

Abbas invites militant groups to join govt

Fatah gunmen storm Gaza offices demanding jobs

REUTERS, AP, Gaza

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has invited militant factions, including the Islamic group Hamas, to join his government before next month's Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip, a Palestinian Authority official said on Saturday.

Israel condemned the idea, which would mark the first time armed groups have been part of a Palestinian cabinet.

Israel and the United States have demanded Abbas disarm and dismantle militant organisations, as dictated by a US-backed "road map" to peace.

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said his faction, which has spearheaded a suicide campaign against Israel and is sworn to its

destruction, would discuss the offer and "announce its decision in suitable time."

However, Islamic Jihad leader Nafez Azzam said his group, which has also killed hundreds of Israelis in attacks, had rejected the invitation, saying it "would not take part in a Palestinian government as long as (Israeli) occupation exists."

Samir al-Mashrawi, a Palestinian Authority negotiator and top leader in Abbas's Fatah faction, said he had invited the militant groups to discuss the formation of a unity government whose prime agenda topic would be Israel's pullout plan.

"The offer was prompted by the need to have a national partnership to shoulder responsibility in this very delicate and sensitive situation," he said, adding that such a move would

not affect an upcoming legislative election.

Hamas's popularity has grown during more than four years of violence, especially in Gaza, where it made a strong showing in municipal elections earlier this year. Hamas also plans to challenge Abbas's Fatah group in the coming election.

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev said Israel sees the group as "part of the problem and not as part of any sort of solution" and reiterated Israel's demand that Abbas dismantle it.

Meanwhile, dozens of militants linked to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah group raided a government building in Gaza on Saturday, demanding he make good on a deal to recruit them

into his security forces.

About 40 armed men from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, some masked, stormed the Legislative Council building in the town of Rafah and occupied it for four hours. They said they had not used violence or held anyone hostage.

The Palestinian Interior Ministry called the protest "useless" and said committees were still discussing the issue of hiring the men. Al-Aqsa is linked to Fatah, the main Palestinian faction.

"The ministry ... will not succumb to any blackmail attempt made by any of the armed groups," the ministry said in a statement. "The ministry and its agencies will not hesitate to impose the law and protect private and public properties."



PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of protesters take part in "Make Poverty History" campaign rally in the meadows in Edinburgh yesterday. An unprecedented mass rally staged to put pressure on leaders of the Group of Eight most industrialised nations to "make poverty history" in Africa in the Scottish capital which will host the G8 summit.

Live 8 opens to rock world into helping the poor

REUTERS, Tokyo

What has been billed as the greatest music show ever kicked off in Tokyo yesterday, as the first in a galaxy of rock stars took to the stage in a global event aimed at pushing world leaders to do more to help the poor.

Live 8, an expanded version of the Live Aid sensation 20 years ago, will take in 10 cities and four continents, starting in Tokyo in the east and ending in North America in the west.

Tokyo's concert, added to the list only two weeks ago, attracted about half the capacity crowd of 10,000 by the time Japanese rockers Rize opened the show at 2:00 p.m.

But organisers expect more fans at the conference centre outside of Tokyo later in the day when the main act, Icelandic pop singer Bjork, gives her first live performance in two years.

In London, boasting arguably the strongest line-up of the 10 concerts planned, Paul McCartney and U2 frontman Bono are due to open proceedings before more than 200,000 fans with a rendition of "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

Deals pave way for closer Sino-Russian relations

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Moscow

China and Russia on Friday signed bilateral deals on energy, electricity and finance, paving the way for increased "mutually advantageous" cooperation.

"I'm pleased with the success that we achieved in various fields," said visiting President Hu Jintao, after nearly two-hours of talks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

A protocol was signed on an oil-field cooperation between Russia's Rosneft oil company and the China National Petrochemical Corporation (Sinopec), together with a framework agreement on long-term cooperation between the Russian firm and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC).

CNPC President Chen Gen said the agreement with Rosneft covers technology and information exchanges.

"Both sides are confident that in 2006, Russia's promised oil deliveries of 15 million tons will be achieved," he said.

Maoist rebels kill 3 civilians in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Suspected Maoist rebels shot dead three people, including a veterinarian, and wounded another in south-western Nepal, police said yesterday.

The attack occurred Thursday in the Bardia district, 535km south-west of the capital Kathmandu, police said.

"Armed terrorists on bicycles shot dead three civilians," police said, adding that there was no apparent motive for the shootings.

The attack comes after the Maoist leader Prachanda said last month that the rebels would not target civilians following a landmine attack on a crowded bus in southern Nepal that killed 38 people.

The rebels called the bus bombing a "grave" mistake. Rebels have stepped up attacks since King Gyanendra seized power in February. The king said the move was needed to crush the Maoist insurgency, which has claimed around 12,000 lives since 1996.



PHOTO: AFP

In this aerial view taken from a helicopter an Indian freight train lies half submerged by floodwaters in an unidentified location between Baroda and Ahmedabad yesterday. At least 123 people have died and about 25 million have been affected by heavy rains and flooding in the western Indian state of Gujarat this week.

