

Israeli ministers okay Gaza border crossing

No peace until militants disarmed, says Sharon

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's inner cabinet approved yesterday a proposal for a crossing to let Palestinians come and go between Egypt and Gaza following the Israeli withdrawal from the strip.

Israeli controls.

But details, including the possible role of European Union monitors, still have to be finalised with the Palestinians. Recent contacts have been weighed down by the worst violence since the Israeli withdrawal in September.

The Egyptian-proposed plan also has to be approved by the full Israeli cabinet, probably on Sunday.

Under the plan accepted in Cairo last week by Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, the foot crossing would be under foreign oversight to assuage Israeli fears that arms and militants could easily cross into Gaza.

Israel has been under pressure from the United States to help open Gaza's frontiers so Palestinians can

trade and travel more easily. International mediators hope a thriving economy in Gaza will boost a peace "road map" for Palestinian statehood.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made future progress in the Middle East peace process conditional on the disarmament of Palestinian militant groups Monday as he vowed to expand Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and Golan Heights.

Delivering his first address to parliament since withdrawing troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip after a costly 38-year presence, the prime minister said the onus was now on the Palestinians to make painful concessions towards peace.

India cautious over Pak proposal to demilitarise LoC

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday responded cautiously to Pakistan's suggestion that the rivals demilitarise disputed Kashmir to speed up relief efforts after last month's quake, which claimed 58,000 lives, saying the step could not be taken unilaterally.

"It (the demilitarisation) can't be done unilaterally," Foreign Minister Natwar Singh told reporters in New Delhi, the Press Trust of India reported.

"After all, they (Pakistan) are in occupation of our areas," he said referring to India's claim over all of the Himalayan region of Kashmir -- the root cause of tension between the nuclear-armed rivals.

Singh was responding to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's remarks to Saudi newspaper Arab News at the weekend in which he said he was "for demilitarisation (in Kashmir).

"If they (India) agree to that, we will too," Musharraf's spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan quoted him as saying.

The minister made it clear that he has to study the Pakistan president's comments and the context in which they were made before offering any definite views.

"Over-verbalising doesn't help. Every second day there is a statement from that side," he added, referring to Pakistan.

Late Monday Indian Prime Minister Singh indicated the possibility of Pakistani involvement in Saturday's bomb blasts in New Delhi that claimed 62 lives.

"We continue to be disturbed and dismayed at indications of the external linkages of terrorist groups with the October 29 bombing," Singh said in a telephone call initiated by Musharraf.



Syrian youths, waving national flags, demonstrate against UN Security Council Resolution 1636 in Damascus yesterday. Syria described as "unjust" the UN resolution adopted Monday, urging it to cooperate fully with the probe into the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

PHOTO: AFP

20 killed in Kyrgyz prison riots

AFP, Bishkek

At least 20 inmates were killed yesterday after riots in four jails in the Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan sparked by the transfer of a jailed criminal gang leader, officials and rights activists told AFP.

"More than 20 prisoners were killed after special operations this morning," a prison administration official told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"The situation in the prisons remains difficult," the official added.

The riots were sparked by an attempt to move around 25 inmates led by criminal kingpin Aziz Batukayev out of Moldovanovka jail near Bishkek where a lawmaker was killed last month during a visit in clashes between inmates and prison guards, officials said.

"There was an attempt to move several criminal gang leaders, including Aziz Batukayev, into quieter prisons and search all the prisoners," said the official.

The death toll was substantiated by human rights campaigners.

"More than 20 inmates died when prison 31 was stormed, and several prisoners are injured," said Aziza Abdrasulova, a human rights activist, referring to the Moldovanovka facility.

Riots occurred at Petrovka, Moldovanovka, Novo-Pokrovka and Jalal-Abad jails around Kyrgyzstan as inmates communicated by mobile phones to coordinate the protest, another official from Moldovanovka jail said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Muslims hold placards condemning the Delhi serial blasts during a special prayer meeting in memory of the blast victims in Mumbai yesterday. Indian police have prepared a sketch of a key suspect in New Delhi's deadly bombings as Hindus celebrated the Diwali festival under tight security.

Iraq can't stop US use of its soil against Syria

Talabani opposed to action against Damascus, 20 killed in bomb blast

AFP, Dubai

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani said he opposed military action against neighbouring Syria but lacked the power to prevent US troops from using his country as a launchpad if it chose to do so.

