

Palestinians take control of Jericho

REUTERS, Jericho

Israeli forces pulled back from Jericho yesterday, strengthening the hand of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas as he seeks to commit militants to a formal ceasefire so that he can talk peace with Israel.

The withdrawal, delayed for weeks by disputes over its scope, marked the launch of a planned handover of five cities in the occupied West Bank to Palestinian control agreed at a Feb. 8 summit between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

"From this moment we are resuming our control over the Jericho area," Palestinian security General Ahmed Eid said seconds after shaking hands with his Israeli counterpart in a short ceremony on Jericho's outskirts.

It was the first in a series to be held over coming hours in areas around the biblical oasis town where Palestinians were establishing a security presence to replace Israeli soldiers dismantling roadblocks.

The handover was expected to be completed in the afternoon.

Palestinians flashed V-for-victory signs and sat down to festive picnics in Jericho as cranes loaded concrete blocks onto Israeli trucks at the city's main entrance and the two sides' officers met to wrap up the details.

The accord allows armed Palestinian police to operate with the obligation to keep militants in

check. In return, Israel agreed to end arrest raids and lift tough restrictions on movement of Palestinian inhabitants.

Israeli officers said the Jericho area would be given over to "full Palestinian security control," ending a military encirclement, and residents could travel freely to Ramallah, the hub of Palestinian government and commerce in the West Bank.

But Israeli soldiers would retain control over the nearby Jordan Valley transit highway used by many Israelis.

Sharon pledged to move troops away in phases from four other West Bank cities -- Tulkarm, Ramallah, Qalqilya and Bethlehem -- after Abbas promised to ensure militants mounted no further attacks from those areas.

Abbas, elected in January to succeed the late Yasser Arafat on a platform of ending violence and embarking on "road map" negotiations for a Palestinian state, is meeting militant groups in Cairo this week to get them to declare a formal ceasefire.

A tacit deal to observe calm wrung by Abbas from militant leaders soon after his election has been prone to violations, including a Feb. 25 suicide bombing that killed five Israelis.

Militant leaders said any formal ceasefire depended on what Israel had to offer.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian security guards man a checkpoint in Jericho yesterday ahead of a full security transfer of the West Bank city and its surrounding area from Israel to the Palestinians following an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

N Korea lashes out at Rice, rules out talks

AFP, Seoul

North Korea lashed out at US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice yesterday for calling the communist country an "outpost of tyranny" and ruled out new nuclear crisis talks as she headed to the region.

"We cannot return to the negotiating table after having been dubbed an outpost of tyranny," Yonhap news agency quoted a North Korean foreign ministry spokesman as telling Pyongyang's official media.

The spokesman urged Rice to apologize for her description of the North, according to Yonhap.

Rice arrives in Tokyo on Friday ahead of visits to Seoul and Beijing where efforts to revive the six-way talks will dominate the agenda.

During a stop-off in India, she warned North Korea it was becoming increasingly isolated and said Pyongyang's return to stalled six-party talks was the only way to end a standoff over its nuclear weapons drive.

Condoleezza Rice, on a six-nation tour of Asia, warned North Korea it was becoming increasingly isolated and said Pyongyang's return to stalled six-party talks was the only way to end a standoff over its nuclear weapons drive.

Stressing that the United States had no intention of invading North Korea, Rice called on North Korea to end its nuclear weapons programmes "verifiably and irreversibly".

Alcohol powered plane launched

AFP, Sao Paulo

A Brazilian firm on Tuesday delivered the world's first ethanol-burning production aircraft to a crop-spraying company and it sees a booming market for alcohol powered planes.

The single-seat EMB 202 Ipanema is the first production-series model approved by aviation authorities to run on ethanol produced from sugar cane.

Its makers, Neiva Aeronautic Industry, said it had orders for 70 of the single-engine planes this year.

The Ipanema is a new step forward for Brazil's pioneering national ethanol fuel program, launched in response to the 1970s oil crisis.

Drawing on its world-leading sugar cane production to produce the alternative to petroleum-based gasoline, by the 1980s ethanol was the dominant fuel for automobiles.

Today, under a flexibility program, roughly a third of all cars sold are adapted to use both ethanol and regular gasoline.

