

Israel, Palestinians urged to maximise peace effort

Sharon, Abbas invited to US meetings, Rice announces \$40m aid plan

AFP, AP, Ramallah

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice yesterday pledged her personal commitment to find Middle East peace as she unveiled plans for a special coordinator to help the Palestinians maintain security.

Speaking after talks with new Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, the top US diplomat said she had been impressed by his efforts to put an end to the four year armed uprising and said Washington wanted to help him advance the peace process.

On a visit on the eve of a breakthrough peace summit in Egypt Tuesday, she also urged both the Israeli government to maximise its efforts to bring about peace, urging it not to take any unilateral measures to alter the status quo.

"It is time for both parties to make maximum efforts to give this chance for peace a real chance," Rice said at a joint press conference with Abbas.

"I have been encouraged by my conversations here and (with) the prime minister in Israel that both sides understand the moment before them and their responsibilities."

The meeting was the highest level contact between the US and the top Palestinian leader in nearly three years and comes a day before Abbas

and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon are to meet in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh today.

Increasing the United States' involvement in the Middle East peace process, President Bush has invited Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to separate meetings in the United States, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced yesterday.

Rice finished two days of meetings in Israel and the West Bank with announcements that both sides have accepted the invitation and that the United States' partners in a four-nation coalition to promote Middle East peace would soon hold a meeting that would be the first since the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat gave new life to peace hopes between Israel and the Palestinians.

Bush may attend that meeting as well, Rice said. It was not clear when that meeting might happen.

Rice also said Lt. Gen. William Ward would be the Palestinian security coordinator.

"Making certain that the parties understand each other, and if necessary making certain that we understand," Rice said of his duties.

"The Palestinians will be the first to tell you that they need help," training, equipping and unifying their security forces, Rice said.

She said Ward will have direct line to her.

In another show of support for Abbas, who was elected as Arafat's successor on January 9, Rice announced plans for the fast-tracking of some 40 million dollars in funds for the Palestinian Authority over the next 90 days.

The Abbas invitation represents a significant shift from the US position in recent years when Bush viewed Arafat as a major impediment to peace. The Bush administration refused to deal directly with Arafat and peace negotiations stalled.

The administration of US President George W. Bush ended up shunning the late Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat before his death on November 11 which has heralded a new push for peace by Washington.

Rice said she had detected "faster progress under President Abbas' leadership" than had been seen for years.

His decision to deploy large numbers of security personnel in the Gaza Strip, resulting in a sharp downturn in violence had happened "in a matter of weeks".

Rice said "there was a lot of work ahead" but that she wanted to help by appointing a special coordinator to help put an end to attacks.

"The idea is to have someone

who is responsible for helping the Palestinian and reform of their security, forces, for helping with monitoring" of efforts to put an end to attacks, she said.

She said the idea would not be to supplant activities of two sides which need to maintain "security cooperation that is bilateral, that is strong, that is robust".

But she said the United States is ready to help "and we will have therefore a security coordinator".

"It really is to provide a focal point for training, equipping, helping Palestinians build their forces and also for monitoring and if necessary to help the partners on security matters."

She added: "I am available... to be very active in this process as well as members of my staff and people from the White House because this is a time that we want to seize the opportunity."

The United States has been regularly accused of showing a pro-Israeli bias in the peace process.

But Rice, who held talks with Sharon on Sunday, said she had made clear her disquiet over both the route of the West Bank barrier and Israel's continued settlement activity.

"Israel has obligations too," she said.



Standing under a portrait of late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas hold a joint press conference after their meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Rice pledged her personal commitment to find Middle East peace as she unveiled plans for a special coordinator to help the Palestinians maintain security.

'Unqualified US medics carried out amputations at Abu Ghraib'

AFP, Washington

Unqualified US military medics stationed at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison carried out amputations, recycled used chest tubes and lacked medical supplies to treat the overcrowded jail's inmates after the fall of Baghdad, according to a Time magazine report.

The report, to hit newsstands Monday, also said that a medic was ordered, by one account, to cover up a homicide inside the jail.

Although the prison just outside Baghdad was jammed with as many as 7,000 detainees - some of whom displayed serious mental illnesses - no US doctor was in residence for most of 2003 following the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The report said "with straitjackets unavailable, tethers -- like the leash held by Private Lynndie England -- were put to use at Abu Ghraib to control unruly or mentally disturbed detainees, sometimes with the concurrence of a doctor."

Indian president treated for fractured shoulder

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam yesterday underwent treatment for a fracture he suffered on his right shoulder bone after he slipped during a walk inside Rashtrapati Bhawan Sunday afternoon.

Kalam, 74, underwent a "closed reduction" of the fracture. "This morning, under short general anaesthesia, closed reduction of the fracture has been done," said Maj Gen L P Sadhotra, Commandant of the Army Hospital here where the president was admitted Sunday night.

