

Israeli hardliners plan guerrilla war

9 detained for planning attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque, 400 settler families agree to relocate for Gaza pullout

AFP, AP, Jerusalem

The Israeli extreme-right appeared bent yesterday on waging a guerrilla war against the planned pullout from the Gaza Strip, vowing to bring the country to its knees after causing chaos on the roads.

Around 300 demonstrators were arrested late Monday as ultra-nationalist opponents of the so-called disengagement plan blocked dozens of roads across the country in a game of cat-and-mouse with the police during rush hour.

Drivers were left fuming as huge traffic jams built up, but the organisers said Tuesday they had only just started.

Earlier more than one-fourth of Gaza Strip settler families have agreed to relocate to southern Israel, a settler leader said Tuesday

the biggest crack so far in the formidable wall of opposition to the Gaza pullout this summer.

But while some settlers were beginning to reconcile themselves to the notion of being uprooted, die-hard opponents claimed victory after snarling traffic at more than 100 intersections with burning tires and sit-down strikes Monday evening.

Their objective: to tie up police for hours in a dress rehearsal for diversionary operations designed to scuttle the evacuation.

Baruch Marzi, one of the ring-leaders, said he hoped the government would be persuaded to abandon its plan to leave the occupied Palestinian territory with more direct action.

"The operation yesterday was a huge success, and if we continue with this kind of determination we

will be able to paralyse not only the traffic but the whole country and put an end to this whole plot," Marzi told Israeli radio.

Another of the protest organisers said police had shown a reluctance to crack down on the activists, which boded well for future attempts to block the pullout from Gaza which is due to begin in mid-August.

"The police did not act violently against us yesterday which shows that they understand that Jews cannot expel other Jews from their home," said Orit Spitz.

Soldiers and police who will take part in the operation to uproot the 8,000 Gaza settlers will be unarmed, hoping that sheer weight of numbers will overwhelm the opposition of the settlers.

However the events of Monday night appeared to demonstrate the

limitations of manpower alone, especially in the face of well-organised protests.

Meanwhile, Israeli security services revealed Monday they had arrested nine people suspected of plotting to attack the third holiest site in Islam as Jewish militants stepped up their bid to wreck the Gaza Strip pullout.

News of last month's arrests emerged as a major operation was staged to prevent ultra-nationalists from bringing the nation's traffic to a standstill.

The arrests of the nine, who have all been released, followed an operation led by the Shin Beth internal security agency on suspicion that a group intended to buy one or more anti-tank missiles to attack Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, police sources said.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei (R) and former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad are seen at the West Bank city of Ramallah Monday. Israel Monday banned former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad, whose comments have in the past infuriated Jews, from entering Jerusalem while visiting the West Bank.

Trial of Beslan school siege suspect begins

BBC ONLINE

The only hostage-taker to have been captured alive after the Beslan school siege has gone on trial in the Russian republic of North Ossetia.

Chechen carpenter Nur-Pashi Kulayev, 24, faces nine charges, including murder, banditry and terrorism.

He has denied murder, claiming he thought he was going to capture a Russian checkpoint and only ever fired his machine-gun into the air.

More than 300 people were killed in the siege last September.

Security is tight around the court in the North Ossetian capital, Vladikavkaz.

All roads leading to the supreme court have been sealed off and there is a heavy police presence around the building.

Relatives carrying pictures of some of the 300 people who died stood outside the court as Kulayev arrived by police convoy an hour before the hearing was due to start.

He was led handcuffed into a packed courtroom by six guards and placed in a cage, the Associated Press reported.

Blair unveils his plans for 3rd term

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government unveiled yesterday a controversial proposal for national identity cards and other anti-terror measures under a raft of bills for its third term in office.

The ID card plan, announced by Queen Elizabeth II in parliament amid great pomp and pageantry, is the most contentious measure proposed by Blair since his Labour Party was re-elected for a third term in office on May 5.

The passage of the ID card bill through parliament is likely to be the prime minister's first big test of party discipline with his newly-reduced majority in the House of Commons, 67 since the election, down from 167 at the 2001 poll.

"My Lords and members of the House of Commons," began the queen, resplendent in crown, heavy ermine robe and full ceremonial jewellery, as she outlined the government's plans for the next 18 months in one of the British parliament's set-piece events.

