

Knesset gives final nod to Gaza pullout

AP, Jerusalem

Israel's parliament agreed Wednesday to pay nearly \$900 million in compensation to 9,000 Jewish settlers who will be uprooted when Israel pulls out of the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank.

The package, part of a bill authorizing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's pullout plan, will result in payments of hundreds of thousands of dollars to each settler family forced to leave.

The compensation for settlers depends on the size of a family, whether it owns or rents, what it owns and how long it has lived in the settlement.

Under the plan, a couple with two children who have rented a home in a settlement for the past 15 years would receive just over \$230,000. A similar family who owned a home would get about 30 percent more, or about \$300,000. Families who own farmland or businesses in an affected settlement or who agree to move to development zones in the

Negev desert or the Galilee would receive extra money.

The vote marked the last Knesset authorisation needed before this summer's withdrawal, and some officials feared the approval of a pullout would spark a new wave of protest, civil disobedience and possibly violence by settlers and others.

Vice Premier Shimon Peres called the vote "a clear decision for peace," while the Settlers' Council said it marked "a black day for democracy."

As the Israeli government shored up support for the withdrawal, Palestinian officials approved a Cabinet expected to put allies of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in control of security forces and other key departments. The Cabinet, whose makeup was not announced, is to be presented to the Palestinian parliament next week for approval, Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei said.



PHOTO: AFP

The wife of slain former prime minister Rafiq Hariri holds her husband's picture near his grave while French President Jacques Chirac and his wife Bernadette look on in Beirut Wednesday. Frenzied crowds of mourners bid farewell to 60-year-old Hariri at a politically charged funeral that underscored the seething tensions with Syria over his murder.

'Syrian behavior harmful'

Syria, Iran vow 'united front' against US threats, Washington recalls envoy from Damascus

AFP, REUTERS, Washington

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld charged Wednesday that Syria's behavior is "harmful" to US efforts to stabilise Iraq and establish a democracy while Damascus and Tehran vowed "united front" against foreign threats.

Rumsfeld's comments came in testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, only a day after the State Department recalled its ambassador to Damascus for consultations in the wake of the assassination in Beirut of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

Syria has vehemently denied suggestions that it was responsible for Hariri's killing in a car bombing Tuesday.

"They're harmful to what we're trying to do," Rumsfeld said of the Syrians.

"They're holding Iraqi assets and

refuse to release them. They have harbored Baathists in their country. They are occupying Lebanon. They are facilitating, with Iran, the Hezbollah into Lebanon and Israel," he said.

During the US invasion of Iraq, he said, Syria allowed busloads of jihadists into Iraq to try to defeat US forces.

"And they've been unhelpful," Rumsfeld said. "They're not a country that is cooperating and it's harmful to what we're trying to do."

Rumsfeld said President George W. Bush and successive secretaries of state have tried to persuade Damascus to "behave in a way that was consistent with other civilized nations."

"And they, thus far, have been unwilling to do it," he said.

Lebanon's political masters in Syria were in the full glare of global suspicion Wednesday over the assassination of former Lebanese

premier Rafiq Hariri, as the United States again demanded that Damascus pull its troops out of its smaller neighbor.

Washington, while stopping short of pointing the finger, has made no secret of its suspicions over Hariri's death and has recalled its ambassador to Syria, Margaret Scobey, for urgent consultations.

Lebanese opposition figures, who have become increasingly vocal in their criticism of Syria since Hariri stepped down as prime minister four months ago, have openly accused Damascus of killing him and 14 others in Beirut on Monday.

Arch-foe Israel too has not ruled out that Syria may have had a hand in the death of Hariri, who resigned in a row with pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud over Damascus' role in Lebanon's political affairs and the presence of 14,000 troops on its soil.

However, Syria's ambassador to France, Siba Nasser, said her country had no role in the killing of Hariri.

"Syria had nothing to do with it," she told French radio. Nasser said Hariri "was a big friend of Syria" and asserted that Damascus "does not want a permanent or indefinite presence in Lebanon."

Meanwhile, Iran and Syria, both locked in rows with the United States, said on Wednesday they would form a common front to face challenges and threats.

"We are ready to help Syria on all grounds to confront threats," Iranian Vice-President Mohammad Reza Aref said in Tehran after meeting Syrian Prime Minister Najji al-Otari.

Otari told reporters: "This meeting, which takes place at this sensitive time, is important, especially because Syria and Iran face several challenges and it is necessary to build a common front."

Bill introduced in US Congress to restore ties with Taiwan

AFP, Washington

A bipartisan resolution was introduced Wednesday in the House of Representatives demanding resumption of diplomatic ties with Taiwan in a move certain to upset China and embarrass the Bush administration.

