



Israel blocking aid, food to Gaza: UN

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations on Friday said Israel was blocking the movement of staff and supplies into the Gaza Strip, which may mean an end to some crucial aid programmes for Palestinian residents.

Israel has blocked "nearly all" UN and other relief agency vehicles from going through the Erez checkpoint into Gaza for the past three weeks, and food shipments through the commercial crossing of Karni are also on hold, it said.

"These unacceptable limitations on access for humanitarian staff and goods are undermining UN operational capability to deliver essential services and food relief to Gaza's civilian population," the world body said in a statement.

"The heads of the United Nations agencies may have to reduce or terminate some critical relief operations."

The statement said that the United Nations recognises Israel's security concerns and that senior UN officials have tried to talk to the Israeli government about the blockage without success.

PHOTO: AFP
The mother (L) of Khaled Walaweel screams as his uncle rushes away with him in his arms after being shot during clashes between Palestinian youth and Israeli troops in the Balata refugee camp on the edge of the West Bank town of Nablus yesterday. The six-year-old Palestinian boy died of his injuries after being shot in the neck during the clashes, Palestinian medics said. The trouble broke out when soldiers moved into three houses in the camp and young Palestinians threw stones at their jeeps. The Israelis then fired off live bullets, hitting the six-year-old, the sources added.

Kashmiri separatists start talks with Delhi

Militants press for end to HR abuses

AFP, New Delhi

Kashmiri separatists and India's Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani began a second set of talks yesterday aimed at ending 15 years of Islamic militancy in the disputed Himalayan territory.

Four members of the moderate wing of the All Party Hurriyat Conference, and Advani went into the closed-door session.

The talks are the second to be held since January as part of a precedent-setting dialogue to halt the conflict in Kashmir, which has claimed tens of thousands of lives since erupting in 1989.

It was not immediately known how long the discussions would last.

Kashmiri leaders said the talks would focus on alleged human rights abuses by Indian troops and

calls for the release of political prisoners.

"Last time they made some promises that weren't met so these issues will be forcefully taken up this time," Hurriyat spokesman Abdul Gani Bhatt told AFP ahead of the talks.

Advani pledged during the initial talks in January -- the first high-level dialogue since the revolt erupted -- to curb alleged rights violations and review the fate of political prisoners in Kashmir, Bhatt said.

But he said the promises remained unfulfilled.

Maulana Abbas Ansari, leader of the delegation, added he would also press New Delhi for permission to travel to neighbouring Pakistan for talks on the region's future, a demand India has consistently rejected.

Ansari still sounded a concilia-

tory note as he praised Advani for making time to see the delegation during hectic campaigning for next month's general elections. "Advani is busy with campaigning and yet gave us time and so we hope these talks will be good for all sides," Ansari said.

The Hurriyat had threatened to pull out of the talks, saying Advani had reneged on promises to end rights abuses, but later agreed to resume them.

The separatists want the Muslim-majority region, held in part by India and Pakistan but claimed in full by both, folded into Pakistan or to become independent.

Media reports said New Delhi has cleared the way for 10 political detainees to be released as a goodwill gesture and to keep the talks on track. The releases would come on top of 69 prisoners already freed since January.

Mobs take to streets ahead of Nigerian polls: 20 dead

AFP, Abuja

Mobs of political thugs were out in force across Nigeria on Friday, the eve of long-delayed local elections, as reports came in that 20 people had been killed in a clash between rival communities.

A gang of stonethrowers attacked the convoy of the governor of the northern state of Kano as he returned to the state-capital, where this week busloads of machete-wielding party activists have been intimidating voters.

Hundreds of heavily armed mobile policemen were deployed to the flashpoint southern oil city of Warri, in the Niger Delta, where polling has been cancelled in three districts because of fears of ethnic violence.

A senior official in Plateau State told AFP that at least 20 people, including two policemen, had been killed when suspected Christian villagers attacked the Muslim village of Wase in Nigeria's central highlands.

Bush to hold ME crisis talks with Israeli, Arab leaders

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush will meet next month with the leaders of Israel, Egypt and Jordan, the White House announced Friday, launching a new round of Middle East diplomacy to lay the groundwork for Israel's withdrawal of settlements from the Gaza Strip.

The White House said it sees the withdrawal as a "positive" and potentially "historic" interim step while the US-backed "road map" Middle East peace initiative remains stalled. US and Israeli officials have been ironing out the details and are seeking cooperation from Egypt, Jordan and others.

US officials said next month's meetings marked a new push by the administration to calm rising tensions in the region after the assassination of Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin by Israeli forces. As part of that effort, the White House has decided to delay, possibly until mid-April, new US economic sanctions against Syria for backing anti-Israel militants, sources said.

