

Palestinians to cancel polls if Israel bars voters

Two kidnapped teachers freed

AP, AFP, Jerusalem/ Gaza City

The Palestinian Authority will cancel Jan. 25 parliamentary elections if Israel goes ahead with its plan to bar Jerusalem Palestinians from voting, a senior Palestinian official said yesterday.

"If the Israelis insist on not allowing us to conduct the elections in Jerusalem, then there will be no elections at all," Information Minister Nabil Shaath said.

Israeli officials said Wednesday that Israel would not allow Jerusalem Palestinians to vote because it objects to the participation of Hamas militants in the race, and does not want to help bring its candidates to power.

Israel voiced fears of a potential explosion of Palestinian violence ahead of next month's parliamentary election and said yesterday it

would not allow any voting in occupied east Jerusalem.

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz was reported to have told a meeting of his top lieutenants that Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas was losing control and that the radical Islamist movement Hamas was likely to resume its campaign of attacks, particularly from the Gaza Strip.

"The Palestinian Authority is not functioning in the Gaza Strip, there is no guiding hand," Mofaz was quoted as saying by the Yediot Aharonot daily.

"The Palestinian security forces are not obeying the instructions of the PA chairman (Abbas). We have to be prepared for Hamas's return to terror activity."

Hamas, which is participating in the elections for the first time on January 25, is currently observing a moratorium on its campaign of

attacks against Israel but that is due to expire at the end of the year.

Khaled Meshal, Hamas's Damascus-based overall leader, said earlier this month that the truce would not be renewed as "our people are surrounded and are preparing for a new round of conflict."

Yuval Diskin, the head of Israel's Shin Beth internal security service, told the meeting with Mofaz that the weakening of Abbas's Fatah movement would diminish the Palestinian security services' ability to prevent attacks.

"As soon as Fatah is very weak, and it is weak, the security services that are controlled by the old guard have no legitimacy or motivation to act to prevent terrorism, and without internal legitimacy there is no chance that this will happen," he was quoted as saying by Yediot.

Fatah has been riven by divi-

sions to such an extent that faction rebels have submitted a rival list of candidates to the official slate which will compete against each other in voting on January 25.

Hamas has been trailing Fatah in the polls but managed to win control of three major West Bank municipalities in local elections last week, in areas which had traditionally been Fatah strongholds.

Earlier the principal of the prestigious American School and his deputy were released Wednesday, hours after becoming the latest in a line of foreigners to be kidnapped in the Gaza Strip.

Dutchman Hendrik Taatgen and his Australian assistant Brian Ambrosio were immediately taken to the Gaza City headquarters of the Palestinian Authority after their release, witnesses and security sources said.



Palestinian children throw stones at an Israeli bulldozer near a portrait of slain Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin during an incursion into the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. Israel voiced fears of a potential explosion of Palestinian violence ahead of next month's parliamentary elections but ruled out allowing any voting to take place in occupied east Jerusalem.

Lanka rejects Oslo venue for talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president yesterday rejected a Tamil rebel demand to hold talks in Oslo and welcomed a statement from an international quartet this week that urged the guerrillas to halt killings.

President Mahinda Rajapakse said his new government was prepared to travel to any Asian destination for talks with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on upholding a fragile ceasefire.

Colombo last week backed down from its earlier demand that the negotiations should be within government-held territory and agreed to an Asian venue, a move which saw Japan offering to host talks.

"I think the Tigers are playing politics," Rajapakse told reporters. "If they are serious they must come for talks in Japan. I am ready for talks as soon as the Tigers are ready."



Workers push a patient through the flooded water at a hospital in Kedah, Malaysia yesterday. Severe floods in Malaysia's north have forced thousands more people to flee their homes, but the situation is improving in some areas as the monsoon rains ease.

US Congressmen seek to oppose Indian nuke deal

REUTERS, Washington

Two US lawmakers have proposed a resolution expressing congressional disapproval for President George W. Bush's sweeping nuclear agreement with India, one of the congressmen said on Tuesday.

If the resolution passed, it would signal lawmakers' "disapproval" of the July 18 deal, which has generated strong opposition from non-proliferation advocates because it would give India access to previously banned technology.

"The administration's move to launch nuclear cooperation with India has grave security implications for South Asia and the entire world," said Democratic Rep. Edward Markey of Massachusetts, who introduced the resolution with Republican Rep. Fred Upton of Michigan last week.

Markey, co-chair of the Bipartisan Task Force on Non-

proliferation, is a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, as is Upton.

"Supplying nuclear fuel to countries that are not party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty derails the delicate balance that has been established between nuclear nations and limits our capacity to insist that other nations continue to follow that important non-proliferation policy," he said.

"We cannot break the nuclear rules established in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and demand that everyone else play by them," he added in a statement.

A congressional resolution is a formal statement of opinion on an issue but is not binding.

For 25 years, the United States led the global fight to deny India access to nuclear technology because it rejected the treaty, developed nuclear weapons and tested them.

Saddam trial hears evidence of torture

REUTERS, Baghdad

The trial of Saddam Hussein on charges of crimes against humanity yesterday heard some of the strongest evidence yet linking the former Iraqi president and his co-defendants to alleged torture.

