

## Rice prods Israelis, Palestinians to fulfil peace obligations

AFP, Reuters, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice kicked off her first comprehensive Middle East tour yesterday, bearing stern messages to Israel and the Palestinians to work together on the upcoming withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

Rice, who headed straight to Jerusalem after landing at Tel Aviv's international airport, was due to hold talks later in the day with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

She will then return to Jerusalem overnight before holding talks with a string of Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the new chief of staff, Dan Halutz.

It is the first leg of a six-day trip that will also take her to Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia before she attends international conferences in Brussels and London.

The chief US diplomat was

travelling to the region at the behest of President George W. Bush to help nail down details of Israel's plan to pull its troops and settlers from Gaza and parts of the West Bank starting in mid-August.

Rice said her main concern was coordination of what started out as a unilateral Israeli move. She said "six or seven" issues had to be made clear, including security, the hand-over to Palestinian institutions, distribution of assets and freedom of movement.

"There needs to be clarity between the two sides about what to expect," she told reporters aboard her plane.

"That I think will lead to less confusion in what is likely to be under the best of circumstances a pretty complicated set of days."

But the secretary also expected the parties to live up to their obligations to make the pullout a success and move on to implement an

internationally drafted "roadmap" to end nearly five years of bloodshed.

She praised the Palestinians for making a start in streamlining and professionalising their security services, saying, "I think they are making progress on that."

But she added, "In terms of their ability to fight terror, what they do on a day to day basis, frankly I do think more can be done."

"I'm certainly going to talk with president (Mahmud) Abbas about the need for the Palestinians to play a critical role in providing a secure environment in which the Gaza disengagement can take place," Rice said.

"Obviously that means that the calm he has discussed with the various Palestinian factions is going to have to hold."

She also called on the Palestinians to end "revolving-door arrests" of militants and deal with the stockpiling of weapons by the militant group Hamas.

## Unicef to work with Tigers to tackle child soldiers

AFP, Kilinochchi

Unicef agreed yesterday to work with Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels to tackle the issue of child soldiers, a top official of the United Nations children's agency said after talks with a rebel leader.

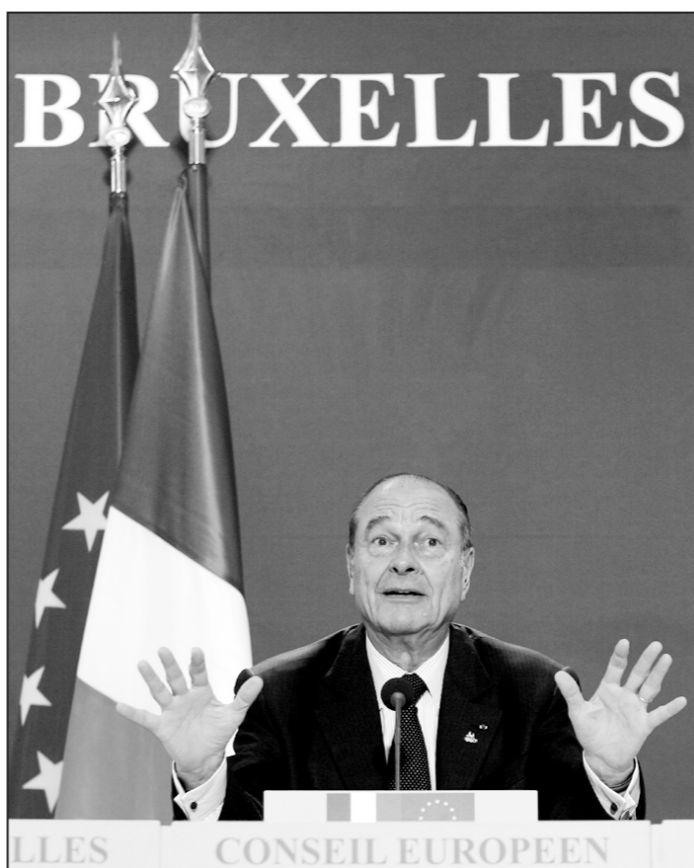
The executive director of Unicef, Ann Veneman, told reporters she discussed the question of underage combatants in rebel-held areas.

"We had a good discussion on this issue..." Veneman said after talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) political wing leader S. P. Thamiliselvan. "We have agreed we will work together to address the issue."

