

Israeli troops lift siege of Rafah neighbourhood

Hamas blasts Arab silence over 'genocide'

REUTERS, Gaza

Israeli troops pulled out of a key neighborhood of Gaza's Rafah refugee camp yesterday after killing 42 Palestinians in a six-day siege that was roundly condemned by the international community.

Residents of Rafah's Tel Sultan district ventured onto the streets as Israeli tanks rumbled out of the area. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon pledged to put a revised plan to evacuate Jewish settlements in Gaza to a cabinet vote by next week.

Egypt's Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman was due to hold talks with Palestinians later on Monday about Sharon's plan.

An Israeli military source said the pullout was part of a "new deployment" to "ease conditions" and allow residents to leave their homes to stock up on food, water and medicine.

"It looks like an earthquake hit the neighborhood," said resident Sami Fuja. "The roads are completely torn up, thousands of green

houses were razed and many houses damaged."

But Israeli troops remained in at least one other Rafah stronghold, known as the Brazil camp, where besieged residents reported a severe water shortage.

Yousef al-Nala, father of six, had only one bottle of water left. "Whenever one of the children says he wants water, I dribble a few drops into his mouth," said al-Nala.

Television footage of Palestinian refugees picking through the rubble of some 35 demolished homes in Rafah sparked a world outcry and even a row inside Sharon's cabinet.

Justice Minister Yosef Lapid, a Holocaust survivor, touched a raw nerve by saying the sight of an elderly Palestinian woman searching through the rubble of her home reminded him of his grandmother who died in a Nazi death camp.

He urged the cabinet to halt the demolitions and said further wreckage could force his centrist party to reconsider its participation in Sharon's government.

Sharon said on Sunday he was determined to push through a step-by-step plan to withdraw from Gaza and several West Bank Jewish settlements despite his right-wing Likud party's rejection of the pullout in a May 2 referendum.

AFP adds: The Islamist movement Hamas lambasted Arab countries yesterday for failing to prevent what it described as a "genocide" perpetrated by the Israeli army against the Palestinians in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah.

"What happened in Rafah is a genocide, an operation planned to avenge the deaths of Israeli soldiers killed in Zeitun and Rafah," the group said in a statement received by AFP here.

Hamas was referring to the killing of 13 soldiers in separate attacks by the Islamic Jihad group two weeks ago, which prompted Israel to launch the Intifada's largest operation in the Gaza Strip, leaving 43 Palestinians dead since last week.

Retd US general Zinni blasts Iraq war plan

REUTERS, Washington

Retired Marine General Anthony Zinni, former chief of US Central Command, accused senior Pentagon officials of failure in executing the Iraq war and told CBS' "60 Minutes" on Sunday they should resign.

"Somebody has screwed up. And at this level and at this stage, it should be evident to everybody that they've screwed up. And whose heads are rolling on this? That's what bothers me most," Zinni said without naming names.

Zinni, commander-in-chief of the US Central Command from 1997 to 2000, said planning for the Iraq war and its aftermath had been flawed from the start.

Zinni's scathing critique of the Pentagon and its handling of the war in Iraq are included in a new book about his career, co-written by Tom Clancy, called "Battle Ready," CBS reported.

Zinni told "60 Minutes": "I think there was dereliction in insufficient forces being put on the ground and (in not) fully understanding the military dimensions of the plan."

8 ministers survive Thai censure vote in parliament

AFP, Bangkok

Eight Thai ministers survived a censure vote in parliament yesterday after a debate focused on allegations they had helped promote Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's family business empire.

The government used its thumping majority to deflect the opposition's motion to oust the ministers for finance, transport, commerce, education and other portfolios, which was launched last week.

Thaksin, who must call national elections early next year, welcomed the outcome and said he had no plans to reshuffle his cabinet despite the intense criticism aired in parliament.

"The government now has the stability to continue its work with strength and transparency," he said.



This combo picture shows India's cabinet ministers (L to R) Natwar Singh (External Affairs), P. Chidambaram (Finance), Dayanidhi Maran (Information Technology), Shivraj Patil (Home), Kamal Nath (Commerce and Industry) and Pranab Mukherjee (Defence) in New Delhi Sunday. India's new government got down to work yesterday, setting about preserving stability on volatile financial markets and in troubled Kashmir after a deadly bomb attack on BSF.

Delhi looks for improving ties with neighbours

Economy to rule the game of foreign policy

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

As India moved from BJP-led government to the first-ever Congress-led coalition relying heavily on the support of Left parties, it is likely to have significant ramifications for the country's foreign policy in certain areas though continuity is by and large the buzz word.

