than 500 US troops have died.

McCain is a maverick who opposed Bush for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000 and is known for speaking his mind and taking on the administration. He broke party ranks to insist that Bush needed to have an independent commission look into prewar intelli-

gence.

He would lend a streak of independence to a commission that Democrats doubted would be non-partisan since its nine members are being picked by Bush rather than by Congress.

Republican sources said McCain was offered the post by the White House on Thursday and accepted.

Names that have been circulating as possible commission members included Robert Gates, a former CIA director under the president's father; Nebraska Republican Rep. Doug Bereuter; and former Georgia Democratic Sen. Sam Nunn, among others.

The White House was also drafting an executive order to set out the scope of the investigation. The administration was giving the panel a broad mandate to look beyond Iraq and at other intelligence matters like the nuclear programs of Libya, Iran and North Korea.

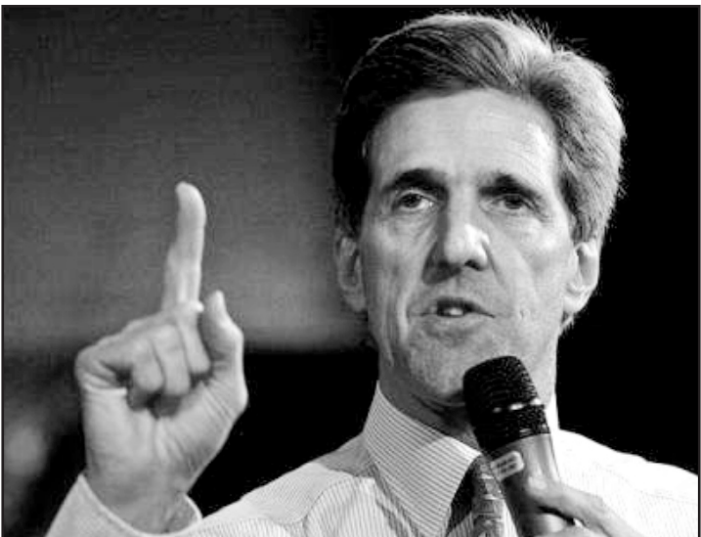


PHOTO: AP

Massachusetts Senator John Kerry is looking to wrap up the Democratic nomination for President with commanding primary victories this week-end.

Gephardt backs Kerry Dean to make final stand

REUTERS, Detroit

Democratic presidential front-runner John Kerry, riding a hot streak in the presidential race, won the backing of former rival Richard Gephardt on Thursday as rival Howard Dean vowed to make what could be his last stand in Wisconsin.

With five Democratic nominating contests scheduled over the next five days, Kerry's challengers frantically raised money and searched for a strategy to derail the Massachusetts senator before he runs away with the nomination to face President Bush in November.

Gephardt, a Missouri congressman who dropped out of the race last month after a disappointing finish behind Kerry in Iowa, endorsed him at a campaign event in Warren, Michigan, on Friday. The two then appeared together at events in Michigan, which holds its nominating contest on Saturday.

Gephardt's seal of approval for Kerry was expected to lead to an endorsement of Kerry by a coalition of labor unions that had backed Gephardt, with an announcement likely within the next week after union leaders conferred with mem-

bers, labor sources said.

One-time front-runner Dean looked beyond the next five contests and drew the line at the Feb. 17 primary in Wisconsin, telling supporters in an online fund-raising appeal that his fading campaign must win there or he would be finished.

"The entire race has come down to this: We must win Wisconsin," said the former Vermont governor, who has squandered a huge lead in the polls and a \$40 million bank account. "A win there will carry us to the big states on March 2 -- and narrow the field to two candidates. Anything else will put us out of the race."

Kerry has seized command of the race with wins in seven of the first nine contests as the focus shifts to Michigan and Washington on Saturday, Maine on Sunday and Virginia and Tennessee on Tuesday.

A new Reuters/MSNBC/Zogby poll found Kerry with a huge 47 percent to 10 percent lead over Dean in Michigan. No other candidate managed double digits in the state with 128 delegates at stake, the largest haul in the race so far.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani man looks at magazines with the portrait of the father of Pakistani Nuclear bomb, Dr Qadeer Khan, at a roadside book stall in Islamabad. President Pervez Musharraf pardoned the disgraced architect of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, Abdul Qadeer Khan, who made a dramatic, televised confession that he had leaked technology abroad.