

# Militants link ME truce deal with guarantee of their political role

AFP, Cairo

The future shape of Palestinian politics stole the spotlight from wrangling over a truce with Israel in factional talks in Cairo, as Islamists conditioned a ceasefire on guarantees of a role in the national apparatus.

The crunch negotiations between the leaders of all 13 major militant groups were expected to wrap up on Thursday with no breakthrough on the true deal sought by the international community.

The debate on whether to continue anti-Israeli attacks was overshadowed in the talks by discussions on how to include groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, that have expressed their willingness to move away from a chiefly military agenda to join mainstream politics.

For its part, Hamas, which last week announced it intended to run in upcoming legislative elections, suggested that the new Palestinian landscape be fashioned along the results of recent municipal elections in Gaza in which it won a large majority of the votes.

"We need a leadership in which all Palestinian forces participate and we think the best way to define this participation is to mirror the results coming out of the polls," the group's spokesman Mohammed Nazal told AFP.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad boycotted the first legislative elections in the Palestinian territories in 1996 and refused to field candidates for the presidential election in January, which saw the moderate Mahmud Abbas chosen to succeed the late Yasser Arafat.

## Powerful blasts kill 29 in China

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

At least 29 people were killed when a double-decker bus collided with a truck loaded with firecrackers and explosives and exploded in eastern China's Jiangxi Province early yesterday.

The blasts were so powerful that they could be heard some two kilometers away, Xinhua and local media reported.

According to a report by photobase, affiliated to the east China bureau of People's Daily, police have found 29 bodies at the explosion site, and no one in the bus and truck survived the explosions. Five villagers and two drivers near the site were injured and are treated in a local hospital, and about 60 houses nearby were also damaged.

The blasts occurred at about 4:05am on Thursday in Shangrao, a city in Jiangxi Province when the long-distance bus, traveling from southern Shenzhen city to eastern Zhejiang province, collided with a truck loaded firecrackers and explosives that was travelling from central China's Hunan Province to Zhejiang.



PHOTO: AFP

A protester carrying a cross depicting Jesus Christ kneels in front of a burning mock US missile during a protest near the presidential palace in Manila yesterday. The demonstrators denounced Philippine President Gloria Arroyo's support for the US "anti-terror" campaign.

'Bush, Blair force Berlusconi to backtrack on Iraq pullout'

AFP, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was forced by Washington and London Wednesday to backtrack on his surprise announcement that Italian troops would start leaving Iraq in September, the Italian press said yesterday.

"George W. Bush and Tony Blair say 'Stop Berlusconi,'" read the headline in the centre-left opposition daily *La Repubblica*.

US President, Bush and British Prime Minister Blair Wednesday reacted to Berlusconi's announcement by saying that no troop withdrawal from Iraq has been ordered and that the Italian leader would not act unilaterally.

Berlusconi then qualified his remarks on pulling Italy's 3,300 soldiers out of southern Iraq in about six months, calling it "a wish."

"If it isn't possible, it isn't possible. The disengagement must be co-ordinated with the allies," he said.

# Iraq insecurity rife two years after invasion

AFP, Baghdad

Violence and insecurity hold sway over much of Iraq two years after the US-led invasion, despite burgeoning Iraqi security forces and the continued presence of 150,000 foreign troops, mostly Americans.

The two main roads heading south from the capital are so dangerous that one of them is nicknamed the "highway of death", while the other passes through an area with the dubious moniker of the "triangle of death".

The road north, which passes through the country's Sunni Arab heartland, is the scene of repeated kidnappings and murders.

The cities of Ramadi, west of the capital, and Samarra and Mosul, to the north, see daily clashes between insurgents and government forces

## Red Cross warns states practising torture

AFP, Geneva

"Nobody is above the law" which bans torture, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned Wednesday at the UN commission on human rights.

ICRC president Jakob Kellenberger said the ban on torture and other forms of mistreatment was absolute.

The ICRC and other human rights groups have accused the United States government of torture of prisoners in Iraq, Afghanistan and the US military base in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

"We continue to hear certain voices who say that individuals do not deserve to be treated with humanity, because of the horrible

acts they are suspected of committing," said Kellenberger, who met last month with US President George W. Bush over concerns about the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. "Nobody is above the law," Kellenberger said.

The ICRC is guardian of the Geneva Conventions which ban the use of torture.

The United States has denied that detainees at Guantanamo Bay had been tortured or mistreated, after a newspaper report cited ICRC findings of torture during an inspection visit in June 2004.

Another confidential report by the humanitarian agency leaked in 2004 denounced abuse inflicted on Iraqi prisoners in the US-run Abu Ghraib jail near Baghdad.

## Syria completes first phase of pullback

REUTERS, Beirut

Syria completed the first phase of its troop pullout from Lebanon yesterday, bringing Damascus closer to meeting US and Lebanese opposition demands that it quit the neighbour it has dominated for three decades.

Washington wants all Syrian troops and intelligence agents out of Lebanon to allow for free elections in May and demands the disarmament of Shia Muslim Hezbollah guerrillas.

But Hezbollah, which is backed by Syria and Iran, said it would keep its guns to fight Israel rather than confining itself to politics as demanded by President Bush.

## US won't slam China on HR at UN meet

AFP, Geneva

For the first time in more than a decade, the United States is not to propose a motion criticising China at this year's session of the UN human rights commission, a member of the US delegation said yesterday.

"We're not tabling a China resolution this year. We've been working with them for many years to try to make them do some reforms on human rights and in the past year they have made some progress that we like," the source told AFP.

## UK foils high-tech bank robbery attempt

AFP, London

Police foiled what could have been one of Britain's biggest bank heists ever, after a gang tried to hack into computers at the London branch of the Sumitomo Mitsui bank group to steal 220 million pounds (423 million dollars, 316 million euros), police sources said yesterday.

The gang broke into Sumitomo's computer systems last October and tried to make cash transfers to 10 bank accounts around the world, according to the Financial Times.

Police said no money was taken and Sumitomo stressed it had suffered no financial loss as a result of being targeted.

The National Hi-Tech Crime Unit (NHTCU), the branch of the British police which deals with computer crimes, said it was leading an investigation into "the failed attempt to seize money from a bank in London".



PHOTO: AFP

Chairman of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Yasin Malik (L) shakes hands with famous Indian writer and social worker Arundhati Roy (R) during the inauguration of a photo exhibition titled "Voices for Peace, Voices for Freedom", in New Delhi yesterday.