

Sharon makes a break with Jewish settlers

AP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made a final break with his former allies in the Jewish settler movement, appealing to parliament to approve a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank in a historic vote yesterday.

The plan would mark the first time Israel has pulled down Jewish settlements in the West Bank or Gaza. It has bitterly divided the nation, and solidified Sharon's transformation from longtime patron of the Jewish settlers to their No. 1 nemesis.

In other developments, Israeli troops withdrew from a refugee camp in southern Gaza, ending a two-day operation aimed at halting Palestinian mortar fire in which 17 Palestinians were killed.

Meanwhile, speculation mounted that Yasser Arafat is suffering from a serious ailment following news that the 75-year-old Palestinian

leader underwent an endoscopy to check his digestive tract. Israeli security officials said there is "something serious," possibly cancer. Palestinian officials said Arafat is merely recovering from the flu.

Sharon opened a stormy two-day debate in parliament Monday, defending his plan as the only way to secure Israel's future.

"This is a fateful moment for Israel. We are dealing with a difficult decision that has few parallels," he said in a speech repeatedly interrupted by heckling from hard-line opponents.

"We have to do this, despite all the suffering involved," Sharon said. "This will decrease hostility, and will lead us forward on the path to peace with the Palestinians."

Israeli commentators said Sharon's speech was remarkable, both for his gestures toward the Palestinians and his unprecedented criticism of settlers, whom he

accused of suffering from a "messianic" complex.

"Even if tomorrow morning Ariel Sharon resigns from his position, or is deposed, or recants, this earthquake has already occurred. The rift has taken place. Nothing will ever be the same," wrote Ben Caspit in the Maariv daily.

Tuesday's vote is the climax of a monthslong confrontation over Sharon's "unilateral disengagement" plan, which has torn apart Sharon's Likud Party and weakened his coalition government.

Sharon was expected to win, but only with the help of dovish opposition parties. Nearly half of Likud's 40 lawmakers said they would vote against him, and two religious parties that Sharon has courted Shas and United Torah Judaism also have come out against the plan.

Indian nukes blunted 'strategic ambiguities' in region: Manmohan

AFP, New Delhi

India's nuclear weapons have blunted the ambitions of regional adversaries, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said yesterday, as he warned military leaders not to be over-ambitious in forging a new combat doctrine.

"The exercise of the nuclear option by India helped remove potentially dangerous strategic ambiguities in the region," Singh told military commanders at a five-day brain-storming meeting in the Indian capital.

"In fashioning our nuclear doctrine we have been guided by the policy of minimum nuclear deterrence and no first use, underlined by restraint and responsibility."

India in May 1998 detonated a range of nuclear weapons including a thermonuclear bomb and then imposed a unilateral moratorium on

further testing. The exercise prompted archival Pakistan to carry out tit-for-tat atomic blasts the same month.

India, which has fought three wars with Pakistan since 1947, insists the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction was aimed at thwarting the military ambitions of larger Asian neighbours.

The prime minister urged his top commanders to study the US-led war in Iraq but said India's military, which has a 14-billion-dollar annual budget, must be practical while giving shape to a new combat doctrine.

"Technology and strategy are mutually interactive," Singh said in an obvious reference to Iraq.

"Our military doctrine must have the inherent flexibility to imbibe technological changes and adapt them to our strategic needs (but) in this process availability of resources has to act as a reality check," he said.



PHOTO: AFP
India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) is escorted by The Chief of Army Staff, General N.C. Vij (C) as he reviews a line of senior officers prior to a meeting of The Combined Commanders Conference at the Ministry of Defence in New Delhi yesterday.

Myanmar won't let Indian rebels use its soil

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Myanmar's top military general Than Shwe on Monday assured Indian leadership that his country would not allow its territory to be used by anti-India insurgents groups.

The assurance was conveyed by Shwe during his talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

On New Delhi's concern over northeastern Indian insurgents taking shelter in Myanmar, the visiting military ruler said his country would take immediate action whenever India passed on specific information to it about activities about anti-India militant groups operating out of that country.

The two countries inked a memorandum of understanding commit-

ting them to boost cooperation against terrorism, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, organized crime, money laundering and international economic crimes, Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told reporters last evening.