India, US push Nepal to restore democracy

Kathmandu justifies emergency to UN

AFP, New Delhi/ Geneva

India and the United States called jointly yesterday for a return to multi-party democracy in Nepal, saying the seizure of power in the Himalayan outpost by King Gyanendra was a "setback" for the region.

The call was made at a joint press conference between Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and visiting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice after they had held talks in the Indian capital, where Rice kicked off a six-nation tour of Asia.

"We discussed important regional and global questions. We approached these issues (on the basis of) our common commitment to democracy, pluralism and prosperity," Singh said.

"On Nepal we agreed that recent events have been a setback to these goals. Democratic freedoms must be restored and reconciliation with political parties must lead to a return to a multi-party democracy in Nepal," he added.

Gyanendra dismissed a four-party coalition government on February 1 and seized control of Nepal, imposing emergency rule and vowing to tackle an increasingly bloody Maoist revolt that has claimed 11,000 lives since 1996.

The power grab has been widely condemned internationally, with India and Britain freezing military aid needed by Nepal's badly-equipped army to fight the Maoists while Washington has threatened to follow suit unless the king restores basic freedoms.

"There needs to be a return to democracy in Nepal," Rice said in an interview with Indian television station NDTV.

At the joint press conference with Singh she said India and the US shared "regional responsibilities but also increasingly global responsibilities".

"We had a chance to talk about Afghanistan, about Iraq and specially about the challenge to democracy in Nepal where we had outstanding cooperation between our ambassadors to try and help that country to get back on the democratic path ... that simply must happen and we are in complete agreement that it needs to happen very, very soon," she said.

Meanwhile, Nepal told the UN human rights commission Tuesday the state of emergency it declared six weeks ago was temporary and being slowly relaxed just a day after 500 anti-monarchy protestors were rounded up there.

Nepalese foreign minister Ramesh Nath Pandey asked the human rights commission for understanding and for support from the international community saying his

country was still committed to human rights.

King Gyanendra of Nepal took control of the country by firing the government on February 1 and declaring a state of emergency in an effort to stifle Maoist rebels, who have battled since 1996 to topple the monarchy in a struggle that has claimed 11,000 lives.

"The larger threat of terrorism on the enjoyment of human rights should not escape from your attention," Pandey explained.

"The effective implementation of our commitments depends on our ability to effectively put down the insurgency and restore peace and security in the country."

"Nepal has consistently called for and is committed to the negotiated solution to the insurgency based on patriotism and multiparty democracy, but the rebels have refused to come to the negotiating table," he added.

Several political parties are engaged in a programme of demonstrations against King Gyanendra's seizure of power.

Of those arrested Monday 15 will be held for three months under the Public Security Act. Among those detained are leaders, lawmakers and activists of the five political parties who organised the protest, a police official said Tuesday.

Bush asks Hizbollah to lay down arms for legitimacy

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush held out the prospect of legitimacy for the Lebanese guerrilla group Hizbollah on Tuesday by saying it can prove it is not a terrorist organisation by laying down its arms.

US officials have said they could accept a political role for Hizbollah in Lebanon if it disarmed. The group has been blamed for launching attacks against Israel from southern Lebanon.

But the organisation is also a political party, with deputies in the Lebanese parliament, and last week it showed its power by drawing hundreds of thousands of people to central Beirut for a pro-Syria rally.

The rally appeared aimed at deflating a US-led drive to pressure Syria to pull out troops from Lebanon.

Blasts mar first Iraqi parliament session

AP, Baghdad

Iraq's first freely elected parliament in half a century began its opening session yesterday after a series of explosions targeted the gathering.

The opening marked a major milestone on the road to forming a new government in a country still beset by violence.

The parliament's 275 members, elected during Jan. 30 elections, convened in an auditorium amid tight security in the heavily guarded Green Zone with US helicopter gunships hovering overhead.

Minutes before convening, at least a half dozen explosions detonated a few hundred yards away. The US military said two mortar rounds landed inside the zone but caused no injuries.

The lawmakers opened with a reading of verses from the Quran. Iraqi Chief Justice Medhat al Mahmoud then administered the

oath to the assembled deputies.

