

Sharon, Abbas to meet Bush April 12

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will meet President Bush in Washington on April 12, Israeli government sources said yesterday, for talks on the Middle East peace process.

Palestinian officials have already said Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, a moderate who declared a cease-fire with Sharon last month, will see Bush at the White House next month. The meetings will be separate.

Sharon and Bush have spoken of a historic opportunity for peace in the Middle East after the death of Palestinian president Yasser Arafat last November.

But they said Abbas, elected two months ago, must rein in militants for any peace efforts to succeed, a point Sharon hammered home after a Palestinian suicide bombing killed five Israelis in Tel Aviv on Feb. 25.

He is likely to echo the call during his 10th visit to the White House since first taking office in 2001, along with support for Bush's demand that Syria quit Lebanon.



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese opposition protesters waving their national flag react in downtown Beirut to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's speech in Damascus Saturday. Assad announced that Syria would redeploy all its troops in Lebanon to the Syrian border but did not set a timetable for a full withdrawal.

Italian hostage says US tried to kill her

AFP, Rome

The Italian journalist wounded by US troops shortly after her month-long kidnap ordeal ended this weekend, yesterday fanned a growing diplomatic rift between Rome and Washington by suggesting the US soldiers deliberately tried to kill her.

Giuliana Sgrenea, wounded when the convoy taking her to safety was riddled with bullets by a US patrol near Baghdad airport on Friday, said she may have been a target because the US opposed negotiations with her kidnappers.

"Everyone knows that the Americans don't want hostages to be freed by negotiations, and for that reason, I don't see why I should rule out that I was their target," Sgrenea told Sky Italia news channel on Sunday.

The comment comes amid fears that Friday's incident, in which Italy's top intelligence officer in Iraq was killed, could lead to a full-scale diplomatic rift between the two allies.

Syrian troops to start pullback today

US leads sceptics as world divided

AP, AFP, Beirut

Syrian troops will begin pulling back to the Lebanese border following a meeting of the two countries' leadership today, the Lebanese defense minister said yesterday.

Abdul-Rahim Murad said Syrian troops would withdraw from Mount Lebanon and northern Lebanon toward the eastern Bekaa Valley closer to the Lebanon-Syria border.

"The Syrian withdrawal will begin Monday directly after the meeting in Damascus of the Syrian and Lebanese leaderships," Murad said. Syrian President Bashar Assad and Lebanese President Emile Lahoud were to meet in Damascus with other top officials to discuss the details of the two-stage pullback the Syrian leader announced Saturday.

Murad said the pullback would take place over the course of two or three days.

In a speech to parliament Saturday, Assad announced a two-stage pullback of Syrian forces to the Lebanese border, but failed to address broad international demands that he completely withdraw Syria's 15,000 troops after nearly 30 years in the country.

Assad was vague about the pullback, leaving it unclear if Syrian forces would eventually leave Lebanon or remain inside the country near the Syrian frontier.

The United States issued a strong statement of dissatisfaction with Assad's comments, which came after four weeks of political turmoil in Lebanon set off by the assassination of a popular former prime minister.

On Friday, President Bush demanded that Syria withdraw all its troops and intelligence agents from Lebanon before its parliamentary elections in May. The United

Nations and France also have demanded that Syria completely withdraw.

Later Saturday, Syrian Immigrant Affairs Minister Buthaina Shaaban indicated Syrian troops would withdraw completely from Lebanon.

Meanwhile, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's pledge to redeploy troops in Lebanon divided world opinion yesterday, with some leaders describing the move as a welcome first step but the United States leading complaints it was not enough.

The promise to pull Syria's 14,000 troops in Lebanon back to the border was seen as an attempt to ease international pressure on Damascus, which has mounted since the assassination last month of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Governor recommends president's rule in Bihar

PTI, New Delhi/Patna

Bihar Governor Buta Singh yesterday recommended to the Centre imposition of President's rule in the state, Raj Bhawan sources said in Patna.

Later, Home Minister Shivraj Patil on Sunday met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and is understood to have discussed the report of Bihar Governor Buta Singh with regard to political developments in the state.

The meeting lasted an hour, official sources said. The Governor had sent his report to the Centre on Sunday morning, they said.

The Centre is not ruling out the possibility of President's rule in the state in case no political formation is in a position to form Government, the sources said.

With the magic figure of 122 eluding rival contenders - RJD-led alliance and NDA - for forming a Government in Bihar, the state is likely to be brought under the central rule from midnight on Sunday when the term of the outgoing assembly expires.

China warns US, Japan to keep Taiwan out of military pact

AFP, Beijing

China warned the United States and Japan against including Taiwan in their military pact Sunday, while also seeking to calm fears that the lifting of an EU arms embargo would lead to an attack against the island.

Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said Beijing sought better ties with both Washington and Tokyo - China's two largest trading partners - but he warned increasing US-Japan military cooperation should be strictly bilateral and not encompass Beijing's arch-rival Taiwan.

"Any part of putting Taiwan directly or indirectly into the scope of Japan-US security cooperation constitutes an encroachment on China's sovereignty and interference in China's internal affairs," Li said.

"The Chinese government and

people are firmly against such activities."

During a wide-ranging press conference on the sidelines of the National People's Congress, Li characterized the military alliance between Japan and the United States as a "bilateral arrangement" that came about during the Cold War.

Any expansion of such a relationship, Li warned, could cause problems in the region.

"If it goes beyond the bilateral scope, definitely it would arouse uneasiness on the part of Asian countries and bring about complicated factors to the regional security situation," Li said.

Beijing has been increasingly wary of Washington and Tokyo's close strategic partnership, seeing it as a potential obstacle to its firm goal of eventually reunifying with the island of Taiwan, by force if necessary.

'Bush gave CIA broad interrogation power'

REUTERS, New York

The Bush administration gave the CIA extensive authority to send terrorism suspects to foreign countries for interrogation just days after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, The New York Times reported in yesterday's editions.

Citing current and former government officials, the newspaper reported President Bush signed a still-classified directive that gave the CIA a broad power to operate without case-by-case approval from the White House in the transfer of suspects -- a process known as rendition.

HISTORIAN CLAIMS Hitler had the bomb

AFP, Berlin

Nazi Germany built a nuclear reactor and atomic weapons before the end of World War II, contrary to popular belief, a Berlin historian says in a book to be released later this month.

In his book "Hitler's bomb", Rainer Karlsch says a reactor was functioning by the winter of 1944/45 and that nuclear weapons were being tested on a Baltic Sea island and Thuringia, central Germany, under the supervision of the SS.

"The Third Reich was extremely close to winning the race to build the first working nuclear weapon," his publisher, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt (DVA), said in a statement.

However the arm was not well-developed enough to be dropped by air.

Nepali forces destroy Maoist bomb factory

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's security forces have destroyed a bomb-making factory set up by Maoist rebels in southern Nepal which hid a large cache of explosives and more than 2,000 home-made bombs, the army said yesterday.

The factory was found Saturday in Devitar village in southern Chitwan district, the Royal Army Directorate said in a statement.

"The local people had tipped off the security forces about the bomb factory," it said, adding that the unit had been set up to supply bombs to rebel forces in Chitwan and western Gorkha and Dhading districts.

"In the course of the operation, the security forces recovered a large cache of explosives including over 2,000 units of socket (home-made) bombs and other improvised explosive devices and a large quantity of raw materials used for making bombs, detonators and safety fuses," it said.

The statement added that some rebels were arrested in the factory but gave no numbers. In addition, the security forces had found foodgrains, clothes and utensils "stockpiled by the terrorists in the factory".

Earlier a Maoist was killed and an unknown number of others injured late Saturday in an exchange of gunfire in western Nepal between the security forces and a group of rebels who were extorting money from a local leader, a spokesman for Western Nepal Army Brigade told AFP.

Meanwhile, Nepal's Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey is to head for New Delhi today for discussions with his Indian counterpart on the latest developments in the Himalayan kingdom, a foreign ministry official said.

Pandey will be travelling with senior foreign ministry officials, said foreign secretary Madhu Raman Acharya who will be accompanying him.



PHOTO: AFP

Vehicles and pedestrians pass a flooded street in Jakarta yesterday as heavy rains hit the region. Antara news agency said that due to downpours on Saturday night hundreds of people had been taking refuge in safer areas as houses were submerged by water.

Lanka's peace bid suffers fresh blow

AFP, Colombo

A weekend killing spree has compounded problems for Sri Lanka's already troubled peace process and dimmed prospects of a deal on tsunami aid, diplomats and officials said yesterday.

Gunmen shot dead seven people in two separate incidents in the Eastern province Saturday, marking an upsurge in apparent clashes between rival Tamil Tiger rebel factions, military officials said.

The bloodletting came as Norway's ambassador here, Hans Brattskar, met with the Tiger political

leadership in the island's north to discuss a way for the Tigers and Colombo to cooperate in distributing tsunami relief.

Diplomats close to the peace process said they had expected a breakthrough in setting up a "joint mechanism" to handle millions of dollars in foreign relief aid, but that appeared to have suffered a blow with the latest killings.

There was no immediate word from the Norwegians, who brought Colombo and the Tigers to the talks table after clinching a truce in February 2002, but sources said Oslo was also concerned about the deteriorating security situation.



PHOTO: AFP

A woman take part in a protest in the northern city of Kirkuk yesterday demanding the return of their properties and rights which were snatched away during the regime of ousted President Saddam Hussein and given to Iraqi Arabs.