

Security handover talks on WB towns stalled

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinian Authority yesterday accused Israel of dragging its feet over promised confidence-building gestures after talks stalled on West Bank security handovers and a gunman was killed.

"Israel is prevaricating over carrying out its Sharm el-Sheikh resolutions," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told Voice of Palestine radio from Madrid where he was to attend an anti-terrorism conference.

At Middle East summit in Egypt last month, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas declared an end to more than four years of violence and announced a series of confidence-building measures.

In the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, Sharon pledged to release 900 Palestinian prisoners and transfer security control in five West Bank towns -- Ramallah,

Bethlehem, Qalqilya, Tulkarem and Jericho -- to the PA.

But two rounds of talks on such a handover in Jericho ended in deadlock on Wednesday, with Palestinian officials accusing the Israeli commanders of refusing to relinquish control of checkpoints and the wider area.

Less than 24 hours earlier, Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz had said Israel would hand over Jericho and Tulkarem to the Palestinian Authority "in the coming days" after talks with Abbas.

"The Israelis do not want to remove the roadblocks suffocating Jericho and Tulkarem, not to mention other regions in the West Bank," Erakat said.

"We are asking them to respect their commitments," he added, appealing to the international community to put pressure on Israel to make good on their Sharm el-Sheikh promises.



Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero (R) gestures as Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan listens during their joint news conference in Moncloa's Palace in Madrid Wednesday on the occasion of Annan's participation in the International Summit on democracy, terrorism and security.

INDIAN PM SAYS

Pak rebel infiltration into Kashmir down by 60pc

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said yesterday that cross-border movement of Islamic rebels from Pakistan-administered Kashmir to the Indian zone of the Himalayan region dropped by 60 percent last year.

"We are moving forward (on the peace process with Pakistan)," Singh told India's parliament. "The infiltration level has come down by more than 60 percent in 2004."

The cross-border movement of Islamic rebels into Indian-Kashmir from the Pakistani zone has been at the heart of tensions between the two nuclear rivals, who almost went to war with each other over the issue in 2002.

but claim it in full.

According to Indian intelligence sources in Kashmir, between 500 and 600 rebels crossed from Pakistan-administered Kashmir into the Indian zone in 2004, compared with between 1,200 and 1,300 in 2003.

The sources attributed the drop to fencing by the Indian army of the 760-kilometre (472-mile) Line of Control, the de facto border dividing India and Pakistan in Kashmir, as well as to the deployment of Israeli-made sensors which pick up movements of rebels in the dark.

So far this year there have been only 10 to 15 infiltrations by guerrillas, the sources said. The number traditionally falls in winter, and this year has seen the worst snowfalls in two decades in parts of Kashmir.

India accuses Pakistan of sending in rebels to bolster an Islamic insurgency in Indian-Kashmir, a charge that Islamabad denies though it admits to extending moral, political and diplomatic support to the "freedom struggle of the Kashmiri people."

More than 40,000 people have been killed in violence in Indian-Kashmir since the start of the insurgency in 1989, according to official count. Separatists say it is at least double that figure.

The South Asian rivals are engaged in a tentative and slow-paced peace process, launched after then Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee extended a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan in April 2003.

Lebanon reappoints Karami as PM

REUTERS, Beirut

Lebanon's president reappointed pro-Syrian Prime Minister Omar Karami yesterday, 10 days after he resigned amid a storm of anti-Syrian protests in Beirut.

President Emile Lahoud asked the Sunni Muslim politician to form a national unity government after parliament, where Syria's allies have a majority, nominated him for the post on Wednesday.

It was not clear if any opposition politicians would join such a government. The opposition has demanded a full Syrian withdrawal, the resignation of Syrian-backed Lebanese security chiefs and an international investigation into last month's killing of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

Gunmen kill 5 Iraqi cops in Baghdad

AP, Baghdad

Gunmen shot dead five policemen in a drive-by shooting in the Iraqi capital yesterday, one day after authorities said they'd found dozens of corpses some bullet-riddled, others beheaded at two different sites.