Gen Sadhotra clarified that the president did not undergo a surgery for the injury.

"His Excellency had an uneventful recovery and is cheerful. His condition is fine," added Gen Sadhotra.

Italy, Libya to step up fight against illegal migration

AFP, Rome

Italy and Libya are planning to set up joint teams of investigators to tackle people-smuggling gangs, the Italian interior ministry said after weekend talks in Tripoli.

The move would bolster their cooperation on illegal immigration, with Libya often a source and Italy a target of thousands of immigrants seeking to make their way into Europe.

Italian Interior Minister Giuseppe Pisanu held talks Sunday in Tripoli with Libyan National Security Minister Nasser al-Mabruq and Foreign Minister Abdel Rahman Shalgham to review joint measures adopted last year to stem the flow of mainly African migrants.

Avalanche blocks highways in Kashmir: 7 killed

AFP, Srinagar

Seven Indian paramilitary soldiers died overnight when avalanches smashed into their mountain barracks in Indian-administered Kashmir and also blocked the region's main highway, police said yesterday.

More than a dozen members of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) were in their barracks near Jawahar tunnel, 100km south of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, when avalanches hit them, a police spokesman said.

He said seven other ITBP men were injured and one was missing and presumed dead. A search for the missing man was continuing amid heavy snow fall.

Repolling held in 2 north Indian states

AFP, Patna

One paramilitary trooper was killed and four other people injured in a landmine blast as repolling was held yesterday at hundreds of centres in two Indian states where rigging was suspected during state elections, officials said.

One Border Security Force (BSF) member died and another was injured in the explosion which also wounded three election officials in Jharkhand state's northern Palamau district where Maoist rebels are active, police said.

Violence, particularly in Maoist areas, as well as voting irregularities led to the fresh balloting at more than 700 stations in Jharkhand and Bihar.

US probing whether Khan sold nuke tech to KSA, others

AFP, Washington

The United States is investigating whether Pakistani scientist Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan sold nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia and other countries, Time magazine reported Sunday.

The news weekly, citing a source in Pakistan's defence ministry, said that Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, had also played a bigger role in helping Iran and North Korea with their nuclear programmes than had been previously disclosed.

"US intelligence officials believe Khan sold North Korea much of the material needed to build a bomb, including high-speed centrifuges used to enrich uranium and the equipment required to manufacture

more of them," Time said.

Iran also may have bought centrifuges and weapons designs from Khan in the mid-1990s, Time said, adding that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had confirmed at least 13 meetings between 1994 and 1999 with representatives of Khan's network.

Among the countries known to have been helped by Khan was Libya. Time said the Pakistani scientist had given the Libyans equipment for centrifuges and "technical instructions for how to build a nuclear warhead."

Time said US and IAEA investigators believe Khan also traveled to Saudi Arabia and Egypt and to such African countries as Sudan, Ivory Coast and Niger.

Spanish birthday party turns death trap

Gas leak kills 18

AP, Todolella

Eighteen people gathered in a mountain hotel in eastern Spain for a birthday party died in their sleep from an apparent gas leak, officials said Sunday.

The victims ages 20 to 40 were part of a larger group of about 50 people who had converged on the hotel for the party Saturday night. Most went home, but some decided to stay and slept in one of several large rooms at the hotel.

To keep themselves warm at night, they turned on a butane gas heater in the room, according to Valencia regional emergency workers. An apparent gas leak, or bad combustion from the heater, killed the revelers.

Two other people who slept in a

separate room survived, Todolella Mayor Alfredo Querol told the private radio SER.

The bodies were found by hostel workers Sunday afternoon. No details were released about how many of the dead were men or women.

"The judicial police are there investigating but from what I could see on first glance there doesn't seem to be any other cause than the bottle of gas," Querol said.

Distraught and weeping relatives and friends arrived late Sunday at a sports hall in the town where police and forensic experts told them what had happened. Civil Guards prevented journalists from entering the center and cordoned off the single mountain track to the hotel, about two miles outside the village.

'Anti-terror laws turning UK into a police state'

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government stands accused of going down the road towards a police state following proposed new anti-terror laws which have prompted comparisons with repressive regimes such as Myanmar.

The row erupted late last month, when Home Secretary Charles Clarke announced a series of planned changes to the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, passed following the September 11 attacks on the United States.

That law allowed foreign nationals suspected of terrorism offences who refused to be deported to be detained indefinitely without trial, solely on the word of the home secretary.

Slammed by rights groups as creating "Britain's Guantanamo Bay", after the US centre for terror suspects in Cuba, late last year the Law Lords, Britain's top court of appeal, ruled that the measure broke human rights obligations.

In response, Clarke announced on January 26 that 12 detained foreign suspects would gradually be freed.

However, under a planned change to the law they could instead be placed under "control orders", including indefinite house arrest, electronic tagging or curfews, again on the say-so of the home secretary.

