

Russia finds no leads in subway bombing

AFP, Moscow

Russia's security service said yesterday it still had no suspects in a Moscow subway bombing that killed at least 39 people as police stepped up their presence across the jittery capital just weeks before presidential elections.

President Vladimir Putin linked the Friday morning rush hour strike to Chechen guerrillas and police briefly detained two people on Saturday before releasing them and admitting that they had no clear leads in the attack.

The Moscow mayor has declared Monday a day of national mourning as Muscovites reeled from the shock of yet another deadly strike on the capital -- one which has turned the booming city into one of the prime bombing targets in Europe over the past year.

A spokesman for the Federal Security Service (FSB, former KGB) admitted Sunday that the agency, which is now in charge of the investigation, had no firm leads in the case and suggested the explosion may have been accidental.

"It is premature to speak of specific people who may have been linked to this incident," the RIA Novosti new agency quoted FSB spokesman Sergei Ignatchenko as saying.

He said investigators said some form of explosive material that was being transported on the train may have accidentally gone off.

"We have still not ruled out this theory. We are still working on it, especially since no one has yet taken responsibility for the attack," Ignatchenko said.

Sharon seeks support over evacuation plan

Palestinian premier hopes to meet Sharon this month

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was rallying support for his controversial Gaza evacuation plan among sceptical members of his own party Sunday as a wanted militant was shot dead in the territory by Israeli troops.

"Mr Sharon has met today with (Foreign Minister) Silvan Shalom and should meet in the days to come with other Likud ministers to explain the principles" behind his disengagement plan, Assaf Shariv told AFP.

Hard-right members of Sharon's governing coalition have threatened to quit in protest at his plans to pull Jewish settlers out of most of Gaza as part of a package of unilateral measures intended to make up for the lack of progress in the Middle East peace process.

Shalom is understood to be opposed to the Gaza pullout on the grounds that it would encourage Palestinian attacks but his portfolio would be particularly vulnerable if the opposition Labour party replaced hardliners in the coalition.

In a surprise move, Sharon dispatched deputy premier Ehud Olmert instead of Shalom to

Washington late last week to woo US support for his project.

Shariv added that Sharon would hold talks on Monday with his powerful Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Education Minister Limor Livnat who are seen as two of his most likely successors.

Meetings have also been arranged for Thursday with Agriculture Minister Israel Katz and Minister with Portfolio Uzi Landau, the two Likud ministers most opposed to his proposals.

Senior US officials were expected here later this week to discuss the disengagement plan as well as plans to reroute Israel's controversial West Bank separation barrier closer to the territory's borders, reports said.

The Maariv daily said the aim was to secure US support for the annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank which will eventually lie on the Israeli side of the barrier.

The major settlements of Ariel and Maale Adumim are expected to fall on the Israeli side of the barrier when it is completed next year.

Israel insists the barrier is essential to its security but the Palestinians see it as little more than a land grab.

The legality of the barrier is to be

the subject of a hearing before the International Court of Justice in The Hague which is due to begin on February 23.

Maariv also reported that Israel was likely to ratchet up its military operations in Gaza ahead of the pullout to ward off accusations that it represented an act of weakness.

The funeral was taking place Sunday of Aziz al-Shami, a senior military official of the Islamic Jihad movement, who was killed in an Israeli air strike the day before. A 12-year-old boy was also killed in the attack.

Another Palestinian militant was shot dead Sunday morning after Israeli troops backed by helicopters raided the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip.

Ashraf Abu Libdeh, a member of the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), died of multiple bullet wounds after troops had surrounded his house, medics and witnesses said.

Six other Palestinians, including the victim's six-year-old nephew, were also wounded in exchanges of fire, sources at Rafah hospital told AFP.

The troops had entered Rafah at around 5:00 am (0300 GMT), travelling in around 10 tanks and several jeeps with two Apache assault

helicopters flying overhead.

An army spokesman said the victim had been shot as he tried to escape from his house during an operation to find tunnels used to smuggle weapons under the Israeli-controlled border with Egypt.