Gunmen in two cars opened fire on a vehicle carrying Col. Ahmed Abeis, the head of a police station in central Baghdad, killing him and four of his guards, said police Capt. Talib Thamir.

It was not known who shot the men, but Iraqi police and army troops, as well as top Iraqi politicians, are frequently targeted by insurgents who see them as collaborators with US forces.

Explosion at Australian embassy in Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

An explosion occurred outside the Australian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur late Wednesday but police yesterday ruled out the possibility of a terrorist attack.

However, the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur said it has been warned by the Malaysian government of an "anonymous, unverified threat" in the city centre.

"The American embassy in Kuala Lumpur has received information from the Malaysian government regarding an anonymous, unverified threat in central Kuala Lumpur," it said in an advisory to US citizens here.

9 dead in Costa Rica as last hostage-taker surrenders

AFP, San Jose

The last member of a band of hostage-takers surrendered to authorities late Wednesday, putting an end to a day-long crisis in which nine people died.

One of those killed was former presidential security boss Oscar Quesada, involved in an operation to release the hostages after assailants stormed a bank on Costa Rica's Pacific coast a day earlier, authorities said Wednesday.

Quesada was shot when he entered the National Bank alongside other special agents at the small tourist town of Monteverde, some 120km northwest of the capital San Jose.

Five hostages and three assailants died after Tuesday's hold-up in a confrontation with two security officers, as well as the former presidential security chief, authorities said.

Assam on high alert after string of blasts

AFP, Guwahati

Federal troops were on maximum alert yesterday in India's troubled northeastern state of Assam after a series of overnight blasts triggered by separatists killed a policeman and damaged vital installations, an official said.

"Security forces have been placed on high alert across the state with army, police, and paramilitary troops taking vantage positions to foil further militant attacks," Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi told AFP.

A total of 14 explosions, including two landmine blasts and a grenade attack, occurred Wednesday in various parts of the state. Four were in Assam's main city of Guwahati. Gogoi blamed the attacks on the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), which has been fighting for an independent Assamese homeland since 1979.

"The Ulfa wanted to make its presence felt ahead of the March 16 annual foundation day of its military

wing," he said.

The Ulfa has not immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks.

A police official said the authorities had "arrested at least a dozen of suspected militants involved in some of the blasts."

"The militants blew up two crude oil pipelines, a transmission tower, a telephone exchange, besides making an attempt to target the international airport in Guwahati," the official said.

The explosion at the airport damaged a section of the outside parking area but claimed no casualties.

The two landmine blasts at crude oil installations belonging to the state-owned Oil India Limited (OIL) in eastern Assam's Tinsukia district, triggered a "massive fire," a spokesman said.

"Our experts worked overnight and plugged the leak," he said.

A policeman was killed and three wounded in western Assam's

Bongaigaon district, 200km from Guwahati, when a bomb went off while a security team was trying to defuse explosives planted at a market.

Three civilians were wounded in a blast at vegetable market near village Sonapur, 30km east of Guwahati.

The latest attacks caused panic among civilians.

"It was fortunate that there were no major casualties. But the attacks have led to a sense of insecurity," said Haridhan Bora, a school-teacher in Guwahati.

Meanwhile, soldiers have sealed possible entry points for Ulfa rebels who enter Assam from bases inside northern Myanmar.

"We are laying a trap and with Myanmar launching a crackdown on the rebel bases in that country, we hope the Ulfa cadres will be choked and forced to come out," a senior army commander said.

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam during the past two decades.

Filipino parents bury dead children after mass poisoning

AFP, Mabini

Hysterical parents wept as they buried the bodies of schoolchildren among 30 who died after a tragic mass food-poisoning in an impoverished central Philippine town yesterday.

Ten white coffins adorned with paper flowers were carried one-by-one by mourners in the tiny chapel of San Jose village to be given last rites before being lowered into a mass grave.

The 10 were among 30 San Jose children, aged seven to 13, who died Wednesday just hours after consuming caramelized cassava sweets bought from street vendors at the school gates.

President Gloria Arroyo helicoptered to the area from central Cebu city to offer condolences to parents and ordered the release of relief funds.