The new proposals, which have yet to reach the statute books, have prompted further ire from rights groups, who point out that indefinite house arrest without trial is usually only practised by despotic regimes

such as Myanmar, also known as Burma, China and North Korea.

Louise Christian, a lawyer representing several of the detainees held under the 2001 law, has been scathing, calling the new proposals "the kind of measures aimed at people like Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma".

Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Myanmar's main opposition party and a Nobel Peace laureate, has been held off and on at her home by the military dictatorship in Yangon for many years.

The Guardian newspaper reported Monday that terror suspects detained at Belmarsh prison and Broadmoor high security hospital have launched a case at the European court of human rights that could wreck the government's plan to replace detention in prison with house arrest.



Nepal's Human Rights and Peace Society (Hurpes) Chairman Purushottam Dahal (2ndL) talks to Hurpes executive members during a meeting to draw a plan of actions against Nepal's King Gyanendra sacking of the country's government last week in Kathmandu yesterday. Hurpes called for Nepalese Human Rights and peace activists to gather for a demonstration set for February 10 and said they would be ready to go to jail for the sake of freedom in Nepal.

India launches human trial of Aids vaccine

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday launched its first human clinical trials of a vaccine designed to prevent HIV-Aids, federal health minister Anbumani Ramadoss said.

"The trial is being conducted by a partnership between the government and International Aids Vaccine Initiative in Pune," Ramadoss told the Press Trust of India news agency.

The "investigational" vaccine was being tested on 30 volunteers in a first phase of the trial, Ramadoss said.

India has five million people infected with the HIV virus -- one in every eight of the 40 million infected worldwide -- and is second only to South Africa.

The quest for a vaccine is seen as particularly crucial in India where the World Bank has warned the disease could become the single largest cause of death in the nation of more than a billion people by 2033.

CIA renditions of terror suspects 'out of control'

AFP, Washington

The Central Intelligence Agency's rendition of suspected terrorists has spiralled 'out of control' according to a former FBI agent cited in a report by The New Yorker magazine, which examined how CIA detainees are spirited to states suspected of using torture.

Michael Scheuer a former CIA counterterrorism agent told the magazine "all we've done is create a nightmare," with regard to the top secret practice of renditions.

In an article titled "Outsourcing Torture" due to hit newsstands this week, the magazine claims suspects, sometimes picked up by the CIA, are often flown to Egypt, Morocco, Syria and Jordan, "each of which is known to use torture in interrogations."

The report said suspects are given few, if any, legal protections.

Despite US laws that ban America from expelling or extradit-

ing individuals to countries where torture occurs, Scott Horton -- an expert on international law who has examined CIA renditions -- estimates that 150 people have been picked up in the CIA dragnet since 2001.

The New Yorker report said that suspects in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East "have been abducted by hooded or masked American agents" and then sometimes forced onto a white Gulfstream V jet.

The jet -- marked on its tail by the code N379P which has recently been changed to N8068V -- "has been registered to a series of dummy American corporations ... (and) has clearance to land at US military bases," it said.

Maier Arar was arrested in 2002 by US officials at John F. Kennedy airport and then claims he was put on a "executive jet" which flew him to Amman, Jordan, before he was driven to Syria.

Thaksin jettisons Thai coalition partner

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra confirmed yesterday he will sever a coalition partnership with the Chart Thai party, paving the way for a one-party government after he won weekend polls by a landslide.

Election results are not final, but exit polls from a group of Thai television stations Sunday handed Thaksin an unprecedented victory, showing his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party winning 399 of 500 parliamentary seats.

Early returns with 61 percent of ballots counted Monday showed TRT winning 362 seats, the main opposition Democrat Party 92 and Chart Thai 30.

Thaksin said he and Chart Thai party boss Banham Silpa-Archa, himself a former premier in the 1990s, reached an amicable agreement to part ways.

"I have talked on the telephone with Banham, who reiterated that Chart Thai wanted to be in the opposition as the government won enough seats, but he will support me during the vote for prime minister," Thaksin told reporters.

Thaksin said Chart Thai, which joined TRT in coalition when it took power in February 2001 but resisted merging with it, would remain close to the government despite its exclusion.

After voting closed Sunday the prime minister said he had earned enough seats to form a one-party government but wanted to talk with Banham first before declaring his intent to govern a second term alone.

Thaksin's rivals fear that his tighter grasp on power will boost what they label his authoritarian tendencies, particularly his strong-arm attitude towards a 13-month-old Islamic insurgency in the deep south that last year left over 500 dead.



Elected members and workers of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai Party parade to celebrate their victory and praise people's participation in the general elections in Bangkok yesterday. Thaksin confirmed he will sever a coalition partnership with the Chart Thai party, paving the way for a one-party government after he won weekend polls by a landslide.