Unicef has repeatedly asked the LTTE to give up the practice of recruiting boys and girls below the age of 18 years.

Last month, Unicef said the Tigers had recruited fewer child soldiers this year amid mounting international condemnation of enlisting underage combatants.

The LTTE's recruitment pattern showed a decline in the past three years as rights groups and governments urged them to totally abandon the practice, child rights activists said.



French President Jacques Chirac speaks at a press conference at the end of the end of the botched European summit early yesterday in Brussels. Chirac warned that the EU faces a "grave crisis" after the collapse of budget talks, blaming Britain's refusal to give up its cherished budget rebate.

## Crisis-hit EU faces 'weakening' role on world stage

AFP, Brussels

The European Union faces a progressive "weakening" of its world role after its constitution crisis was compounded by failure to agree on its future financing, the bloc's president warned yesterday.

In the short term its political strength will not suffer, but over time the 25-nation grouping's role will diminish, said Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, who holds the EU's reins until the end of June.

"I don't think that there will be an immediate effect on the international role that Europe can play, and that the Europe claims to have," said Juncker, after talks on a budget deal collapsed amid acrimony.

"The weakening of European will be a more slow, rampant, imperceptible process, which others will see more quickly than Europeans," he added.

Juncker chastised EU leaders for not reaching an agreement here on the budget and casting the 25-nation bloc into a "deep crisis".

He said ironically that he would have "to explain the vigour and

strength of Europe to the president of the United States" during a planned trip to Washington in the coming days.

The failure of the budget talks notably blocked by Britain's refusal to surrender its long-cherished EU budget rebate -- came a day after the EU was forced to postpone plans to ratify its new constitution, after the charter was crushingly rejected by French and Dutch voters.

Meanwhile, Britain's newspapers demanded Prime Minister Tony Blair drive the European Union in a new direction yesterday after talks on the EU budget collapsed in Brussels.

Several newspapers said the summit stalemate presented an opportunity to lead the EU out of the wreckage and urged Blair to take command.

Talks ended Friday with no agreement on the EU's 2007-2013 spending plans with Blair's call for wide-ranging budget reforms and intransigence on Britain's rebate proving the sticking point amid the turmoil.



Members of Myanmar pro-democracy groups hold placards as they take part in a march on the eve of the 60th birthday of imprisoned Burmese leader Nobel laureate Aun San Suu Kyi, in New Delhi yesterday demanding her release.

## Global protests seek Suu Kyi's release

AP, Bangkok

Global protests will be staged and thousands of birthday cards sent to draw attention to the plight of Myanmar's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who turns 60 today her 2,523rd day under military detention.

Isolated both from the outside world and her supporters at home, Suu Kyi is confined to a now dilapidated, two-story family house overgrown by jungle in the Myanmar capital of Yangon. It is sealed off around the clock by security forces.

But the Nobel Peace Prize laureate articulate, attractive and unquestionably brave remains the great hope for those around the world seeking to end more than four decades of harsh military rule in her homeland, also known as Burma.

"We are trying to use the oppor-

tunity of Suu Kyi's 60th birthday to galvanize public opinion and politicians into finally taking some action on Burma," said Mark Farmaner, spokesman for the British-based Burma Campaign.

The birthday campaign is particularly important, he said, because lately interest in Suu Kyi's plight has tapered off. "The international response has been quite pathetic since her latest arrest," Farmaner said.

In fact, little more than statements of concern followed Suu Kyi's detention in May 2003 after a pro-government mob savagely attacked her car convoy in northern Myanmar, killing a number of her companions.

The global birthday effort is modeled after the 1988 "Mandela at 70" campaign to free Nelson Mandela from imprisonment in then apartheid-era South Africa.

## Pak tribesmen vow to oust US from region

AFP, Islamabad

Thousands of Pakistani tribesmen yesterday vowed to fight US forces as they marked the first death anniversary of a slain militant leader in a tribal region near Afghanistan.

Witnesses said up to 3,000 people, some brandishing assault rifles and some masked, turned up in the remote district of Azam Warsak, in South Waziristan tribal region, to offer prayers at the grave of militant leader Nek Mohammad.

Mohammad, a former Taliban commander, was killed in June last year after leading a bloody resistance to the Pakistan army's largest-ever offensive to drive-out al-Qaeda linked militants in South Waziristan. Pakistan's military said it killed the

militant.