A mother comforts her son, one of more than 80 schoolchildren who fell ill after eating poisoned sweets, at Garcia Memorial Provincial Hospital in the town of Talibon, in the central Philippine island of Bohol yesterday. At least 30 primary schoolchildren died Wednesday on the island after eating contaminated cassava root sweets.

HK leader resigns

AP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's leader said he asked for China's permission to resign yesterday, fueling worries that he was actually sacked by the territory's Communist masters to tighten their grip on the former British colony while it pushes for more democracy.

After ignoring 10 days of rumors that he was quitting, Tung Chee-hwa called a news conference and told reporters that he wanted to step down with two years left in his term. He said that he has been having unspecified health problems since late last year.

"My health was obviously not as good as it used to be," Tung said.

"If I continue as chief executive, I won't be able to handle it," he added.

Traders and businesspeople have looked to federal rule as a reprieve from daily crime and extortionist threats.

Regional strongman Laloo Prasad Yadav, whose party has controlled Bihar for the past 15 years, has been blamed for the erosion of law and order in the state.

Yadav became Bihar chief minister in March 1990 and returned to office five years later but installed his wife Rabri Devi in office in 1997 when he faced imprisonment in a case of financial corruption.

'Federal rule may save Bihar from chaos'

AFP, New Delhi

The imposition of direct federal rule in India's Bihar state will help end years of lawlessness and chaos, analysts said as the governor empowered by New Delhi to restore law and order promised a thorough overhaul.

Presidential rule, which arms federally-appointed governors with sweeping powers, was imposed in Bihar Monday after no political group was able to muster a majority in provincial elections held last month.

"Bihar has no government, no law and order, nothing. It is on the verge of collapse. Presidential rule was long overdue. This is very necessary, very timely," political analyst B.G. Verghese of the Centre for Policy Research told AFP Wednesday.

He said the only chance the state had of not descending into chaos was if a competent set of advisors worked together with the governor

to shake up the administration and law enforcement.

Bihar is India's most crime-ridden state where strongmen and powerful Maoist insurgent groups virtually have free reign and where at least 5,000 murders and 12,000 abductions take place every year, according to police figures.

"In their hearts, even the politicians know that what Bihar is facing is cancer. There is a real opportunity for making some beginning towards turning around things. It is no longer a question of getting a government by some addition and subtraction," Verghese said.

Bihar's governor Buta Singh pledged to revamp the administration.

"Administrative reshuffle is a key to improving law and order and providing full security to the people," he told reporters Wednesday after a meeting with top state officials including police and bureaucrats.

Local media reports said the governor was likely to appoint two to three top advisors, including top Indian policeman K.P.S. Gill, who helped stamp out a separatist militant movement in the eighties in northern Punjab state.

"Law, order and development, besides measures to check terrorism on the Bihar-Nepal border will be accorded top priority," Singh said.

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Hard-line nationalists shout slogans in Colombo yesterday denouncing the World Bank country director in Sri Lanka, Peter Harrold, over remarks attributed to him in a local newspaper allegedly recognising the Tamil Tiger rebels. Harrold has said he had been misquoted, but the hard-line Patriotic National Movement, which includes members of the ruling coalition, has asked for his expulsion.

100 feared dead in human trafficking incidents off Yemen

AFP, Geneva

More than 100 Africans are feared to have been drowned when smugglers taking them to Yemen forced them to jump into the sea or their boat sank, the UN refugee agency said yesterday.

Survivors of one incident told the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that the crew of one boat forced 85 passengers overboard while they were "still some way" from the coast on Monday.

Eighteen people, thought to be Somalis and Ethiopians, drowned, and Yemeni authorities had recovered seven bodies, the UNHCR said in a statement.

Sixty-seven survivors reached the coast and were taken to a refugee centre, it added.

Another 93 people including women and children were thought to have died after their boat sank in the Gulf of Aden on March 3, while the four crew survived.

The boat was among five that sailed from Bossasso, in north-eastern Somalia, disembarking 450 passengers near the southern Yemeni coastal village of Bir Ali, where they received help from local authorities.