In presenting the bill, Tom Tancredo, the Republican Representative from Littleton, said the United States should scrap its "one China" policy in which Washington recognises Beijing's position that Taiwan is part of China.

Washington switched recognition from Taiwan to China in 1979 during the administration of President Jimmy Carter but under US law, it is obliged to offer the island a means of self-defence if its security is threatened.

Carter took the action "without consulting or seeking the approval of Congress," said Tancredo, with whom four legislators have joined in sponsoring the controversial resolution.

They include the influential Florida Republican Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who is chairman of the House international

relations subcommittee.

"Our current 'One China' policy is a fiction," Tancredo said. "Taiwan is a free, sovereign and independent country that elects its own leaders. It is not, nor has it ever been a local government of communist China -- and everyone knows that."

He said the time had come "to scrap this intellectually dishonest and antiquated policy in favor of a little consistency and honesty."

"There is absolutely no good reason that the United States cannot maintain the same kind of normal relationship with the democratically elected government in Taiwan that it maintains with the autocratic regime in Beijing," Tancredo said.

About four months after Washington cut off ties with Taiwan in 1979, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which established the United States as a key ally of Taiwan.

It laid the groundwork for Washington to sell an arsenal of defensive weaponry to Taiwan -- even as the mainland has built up its own military forces on its southeast-eastern seaboard along the Taiwan Strait.



Taslima Nasreen seeks Indian citizenship

PTI, New Delhi

After ten years in self-imposed exile from Bangladesh, controversial writer Taslima Nasreen yesterday sought Indian citizenship saying she "dreams of living in West Bengal where I feel at home."

Taslima, who was here this morning, said she had faxed a letter to Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil during the day, expressing her desire to get Indian citizenship or residential permit whatever is possible.

"I have not asked for any political asylum. I have just asked for residential permit or citizenship," the author, who has been in exile in Europe and the US ever since she left Bangladesh in 1994, told NDTV 24X7.

Amnesty urges world powers to suspend military aid to Nepal

Kathmandu urges foreign govts not to abandon Nepal

AFP, New Delhi

Human rights group Amnesty International Thursday called on the United States, Britain and India to suspend military aid to Nepal after King Gyanendra's seizure of power and declaration of emergency rule.

"We are calling on the international community to put pressure on Nepal," Amnesty International secretary general Irene Khan said in a statement at a media conference here.

"We are calling on governments to suspend all military assistance," Khan said, singling out the US, Britain and India.

They are the three main backers of the Himalayan kingdom's nine-year military struggle against Maoist rebels which has cost 11,000 lives.

"Time is running out," she added. "Nepal is on a downward spiral."

Khan said the Indian ambassador to Nepal had told her that they were reconsidering military assistance.

An Indian government official who declined to be named said military assistance that was being extended under an agreement with the Nepalese government before it was sacked was still continuing.

But the Gyanendra-led government had not asked for any fresh assistance from India and therefore none was being given.

The India, the US and EU have recalled ambassadors for consultations following the takeover.

Meanwhile, Nepal's King Gyanendra took power and declared an emergency to prevent anarchy, his number two said, while appealing to foreign governments not to abandon the impoverished Himalayan outpost.

"Emergency rule at a time when anarchy is at its peak is not a matter of great wonder," the senior vice-chairman of the council of ministers, Tulsu Giri, told AFP in an interview here.



PHOTO: AFP

Human rights group Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan addresses a press conference in New Delhi yesterday following her visit to Nepal. Irene Khan said Amnesty called on the United States, Britain and India to suspend military aid to Nepal after King Gyanendra's seizure of power and declaration of emergency rule.

Nepal's media 'suffocated': Media group

AFP, Brussels

Nepal's media has been "suffocated" through a climate of fear and self-censorship since King Gyanendra seized power, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) said yesterday.

In a statement issued by the Brussels-based organisation during a visit to Kathmandu by its president, Christopher Warren, the IFJ said journalists' fear for their safety were among the factors "crippling" democracy in Nepal.

"Since King Gyanendra's royal coup on February 1, he and his army have suffocated the media by directly enforcing censorship through armed military intervention and indirectly fostering a climate of fear and self-censorship," Warren said in the statement.

"As a result of this sweeping censorship, media organisations have been shut down, journalists have been arrested, the public doesn't know what's going on and close to 800 journalists are out of work," he said.

The king on February 1 dismissed the government, declared an emergency and assumed absolute power, launching a sweeping crackdown on dissent on the grounds that stern action was needed to combat a Maoist rebellion.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh (L) shakes hands with Ghafoor Haidri (R), leader of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), after a ceremony in Lahore yesterday. The announcement by the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan to start the bus service between divided Kashmir welcomed with joy on both sides of the ceasefire line splitting the Himalayan territory.