Nepali anti-graft panel charges top leaders

AFP, Kathmandu

An anti-graft body appointed by Nepal's King Gyanendra Monday charged several senior politicians with fraud in government contract deals that could lead to millions of dollars in fines and jail, a commission spokesman said.

"The royal commission has formally charged ex-premier Sher Bahadur Deuba, ex-minister Prakash Man Singh and four other officials with involvement in irregularities and asked them to pay a sum of 370.6 million rupees (5.2 million dollars)," spokesman Prem Raj Karki said.

"In the charge sheets, the investigation official has asked them to be jailed for 10 years and deposit the amount involved in the case," Karki said.

"They will be produced again before the commission for the hearing on the case. They have been sent to further detention," he said.

Donors push govt, Tigers to work together

AFP, Kandy

Lanka's international donors held a second and final day of talks here yesterday as they sought to nudge warring parties to share aid and rebuild the war- and tsunami-devastated nation.

Donors who have promised up to 2.5 billion dollars for tsunami-related reconstruction were keen that the Colombo government and Tamil Tiger rebels work together, a senior diplomat at the talks said.

"We feel a joint mechanism (between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels) will make it quicker to deliver aid and also make it easier for donors to give more," the Dutch ambassador to Sri Lanka, Susan Blankheart, said.

She said European Union nations backed the swift implementation of a proposed "joint mechanism" that President Chandrika Kumaratunga promised

Monday to establish despite threats to her life.

Praful Patel, the World Bank's vice president for South Asia, said donors were keen that Sri Lanka's faltering peace process be revived and noted despite a talks deadlock, both sides had abided by a truce since February 2002.

"For many development partners, the peace process is at the core of their interest in Sri Lanka," Patel said, adding international leaders were also backing the initiative as it was the only way to ensure economic development.

The aid review was not meant as a pledging conference.

But Sri Lanka's Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama said donors and non-governmental agencies Monday raised their aid offers at the meeting in the hill resort of Kandy.

Diplomatic sources, however, said there were no new pledges but a "rounding off" of numbers.

Hunt for top Karachi criminal: 6 killed

AFP, Karachi

A police raid on the hideout of one of Pakistan's most wanted criminals yesterday left six people dead and 20 wounded in an intense gun battle but police failed to capture the elusive fugitive.

One policeman was among the dead and 13 officers were injured in the southern Pakistan shootout that also killed two civilians, three other suspects and wounded seven more in the crossfire, police chief Tariq Jamil told AFP.

The gunfight erupted in the Hub area, just outside of Karachi on the border with Baluchistan province when police raided the hideout of Rehman Baluch also known as Rehman Dacoti, Karachi's most wanted criminal, he said.

"Six people are confirmed dead, including sub-inspector Arshad Butt," Jamil said. Police detained several suspects, some of them injured, and recovered weapons in the search.

ONE YEAR IN POWER Manmohan takes stock of his standing

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in a stock-taking exercise five days ahead of the ruling United Progressive Alliance's completion of first year in office, has given his government six marks out of ten for its performance.

"A journalist had recently asked me what score I will give myself and our government and I said six out of ten," Singh told a meeting of the Congress Party's top decision-making forum here on Monday. The meeting was called to review the performance of the government since assuming office on May 22 last year by outsmarting BJP-led NDA coalition in parliamentary election.

Giving a low-down of his govern-

ment's report card, the prime minister said "for some, this may seem a reasonable mark. But I have never been satisfied with sixty percent. I do sincerely believe we can do better. In the coming year that will be our endeavour."

The meeting adopted a resolution congratulating Prime Minister Singh and Congress chief Sonia Gandhi for their "untiring efforts to ensure cohesive functioning of the alliance of 23 parties."

It recalled Sonia's "unique act of self-abnegation" of power and acknowledged Singh's "quiet dignity and qualities of head and heart."

Briefing reporters after the meeting, senior Congress leader Ambika Soni said Sonia Gandhi reposed her confidence in Manmohan Singh's ability to lead the coalition and implement its national common minimum

programme. Singh, in turn praised, Sonia's "mature, humane and forward-looking leadership."

Setting the agenda for the future, the prime minister reiterated his government's commitment to carrying forward the reforms and called for continuation of disinvestments (privatisation), labour reforms and further liberalisation of investment policy as a recipe for growth.

"We require political consensus both within our own party and across political parties to take this agenda of fiscal reforms forward," he said, in an apparent reference to strong opposition of left parties, which provide crucial support to his government from outside, to allowing FDI in private Indian banks, insurance, pension and retail trade.

