

Israel threatens ground offensive in Gaza

Hamas commander killed by Israeli sniper

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel threatened a large-scale offensive in the Gaza Strip and shot dead a Hamas commander yesterday, saying Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had failed to crack down on militants as a truce teetered.

Addressing Israel's cabinet, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said he had instructed the army "to act without limitation to stop the strikes on Israeli communities."

Palestinian leaders said a major offensive would be disastrous for Middle East peace prospects and Israel's hopes of a smooth pullout from Gaza settlements, starting next month.

But Gaza militants defied Abbas's call to hold fire and kept up rocket barrages. Family members and Hamas officials said a sniper shot and killed a commander of the

Islamic group as he went outside to water the garden. The army confirmed it shot him.

"We are going for a large-scale operation in Gaza," Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim told Israel Radio, when asked about tanks and troops that massed outside Gaza over the weekend.

"It depends on what evolves over the coming hours. It is a matter of hours. We will not tolerate this barrage," he said.

A decision on an offensive was expected later.

Abbas on Saturday urged Hamas and other militants to halt attacks on Israel and return to a truce seen as key to securing an orderly Israeli withdrawal from Gaza as planned next month. Abbas also blamed Israel for the truce's near-collapse.

Israel has not launched a large-

scale offensive into the Gaza Strip since the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat last year raised new hopes for Middle East peacemaking.

Abbas wants to avert Israeli army incursions into Gaza but has to tread carefully against Hamas, committed to destroying Israel, because of its military and political clout.

Two teenagers were killed in the past few days in gunbattles between Hamas and Palestinian police trying to prevent rocket fire, raising fears among Palestinians of civil war.

A Palestinian official rang alarm bells over Boim's threat. "If carried out, it would have only disastrous results on the Gaza disengagement's prospects and on the peace process as a whole," senior negotiator Saeb Erekat told Reuters.

All 55 aboard die in Equatorial Guinea plane crash

AFP, Malabo

No one survived the crash of an Antonov plane in Equatorial Guinea which went down in flames shortly after takeoff from the capital Malabo with 55 people aboard, national radio reported yesterday.

The plane, which crashed early Saturday, "was completely destroyed, burned and there were no survivors," the station announced, playing sombre music as it reported the news.

It took rescuers until Sunday to reach the crash site in a remote area some 30km from Malabo, as they had to skirt the 3,000 meter (10,000 feet) high Mount Basile which overlooks the capital of the west African state and walk several hours through dense forest.

Rescuers had already been able to recover some of the bodies, the radio station said, without stating how many.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi woman rushes with her wounded son to a local hospital in the town of al-Mussayib, south of Baghdad yesterday. The blitz of suicide bombings in Iraq showed no sign of abating after a bomber drove a tanker of liquefied gas into a southern town killing at least 98 people and wounding 156.

Iraqi tribunal lays charges against Saddam

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's special tribunal has laid the first formal charges against Saddam Hussein for crimes committed during his 25-year rule and proceedings could begin "within days," the tribunal said yesterday.

Its chief investigating judge told a news conference in Baghdad Saddam had been charged, with three others, with killings of Shia Muslims in the village of Dujail in 1982.

The case is seen as relatively minor compared to accusations of genocide and crimes against humanity that have also been levelled at the former president. But investigators say it may be easier to prove Saddam's personal culpability in the smaller case, leading to a swift conviction and possible death sentence.

The judge, Raed Jouhi, said court proceedings could begin within days, although diplomatic sources said he was probably referring to pre-trial motions rather than the trial itself.

Norway has no plan to push for Lankan peace talks now

AFP, Colombo

Peace broker Norway denied yesterday a report it was planning to send envoys to Sri Lanka after a Supreme Court ruling effectively scuttled a deal to share billions of dollars in international tsunami aid with Tamil rebels.

There were "no plans for any visits," a Norwegian embassy official, who declined to be named, said discounting a report in Britain's Sunday Times newspaper that two envoys would be dispatched next week to discuss the current crisis in the peace process.

On Friday Sri Lanka's Supreme Court, citing constitutional issues, blocked a deal to share donor aid between the government and Tiger rebels who have waged a separatist

war that has left more than 60,000 dead since 1972.