The MOU provides for exchange of information and personnel, law enforcement cooperation and joint reviews.

What was significant, said Sarna, was the two countries agreed that Myanmarese territory would not be allowed to be used to harm India's interests.

India also sought to leverage economics to its security concerns along the border with Myanmar when President AP J Abdul Kalam, during a banquet hosted for Gen Shwe, called for faster development of border areas to achieve a trade figure of one billion dollars

between India and Myanmar by the year 2005.

"The accelerated development of border areas will be to our common advantage. But our efforts cannot be successful unless peace, stability and security in the border areas are ensured," Kalam said adding it was necessary to remove hurdles to increased cross-border trade and connectivity.

Pointing out that Myanmar was India's gateway to Asean, Kalam said India was committed to early implementation of a road connecting the two countries as well as Thailand to help boost trade.

Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath said New Delhi was taking measures to turn northeastern states a natural base for enhanced trade with Myanmar by creating infrastructure including roads and airports.

Nepal wants to extend truce with Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu/ New York

The Nepal government vowed yesterday to extend a ceasefire in a deadly Maoist revolt as long as rebels refrained from launching attacks.

The two sides began observing the ceasefire last week for the nine-day festival Dassain, which marks the triumph of good over evil and is the biggest religious holiday in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

The truce in the kingdom, reeling from the increasingly bloody eight-year-old insurgency, was due to expire Thursday.

"This (ceasefire) policy will continue until the Maoists break it from their side," Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba told reporters.

The move followed widespread appeals to both sides from human rights groups and politicians to extend the truce in the impoverished kingdom whose economic woes

have been deepened by the conflict.

However, government spokesman Mohammad Mohshin said Nepal was keeping the "army and security on high alert in case the Maoists start any armed action".

Over 10,000 people have died since the Maoists began their armed uprising in 1996 to topple the constitutional monarchy and install communist rule.

Meanwhile, Nepal's revised anti-terrorism law will worsen the problem of forced disappearances in the country, Human Rights Watch charged Monday.

"This law is a major step backwards. It's likely to lead to more disappearances and more torture of people accused of being against the government or aligned with Maoist insurgents," said Brad Adams, executive director of the New York-based Human Rights Watch's Asia division.

S Korea finds holes in North's border fence

BBC ONLINE

South Korea has put frontline troops on high alert after finding two holes cut in the wire along its heavily fortified buffer zone with North Korea.

A spokesman said it was highly possible that North Korean spies or commandos had infiltrated into the south.

Roadblocks have been set up and officials said reservists might be called up to search for any intruders.

The alert coincides with a visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who is on the final leg of an East Asian tour.

Powell has been trying to revive stalled six-way talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons plans.

The two holes, about 40cm (16 inches) wide, were found in the parallel fences that mark the southern boundary of the 4km-wide demilitarised zone that separates the two Koreas.

Zarqawi aide killed in Falluja raid: US

REUTERS, Baghdad

The US military said it killed an ally of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in an overnight air raid on Falluja yesterday, as the Iraqi government tried to find out how Zarqawi's group managed to kill 49 unarmed army recruits.

A statement said the "precision strike" in northwest Falluja at 3 a.m. (2000 EDT) had hit a safe house used by the Jordanian militant al-Qaeda-linked network, adding that a known associate of Zarqawi was present at the time.

Residents said the raid had destroyed one house and damaged three. Hospital staff said they had received no casualties.

Many families have fled Falluja fearing a widely expected US offensive designed to bring the city under the interim government's control before elections planned for January.

People in Falluja deny foreign militants led by Zarqawi are present in the rebel-held Sunni Muslim city west of Baghdad and say civilians are the main casualties of US raids.

New poll confirms tight US race

AFP, Washington

A new opinion poll released yesterday showed President George W. Bush may have a slight lead -- but that his election race with Democratic challenger John Kerry is still too close to call.

The Gallup poll for CNN/USA Today said 51 percent of likely voters would back Bush and 46 percent Kerry. But with a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points it said the race leader was "unclear".

Of the 1,461 registered voters polled, 49 percent supported Bush and 47 percent Kerry. Of those, 1,195 were identified as likely voters.

CNN said that Bush's support had fallen a single percentage point and Kerry's had risen by one or two but because of the sampling error "it's unclear whether the race has changed at all."

