

Haiti freezes diplomatic ties with Jamaica

AFP, Kingston

Ex-president Jean Bertrand Aristide's arrival in Jamaica Monday angered Haitian authorities, who froze ties with their Caribbean neighbour and warned of violence in Port-au-Prince, where the first US marine was wounded overnight.

Jamaican officials declined to say where Aristide and his wife Mildred went after their flight from the Central African Republic landed at Kingston's Norman Manley international airport.

As the plane landed in Jamaica, home to Aristide's two daughters, Haitian prime minister Gerard Latortue announced in Port-au-Prince that he had suspended relations with Jamaica.

"I am immediately recalling the ambassador and we are freezing our relations with Jamaica," Latortue said at a news conference.

Dozens feared dead in Russian building blast

21 bodies recovered, power lines near Moscow damaged

AP, AFP, Moscow

An apparent natural gas explosion sheared off part of a nine-story apartment building in the northern Russian city of Arkhangelsk yesterday as residents slept, killing at least 21 people and trapping dozens under the rubble.

More than 80 people were thought to be inside the building in the city of Arkhangelsk when the blast went off overnight, according to news agency and television reports.

Authorities refused to rule out terrorism amid heightened tension in Russia after a series of terrorist attacks blamed on Chechen rebels.

In fall 1999, explosions blamed on rebels ripped through apartment buildings in Moscow and two other cities, killing some 300 people.

But a gas leak was seen as the most likely cause, emergency workers said, after fire fighters responding to the scene reported a strong odor of gas and gas employees said leaks had been reported in other Arkhangelsk buildings overnight. The ITAR-Tass news agency, citing Natalya Ozhigina, a spokesman for the regional Federal Security Service agency, said that no explosive devices were found.

Tuesday's blast hit at 3:25 a.m. local time when most of the 80 residents registered in the building in Arkhangelsk, about 600 miles

north of Moscow, would have been in bed, said Emergency Situations Ministry spokeswoman Marina Rykлина.

"We were awakened by a terrible noise," Igor, 40, who lives in the adjoining section of the apartment building, told Arkhangelsk's Pravda Severa newspaper. "The wall of our bedroom came crashing down on the bed... We were in a state of shock."

Twenty-three people were retrieved from under the rubble, along with 21 bodies, said Emergency Situations Ministry spokeswoman Irina Andrianova. Earlier, spokesman Sergei Vlasov said that emergency officials believed around 50 people

remained trapped under the debris.

Meanwhile, a section of high-voltage electricity line near Moscow was damaged when unknown assailants tried to blow it up, officials told Russian media Tuesday, adding that leftist radicals rather than Chechen rebels were suspected.

Technicians carrying out a routine inspection of power lines on Monday near Vidnoye, in the southern outskirts of the capital, found an undetonated explosive device as well as damage to some of the pylons supporting the lines, police said.



Rescue workers search for survivors in the debris of an apartment building that collapsed after an explosion in the Northern Russian town of Arkhangelsk yesterday. Dozens feared dead while 21 bodies were recovered from rubbles of the apartment building in northern Russia that officials said was likely caused by a gas leak.



Indian opposition leader and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi shakes hands with US Secretary of State Colin Powell outside her residence in New Delhi yesterday. Powell arrived in New Delhi on a two-day visit on the first leg of a South Asia tour for talks on the peace process between India and Pakistan.

Advani to meet Hurriyat for talks on March 27

PTI, Sholapur

Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani will meet leaders of the Kashmiri separatist Hurriyat Conference in New Delhi for the next round of talks on March 27.

"My next round of talks with the Hurriyat leaders will be in Delhi when I am there on March 27 for a day after completing the first leg of this Bharat Uday Yatra on March 26 in Amritsar," he told reporters before starting on the seventh day of his yatra which reaches Hyderabad this evening.

He said he was going to be in Delhi for a day on March 27 and so he has told the Home Ministry to make the arrangements for the talks with the Hurriyat leaders on that day.

"I had assured the Hurriyat

leaders that I would have the next round of talks with them before the end of this month," he said.

He said "India wanted an amicable solution to the problem."

Meanwhile, Advani raised the Ayodhya issue for the first time during his ongoing Bharat Uday Yatra, saying on Tuesday that he was confident a grand Ram temple would be built at the Lord's "very birth place" with the "cooperation and support of all".

Into the sixth day of his Yatra since setting out from Kanyakumari, he changed the course of his speech at a public meeting in Bagalkot, Karnataka and made reference to Ayodhya when a section of the gathering demanded construction of Ram temple.

Top al-Qaeda leader of Gulf killed in KSA

AP, Riyadh

Saudi security forces killed two militants, including one considered al-Qaeda's chief of operations on the Arabian Peninsula, in a shootout in the capital of Riyadh on Monday, US and Saudi officials said.

A Saudi Interior Ministry statement said the two were killed in the al-Nasseem neighborhood, in eastern Riyadh, in an exchange of fire with security forces on Monday afternoon.

