

PALESTINIANS SAY

Pullout not enough for peace

AFP, AP, Gaza City

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas urged Israel to stop all its settlement activity in the West Bank if it was serious about peace as the evacuation of settlers from Gaza was put on hold yesterday for the Jewish sabbath.

Having presided over the first ever withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territory, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made clear earlier this week that he would "continue and develop" Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Israel's historic pullout from Gaza, which is nearing the closing stages well ahead of schedule, has been seen as an opportunity to revitalise the moribund peace process.

But both Abbas and the radical Islamist movement Hamas made clear that the ending of the 38-year

Israeli presence in Gaza was not about to usher in a new era of peace for a region torn by five years of conflict.

Hailing the withdrawal from Gaza as a "first step", Abbas confirmed that his Palestinian Authority would take control over all vacated land and planned to build 3,000 new homes on one of the settlements, Morag.

But he added it was vital that Israel pulls out of all areas reoccupied since the start of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000 in the West Bank.

"After that it must stop the settlements and its judaising of Jerusalem," he said in a speech in Gaza City.

"Those who continue with these measures show they do not want peace."

While Abbas, a frequent critic of the armed uprising, is seen as the

moderate voice among Palestinians, he is facing a severe test of his popularity from the hardliners of Hamas who are portraying the Israeli departure from Gaza as a "victory for the resistance."

The prospect of a showdown between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah movement was confirmed when Abbas announced that only the second ever legislative elections would take place on January 25.

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri confirmed after Abbas's announcement that the movement, which boycotted the last elections a decade ago, would participate this time "with the aim of serving our people and stopping the monopoly of the decision-making and putting an end to the corruption."

Just as the Palestinian leader was delivering his speech in the parliament building in Gaza City, militants

of the armed wing of Hamas, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, were delivering their own verdict on the implications of the pullout.

In a statement handed to reporters, they reiterated that they would not disarm after the pullout from Gaza or end their campaign against Israel "until the defeat of the occupation from all our land."

Sharon has argued that the pullout from Gaza will reduce friction with the 1.3 million Palestinians living in the narrow coastal strip and enable Israel to hold on to large settlement blocs in the West Bank.

The argument has left his former allies on the Israeli right and within the settler movement cold, with many fearing the current withdrawals are merely the precursor to larger pull-backs in the West Bank.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas gestures as he speaks during a rally in Gaza City yesterday. Abbas urged Israel to stop all its settlement activity in the West Bank if it was serious about peace as the evacuation of settlers from Gaza was put on hold Saturday for the Jewish sabbath.

'Pakistan may build up to 110 nukes by year-end'

PTI, Washington

Pakistan may produce enough weapons grade uranium by the year-end in an attempt to match India's nuclear capability, according to a leading US think tank.

Pakistan, in a bid to gain parity with India, could produce "enough enriched uranium to manufacture 50 to 110 nuclear weapons" by the year-end, said the study by 'Carnegie Endowment for International Peace'.

It claimed that both countries possessed components to deploy a small number of nuclear weapons within a few days or weeks, with fighter-bomber aircraft being the most likely delivery vehicle, the media reports said.

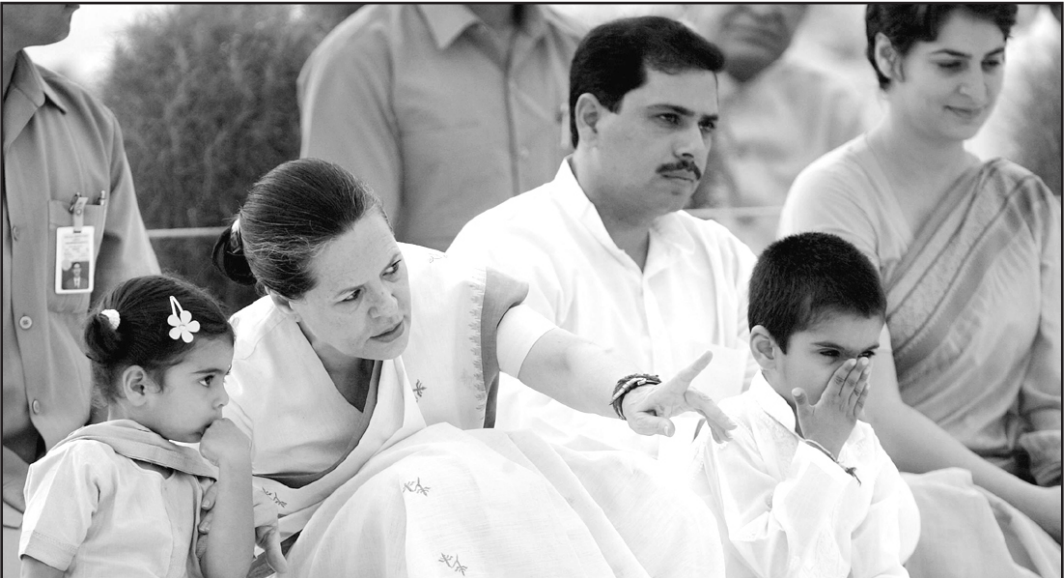


PHOTO: AFP

Congress president and chairperson of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Sonia Gandhi gestures as she talks to her granddaughter (L) while her daughter Priyanka Gandhi Vadra (R) and son-in-law Robert Vadra (2nd-R) look on during a memorial ceremony for her late husband, former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, on the 61st anniversary of his birth in New Delhi yesterday. Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated on May 21, 1991 in Tamilnadu by LTTE suicide bombers.

