

Palestinians move to disarm militants

Israel completes WB town handover

AP, REUTERS, Ramallah/Tulkarm

Palestinian officials took a tentative first step toward disarming militants, banning them from carrying guns in public and requiring all weapons to be registered, according to a new directive.

According to senior Palestinian security officials, the Interior Ministry distributed letters outlining weapons restrictions to militants in the West Bank. The AP obtained a copy of the letter Monday.

Militants said they would not comply until Israel completes a promised withdrawal from West Bank towns.

The move was seen as a concession to the United States and Israel, who have long demanded the Palestinians crack down on militant groups. Palestinians leader Mahmoud Abbas has preferred to use persuasion to get the gunmen to

lay down their arms.

Israel welcomed the move. After four years of bloodshed, Israel has made disarming of militants and dismantling violent groups like Hamas a precondition for progress along the US-backed "road map" peace plan toward a Palestinian state.

The directive limits militants to a single weapon and bars them from loading the weapons or carrying them in public. It also obligates militants to license the weapons with the ministry and forbids them to change the serial numbers on the guns.

Many militants possess more than one weapon, and gunmen have become folk heroes by brandishing their arms openly on the streets and firing in the air at marches and funerals.

The Palestinian Interior Ministry has asked militants to sign the letter

and commit to the process.

Leaders of the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades confirmed they had received the document and said they were considering the offer.

However, Kamel Ghannam, an al Aqsa leader in Ramallah, said militants would not sign the pledge until Israel carries out a planned military withdrawal from five West Bank cities.

Meanwhile, Palestinian police were deployed in the town of Tulkarm for the first time in more than four years on Monday after Israel gave Palestinians security control of a second West Bank city.

The handover of Tulkarm, days after Palestinians regained Jericho, was seen as a gesture by Israel after Palestinian President Mahoud Abbas won a deal with militants last week to extend a de facto truce.



Palestinian and Israeli security officers shake hands after the opening of Anabta checkpoint near the West Bank town of Tulkarm yesterday as part of a broader transfer of security control to Palestinian forces.

Ten killed in US school shooting

AP, Bemidji

A high school student went on a shooting rampage on an Indian reservation Monday, killing his grandparents at their home and then seven people at his school, grinning and waving as he fired, authorities and witnesses said. The suspect apparently killed himself after exchanging gunfire with police.

It was the nation's worst school shooting since the Columbine massacre in 1999 that killed 13 people.

One student said her classmates pleaded with the gunman to stop shooting.

"You could hear a girl saying, 'No, Jeff, quit, quit. Leave me alone. What are you doing?'" student Sondra Hegstrom told The Pioneer of Bemidji, using the name of the suspected shooter.

Before the shootings at Red Lake High School, the suspect's grandparents were shot in their

home and died later. There was no immediate indication of the gunman's motive.

In addition to the shooter, the death toll at the school included five students, a teacher and a security guard, FBI spokesman Paul McCabe said in Minneapolis. Among the dead was Neva Rogers, 62, a teacher at the school for five or six years, the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported.

Fourteen to 15 other students were injured, McCabe said. Some were being cared for in Bemidji, about 20 miles south of Red Lake. Authorities closed roads to the reservation in far northern Minnesota while they investigated the shootings.

Hegstrom described the shooter grinning and waving at a student his gun was pointed at, then swiveling to shoot someone else. "I looked him in the eye and ran in the room, and that's when I hid," she told The Pioneer.



Indian activists of Greenpeace and representatives of pollution-victim communities from across the country shout slogans and wave placards as they take part in a protest march marking the World Water Day in New Delhi yesterday. Hundreds of activists marched towards parliament demanding of the government to ensure clean drinking water as ordered by the Supreme Court of India.

World water situation 'unacceptable': WHO

AFP, Geneva

The head of the World Health Organisation said the lack of clean drinking water in much of the world, with its accompanying pandemic of diarrhoeal diseases constituted "an unacceptable situation."

WHO Director-General Lee Jong-Wook said an estimated 30,000 people, most of them children, die of such diseases every week.

"People who can turn on a tap and have safe and clean water to drink, to cook with and to bathe in often take it for granted, and yet more than one billion of our fellow human beings have little choice but to use potentially harmful sources of water," Lee said.

"Every week, diarrhoeal disease due to easily preventable causes claims the lives of 30,000 people, most of them young children. This is a silent humanitarian crisis that thwarts progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)," he said.

The goals, adopted at a global UN summit in 2000 included a pledge to halve the number of people with no access to clean drinking water, currently estimated at about 1.1 billion, by 2015. Two years later, a world summit on sustainable development in Johannesburg added a commitment to halve the number of people -- some 2.4 billion -- who have no basic sanitation.