Security for Kashmir bus service looms as key problem

AFP, Islamabad

Passenger security will be a major issue as Pakistan and India finalise arrangements for a historic bus service between their zones of volatile Kashmir, officials and analysts said yesterday.

The Srinagar to Muzaffarabad link has been hailed in some quarters as the boldest peace move for nearly 60 years but there are fears it could be targeted by Islamic militants in India's sector of the Himalayan region.

"A major problem for both countries will be to ensure that passengers do not become easy targets for peace-spoilers," said analyst Riffat Hussain, of the Department of Strategic Studies at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam University.

Pakistani officials also said the

issue must be addressed before the first bus leaves on April 7.

"The bus service agreement is a shot in the arm for the faltering peace process but providing security to the travellers is going to be a major problem," a Pakistani government official said on condition of anonymity.

Families on either side of the ceasefire line dividing Kashmir welcomed the deal after it was announced Wednesday by Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Kasuri in Islamabad.

It is widely seen as propping up the peace process between the nuclear rivals, which has become bogged down by their inability to deal with the overall problem of who should control scenic Kashmir.

Negroponete named as new US intel chief

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush on yesterday named John Negroponete, the US ambassador to Iraq, to the new post of director of national intelligence, created to integrate America's diverse intelligence services after major failures before the Sept. 11 attacks and the Iraq war.

Announcing the surprise nomination, Bush gave strong personal support to Negroponete, who will have to curb bureaucratic infighting and organize closer cooperation between the Pentagon, CIA and other agencies.

"If we're going to stop the terrorists before they strike, we must ensure that our intelligence agencies work as a single, unified enterprise," Bush said at a news conference.

Negroponete, 65, a former US ambassador to the United Nations, has been ambassador to Baghdad

for less than a year, prodding the country toward democracy in the teeth of a bloody insurgency prompted by the 2003 US-led invasion.

Creating the new position was a central recommendation of the commission that investigated the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks last year.

"I appreciate your confidence in choosing me for what will no doubt be the most challenging assignment I have undertaken in more than 40 years of government service," Negroponete said as he stood at Bush's side.

The new intelligence chief will give Bush his daily intelligence, a job previously done by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Negroponete's appointment must be confirmed by the Senate.

The new job was created as part of the biggest overhaul of the US intelligence system in a half century.

11 to die

FROM PAGE 12

accused kidnapped Abdul Kadir, 75, and his wife, Rawshan Ara Begum, 57, from a ferry ghat on their way home at Sonarchar village on March 11, 2002 and took them to an unknown place by a launch.

Later, their bodies were found buried in two separate graves at Sonarchar village on March 19 following a confessional statement by an arrested person.

The accused gouged out both eyes of Kadir, cut off his genital and stabbed him to death. They also stabbed his wife to death.

Kadir's younger brother, Nasir Uddin, filed a case with Meghna police on March 16.

Earlier, a gang of criminals had kidnapped and killed Humayun Kabir, the eldest son of the couple. Police arrested Mobarak Hossain in connection with the abduction and murder.

Angered by the arrest of Mobarak, his son and other accused brutally murdered Abdul Kadir and his wife as they had previous enmity over land dispute.

Rebels haunt elected Kashmiri officials

Some quits seeking pardon

AFP, Srinagar

Terrified of rebel reprisals, some newly elected municipal councillors in Indian Kashmir are quitting and apologising to the Islamic militants for contesting the first civic elections in 27 years.

Councillors and family members are asking forgiveness from guerrillas in newspaper advertisements in the insurgency-racked region.

"I'm making a passionate promise to every militant group that I will have no relationship whatsoever with politics," said Ghulam Rasool Khan, a councillor, in an ad placed in a daily in Srinagar, summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

In the latest political violence Tuesday, rebels shot a man dead after failing to find his daughter-in-law who was elected councillor,

police said.

Mohammed Amin, a politician defeated in the first round of the balloting, died of bullet wounds he received in a rebel attack on Tuesday, a police spokesman said.

His family sought pardon "for the mistake committed by Amin" in an ad. Other candidates and elected members have been standing up at mosques vowing to have nothing to do with politics.

The rebels have been waging a campaign of intimidation to derail the polls, which are being staggered to let security forces protect voters. The sixth of seven rounds is due Thursday.

Rebels as well as peaceful separatist campaigners oppose any polls in Kashmir, where a revolt against Indian rule has raged since 1989. They say elections are no

substitute for the right to self-determination.

But voters have defied threats and turned out in good numbers to cast ballots in the first five rounds, election officials say. Still, while many voters have been keen, some candidates and their families are scared.

