

Al-Qaeda claims to have nukes

AP, Sydney

Osama bin Laden's terror network claims to have bought ready-made nuclear weapons on the black market in central Asia, the biographer of al-Qaeda's No. 2 leader was quoted as telling an Australian television station.

In an interview scheduled to be televised on Monday, Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir said Ayman al-Zawahri claimed that "smart briefcase bombs" were available on the black market. It was not clear when the interview between Mir and al-Zawahri took place.

US intelligence agencies have long believed that al-Qaeda attempted to acquire a nuclear device on the black market, but say there is no evidence it was successful.

In the interview with Australian Broadcasting Corp. television, parts of which were released Sunday, Mir recalled telling al-Zawahri it was difficult to believe

that al-Qaeda had nuclear weapons when the terror network didn't have the equipment to maintain or use them.

"Dr Ayman al-Zawahri laughed and he said 'Mr. Mir, if you have \$30 million, go to the black market in central Asia, contact any disgruntled Soviet scientist, and a lot of ... smart briefcase bombs are available,'" Mir said in the interview.

"They have contacted us, we sent our people to Moscow, to Tashkent, to other central Asian states and they negotiated, and we purchased some suitcase bombs," Mir quoted al-Zawahri as saying.

Al-Qaeda has never hidden its interest in acquiring nuclear weapons.

The US federal indictment of bin Laden charges that as far back as 1992 he "and others known and unknown, made efforts to obtain the components of nuclear weapons."

AFP, Brussels

World leaders yesterday condemned as unlawful the killing of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, and warned Israel may have buried the peace process along with any hope of resolving the bloody Arab-Israeli conflict.

Fearful the killing will unleash a new spiral of violence in the region blighted by decades of conflict, governments lined up to urge both sides to show restraint as the Palestinian militant group Hamas vowed an all-out war.

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were swift to warn that the attack could herald a dangerous new phase in the dragging conflict, unresolved since the creation of Israel in 1948.

Israel had the right to defend itself from terrorism, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told reporters in Brussels ahead of an EU foreign ministers meeting called to discuss the fight on terrorism.

"But it is not entitled going for this kind of unlawful killing and we therefore condemn it," the British minister said.

"A measurable restraint is required and I don't believe Israel will benefit from the fact that this morning an (elderly man) in a wheelchair has been the target of assassination."

In a statement, EU foreign ministers condemned the assassination saying it had only poured oil

on the tense situation and called for restraint.

"The assassination which has just been carried out has inflamed the situation," said the statement.

In the first US reaction, White House national security adviser Condoleezza Rice said Washington "did not have advance warning" of the attack and repeated previous US calls for calm.

"We would just ask everyone to step back and do nothing that precludes a better day," Rice told Fox News.

Tens of thousands of Palestinians marched through the occupied territories early Monday, shouting, wailing with some toting guns.

Such scenes were repeated in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat declared three days of mourning.



Palestinians march in the West Bank town of Jenin yesterday protesting the killing of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Sheikh Yassin was killed in an Israeli helicopter strike in Gaza City, prompting the radical Islamist movement he founded to declare all-out war on the Jewish state.

Truce takes hold in Pak al-Qaeda offensive

AFP, Wana

A ceasefire took hold in Pakistan's northwest tribal region yesterday as a delegation of elders tried to negotiate the surrender of al-Qaeda-linked fighters believed to be protecting a senior militant leader.

Firing halted early Monday after intense exchanges overnight between troops and an estimated 500 tribesmen and militants, now believed to be mostly radical Uzbek or Chechen fugitives who fought alongside al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and fled into Pakistan after the US-led offensive in late 2001.

"Firing has stopped and a truce will be observed for the whole day," the chief administrator of South Waziristan tribal district in Pakistan's northwest frontier, Rehmatullah Wazir, told AFP.

The delegation of some 20 tribal elders flew white flags from their cars as they travelled into the besieged villages of Kalasha and Shin Warsak, near the district capital Wana, where a siege since Thursday has left at least four people dead and an unknown number of people injured.

NEHRU-GANDHI DYNASTY

5th generation in polls fray

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The decision of India's main opposition party Congress to nominate Rahul Gandhi, the fifth generation of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, for the coming parliamentary polls has ramifications that go far beyond the coming electoral exercise.

First, Rahul has entered the rough and tumble of Indian politics at a time when her Italy-born mother and Congress chief Sonia Gandhi is under attack from ruling BJP-led NDA is flogging the issue of her foreign origin saying no such person should be allowed to hold the high office of prime minister or the president.

Secondly, the Congress, say political observers, is also mindful of the fact that a section of the opposition is also uncomfortable about Sonia's foreign origin vis-a-vis her credentials to hold the office of prime minister in the event of her party returning to power.

Rahul's candidature for the polls to the Gandhi family pocket-borough Amethi, which her mother had won in 1999, in the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh is widely expected to provide the much-needed boost to the party in Uttar Pradesh, a state which sends the highest number of members (80) to Lok Sabha and holds the key to the success of the party to regain power at the Centre.

Thirdly, Rahul's nomination

comes at a time when Congress is in dire straits in Uttar Pradesh with a deep erosion in its traditional vote bank of Brahmins, Dalits and Muslims who have moved away to BJP, Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party which have emerged as dominant political forces in the state over the last two decades.

It also comes in the backdrop of Congress' failure to firm up alliances with either Samajwadi Party or BSP in a bid to shore up its electoral fortunes in Uttar Pradesh where the real big battle of Indian elections is to be fought.

The announcement of Rahul's taking the plunge was greeted by Congress rank and file in Uttar Pradesh where party men expect him and his sister Priyanka to counter the formidable rivals like Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati.

The Congress also hopes that Rahul's presence will attract the young generation of voters.

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