India to close submarine deal in 'days'

AFP, New Delhi

India is within "days" of closing a two-billion dollar deal under which its navy will buy six French Scorpene submarines, a senior naval official said yesterday.

"It is about to get through," the vice-chief of naval staff Yashwant Prasad told reporters, of the deal aimed at plugging a hole in India's conventional military capability.

"It should be through in the next coming days," he added. A source in the prime minister's office said the deal was on the agenda of the next security cabinet meeting next week.

The deal has been on the table for several years. It provides for the sale of six Scorpene-class submarines and technology transfer that will allow the subs to be manufactured under licence in India.

The "final approval" for the project, under which the Scorpene will be manufactured at Mazagaon Docks off the western city of Bombay, was discussed when French chief of defence staff General Henri Bentegeat visited here this month, a naval official said.

Once the Scorpene deal gets the go-ahead, it will be at least six years before the first submarine is ready for induction, the official said.

By then, some of the older boats in the country's fleet of 16 diesel-electric submarines will be up for decommissioning, he added.

Nepali anti-graft body grills 6 ex-ministers

AFP, Kathmandu

Six former ministers in Nepal's sacked government went before an anti-graft panel on charges of embezzling state funds, officials said yesterday as the king began a corruption crackdown promised after seizing power last month.

The Royal Commission for Corruption Control questioned the six former ministers over the alleged use of government money to pay for personal and party celebrations during the Hindu festival of Daishan last October, a commission official said.

Four ministers -- Mohammad Mohsin, Badri Prasad Mandal, Purna Bahadur Khadka and Hom Nath Dahal -- were quizzed Monday and later released on payment of bail ranging from 300,000 rupees (4,225 dollars) to three million rupees (42,225 dollars).

On Tuesday, two more ex-ministers, Yuba Raj Gyawali and Jog Mehar Shrestha, appeared

before the commission to explain the alleged embezzlement, said the official, who would not be named.

All the ministers were members of the four-party coalition government led by Sher Bahadur Deuba that was sacked by the king on February 1 when he seized power and declared emergency rule.

The commission alleges the ex-ministers had persuaded the cabinet to distribute 4.1 million rupees (57,746 dollars) from the Prime Minister's Relief Fund to party activists and relatives during the Dashain festivities, the official said.

The ministers have been warned to appear before the commission again on March 31 to respond to the allegations, the official said.

The corruption commission, which has wide-ranging powers equivalent to a court of law, was constituted by the king on February 16 to curb corruption in all sectors of a society.

Camilla in line to become Queen

AP, London

In the latest twist in a royal wedding saga that has been full of flip-flops, the British government revealed Monday that like it or not, Britons will have to get used to Queen Camilla.

That's because Camilla Parker Bowles will, by law, automatically become queen when Charles is crowned.

While the public has come around to supporting the marriage, opinion polls still show strong opposition to Parker Bowles taking the title of queen.

But any attempt to change the rules to bow to popular sentiment would be exceedingly difficult: It would require not only a new law in Britain, but also legislative changes in 15 nations of the Commonwealth.

Ever since Prince Charles' office announced the wedding in February, preparations have been riddled with reversals that have prompted many observers to liken the nuptials to a farce.

COMMANDER SAYS Major crisis brewing in Pak tribal belt

AP, Sui, Pakistan

A local commander warned yesterday that a "major crisis" could be brewing in a restive Pakistani town where thousands of armed tribesmen have surrounded a military base following clashes last week that reportedly left dozens killed.

Brig. Salim Nawaz showed video images of what he said were tribesmen armed with rocket-propelled grenades and assault rifles ringing the base in Dera Bugti, in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province. A local official told The Associated Press that around 5,000 tribesmen have taken up positions on mountains surrounding the town, some setting up roadblocks and digging trenches.

Tribesmen in the region have been angered by a dispute over royalty rights for natural gas extracted from the area, and by government plans to set up a new military garrison.

They also are enraged by the rape of a female doctor in the area, allegedly by members of the military, and by what they say is the government's failure to arrest the suspects.

Nawaz said his Frontier Corps troops have the power to fight off the tribesmen but are hoping to avoid such a confrontation.

