

Pak opposition fails to dislodge Speaker

AFP, Islamabad

A move by Pakistan's opposition parties to dislodge the Speaker of the national parliament's lower house failed yesterday amid a rumpus and without the resolution being put to a vote.

The two major opposition alliances -- the secular Alliance for Restoration of Democracy and the religious Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal bloc -- boycotted the vote over the deputy Speaker's refusal to allow a full debate on the motion.

The motion against the speaker, Chaudhry Amir Hussain, was tabled last week when the 342-member lower house passed a bill allowing President Pervez Musharraf to renege on his pledge to quit as army chief by the end of the year.

The opposition has been protesting in parliament since then and plans to mount a public campaign next month to force Musharraf to shed the uniform.

Most government lawmakers did not attend yesterday's session, prompting the opposition to allege the ruling coalition had orchestrated their absence for fear of some of its members could side with the opposition in the ballot.

**US slaps ban on Bulgarian firms for arms sales to terror sponsor**

AFP, Washington

The United States yesterday slapped punitive sanctions on two Bulgarian firms for arms sales to one of six countries on a US terrorism blacklist.

The penalties were imposed against the Beta JSC and KAS Engineering Consortium/BMG-M OOD companies for the transfers which involved unspecified "military equipment," the State Department said.

"The United States government has determined that the (firms) transferred certain military equipment to a state sponsor of terrorism," it said in a notice published in the Federal Register.

The purchasing country was not identified, but since Iraq was removed from the "state sponsors terrorism" blacklist earlier this week there are only six nations so designated: Cuba, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.

# Israeli missile kills top Hamas militant, aide

Another Palestinian killed, Tel Aviv urged to resume peace talks

REUTERS, AFP, Gaza/Almaty

Israel killed Hamas's top bomb and rocket maker in Gaza and launched a missile strike on the home of another leading militant yesterday in the run-up to a key parliamentary vote on a plan to quit the occupied territory.

The assassination of Adnan al-Ghoul, number two in the Hamas military wing and known as "Father of the Qassam," a makeshift rocket frequently fired into Israel and at Jewish settlements in Gaza, dealt a major blow to fundamentalist Islamic group.

It could also help Prime Minister Ariel Sharon counter far-right opponents who say the plan he will bring to parliament on Monday to remove all 21 settlements in Gaza and four of the 120 in the West Bank would reward Palestinian attacks.

In the biggest blow to Hamas since Israel assassinated the group's Gaza leader Abdel-Aziz al-Rantissi in April, a missile from an unmanned Israeli drone slammed into Ghoul's car, late on Thursday.

killing him and an aide, witnesses said.

Militants from Hamas, sworn to destroying Israel, vowed suicide bombings in revenge for the Gaza City attack.

The army confirmed it targeted Ghoul, 45, the "ace of hearts" in one Israeli newspaper's deck of cards of Palestinians on Israel's most wanted list.

Israel launched a missile attack on Friday in the northern Gaza Strip on the home of Amer Qarmout, a leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, an umbrella militant group, witnesses said. They said neither he nor anyone else was hurt.

The group earlier said it had fired homemade Nasser-3 rockets into the Israeli town of Sderot. The Israeli army said the missile was aimed at a building used for armaments production and which was also a weapons store for militants.

To avenge Ghoul's killing, Hamas fired off salvos of rockets and mortar bombs toward Israeli targets. "Death is coming to the

enemies," said the group's armed wing, the Izz el-Deen al-Qassam Brigades.

Ghoul had survived several previous assassination attempts, including a bid to kill him with a poisoned cup of coffee. He lost two sons in earlier Israeli attacks.

Palestinian cabinet minister Saeb Erekat condemned the assassination and said it "reflects the determination of the Israeli government to continue the path of military solutions rather than negotiations."

Saying there is no Palestinian negotiating partner, Sharon has vowed to carry out a unilateral withdrawal of Gaza's 8,000 settlers and several hundred of the 230,000 in the West Bank by the end of next year.

Palestinians believe the plan is a ruse by Sharon to retain West Bank land and violence has surged in Gaza.

AFP adds: A Palestinian man was killed yesterday by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip during the funeral of a Hamas militant, medical sources said.

Ahmed al-Haddad, 21, was hit by a burst of gunfire during the funeral of Iyad al-Sirri, who, witnesses said, died earlier in the day when a mortar round he was about to fire exploded.

The circumstances of the shooting were not immediately clear.

A senior Palestinian official urged Israel yesterday to resume long-stalled peace talks and appealed to central Asian states to support the US-brokered Middle East "roadmap" for peace.