Guerrillas have bombed rallies and killed candidates, party workers and elected officials to scuttle the elections. Those slain include the frontrunner for the Srinagar's mayor job along with another councillor and two candidates.

Requests for pardons for "the mistake" of running jumped after last week's killing of Mohammed Maqbool Shah, who was tipped to become Srinagar mayor.

Iraqi politician kidnapped

2 GIs, 12 Iraqis killed in violence

AFP, Samarra

Armed men kidnapped an official of interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's party while two US soldiers, four Iraqi policemen and 8 Iraqis were killed in violence north of Baghdad, security sources said yesterday.

"Seif Abu Meshal Hassan, in charge of the Iraqi National Accord in Salaheddin, was kidnapped from his house in Dajila," near Samarra, 120km from Baghdad, they said.

Armed and masked men in four cars snatched Hassan late Wednesday.

A Turkish national is thought to be among eight people found shot dead north of Baghdad, Iraqi police said yesterday, adding that all the victims were employed on a US military base.

Initial reports after the corpses were found near the town of Balad on Wednesday had indicated that four foreigners might be among the victims.

He said the eight were abducted as they were heading to work on a US base some 10km from Balad.

Earlier two US soldiers have been killed in a vehicle accident in southern Iraq, the US military said yesterday.

"Two soldiers assigned to the First Marine Expeditionary Force were killed in a non-hostile vehicle accident yesterday (Wednesday), while conducting security and stability operations in the northern Babil province," said a statement.

Elsewhere, a bomb targeted a police patrol in Samarra killing a policeman and wounded four others yesterday, a police officer said.

An RU teacher

FROM PAGE 1

Intelligence agencies here, on several occasions since 1999, have reported in vain to the government the suspicious activities of Asadullah, also the chief of radical Islamist outfit Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB).

In March 1993, an intelligence agency informed the government high-ups the details about his activities, seeking permission to arrest him for interrogation.

However, Asadullah, at a press conference yesterday, denied his involvement with Islamist extremists, claiming his enemies might have paid the arrested militants in Natore and Bogra to name him as their leader in a so-called Islamic revolution that already has produced a series of bomb explosions in cultural programmes.

In support of his claim, Asadullah proudly showed off two letters from two parliament members, Rajshahi Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu and Principal Maolana Abdul Khalek of Sathkira, which stated that neither Asadullah nor his organisation has any link with extremists.

The certificates signed in 2004 and given to journalists at the press conference say, "AHAB and its youth front were not involved with any anti-state or extremist organisations."

The then RU Registrar Prof Muhammad Yunus, who was killed last year by unknown assailants, issued a

show-cause notice on Asadullah in 1998, asking him to explain why he had gone to India without the authority's no objection certificate (NOC).

According to sources, Asadullah, using a business passport, went to India in 1998 and spent 11 days with his spiritual leader Maolana Abdul Matin Salafi. A highly radical religious preacher, Salafi was expelled from Bangladesh by the Ershad government for his anti-state activities.

Salafi is connected to a Kuwait-based Islamic charity group, Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, which is one of the major financiers of Asadullah's activities. The Pakistan government froze bank accounts of the organisation following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in the United States.

Asadullah admitted to possessing a business passport, but said, "I cancelled it and now I have a teaching passport." DUBIOUS CONTACTS Pakistani militant leader Maolana Abdullah Nasser Rahmani, a Kashmiri mujahideen named Gazzali as well as other unknown men from India and Pakistan were frequent visitors to his Rajshahi office, according to several former AHAB leaders.

"I saw Asadullah hosting Arab and Kashmiri mujahideens at his Naodapara Madrasa many times during 1992-93. He (Asadullah) proudly introduced them to us as mujahideens," said expelled AHAB secretary general

Rezaul Karim.

Once, in 2000, Rajshahi BDR apprehended four Kashmiri mujahideen from the Godagari border, and also took AHAB Nayeb-e-Ameer Abdus Salam Salafi to a BDR camp for interrogation, intelligence sources said. All of them were later released. But present BDR officials said they were unaware of the incident.

However, Asadullah, who has a long history of run-ins with the court, denied ever having entertained any militants.

Two judicial inquiries in 2003 primarily proved allegations against Asadullah, showing that he misappropriated Tk 18 lakh provided by the Kuwait embassy in 1992 for Islamic development and Tk 11 lakh from the Tawhid Trust.

Asadullah was expelled from the ameer post of the Tawhid Trust following the irregularities. He later challenged the decision in a lower court, but it ruled against him. The case is now under trial at the High Court.

He was also accused in two additional cases of misappropriating funds from the trust projects at Joypurhat, Comilla and Gazipur.

Rezaul Karim, also a lecturer at Bogra Azizul Haque College, also filed a case against Asadullah for attacking his house with petrol bombs in 2002.