The deal, reached with the help of Norway almost six months after tsunamis devastated the island nation killing nearly 31,000 and leaving one million homeless, is now in limbo with the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) so far mute on the next steps.

About two-thirds of the tsunami damage occurred in the northeast of the country, parts of which are dominated by the LTTE.

The collapse of the tsunami aid deal is seen as a major setback to the peace process and truce in place since February 2002 and has increased the tension in the country's volatile northeast region.

Govt rejects claims to Taj Mahal

BBC ONLINE

The Indian government has dismissed claims by a Muslim trust, the Sunni Waqf Board, that it owns the Taj Mahal.

Calling the board's claim baseless, Law Minister H R Bharadwaj said the monument was Indian national property.

The board argued the monument was its property since it holds several Muslim graves, and the board is responsible for all Muslim graves in the country.

The 17th century Taj was built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan as a tomb for his beloved queen, Mumtaz Mahal.

The emperor is also buried in the monument, which is visited by millions every year, next to his queen.

It has been governed, managed and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) since 1920.

'Bush approved, then scrapped plan to influence Iraq polls'

AFP, New York

President George W. Bush approved a covert plan to influence the outcome of Iraq's January 2005 election, but dropped it amid opposition from the US Congress, the New York Times reported yesterday.

After debate within the White House, "the president's national security team recommended that he sign a secret, formal authorisation for covert action to influence the election," the Times said, citing "a dozen current and former government officials" familiar with the discussions.

"Bush either had already signed it or was about to when objections were raised in Congress. Ultimately, he rescinded the decision," the Times said.

All the sources spoke anonymously, except for Frederick Jones, spokesman for the National Security Council, who would not comment on whether a formal authorisation ever existed.

"But there were concerns about efforts by outsiders to influence the outcome of the Iraqi elections, including money flowing from Iran," he was quoted as saying.

"This raised concerns about whether there would be a level playing field for the election. This situation posed difficult dilemmas about what action, if any, the United States should take in response," he said.

Advani struggles to stay put

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Top leaders of India's main opposition party yesterday held a meeting among themselves as the party chief L K Advani came under pressure from within the party to resign in the wake of his praise of Pakistan founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah during a visit to that country.

The meeting discussed about the fate of a scheduled meeting of the party's highest decision-making forum in Chennai next week in the light of renewed pressure on Advani to quit as party chief.

While the RSS, the ideological fountain head of the Sangh Parivar, has already stepped up its efforts to ensure the change at the top of BJP, Advani's woes were compounded on Sunday when four senior party leaders, two of them former chiefs of the party, questioned his leadership.

Apparently at the prodding of RSS, four senior BJP leaders Madan Lal Khurana, Piyarelal

Khandelwal, Jana Krishnamurthy and Bangaru Laxman joined the "oust-Advani" campaign, signalling the outbreak of revolt within the party against his leadership.

Having a tough time Advani is reported to have spoken to RSS chief K S Sudarshan Saturday night and agreed to step down from one of the two posts he is holding BJP president and leader of the opposition in parliament.

The RSS top leadership had met former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and other senior BJP leaders here last week and conveyed him that Advani must make way soon for having "strayed" from the ideological mooring of the Sangh.

But with a section of senior party leaders, including Vajpayee, rallying round Advani at that time, the BJP chief appeared to have weathered the storm triggered by his remarks on Jinnah for a short time. Now four senior party leaders have joined the "oust-Advani" drive making the

challenge to the BJP leadership an open chapter, at least for the RSS.

The RSS is understood to be extremely annoyed by Advani's "refusal" to step down as party chief and the Sangh took this as its defiance by a man who till the other day was its poster boy of aggressive Hinduism.

Khurana shot off a letter to Advani telling him that "it is public knowledge that the RSS leadership has lost confidence in you and had expected that you as its disciplined member should resign from the presidency of the party. Under the present circumstances, I find it impossible to continue under your leadership."

