



A Palestinian hangs a giant poster of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin as Palestinians are lining up to console the Hamas leadership during the second day of mourning of assassinated Hamas founder and spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin at a stadium in Gaza City yesterday. Israel will continue its policy of "liquidating terrorists", Israeli Defence Minister Shaoul Mofaz was quoted as saying by Israeli army radio, one day after it killed the leader of the radical Islamist movement Hamas.

## 'Yassin assassination buries ME peace'

AFP, Moscow

Israel's assassination of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin risks burying international efforts for peace in the Middle East, the Russian press wrote yesterday.

"The only official peace plan for the region, the 'roadmap', is today dead," Nezavisimaya said.

"Israel has opened 'the gate to hell,'" wrote the Izvestia daily.

"The situation in Israel risks being transformed into a large-scale war that will inflame anti-West and anti-Israeli sentiment throughout the Arab world," Izvestia said.

"The European Union will likely have to rethink its conception of an 'enlarged Middle East', which

envisages a strengthening of relations between Mediterranean countries, because of the radicalization of the Arab world," Izvestia said.

"The United States can no longer count on an easy success in its missionary plans to rebuild the Muslim world on a base of electoral democracy," Izvestia said.

Meanwhile, Saudi dailies were in no doubt yesterday that Israel had killed off the chances for peace by assassinating Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, but one newspaper thought Washington's plan for reform in the Middle East would suffer most of the collateral damage.

"(Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon's crime in Gaza yesterday dealt a body blow to the American plan," wrote Al-Medina in a front-page leader headlined "Greater Middle East Fire."

Washington's "Greater Middle East Initiative" ignored the Palestinian issue, suggesting its authors "can't see that regional peace and political reform are inseparable," it said.

Then came "the assassination of the crippled Yassin with US-made missiles fired from US-made helicopters" to "put American policy planners sitting in front of their computers at the Pentagon, State Department, White House and CIA in a fix," the paper wrote.

The assassination of the founder of Hamas will not help US President George W. Bush's efforts to fight terror, "because Bush's war on terror has to be comprehensive and not exclude any terrorist, including Sharon," and it will complicate Washington's task in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## 'Arab reform pushed aside by Israeli killing'

AFP, Cairo

Arab leaders faced with the fallout from Israel's assassination of Palestinian Islamist leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin will have little time for US-inspired plans for reform when they meet in Tunis next week.

Arab leaders will be forced, not only to respond to a likely escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also cope with security concerns arising from a wave of popular anger over Monday's killing in Gaza City, analysts say.

Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa, who was already in Tunis to prepare for the March 29-30 summit, made it clear Monday that the Arab-Israeli conflict now topped the agenda.

"This assassination has already cast a shadow over the summit and the consequences of the elimination of Sheikh Yassin will be at the heart of discussions of the partici-

pating heads of state," Mussa said in a statement.

Sources close to the league said the Palestinian issue had originally been third on the agenda, following the issue of reform and efforts to restore sovereignty to Iraqis.

Though Mussa did not say what would happen to debate on reform, Egyptian analyst Abdel Moneim Said expected "the reform agenda will not take much time, if any" at the summit.

Arab governments had hoped to agree on a framework for reform of both Arab League institutions -- including proposals for an Arab parliament and court of justice -- as well as reform of Arab political systems, he said.

Guidelines discussed in the Egyptian city of Alexandria last week -- such as increased checks and balances, the need for elected institutions and promotion of human rights -- were to have been presented at the summit, he added.

## Has the son got the family business?

THE STATESMAN/ANN, New Delhi

Is Rahul Gandhi the heir apparent of the Nehru-Gandhi legacy instead of his, as Congress leaders say, "more popular" sister Priyanka?

While the siblings' mother and the AICC president, Sonia Gandhi refused to answer the question, indications are that the "family business" will go to Rahul.

The fact that Rahul has been fielded from Amethi the seat represented by Indira Gandhi's successive heir apparents, Sanjay Gandhi in 1980, and then Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 and 1989 points towards the dynasty's move to establish him as the next claimant to its legacy, Congress leaders said.

Leaders said that 10 Janpath and its coterie have been mulling over launching Rahul for "quite some time".

## US exploring possibility of making India a non-Nato ally too

PTI, Washington

The US is exploring the possibility of making India a non-Nato ally, the White House has said.

"I think we made it clear that we're willing to explore the same possibility of similar cooperation with India," Press Secretary Scott McClellan said at a White House Press briefing Monday when asked about Washington's recent decision to confer the status of non-Nato ally on Pakistan.

The US has said its decision to grant major non-Nato ally status to Pakistan was linked to Islamabad's cooperation in the war on terror.

"This decision underscored the importance of Pakistan's role in the war against international terrorism, particularly in the continuing fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said on Monday.

However, he termed the partnerships with India and Pakistan "close and productive" and said US will continue to build strong bilateral relations with both the countries.

Each of these relationships

stands on its own merits, he said adding Powell, during his visit to the countries last week, reviewed expanding bilateral ties with the neighbours.

Shortly after declaring Pakistan a major non-Nato ally last week, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said en route to Kuwait that Washington wanted to have a similar relationship with India too.

"Major non-Nato Ally status (with Pakistan) was something we have been working on for months and months and months.... Took this opportunity to make brief mention of it (in Islamabad)."

"It is not a reward for A.Q. Khan; it is part of a continuing relationship and we have been doing things to demonstrate to the Pakistanis that we are good, solid, long-term partners. The same relationship we want to have with India."

