

Japan pledges extra \$100m for Palestine

REUTERS, AFP, Tokyo

Japan has pledged an additional \$100 million in aid to Palestine, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said yesterday after a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Japan has given Palestine \$760 million in aid since 1993 and an additional \$60 million in special aid following the death in November last year of former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Abbas arrived in Japan on Sunday for a three-day visit that is the first by any Palestinian leader since longtime leader Arafat came in 2000. He leaves Japan on Tuesday for China and is set to meet with US President Bush on May 26 in Washington.

In an interview with Japan's Kyodo news agency on Sunday, Abbas said Japan should continue to support Palestine, both economically and politically, as it moves toward the establishment of an independent nation in a peaceful Middle East.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas said in remarks published yesterday that summer elections would go ahead as scheduled after talk of a delay amid fears the Islamist group Hamas would post gains.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators chant slogans during a rally against Nepalese King Gyanendra's policies Sunday in Lafayette Park near the White House in Washington, DC. In February, King Gyanendra seized power, detained political leaders and suspended civil liberties under a state of emergency law, saying the move was required to quell an anti-monarchy Maoist revolt in which nearly 12,000 people have died. Protesters are stepping up activities against the power-grab in an attempt to force the monarch to restore democracy.

Bombings, drive-by shootings kill 10

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Mortar barrages, roadside bombings and drive-by shootings killed ten Iraqis, officials said yesterday, as Iraq's new government vowed to crack down on the killers of more than 40 people whose bodies were found over the weekend.

Over the weekend the bodies of at least 41 people were found. They included two Iraqi journalists found in their car on a road south of Baghdad, 10 soldiers dumped in the battleground city of Ramadi, two truck drivers lying with nine other bodies in the chicken farm and a judge found nearby.

That violence continued with officials saying Monday that mortar rounds, homemade bombs and drive-by shootings killed 10 people and injured at least 10.

Four Iraqi soldiers were killed and at least four people wounded after a mortar and roadside bomb attack was launched against a fire station in Khan Bani Saad, a town about 15 miles northeast of Baghdad, said police Col. Mudafar Mohammed.

Chandrika sees her life in danger over aid deal

Lankan donors' meet opens

AFP, Kandy

Lanka's president told international donors yesterday that she will enter into an aid-sharing deal with Tiger rebels despite threats to her life from "within and outside" her government.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga made the remarks at the opening of a two-day aid meeting attended by more than 125 participants including the World Bank, Japan and the United States aimed at helping the island nation rebuild its economy after two decades of civil war and last December's tsunami.

Kumaratunga vowed to the donors that the country would go ahead with a proposed deal to distribute tsunami aid in tandem with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam despite threats from opponents of the plan.

"In the decisions we are called

upon to take, the lives of some of us are in extreme danger," Kumaratunga said, adding that most of her coalition government supported the move.

She said that there is a threat "from within" her government as well, in an apparent reference to opposition to the aid distribution deal from her Marxist ally, the JVP, or People's Liberation Front.

The World Bank, speaking on behalf of the donors, said they supported her aim for a deal with the LTTE and noted it could boost the island's peace hopes.

"Development partners are strongly supportive and wish you success," said World Bank official Praful Patel.

Kumaratunga assured the international donors, who had pledged two billion dollars for tsunami reconstruction and another billion for budgetary support, that she will also make good on a prom-

ise to work with the LTTE and strengthen peace moves.

"Our commitment to this cause will be steadfast despite various objections from extremists, from various groups," Kumaratunga said. "I know and can assure all of you that the vast majority of Sri Lankan people stand with us."

Shortly after she ended her lengthy address, a Buddhist monk legislator from the opposition National Heritage Party, Athuraliya Ratana, made an impromptu speech denouncing the proposed joint mechanism.

"The president has no right to have any deal with the LTTE," the monk said at the tightly-guarded meeting in the central hill resort.

Kumaratunga made no reply to the monk, but in her speech delivered minutes earlier vowed that the government will press ahead with a new poverty reduction strategy coupled with peace moves.

"We recognise that no economic development will be sustainable, no poverty reduction will be effective for more than a couple of years, unless there is political stability and peace in the country," she stressed.

The president lost her right eye in a Tamil rebel suicide assassination attempt in December 1999, just three days before elections. Kumaratunga launched a peace drive with the Tigers in August 1994 but it collapsed in April 1995.

After winning a second term in December 1999, she invited Norway to help broker peace on the island where more than 60,000 people have been killed in three decades of ethnic bloodshed.

Kumaratunga said the proposed joint mechanism with the Tiger rebels would not be a direct element of the peace process, but would help build confidence between the two sides.

Nepalese army rescues 600 abducted students

Four rebels, 4 soldiers killed in clash

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese security forces rescued 600 students on Sunday who had been abducted by Maoist rebels from village schools in remote mountainous areas in the west of the country, the army said.

"The security forces managed to rescue Sunday 600 students abducted from Niskot area of Myagdi district," an army statement said.