Abu Hazim al-Sha'ir, a Yemeni believed to be about 30, was the senior al-Qaeda figure in the region, a US counterterrorism official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity. The official said his death represented a "major, very significant blow" to al-Qaeda.

Iran agrees to let IAEA inspections resume

REUTERS, Tokyo

Iran's chief nuclear negotiator confirmed yesterday that Tehran had agreed to let UN nuclear inspectors back into the country on March 27 without any conditions, ending a freeze that Washington had said was an attempt to hide a covert nuclear weapons programme.

"March 27 has been decided as the date," Hassan Rohani, secretary-general of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, told a news conference in Tokyo, where he is meeting Japanese officials. "There are no conditions."

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Mohamed ElBaradei said Monday that Iran had informed him it would allow nuclear inspectors to return on

March 27.

ElBaradei, speaking in Washington, said he regretted the interruption in the inspections but believed the date set for resumption was "still within our time schedule."

The UN's nuclear watchdog condemned Iran Saturday for suspending inspections.

Iran said it had taken the step Friday to show its displeasure at the drafting of an IAEA resolution criticising it for failing to report sensitive research and development that, the agency argued, could have military use.

The IAEA also said it would decide in June how to respond to the omission, which diplomats said kept the door open for a possible report to the UN Security Council and economic sanctions.

EU calls emergency meet for anti-terror talks

AFP, Brussels

The EU's Irish presidency called Monday an emergency meeting of interior ministers to forge a response to the Madrid bombings, notably proposing a new EU "security coordinator" on terror threats.

Ireland, which has bumped terrorism onto the agenda of an EU summit next week, set out key proposals also including implementing an all-for-one solidarity clause as it called the ministerial talks for Friday.

"We stand in solidarity with the Spanish people and pledge ourselves to combat all forms of terrorism within our power," Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern said in a statement.

The announcement came as calls intensified for Europe to boost joint measures to fight terrorism in the wake of the Madrid attacks, which killed 200 people and left 1,500 injured.

The Spanish massacre, and in particular an Al-Qaeda claim of

responsibility, has revived fears in Europe of attacks on the scale of the September 2001 attacks in the United States.

An Irish spokesman said Friday's ministerial talks would prepare the ground for regular EU foreign ministers' meeting next Monday, ahead of the EU summit Thursday and Friday next week.

Measures proposed by Dublin include:

- implementing a solidarity clause included in a draft EU constitution, requiring EU countries "to come to the assistance of each other in response to new threats, arising from terrorist and non-state entities."
- adopting a revised "strategy plan" on terrorism. The EU originally agreed an action plan in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.
- appointing a "security coordinator" to improve cooperation between the EU and other countries, and to streamline counter-terrorism initiatives.

- boosting cooperation among EU intelligence services.
- improving coordination with the United Nations in fighting terrorism.
- clamping down on extremists' funding. This would involve tightening up measures already agreed in September 2001.

The Irish announcement came after European countries, at Dublin's behest, paid tribute to the victims of the Madrid blasts in a continent-wide three-minute silence on the stroke of midday Monday.

The Irish premier added: "The callous and cowardly attacks on 11 March served as a terrible reminder of the threat posed by terrorism to our society."

"We condemn utterly those who planted the bombs that wrought such destruction and cost so many lives last Thursday. The attacks in Madrid were an attack against the very values on which the Union is founded."

Israel prepares for mighty retaliation

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli troops were massing around the Gaza Strip yesterday as defence officials threatened an unprecedented military response to a double suicide bombing that left 10 civilians dead in the port of Ashdod.

Israel's security cabinet was set to convene for the first time in six months to decide on a response for Sunday's twin suicide attacks by teenage Palestinian militants.

The bombings -- the first carried out by Palestinians from the Gaza Strip since the start of their Intifada and the first to hit a strategic target -- rattled Israel's security establishment.

On Monday night, Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz threatened to unleash unprecedented military might on the Gaza Strip.

A senior security source, quoted by the radio, said the proposed moves would be "exceptional in their scope, their intensity and their duration", and include activi-

ties "not seen in the Palestinian territories for a long time".

The Israeli daily Haaretz website said defence officials proposed an increase of both ground operations and targeted killings similar to those carried out last autumn in Gaza following a series of suicide attacks in Jerusalem.

Sunday's attacks were jointly claimed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and Hamas' military wing, sparking fears that Israel army would make fresh attempts to kill the Islamist movement's main leaders, such as Abdelaziz Rantisi or Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

The Ashdod bombings prompted Sharon to rule out any negotiations with the current Palestinian leadership, whom he accused of not having "the necessary courage or capabilities to fight terrorism."

Following the bombings, Sharon had already indefinitely postponed a long-awaited summit with his Palestinian counterpart Ahmed Qorei.



Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi greets villagers in Kedah yesterday. Launching the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party's manifesto on Sunday, Abdullah promised a more open and progressive government with respect to human rights, while pledging that Arabic and Quranic studies would be introduced as compulsory subjects for Muslims in primary schools.