

Abbas vows no delay in Palestinian elections

Delhi reiterates support for statehood, PLO chief holds talks with Sonia

AFP, PTI, New Delhi

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas said yesterday there would be no delay in holding parliamentary elections due in July amid surging violence in the occupied Gaza Strip that is straining a fragile truce.

"The elections will be on the 17th of July. We have no intention of postponing them," Abbas told reporters in the Indian capital, New Delhi, where he arrived late Thursday.

Abbas, who is on his first Asian tour since succeeding the late Yasser Arafat as president of the Palestinian Authority in January, was speaking on the last day of his two-day visit to New Delhi where Indian officials reiterated support for creation of an independent Palestinian state.

"I hope all parties will stick to the truce, I hope we can contain and control" the violence, he said.

Abbas is facing a tough challenge to control militants and press

ahead with democratic reform, regarded by Middle East mediators as vital to reviving peacemaking between Israel and the Palestinians.

The elections in Gaza are regarded as a test of strength between the Islamic guerrilla group Hamas and Abbas's ruling Fatah movement.

Hamas has pledged to respect an informal truce in place since late January but has said it is determined to "avenge Israeli crimes".

A Palestinian militant was killed earlier Friday by Israeli forces in an abortive assault on a Jewish settlement Friday as violence flared in Gaza despite Israeli threats of tougher reprisals.

With the informal truce in jeopardy, Israel has pledged tougher military action against Palestinians who continue to target Jewish settlements in Gaza, less than 100 days before all settlers are to be evacuated from the territory.

Abbas added he was confident the Israelis would stick to their word and pull out from Gaza.

"I think that (the Israeli pullout) will take place in the end," he said.

Earlier, Congress President Sonia Gandhi had a meeting with Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in New Delhi yesterday.

External Affairs Minister K Natwar Singh was also present during the 35-minute meeting with Sonia Gandhi, who is also the UPA Chairperson, had with the visiting dignitary.

Abbas arrived in New Delhi on a two-day visit on Thursday and this is his first top-level political contact with Indian leadership after he was elected to the key post earlier held by Yasser Arafat.

Abbas had a meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Thursday night. India is hoping for a "comprehensive peace" in the Middle East. New Delhi has always

extended its support to the Palestinian cause and their "inalienable" right to Palestinian state.

Abbas is on his first Asian tour since succeeding the late Yasser Arafat as president of the Palestinian Authority in January.

He arrived in the Indian capital from Pakistan where he said Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf could play an important role in the quest for a Middle East peace.

His tour has also taken him to Japan, where he won a pledge of 100 million dollars in aid to follow Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, and to China, where he warned that despite progress the Middle East was still on the brink.

In India, he met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh Thursday evening and was greeted at the airport by junior foreign minister E.A.S. Ahamed.



PHOTO: AP
Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, left, prepares to shake hands with Congress Party president and chairman of the ruling United Progressive Alliance Sonia Gandhi as Foreign Minister Natwar Singh looks on, in New Delhi on Friday. Abbas is in India for a two-day visit to meet Indian leaders and hold bilateral talks.

Iraq plans talks with Syria to stop insurgent flow

AFP, Ankara

Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari said yesterday that Baghdad would hold talks with Damascus soon to demand action against insurgents infiltrating from Syria and warned that his country would not tolerate threats from its neighbours.

"There are some armed groups infiltrating from Syria. We will talk about how much the Syrian government knows about these infiltrations," Jaafari told reporters here after meeting his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"There will be a visit to Syria soon and one of the dossiers will be security," he said through a translator.

The United States has repeatedly accused Syria of aiding the Iraqi insurgency by supplying foreign fighters or failing to prevent militants from crossing the border into Iraq, a charge Damascus denies.

"We want to strengthen ties with all countries, primarily our neighbours, but we will never accept anything that harms our economy and security," said Jaafari, who is in Turkey on his first visit abroad

since he came to power last month.

He said Baghdad would implement a number of measures, including border controls, monitoring insurgent groups and asking neighbouring countries to prevent infiltrations.

His remarks came against a backdrop of rising sectarian tensions in war-torn Iraq despite repeated warnings from religious leaders against any acts aimed at dividing Sunnis and Shias.

Jaafari said Iraq would not fall prey to sectarian violence.

"There may those who plan (such violence), but Iraqi (society) stays away from such evil," he said.

