

From R to L: Egyptian honour guards walk along with the coffin of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat as it makes its way to Al-Maza military airport in Cairo; newly-installed PLO Chairman Mahmud Abbas emerges from one of three helicopters bringing the body to Ramallah; Arafat's widow Suha (R) and their daughter Zahwa breaks down during his funeral in Cairo and Palestinians march with candles and posters of their late leader.

RED CRESCENT SAYS

Falluja a 'big disaster,' aid needed

REUTERS, Baghdad

Aid agencies called on US forces and the Iraqi government to allow them to deliver food, medicine and water to Falluja yesterday and said four days of intense fighting had turned the city into a "big disaster."

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society, which receives support from foreign agencies including the Red Cross and Unicef, said it had asked US forces and Iraq's interim government to let them deliver relief goods to Falluja and establish medics there.

But it said it had received no reply.

"We call on the Iraqi government and US forces to allow us to do our humanitarian duty to the innocent people," said Firdos al-Ubadi, Red Crescent spokeswoman.

"This is their responsibility," she said, adding that judging by reports

received from refugees and pictures broadcast on television, Falluja was a "big disaster."

AUS military spokesman said the Red Crescent had permission to help refugees in towns around Falluja, but could not say if it had been granted access to the city itself.

The Red Crescent has seven teams of doctors and relief workers, backed by trucks of food and other aid ready to go into each of Falluja's districts when the word is given.

About 10,000 US soldiers and Marines, backed by heavy artillery and war planes, surged into Falluja from several directions on Monday night, launching an offensive on rebels.

The US military estimates that 600 militants have been killed in four days of street fighting.

Scores of buildings in Falluja have been completely destroyed, with TV footage showing some

districts all but leveled. There has been no water and electricity for days and food shops have been closed, residents say. The stench of dead bodies is hanging over some areas of the city, they say.

US commanders say civilian casualties have been low, but residents dispute that, describing incidents in which non-combatants, including women and children, have been killed by shrapnel or hit by bombs.

In one case earlier this week, a 9-year-old boy died after being hit in the stomach by shrapnel. Unable to reach a hospital, he died hours later of blood loss.

"Anyone who gets injured is likely to die because there's no medicine and they can't get to doctors," said Abdul-Hameed Salim, a volunteer with the Iraqi Red Crescent.

France looks for bigger role in ME peace

AFP, Paris

By looking after Yasser Arafat in his last days and sending his body home with full honours, France reinforced its image as a major Palestinian ally and attempted to position itself as a key player should the Middle East peace process now be reborn, observers say.

Foreign Minister Michel Barnier acknowledged as much when he said Friday that France took in the late Palestinian Authority president because of longstanding ties.

"We welcomed him as we would have welcomed any leader who is a friend to France," he told Europe 1 radio in an interview from Cairo, where he attended a funeral service for Arafat alongside other foreign dignitaries.

"It's simply a question of humanity. It's also proof of the ties that have long existed between the Palestinian people, their leader and our country," he said.

French President Jacques Chirac personally made the decision to allow Arafat to fly to Paris on October 29 for emergency treatment of a

serious illness that has not been publicly revealed.

The 75-year-old Palestinian leader was declared dead Thursday at the French military hospital treating him days after falling into a coma and being put on life-support machines.

France, with its veto power on the UN Security Council, five-million-strong Muslim community and regular dealings with Arab countries, has traditionally been seen as the only sympathiser of the Palestinian cause with the weight to challenge the pro-Israeli leanings of the United States.

Through the European Union, it has a place in the so-called international "quartet" sponsoring Middle East peace, alongside the United States, Russia and the United Nations.

In recent years, though, France's influence has been muted, particularly as US President George W. Bush's administration sided with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plans to withdraw his troops from Gaza while ignoring negotiations with the Palestinians.

Thousands greet Arafat's body in Ramallah

Palestinians pray for his soul

AFP, Ramallah

Amid scenes of chaos, a military helicopter carrying Yasser Arafat's coffin landed at the late Palestinian leader's West Bank headquarters where he was buried yesterday.

Security forces started shooting in the air in a bid to restrain hundreds of people who surged towards the helicopter which had brought Arafat back to his final resting place after a funeral in Cairo.

