

Annan sends proposal to Cypriot voters

Reunification referendums on April 24

AP, Fuzigen

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan put the future of Cyprus in the hands of its people as he laid out a proposal for reunification of the Mediterranean island that will now go directly to voters.

The two sides and the Greek and Turkish governments failed to reach an agreement of their own after lengthy talks, prompting Annan to fill in the blanks and ask voters to give final approval in separate referendums in the two Cypriot communities on April 24.

"There have been too many missed opportunities in the past. For the sake of all of you, I urge you not to make the same mistake again," Annan said Wednesday on the final

day of peace talks in the Swiss mountaintop resort of Buergerstock.

If Greek and Turkish Cypriots vote for the plan, the island will be reunited in time to join the European Union as a single country on May 1. If either side rejects it, EU rules and benefits will not apply to the breakaway state in the Turkish-occupied north of the island, which is not recognised internationally.

"The time for negotiations and consultation is over. The time for decision and action has arrived," Annan said. "Let us be clear, the choice is not between this settlement plan and some other magical, mythical solution. In reality, the choice is between this settlement and no settlement."

Cyprus has been split into the

Greek Cypriot-controlled south and the occupied north since Turkey invaded in 1974 following a short-lived coup by supporters of union with Greece. The breakaway state is only recognised by Turkey, which maintains 40,000 troops there.

Turkey's government, which is keen to see a settlement in Cyprus as a step toward eventually joining the EU itself, quickly endorsed the proposal.

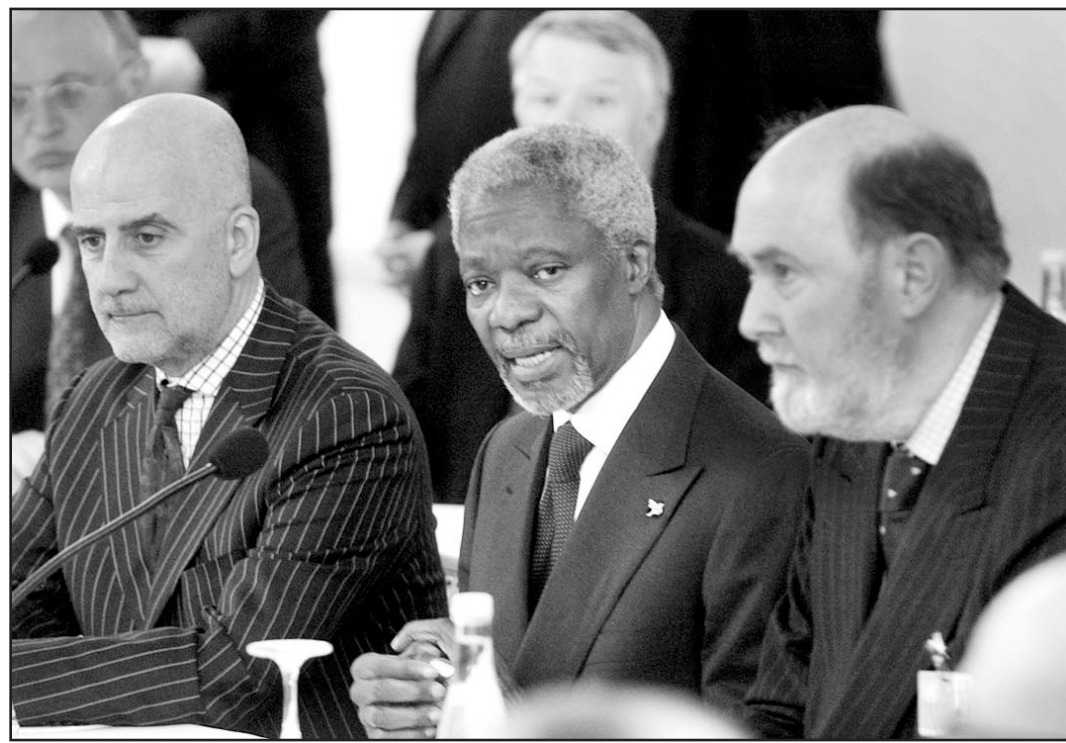
"No side has lost in these negotiations," Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters.