Newsweek urged to do more to repair damage

Pak leader warns retraction not enough

AP, AFP, Washington/ Islamabad

The White House says Newsweek took a "good first step" by retracting its story that US investigators found evidence interrogators at Guantanamo Bay desecrated the Quran, but it wants the magazine to do more to repair damage caused by the article.

Newsweek on Monday retracted the report in its May 9 issue after officials in the White House, the Pentagon and the State Department criticised its publication and its use of an anonymous source. Protests in Afghanistan, where more than a dozen people died and scores were injured in rioting, and demonstrations elsewhere in the Muslim world were blamed on the article.

"The report had real consequences," White House press secretary Scott McClellan said Monday. "People have lost their lives. Our image abroad has been damaged. There are some who are opposed to the United States and what we stand for who have sought to exploit this allegation. It will take

work to undo what can be undone."

McClellan said a retraction was only "a good first step" and said Newsweek should try to set the record straight by "clearly explaining what happened and how they got it wrong, particularly to the Muslim world, and pointing out the policies and practices of our military."

A senior Pakistani Islamic leader warned yesterday that Muslim anger over Newsweek's "humiliating" story on the alleged desecration of the Quran will not subside despite the magazine's retraction. The powerful six party Islamic alliance of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) also demanded those responsible for the "conspiracy" be punished.

"Those who planned and flashed this story in Newsweek must be exposed and punished," deputy secretary general of the MMA, Liaquat Baloch, told AFP.

The Pentagon looked into the allegations initially and found nothing to substantiate them. "They continue to look into it," McClellan said.

Indonesia to end Aceh emergency today

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's government and parliament have agreed to lift tsunami-devastated Aceh province's one-year-old state of civil emergency this week, a report said Tuesday.

"After the government's briefing on the evaluation on the implementation of the state of civilian emergency and its analysis on the existing development, the leadership of the parliament and the government agree to end the state of civilian emergency in Aceh," President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said in a report.

Yudhoyono was quoted by the Kompas newspaper as having told journalists Aceh would revert to normalcy when the current state of civilian emergency ends at midnight Wednesday (1700 GMT Tuesday).

"The parliament's leadership also agreed that the existence and presence of troops of the Indonesian armed forces will be retained to assure a feeling of security for people of Aceh and guarantee the implementation of recovery programs as well as the post-tsunami rehabilitation and reconstruction," he said.

Yudhoyono also said the government was prepared to continue peace talks with the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) but added some principles, including that on broad autonomy and the constitution were not negotiable.

"There are several things that can be negotiated but there are several principal matters that are not negotiable, such as the matter of the constitution, the structure of the state and the principles of special autonomy," he said.

The parliament and the government would also set a deadline for the peace negotiations. Top security minister Adi Sucipto Widodo said last week the government was planning to lift the emergency state in Aceh but added it also planned to maintain its military operations to rid the tsunami-ravaged province of separatist rebels.

Widodo has said normalcy in Aceh was also needed to guarantee the implementation of the rehabilitation and reconstruction can proceed transparently and in an accountable manner.



PHOTO: AFP

Kuwaitis celebrates after women were granted the right to vote and stand in elections in an amendment to the conservative Gulf emirate's election law that parliament passed Monday at Kuwait's national assembly.

'Women's voting right to boost Kuwaiti reforms'

AFP, Kuwait City

The Kuwaiti parliament's surprise decision to grant women the vote is likely to speed up political and economic reforms in the oil-rich Gulf Arab state, analysts and MPs said yesterday.

Kuwaiti women, disenfranchised for more than four decades, however, will still have to wait two years to exercise their right to cast their ballots and run for public office following Monday's vote by parliament.

Next month's municipal polls will remain an all-male affair.

The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for July 2007 and women will have two years to register on voter lists.

"This is a prelude to political reform. The government is now under the international microscope and it must forge ahead with remaining reforms," Islamist MP Nasser al-Sane told AFP.

"When the government meant to, it was able to (make parliament) pass the women's rights law. Now, it must do the same with economic and political reform bills" that have been stalled for years, he said.

Former parliament speaker Ahmad al-Saadun said he hoped that giving women the franchise was just the first step in a wider modernisation process.

"It is a big step forward. I hope more steps will follow, especially redrawing constituency boundaries to prevent political money from deciding election results," he told AFP.