"I categorically refuse the use of Iraqi soil to launch a military strike against Syria or any other Arab country," Talabani told the London-based Arabic daily Asharq Al-Awsat in an interview published Tuesday.

"But at the end of the day my ability to confront the US military is limited and I cannot impose on them my will."

Talabani spoke before the UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution Monday demanding full Syrian cooperation with a UN inquiry into the assassination in Beirut in February of five-time Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had stern words for Syria in her speech to the council accusing it of supporting terrorism, interfering in the affairs of neighbouring countries and having a "destabilising behaviour in the Middle East."

The Iraqi government and its US backers have long accused Syria of not doing enough to prevent the flow of men and materiel across its borders to insurgents fighting US-backed troops in Iraq.

On Monday, US warplanes struck what commanders described as a house sheltering an "al-Qaeda cell leader" near the border town of Al-Qaim, in the latest in a string of operations against suspected foreign fighters in the region.

But medics in the town and Arabic media reports spoke of 35-plus civilian deaths in the airstrike.

In violence at least 20 people were killed when a car bomb tore through a crowded market in the southern port city of Basra as Iraqis shopped for the Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Fitr, security sources said.

Meanwhile, the month of October, the fourth deadliest month of the war for the United States, ended with the deaths of seven more US soldiers in roadside explosions Monday.

According to an interior ministry source "twenty people, mostly civilians, were killed and 45 wounded in the car bomb attack," late Monday in Basra just ahead of the holiday to mark the end of the fasting month of Ramadan.

The bomb exploded as a police patrol passed, he said, quoting police reports from Basra.

Iraq asks UN to let US-led force stay

REUTERS, United Nations

Iraq asked the UN Security Council on Monday to let a US-led multinational force remain in Iraq for another year, acknowledging its own troops could not yet assure national security.

The request came in a letter to the 15-nation council from Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari.

"This means that basically the mandate and the status of the multinational force will be discussed in the coming weeks so that from January 1, 2006, we will have a consistent military presence in Iraq as happened in the past," Mihai-Razvan Ungureanu, the foreign minister of Romania, the Security Council president for October, told reporters.

The multinational force's current mandate expires at the end of this year, under a resolution approved by the council in June 2004, when the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority turned over Iraq's administration to an interim government.

Extending the mandate through the end of 2006 will require the council to adopt a new resolution in the next two months.

Jaafari said the government in Baghdad wanted the right to terminate the mandate before the end of 2006 if it decided to do so. He also asked the council to agree to review the new mandate eight months after its approval or at any other time if asked to do so by Baghdad.

'Syria under pressure after UN vote'

AFP, Washington

The UN Security Council has sent a clear warning to Syria that it must come clean over its alleged role in the murder of Lebanon's former premier or face further international isolation, analysts say.

"The signal by the Security Council today is that Syria cannot escape the international community," said Scott Lasensky, a Middle East expert at the US Institute of Peace.

The council voted unanimously on Monday for a resolution demanding Syria cooperate fully with a UN investigation into the murder of Lebanon's former premier Rafiq Hariri.

The text urges Syria to detain suspects and impose a travel ban as well as a freeze on assets of all those designated as suspects in the February slaying of Hariri.

But the sponsors of the resolution, Britain, France and the United States, dropped a reference threatening economic and diplomatic sanctions due to objections from China and Russia.

Instead, the compromise wording threatens unspecified "further action" if Damascus fails to cooperate.

While Syria may have avoided the worst case scenario for the moment, the possibility of sanctions still hangs over Damascus even if the resolution does not say so explicitly, Lewensky and other analysts said.

"I don't think it needs to be stated. They know the threat is there," Lewensky said.

With London, Paris and

Washington having to back away from threatening sanctions to gain support from China and Russia, the final language represented "the best they could do," said Steven Cook, an analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The UN investigation has been extended until December 15 after the head of the probe, German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, released an initial report.

Based on interviews with 400 witnesses and suspects and numerous documents, the report found senior Syrian security officials were implicated in the car bombing that killed Hariri and 20 others in Beirut.

Syria has denied any role in the murder and has announced its own internal investigation.

Given the report's reliance on circumstantial evidence, the US insistence on sanctions was untenable and had to be dropped, said Murhaf Jouejati, director of the Middle East Studies Program at George Washington University.

The report was "very thin on material evidence and it is a report that does not stand in front of a court of law," Jouejati said.

"Some members were able to block the US attempt to get at the jugular of Syria."

The watered down language may provide Syria with one last chance to defuse the crisis.