With reform-friendly and economist Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister, the emphasis in Indian diplomacy is expected to remain on its economic component, analysts said.

Singh, in his broad policy statements shortly after being appointed Prime Minister last week, had spoken about New Delhi's keenness to improve relations with immediate neighbours.

Analysts expected economic and commercial ties to be the driving force of India's foreign relations in the days to come as it was Singh who had put India on the path of reforms in early nineties.

In his first foreign trip after taking over the top post, Singh will be attending the maiden summit of Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) in Thailand's sea resort of Phuket in July.

The summit was scheduled to be held in February this year but put off because of the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's inability to make it because of preoccupation with preparation for parliamentary elections in India.

The BIMST-EC summit will also provide an opportunity for Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia with her first interaction with Manmohan Singh.

Pakistan of course looms large on India's foreign policy mandarin. Singh has made it clear that India favors pressing ahead with dialogue with Pakistan on all outstanding issues.

Although talks on nuclear confidence building measures scheduled from today has been postponed at the request of India, it is taken in the right spirit in Islamabad given the fact that the new government in India took over only yesterday after portfolios were announced late Sunday night.

Analysts said the new External Affairs Minister K

Natwar, a seasoned diplomat who was an automatic choice of the Prime Minister for the portfolio, needs a little bit of time to settle down and handle the sensitive issue of Indo-Pak relations.

The one big advantage for 73-year-old Natwar Singh, a key member of Congress' foreign policy think-tank, is that he is an old Pakistan hand, having served as India's high commissioner to that country in the eighties.

Natwar Singh, who hails from Rajasthan state, has come back to the Indian federal council of ministers after a break of 15 years, for the first time with a cabinet rank. He had served as a junior minister in Foreign Ministry in the Rajiv Gandhi government from 1986 to 1989.

Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan are scheduled to meet in June to discuss peace, security and Kashmir issues followed by a meeting of Foreign Ministers of the two countries in August this year as per a time table agreed to by India and Pakistan in January this year.

The new government in India is likely to carry forward the Look East policy with greater economic integration with Asean countries and consolidate trade, investment and technology ties with members of BIMST-EC set up in June 1997.

India, analysts said, will continue to build on the upswing in ties with the United States and other Western powers such as Britain even though Congress, while in the opposition, has voiced reservations about the previous BJP-led regime's approach to Washington particularly with regard to Iraq.

It remains to be seen how the new government carries forward India's ties with Israel which were put on the growth path by the Congress government under P V Narasimha Rao and pursued vigorously by the BJP-led government later.

Analysts feel there could some subtle shift back from the pro-Israel tilt witnessed during the BJP-led regime, an indication of which was already evident from a comparison with New Delhi's reaction to the Israeli raids on Palestinians.

Will Pranab find comfort in arms?

THE STATESMAN/ANN, New Delhi

It is often said that defence and diplomacy are the two sides of the same coin. So handling the defence portfolio should not be entirely alien to Pranab Mukherjee, a former minister for external affairs.

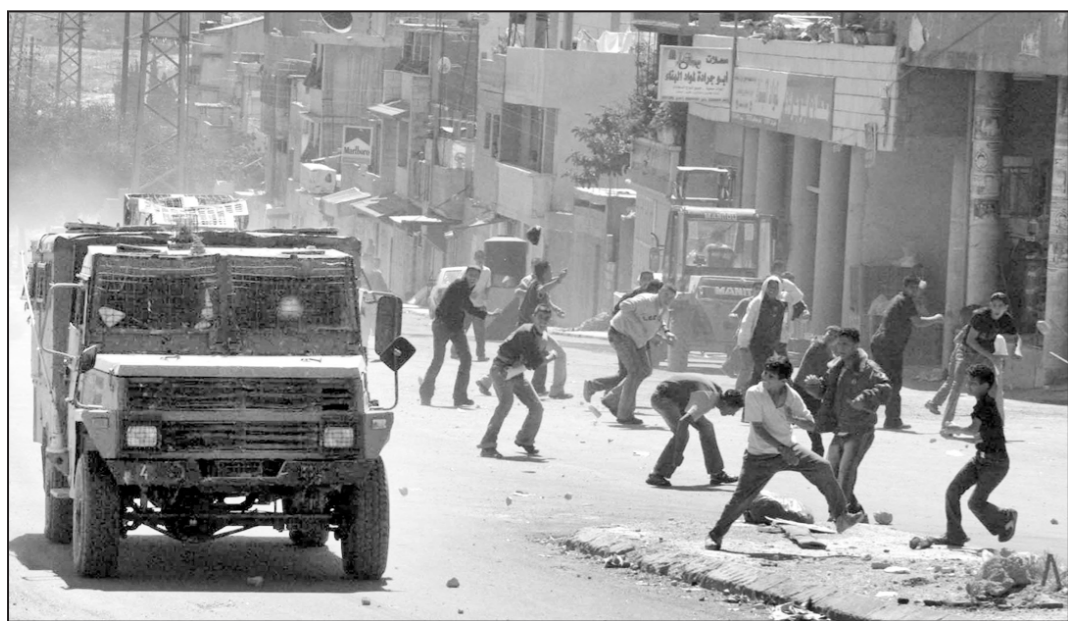
In political terms his is not the highest appointment after the Prime Minister, but his seniority would suggest that defence is being accorded a distinct priority.