Jaafari sought to dispel Ankara's concerns over an estimated 5,000 Turkish Kurdish rebels hiding in northern Iraq as Turkey says they are infiltrating back into Turkish territory in growing numbers to commit acts of violence.

"In line with the principle of good neighbourly relations, we will never allow any group to harm the security, economy and politics of a neighbouring country," he said.



PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN
Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and her entourage members pay a floral tribute to the martyrs of Vietnam War at the National Mausoleum in Hanoi on Thursday. The Bangladesh premier was in Vietnam on a three-day state visit to the country to strengthen bilateral relations.

ICRC informed US about Quran abuse in 2002-2003

AFP, Washington

The International Committee of the Red Cross reported to US authorities on multiple occasions between early 2002 and mid-2003 that detainees at Guantanamo Bay were alleging that the Quran was being disrespected, a spokesman said Thursday.

US authorities appeared to have taken corrective measures because allegations that the Quran was being disrespected stopped after mid-2003, said Simon Schorno, an ICRC spokesman here.

The issue sparked riots in Afghanistan last week that left 15 people dead following a report in Newsweek magazine that US investigators had found that interrogators at the prison threw a Quran in a toilet to rattle Muslim inmates.

The magazine this week retracted the story after its source

developed doubts, and the Pentagon has said its own investigation has found no evidence to support the allegation that Qurans were defiled at the off-shore US prison.

But the rare disclosure by the ICRC, which normally keeps its reports to governments strictly confidential, indicated that the mishandling of the Quran by guards or interrogators at Guantanamo was a persistent problem during the prison's first year of operations.

The ICRC has been visiting detainees at the military-run prison at Guantanamo since January 2002, shortly after hundreds of suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters captured in Afghanistan and Pakistan began arriving at Guantanamo.

COMPLETION OF FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE

Manmohan in tricky balancing act

AFP, New Delhi

Days after the Congress Party won an upset election victory with left-wing allies in May 2004, Manmohan Singh was asked to calm investors after India's stock market had its biggest one-day fall ever.

In his first year in office, the 72-year-old prime minister has had to use all his diplomatic skills to assure many more people who expect the distinguished academic to follow their advice.

Those include communist allies opposed to economic reform, senior ministers accused by courts of corruption and Congress Party leader Italian-born Sonia Gandhi who manages election strategy, leaving many observers to view

Singh as India's first technocrat prime minister with little political sway.

By Singh's reckoning, he gets a six on a scale of 10 for managing the fortunes of the one-billion-plus population.

The government's successes include a new patent law, a nuclear non-proliferation law and a freedom-of-information law that empowers citizens to challenge widespread corruption in Indian government.

Still, Singh was rebuffed by communist allies on increased foreign investment and warned repeatedly he could lose their crucial support for pursuing market-friendly policies such as raising fuel

prices.

More importantly, efforts to cut poverty have not been successful for almost 300 million people who live on less than a dollar a day, a key vote bank for the Congress and its left-wing allies and which calls into question whether the government will complete a full five-year term.

"I am not satisfied with what we have been able to do in terms of implementing new policy initiatives," the Oxford-educated Singh said in an appraisal of his government, days before its one-year anniversary on Sunday.

"I do sincerely believe that we can do better. In the coming year, that will be our endeavour," he said.

Kashmir heading for a crucial turn: Kasuri

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan wants Kashmiri leaders on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir to meet and hold talks as India was 'reluctant' to involve them directly in the dialogue process, Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri has said.

"We believe Kashmiris of both sides should meet together and hold talks if direct three-party talks are not possible (at this stage)," he told reporters yesterday on his return from a visit to Australia and New Zealand.

He said Pakistan wants to involve Kashmiri leadership of both sides at a sooner or later stage but India is so far 'reluctant' to involve them directly.

He said his country would not accept any solution, which would not be accepted by Kashmiris, as the country wanted durable peace, which could only be possible if the people of the two sides are involved in the peace process.

Kasuri observed that the Kashmir issue was heading for a 'crucial turn' and, therefore, the leadership of different Kashmiri groups should unite, as Pakistan could not dictate them.

He said in 1989 both governments had reached an agreement on Siachen and Pakistan would express its willingness to implement that agreement when the defence officials meet on May 25.

"Similarly, Sir Creek is a smaller issue and it can be solved if there is a political will," he was quoted as saying by The News daily.

