

WEST BANK

Israel to expand settlements

AP, Jerusalem

Israel said yesterday it will build more than 200 new homes in Jewish West Bank settlements – a blow to peace efforts despite word that Ariel Sharon's new party plans a major push for Palestinian statehood if it wins upcoming elections.

In a separate sign of accommodation, Israeli officials said they will likely permit east Jerusalem's Palestinians to vote in next month's Palestinian election. Israel had recently threatened to bar east Jerusalem residents from voting.

The latest settlement construction, revealed in newspaper ads published Monday seeking bids from contractors, would violate Israel's commitments under the U.S.-backed "road map" peace plan.

The plans include a total of 228 homes in the settlements of Beitar Illit and Efrat both just outside Jerusalem.

The road map calls for a freeze on all settlement construction in the West Bank, which the Palestinians claim as part of a future independent state. Since accepting the plan in June 2003, Israel has continued to expand settlements. The Palestinians also have not carried out their road map obligation to disarm militant groups.

Raanan Gissin, spokesman for the prime minister, said plans for the latest construction began more than five years ago and would take place in existing communities. He also noted that the construction would be in settlements that Israel plans to retain after a final peace settlement with the Palestinians.

"These are the large settlement blocs, they will be strengthened," he said.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat condemned the expansion and urged the U.S. to intervene. U.S. Embassy spokesmen in Israel were not immediately available for comment.

The settlement plans came as Sharon's new political party, Kadima, signaled it is ready to hand over West Bank territory to the Palestinians and work toward an

Bangladesh

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pre-qualifying return-leg match at the People's Sports Complex Stadium in Karachi.

The first-leg in Dhaka on December 22 ended in a goalless draw.

Bangladesh also defeated Pakistan by an identical margin in the SAFF Championship semifinal at the same venue on December 14 before being dethroned by India.

Bangladesh's Argentine coach Diego Cruciani, banned by the Asian Football Confederation to sit on the bench for his argument with Indian referee Rizwan Ul Haque after the first leg match in Dhaka, watched the match from the stands but was allowed to visit his charges during half-time in the dressing room.

Manager Sayeed Hassan Kanan told the Daily Star Sport over phone that Bangladesh played better in the second half.

"Both sides played tough in the first half with very little chances created. But we dominated the second half and could have won by a wider margin had not Alfaaz wasted a sitter and Abu missed a good chance," Kanan told the match.

Bangladesh, who return home today, join Palestine, Sri Lanka, Chinese Taipei, India and debutant Australia in Pot D for the lowest seeded teams in the 24-team qualifiers.

Australia, who formally join the AFC on January 1, have been given the lowest rank as newcomers.

One team will be drawn in each of the six qualifying groups from each Pot at the draw at AFC House on January 4.

The qualifiers will begin on February 22. Top two teams from each group will make it to the finals.

The Asian Cup 2007 is scheduled to kick off on June 23 in Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand, who all qualified automatically.

Bangladesh team: Aminul, Hassan Ali Mamun, Rajani, Sujan, Titu, Abul (Kanchan), Joy, Munna (Parvez Babu), Ujjal, Alfaaz (Arman Aziz) and Emily.

JMB's Rajshahi top

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the outlaws in Rajshahi region.

"He has never been involved with us (Jamaat). He is known as a Jamaat man because all the people in Bagmara in fact belong to Jamaat out of their love and dedication for Islam", said Joint Secretary of Bagmara Jamaat Abdul Halim.

Lutfar led the march of several thousand armed JMB cadres in Rajshahi on May 23 last year. He addressed a number of wayside meetings and handed over memorandums to Rajshahi DC, SP and DIG after the march.

He also chaired several meetings attended by Bangla Bhai at Bagmara and Atrai.

According to sources, Jamaat leader Lutfar along with Jagrachhi Fazil Madrasa teacher Abdus Sattar, owner of Bhawaniganj Clinic Dr Abdul Bari and former outlaw leader Mahtab Khamaru had been aiding and abetting Bangla Bhai in its vigilante operations against Sarbarahas (outlawed parties) since April last year.

The drives led by JMB chief Abdur Rahman and Siddikul Islam Bangla Bhai from their camps at Bheti Siddikia Madrasa in Atrai and house of Ramjan Kaya in Bagmara left some 22 people

Militant

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JP Secretary General Sheikh Shahidul Islam said, "We don't have any specific information, but the government has. So they [the government] must act to curb the militants."

"We suggested that those who have been accused of militant links should resign from the government and the administration. A free and fair investigation is possible only if they stand down."

