

Arafat admits mistakes by officials

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat admitted yesterday that unacceptable mistakes had been made by his Palestinian Authority as he pledged his full backing to his premier Ahmed Qorei's efforts to tackle the security chaos in the occupied territories.

In a much anticipated keynote speech to members of the Palestinian parliament, the 75-year-old also accused Israel of trying to sabotage his government and of wrecking the peace process with its continued settlement activity and its building of the West Bank separation barrier.

"Some unacceptable mistakes have been made by our institutions and some have abused their positions and violated the trust that has been placed in them," Arafat said.

Mass demonstrations were held both within the Gaza Strip and the West

Bank last month in protest at the rampant corruption in the Palestinian Authority, representing arguably the biggest challenge to his authority since his return from exile a decade earlier.

The protests also came amid a general collapse in security, which included an unprecedented spate of kidnappings and arson attacks on government buildings.

Arafat admitted that "no real efforts have been made to enforce law and order".

"More efforts and support should be made for the security of the people and this is the responsibility of the security organisations," he added.

Qorei submitted his resignation last month after the kidnappings but he later retracted his move after lengthy mediation efforts involving other senior Palestinian and deputies.

With Qorei sitting alongside Arafat in the headquarters known as the

Muqataa, Arafat again said he would do everything in his power to help the premier tackle the security situation.

"I support my brother Abu Alaa (Qorei) and I give him my full support to implement this."

World leaders, including UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and US Secretary of State Colin Powell, have been pushing Arafat to loosen his grip over the security services which allow him to still exercise the lion's share of power in the territories.

While acknowledging the mistakes by his own officials, Arafat accused the Israeli government of trying to wreck the Palestinian government.

"Israel has not stopped for a minute its campaign to end our Palestinian National Authority but this will all be in vain," Arafat said.

PALESTINIAN MPs SAY He must act on admissions of failure

AFP, Ramallah

Senior Palestinians called on veteran leader Yasser Arafat to follow his rare admission of failure by his government in the speech with concrete measures to empower his prime minister.

"This speech has very important headlines and we thank Arafat for it, but all the Palestinian institutions could not implement anything without Arafat's signature," said parliament speaker Rawhi Fattuh.

"For that," he said, addressing Arafat directly, "we need from you some formal decisions with your signature about issues you raised in the speech."

A 14-member committee of MPs which has been pushing Arafat to crackdown on corruption and implement reforms in the security services was due to meet the 75-year-old later Wednesday.

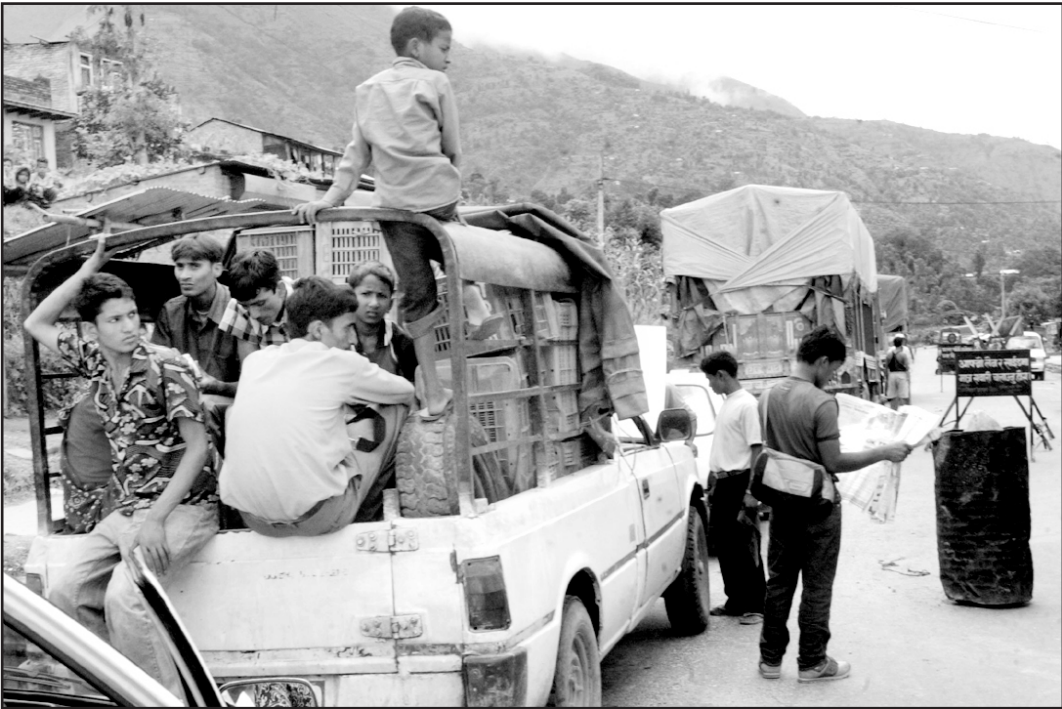


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese travellers sit at a roadblock at Khanikhola, some 28 kms west of Kathmandu yesterday, a day after a threatened Maoist rebel shutdown of the Himalayan kingdom's top companies. Maoist rebels cut off routes Wednesday to Nepal's capital Kathmandu in their first blockade of the city since they launched their insurgency to overthrow the constitutional monarchy eight years ago.