A crowd of over 10,000 people had managed to make their way into the Muqataa although numbers had been meant to be limited. The number of people gathered on the streets outside was estimated to be well in excess of 100,000.

Many began cheering and chanting Arafat's name as they spotted the aircraft approach the central West

Bank town, which lies around 10 miles (16 kilometres) from Jerusalem.

Arafat, who led the Palestinian struggle for statehood for four decades, died in a French military hospital on Thursday.

Two Egyptian military helicopters landed simultaneously at around 2:17 pm (1217 GMT), a little over a fortnight after Arafat was dramatically airlifted out of the compound where he had been kept under virtual house arrest by Israel for nearly three years.

Workman had cleared an area within the compound where Arafat will be buried although Palestinian officials hope to eventually move his body to east Jerusalem.

Israel has refused to countenance Arafat's burial in the holy city which Palestinians yearn to see

become the capital of their promised future state.

Meanwhile, mosques across Gaza City offered prayers for the soul of Yasser Arafat yesterday, the Muslim day of rest, as clerics accused Israel of poisoning the veteran Palestinian leader.

Reciting special Muslim prayers instead of the usual Friday service, imams and members of the congregations prayed that their leader's soul would rest in peace and implored "God to grant him grace and mercy".

Most clerics dedicated their main weekly sermon to accusing Israel of having "poisoned" its peace partner turned reviled foe -- echoing charges levelled by militants from Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades.



Iraqis demonstrate to protest against the US-led attack on the restive Sunni Muslim city of Fallujah after Juma prayers at Umm al-Qura mosque in Baghdad.

India cuts Kashmir troops

Pakistan welcomes move

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In a significant step prior to his maiden visit to Jammu and Kashmir next week, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has announced reduction in the troops deployment in the militancy-hit state this winter citing an "improvement in the situation" there.

Singh's decision was promptly welcomed by Pakistan as well as the moderate separatists and mainstream political parties in Jammu and Kashmir even though the Indian Prime Minister made no mention of its linkage with the ongoing peace process with Islamabad.

Announcing his decision to cut the number of troops deployed in the state, Singh said in a statement issued Thursday night that there was visible improvement in the situation and attributed it to "effective counter-infiltration measures and mobi-

lising the support of the people in the war against terrorism."

"During the past several months, the Indian army and other security forces deployed in the state of Jammu and Kashmir have achieved success in bringing about an improvement in the security situation in the state," he said.

"This is reflected in the increasing tempo of economic activity, continuing increase in tourist arrivals and a general sense of security among the people," he added.

The Prime Minister, however, made it clear that the decision to cut troops deployment could be reviewed if "levels of infiltration and terrorist violence increase there and more troops will be redeployed."

"We cannot, however, afford to relax our vigil. We are aware that infiltration attempts from across the border and the Line of Control continue and the infrastructure of

terrorism in the shape of training camps and launching bases remain intact," he said.

Last November, India had announced ceasefire along the Line of Control, which divides India and Pakistan, which was immediately reciprocated by Pakistan.

Officials here said the decision on reduction in troop deployment in the state is apparently linked to the assessment that infiltration level is normally lower in the winter when heavy snowfall covers all mountain passes between India and Pakistan and hamper free movement of infiltrators.

The announcement about cut in the number of troops in Jammu and Kashmir comes at a time when the mood in Kashmir valley is somewhat sour following allegations of the rape of a woman and her daughter by an army officer who was put under suspension by the Army.

Colombo, LTTE agree to uphold truce

But deadlock drags on

AFP, Colombo

Norway's latest bid to salvage Sri Lanka's faltering peace process ended without a breakthrough yesterday but the government and the rebels have pledged to continue to uphold a fragile truce.

Norway's Foreign Minister Jan Petersen cut short his peace mission and flew to Cairo for Yasser Arafat's funeral yesterday, with no prospect of ending a 19-month deadlock in face-to-face talks between the government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"High expectations, no major breakthrough," said the Tiger's website on the latest Norwegian initiative to save the island's troubled peace process.

The rebel's chief peace negotiator, Anton Balasingham, said the

Tigers wanted talks to resume on the basis of their plan for self-rule and rejected Sri Lankan government demands to start parallel talks on a final settlement.

"This position of ours, we are told by the facilitators, would be conveyed to the president... and a feedback provided to us in course of time," Balasingham was quoted as saying on the website.

