

Abbas accuses Israel of wrecking peace

Shia rivals clash

5 Palestinians shot dead

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas accused Israel yesterday of wrecking the prospects of peace after soldiers killed five militants and officials unveiled plans to expand the largest West Bank settlement. The shootings, Israel's first deadly operation since the historic pullout of settlers from Gaza, came as a British Jew was stabbed to death by a lone Arab in the first fatal Palestinian attack in Jerusalem's Old City in three years. The bloodshed and plans to build a major new Israeli police station in the West Bank deflated interna-

tional optimism that the evacuation of Jewish settlers from Gaza would help revive the stagnant Middle East peace process. "We strongly condemn this crime and the Israeli side will be responsible for any consequences," Abbas said. "This policy of the Israelis is destroying the peace process and the ceasefire," he added in reference to an unofficial truce by militant groups. The five gunmen, one from Islamic Jihad and the rest members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades that is loosely affiliated to Abbas's Fatah party, were shot dead when an overnight arrest operation disinte-

grated into a fierce shootout. Israel said all five belonged to Islamic Jihad and were wanted in connection with a suicide bombing last month that killed four Israelis, claimed by the Islamist faction. An army spokesman said the five, one of them a top Jihad official, were killed late Wednesday in the northern West Bank Tulkarem refugee camp. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had warned on the eve of the Gaza pullout that Israel would respond more harshly than ever against militant violence unless the Palestinian Authority clamped down on armed groups in the future.

Bodies of 36 men discovered in Iraq

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders were battling yesterday to strike an accord on the constitution by a midnight deadline and restore calm after deadly fighting erupted between Shia rivals that could derail the political process. Negotiators involved in drafting the constitution said leaders were in intense talks with Sunni Arabs in a last-minute bid to seek their nod for the charter before it goes to parliament for lawmakers' vote. However, they warned that the eruption of violence between rival militia groups in Shia-dominated parts of southern Iraq could affect the parliament vote. Seven people have been killed and dozens wounded since late Wednesday when supporters of radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr clashed with the rival Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a powerful Shia party

led by Abdel Aziz al-Hakim. "The Shia clashes have come at an awkward time. It threatens today's constitutional approval as 22 MPs and two cabinet ministers are close to Sadr and if they do not vote it will be a tough call," said Kurdish constitution committee member Mahmud Othman. The United States, which invaded Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein in March 2003, is pushing for the approval of the charter, a key phase in the country's political transition which could pave the way for a withdrawal of foreign forces. Meanwhile bodies of 36 men were discovered yesterday southeast of Baghdad on a road leading to Iran, police said. The bodies were naked and left on a road leading to Badra, a town near the Iranian border, police Lt. Abbas al-Shammari said. The area southeast of Baghdad has witnessed killings in the past between Shiites and Sunnis.



PHOTO: AFP

Firemen pump the high water of the Donau river out of the Weltenburg abbey's court yesterday. Damaging floods continued to abate in the southern German state of Bavaria as swollen rivers receded or remained below the hazard-dous levels.



PHOTO: AFP

A man negotiates a puddle of mud near part of the fuselage of the Peruvian plane crashed Tuesday in Pucallpa, Peru. Rescuers scoured the Amazon jungle Wednesday for human remains at the site of a Peruvian plane crash that killed at least 41 people, while 57 survivors were treated at local hospitals.

UN members under growing pressure

US calls for changes on reform draft

AFP, REUTERS, United Nations

Three weeks before a scheduled summit of world leaders tasked with endorsing a sweeping reform of the United Nations, member states are under growing pressure to break the current deadlock standing in the way of an acceptable compromise document. The summit's so-called outcome document "is moving in the right direction but we still have lingering differences in a number of major areas, substantive issues on which we will have to negotiate," the current president of the General Assembly, Gabon's Jean Ping told AFP Wednesday. Ping, who has been tasked with drafting the document and has been holding consultations with the various UN regional groups this week, said he had set up a small negotiating group -- 20 to 30 members -- to try to work out a compromise in the "six or seven areas where differences still persist." The summit, which will bring

together a record 180 heads of state or government, is to be held here September 14-16, ahead of the annual session of the UN General Assembly, which will mark the 60th anniversary of the creation of the world body. Meanwhile, US Ambassador John Bolton urged UN member nations on Wednesday in a letter to accelerate negotiations on development, security and human rights proposals less than a month before 175 world leaders are to approve reform proposals at a summit. Bolton's letter, circulated to the other 190 ambassadors, at the United Nations comes a week after the United States submitted more than 500 amendments to a draft document diplomats have been negotiating for six months, causing some envoys to panic that agreement might not be reached. In talks with delegates, Bolton has suggested the 30-page document be replaced by a three-page statement or negotiated line by line, diplomats reported.

Fires put out, floodwaters recede in Europe

AFP, Vienna

Europe's weather crisis eased yesterday as fires were put out in Portugal and flood waters receded in central Europe but the death toll rose in Romania and Austria after heavy rains. Since June, the flooding in central and eastern Europe has caused 103 deaths while fires in drought-stricken Portugal, Spain and France killed 37, according to figures compiled by AFP. Portuguese firefighters said Thursday they had brought under control all blazes which have ravaged the centre and north of the country over the past two weeks thanks to the arrival of cooler weather. Across the country 850 firefighters backed by 600 soldiers were still monitoring the sites of recent blazes however to guard against flare-ups, the civil protection agency said in a statement. Wildfires have killed 15 people, including 10 firefighters, destroyed

more than 100 homes and charred at least 180,000 hectares (some 450,000 acres) of land since the start of the year. Meanwhile flood waters receded across central and eastern Europe, but the death toll continued to rise in Romania and Austria. "Unfortunately, we are expecting the number of victims to rise hour by hour," Romanian Interior Minister Vasile Blaga said at a news conference on Thursday. "Our priority is the safety of residents. For that reason we have deployed nearly 10,000 military troops and police to help in rescue operations," Blaga said. Thirteen people have died in Romania in the past three days and three more are missing, including a four-year-old girl. The latest victims brought the toll from extreme weather in Romania to 66 since the beginning of this year, Braga said. Most victims have been elderly people swept away by the currents of raging rivers. Detailing the extent of the disas-

ter, Blaga said nearly 2,000 people had been evacuated from their homes over the past two weeks and 400 houses had been swept away by flood waters. Damages are estimated at over 1.5 billion euros. In Austria, an 81-year-old man on Thursday became the fourth victim in three days of heavy flooding, as 14 army helicopters were airlifting food and medicine to some 5,000 stranded tourists in Paznauntal, in the western province of Tyrol. The latest victim was driving his car when he veered into the raging currents of the Litz River in the western province of Vorarlberg. In Switzerland, authorities continued to evacuate residents from flood-stricken areas Thursday as rescue workers battled to remove debris that threatened dams and bridges even as the waters subsided. Six people were dead or missing after four days of flooding in Switzerland's north, centre and east.