Bush will meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, one of Washington's closest allies in the Arab world, at the president's

ranch in Crawford, Texas, on April 12.

He will meet with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on April 14, and lend support to his plan to withdraw settlements in the Gaza Strip, people involved in the deliberations said.

US and Israeli officials want to make sure the withdrawal does not allow Hamas to cement its grip over Palestinian affairs in Gaza. Egypt has offered to secure its side of the border with Gaza, a move Israel sees as crucial to staunching the flow of weapons to Hamas.

At their meeting, Bush and Sharon are expected to "finalise understandings" on the settlements and security arrangements in Gaza, one source said.

Bush will then meet with Jordan's King Abdullah on April 21, the White House said.

An Israeli diplomat in Washington said the goal of Bush's talks with the three leaders was to forge a "consensus behind Sharon's proposal for unilateral disengagement" from the Palestinians, including Israel's full withdrawal from Gaza.

"This is not going to be easy, but

it's doable," the diplomat said.

Yassin's killing prompted threats of revenge from Hamas and was a major setback to the road map, already mired in violence. But Bush held out hope of reviving the plan.

He told reporters on Tuesday he would send a delegation to the region next week to "see if we can't keep the (peace) process alive."

The American team will be led by deputy national security adviser Stephen Hadley, National Security Council Middle East chief Elliot Abrams and Assistant Secretary of State William Burns, officials said.

With the "road map" all but dead, the Bush administration has been moving toward an agreement with Israel on the details of the withdrawal plan, sources said.

"The 'road map' is the preferred solution. ... But there's just not effective Palestinian leadership to negotiate with," the Israeli diplomat said.

Sharon has proposed evacuating most of the 7,500 Jewish settlers living in hard-to-defend enclaves in the Gaza Strip and setting up a new "security line" in the West Bank.

Vajpayee hails peace with Pakistan

Advani ends campaign tour

AFP, Amritsar

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee hailed warming ties with Pakistan in a rally Friday for his Hindu nationalist supporters at the end of a gruelling nationwide campaign tour by his deputy.

Lal Krishna Advani, the deputy prime minister, wound up a 16-day, 4,125-kilometre (2,480-mile) trip in a bullet-proof mini-bus at Amritsar, near the Pakistani border, where he and Vajpayee addressed some 20,000 people.

"Let's talk about Kashmir and settle that. That is the only way the problem can be resolved. There is no other way out," Vajpayee said amid a sea of saffron and green flags of his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"I have said many a time to Pakistan, we have fought many wars and what have you gained out of it?" Vajpayee said.

"You have not gained anything and you lost Bangladesh," he said. Friday is the 34th independence anniversary of Bangladesh, which broke away from Pakistan in a

bloody nine-month war backed by India.

India's cricket team is touring Pakistan, which would have been unthinkable two years ago as the nuclear-capable neighbours looked on the verge of another war over disputed Kashmir.

"When bullets used to fly, now we're playing cricket," Vajpayee said. "To play you need two teams -- two countries -- with similar mindsets."

Vajpayee and Advani wore traditional Sikh turbans at the rally in Amritsar, which hosts the Sikh religion's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple.

The BJP is widely tipped to win the election, which is taking place in five rounds from April 20 to May 10, on the back of Vajpayee's personal popularity and strong economic growth triggered by a healthy monsoon.

Advani, who is often mentioned as a successor to the 79-year-old Vajpayee, has tried to show a softer side to the BJP on his tour, surrounding himself at the start by Muslim leaders.



PHOTO: AFP
Kuomintang demonstrators wave the national flags in front of a Statue of Liberty during a demonstration in front of the Presidential Palace in Taipei yesterday. Taiwan's opposition called on 500,000 people to protest over the reelection of Chen Shui-bian as China rapped the United States for meddling in its affairs by recognising his victory.

Taiwanese protest swells amid China's fury

REUTERS, Taipei

In Taiwan's biggest-ever protest, 300,000 supporters of defeated presidential challenger Lien Chan massed in Taipei yesterday to dispute his loss as China said it would not tolerate turmoil on the island.

A sea of yellow raincoats filled the square and streets around the office of President Chen Shui-bian as demonstrators defied rain to demand a recount for last Saturday's poll, which Chen won by just 30,000 votes out of more than 13 million cast.

Dressed in black in a demonstration of mourning and standing in front of a huge sign reading "Democracy is Dead," Lien told the crowd he had counted more than 1,000 irregularities in the island's third ever direct presidential vote.

"Today so many people gather here to demand a fair election. This is the most basic value of democracy," said Lien, leader of the Nationalist Party who also lost to Chen in 2000.