He said the most important issues for Turkey were ensuring that the agreement would be adopted by the European Union, political equality for the Turkish Cypriot minority, boosting prosperity in the impoverished north,

ensuring the continued presence of Turkish troops and protecting some 80,000 Turkish settlers.

"I would like to call on the Greek and Turkish sides: let's walk together on the road of peace that started here in Buergerstock and let's take the necessary steps together," Erdogan said.

The Greek side was more cautious after expressing disappointment in the failure to guarantee Turkish troop withdrawal and the return of all Greek Cypriot refugees to their homes in the northern part of the island.



UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (C), UN special envoy for Cyprus Alvaro de Soto (L) and Deputy UN Secretary General Kieran Prendergast attend the closing ceremony of the Cyprus reunification talks on Wednesday. Annan handed Greek, Turkish and Cypriot officials his final plan for the reunification of Cyprus, stressing that "the time for decision and action had arrived."

Top Sikh leader dies

AFP, New Delhi

Top Indian Sikh leader Gurcharan Singh Tohra died in a New Delhi hospital early yesterday after having a heart attack, press reports said. He was 80 years old.

Tohra died hours after being airlifted to New Delhi from the northern Punjab state capital of Amritsar, the holiest Sikh city, where he had been treated for a massive heart attack last Thursday.

An official of the private Escorts Heart Institute said Tohra died minutes after having another heart attack, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

Tohra headed the Sikh religion's managing body, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), which runs Sikh religious and cultural affairs worldwide and is headquartered at the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar.

There are some 20 million Sikhs around the world, most of them in Punjab. The SGPC is hugely influential among the affluent Sikh community.



British soldiers, members of the Nato-led peacekeeping forces in Bosnia, secure the perimeter after special forces entered a house in Pale, east of Sarajevo yesterday. Nato troops failed again to arrest ex-Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic in an operation in his former stronghold of Pale, which left two seriously injured civilians, a spokesman said.

New members to be feted at Nato HQ

AFP, Brussels

Nato will bring out the bunting today at a ceremonial welcome for seven ex-communist countries that joined the alliance this week -- before getting down to business in talks with an irate Russia.

National flags will be raised and anthems sung as the foreign ministers of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia are feted at the first Brussels meeting of the now-26-nation alliance.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell will be among the dignitaries on hand to welcome the new mem-

bers, which joined Nato on Monday by depositing their accession treaties in Washington to take the alliance up to Russia's borders.

Moscow has made no effort to hide its irritation at Nato's biggest expansion ever, especially at the inclusion of the Baltic states -- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania -- which used to be part of the Soviet republic.

"If we feel that this expansion poses a threat to us that demands a military response, this response will follow," the Russian news agency Interfax quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Chizhov as warning Monday.

Nato troops fail to find Karadzic

AFP, Pale

Nato troops tried and failed for a third time to arrest ex-Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic in an operation early yesterday in his former stronghold of Pale, which left a priest and his son seriously injured.

"We conducted a focused international operation in Pale to detain Radovan Karadzic... we did not find him," Dave Sullivan, spokesman for the Nato-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR), told AFP.

He confirmed that two civilians suffered blast injuries during the operation that started shortly after midnight after an SFOR helicopter landed in the courtyard of an Orthodox church and a priest's house in the center of Pale.

The US and British troops used "blast devices" while entering the priest's home in order to "avoid the use of lethal weapons", he said.

According to eyewitnesses, two civilian vans and an icecream truck full of SFOR soldiers drove into the church yard.

Rat genome is sequenced

AFP, Paris

A US-led international consortium Wednesday announced it had sequenced the genetic code of the rat, an achievement that should greatly speed up the quest to cure disease in humans.