A witness told the court that Saddam's guards applied electric shocks to detainees at the headquarters of his feared intelligence service in Baghdad, and heated up plastic tubing and allowed the hot plastic to drip onto the bodies of victims.

"They would be in such pain as the plastic solidified on their bodies," the witness recalled. "A man would

leave on his feet and come back thrown in a blanket."

Saddam and seven co-defendants, including his former intelligence chief Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, are standing trial in connection with the killing of 148 people from the mainly Shia village of Dujail, north of Baghdad, in the 1980s.

Prosecutors say Saddam ordered the killings in reprisal for a failed bid to assassinate him in the village in 1982.

Previous witnesses have given sometimes rambling and imprecise accounts of hardships they suffered under Saddam but the latest, Ali Hassan al-Haidari, spoke calmly

and coherently and made a specific allegation against Barzan.

He said Saddam's half-brother Barzan had been present in the building where the torture took place and had kicked him once as Haidari lay in a hallway suffering from a fever.

"He said to the guards 'Do not treat him, this family does not deserve to live,'" Haidari said. "I was in pain for weeks because of that kick."

Barzan lost his temper several times. During six trial hearings he has emerged as the most outspoken defendant, eclipsing even Saddam, who seemed subdued on Wednesday.

Pakistan, India agree on new bus links

REUTERS, Lahore

Pakistan and India agreed on two new bus links yesterday, the latest progress in a hesitant peace process between the nuclear-armed rivals.

The agreement was made in days of talks between technical teams in Lahore, a joint statement issued by the Pakistani Foreign Ministry said.

Transport links have been one of the most visible signs of slowly improving relations between neighbours which have fought three wars since 1947 and nearly went to war a fourth time in 2002.

In April, they launched a bus link

between their parts of the disputed region of Kashmir, which is at the heart of their decades old hostility.

On Wednesday, they finalised an earlier agreement to launch a service linking the Lahore and Amritsar, with a Pakistani bus to make the first run from Lahore to Amritsar on Jan. 20.

The Pakistani bus will travel to Amritsar every Friday and return on Saturday.

The first bus from Amritsar to Lahore will run on Jan. 24. The Indian bus will make the journey to Lahore on Tuesdays and return on Wednesdays, the statement said.

The two sides also agreed to start a bus service between Amritsar

and the eastern Pakistani town of Nankana Sahib, a place of pilgrimage for Sikhs, many of whom live in northwestern India.

Trial runs of that service will be held on Jan. 27, with an Indian bus running from Amritsar to Nankana Sahib, and on Jan. 29, when a Pakistani bus will go the other way.

"Regular operation of the bus service would commence within a month from the trial run," the statement said.

The two countries are holding talks on a range of issues, including border disputes and Muslim-majority Kashmir.

Iran holds tough line as EU resumes talks

REUTERS, Vienna

Iran reiterated its intention to develop a fully-fledged nuclear programme on Wednesday as Europe's top three powers revived a dialogue with Tehran over suspicions it is secretly trying to make nuclear bombs.

Confrontation rather than compromise has been brewing after declarations from Iran that the Holocaust is a myth and Israel should be wiped out, and a European Union accusation on Tuesday that Tehran has systematically violated human rights at home.

The Islamic republic's increasingly vocal hostility toward the Jewish state and commitment to developing sensitive technology that could yield ingredi-

ents for nuclear weaponry have stoked Western concern about its atomic programme.

Tehran says it aims only to generate more electricity for an energy-hungry economy. But it dodged UN nuclear inspectors for 18 years until 2003 and the West says its cooperation since has fallen short of what is needed to regain diplomatic confidence.

Wednesday's meeting between Iran and Britain, France and Germany in Vienna will be "talks about talks" -- exploring whether any basis exists for resuming negotiations on the future of Iran's nuclear activity, frozen by the "EU3" last August.

'Laden may not be in command'

REUTERS, Islamabad

al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden may no longer be able to run the militant network and has not been heard from for nearly a year, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Wednesday.

"I think it is interesting that we haven't heard from him for close to a year," Rumsfeld told reporters en route to Islamabad.

AFGHAN HR GROUP SAYS US must come clean about 'secret prisons'

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's main rights group demanded yesterday the United States come clean about reported secret detention centres in the country while an Afghan official played down the existence of such facilities.

New York-based Human Rights Watch, citing inmates as sources, said in a report this week that the United States operated a secret prison near the capital Kabul where detainees were abused and tortured as recently as 2004.

The watchdog's Asia research director Sam Zarifi told AFP at the week-

end that US forces were indefinitely detaining and mistreating people without charge at various undisclosed bases around the country.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was asked about the allegations at a media briefing in Kabul Wednesday with President Hamid Karzai, who, after translating the question for him, said: "I am sure you don't have them, say you don't have them."

"If I had, then they would be secret," Rumsfeld replied.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission said the allegations were credible and shocking.



Local residents stand in a line to get drinking water from a water carrier in the Russian city of Khabarovsk yesterday. Residents of Khabarovsk anxiously counted the hours as a toxic benzene slick approached the Russian city's waterways, pinning their hopes on filters and makeshift dams set up to protect the 600,000 residents from poisoning.