In the previous survey, 52 percent of likely voters said they would back Bush and 44 percent the Democratic senator from Massachusetts.



PHOTO: AFP
Former US President Bill Clinton (L) gives a speech as he campaigns for US Democratic presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry (R) at a rally Monday at Love Field in Philadelphia.

US ELECTION 2004

Clinton, Kerry team up to oust Bush

REUTERS, Washington

Former President Bill Clinton and Sen. John Kerry ganged up on President Bush on the campaign trail on Monday, with Clinton warning Bush wants to scare voters and Kerry slamming Bush's "incompetence" in not protecting tons of missing explosives in Iraq.

Bush, with former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani at his side, criticized Democrat Kerry's strategy of "pessimism and retreat" and told voters in Colorado that "in every critical respect, my opponent and I see the war on terror differently."

The potential balance of power on the Supreme Court moved front and center with news that Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and is in the hospital after undergoing a tracheotomy.

Rehnquist, 80, the leader of the court's conservative majority, is expected back on the bench next week. But his illness reminded voters a new president could be asked to fill several vacancies of retiring justices on the closely divided court.

'Americans sceptical about voting process'

AP, Washington

Memories of Florida's contested 2000 presidential election and a growing number of pre-election lawsuits are making Americans sceptical about a voting process they once took for granted.

Six in 10 of those surveyed in an Associated Press poll say it's likely there will not be a clear winner in the presidential race by Nov. 3 the day after the election and fear the results will be challenged in court.

The poll was conducted for the AP by Ipsos Public Affairs.

Both Democrats and Republicans worry about the possibility of an unresolved election though Democrats express more worries. About seven in 10 Democratic voters, 69 percent, say they think it's likely there won't be a clear winner by Election Day, while almost six in 10 Republican voters, 56 percent, say they feel that way.

With both political parties putting thousands of lawyers on call for Election Day, a majority of both

Democrats and Republicans just over half of each expect the election results will be challenged in court.

"I read the other day that there's going to be a perfect storm," Jack Martin, a businessman who lives near Salt Lake City, said of the growing number of lawsuits. "I think it's coming down to the courts. It worries me about our election system. I used to think every vote counts."

Both parties already have filed lawsuits over a variety of complaints from how provisional ballots are counted to alleged fraud in voter registration. Judges in several states have issued disparate rulings on provisional ballots, which are required under law for voters who show up at the polls only to find their names are not on the voter rolls.

The 6th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati is expected to hear arguments this week on the use of provisional ballots in Michigan. It is unclear whether the court will rule before the election.

DOCTORS INSIST No need for hospitalisation of Arafat

AFP, Ramallah

Yasser Arafat's medics flatly denied yesterday that the Palestinian leader needed hospital treatment after Israel gave clearance for the 75-year-old to be treated outside his West Bank headquarters.

Israel's defence ministry said late Monday that Arafat, who has been under virtual house arrest for nearly three years, would be allowed to leave his headquarters to be examined in a Ramallah hospital.

But one of Arafat's medics told AFP that the veteran leader would not require any hospital treatment, insisting that he was merely suffering from a bout of flu which had been compounded by his decision to continue fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

"President Arafat is only suffering from very strong flu and because he is insisting on continuing with his fast it is taking a longer time to recover," the doctor told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"There is no need for him to go to hospital. These are just Israeli rumours," he added.

Other Palestinian sources said that reports about his ill health had been exaggerated, saying that he has been continuing to work as usual and not confined to his bed.

Non-Iraqi prisoners not covered by Geneva accords: US

AFP, Washington

A new legal opinion by the US government bars some non-Iraqi prisoners captured in Iraq from the internationally accepted protections of the Geneva Conventions, The New York Times said yesterday.

The consensus reached since March 2004 by lawyers from the departments of state, justice and defense, the National Security Council and other US government agencies lets the Central Intelligence Agency treat some prisoners the same way as members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban captured in Afghanistan.

The new legal opinion was outlined to The New York Times by unidentified government officials in response to a Washington Post report on Sunday on the CIA's secret transfer of detainees out of Iraq for interrogation purposes.