"I appeal to your excellencies to raise your voices and use your good offices to effect a ceasefire between the Palestinians and the Israelis," said Abdalla Abdalla, first deputy foreign minister of the Palestinian Authority.

Addressing delegates to a regional Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Almaty, Abdalla said Israel and the Palestinians needed "to return to the negotiating table and implement obligations" under the roadmap.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians inspect the car of Adnan el-Ghoul, one of the leaders of the military wing of the radical Palestinian Islamic movement Hamas, after it was attacked by the Israeli army in Gaza City late Thursday. Ghoul, one of the chiefs of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, was killed in the strike by an Israeli helicopter gunship on the car in northern Gaza City.



A woman washes her hands next to a collapsed house destroyed by typhoon Tokage in Izushi town, Hyogo Prefecture yesterday. The death toll from Typhoon Tokage rose to 67 with 21 still missing, the worst damage from a typhoon in Japan in 25 years, officials said yesterday.

NATWAR SAYS

Terrorism common threat to all Asian countries

PTI, Almaty

Describing terrorism as the common threat to all Asian countries, India said on Friday that eliminating the menace through a "comprehensive and sustained effort" should be the "foremost common concern" for all nations.

Addressing the annual Ministerial Meeting of Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), External Affairs Minister K Natwar Singh, said that India was committed to strengthening the global campaign against terrorism and underlined the need for all countries to "go beyond the old ideologies and ways of thinking."

"The common threat to the security of our peoples and states is international terrorism. How we deal with it will affect our collective

future," he told the meeting of 16-member grouping of Asian countries.

"Our foremost common concern should be to root out this menace through a comprehensive and sustained effort," Singh said.

He underlined that "the current threats and emerging challenges require a cooperative approach based on the principles of inclusiveness and equal security."

India, he said, had actively sought to "strengthen and deepen" its relationship with all the countries in its extended neighbourhood.

"Our engagement is reflective of the constructive contribution that India can make to peace and stability in Asia and globally," the minister said.

# Delhi gives nod to peace talks with Bodo rebels

AFP, New Delhi

told AFP.

Gogoi had offered the ceasefire and talks last month to the NDFB, which is fighting for an independent homeland for the Bodo tribe in Assam, and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

The NDFB accepted the offer, but the ULFA rejected it.

However, on Friday, ULFA's commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah was quoted by newspapers in Assam as saying the group could hold peace talks with New Delhi if the government discussed its demand for independence.

"We are not going to forsake this condition (issue of sovereignty or independence) for any possible talks with the government," Baruah said.

The rebel leader said they were in touch with noted Assamese writer Mamoni Raisom Goswami and had conveyed their stand to her on holding talks with New Delhi.

"They (the NDFB) are free to do whatever they like. Our goals are different," the ULFA leader said.

The ULFA, fighting for an independent homeland in Assam, was blamed for a series of bombings in Assam earlier this month.

Gogoi, still in New Delhi after his meeting with Patil, said Friday he was aware of the latest move by ULFA.

"I was told by Goswami that the ULFA leaders were in touch with her. We on our part said anybody helping us to bring any militant group for talks would get all our help and support," he said.

"We hope the ULFA see reason and come for talks and accept our ceasefire offer like the NDFB," the chief minister added.

The ULFA and the NDFB are among 30 insurgent groups in the northeast, pushing demands ranging from independent homelands to autonomy within the nation.

Laden on the move, Indian intelligence on alert

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Central intelligence agencies are on alert following a report in a Pakistani newspaper, quoting unnamed US intelligence agency sources, that al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden has left Afghanistan and entered the rugged terrain around the Sino-Indian border. Union home ministry officials have been intimated about the news report which appeared in Thursday's edition of a Lahore-based newspaper. Reuters has quoted the newspaper as saying that Laden has "left Afghanistan for the rugged mountainous border areas between Pakistan and China" and that "there are reports that he has thereafter moved from a Chinese area to Ladakh and a Tibetan area of India" (sic).

The newspaper, quoting "reports received by US intelligence agencies", went on to state that the al-Qaeda chief could be sheltered by tribal lords in the area which is "considered the world's most difficult terrain".

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PHOTO: AFP

Secretary General of the Commonwealth Donald Charles McKinnon (R) and Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri (L) address a press conference after a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. McKinnon is in Pakistan on a two-day visit to discuss with Pakistani leaders a wide range of issues including those related to economic development.