Powell did not say whether in the case of India there would be a notification nor was he asked about it.

"It is part of a normal relationship with countries that we have military-to-military relationships with and we think it is sensible to do," said Powell.

## US piles up pressure on Syria to disarm as ME heavyweight

AFP, Damascus

With imminent sanctions for allegedly bankrolling terror and demands to pull its troops out of Lebanon, a US noose is tightening around Damascus's neck in a bid to disarm it as a Middle East heavyweight.

Neither has Washington missed an opportunity to press Damascus to pull its 17,000 troops out of neighbouring Lebanon in keeping with the law passed by Congress in December that approved sanctions.

On Saturday, US Secretary of State Colin Powell used a visit in Kuwait to urge Syria to withdraw troops from Lebanon to give Beirut "full sovereignty".

In an interview that appeared just 24 hours earlier, a US State Department spokesman was more direct.

"It is time for Syria to withdraw from Lebanon," Nabil Khoury was quoted as saying by the French-language Beirut daily L'Orient-Le Jour.

After maverick Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi shocked the world and renounced efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction, Washington urged the Baathist government in Damascus

to do the same.

Last week, the US campaign stepped up a gear. Barely a day went by without US officials warning of stiff and imminent embargoes on Syria.

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"The old arguments that this presence was necessary as collateral for recovering the Golan (Heights from Israel) or to protect Syria's flank in the event of an Israeli attack are now obsolete and out of date," Khoury said.

Last week, US President George W. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, demanded that Lebanon's presidential elections, scheduled for later this year, take place without meddling from abroad, in reference to Syria.

Syria sent troops into Lebanon in 1976, a year after the outbreak of a 15-year-long civil war in the country that has come to be politically dominated by Damascus.

It has kept them there ever since, though it has reduced their number in recent years.

Such statements have seen pro-Syrian leaders in Beirut leap to the defence of their dominant neighbour.

## Nepal to press ahead with elections despite Maoist attacks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's home minister said yesterday the government will press ahead with elections despite a deadly Maoist attack against security forces at the weekend he said was aimed at disrupting the polls.

The army said Sunday it killed over 500 rebels in the single bloodiest clash since the Maoists launched their revolt in 1996 to topple the monarchy and set up a communist republic in the Himalayan nation.

It was impossible to verify independently the number of dead due to the area's remoteness.

"Despite the Maoist attacks on Beni Bazar, the government will go ahead with plans for the general elections," Home Minister Kamal Thapa told reporters after inspecting the battleground in rebel-dominated west Nepal.

The Maoist leader, known as Prachanda or the "fierce one," has accused the government of being "hell-bent on continuing military totalitarianism in the name of conducting the elections."

The Maoists have vowed to continue their attacks until a "political solution" is reached to the revolt that has undermined the economy of the already impover-

ished nation by scaring away tourists and investment.

Thapa did not say when the polls would be held. Earlier, the government had said they would take place around November.

If the army's statement that over 500 rebels died in the most recent fighting is true, it would mark a big setback for the Maoists, who boasted last weekend that a "decisive victory over the autocratic regime looms large on the horizon."

But newspaper editorials said Tuesday it was far from clear the army had scored a decisive win over the rebels.

"The Maoists created havoc in the town," said the largest-selling English daily The Kathmandu Post.

The Maoists said on Monday only 49 of their fighters died in the battle in which authorities said around 2,500 rebels stormed a state bank, a jail and government buildings in Beni Bazar.

Thapa said government forces had so far recovered the bodies of 210 rebels. He said 28 security men and four civilians died in the clash.

Thapa also said 35 soldiers and security guards were missing. The Maoists said Monday, however, they held 92 hostages.



A fight breaks out between DPP and KMT parliamentarians, including Kuomintang parliament whip Liao Feng-teh (C) and Lin Feng-hsi (L-white hair) of the ruling DPP, in a meeting room of the parliament building in Taipei yesterday. The scuffle erupted when Liao refused to schedule urgent parliamentary sessions to discuss a recount amendment following the political crisis in the aftermath of the March 20 presidential election.

## 'US faces credibility erosion over WMD'

REUTERS, Cambridge

The former chief US weapons inspector in Iraq warned Monday that the United States is in "grave danger" of destroying its credibility at home and abroad if it does not own up to its mistakes in Iraq.

"The cost of our mistakes... with regard to the explanation of why we went to war in Iraq are far greater than Iraq itself," David Kay said in a speech at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

"We are in grave danger of having destroyed our credibility internationally and domestically with regard to warning about future events," he said. "The answer is to admit you were wrong, and what I find most disturbing around Washington... is the belief... you can never admit you're wrong."

The comments by Kay came as

the White House sought to fend off accusations from its former anti-terrorism czar, Richard Clarke, who said President Bush ignored the al-Qaeda threat before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and focused on Iraq rather than the Islamic militant group afterward.

The White House last year cited Iraq's weapons of mass destruction as the main reason for going to war.

Kay resigned his post in January, saying he believed no such arms existed and that the failure to find any such weapons raised serious questions about the quality of prewar intelligence.

Kay, who was part of United Nations weapons probes in Iraq in the early 1990s, said US intelligence there was poor in the decade before the war, relying entirely on international inspectors themselves, Iraqi defectors or intelligence from allies like France and Britain.



Indian Law Minister and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Arun Jaitley (l) addresses media representatives as Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Convenor and Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes (R) looks on during a press conference in New Delhi yesterday. Fernandes said it was a "mistake" that a law to bar people of foreign origin from holding high constitutional posts was not passed by the Alliance Government.