Muslims protests demolition of Bihar mosque

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Patna

A Muslim organisation in Bihar has protested the demolition of a 100-year-old mosque to make way for a stadium, saying that it would launch a mass movement if it was not rebuilt.

The mosque at the Danapur Cantt near Patna was demolished a few days by army officials. The All India Pasmanda Mahaz is furious.

"If a mosque is not rebuilt in the original place, we will launch a strong mass movement," an official of the organisation said.

The group has said attempts were made to demolish the mosque in 1972 and 1985, but protests by locals foiled the moves.

The organisation has urged Governor Bula Singh to convey its message of hurt to the Central Government.

China to allow nationals to visit Taiwan

REUTERS, Beijing

China will lift a decades-old ban on mainlanders visiting political rival Taiwan yesterday, state media reported, a move that could further ease tension after visits to China by two of the island's opposition leaders.

China has had tight restrictions on its people visiting Taiwan since 1949 when the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek fled to the island at the end of the Chinese civil war. A limited number of mainlanders have been able to travel there on business.

Ultimately, it is up to the Taiwan government under independence-leaning President Chen Shui-bian to decide if the floodgates are opened. Taiwan has its own tough rules restricting mainland visitors.

Beijing views the island as a breakaway province, which must eventually be unified with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Chinese tourists have proven a potent economic force. In the year or so since China relaxed rules on travel to Hong Kong, a tourism boom has boosted retail sales and been an important factor in the territory's economic recovery.

Tourism-related stocks surged in Taipei on Friday morning in anticipation of China relaxing its rules, with the tourism sub index up 6.79 percent by 0433 GMT.

China's National Tourism Bureau would allow mainlanders to join travel agency tours to Taiwan, including a seven-day package for less than 7,000 yuan (\$845), the Beijing Morning Post said.

Nepal Maoists bomb restaurant, ransack radio station

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels in Nepal bombed a restaurant in the tourist town of Pokhara yesterday, wounding two local workers and ransacked a radio station in the west of the Himalayan kingdom, police said.

The restaurant was almost empty at the time of the blast in Pokhara, 200 km west of Kathmandu, a police officer said.

"There is the possibility of the terrorists stepping up attacks, kidnappings, extortions, and setting up road blocks to show their presence," an army officer told reporters on Friday.

The guerrillas want to overthrow the world's only Hindu monarchy and close to 12,000 people have died in the conflict since it started in 1996.

Kashmir leader suggests jt Indo-Pak power plant

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's chief minister yesterday urged India and Pakistan to cooperate on developing hydroelectric power in the divided Himalayan region in a bid to avert further rows over power development in the territory.

The two sides are at odds over a 450-megawatt hydroelectric project on the Chenab River in south Kashmir that Pakistan charges violates a decades-old water treaty between the nations.

"This Baglihar project does not amount to any violation of the Indus Water Treaty, Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed said in a statement.

"The answer to end this mistrust and apprehension is to have joint ventures in hydroelectric power."

Sayeed's suggestion follows a decision by the World Bank to name a neutral expert in response to a request by Pakistan which charges that India has violated the Indus Water Treaty in building the Baglihar dam.

The World Bank brokered the water treaty 44 years ago.

Pakistan fears the one-billion-dollar project could deprive its wheat-bowl state of Punjab of vital irrigation water and says it never approved the project's design as stipulated under the treaty.

The row over the Baglihar Dam has been an irritant in the ongoing peace process between the South Asian nuclear rivals who have fought three wars, two over the disputed region of Kashmir which both hold in part but claim in full.

Uzbek govt vows to keep UN informed on unrest

Rights chief steps up pressure for independent probe

AFP, Tashkent

With international pressure growing on the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov yesterday pledged to keep the UN informed of unrest in Uzbekistan, but denied he had discussed holding an independent inquiry into an alleged massacre of civilians.

Karimov spoke by telephone with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Thursday and informed him "in detail about the events that took place on May 13 in the city of Andijan," the state news agency UZAREported Friday.

Karimov "agreed to continue the closest of contacts and information exchange about the situation in Andijan and the region as a whole" with Annan, the report said.

The UN secretary general voiced concern about the loss of life and "expressed the necessity of carrying out the most thorough investigation of the events and the punishment of those responsible," it added.

