



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian militant fires a rocket launcher at the site of a firefight with Israeli forces yesterday in Gaza City. At least thirteen Palestinians were killed yesterday during a firefight with Israeli soldiers in eastern Gaza City, according to a new toll from Palestinian medical sources. A total of 25 people had also been wounded after soldiers opened fire on a Palestinian security post in the al-Shijaiyah area near the town centre.

French headscarf ban sparks ire of Islamists

AFP, Cairo

The passage by France's National Assembly Tuesday of a bill to ban the Muslim headscarf from state schools has angered Islamists in the Arab world, who say the law will damage France's image in the region.

The number two of Egypt's influential Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Habib, warned that the adoption of the draft would "negatively affect the attitudes of Arabs and Muslims with respect to France and the French government."

"We would have preferred that the French parliament not adopt this bill and that the French government respect the feelings of Arabs and Muslims, as wearing the veil is an obligation in the Islamic faith," he said.

Habib, the deputy spiritual leader of the party banned movement, noted that Paris had previously enjoyed a positive image in the region "due to its political positions, especially with respect to the Palestinian cause."

On Tuesday, the lower house of France's parliament, the National Assembly, adopted by a wide margin the first reading of a bill that would ban Muslim headscarves and other conspicuous religious insignia from state schools.

The initiative — put forward by French President Jacques Chirac's ruling centre-right party and supported by the left-wing opposition Socialists after a compromise deal — faced opposition from some Muslims and human rights groups.

It will now go on to the parliament's upper house, the Senate, for review and further amendments.

In a statement published Tuesday, students at Egypt's Alexandria University cautioned: "France's image will be severely altered if the law is passed."

Hundreds of students demonstrated against the draft at the university on Monday, calling for a boycott on French products, the French university in Cairo and French schools across Egypt following its eventual passage.

Mobile phones buzzed in Cairo on Monday with text messages calling for shows of solidarity with France's estimated five million Muslims.

In Jordan, a top official in the main opposition Islamic Action Front, Abdel Latif Arabiyat, condemned the vote, calling it an "act of aggression against the Islamic faith" and warning that France would "regret its decision".

Habib hit out at the sheikh of Al-Azhar, the highest authority in Sunni Islam, who said France had the right to ban the Islamic headscarf in schools.

Mohammed Sayed Tantawi "gave France what it wanted on a silver platter and proved himself to be more monarchist than the king for political reasons," said Habib, whose organization is seen as the strongest opposition group in Egypt.

Kerry on a winning streak

AFP, Fairfax

US Senator John Kerry knocked out one rival for the Democratic nomination and crippled another, powering to a double victory in Tennessee and Virginia and closer to an election showdown with President George W. Bush.

Kerry's first two wins Tuesday in the electorally crucial south prompted former NATO commander Wesley Clark to pull the plug on his campaign, and badly wounded the White House bid of Senator John Edwards who slumped to defeat in his own southern backyard.

Kerry, 60, who took his haul of wins to 12 out of 14 states contested, immediately claimed a national mandate for a campaign fuelled by his heroism in the Vietnam war and sharp antipathy among Democrats towards Bush.

"Americans are voting for change, east and west, north and now in the south," Kerry, told cheer-

ing supporters in Fairfax, a Virginia suburb of Washington.

"Together across the south, you have shown the mainstream values that we share, fairness, love of country, a belief in hope and hard work are more important than boundaries or birthplace."

But Edwards, a son of the south, vowed to fight on, as the campaign moves out of the south to a primary in northern Wisconsin next week.

"We are going to have a campaign and an election, not a coronation," Edwards promised subdued supporters at a rally in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

But Clark decided that time had run out for his first-ever political campaign.

"It was a very difficult decision to make, obviously," Matt Bennett, communications director for the Clark campaign, told reporters. "He did it after the final results were in from Tennessee, and the decision is final."

Clark was to formally announce the end of his campaign in his home state of Arkansas on Wednesday, after claiming a sole victory, in the adjacent state of Oklahoma, last week, aides said.

Clark became the third candidate to pull out of the Democrat race since the nominating season opened last month. Party baron Dick Gephardt quit in January and Senator Joseph Lieberman wound up his effort last week.

As well as crippling his rivals, Kerry's double win struck a blow at critics who paint him as a starry "limousine liberal" married to a rich heiress who as a product of the northeastern establishment cannot connect with southern voters.

With 100 percent of precincts reporting in Virginia, Kerry had 52 percent of voters, more than Edwards and Clark put together, who had 27 percent and nine percent respectively.

Chandrika sacks 39 junior ministers

BBC ONLINE

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has dismissed 39 junior ministers ahead of elections in April.

Reports say her aim is to prevent ministers from misusing official assets to help their re-election campaigns.

The president is engaged in a bitter power struggle with Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe caused by differences over the peace process.

She believes Mr Wickramasinghe has made too many concessions to Tamil Tiger rebels.

The BBC's Frances Harrison in Colombo says that the president's decision to formally remove the 39 non-cabinet ministers from their posts was not a complete surprise.

Under the technicalities of the constitution, their tenure ended when parliament was dissolved on Saturday. The cabinet ministers, however, are staying in their place

as the caretaker government.

A statement released by the president said: "In view of the dissolution of Parliament, I have decided to remove all non-cabinet and deputy ministers by virtue of powers vested in me."

The sacked ministers headed departments such as highway development, housing development and irrigation.

Our correspondent says that the thinking is that such a large number of ministers might misuse their staff, buildings and cars to organise their election campaigns - something that has happened in the past.

A letter from the president's office to the ministers being removed complained that vehicles, office equipment and important documents were already being taken away from ministries illegally.

The president's move has been criticised by the spokesman for Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe.