"Our common demands are very simple: immediate recount. I want to ask Mr. Chen Shui-bian: what are you afraid of? Stand up!"

Republicans, Democrats at war over 'war on terror'

AFP, Washington

Republicans in Congress and the White House rolled out heavy artillery Friday to answer broadsides on President George W. Bush's handling of terrorism, forcing Democratic opponents to close ranks.

Bush's Democratic challenger in the November 2 election, John Kerry, has raised questions over US national security, what had been Bush's strongest suit.

The president adhered to the Iraq war as a cornerstone of his "war on terror."

"Because we acted, the world is more free and America is more secure," Bush has said repeatedly.

The former chief of counterterrorism at the White House,

Richard Clarke, stoked the debate this week in a book and in public testimony before a September 11 commission of inquiry with strong criticism of Bush's handling of the matter.

Clarke, who said he had voted Republican in the past, published a book this week claiming that the Bush administration failed to take the terrorist threat as seriously as it should have before September 11, 2001.

After the terror attacks the administration pursued what Clarke called an unnecessary Iraq war to topple Saddam Hussein -- which "undermined" any war against the al-Qaeda terror network and the search for its leader, Osama bin Laden.

Clarke's book, "Against All Enemies," triggered a barrage of

return fire from the White House and senior Republicans.

Several Bush staffers, including Vice President Richard Cheney, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and White House spokesman Scott McClellan, questioned Clarke's credibility, saying he sought to promote book sales.

Rice told reporters that Clarke's book is "180 degrees from everything else that he said."

She refused to testify before the September 11 commission publicly, but agreed to do so privately for a second time.

Republican lawmakers said Friday that they would declassify Clarke's congressional testimony from July 2002, which they said belies his claims.

NDA to get around 300 seats: Poll

PTI, New Delhi

The BJP-led NDA is expected to get a majority in the coming Lok Sabha elections, bagging around 287 to 307 seats against the Congress-led alliance which is expected to secure around 143 to 163 seats, according to an opinion poll conducted for NDTV and Indian Express by AC Nielson.

The survey, claimed to be the largest ever opinion poll, covered a sample of 45,000 people in 207 constituencies, 80 per cent of them in rural areas.

Showing a complete sweep for BJP in the western region, the survey gave the saffron party a total of 190 to 210 seats in the country and Congress 95 to 105 seats with others accounting for 90 to 100 seats.

In the western region, the sur-

vey gave 27 seats to BJP in Maharashtra and 20 to Congress besides one to others, while in Madhya Pradesh it said BJP would secure 26 of the 29 seats and Congress the remaining three.

In Chhattisgarh, BJP was projected to get all the 11 Lok Sabha seats while in Rajasthan BJP was given 23 of the 25 seats and Congress the rest.

In Gujarat, where Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani were shown to have the highest feel-good vote, BJP was far ahead with 24 of the 26 seats and Congress only two.

In Tamil Nadu, the DMK-Congress alliance was projected to win 34 seats, a gain of 21 seats, while AIADMK was pegged at five seats with Chief Minister Jayalalitha recording the lowest rating in the country.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian Congress Party activist participates in a silent protest as he displays a clay statue of 1913 Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore in Kolkata yesterday during a protest against the theft of Tagore's Nobel Literature Prize medal. At least 30 items including the medal belonging to Tagore, who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1913, disappeared from the museum at Visva Bharati University, some 200km north of Kolkata.

UNSC extends mission in Afghanistan

AFP, United Nations

The Security Council Friday voted a one-year extension for the UN mission in Afghanistan ahead of a key conference next week on the country's future.

The unanimous vote also backed UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's latest report on Afghanistan, which asked for the extension in order to help keep the nation on the path to progress.

Echoing the report, the 15-nation council underscored the importance of imposing central authority across the country, disarming all factions and making sure elections later this year are as representative as possible.

Germany will host a two-day international aid conference on Afghanistan next Wednesday and Thursday.

The Afghan government is set to call for 28.5 billion dollars in aid over the next seven years to rebuild the shattered country and prevent it from lapsing into a failed state.

Five tribals killed, 60 houses set on fire in Assam

PTI, Guwahati

Five Karbi tribals were killed and 60 of their houses set afire by the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) on Saturday in a renewed violence in the strife-torn Karbi Anglong district of Assam.

Official reports in Guwahati said the heavily-armed KRA ultras swooped on at least six villages and shot dead the five Karbi people who were sleeping.

They also set ablaze 60 houses before escaping into the dense jungle.

The villages that were attacked by the ultras are: Holonghola, Nagasugaon, Cankakalba, Intigaon, Upper Deopani and Deopani Bazaar.

This is the second incident of violence in quick succession after the KRA mowed down 34 tribal Karbis of four villages on March 24.