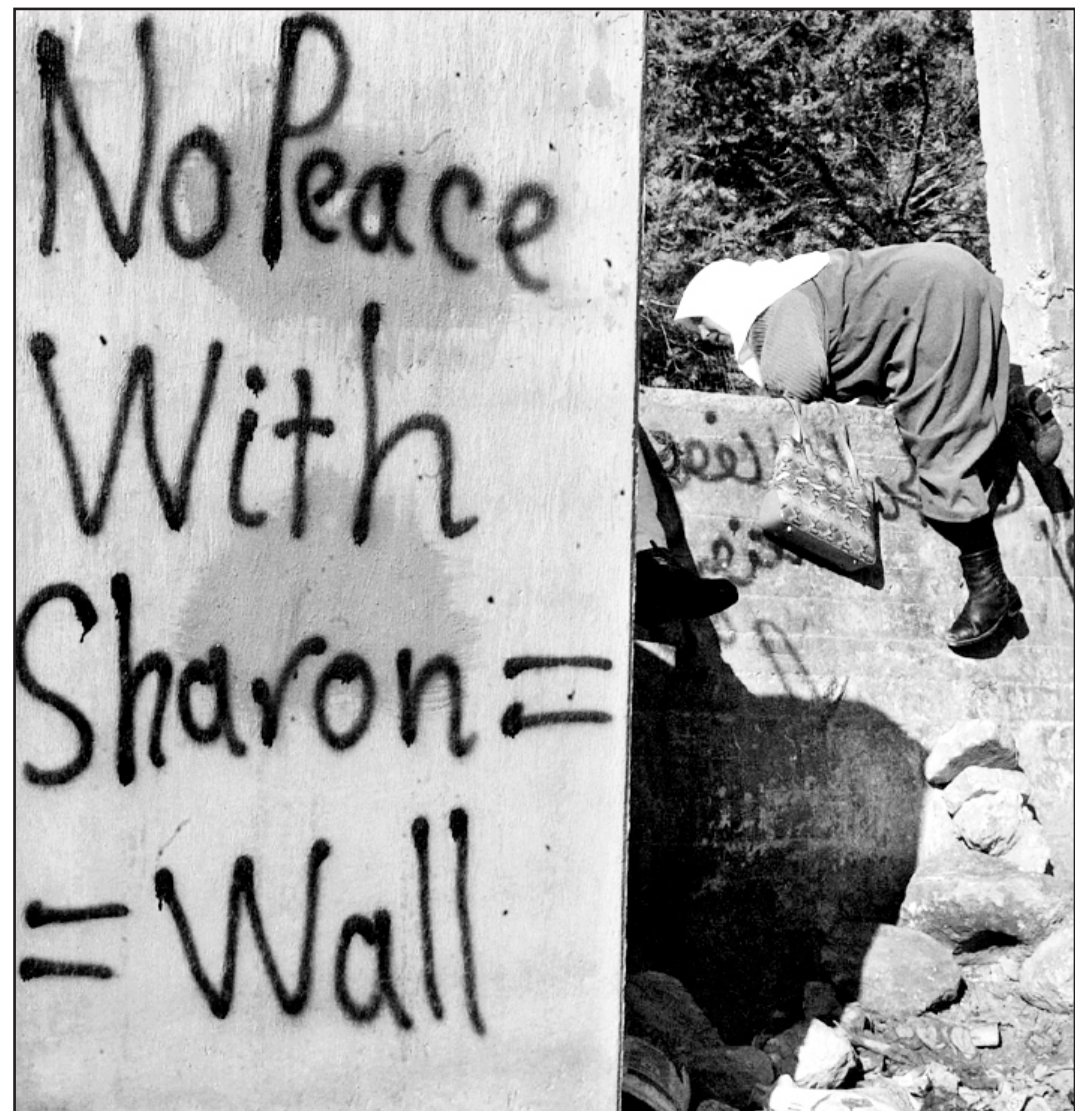
Meanwhile Palestinian premier Ahmed Qorei said yesterday that he hoped to hold his first meeting with his Israeli counterpart Ariel Sharon by the end of the month.

"I believe that there will be a meeting with Sharon before the end of February," Qorei told journalists after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

He said the head of his office Hassan Abu Libdeh and top negotiator Saeb Erakat would meet Sharon aide Dov Weisglass on February 15 to prepare for the meeting.

During a first round of preparatory talks in Jerusalem last week, "all the questions on the (meeting's) agenda were examined, but we did not reach agreement on all the questions," Qorei said.

The Palestinian premier has yet to meet Sharon since his appointment late last year in one of the starkest indications of the deadlock in the Middle East peace process.