Earlier Sunday, the army said that in a separate series of abductions, some 650 students had been taken from schools in western Nepal in the last week or "several days".

The latest abductions included at least 450 students from villages in the Tanahun, Palpa, and Baglung districts, and another 200 from a school in the western district of Salyan.

The army said it had little infor-

mation on where the students were being held, but termed the abductions "inhuman and a violation of human rights."

Rebels have been known to round up students to indoctrinate them with Maoist ideology, but normally return most of them unharmed.

The practice has drawn criticism from Nepalese and international rights groups who have appealed to the guerrillas to protect students from the violence.

Meanwhile, four international aid agencies suspended their operations in western Nepal earlier Sunday after their aid workers were beaten by rebels.

The World Food Programme, Britain's Department for International Development, the German Technical Cooperation, and the

Dutch Aid Agency SNV, all ended their operations after investigating alleged beatings in the village of Sukariya, 550km west of Kathmandu.

"The investigation concluded that Maoist cadres seriously assaulted one male and one female staff member," the statement said.

The groups expressed regret over the suspension of their work, adding, "But we cannot put our staff at further risk."

Meanwhile, four Maoist rebels and four security personnel were killed in a weekend clash in southeastern Nepal, a Royal Nepalese army statement said yesterday.

"At least four Maoist rebels, three soldiers and a policeman were killed when they clashed at Sandhale in Sindhuli district Sunday afternoon," the statement said.

Koreas resume talks after 10-month hiatus

AP, Seoul

South Korean officials told North Korea yesterday that its removal of spent nuclear fuel rods from a reactor that could allow it to harvest more weapons-grade plutonium has aggravated tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

The South also promised the North "a substantial proposal" if it returns to six-party talks.

The first direct talks between the rival Koreas in 10 months came even as a top US security official promised unspecified action against North Korea if it carried out a nuclear test.

South Korea said it urged the North to return to six-party nuclear disarmament talks.

A Japanese official on Sunday echoed comments from Stephen Hadley, President Bush's national security adviser, that a North Korean nuclear test would provoke action.

"We've seen some evidence that

says that they may be preparing for a nuclear test," Hadley said in an interview with CNN. "Obviously, that would be a serious step, and it would require us to consult very closely with our colleagues on the six-party talks for what kind of response we should make."

He said a nuclear test "would be something where the North Koreans would be defying not only us, but our partners in the six-party talks, and action would... have to be taken."

Shinzo Abe, secretary-general of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, said Tokyo would take the issue to the United Nations.

"It is unthinkable not to impose any sanctions in case of a nuclear testing," Abe said.

Last week, North Korea ratcheted up the issue by claiming it had completed removing spent fuel rods from a reactor at its main nuclear complex and said it would strengthen its nuclear arsenal.

That raised concerns about a possible nuclear test, spurring the public warnings by US and Japanese officials.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean Vice Unification Minister Rhee Bong-Jo (R) shakes hands with North Korean head of delegation Kim Man-Gil (L) at inter-Korean talks in the North's border town of Kaesong Monday. North Korea and South Korea resumed reconciliation talks after a 10-month hiatus, overshadowed by tension over the communist country's nuclear weapons programme.

Unrest spreads in Uzbekistan towns

Mass arrests likely

AP, REUTERS, Andijan, Uzbekistan

Unrest spread through eastern Uzbekistan after a crackdown by security forces left up to 500 dead in Andijan, with disturbances reaching three other towns including one that reportedly left 200 dead.

The clashes in the region bordering Kyrgyzstan were the worst since Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

President Islam Karimov's government has denied opening fire on demonstrators as witnesses have claimed, instead blaming Islamic extremists for the violence. The authoritarian government has restricted access for reporters in the affected areas.

But if the reports of more than 700 deaths since Friday hold true, and if Uzbek forces were behind the killing as most reports indicate it would be some of the worst state-inspired bloodshed since the massacre of protesters in China's Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Uzbek authorities are likely to carry out mass arrests of protesters who staged an uprising bloodily suppressed by troops at the weekend, a leading human rights campaigner said yesterday.

"One can now only expect massive arrests and the elimination of those opposing the regime," human

rights campaigner Saidzhakhon Zainabidinov of Uzbek rights group Appeal, told Reuters in Andijan.

He has estimated troops killed up to 500 people.

Saidzhahon Zaynabidinov, head of the local Appeal human rights advocacy group, said Monday that government troops had killed about 200 demonstrators on Saturday in Pakhtabad, about 20 miles north-east of Andijan. There was no independent confirmation of his claim.

That violence would have come a day after some 500 people reportedly were killed in Andijan Uzbekistan's fourth-largest city when government troops put down a prison uprising by alleged Islamic militants and citizens protesting dire economic conditions.

Andijan remained tense on Monday after gunfire continued throughout the night. Residents said government troops were fighting militants in an outlying district, but the claim could not be confirmed.