Lanka keen for early truce talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government is keen to have early talks to salvage a truce with Tamil Tiger rebels after both sides agreed to a review of the ceasefire, peacebroker Norway said.

Norway stepped up efforts to arrange the first high-level talks in 30 months between Colombo and the Tigers as the ceasefire came under renewed pressure following the assassination on August 12 of the foreign minister.

"The government is keen to have the talks as soon as possible," said Norwegian embassy spokesman Tom Knappskog on Saturday. "We are in consultations with the parties to finalise a date and a venue."

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said Friday the

truce talks would be held in Oslo "in a couple of weeks."

Scandinavian truce monitors had warned that the murder of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was a major setback for the truce that took effect February 23, 2002 and could jeopardise the entire peace process.

The government has blamed the LTTE for the killing but it has denied responsibility. Kadirgamar, an ethnic Tamil, had been a vociferous critic of the Tigers who branded him a traitor to their campaign for a Tamil homeland.

The Tigers and the Colombo government had their last high-level contact in March 2003 in Hakone, Japan when they had their sixth round of peace talks since starting negotiations in September 2002.

Pak soldier hanged for plot to kill Musharraf

REUTERS, Lahore

A soldier convicted of plotting to assassinate Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf was hanged on Saturday, a senior government official said.

Islam Siddiqui, one of several soldiers and militants arrested after two al Qaeda-inspired attempts on Musharraf's life in late 2003, was executed in the central city of Multan after being sentenced by a military court last year.

"He was hanged this morning and his body was handed over to his family," Hasan Waseem Afzal, Home Secretary of the Punjab province, told Reuters.

London cops retain 'shoot-to-kill' policy

REUTERS, London

London's police force has reviewed its controversial "shoot-to-kill" policy and left it largely unchanged despite the killing of a Brazilian mistaken for a would-be suicide bomber, Scotland Yard said yesterday.

"We have reviewed it and we have made one or two small changes, but the operation remains essentially the same," a Metropolitan police spokeswoman told Reuters.

The spokeswoman declined to detail the changes, but London police chief Ian Blair said officers would continue to use deadly force to stop possible terror attacks.

"The methods that were used appeared to be the least worst option (for tackling suicide bombers) ... we still have the procedure in use," he

told the Daily Mail.

A spokeswoman for the Association of Chief Police Officers, which issues the shoot-to-kill guidance, codenamed "Operation Kratos," said the overall policy was unaffected.

"They are going to make changes operationally, but they are not in a position to change the guidance. We are not changing it," she said.

Operation Kratos outlines what level of force officers can use to thwart what police call a "deadly and determined attack."

Public awareness of the policy only emerged after police shot Jean Charles de Menezes eight times at point blank range as he boarded an underground train on July 22, the day after four bombs failed to explode on the London's transport system.

Maldives govt accused of stepping up crackdown

AFP, Colombo

The main opposition in the exotic tourist paradise of the Maldives accused the government of stepping up arrests as a rights group demanded the immediate release of a leading dissident.

The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) said arrests had extended from the capital island Male to the other atolls and the government of President Maumoon Gayoom had crushed its latest protests.

"After four days of protests by us, there is a brutal crackdown going on," said the Colombo-based MDP spokesman Mohamed Latheef on Saturday. "Lots of people are being rounded up, beaten and then released."

He said hundreds had been arrested without giving a specific figure. The Maldivian government has said it has detained 130 people, including MDP chairman Mohamed

Nasheed, and has denied allegations of brutality.

Political parties were allowed in the Maldives for the first time in June in line with Gayoom's pledge at the start of the year to establish multi-party democracy in the nation he has ruled since 1978.

The MDP, which for the first time has been allowed to register as a political party, has said the state is unleashing violence against its supporters to contain its popularity.

The British-based Friends of the Maldives said the group was "deeply concerned" over the crackdown in the tiny archipelago. It called for the immediate release of Nasheed, taken into custody eight days ago.

"Four days of civil unrest have been plagued by excessive force and brutal beatings of the 200 pro-democracy activists," group spokesman David Hardingham said in a statement.

He said the administration had

used water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets against peaceful protestors.

"Arbitrary arrests are continuing," Hardingham said. "The charges for which suspects are detained are not made clear and the families are given very little information."

On Thursday Gayoom named one of the country's top dissidents, Ghasim Ibrahim, as the new finance minister. Ibrahim, a top businessman and a former member of the MDP, was among dozens arrested after anti-government riots in Male a year ago.