A Palestinian woman jumps over a small wall next to a concrete block of Israel's controversial "security" wall in the village of Abu Dis on the edge of Arab east Jerusalem yesterday. Israel is to reroute its controversial separation barrier closer to the border with the West Bank in a bid to secure US support for the annexation of Jewish settlements, according to Israeli newspapers.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Democratic presidential hopeful Senator John Kerry (D-MA) smiles during a rally in Richmond, Virginia. Kerry is campaigning in Tennessee and Virginia this weekend in his quest for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Kerry eyes conciliatory foreign policy

AFP, Washington

Call him a prudent statesman, call him a weak-kneed dove, but when Democratic presidential front-runner John Kerry looks out on the world he sees diplomatic landscapes vastly different than the harsh horizons eyed by George W. Bush.

Arguably no other Democrat in the last half century has gone into a run for the White House with more international experience than Kerry, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for nearly two decades.

And the Massachusetts senator, 60, has lost no time staking out a conciliatory, consensus-building foreign policy in sharp contrast to Bush's willingness to go it alone and use pre-emptive military force.

Kerry proposes a "new era of alliances" to replace an approach by the Republican administration that he brands "the most arrogant, inept, reckless and ideological foreign policy in modern history."

"No matter how much power we have, we cannot prevail single-handedly," he says. "We have to work with the international community to define a global strategy that is inclusive, not exclusive, collective and not imperial."

The Vietnam veteran and anti-war protester, who as senator helped smooth the way for a normalisation of ties with Hanoi, says he is ready to break with several canons of Bush policy if he captures the presidency.

He would seek direct dialogue with Iran and North Korea, two charter members of Bush's "axis of

evil," to further negotiations on nuclear non-proliferation, the war against terrorism and other issues.

He would put the United Nations in charge of rebuilding Iraq, reject Bush's rush to hand power back to the Iraqis, and establish a "reasonable plan and a specific timetable" for restoring self-government.

If the war on terrorism does occasionally require military action, Kerry says, "it's primarily an intelligence and law enforcement operation that requires cooperation around the world."

Kerry would make an aggressive effort to rebuild "frayed and shredded" relationships, particularly with NATO allies, and call a summit to discuss a common anti-terrorism agenda and security framework.

India's EC warns politicians over misuse of public funds

AFP, New Delhi

India's new election chief yesterday warned parties not to use public funds to entice voters ahead of parliamentary polls expected within months in the world's largest democracy.

T.S. Krishna Murthy, addressing reporters at his swearing-in as head of the three-member Election Commission, said parties needed to observe campaign rules even before the date for the polls is set.

"As far as possible, the taxpayers' money should not be used for electoral advantage," Murthy said.

Political parties in India

regularly splash full-page advertisements in newspapers and put up massive banners of their leaders.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government offered a raft of indirect tax cuts and other voter-friendly incentives in an interim budget days before parliament was dissolved Friday.

Asked about the last-minute spending bill, Murthy said: "I would like to use this opportunity to tell all political parties -- those in power and those in opposition -- that the spirit of the code of conduct should be observed even now."

Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

wants elections held in April or May to take advantage of booming economic growth triggered by a bountiful monsoon.

It is up to Murthy's commission to set the date for the election, in which more than 650 million voters are eligible.

Murthy, 63, took over from the outspoken James Michael Lyngdoh, who incurred the wrath of politicians by describing them as a "cancer" to India.

In 2002, he reprimanded the BJP for telling him situation was normal in Gujarat after 2,000 people died in anti-Muslim riots. Elections were held in the western state in December 2002 with the BJP sweeping back to power.

UN envoy fails to win invitation to Myanmar

AFP, Phuket

UN envoy Razali Ismail met with Myanmar's Foreign Minister Win Aung yesterday but failed to win an invitation to visit the country or find out when its "road map" to democracy will be launched.

"You know my interest in going. We're waiting there on that point," Razali told reporters after the talks held on the sidelines of a regional ministerial meeting on this Thai resort island.

Razali said in December that he aimed to make his 12th visit to Myanmar early in the new year, but sources say that so far his overtures have been rebuffed, forcing him to instead travel here to see the minister.

Since Myanmar announced the road map last August, a sceptical international community has been waiting to learn when the first step in the process -- a national convention to draft a new constitution -- will begin.

But Razali said the topic was not broached. "We didn't discuss that. We just exchanged views," he told reporters. "I didn't talk about the details."