Khandelwal stopped short of asking for Advani's resignation but said the party should discuss the controversy set off by the party chief's remarks during his Pakistan visit and the principle of "one-man-one-post". Krishnamurthy and Laxman were understood to have expressed similar views.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani tribesmen look at the vehicle of suspected militants which was burnt during a clash with Pakistani soldiers on the outskirts of Miranshah, the main town in the semi-autonomous North Waziristan yesterday. Pakistani forces gunned down 17 suspected militants, most of them foreigners, after surrounding their compound in the rugged tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, officials said.

Image of London bombers released

Turkey blast raises fear of new attacks

AFP, London

Britain woke up yesterday to a chilling image of the four London bomb suspects as they headed together to the scene of the attacks, after a bomb blast in a Turkish tourist resort raised fears of further atrocities.

Splashed over most of Sunday's front pages, a security camera image released by police showed the four men, toting large rucksacks, at Luton station, north of London, about to head into the capital on July 7.

"Together, the four bombers," read the Mail on Sunday headline next to the grainy picture.

London's Metropolitan Police released the photo in the hope of jogging the memory of potential witnesses as part of an inquiry, which has now stretched to four continents.

Police had warned of possible further attacks, and on Saturday a British woman was among five people killed when a bomb

destroyed a minibus in the Turkish seaside resort.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned the blast at Kusadasi — particularly popular with British tourists — as a "terrorist attack", without blaming a specific group.

Police have now formally identified all four men suspected of carrying out the attacks on three London Underground subway trains and a bus which left at least 55 people dead including the bombers and injured more than 700.

They believe Mohammed Sidique Khan, 30, set off the explosion at Edgware Road station, while Germaine Lindsay, 19, caused the blast between King's Cross and Russell Square subway stations, the most deadly of the four rush-hour attacks.

The two other previously named suspects are Hasib Hussain, 18, and Shahzad Tanweer, 22.

G-4 ministers in NY for talks with Africa

PTI, New York

Foreign Ministers of G-4 countries, including External Affairs Minister K Natwar Singh, are here for crucial talks with their African counterparts during which they would try to reconcile differences on their resolutions on expansion of the UN Security Council.

The G-4 comprising India, Brazil Germany and Japan have already moved their resolution in the UN General Assembly while Africans have also tabled one and are planning to move it today.

Emergency in Thai Muslim provinces

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand declared emergency rule across virtually the whole of its Muslim south yesterday in a surprisingly tough move to reign in a raging insurgency.

Invoking new powers, the government declared an emergency in Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani provinces plus four districts in neighbouring Songkhla province, where at least 810 people have died in violence since January 2004.

"The decree will cover every district in the three provinces, plus four neighbouring districts in Songkhla province. Those districts also need monitoring, because something could happen," Interior Minister Chidchai Vanasathiyada told reporters.

The government had been expected to announce "emergency zones" within the provinces rather than declaring the whole provinces under emergency rule.

US Muslims fear the enemy within

AFP, Washington

US Muslim leaders watched with foreboding as their worst nightmare played out in Britain, where home-grown suicide bombers were blamed for London's worst attacks since World War II.

Now they are hoping their community is not next in line to face the chilling scenario of one of its own turning against the country of his birth.

"The fact that these young men were British-born Muslims creates a degree of a different kind of anxiety

within the community," said Edina Lekovic of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), a group that presses for American Muslims' civil rights and for the peaceful integration of Islam into US society.

"If this could happen in the UK, it is our worst nightmare that it could happen here."

British police said four young British Muslims possibly operating under a foreign "mastermind" carried out attacks on three Underground trains and one bus in London on July 7 which killed 54 people.

Khatami hails new era in relations with Iraq

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami yesterday hailed a "turning point" in relations with Baghdad as Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari made a historic visit to Tehran aimed at strengthening ties after decades of enmity.

Following talks with the first Iraqi head of government to visit Iran since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Khatami said that Iran was prepared to do anything it could to help its one-time foe, with whom it fought a

devastating eight year war.

"The visit of the Iraqi prime minister to Iran is a turning point in the historic relations between the two countries. It will allow us to plaster the wounds and repair the damage caused by Saddam Hussein through joint cooperation," said Khatami, quoted by the official IRNA agency.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran will do everything it can to assure the reconstruction, security and stability of Iraq," said Khatami. "The strategy of Iran is to support a free Iraq, independent and developed."