Yet, defence was not the ministry for which the veteran Congressman was being tipped. The somewhat more important home ministry was what had been predicted by most observers. That Shivraj Patil defeated at the hustings should get that job could be deemed a political snub for Mukherjee.

With his considerable and wide-ranging administrative experience, Mukherjee would bring to the MoD section of South Block a level of maturity and restraint. What could prove an asset is his experience as finance minister he ought to know how to get the funds from his colleague on the other side of the Central Secretariat.

All is currently quiet along the borders of both Pakistan and China. However, there are quite a few "hot" issues in the defence ministry that are likely to test Mukherjee's mettle. Effective utilisation of the budgetary allocations is one of them. It has found mention in the draft of the common minimum programme that will serve as the blueprint of the UPA government's functioning.

The process of integration has made only limited progress within the armed forces.



Palestinians hurl stones at an Israeli army vehicle during clashes at the Balata refugee camp south of the West Bank town of Nablus yesterday. A Palestinian teenager was killed in the clashes with Israeli troops, Palestinian medical sources said.

700,000 killed by bad food, water in Asia a year: UN

AFP, SEREMBAN, Malaysia

More than 700,000 people die from consuming contaminated food or water in the Asia-Pacific region every year, a United Nations conference heard yesterday.

"The death toll of food-borne illnesses is staggering," said Hartwig de Haen, assistant director-general of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

He was addressing food safety policy-makers and specialists from 40 countries in the region on global efforts to reduce the risk of large-scale food-borne disease outbreaks and their public health and trade ramifications.

The average estimated cost in each outbreak of food-borne illness is 100 dollars per person per year and the cost could be much higher in developing countries, De Haen said.

Outbreaks of food-borne diseases can badly strain health care systems and reduce productivity, said Han Tieu, the UN's World Health Organisation (WHO) representative for Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore.

Even though avian flu and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) -- which recently caused major public health crises in Asia -- were not food-borne diseases "they are all in some way related to either the way food is produced or how food animals are handled," he said.

"The danger of food-related outbreaks is particularly acute in Asia and the Pacific, because of the instances in which animals and people live in proximity and the way in which some food is produced and distributed," said Kerstin Leitner, WHO assistant director-general responsible for food safety.

The avian flu epidemic, as the most recent example of a disease linking food, animals and human health, was unprecedented, with 23 fatal human cases and about 100 million birds dead or culled, she said.

The conference in Seremban, south of Kuala Lumpur, hopes to come up with an action plan for countries to improve food safety systems and strengthen regional co-operation in food-borne disease surveillance.

New video shows US bombed Iraq wedding

REUTERS, Baghdad

New video showing Iraqis singing and dancing at a desert wedding begged more questions yesterday about a US air strike last week that killed about 40 people.

The US military has insisted most of the dead were foreign guerrilla fighters who had slipped over the nearby Syrian border. Local people say the Americans massacred wedding guests.

Associated Press Television News said it obtained the footage from a survivor of the strike early on May 19.

The US military says troops found no signs of a wedding in the wreckage left at the remote hamlet of Mogr al-Deeb. But a spokesman, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, conceded on Saturday that six women were killed in the strike and a celebration may have been taking place: "Bad people have parties too," he said.

The film shows pick-up trucks racing across the desert -- many of the dead came from the regional

capital Ramadi -- men dancing in a tent, children playing and a musician playing an electric organ. The same man later appeared dead in a shroud.

Ultimately the truth may count for less than the perception; many Iraqis, exasperated by 14 months of occupation and by a scandal over the abuse of prisoners by US soldiers, find it easy to believe a tale of American brutality or incompetence.