Diplomatic sources said Ibrahim's defection to the government could be a blow to the dissidents. Some critics have said the pledge by Gayoom, South Asia's longest-serving leader, is hollow and that he has no intention of instituting a vibrant democracy in the nation of some 300,000 Sunni Muslims.

Pro-Musharraf parties score early polls win

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's government parties claimed early wins while opposition groups cried foul as unofficial results poured in following the first round of Pakistan's local elections yesterday.

Political parties could not contest district council elections, but they openly showed which candidates were theirs even if colours and symbols were barred from campaigns.

At least 16 people were killed and hundreds injured in sporadic violence during Thursday's voting.

With general elections due in 2007, parties want district leaders in place who can influence voting for seats in provincial and national assemblies.

It matters for President Pervez Musharraf, one of the West's main allies in a global war on terrorism, as he will seek re-election by the assemblies and the Senate that emerges from the vote in two years' time.

The chief minister of Punjab

reckoned the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q), the party backed by Musharraf, had scored a landslide in the most populous of Pakistan's four provinces.

"Eighty percent of the winners are candidates supported by us. The PML has come out as a strong political force, and its impact would be visible in the 2007 general elections," Punjab's Chief Minister Pervaiz Elahi said.

In southern Sindh province, Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a junior partner in government, was sure of wresting Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, from Islamist parties who won in 2002.

"We have won in 110 out of the 178 union councils in Karachi," Kunwar Khalid Yunus, a central leader of the MQM and a member of the National Assembly, told Reuters.

Democracy has had a sorry history in Pakistan. The military has ruled for more than half the country's 58 years since independence.

NEGOTIATORS SAY

US conceding to Iraqi Islamists

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

Islam will be "the main source" of Iraq's law and parliament will observe religious principles, negotiators said yesterday after what some called a major turn in talks on the constitution and a shift in the US position.

If agreed by Monday's parliamentary deadline, it would appear to be a major concession to Islamist leaders from the Shia Muslim majority and sit uneasily with US insistence on the primacy of democracy and human rights in the new Iraq.

US diplomats, who have been shepherding the process closely, declined immediate comment and at least one secular Kurdish politician said Kurds would try to block such a deal.

But an official from one of the main Shia Islamist parties and a leading Sunni Arab negotiator said agreement had been reached, reversing an understanding reached earlier in the recent talks that Islam would simply be "a main source" of law.

Parliament would not be able to pass legislation that contradicted the principles of Islam, several negotiators told Reuters. One Shia official said that a constitutional court would decide whether laws conformed to Islamic faith.

But Sunni negotiator Saleh al-Mutlak said that, at the insistence of US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the constitution would also contain language stating that the "principles

of democracy" would be respected.

Khalilzad, who said this month there would be "no compromise" on equal rights for women and minorities, helped draft a constitution in his native Afghanistan which declared it an "Islamic Republic" in which no law could contradict Muslim principles.

It also, however, contained language establishing equal rights for women and protecting religious minorities.

Other Arab states, including secularly ruled Egypt, have similar phrasing in their constitutions, allotting a special role for Islam in the law.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush, besieged at his Texas ranch by relatives of US soldiers killed in Iraq, said yesterday that the best way to honour fallen troops was to win the war on terrorism.

"We must finish the task that our troops have given their lives for and honour their sacrifice by completing their mission," the president said in his weekly radio address from his Prairie Chapel property near this tiny town.

"They know that if we do not confront these evil men abroad, we will have to face them one day in our own cities and streets, and they know that the safety and security of every American is at stake in this war, and they know we will prevail," said Bush, who was here on a five-week vacation from Washington.

Myanmar talks on constitution to resume by Dec: UN envoy

AFP, Yangon

Constitutional talks suspended by Myanmar's military rulers and designed as the first step on the junta's "road map" to democracy, are due to resume by December, a visiting UN envoy said yesterday.

Former Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas on Friday held a rare meeting with the junta's top five leaders to discuss reforms at the United Nations, and later met organisers of a national convention charged with drafting a new constitution.

Alatas, who wrapped up the last of a three-day visit to impoverished Myanmar, told reporters the meeting with constitutional talks organisers and others with government-backed social groups were added to his agenda by the junta.

"It was quite interesting but I didn't come for this," Alatas said, stressing his mandate was the UN reform process.

He said national convention senior organiser Judge Aung Toe told him the talks -- which the junta suspended in March -- would resume by December.

The European Union, the United States, the United Nations and human rights groups consider the national convention a sham because it has been boycotted by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under her latest stint of house arrest since May 2003.



PHOTO: AFP

(L-R) Spain's Princess Letizia, Prince Felipe, Queen Sofia and King Juan Carlos watch the coffins arrive at the army's headquarters in Madrid yesterday during the state funeral of the 17 Spanish soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan. The soldiers, attached to the Nato-led International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) were on manoeuvres when the Cougar helicopter they were travelling in crashed on August 16 near Herat.