354 people trapped in Gujarat train rescued

Floods force evacuation of 250,000, toll rises to 123

AP, AFP, New Delhi

Rescuers saved 354 train passengers trapped for two days in neck-deep water on flooded rail tracks in Gujarat, where heavy rains have forced the evacuation of nearly 2,00,000 people from their homes, police said on Saturday.

At least 123 people have died and about 25 million have been affected by heavy rains and flooding in the western Indian state of Gujarat this week, a state official said yesterday.

The Indore-Gandhinagar Shanti Express and its passengers were submerged on Thursday morning by floodwaters raging through parts of India, after a lengthy heat wave.

"All the passengers have been saved by Army soldiers and local police," said Director-General of Police AK Bhargava. "All of them have been moved to safer places."

The rescue was carried out late

Friday and there were no casualties, he said.

Large stretches of property near rivers, tributaries and dams in the state with a population of 50 million were under water with more than 900 villages cut off by flooding, said provincial revenue minister Kaushik Patel.

At least 250,000 people have been evacuated because of heavy rains and flash floods in the state and the situation is likely to worsen with more rain forecast, federal Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal told reporters in New Delhi Friday.

"We have to be prepared for the worst floods. Only after July 4 or 5 will there be a substantial fall in rainfall."

A damage estimate was not immediately available, but federal Home Minister Shivraj Patil announced a five billion rupee (110 million dollar) aid package for

Gujarat after an aerial survey of the flood-affected areas on Friday.

"One hundred hours of rain in different parts of Gujarat has affected more than 70 percent of the state, 123 people died in various mishaps," state revenue minister Patel said.

In all, some 4,577 villages and 31 urban centres in Gujarat were hit by power cuts as rains pounded the state non-stop for four days straight, Patel said.

The 123 victims -- including both adults and children -- died as they were washed away by strong currents after dams overflowed, while others were crushed when portions of buildings collapsed or were buried in mudslides, officials said.

Train services were delayed as the floods damaged rail tracks while some had to be cancelled, marooning hundreds of passengers on railway platforms.

5 soldiers die as Turkey train bombed

REUTERS, Tunceli

Five soldiers were killed and eight people were injured yesterday when a bomb planted by Kurdish guerrillas exploded on a train in eastern Turkey, military officials said.

A second train which travelled to the scene to provide assistance was fired on by militants armed with rifles, an official said. It was not clear if there were any casualties in this attack.

The state-run Anatolian news agency said a postal train was targeted in the first attack. The five dead and three of those injured were soldiers travelling on the train in Bingol province between the eastern towns of Elazig and Tatvan when the blast occurred around 10:15 a.m. (0715 GMT).

One official said rebels from the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) were believed to have laid the C-4 plastic explosives on the track and triggered them by remote control. A military operation was launched to capture those responsible.

The blast toppled carriages, and work had begun to rescue people trapped inside, an official said. Around 100 people were on board the train at the time. The injured were being transported to hospital

Congress should introspect, says Jyoti Basu

PTI, New Delhi

Asking the Congress to seriously introspect whether its policies were benefiting the "vast masses" of the country, veteran Marxist Jyoti Basu has said the biggest political party should also strengthen the secular character of the state.

"We want the Congress to introspect with due seriousness. Can it continue with the same economic politics of indiscriminate liberalisation and privatisation? Will there then be any difference between its policies and those of the BJP," he said in a special article in the CPI (M) organ 'People's Democracy' which observes its 40th anniversary.

Basu, the founder Editor of the journal, said the people expected the UPA government to "fulfil its commitment that its policies will be for the common people".

Observing that the CPI (M) recognised the Congress as a "secular" party, Basu said "as the biggest political party in the country, its role has relevance in determining the secular character of the state at this juncture."

No evidence to link Ahmadinejad with 1979 US embassy siege

REUTERS, Washington

The White House said on Friday it has unearthed no evidence so far to support assertions by former American captives that Iranian President-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was involved in the 1979 siege of the US Embassy in Tehran.

Several Americans who were held have said they recognised the ultra-conservative Ahmadinejad as a ringleader. But two Iranians who were leading figures in the storming of the embassy said he did not take part.

"We continue to look into it to establish the facts," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

Asked if the United States was aware of the allegations before the hostages went public, McClellan noted that President Bush had said on Thursday "that he didn't have any information."

Involvement by the new Iranian leader in the 1979-1981 hostage crisis would send a chill through the US government, which has not resumed diplomatic relations with Iran. Fifty-two Americans were held for 444 days.

US bombs Taliban compound

Afghan fighting kills 31

AP, AFP, Kabul/ Kandahar

American warplanes bombed a suspected Taliban compound in an area where an elite US military team has been missing for five days in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan while 31 suspected militants killed in fighting in south, a US military spokesman said yesterday.

It was not clear if there were any casualties from the airstrike.