The video is unwelcome news for Washington on a day when it is to present a proposal at the United Nations seeking approval for its continued military presence in Iraq following a handover of sovereignty to an interim government on June 30.

Nor will it help President Bush, who is to make a televised speech to the nation at midnight GMT that will lay out his strategy in Iraq. Bush's chances of re-election in November have suffered as Americans question the cost in lives and dollars of occupying Iraq.

Morgue records show 5,500 Iraqis killed in first 12-month of invasion

AP, Baghdad

More than 5,500 Iraqis died violently in just Baghdad and three provinces in the first 12 months of the occupation, an Associated Press survey found. The toll from both criminal and political violence ran dramatically higher than violent deaths before the war, according to statistics from morgues.

There are no reliable figures for places like Fallujah and Najaf that have seen surges in fighting since early April.

Indeed, there is no precise count for Iraq as a whole on how many people have been killed, nor is there a breakdown of deaths caused by the different sorts of attacks. The US military, the occupation authority and Iraqi government agencies say they don't have the ability to track civilian deaths.

But the AP survey of morgues in Baghdad and the provinces of Karbala, Kirkuk and Tikrit found 5,558 violent deaths recorded from May 1, 2003, when President Bush declared an end to major combat operations, to April 30. Officials at morgues for three more of Iraq's 18

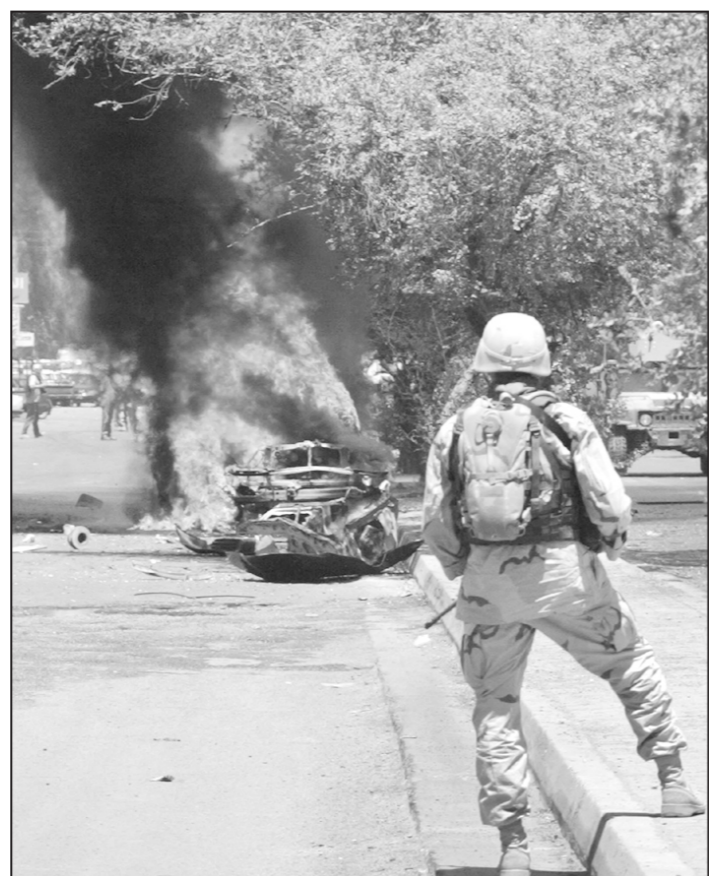
provinces either didn't have numbers or declined to release them.

The AP's survey was not a comprehensive compilation of the nationwide death toll, but was a sampling intended to assess the levels of violence. Figures for violent deaths in the months before the war showed a far lower rate.

That doesn't mean Iraq is a more dangerous place than during Saddam Hussein's regime. At least 300,000 people were murdered by security forces and buried in mass graves during the dictator's 23-year rule, US officials say, and human rights workers put the number closer to 500,000.

"We cannot compare the situation now with how it was before," Nouri Jaber al-Nouri, inspector general of the Interior Ministry, said recently. "Iraqis used to fear everything. ... But now, despite all that is happening, we feel safe."

Still, the morgue figures, which exclude trauma deaths from accidents like car wrecks and falls, highlight the insecurity Iraqis feel from the high level of criminal and political violence, and underline the challenges that coalition and Iraqi forces face in trying to bring peace.



A US soldier secures the area where a Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) is seen burning 500 meters from the heavily guarded US-led coalition headquarters in Baghdad yesterday.