JP leader Sadek Siddiqui told the prime minister that the government should probe whether the political parties who are local chapters of international organisations are responsible for the rise of militancy.

On the first day of the dialogue, which began on December 12 amid boycott by the 14-party opposition alliance and pro-opposition professional bodies, Krishak Sramik Janata League suggested the prime minister purge ruling coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh both from the government and the alliance for patronising the militant outfits.

HM Ershad led Jatiya Party, the second largest opposition in parliament, on December 13 proposed a judicial probe commission headed by the chief justice to probe the allegations of militant links against some quarters, be they inside or outside the government.

Besides Jamaat, allegations have been levelled against a number of cabinet members of having links to the militants.

SC Bar asks

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by the BNP-Jamaat leaders under the banner of a local madrasa committee at Fatikchhari upazila in Chittagong on September 9, he further commented that the incident of receiving reception by a judge from political elements is unprecedented.

"Faizee's involvement with political leaders and disputed activists have tarnished the image and dignity of the judges and judiciary. Running judicial functions by a person who has no certificate is tantamount to contempt of court," he added.

Reiterating the demand for Faizee's resignation, he also said there is no other alternative for protecting the dignity and image of the Supreme Court.

The lawyers' body of the apex court, on September 12, sent a letter requesting the president to rescind the order by which Justice Faizee was appointed an additional judge of the High Court and also requested the Chief Justice not to allocate any bench to him for his disputed activities.

The SCBA has also been boycotting Justice Faizee's bench from October 30, 2004.

Bangladesh Bar Council, on April 24, cancelled the enrolment certificate (Advocate ship certificate) of Justice Faizee "for providing false information to the Bar Council".

Justice Faizee did not hold any hearing till April 10 this year from October 2004 as the Chief Justice had not allocated him bench following the SCBA's agitation programmes against him.

Tata investment

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bargaining, sources said.

The Tata team will sit with the government negotiation committee on January 7 and 8 to finalise the schedule and modalities of the fourth round negotiation.

The team will talk with the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Power Division, National Board of Revenue (NBR), and Petrobangla on January 15, 16 and 17.

The Tata team will again sit with the negotiation team for wrapping up the fourth round on January 22 and onwards.

The Board of Investment (BoI) finalised the schedule yesterday after consultation with the Tata representatives.

Communications Secretary Shafiqul Islam will lead the government team while Tata Sons' Executive Director Alan Rosling will lead the Tata team.

The government earlier appointed five consultants to examine the pros and cons of different sub-issues in this connection.

The consultants will help the government determine gas and coal prices for the industrial giant's plants, investment incentive, process of land allocation, policy on open cast mining, power purchase and infrastructure development.

Tata Group on April 20 this year formally submitted a \$2.5 billion investment proposal for setting up a 1,000-MW power station, a steel mill with 4,20,000 tonne annual production capacity and a fertiliser unit with one million tonne capacity.

The Bangladesh government and the Tata Group agreed to kick off formal negotiations on May 25 and wind it up by August 31 to clear the way for signing the investment contract before November 30 this year.

A Rab team picked up Khamaru on November 27, but released him within hours following dictat of a deputy minister and BNP high-ups.

25 police stations

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lanes. Financed by Japan debt relief grant, the project is expected to complete by 2010.

The Econc meeting decided to conduct a study by foreign consultants to decide whether the existing two-lane road will be expanded to four lanes or a separate two-lane road will be built beside the existing highway.

"As we have no experience on this type of big project, huge money will have to be spent on foreign consultancy to conduct the study of the project," Saifur said.

Another project involving Tk 192 crore for expansion of renewable energy and solar home system was also approved by the meeting. Under the German-aided project, 1 lakh solar home systems will be installed in the remote areas.

The meeting also approved a project of Tk 37 crore for establishment of diabetes, endocrine and metabolic hospital for women and children at city's Segunbagicha.

The other projects include construction of a road from Zia Colony to Mirpur Cantonment at a cost of Tk 74 crore, completion of work on the incomplete bridges under upazila connecting road project at a cost of Tk 182 crore, and improvement of meteorological radar system at Cox's Bazar and Khepupara spend-

ing Tk 129 crore.

LGRD and Co-operatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Health and Family Welfare Minister Khandaker Mosharrif Hossain, Communications Minister Nazmul Huda, Education Minister Osman Faruk and high officials of the ministries concerned were present at the meeting held at the National Economic Council (NEC) auditorium.

Boy kidnapped

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arrested three are all residents of Mirpur in Dhaka.

Police sources said Imtiaz, son of an expatriate in Japan Abdul Hasem Talukdar, was kidnapped from opposite his home at Mirpur Palash Nagar. The kidnappers later demanded Tk 20 lakh ransom from his mother Yasmin Talukdar.