As popular in the lab as it is loathed outside it, the rat becomes only the third mammal whose genome has been unravelled, after humans and mice.

"This is an investment that is destined to yield major payoffs in the fight against human disease," said Elias Zerhouni, director of the US National Institutes of Health, which contributed 118 million dollars to the initiative.

"For nearly 200 years, the laboratory rat has played a valuable role in efforts to understand human biology and to develop new and better drugs. Now, armed with this sequencing data, a new generation of researchers will be able to greatly improve the utility of rat models and thereby improve human health," Zerhouni said in a statement.

Israelis battle gunmen at mental hospital

US envoys begin ME mission

REUTERS, Bethlehem

Israeli soldiers battled Palestinian gunmen holed up in a mental hospital yesterday in a flare-up of violence as US envoys began a visit to sound out Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on a Gaza pullout plan.

White House officials Stephen Hadley and Elliot Abrams and Assistant Secretary of State William Burns met senior Israeli officials ahead of talks with Sharon. They were also expected to see Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei.

In Bethlehem, Palestinian witnesses said 12 men, mostly known militants from al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades that make up part of President Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction, were detained in the city's mental hospital during an Israeli raid.

The army said there were no casualties and that the militants had been meeting at the hospital to plan attacks against Israelis.

Political sources said Sharon hoped the latest discussions over his plan to remove soldiers and settlers from most of Gaza and

some of the West Bank would wrap up understandings before his April 14 talks with President Bush in Washington.

"Israel will be negotiating with the Americans over what they will get in exchange for withdrawal from Gaza and four settlements in the West Bank," said one senior political source.

Sharon and Bush, the source said, would exchange letters of guarantee on the pullout plan, but the United States would not commit itself to assuring the future of West Bank settlement blocs that Israel wants to keep.

Commenting on the Bethlehem raid, an Israeli army officer said troops surrounded the hospital before dawn and called on the gunmen to surrender. "They opened fire from inside. We traded gunfire for about an hour," the officer said.

Israeli fire left gaping holes in walls and chunks of plaster littering the corridors where nurses comforted shaken patients, witnesses said. The Palestinians surrendered after the firing stopped.

Bremer vows revenge

Eerie calm grips Fallujah after killings

AFP, Fallujah

An eerie calm gripped this town west of Baghdad yesterday, a day after four American civilians were burned to death and their bodies dismembered, as US overseer Paul Bremer vowed the deaths and those of five US soldiers in a separate attack would be avenged.

"Their deaths will not go unpunished. They have not died in vain," Bremer said in Baghdad as he attended the graduation of a new batch of 479 Iraqi police at the police academy.

Bremer described Wednesday's attacks by insurgents in and near Fallujah as "inexcusable and despicable".

But he vowed that the US-led coalition that toppled the ironfisted regime of Saddam Hussein almost a year ago will fight ahead with efforts to restore security in Iraq and hand over sovereignty to the Iraqis on July 1.

"They will not derail the march towards stability and democracy," Bremer told the new police cadets.

Reaction was also fierce from

Washington, where White House spokesman Scott McClellan said: "We condemn these attacks on the strongest possible terms".

In Fallujah, schools and shops were open on Thursday and burn marks on the surface of the main street were the only evidence of the gruesome deaths of the four employees of the private US firm Blackwater Security Consulting, AFP correspondents said.

One witness said that what remained of the charred bodies after they were dragged from their cars, mutilated and strung from a bridge had been "cut up into pieces, with parts thrown into the river or to the dogs".

Residents also took away the carcasses of the two four-wheel-drive vehicles that had been ambushed and set on fire by gunmen, burning the occupants to death, the witness said.

US marines, who were seen Wednesday at the eastern entrance of Fallujah, were nowhere in sight while Iraqi police and paramilitary defence units manned a checkpoint to search cars entering the town and control identities.

The previous evening, hours after the killings, crowds were still celebrating in the streets, with people firing in the air and distributing candies.