"It is only after receiving such a response, we would comment on the feasibility of early resumption of talks or otherwise."

After a second round of talks between President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Petersen, the president's office said in a statement the Norwegian had briefed her on their meeting with the Tiger leadership and their views on resuming talks.

Blair meets with Bush as ME tops agenda

AFP, Washington

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was due to meet with President George W. Bush yesterday to discuss new perspectives on Middle East peace in the aftermath of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's death.

The British prime minister arrived here Thursday and went straight to the White House for a dinner with Bush. Neither made statements but were to hold a joint press conference after their meeting Friday.

Reflecting the close relationship between the two, Blair is the first foreign leader received at the White House since Bush's re-election last week.

Their talks coincided with Arafat's funeral in Cairo, which has thrown a new spotlight on the deadlocked Middle East peace process, and the US offensive on insurgents in the Iraqi city of Fallujah.

Blair faces intense domestic pressure to reap some benefits from his support for the US-led war in Iraq, and hinted before his departure that the Middle East was where he expected to find this.

"Peace in the Middle East must be the international community's highest priority," Blair said in a statement following Arafat's death.

Blair reaffirmed a call for action, saying that "the goal of a viable Palestinian state alongside a secure

Iraq is one that we must continue to work tirelessly to achieve."

The United States offered some encouragement in Bush's statement of condolences after the death of the iconic Palestinian leader who had been marginalised during the Bush presidency.

"The death of Yasser Arafat is a significant moment in Palestinian history," Bush said.

"For the Palestinian people, we hope that the future will bring peace and the fulfilment of their aspirations for an independent, democratic Palestine that is at peace with its neighbours."

"During the period of transition that is ahead, we urge all in the region and throughout the world to join in helping make progress toward these goals and toward the ultimate goal of peace," Bush added.

Many questions remain about the US attitude so long as a new Palestinian leadership is not in place.

But on the plane to Washington, Blair's spokesman said the prime minister saw a "new era" for the peace process.

"There is a moment and that moment is to send a signal to the region we are serious about" peace in the Middle East, he told journalists.

"If the world sees president Bush and the prime minister saying they are very serious on this issue and we are committed to it, that helps," the spokesman said.

FORMER US GENERAL SAYS

US to stay in Iraq for 3 more years

AFP, Lisbon

The US-led invasion of Iraq will eventually succeed but US troops will likely have to stay in the country for up to three more years, a former commander of US forces who ran the war in Iraq and Afghanistan said here on Thursday.

Retired US army general Tommy Franks added that he believed the assault by US forces against Fallujah would be a turning point in Iraq and elections will be able to go ahead as planned in the violence-ravaged country in January.

"I said when we started the operation that I thought we would be involved in Iraq in a serious way for three to five years," he told reporters on the sidelines of a conference.

"Well we are two years into it, I think for another one to three more years we will be involved in helping Iraqis to build their own capability," he added.

"I think we will find more fighting, and Fallujah is an example of this, and we will find a lot more capacity building."

US-led forces launched an assault on Fallujah, deemed Iraq's most rebellious city, on Monday night aimed at clearing the city of Baathist rebels and foreign fighters said to be holed up there which has killed hundreds of insurgents.

Iraq's interim government has vowed to retake rebel-held cities to

enable national elections to go ahead in January.

"Fallujah won't be easy, it won't be the end of anything, it is not the end of problems in Iraq, but it is the beginning of the end of problems in Iraq," Franks said.

