

Sharon determined on Gaza pull out plan

Likud Party members begins to vote

AP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is determined to withdraw Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip even if his Likud Party rejects the plan in Sunday's referendum as polls predict, his advisers said Saturday.

However, a defeat could trigger a major political crisis, including a Cabinet reshuffle, a split in Likud or even early elections. Sharon would be weakened politically by a defeat in his own party, but he is not expected to resign.

Analysts say that even though polls give referendum opponents a strong lead, the race is still open. Much depends on how many of Likud's 193,000 members turn out, with a strong showing expected to help Sharon.

The voting began as scheduled at 8 a.m. Sunday. Official results were expected Monday.

Under Sharon's plan of "unilateral disengagement," Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip and evacuate some 7,500 settlers, take

down four small West Bank settlements and complete construction of a West Bank separation barrier by the end of 2005. Sharon argues that this would give Israel defensible borders and reduce friction with the Palestinians in the absence of a final peace deal.

Opponents, who say an Israeli withdrawal will be viewed as a victory by Palestinian militants, accuse Sharon of betraying the settlers, his erstwhile constituents. For decades, Sharon was the foremost champion of settlement expansion, responsible for establishing many of the communities he now plans to remove.

In Gaza, an 8-year-old Palestinian boy was killed Saturday and 12 Palestinians were wounded, 10 of them minors, by army fire near Israeli settlements, hospital officials said. The army said soldiers fired in response to an anti-tank missile and several firebombs. Two teens got too close to a settlement, the army said.

In the West Bank, a 22-year-old

Palestinian died of wounds suffered during a clash with Israeli forces, doctors said. Palestinians said he was a bystander.

Referendum opponents have run a tight campaign, visiting tens of thousands of Likud members in their homes. Thousands of Gaza settlers spent the weekend with relatives in Israel for a final campaign of persuasion in synagogues Saturday and at polling stations Sunday.

Sharon placed phone calls to Likud activists after the Jewish Sabbath ended at sundown Saturday. However, he had less than two hours since he was not expected to call Likud members at home after the start of the Euroleague basketball championship game.

With defeat appearing likely, critics said Sharon underestimated his opponents and did not campaign hard enough. In calling the referendum about a month ago, Sharon was confident his popularity in the party would translate into easy victory.

Iraqi prisoners faced 'Sadistic' abuses: Report

REUTERS, Washington

Iraqi prisoners faced numerous "sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses" by US soldiers, including sodomy and beatings, according to a US Army report quoted by the New Yorker magazine.

The New Yorker said it had obtained a 53-page, internal US military report into alleged abuses at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad. In an article posted on its Web site Saturday, the magazine said the report had been authorized by Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the top US officer in Iraq, and was completed in February.

The May 10 issue of the magazine goes on sale today.

The army report listed abuses such as "breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; ... beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair; threatening male detainees with rape; allowing a military police guard to stitch the wound of a detainee who was injured after being slammed against the wall in his cell; sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick."



Masked Iraqi men display the new proposed Iraqi flag with an x over it as others wave high the current national flag while they drive in a street of Fallujah yesterday. The people of Fallujah claimed a great victory as Iraqi forces arrived under the command of a former officer from Saddam Hussein's army after weeks of fierce fighting.

PHOTO: AFP

Norway resumes effort to salvage Lanka peace process

AFP, Colombo

Norwegians envoys began talks Sunday with Sri Lanka's new government to salvage the stalled process aimed at ending the island's ethnic conflict which has claimed more than 60,000 lives, officials said.

Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen met Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse in Colombo Saturday and was to travel Sunday to the central hill resort of Nuwara Eliya for talks with President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Kumaratunga asked Norway's Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik to resume his mediation after her allies narrowly won April 2 parliamentary elections.

Norway had suspended its mediation in November after Kumaratunga triggered a power struggle with then prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, accusing him of making too many concessions to the rebels.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon casts his vote at a Sderot polling station yesterday as his Likud party votes on whether to accept his plan to remove the Jewish settlers from the 21 settlements in the Gaza strip.

Doubts over torture by British troops

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Sources close to the army have questioned the authenticity of photographs appearing to show British soldiers torturing an Iraqi prisoner.

An investigation has begun into claims British troops assaulted the prisoner before throwing him from a lorry.

The claims were made in the Daily Mirror which carried photos allegedly taken during the man's ordeal. Tony Blair says that if the photos are authentic this is "completely and totally unacceptable".

However the BBC's defence correspondent Paul Adams says sources close to The Queen's Lancashire Regiment believe many aspects of the photographs are suspicious.

He says they believe the pictures may not have even been taken in Iraq. They believe the rifle is an SA80 mk 1 - which was not issued to troops in Iraq.

They say soldiers in Iraq wore

berets or hard hats - and not floppy hats as in the photos.

They also believe the wrong type of Bedford truck is shown in the background - a type never deployed in Iraq. Mr Blair said if there had been any abuse it was "exceptional", and should not detract from the good work being done by UK armed forces in Iraq.

However he stressed if the photos were genuine it was totally unacceptable. "We went to Iraq to get rid of that sort of thing, not to do it," he added. Military police are investigating the photos which appear to show a soldier using violence and urinating on a captive.

Pictures showing American troops humiliating Iraqi prisoners, with a hooded and naked prisoner standing on a box with wires attached to his genitals, also generated outrage earlier this week.

Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram said there was no "culture of abuse" in the British Army despite the fact five separate inquiries into maltreatment are under way.

MURDER OF FIVE WESTERNERS

Saudi authority vows to crush terror

AFP, Yanbu

The body of one of five Westerners killed in a shooting rampage in the Saudi port of Yanbu was stripped naked and dragged behind the gunmen's getaway car, witnesses and press reports said yesterday.

Saudi Arabia's de facto leader vowed to use an iron fist to crush Islamic extremists after Saturday's attack on a petrochemical plant in the Red Sea port which killed two Americans, two Britons, an Australian and a Saudi national.

Four of the attackers and one security agent were also killed in a shootout. One of the assailants was reported to be Abdullah Saud Abu Nayan As-Subayhi who is on a list of the kingdom's 26 most wanted terror suspects.

Swiss-Swedish engineering company ABB, who employed the slain Westerners, said it is evacuating all international staff and their families from Yanbu.

"I saw three armed men pull (a victim) close to my school and shout 'Help your brothers in Fallujah

(Iraq). Jihad! Jihad! God is great!" said a local student. Another witness added: "The American was mutilated."

The English-language Saudi Gazette reported on its website on Sunday that "a Westerner was kidnapped, stripped naked, tied to a vehicle, and dragged along the road as the attackers made their getaway".

It also ran a photograph of a mutilated body lying in a street before a crowd of onlookers.

Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, the kingdom's de facto ruler, vowed that the Saudi authorities would crush terrorists, who he said were manipulated by "Zionism."

"Your country is targeted... Zionism is behind what is happening. This has become clear -- I wouldn't say 100 percent but 95 percent," SPA quoted him as saying on Saturday.

"We will strike with an iron fist at anyone who undermines the security of this country. We will pursue this deviant group for 20 or 30 years."

EU gets down to business after biggest expansion

AFP, Dublin

After toasting its expansion to 25 with the entry of 10 mainly ex-communist nations, the European Union faced Sunday an array of stiff challenges, not least closing the wealth gap between old and new.

The once-communist states of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia officially joined the EU family this weekend, along with the Mediterranean islands of Cyprus and Malta.

The expansion from 15 to 25 rounded out the world's biggest trading bloc, which now stretches from Ireland's Atlantic coast to the Russian frontier and is home to 455 million people.

It is by any measure a formidable entity. And the enlargement is all the more impressive coming just 15 years after the Berlin Wall collapsed.

The flags of all 25 nations of the new-look EU were raised in the presence of the countries' leaders at a solemn ceremony Saturday in

Dublin's vast Phoenix Park.

"We welcome them with pride. We welcome them with hope. And we invite all the people of Europe to celebrate with us," Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern said in a speech.

"We pause to reflect on what we in the European Union have created," he said. "We must never forget that from war, we have created peace. From hatred, we have created respect. From division, we have created union."

The leaders headed on to dinner in the Farnleigh state guesthouse, toasting the enlargement over champagne as well as wines from France and EU entrant Slovenia.

From Ireland's Atlantic coast to the Russian frontier, from the fringes of the Arctic to the sun-kissed Mediterranean, enlargement was celebrated with fireworks, street concerts and ringing declarations of a continent reunified.

But on the fringes of the 1,762-acre (712-hectare) Phoenix Park, Europe's largest enclosed space, trouble was brewing at the climax to

a series of peaceful May Day protests in the Irish capital.

For the first time in Irish history, the Garda national police turned water cannon on leaders of a march by about 700 protestors late Saturday trying to gain access to the park.

Twenty-nine people were charged with public order offences and one policewoman was treated in hospital after she was hit on the head by a flying bottle, police said on Sunday.

"I am disappointed that the disturbances happened," Ahern said, while praising police for their handling of the situation.

The clashes marred Ireland's welcome to the 10 new EU members on a day that, in the words of Irish Nobel laureate poet Seamus Heaney, "hope and history rhyme".

Between champagne toasts, however, the EU leaders could reflect on the many challenges still facing the EU -- including the economic gulf between east and west, and the vexed issue of a constitution to keep the EU on its rails.

Germany to shorten missions abroad

AFP, Berlin

Germany will shorten the length of its troop missions abroad and stop guarding US bases on its soil by the end of the year, Defence Minister Peter Struck said in an interview published yesterday.

The German military, the Bundeswehr, has more troops deployed abroad as peacekeepers and in the fight against terrorism than any country apart from the United States, but it is currently undergoing massive cost-cutting reforms.

"We will reduce the duration of international missions from six months to four months in the second half of the year," Struck told the weekly Welt am Sonntag newspaper. Germany has some 7,700 sol-

diers deployed on foreign operations: around 2,000 with the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan; 4,900 troops in Kosovo and Bosnia; 250 in the Horn of Africa and others on smaller missions.

"At the end of the year, we want to stop the German federal armed forces guarding American military bases," Struck also told the newspaper.

The US defence department is currently studying a "base realignment and closure" (BRAC) programme aimed at redeploying troop bases around the world so Washington can react quickly to new military threats.

A number of bases are likely to close in Germany and tens of thousands of troops move out of the country, probably to central and eastern Europe.



PHOTO: AFP

A man covered with the EU flag and waving the Polish national flag walks down the street of the Old Town in Warsaw on Saturday as Poland and nine other countries become members of the EU.