But Karimov's office subsequently denied a report by Russia's NTV television network that the Uzbek leader and Annan had discussed the possibility of an independent inquiry into the violence that may have left up to 1,000 people dead, as some countries have

called for.

"During the discussions of President Islam Karimov and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan no proposal about carrying out an independent investigation into the recent events in Andijan was discussed," a statement from the president's office said.

Such reports were "yet another invention," it added.

Britain, Germany and several other countries have called for an independent, international investigation into the events in and around Andijan that began on May 13, which the Uzbek government said killed 169 people -- but which local and international rights groups and residents say have left between 500 and 1,000 people dead.

The United States, which has an air base in Uzbekistan that is a key logistical link for its operations in neighbouring Afghanistan, has by contrast stopped noticeably short of calling for an "international" and "independent" probe.

Instead, Washington has said officially it wanted to see Uzbek authorities conduct an investigation that was "credible" and "transparent" -- in essence a call for the authorities in Uzbekistan to investigate themselves.

A senior US official, however, speaking to a group of journalists in Moscow on Thursday, cautioned that Washington may reassess its financial assistance to the Central Asian country if the government in Tashkent failed to conduct what the United States considered a credible probe.

Despite apparent differences in the West on how to approach the situation in Uzbekistan, the heat was rising on the regime in Tashkent to the point where some independent observers predicted that the events in Andijan could mark "the beginning of the end" for Karimov.

Meanwhile, the UN's top human rights official yesterday stepped up the pressure on Uzbekistan's leader over an investigation into clashes between protestors and security forces that left scores of civilians dead.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, reaffirmed her calls on Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov to allow an independent probe of events in the city of Andijan, her office said.

Uzbek authorities have pledged to keep the UN informed of unrest in his country, but has resisted calls for a probe of an alleged massacre of civilians.

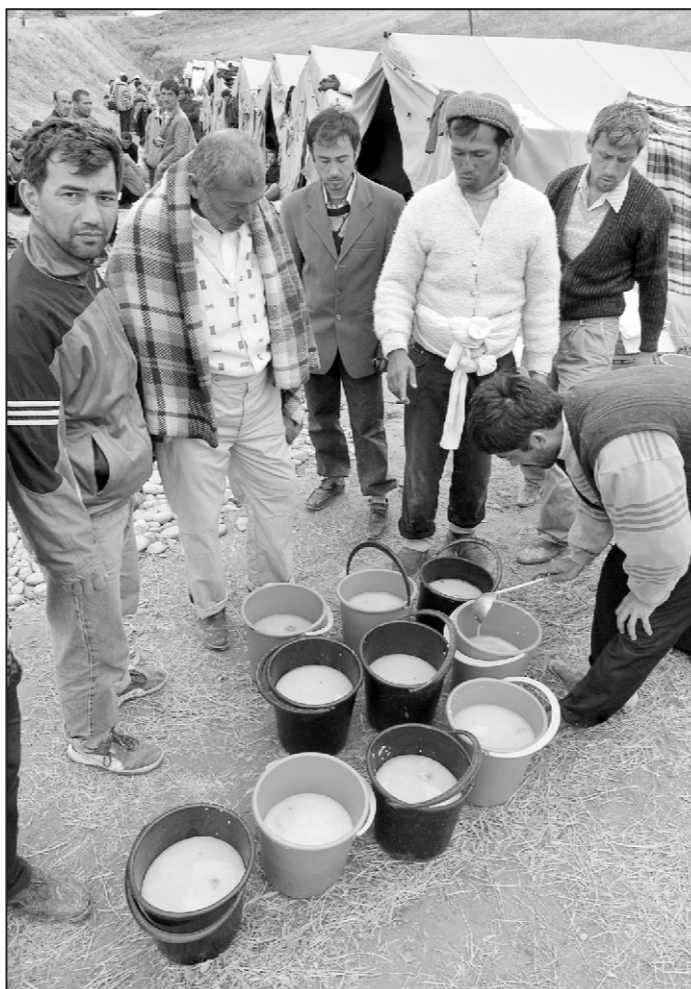


PHOTO: AFP
Uzbek refugees get a soup at the refugee camp just outside the Kyrgyz village of Barash, some 40km from Andijan, at the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border Thursday. Uzbek troops Thursday reclaimed control of the eastern town of Kara-Suu, where protestors had chased out federal authorities following a bloody military crackdown in the nearby city of Andijan.