Alexei Volosevich, an Andijan correspondent for the Fergana.ru Web site, said witnesses told him that militants fired at police from apartment buildings near the prison and that police eventually killed the assailants. There was no word about police casualties.

MUSHARRAF SAYS 'Soft borders' in Kashmir positive step, not a solution

AFP, Hong Kong

Pakistani leader General Pervez Musharraf has warned that "soft borders" in Kashmir are a confidence-building measure but not a solution to the conflict, a report said Monday.

"Soft borders are not a solution," Musharraf was quoted as telling Britain's Financial Times. "Many magazines and articles I read from the Indian side, some of them misrepresent this soft as meaning a solution."

"I don't see this as a solution at all. This may be a step towards confidence building, which could facilitate a solution," he said.

Nuclear rivals India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars since independence from Britain in 1947 over the disputed Himalayan territory.

Amid ongoing peace talks, both countries in April resumed bus services across the de facto border, the Line of Control.

Musharraf at the time said the opening of the bus route represented a step toward a "soft border" in Kashmir, picking up a phrase previously used by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Support for sanctions on Iran grows in US

AP, REUTERS, Washington/ Tehran

As Iran appears to move closer to resuming nuclear activities, support has been quietly building in Congress for new US sanctions, including penalties that could affect multinational companies and this country's foreign aid recipients. The legislation would put the United States on a more confrontational course than the one pursued by President Bush. He has supported European efforts to offer Iran incentives in exchange for abandoning its nuclear program.

More than 200 members of the House of Representatives nearly half the body are co-sponsoring a

bill that would tighten and codify existing sanctions, bar subsidiaries of US companies from doing business in Iran and cut foreign aid to countries that have businesses investing in Iran.

More lawmakers both Republicans and Democrats are adding their names to the bill every week.

The measure faces big hurdles before becoming law, however. Support may not be as strong in the Senate, which is considering a more limited version. Key lawmakers in both chambers could block the legislation. The White House has not taken a position, but it generally opposes congressional efforts to steer foreign policy.

Israel bans Mahathir visit to Jerusalem

AFP, Ramallah

Israel yesterday banned former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, whose comments have in the past infuriated Jews, from entering Jerusalem while visiting the West Bank, the Palestinians said.

Mahathir was delayed for an hour at the Allenby crossing from Jordan into the West Bank where Israeli officials banned him from going to Jerusalem or the city of Jenin in the West Bank, Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei said.

"I want to say to the entire world that this is the political mind of the occupation," Qorei told a joint news conference with Mahathir in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

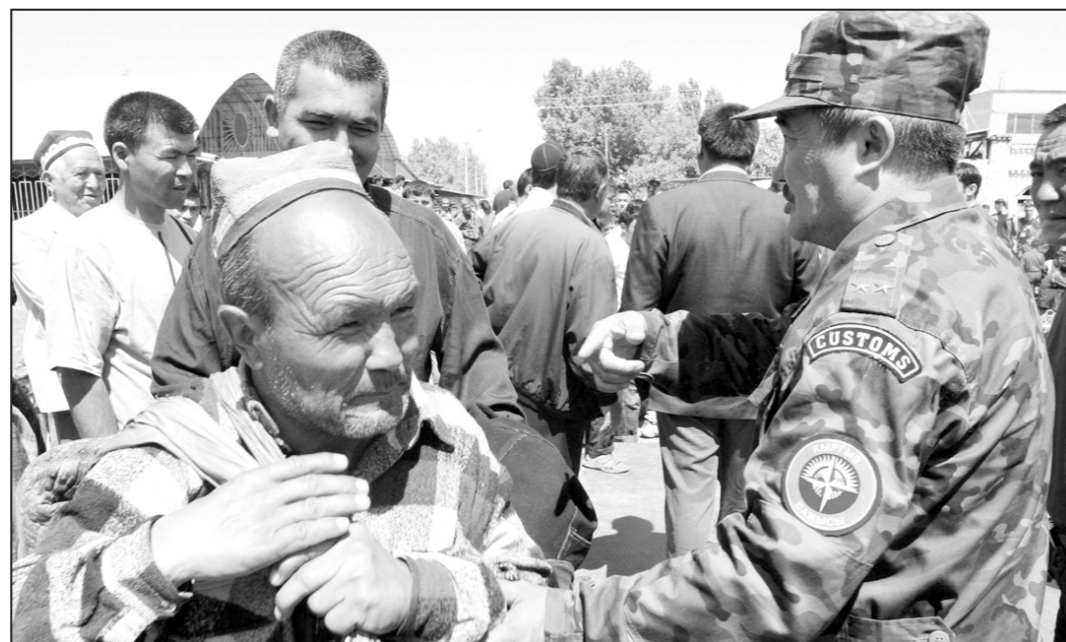


PHOTO: AFP

A Kyrgyz customs officer checks the documents of an Uzbek resident at the border town of Kara-Suu, some 50 km from Andijan Sunday. Kyrgyzstan has opened a camp for refugees fleeing Uzbekistan, where a military crackdown had left hundreds of people dead.