"They must cooperate. They have no choice but to cooperate this time," Jouejati said.

'Blasts jolt Indo-Pak peace process'

AFP, New Delhi

The peace process between India and Pakistan has been jolted by bombings in New Delhi, which killed 62 people but remains intact despite sharp comments by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, analysts on both sides said yesterday.

However, Indian analysts warned that should a direct link be proved between Pakistan and Saturday's bombings of two busy markets and a packed bus, the process which began in January last year would come under severe strain.

Singh has hinted at the possibility of Pakistani involvement in the blasts on the eve of the major Hindu festival of Diwali. His comments were released by the foreign office after he spoke to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf

by telephone Monday night.

"We continue to be disturbed and dismayed at indications of the external linkages of terrorist groups with the October 29 bombing," Singh told Musharraf.

"India expects Pakistan to act against terrorism directed at India," the foreign office quoted Singh as telling Musharraf.

It added: "The prime minister again drew the president's attention to Pakistan's commitment to ending cross-border terrorism."

Musharraf made the commitment in January 2004, when the nuclear-armed rivals, who each hold Kashmir in part and claim it in full, began an eight-point Composite Dialogue aimed at resolving disputes dating back to 1947 when the sub-continent was partitioned at independence.

Son of former Nepali PM abducted

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels have abducted the son of former prime minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand in the northwest of the country, the army said Monday.

"Terrorists" abducted Arun Chand from the Chuha Bazar area of Kailali district on October 27 and took him to an unknown destination, the army said in a statement.

The National Human Rights Commission said Arun Chand was seized at the premises of the Basuling Sugar Mills where he was executive director.

In a statement it urged the rebels to free him unconditionally and immediately.

The Maoists have not admitted the abduction.

Iran not afraid of war or sanctions

AFP, Tehran

Iran is unfazed by the threat of war or sanctions over its disputed nuclear programme and mounting international pressure has only hardened its resolve, a senior official said Monday.

"They must understand that such an attitude will only persuade us more to have nuclear technology," said top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani, responding to widespread condemnation of comments by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Iran has been the focus of an international outcry after Ahmadinejad last week called for Israel to be "wiped off the map". The storm has also raised concerns over the country's bid to master sensitive nuclear fuel technology.

"There won't be a war. They do not have the means to go to war on two fronts," Larijani was quoted as saying by the student news agency ISNA in a reference to the continued hostilities faced by US-led forces in neighbouring Iraq.

"Iran is a hard target," insisted Larijani, who was addressing a seminar on nuclear energy.

"If they think they can limit us by oil sanctions or other sanctions, they are wrong. Oil sanctions will only increase the price of oil," he warned.

Iran says it only wants to develop nuclear power for electricity generation, but the United States and European Union fear Iran is using the fuel cycle as a means to acquire atomic weapons.



PHOTO: AFP

A Sri Lankan man passes by the mirror of a motorcycle, which reflects an image of a billboard of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse in Colombo yesterday ahead of this month's presidential election where he is a candidate. Putting up posters, banners and billboards are banned, but election authorities have allowed the display of election advertising material limited to offices of political parties.

Kashmiris gear up for battle against cold

AP, Karnah

Shivering in the autumn chill, 12-year-old Adil Khan and his younger brother collect wood and tin sheets from a heap of rubble. This was their home until a devastating earthquake hit Kashmir three weeks ago.

The boys are helping their parents build a temporary shelter on the banks of a shimmering stream in Indian Kashmir.

"It is spine-chilling when I think of winter," says their father, 50-year-old farmer Assadullah Khan. "Tents won't work. We have to make a shelter of tin sheets and wood that will protect us from the snow and the icy winds."

The winter in the Himalayan region jealously divided between India and Pakistan is just weeks away and fears are growing for the fate of thousands of villagers in the rugged, remote and

mountainous areas who have had no real shelter since the quake on Oct. 8.

The quake, the strongest to hit South Asia in a century, killed, at least 57,000 in Pakistani Kashmir and parts of northern Pakistan and more than 1,300 in Indian Kashmir.

Winters are always brutal in this part of the world -- snowstorms and avalanches killed 300 in Indian Kashmir last season -- and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) predicts another tough one this year. Villages and districts are cut off from the rest of the world, sometimes for months.

"Temporary shelter is the top priority now and we are running against time," says Indian army colonel P.S. Sisodiya. "Hopefully, we will make it before this valley gets cut off."