The Post said the CIA had requested and gotten a US Justice Department draft memorandum justifying the practice dated March 19, 2004. The Times' sources said that memorandum was not incorporated into the new legal opinion.

Officials told the Times that all prisoners transferred by the CIA out

of Iraq had been moved between April 2003 and March 2004, adding that none had been transferred in the past six months.

However, the officials said the new legal opinion could open the way for additional transfers on a broader scale.

They said that under the new ruling, non-Iraqis who could be deemed exempt from the Geneva Conventions would include suspected members of al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups as well as other non-Iraqis believed to have traveled to Iraq to engage in terrorism or join the insurgency.

The Geneva accords are a set of international laws governing the conduct of war and occupation, and include rules on the humane treatment of prisoners.

Without indicating exactly how decisions are made about a person's status under the accords, the officials said that factors would include nationality, affiliation with terrorist organizations and activities in Iraq.

The decisions, they added, would be made by US government agencies who hold the suspects in their custody.

Powell predicts talks with N Korea after US polls

AFP, Seoul

US Secretary of State Colin Powell and South Korean officials predicted yesterday that North Korea will return to stalled talks on its nuclear weapons programmes after next week's US presidential elections.

"We expect North Korea to come to the talks following the (November 2) election," a spokesman for South Korean Unification Minister Chung Dong-Young quoted Powell as saying.

Powell also said if the Stalinist state returned to the so-called "six-party talks" and agreed to dismantle its nuclear weapons programmes it would accrue "many benefits," according to the spokesman.

Chung said Seoul shared that opinion and expressed hope that a resumption of the discussions would "bear fruit," the spokesman said.

Many analysts believe North Korea is waiting for the election to determine its next move, hoping for a less hardline US stance if John Kerry defeats incumbent George W. Bush for the presidency.

Powell, who has predicted a Bush victory, has also dismissed suggestions that Kerry would abandon the six-party framework.

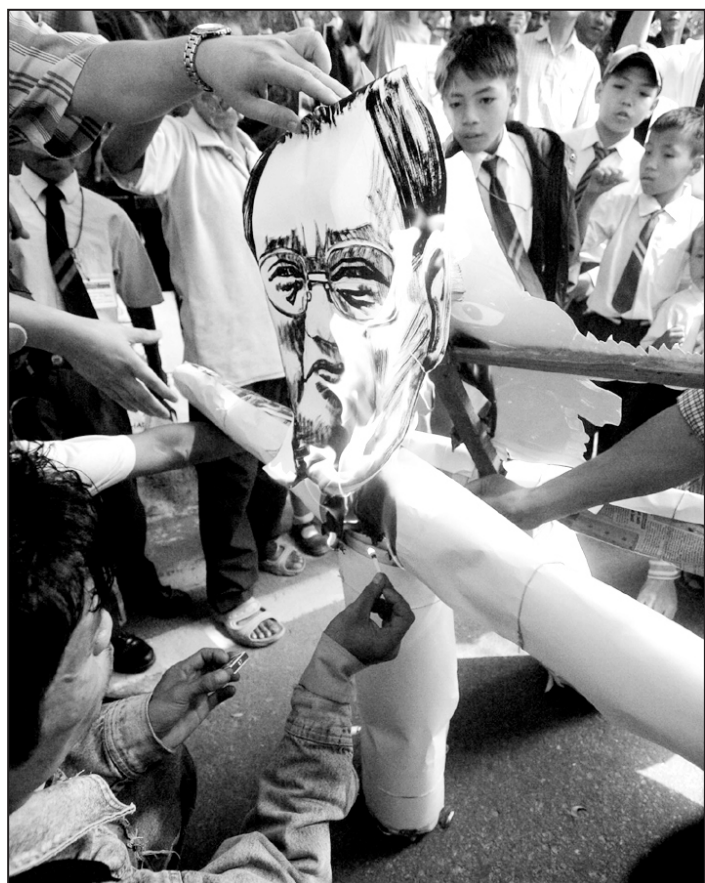


PHOTO: AFP
Myanmar students set fire to an effigy of their country's leader General Than Shwe as they take part in a protest against Shwe's visit to India in New Delhi yesterday. Shwe has met with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and senior Indian leaders during his six day visit as the neighbouring nations sought stronger ties.