"It is a great day in Iraqi history that its elected representatives meet," said Fuad Masoum, a Kurdish delegate. "This day coincides with a painful memory that has many meanings. ... Today, on this occasion, we celebrate the inauguration of parliament after the fall of this regime."

Wednesday marked the anniversary of the Saddam Hussein-ordered chemical attack in 1988 on the northern Kurdish town of Halabja, an attack that killed 5,000 people.

Iraqi leaders have not yet agreed on a coalition government, and the leader of the Shiite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance, cleric Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, said his alliance hoped to "form a government whose motto is to serve the Iraqi people, a government of national unity and reconciliation."

"A government that can root out

violence and set a trial for Saddam and the elements of his regime," Hakim said in a speech that wove in and out of prayer. He said a government led by the alliance would also try "to achieve the independence of Iraq and put an end to the role of multinational forces in Iraq."

Jalal Talabani, the Kurdish leader who will probably become Iraq's next president, said deputies "all have a duty to achieve real national unity."

"Iraq is facing tough times due to the continuation of criminal terror crimes," he said. "al-Qaeda is waging a war of extermination on Kurds and Shias."

The alliance and a Kurdish coalition agreed last week to form a coalition government with Shiite politician Ibrahim al-Jaafari as prime minister. In return, Talabani will become Iraq's first Kurdish president, though the presidency is a largely ceremonial post.

Indo-Pak troops work together for mending bad Kashmir road

AFP, Kaman Post, India

Villagers watched in amazement as Pakistani and Indian officers shared jokes, tea and snacks while they worked to open a road over a heavily-fortified border in divided Kashmir.

The work on the road crossing the de facto border between the two countries in the Himalayan state of Kashmir follows decades of sniper and artillery fire across a dividing line strewn with landmines until a few weeks ago.

"I had never visualised Indians and Pakistanis working together. Now it is a treat to see them working on this road," said Mohammed Sidiq, a labourer from neighbouring Odussa village.

The situation contrasts with the only other border crossing between the two countries, at Wagah in the

Punjab state. There, soldiers from the two countries face off in an evening closing ceremony that ends with the gates slammed shut for the night. It is also a change from a border standoff in the summer of 2002, when the two countries almost went to war.

Instead, the soldiers are coordinating efforts to rebuild the bridge and road linking this key Indian army post to Pakistan-controlled Kashmir for a bus service set to start April 7.

"The army commanders from two sides share jokes, have tea and snacks during meetings," an Indian army officer said.

Only 15 months ago, the garrisons on either side of the road used to wake each other up with machine gun bursts and artillery fire. Suspicious movement on either side ignited gunbattles.

'Major quake may hit tsunami zone soon'

AFP, London

Seismologists say there is a heightened risk that a major earthquake may soon strike the western coast of Sumatra as a result of the monster quake that generated the December 26 tsunami.

The Indonesian city of Bandar Aceh, which was already badly hit by the killer wave, could be at risk from a quake measuring up to 7.5 on the Richter scale and there is a potential for a tsunami-making 8.5 quake offshore, they warn.

"There is no doubt -- our calculations show a very significant increase on stress on two major active faults in the Sumatra region" since December 26, seismologist John McCloskey at Britain's University of Ulster told AFP.

McCloskey noted that in so-called subduction zones, an earthquake can be swiftly followed by

another one if certain geological conditions are met.

"There is a very well established link between these stresses and following earthquakes," he said.

Energy released by the December 26 quake has boosted stress in adjoining parts of two dangerous faults, he said.

One fault runs under land to the east of the December 26 quake and crosses the northwestern tip of Sumatra. The other fault, known as the Sunda Trench, runs under the sea to the south, parallel to the coast, where two fatal tsunamis occurred in 1833 and 1861.

"We are not trying to cry wolf," said McCloskey. "We can point to many other quakes where the stresses like the one we've measured have resulted in a following earthquake, and we are suggesting there is a significantly increased risk.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (L), India's ruling Congress party president Sonia Gandhi (C) and Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh walk out of a meeting together in New Delhi yesterday. Rice was on a full working day visit to New Delhi and held a flurry of talks with Indian leaders focussing on the India-Pakistan peace process and other regional issues.