The kidnappers took Imtiaz to the bus counter to take him to Dhaka and release him after receiving the ransom money which the mother had promised, police sources said.

Nipahamari police later yesterday handed Imtiaz over to Sub-inspector Jahangir Alam of Pallabi Police Station, investigation officer (IO) of the case. Imtiaz's uncle and cousin received him.

Remittance

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local people in a number of sectors where foreigners earlier got job in large number," State Minister for Expatriates Welfare Mohammad Quamrul Islam said.

He, however, said some other countries including Sudan, Nigeria, Jordan and Fiji Islands, have recently opened their doors for Bangladeshi workers.

Many Bangladeshi went to work under the multinational companies in Sudan and more are in the process, he said.

The minister attributed the increase in remittance earning to new system for sending money quickly through official channels and increased number of skilled workers' going abroad.

A custodian at a branch of the Maksidom home-supplies chain found a suspicious box before the store's opening and saw ampoules attached to wires and a timer when she opened it, said Vyacheslav Stepanchenko, a spokesman for the St. Petersburg police. The woman inadvertently broke one of the ampoules and noticed a bad smell, but was not sickened, he said.

Similar boxes with glass containers attached to timers were found in two other stores by employees, who carried them outside and covered them with buckets; police defused them, he said.

All the people who sought medical care were from a fourth branch of the chain, Stepanchenko said. It was not immediately clear if a similar box had been discovered there, or if they had been affected by the same gas found at the three other branches.

A spokesman for the Emergency

Situations Ministry, Viktor Belsov, said 66 of 78 people who sought medical care were hospitalized, none with life-threatening conditions.

Stepchenko said 15 people were hospitalized. The discrepancy could not be immediately explained.

Officials of the store, which only has outlets in St. Petersburg, told police that they had received letters in recent weeks threatening to disrupt sales during the holiday gift-buying

Gas sickens 78 in Russian store

AP, St Petersburg, Russia

More than 70 people at a home-supply store were sickened yesterday as employees at three other outlets of the chain found gas-filled containers and timers hidden in boxes. Police said they believed a commercial dispute or blackmail attempt was behind the incidents.

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Police had initially reported the explosion as a suicide car bombing. It was unclear if the attack was aimed at the funeral, but bombers in Iraq have frequently targeted such events.

The attack followed at least four car bomb explosions in the Iraqi capital earlier on Monday, which left four people dead and 17 others wounded.

Violence has flared in Iraq in recent days after a lull in attacks during parliamentary elections nearly two weeks ago.

Bombing kills 2 in Baghdad market

REUTERS, Baghdad

A parked motorbike loaded with explosives blew up in a market in a Shia neighbourhood of Baghdad near a funeral yesterday, killing at least two people and wounding 23 others, police said.

Police had initially reported the explosion as a suicide car bombing. It was unclear if the attack was aimed at the funeral, but bombers in Iraq have frequently targeted such events.

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Safta accord

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this year, so that the accord comes into effect in due time and its enforcement is not hampered.

Official sources said the ratification of the agreement will be sent to the Saarc Secretariat, which will take further measures to complete its technical matters by next July.

The signing of the agreement two years ago was the culmination of a clear commitment the Saarc member states expressed in the Kathmandu Summit held in 2002 for the creation of the South Asian Economic Union.

The South Asian leaders at the 13th summit in Dhaka reaffirmed their commitment to implement the Safta on schedule. As part of the Dhaka Declaration, the Committee of Experts finalised the deal in its meeting on November 29 December 1.

The member states laid importance on Safta as the South Asian region is a big market of 1.3 billion people, which constitutes one-fifth of the world population.

Regrettably over 90 percent requirements of South Asian countries are still sourced from outside the region and conversely, a major part of region's exports are also destined for countries outside the Saarc grouping.

Officials said South Asia is not only demographically the largest regional bloc on the planet, it is also one of the fastest growing regions for several decades -- demographically, and now economically.

But the challenges it faces are perhaps the most serious as South Asia today is home to almost two-thirds of the world's poor. Nearly one out of every three people or over 600 million people struggle to survive on less than a dollar a day.

Saarc leaders at the Dhaka Summit agreed to address the wide income disparities exist within and between the countries in the region.

The objective of Safta, which will become fully operational by 2016, is to reduce existing tariffs to less than 5 percent within the stipulated timeframe among the member nations.

According to the Safta agreement, the non-LDC members -- India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka -- will reduce their tariff to 20 percent in the first two years (Jan 2006-Jan 2008).