"We will complete the mission of our commander Nek Mohammad and we will continue our jihad (holy war) against the US forces in the region," militant leader Maulvi Abdul Aziz told the gathering amid shouts of "Allah-o-Akbar" (God is greatest).

Pakistan's tribal region bordering Afghanistan has long been suspected of providing refuge to hundreds of al-Qaeda-linked and Taliban militants who fled there after the ouster of the extremist Muslim Taliban regime by US-led forces in 2001.

Afghan and US government officials have said that Taliban militants hiding in the Pakistani tribal regions were conducting hit-and-run attacks on the US-led coalition

and Afghan forces inside Afghanistan.

Since last year Pakistan, a key ally in what the US calls a war on terrorism, has conducted several major operations in its tribal regions. It says it has destroyed hideouts and training camps of militants linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network which claimed responsibility for attacks on the United States that killed about 3,000 people on September 11, 2001.

A US-led 18,000-strong coalition force is battling militants in Afghanistan's south and eastern provinces which border the Pakistani tribal belt, three years after the Taliban's ouster by a US-led military campaign.

## Taliban threaten to kill 13 kidnapped Afghan police & officials

AFP, Kabul

Suspected Taliban rebels have taken 13 police and government officials hostage and are threatening to execute them, officials said yesterday.

The suspected Taliban kidnapped a district police chief and 12 other policemen and government officials in Mian Nisheen near the southern city of Kandahar, officials said.

Malik Noor Mohammed, the district chief of southern Kandahar's Mian Nisheen, and the 12 others were taken prisoner late Wednesday, a provincial police commander, Mohammed Salem, told AFP.

"The district chief and police chief of Mian Nisheen along with 11 other policemen and civilians have been missing since Wednesday," Salem said.

"We suspect they have been taken hostage by Taliban," he added.

Abdul Hakim Latifi, the rebels' spokesman, claimed responsibility for the attack saying the kidnapped

men would be tried in a Taliban court later on Saturday.

"We will put them on trial today. If they are found guilty they'll be executed. If not they will be released," Hakim told AFP by satellite phone from an unknown location.

He said 14 other policemen were captured but later released by the hardline militia after an attack on the district government office in Mian Nisheen late Friday.

"The Taliban attacked the district last night and took control of it," a high-ranking police officer told AFP, asking not to be named.

Also on Friday, the Afghan National Army (ANA) launched an operation against militants in Shah Wali Kot district on the outskirts of Kandahar city in which two militants and an Afghan government soldier were killed.

"During the operation two Taliban were killed and two others were wounded. They left behind the dead," ANA military commander for southern Afghanistan, Muslim Hamed, told AFP.

## Nepali parties vow to boycott municipal polls

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's seven-party pro-democracy alliance said yesterday it would boycott municipal polls announced by King Gyanendra two months ago as part of what he called a bid to "reactivate" democracy.

"The seven parties have unanimously decided to boycott the municipal elections," said alliance spokesman Arjun Narsingh K.C., who is also a member of the Nepal Congress Party.

"All of the king's actions are unconstitutional, so we are not taking part in any of his activities," he said after an alliance meeting on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

The grouping had decided that any member who contests the polls would be expelled from party ranks, he added.

King Gyanendra announced the municipal elections in April after a storm of international criticism over his February 1 seizure of power, which he said was needed to end a bloody Maoist revolt in the impoverished Himalayan country.

The monarch, who has given himself three years to restore democracy, said the polls were part of an effort to "reactivate the democratic process".

## Khamenei declares victory over US 'lies and deceit'

AFP, Tehran

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared Saturday that Iran had dealt a major defeat to the "lies and deceit" of US President George W. Bush by turning out en masse in presidential elections.

Khamenei slammed as "stupid prejudice" comments by "the disgraced" Bush on the eve of the election in which the US president said the vote ignored the "basic standards of democracy."

"With your solid, collective and glorious presence, once again you defused the conspiracy of your enemy," Khamenei said to Iranians, in a message read out by a state television announcer.

"Your irrational enemy, with a wrong perception to frighten and deceive you, in a statement full of lies and deceit, assaulted the Iranian nation and the Islamic republic."

"You, an alert nation, you enthusiastic and committed youth, you faithful men and women with your

legendary and conscious presence have bounced back Bush's insults," said Khamenei.