Strike brings Assam to a halt

AFP, Guwahati

Businesses and shops were shut down yesterday in the northeastern Indian state of Assam to protest a rebel assault on an Independence Day parade which left 15 people dead, most of them schoolchildren.

"The strike has affected normal life across the state as the issue on which the call for a shutdown was given is an emotional one," a senior police official said.

In Sunday's attack, which also wounded 21 people, a bomb shook a college ground in the remote town of Dhemaji, 460 kilometres (285 miles) east of Assam's state capital Guwahati, during a parade.

"The response to the strike has been spontaneous. Everyone is angry over the killings," Amiya Bhuyan, general secretary of the All Assam Students

Union (AASU), which called the dawn to dusk strike, told AFP.

AASU volunteers stood guard in various places to enforce the strike.

A senior police official, meanwhile, told AFP the Assam government was mulling plans to buy Improvised Explosive Device (IED) detectors from Israel.

"The surveillance systems we are using to detect explosives are obsolete. We need advanced sensors like those used in Israel," said the official, adding that the Assam government had urged the defence and home ministry to take up the matter with Israel.

Assam governor Ajai Singh, a retired army commander, has thrown his weight behind the proposal.

"Surveillance gadgets made in Israel are among the best in the world and we must upgrade our system to fight militancy," said Singh.

The army pointed out that the separatist United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) which has claimed responsibility for Sunday's attack had buried slabs of explosives about one metre (three feet) under the Dhemaji college grounds days before the parade.

At least three of the 21 people injured in the blast are in a serious condition, Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi told reporters.

"We have asked the authorities to shift a seriously injured girl to New Delhi for specialised treatment. She has injuries in both eyes," he said.

The ULFA has not responded to government appeals to end its campaign for an independent homeland. More than 10,000 people have died in insurgency in Assam in the past two decades.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis trying to cross a street raise their hands to avoid getting caught in the crossfire during an intensive battle between militiamen loyal to radical Iraqi Shiite Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr and US forces some 700m from the shrine of Imam Ali in the holy Shiite city of Najaf yesterday. US troops, backed by helicopter gunships, pounded militia bastions in Najaf's historic Old City, one day after Sadr snubbed an Iraqi peace mission. Two helicopters shot a battery of rockets close to Najaf's vast cemetery, while snipers planted on rooftops fired at targets around the city's holy Imam Ali shrine.

Bombs defused in Sardinia after Berlusconi-Blair meet

AFP, Rome

Police discovered two bombs near the Sardinian villa of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, just hours after he met his British counterpart Tony Blair on the island, the Ansa news agency said yesterday.

The two devices were discovered yesterday at Porto Rotondo, a village near the prime minister's villa after an anonymous telephone call the evening before.

Berlusconi hosted Blair and his wife Cherie at his holiday mansion in Sardinia for about 24 hours. The two leaders held talks on the situation in Iraq on Tuesday, appealing for a peaceful solution to the crisis in Najaf.

The caller claiming to speak on behalf of the "Proletarian Groups for Communism" contacted a regional newspaper to signal that the two bombs had been planted.

The caller said the first device was in a dustbin, saying the police would have to look for the second, according to the Corriere della Sera newspaper.

Annan demands Suu Kyi's release

BBC NEWS ONLINE

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan has called for Burma's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to be freed from house arrest.

He said the Burmese government's reforms would not be credible without the involvement of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy.

He called for "substantive dialogue" between all parties. He released a statement after Aung San Suu Kyi's party failed in an attempt to win her release.

A spokesman for the NLD said the legal bid failed because officials refused to sign a document presented to the court.

The government of Burma - called Myanmar by its ruling military junta - last month adjourned a national convention meant to draw up a new constitution as a first step to the restoration of democracy.

It had promised to welcome all religious and political parties into the

process, but has been criticised for hand-picking most of the delegates.

The NLD is refusing to take part in the process until Aung San Suu Kyi is freed.

Mr Annan's statement said: "Unless and until the views of the National League for Democracy and other political parties are sought and considered, the national convention and the roadmap process will be incomplete, lacking in credibility, and therefore unable to gain the full support of the international community, including the countries of the region."

Mr Annan also urged the Burmese government to allow his special envoy, Razali Ismail, to return to the country and help the transition towards democracy.

Earlier this year the authorities rejected Mr Razali's visa application. Democratic elections were last held in Burma in 1990.