"We conducted an airstrike on a target we deemed we had to hit immediately. The target was an enemy compound in Kunar province," US military spokesman Lt. Col. Jerry O'Hara said. "The bombing was done using precision guided munitions. The target objective was intelligence driven."

He said a "battle damage assessment is ongoing" and declined to speculate on casualties from the attack, which happened at dusk on Friday. O'Hara also declined to say if the airstrike was directly related to the missing military team.

He said earlier Saturday that there had been no sign of the team by rescuers who are desperately scouring the mountains near Asadabad town, Kunar province, close to the Pakistani border.

A purported Taliban spokesman claimed Friday that militants had captured one of the men.

Meanwhile, thirty-one people, most of them Taliban insurgents, have been killed in new battles in southern Afghanistan, an official said yesterday.

The latest casualties in Uruzgan province increased the death toll in the restive region to 47 within a week.

Uruzgan governor Jan Mohammad Khan said 25 rebels and six policemen were killed as more than 100 policemen swarmed through Tagab village and clashed with militants on Friday.

Four policemen and five suspected Taliban rebels were killed in a Taliban attack on a police checkpoint in the early hours of Friday morning and another 20 militants and two policemen were

killed in clashes later that day, he added.

"Now we've 25 Taliban killed in the fighting -- 20 of them later Friday afternoon," he told AFP, adding another militant was captured.

Khan said the hunt for the guerrillas was ongoing.

Mullah Abdul Latif Hakimi, a spokesman for the rebels, confirmed the fighting but said they had lost only six of their soldiers.

"We killed 14 police on Friday morning -- the government attacked us in the afternoon in which we lost six of our mujahedin," he said.

His claims could not be independently confirmed.

The village in Uruzgan's Charchino district has been the scene of bloody clashes between police and the ousted militia in the past week.

On Thursday Taliban insurgents attacked the same village and kidnapped nine village elders and a child, accusing them of spying for the American troops.

Opposition launches drive for early polls in Lanka

AFP, Dondra

Sri Lanka's main opposition party yesterday launched a 10-day march with thousands of supporters to pressure President Chandrika Kumaratunga to call nationwide elections by year-end and revive a Norway-led peace process.

United National Party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and supporters set off from the southernmost tip of the island for the capital Colombo, 170km north, where they will arrive for a rally on July 12.

Kumaratunga's government was reduced to a minority after Marxist allies quit the government last month to protest a deal to share billions of dollars in international donor aid with ethnic Tamil rebels to rebuild the country after the December 26 tsunamis.

Previously Wickremesinghe said

his party, the largest in the 225-seat parliament with 88 seats, would support her government as it implements the tsunami aid plan.

But on Saturday he signalled his backing was not open-ended.

"We are ready for any election," Wickremesinghe told AFP. "The expectation in the country is for a presidential election, but if the government wants to have even an early parliamentary election, we are ready for that."

Kumaratunga holds the powerful post of president and leads the Freedom Party which formed a government with allies after defeating Wickremesinghe in elections in 2004.

The opposition leader also accused the government of scuttling a peace process with Tamil Tiger rebels who have warned that a truce clinched in February 2002, when Wickremesinghe was prime minis-

ter, was in danger of collapsing.

"The government has messed up the peace process," Wickremesinghe said. "The peace process is being turned into a march towards war. I can tell the government only one thing. They just can't deliver."

Kumaratunga accused Wickremesinghe of making too many concessions to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during six rounds of direct peace talks and used her post as president to call the April 2004 elections.

Despite opposition from allies, Kumaratunga signed the tsunami aid deal with the rebels under prodding by international donors who said it was the only way to ensure help reached people in areas under rebel control, mainly in the east of the island.

Aids is Asia's 'silent tsunami': Experts

REUTERS, Kobe

Aids is a silent tsunami that threatens all of Asia, but the deadly disease can still be conquered if governments take urgent action now, world health officials said yesterday.

One in four new infections occurs in Asia and 1,500 die in the region each day. The disease has spread to all provinces in China, the world's most populous nation, while India has the second-highest number of Aids/ HIV patients after South Africa.

But political will to battle the illness is lacking in most of the region's governments despite the huge potential toll in lives and missed development goals as millions of households are pushed into poverty, officials said at an international Aids conference in the western Japanese city of Kobe.

Failure to fight Aids will have a

critical economic impact on the region. The United Nations estimates losses could total \$29 billion from Aids alone by 2010 if nothing is done now.

Governments need to view Aids as a threat on the scale of a natural disaster such as the tsunami last December that killed or left missing 232,000 people, said J.V.R. Prasada Rao, Director of the Regional Support Team for UNAIDS, the UN agency dedicated to fighting the disease.

"The only real barrier to scaling up the response to HIV is one of perception," he told a conference session.

"The virus doesn't kill hundreds of thousands at a thunderous stroke like the tsunami, and it doesn't provide vivid television pictures," he added. "It is more like a silent tsunami."