'Pentagon exaggerated risk posed by Iraq'

AFP, Washington

A senior Democratic senator released a report Thursday alleging that the US Pentagon exaggerated the military risks posed by Iraq before the US-led war there to support a decision already taken by the White House to invade the country.

In a statement, Senator Carl Levin, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said a months-long probe conducted by his staff of prewar intelligence showed that the US Defence Department tailored its analysis to the George W. Bush administration's liking, after "assessments of the intelligence community did not make a sufficiently compelling case" for invasion.

Levin, who began his inquiry in June 2003, concluded that defence officials had found only "a relatively weak" relationship between Saddam and the Al-Qaeda terrorist network, rather than the substantial one that the Bush administration cited as a justification for invading Iraq.

OBSEVERS SAY  
Access to US polling places difficult

AFP, Washington

An international human rights group said Thursday its observers for the 2004 US election found access to polling stations difficult in Florida and Ohio.

"One of the surprising things we learned is that most voting jurisdictions have no mechanisms for nonpartisan polling observation," said former Canadian cabinet minister David MacDonal.

"A system needs to be put in place that allows for international and domestic nonpartisan poll observation."

In 2000, President George W. Bush was not selected over Democrat Al Gore for more than a month, after a US Supreme Court decision effectively decided the contest over who had won Florida.

# Iraqi polls still possible in Jan, says Annan

US-led troops to protect UN officials

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Thursday said elections in Iraq were still possible in January despite the limited UN presence on the ground because of security concerns.

"It will be their call, not ours. I think at this point it is technically possible," Annan told reporters at UN headquarters in New York. "We still have a couple of months yet."

The United Nations is helping Iraq organise the elections but Annan has kept only a minimal number of staff in the country because of the uncertain security situation.

The ceiling on UN staff in Iraq is currently at 35 -- well below the 250 experts it had before the conflict.

In Baghdad, a spokesman for the country's independent electoral commission, which was set up with

help from the United Nations, said his organisation was stretched to its limits and was working under very difficult conditions.

"We need far more UN experts," Farid Ayar told AFP.

"I cannot understand the situation of the United Nations in New York. We hope that we have more experts and monitors before the elections," he said.

Annan acknowledged there had "been some question as to whether we have enough UN staff on the ground or not."

He said more personnel would have to be sent later if the situation permits.

The circumstances have to be conducive, in the sense that either we have to notice a genuine improvement in the security environment or solid arrangements for the protection of staff," Annan said.

Coal mine blast devastates life of many in C China

AFP, Xinmi

Along a dusty, dirty road outside the scene of one of China's worst mining disasters, a woman sat sobbing yesterday, her mother-in-law in tears next to her and her sister offering comfort.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," said the woman, who only gave her surname Li. "Our son is only eight years old."

She had not seen her husband since he left for work on Wednesday at the Daping mine, which was devastated by a huge gas explosion that left 66 people dead and a further 84 missing.

Like many relatives gathered at the mine in Wuzhuang village Friday, Li is preparing for the worst.

Wives, mothers and fathers of missing or dead villagers had come from all over the region -- some travelling hundreds of kilometers (miles) -- to a "reception" area set up for victims' families.

US ELECTION 2004

US elections projected to cost record \$3.9b

AFP, Washington

increase over the three billion dollars that are believed to have been spent on federal elections four years ago.

"The 2004 presidential and congressional elections will shatter previous records for spending, and the biggest reason is the increase in giving by individuals to candidates and parties," observed Larry Noble, executive director of the think tank.

The presidential race alone, fueled by massive spending by President George W. Bush and his Democratic rival, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, their respective parties and a multitude of support groups, will cost an unprecedented 1.2 billion or more, the report pointed out.

So far, the Bush campaign has spent a little over 278 million dollars, producing television and other media advertisements, airing them

in battleground states, paying pollsters, campaign strategists and crisscrossing the country.

It has an additional nearly 152 million on hand to spend on the home stretch of the race that will conclude on November 2.

Kerry's war chest, according to the center, is a little more modest, but still will put to shame any of the candidates that ran for the White House in 1976.

The Democratic hopeful has spent so far more than 197.5 million dollars and has 113.5 million in cash on hand to continue buying advertising time and stump in states he believes he can win.

By comparison, all the candidates involved in the 1976 presidential race won by Jimmy Carter raised a total of 171 million dollars, the center said.



PHOTO: AFP

A man screams in protest after he was prevented from entering the compound of the Daping coal mine near Xinmi in central China's Henan province yesterday. Wives, mothers and fathers of missing or dead Chinese miners had come from all over the region -- some travelling hundreds of kilometers -- to a "reception" area set up for victims' families.