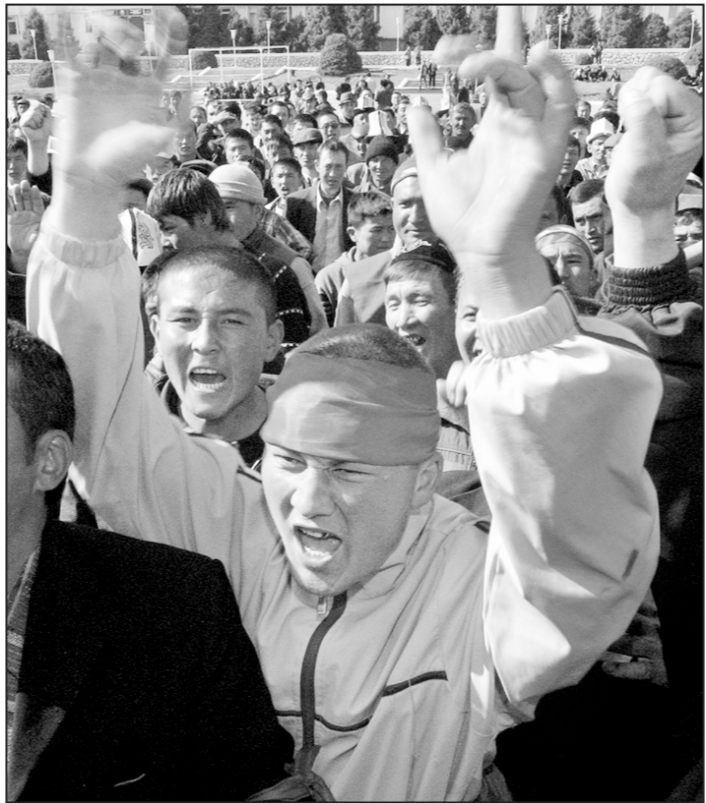
"We will use force only as a last resort," he said. "We have the capability to remove them but we are exercising full restraint so the situation does not get messed up."

The fighting broke out Thursday after tribesmen allegedly attacked a convoy of paramilitary troops in mountains near Dera Bugti.

As many as 60 people, including eight soldiers, reportedly died in the attack and subsequent clashes. Seventeen minority Hindus were reportedly among the dead. They were killed when their temple was hit by rockets during gunbattles between the tribal fighters and the troops.

Nawaz said he had no figure on the number of casualties, but acknowledged that civilians may have died.

Thousands of government officials, their families and women and children of local tribesmen have fled Dera Bugti, fearing fresh fighting in the town. But the troops and tribesmen have been sticking to a cease-fire since Friday.



Kyrgyz opposition supporters demonstrate in Osh, southern Kyrgyzstan yesterday. A prominent human rights activist and a top opposition figure have been arrested in Kyrgyzstan, where protesters have clashed with police after a disputed parliamentary vote.

US soldiers kill 26 Iraqi militants

AP, AFP, Baghdad

US soldiers, ambushed by dozens of Iraqi militants near the infamous "Triangle of Death," responded by killing 26 guerrillas in the largest single insurgent death toll since last fall's battle for Fallujah, the US military said Monday.

The high number of deaths in Sunday's daylight battle south of Baghdad was attributed to the large number of attackers, unusual in a country where most clashes are carried out by small bands of gunmen or suicide bombers.

"I was surprised at the numbers," said Staff Sgt. Timothy

Nein, a squad leader for the 617th Military Police Company of Richmond, Ky., and a native of Henryville, Ind., involved in the firefight. "Usually we can usually expect seven to 10."

A US soldier was killed in action Monday in Iraq's restive Al-Anbar province, west of Baghdad, the US military said Tuesday in a statement.

"A Marine assigned to 1st Marine Expeditionary Force was killed in action March 21, while conducting security and stability operations in the Al Anbar province," the statement said, declining to give further details.

Jordan to send back envoy to Iraq

AFP, Algiers

Jordan's King Abdullah II ordered the return of Amman's top diplomat to Baghdad as officials from the two neighbouring countries met Monday in the Algerian capital to defuse a diplomatic crisis.

"His Majesty King Abdullah ordered the immediate return of the Jordanian charge d'affaires to Iraq ... as a gesture of goodwill to ease the tension between our countries," Jordanian Prime Minister Faysal al-Fayez told AFP.

He was speaking after a meeting with Iraq's outgoing President Ghazi al-Yawar, while the foreign ministers

of Iraq and Jordan, Hoshiyar Zebari and Hani Mulki, met separately to contain tensions between their countries.

Jordan on Sunday recalled its charge d'affaires Dimai Haddad from Baghdad, saying it feared for his safety due to anti-Jordan demonstrations over the alleged involvement of a Jordanian in a devastating suicide bombing.

Hours later Baghdad retaliated by recalling its ambassador from Amman, Atta Abdel Wahab, and accused Jordan of not doing enough to help prevent attacks in Iraq.