An estimated 68 percent of the electorate turned out in the election, officials said, to the relief of the authorities who had made clear strong participation was needed to bolster the regime's legitimacy.

The figure was way above the weak turnout in last year's parliamentary elections and came after calls for a boycott from opposition liberals including Nobel Prize Winner Shirin Ebadi.

Khamenei made clear he saw the high turnout as a vote in favour of Iran's 26-year-old theocratic regime.

"Your vote, cast in a free atmosphere with different tastes and various candidates, was a vote for the Islamic republic before anything else, a vote for national independence and for the constitution."

He expressed no preference over the candidates in the election, saying they were all "committed to our ideals."

## BUSH NOW SAYS US is at war in Iraq for Sept 11 attacks

AFP, Washington

The United States is at war in Iraq because of the September 11, 2001 attacks, US President George W. Bush said yesterday.

"We went to war because we were attacked, and we are at war today because there are still people out there who want to harm our country and hurt our citizens," Bush said in his weekly radio address.

"Some may disagree with my decision to remove Saddam Hussein from power, but all of us can agree that the world's terrorists have now made Iraq a central front in the war on terror," he went on.

"These foreign terrorists violently oppose the rise of a free and democratic Iraq, because they know that when we replace despair and hatred with liberty and hope, they lose their recruiting grounds for terror," he argued.

"Our troops are fighting these terrorists in Iraq so you will not have

to face them here at home."

The US president ruled out any hard and fast timetable for withdrawing the 130,000 US soldiers currently deployed in Iraq and made it clear that it will not be anytime soon.

Terrorists "know there is no room for them in a free and democratic Middle East, so the terrorists and insurgents are trying to get us to retreat," he said.

"Their goal is to get us to leave before Iraqis have had a chance to show the region what a government that is elected and truly accountable to its citizens can do for its people."

"I am confident that Iraqis will continue to defy the sceptics as they build a new Iraq that represents the diversity of their nation and assumes greater responsibility for their own security," Bush said. "And when they do, our troops can come home with the honour they have earned."

## Kyrgyz govt reasserts control after clashes

AFP, Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan's authorities moved yesterday to show they were fully in control following clashes between police and protesters, and a senior official promised measures to avert disruption to a July presidential poll.

A cordon of around 1,000 police officers guarded the main government complex known as the White House after security forces on Friday dispersed up to 7,000 demonstrators using batons and tear gas.

The cast iron fence surrounding the giant building had been repaired and numerous police officers patrolled the capital's streets.

Security forces temporarily restricted entrance to the capital overnight Friday, setting up checkpoints around its perimeter, an interior ministry spokesman said.

"Now the situation is completely under our control," Vice Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov told reporters.

He said that Friday's unrest, in which protesters seized the election commission's office in the White House, had been orchestrated by people loyal to Askar Akayev, the Central Asian country's ousted former leader.

## NEW AL-QAEDA VIDEO RELEASED Zawahri says peaceful reform impossible

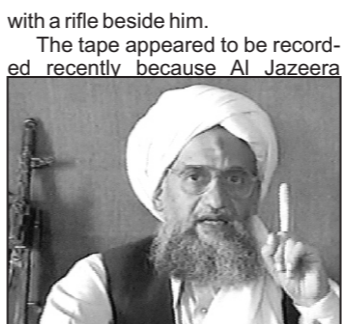
REUTERS, Dubai

al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called for an armed struggle to expel "crusader forces and Jews" from Muslim states and said peaceful change was impossible, in a video tape aired by Al Jazeera on Friday.

A calm-looking Zawahiri also urged Palestinian militant groups not to lay down arms against Israel or take part in parliamentary polls.

"Expelling the invading crusader forces and Jews from our Muslim homes cannot be realised solely through demonstrations and speaking out in the streets. Reform and expelling the invaders from Muslim countries cannot be accomplished except by fighting for the sake of God," Zawahiri said.

"We cannot imagine any reform while our countries are occupied by crusader forces which are spreading throughout our land," said Zawahiri, wearing a white turban



Ayman al-Zawahiri television said Osama bin Laden's right-hand man had slammed assaults on women during a May 25 protest in Egypt.

Washington has pressed Arab allies for political and economic reforms, saying lack of freedom had fostered Islamic militancy. President Bush is also pushing for restarting the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process.