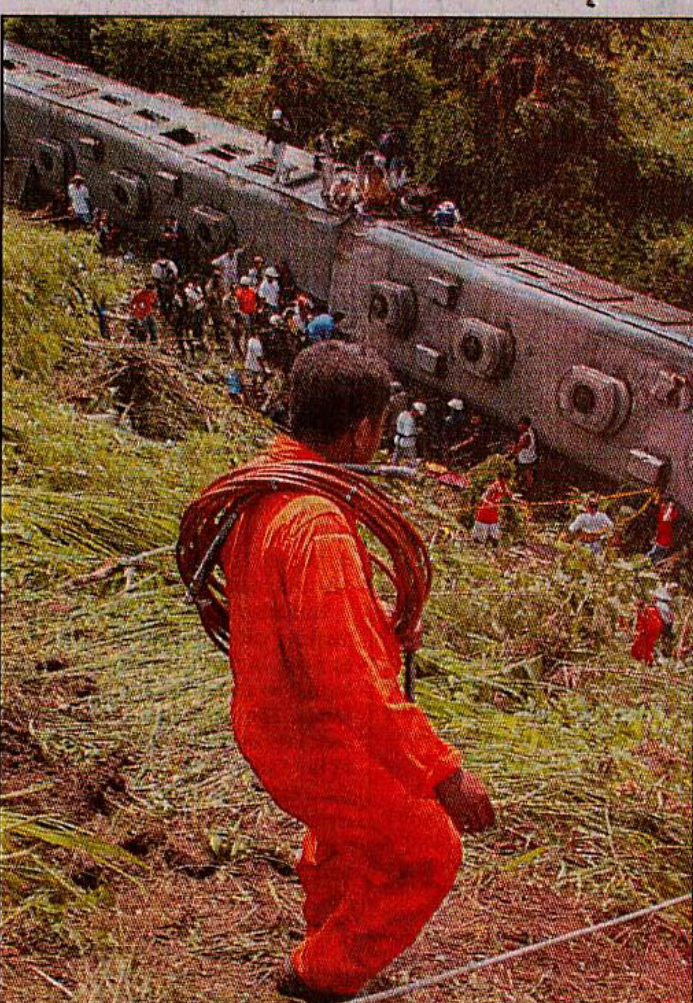
"What we have to do is treat individual problems like Fallujah one at a time until the Iraqi people are able to control their own security and economic fortunes," he added.

Asked if he thought the war against Iraq would be successful, Franks said: "It depends on the metric that is used. If it is the ability of the Iraqi people to control their country with a representative government, control their own wealth and resources, then of course it can be won."

"The people of Iraq over time -- in one year, three years, five years or 25 years -- will come to realize that freedom is a good thing to have, that the opportunity to be a capitalist is a good thing to have, the opportunity to go forth and achieve security and pave the way for children and grandchildren is a good thing to have."

Franks retired as head of US Central Command in August 2003, several months after Saddam Hussein was toppled in Baghdad.

He has hailed US President George W. Bush's leadership since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and publicly endorsed the president's re-election bid.



Rescuers search for victims in the derailed train coaches lying in the ravine in Padre Burgos town, Quezon province some 150km southeast of Manila yesterday. 12 people were killed while about 160 injured when the Manila bound commuter train skidded off its tracks.

Iran vows to resist pressure on nukes

Talks with EU hit snags

AFP, Tehran

Iran vowed yesterday it would "resist" unfair demands to limit parts of its suspect nuclear programme, as talks with Britain, France and Germany on resolving the stand-off appeared to run into fresh difficulties.

Speaking in a Friday prayer sermon, the top advisor to Iran's supreme leader called for "resistance" and complained that Tehran was subject to "idiotic and childish" demands.

The Europeans "have told us to stop our nuclear programme and in return they will sell us commercial jets and trains," Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri said. "This is an idiotic and childish thing."

"Fortunately, the opinion polls show that 75 to 80 percent of Iranians want to resist, and that we continue our programme and reject humiliation."

He said supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say on all matters of state, "has summed up our policy in one phrase -- if you (the Europeans) are reasonable, we will negotiate with you; if not, we have nothing to say to you."

"They tell us to suspend enrichment, but it is none of your business," said Nateq Nuri, noting that fuel cycle work was permitted under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

(NPT).

Powerful former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said the talks were still "moving forward step by step", but added that "on one or two points, we are still far away from getting what we want."

"I think that we can reach a solution and that we can reach an accord if the Europeans prove their wisdom and do not make excessive demands," said the charismatic cleric, who now heads Iran's top political arbitration body.

Iran was this week supposed to give its response to demands it halt its uranium enrichment in order to avoid being taken before the UN Security Council for possible sanctions.

The terms of a preliminary accord were hammered out during two days of tough negotiations in Paris last week.

Fresh talks were held in Tehran Thursday and Friday, but sources close to the discussions said a final deal had yet to be reached.

"It requires a big effort from both sides," the source said.

The Europeans are pushing for Iran to accept a suspension of its work on the nuclear fuel cycle, including enrichment, to ease international alarm over what the United States alleges is a covert weapons drive.