Rumsfeld feigns ignorance over Blair's claim on WMD

AFP, Washington

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has said he did not recall British Prime Minister Tony Blair's pre-war claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction ready to be deployed in 45 minutes.

"I don't remember the statement being made, to be perfectly honest," Rumsfeld told a Pentagon news conference on Tuesday.

General Richard Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he didn't remember the statement either.

The claim made headlines around the world after Blair levelled it in a 55-page "white paper" presented to the House of Commons in September 2002.

The dossier said Iraq had military plans to use chemical and biological weapons and "some of these weapons could be deployed within 45 minutes of an order to use them".

Blair plans to meet Gaddafi

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair plans landmark talks with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in recognition of Tripoli's decision to renounce weapons of mass destruction, Britain said on Tuesday.

An encounter between Blair and Gaddafi would mark a further step in Libya's reintegration into the international community following its surprise pledge in December to abandon plans to develop atomic and other mass destruction weapons.

"We are hoping very much that a visit can be arranged as soon as convenient but no date has yet been fixed," said Foreign Secretary Jack Straw.

He was speaking at a news conference with his Libyan counterpart Mohamed Abderrhmane Chalgham, who earlier met Blair on the first visit by a Libyan foreign minister since 1969 when Gaddafi took power in a bloodless coup.

Talks between Blair and Gaddafi

would set the seal on Libya's reintegration, though Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi became the first Western leader to meet Gaddafi since his weapons pledge on a visit to Tripoli on Tuesday.

It was not clear whether a meeting between Blair and Gaddafi would also take place on Libyan soil.

Straw said "good progress" was being made with Libya on implementing its December 19 agreement to dismantle its weapons programmes and Chalgham said his country was cooperating fully with international inspectors.

"Regarding programmes of weapons of mass destruction, we are the ones who took the initiative in this matter," Chalgham said, according to a translator.

Libya has long been listed by the United States as a sponsor of terrorism, and suffered United Nations sanctions until last year for the 1988 bombing of an airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270 people.

Iran marks 25 yrs of revolution

AFP, Tehran

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians converged on their capital yesterday to mark the 25th anniversary of the Islamic revolution, an event the country's crisis-gripped regime hoped will remove any doubts over its position a week before disputed elections.

But embattled pro-reform President Mohammad Khatami, who has seen most of his key allies disqualified by hardliners from contesting the February 20 parliamentary polls, nevertheless used a speech televised across the country to hit out at his opponents.

In a gathering that resembled more of a pleasant family outing than an outpouring of revolutionary fervour, Islamist hardliners joyfully chanting "Death to America" mingled with balloon and snack sellers around Tehran's huge Azadi Square.

Authorities had requisitioned 4,000 buses for the celebrations marking the 1979 ouster of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, state television reported, while thousands more cars were seen driving people to the area.

Similar demonstrations were taking place in all the main cities of the country in response to calls in

the official media.

Placards bearing the portrait of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his predecessor Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini were also being handed out, together with "Death to America" banners and cartoons of "Rambush" -- US President George W. Bush decked out as the Hollywood action hero Rambo portrayed by Sylvester Stallone.

The huge gathering was also a business opportunity for street vendors, selling anything from Barbie doll balloons to bananas and from cigarettes to stars and stripes underpants.



PHOTO: AFP

This file photo dated June 11, 2003 shows the late Iranian twins Ladan (C-in black) and Laleh Bijani (R) talking at a press conference at Raffles Hospital in Singapore as co-leader of their surgery team, neurosurgeon Keith Goh (L), looks on.

Video shows Ladan, Laleh happily agreeing to surgery

AFP, Singapore

A videotape presented to Singapore's coroner's court yesterday showed Iranian conjoined twins Ladan and Laleh Bijani cheerfully agreeing to their tragic separation operation after being bluntly warned they could die in the process.

The 20-minute recording, screened publicly for the first time at an inquest into the 29-year-old sisters' deaths on July 8 last year, showed chief surgeon Keith Goh explaining in detail the risks involved.

"This is the last time that we are telling you about the complications... if you agree that you want to go on with the surgery, these are the risks," said Goh, who led an international team of 24 doctors and six neurosurgeons in the failed attempt to separate their enmeshed brains.

"They are serious risks. You could die from the operation... you could be in a vegetative state... you can be paralysed... you may be

have a stroke."

But the sisters, who appeared cheerful throughout the recording, insisted on having the operation and signed documents in front of relatives and doctors consenting to the surgery.

As Goh explained the dangers in English and with the help of a translator, Ladan, who was the more talkative of the twins, interjected: "You told me the risks all the time. I know."

Goh then asked them if they wanted the surgery to stop if doctors encountered a difficult situation, to which the sisters again said "no".

"God will help," Ladan said. The session was punctuated with laughter, with Goh at one point joking the plastic surgeons would make sure the sisters look "pretty" when their heads were reconstructed.

At one point they queried Goh on how long the post-surgery rehabilitation would take and if this would be done in Iran or Singapore.

White House releases Bush's military record

AP, Washington

The White House has provided documentary evidence that President Bush completed his National Guard service during the Vietnam War, but Democrats are still demanding proof he reported for duty as ordered in Alabama.

"The president recalls serving both when he was in Texas and when he was in Alabama," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Tuesday, holding up a 13-page packet of military records. "We have provided you these documents that show clearly that the president of the United States fulfilled his duties and that is the reason that he was honourably discharged from the National Guard."

The records, some being released for the first time, didn't satisfy Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe. He argued that the payroll and summary service records posed more questions than they answered.

"The fact remains that there is still no evidence that George W. Bush showed up for duty as ordered while in Alabama," McAuliffe said.



PHOTO: AFP

Democratic presidential hopeful US Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts confers with his wife Teresa prior to addressing supporters at George Mason University on Tuesday, in Fairfax, Virginia.