Pakistan offers bounties for infos on al-Qaeda

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday announced rewards totalling 1.1 million dollars for information on six wanted terror suspects including Al-Qaeda's Libyan planner Abu Faraj Farj, described by Pakistani intelligence as the new number three in Osama bin Laden's network.

The government placed photos of the six on the front pages of major newspapers, offering rewards of around 345,000 dollars each for Faraj and Pakistani militant Amjad Hussain Farooqi.

Bounties of 172,000 to 86,000 dollars each were offered for four other Pakistani suspects.

All six are Al-Qaeda suspects believed to have played a role in two December attempts to assassinate President Pervez Musharraf.

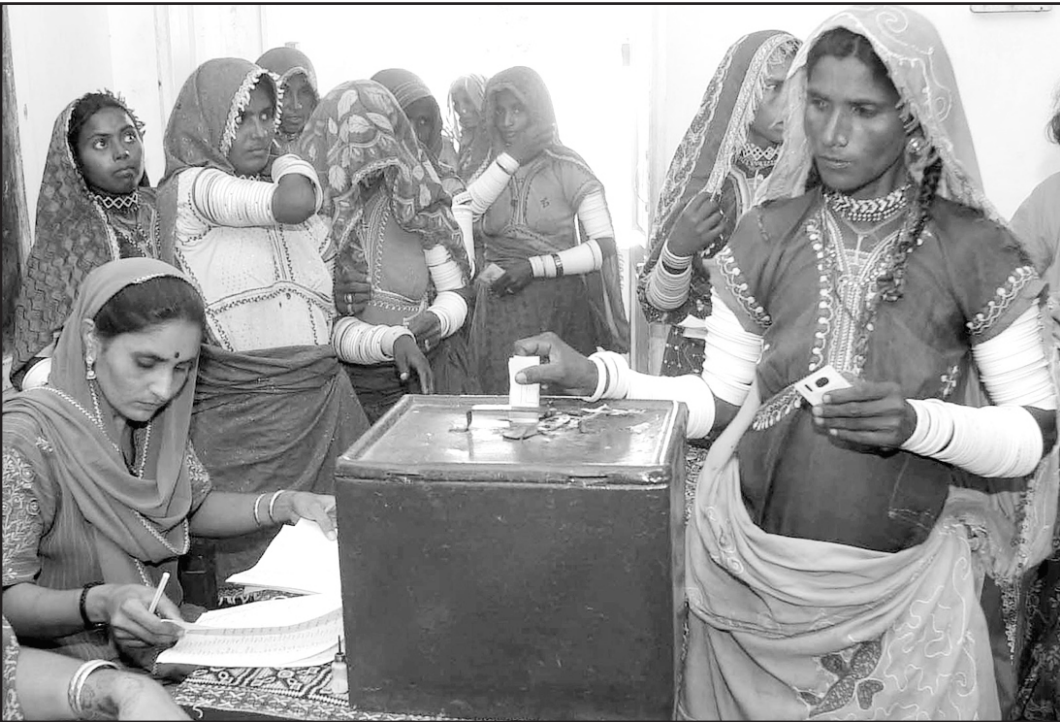


PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani woman (R) casts her ballot as others wait for their turn to vote in a by-election for a seat in the national parliament, in Tharpakar, Sindh province, yesterday. Shaukat Aziz, the finance wizard chosen by President Pervez Musharraf to be Pakistan's next prime minister, sought to cut a path to the parliament's lower house through a virtually guaranteed by-election in this rural seat.

Seventeen dead in Iran road carnage

AFP, Tehran

Seventeen people were killed and 20 injured when a truck collided with a bus in southeastern Iran, state media said yesterday.

The accident occurred late Tuesday evening 55 kilometres (35 miles) from Zahedan on the road to Zabol in Sistan-Baluchestan province.

The injured truck driver said that the accident happened after he swerved to avoid a car and his trailer hit the bus.

Iran's roads are considered to be among the most dangerous in the world, with some 100,000 road-accident deaths in the last five years.

On June 24, about 90 people died in the same province when a fuel truck lost control and crashed into a police station, with the explosion engulfing other trucks, cars and buses.

Iraqi working for German TV found dead in Baghdad

AP, Baghdad

Mahmoud Hamid Abbas, a local producer for the station, was found dead on Sunday near the volatile city of Fallujah, said chief producer Jorg Christ.

Abbas had traveled to Fallujah to gather Iraqi opinions about the Iraqi National Conference, which got underway on Sunday to establish a 100-member council that will act as a watchdog over the interim government until elections in January.

Christ said Abbas phoned ZDF's Baghdad office on Sunday from Fallujah to say he would be back soon, but was not heard from again. It was not known how Abbas was killed, or why, Christ said. Family members identified the body of Abbas, who was a native of Fallujah, Christ said.