They shouted, "Down with the occupation, down with America" and "long live Islam."

"The death of each one of these people is worth 10 Iraqi lives. This is our only deterrence to the (US-led) occupation of Iraq," Nayef, a car merchant who declined to give his surname, told AFP on

Thursday. The previous day a man at the scene, his face hidden by a scarf, vowed that "Fallujah will be the cemetery of the Americans".

Meanwhile the US-backed paramilitary Iraqi Civil Defence Corps urged restraint in Fallujah in a statement handed out to residents late Wednesday.

"An agreement has been negotiated with the occupation forces to lift the siege of Fallujah and to withdraw. We are hoping you will cooperate to protect Fallujah and guarantee its security," the message said.

The death of the four civilians coincided with a roadside bomb blast that killed five US soldiers near the military base in Habbaniya, just west of Fallujah.

It is thought to be the worst single incident involving coalition troops since a US military helicopter was downed on January 8 near Fallujah, killing all nine people aboard.

The latest deaths brought to 291 the number of US soldiers killed in action since US President George W. Bush declared major hostilities over on May 1, according to an AFP toll.

In other violence Thursday one US soldier was wounded when his convoy hit a roadside bomb in northwest Baghdad, an Iraqi police officer said. The US military did not immediately confirm the report.

And in the northern city of Kirkuk three soldiers were wounded when five Katyusha rockets struck their base located in a local airport just west of the city early Thursday, a US officer said.

'Bush's pre-Sept 11 focus was on missiles, not terrorism'

AFP, Washington

The White House's national security policy before the September 11 attacks focused on the threat of long-range missiles, not on terrorism, The Washington Post said yesterday.

National security advisor Condoleezza Rice was to give a speech on September 11, 2001, designed to promote missile defense as the cornerstone of a new national security strategy, said the daily citing former US officials who read the text.

Rice's speech, which the White House declined to release and was never delivered, criticized the administration of former US President Bill Clinton for not doing enough about the real threat of long-range missiles, the daily said.

"We need to worry about the suitcase bomb, the car bomb and the vial of sarin released in the subway," according to excerpts of the speech provided to the daily.

"(But) why put deadbolt locks on your doors and stock up on cans of

the number of speeches, but by the concrete actions taken to fight the threat."

The daily said the White House also refused to confirm the accuracy of the excerpts.

The administration of US President George W. Bush is under investigation for its anti-terrorism policies before and after 9/11.

Rice is due to testify under oath to an independent panel which last week heard from former counterterrorism expert Richard Clarke, who slammed the Bush government for not taking terrorist groups like al-Qaeda seriously and for focusing too much on Iraq in the aftermath of Sept 11.

Rice's speech also mentioned terrorism, said the Post, but only as one of the dangers from rogue nations, such as Iraq, rather than from extremist groups.

The White House's deputy national security adviser for communications James Wilkinson told the Post that Bush's "commitment to fighting terrorism isn't measured by

the number of speeches, but by the concrete actions taken to fight the threat."

"The first major foreign policy directive of this administration was the new strategy to eliminate al-Qaeda that the White House ordered soon after taking office. It was eliminating al-Qaeda, not missile defense, not Iraq, and not the (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty," he said when asked by the daily about Rice's speech.

The Washington Post also said Thursday that Bush's top lawyer Alberto Gonzalez telephoned at least one Republican member of the Sept 11 independent commission when the panel convened on March 24 to hear Clarke's testimony.

While the sources with direct knowledge of the calls did not provide their content, Democratic lawmaker Henry Waxman told the daily he wrote Gonzalez asking him to confirm and describe his conversations.



Thai soldiers hold their machine guns while patrolling in front of a giant Buddha statue during violence in Narathiwat province, southern Thailand yesterday. After three months of violence in the Muslim south, authorities appear no closer to identifying the perpetrators of more than 55 brutal killings and local people are living in fear.