However, after talks between Win Aung and his Thai counterpart Surakiart Sathirathai, officials they were confident Myanmar was moving towards reforms and that it gained a "clearer indication" of when the convention would be held.

Thailand has also said it hopes to hold a second round of international talks on Myanmar by mid-year, in anticipation the ruling junta will soon kick off the road map which culminates in "free and fair" elections.

"We feel that since the meeting of the Bangkok process there has been progress," said Thai foreign ministry spokesman Sihasak Phuangkeow, referring to the 12-nation talks held in the Thai capital in December.

WHO says

Bird flu cannot transmit easily among humans

AFP, Hanoi

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said the bird flu virus has not yet changed into a form capable of easy human-to-human transmission after further tests on suspect cases in Vietnam.

The UN agency had earlier said it was "possible" that two sisters had caught the disease from their brother, sparking fears that the virus had mutated into a far more lethal form.

But in a follow-up investigation the WHO said virologists in Hong Kong had failed to find any human genes in the virus samples taken from the sisters.

This, it said in a statement on

its website, indicated that the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain "has not changed to a form easily transmitted from one person to another."

The WHO has warned that H5N1 could kill millions across the globe if it combined with a human influenza virus to create a new highly contagious strain transmissible among humans.

The two sisters, who passed away on January 23 in a Hanoi hospital, are among 13 people to have died in Vietnam from bird flu.

They were part of a cluster of four cases of respiratory illness in the northern province of Thai Binh that included their brother and his wife.

The brother died shortly before his sisters were admitted to hospital and no samples were available from him for H5N1 testing. His wife was hospitalised on January 13 at the same time as the two sisters, but has since recovered.

In its latest update on the investigation into the cluster, the WHO said no illness has been reported in other family members, in the local community, or in health workers involved in care of these patients.

But it did not categorically rule out human-to-human transmission.

Boy found alive under rubble



PHOTO: AFP

16-year-old boy Muhammet Kalem lays on a stretcher yesterday after being pulled out alive from the wreckage of an 11-storey apartment block in the Turkish city of Konya that collapsed five days ago. Kalem, who survived after being trapped in an air pocket between concrete blocks in the building's basement, is in good health and was taken immediately to hospital, according to the Anatolia news agency.

AFP, Ankara

A 16-year-old boy was pulled out alive yesterday from the wreckage of an 11-storey apartment block in the central Turkish city of Konya that collapsed five days ago, media reported.

According to the semi-official Anatolia news agency, Muhammet Kalem was in good health and taken immediately to hospital.

Kalem survived after being trapped in an air pocket between concrete blocks.

The death toll from the building collapse rose overnight to 66 as rescuers pulled out four more bodies.

Around 60 people were believed buried under the rubble of the building, which collapsed on Monday evening during a major Muslim festival when relatives and friends traditionally visit each other.

Only 32 people have been pulled out alive since the tragedy, which has been blamed on shoddy construction.

Two-headed baby dies after op

BBC ONLINE

A young baby has died hours after landmark surgery in the Dominican Republic to remove a live second head.

Doctors said the baby's blood refused to clot, leading to her death. Earlier surgeons had said baby Rebeca Martinez was doing well after a complex 11-hour operation carried out by a team of 18 people on Friday.

Born with the head of an undeveloped conjoined twin fused to the top of her skull, she was thought to be the first such baby to survive beyond birth.

In the delicate operation, surgeons had to cut off undeveloped tissue, clip the veins and arteries and close Rebeca's skull using a bone graft from another part of her body.

"She was too little to resist the surgery," the baby's mother Maria

Gisela Hiciano told the Associated Press news agency from the hospital in Santo Domingo where surgery took place.

The team was led by Jorge Lazareff, who successfully separated Guatemalan conjoined twins in 2002.

A spokesman for the charity Cure International - which is meeting the estimated \$100,000 cost of surgery - earlier said that as the surgeons came out of the theatre they had unanimously said the operation was a "great success".

But one of the lead brain surgeons, Benjamin Rivera, told AP the infant had lost a lot of blood in the operation and had many transfusions, but that her blood would not clot.

"In that case, you can't do anything. This is the worst complication that can happen in this kind of surgery," he said.



A farmer feeds chicken on the courtyard of her house in Quoc Oai district, Northern province of Ha Tay in Vietnam yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP