



EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana arrives for the start of an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers in Salzburg yesterday. Man at right is unidentified.

# EU to cut aid if Hamas fails to renounce violence

## ‘Israeli plan to finalise borders is act of war’

AFP, Salzburg/ Damascus

The European Union warned yesterday it will cut funding to a new Hamas-led Palestinian government if it fails to renounce violence and recognise Israel.

Speaking at a meeting of EU foreign ministers, External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said the bloc has done more than any other foreign partner to support the caretaker Palestinian government.

The 25-nation EU has released 120 million euros for Palestinians since January elections in which the militant Islamic group swept to power, threatening to derail the Middle East peace process.

But the EU official noted that the 25-nation bloc has set out conditions against which it will review

funding once a new government is fully in place.

"The new government's positions on violence, on recognition of Israel and on existing agreements like the (Middle East peace) road map remain absolutely crucial," Ferrero-Waldner told reporters in Salzburg, Austria.

"We want to remain a reliable partner for the Palestinian people, but we will not go soft on our principles ... Money will not flow to the new authority unless it seeks peace by peaceful means."

The radical Islamic group this week presented proposals for forming a Palestinian coalition government with the Fatah party of President Mahmud Abbas, in the search for an elusive deal on sharing power.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana defended the EU's decision

to keep funding the caretaker Palestinian government.

"The (Palestinian) Authority has a gigantic deficit, which could expand even further," he said. "What we have said is that we don't want to abandon the Palestinian people."

He underlined that Hamas remains on an EU blacklist of terrorist organisations. "So we can't cooperate with them legally," he said, but at the same time: "We have to find ways of supporting the Palestinian people."

Asked if Hamas could be removed from the EU blacklist if it meets the conditions, which would allow aid to continue, the EU official added: "If they do so, yes."

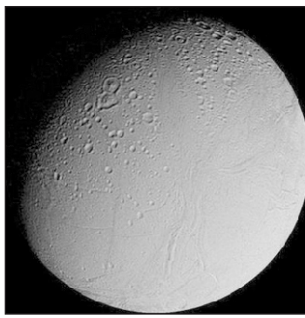
Under the Palestinian constitution, Hamas has three weeks to form a government, but the charter also provides for another 14-day

extension. Abbas tasked him with assembling the next cabinet on February 21.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Islamic radical group Hamas's supreme Khaled Meshaal slammed yesterday the Israeli government's plan to finalise the country's borders by 2010 as a "declaration of war".

Meshaal, the Damascus-based political chief, told AFP in an interview that "Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Palestinian territories is a declaration of war against the Palestinian people."

The head of the militant group that won an upset victory in the Palestinian territories' January 25 election denounced Olmert's plans to fix Israel's permanent borders by 2010 through unilateral withdrawals from the West Bank.



One of Saturn's moons, Enceladus, is seen in an image captured by the Voyager 2 satellite. Enceladus is spewing out a giant plume of water vapour that is probably feeding one of the Saturn's rings, scientists said on Thursday.

## Saturn moon spewing water vapour

REUTERS, Washington

One of Saturn's moons, Enceladus, is spewing out a giant plume of water vapour that is probably feeding one of the planet's rings, scientists said on Thursday.

The findings, published in the journal Science, suggest that tiny Enceladus could have a liquid ocean under its icy surface which in theory could sustain primitive life, similar to Jupiter's moon Europa. The plume was spotted by Cassini, a joint US-European spacecraft that is visiting Saturn.

"We realise that this is a radical conclusion – that we may have evidence for liquid water within a body so small and so cold," said Carolyn Porco, Cassini imaging team leader at Space Science Institute in Boulder, Colorado.

"However, if we are right, we have significantly broadened the diversity of solar system environments where we might possibly have conditions suitable for living organisms."

Scientists have long known that many of Saturn's moons have water. They took an especially close look at Enceladus because it seemed to have a smooth surface – suggesting recent geological activity that, in turn, could mean liquid water.

# EU vows diplomacy can still solve Iran crisis

AFP, Salzburg

The European Union vowed yesterday to press on with efforts to seek a diplomatic solution to the Iran nuclear crisis, which it still believes is possible despite this week's escalation of the standoff.

"We still can reach a diplomatic solution, we want a diplomatic solution," said EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Salzburg, Austria.

"They should take the hands that we have held out to them to come to a compromise solution," she added, citing notably a Russian proposal to carry out uranium enrichment on

behalf of Tehran.

Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, whose country currently holds the 25-nation bloc's rotating presidency, added: "We will continue to work on a diplomatic solution."

"We are entering a new phase now," she added, referring to the referral this week of the Iran issue to the UN Security Council in New York, after efforts at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) failed to break the deadlock.

"We remain committed to the same goals as before," she added.

The Europeans have spearheaded efforts to engage Tehran diplomatically over its nuclear plans,

which the United States in particular suspects of providing cover for work to develop a nuclear weapon.

But those efforts were suspended after Tehran resumed sensitive atomic activities, which it had renounced under a November 2004 accord with the Europeans in Paris.

Also Friday, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana refused to rule out eventual UN sanctions against Tehran.

"Let's wait and see what the Security Council will do. We must weigh up all options," he told the Austrian daily Der Standard in an interview.

# Bush sends Indo-US nuke deal to Cong

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration on Thursday submitted to Congress its proposal to change US law to allow the sale of nuclear technology to India, congressional sources said.

The sources said the administration wants the first of two needed legislative steps enacted by May.

They, however, added that this would be difficult because the bill raises questions about an already complicated and controversial nuclear deal.

Approved in principle last July and confirmed in more detail last week by President George W Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the agreement would end a three decade-old ban on US civilian nuclear technology sales.

But it must first be approved by the US Congress.

The 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group, which oversees nuclear transfers, also must alter its regulations so foreign countries can supply India, whose rapid economic growth has created huge energy demands.

India is currently barred under US and international law from acquiring foreign nuclear technology because it refused to sign the

nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and developed nuclear weapons.

The US approval would be a two-step approach, according to the congressional sources familiar with the India case and who were not authorised to speak publicly. Key sections of the legislation were made available to a news agency.

As a first step, the administration's proposal would exempt India from the Atomic Energy Act, which prohibits nuclear sales to non-NPT states, if Bush makes seven determinations.

These include India providing Washington with a "credible" plan for separating its civilian and military nuclear facilities and supporting international efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear enrichment and reprocessing technology.

Although Bush and Singh announced that India would place 14 of 22 civilian nuclear power reactors under international inspections to guard against weapons diversion, one congressional source said the data sent to Congress on this point was incomplete.



Queen Rania Al-Abdullah of Jordan (L) shakes hands with India's ruling Congress party President Sonia Gandhi yesterday during a meeting in New Delhi. Queen Rania is on a two-day visit to India.

# Maoists abduct 1,500 in Nepali strife: Army

AFP, Kathmandu

Three soldiers, a police officer and five Maoists were killed in clashes in Nepal while the rebels abducted 1,500 civilians this week, the army said yesterday.

"The five Maoists were killed in an encounter during search operations carried out by the security forces in Rautahat district on Thursday," an army official said on condition of anonymity.

The brief clash Thursday afternoon saw no army casualties and took place around 310km east of Kathmandu, the official said.

The rebels, who have been fighting a bloody "people's war" for the last decade, this week abducted 1,500 in Rukum district, the rebel heartland, the army official said.

"The rebels took away one person from every household to make roads," the army official said.

Human rights groups frequently accuse the rebels of abducting people for indoctrination, to use as human shields and to work on Maoist projects. They are usually released unharmed soon after.

On Thursday, three soldiers and a police officer were killed when Maoists detonated a bomb at a security post in

Ghorahi, 380 kilometres (235 miles) west of the capital, said the official from army headquarters.

Meanwhile, Nepal's king should enlist sidelined political parties and restore democracy, a senior US official said at the end of a two-day visit to the country.

Donald Camp, principal deputy assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, met King Gyanendra and political leaders he ousted after seizing power last year in what he said was a bid to quash a Maoist rebellion.



This image provided by the Journal Science shows a Laonastes, the only living representative of the otherwise extinct Distomyidae, a family of rodents that lived in south Asia and Japan.

## Rat-squirrel not extinct after all

AP, Washington

It has the face of a rat and the tail of a skinny squirrel and scientists say this creature discovered living in central Laos is pretty special: It's a species believed to have been extinct for 11 million years.

The long-whiskered rodent made international headlines last spring when biologists declared they'd discovered a brand new species, nicknamed the Laotian rock rat.

It turns out the little guy isn't new after all, but a rare kind of survivor: a member of a family until now known only from fossils.

Nor is it a rat. This species, called Diatomyidae, looks more like small squirrels or tree shrews, said paleontologist Mary Dawson of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

Dawson, with colleagues in France and China, report the creature's new identity in Friday's edition of the journal Science.

The resemblance is "absolutely striking," Dawson said. As soon as her team spotted reports about the rodent's discovery, "we thought, 'My goodness, this is not a new family. We've known it from the fossil record.'"

They set out to prove that through meticulous comparisons between the bones of today's specimens and fossils found in China and elsewhere in Asia.

# RUMSFELD SAYS Unity govt needed to avert Iraqi civil war

AFP, Washington

Iraq must promptly form a national unity government to avoid a civil war but the United States will rely on Iraqi forces if one does erupt, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Thursday.

Rumsfeld said the country has not descended into full-scale civil war but sectarian tensions are high in the wake of a bombing of a Shia mosque February 22.

He again accused Iran of sending agents into Iraq to do "damaging and dangerous things," and warned that US forces would take "appropriate" action to stop them.

"The plan is to prevent a civil war, and to the extent one were to occur it is, from the security standpoint, to have the security forces deal with it to the extent they are able to do it,"

Rumsfeld said.

But, testifying before a Senate committee with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and his top generals, Rumsfeld argued the problem was more political than one of security.

"The need is for the principal players of that country to recognise the seriousness of the situation and to come together to form a government of national unity that will govern from the centre, and to do it in a reasonably prompt manner."

"And that will be what it takes, in my view, to further calm the situation," he said.

General John Abizaid, the commander of US forces in the Middle East, later told reporters that, while sectarian tensions are very high, "It's my impression that Iraq is not

moving toward civil war."

Rumsfeld went before the Senate Appropriations Committee with Rice and the generals to defend the administration's request for nearly 72 billion dollars in emergency funding, most of it for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Senator Robert Byrd, a Democrat from West Virginia, said the request would push total funding for the war in Iraq to an "astounding" 320 billion dollars.

It comes as a "cloud of peril and uncertainty" hangs over Iraq, which only narrowly missed descending into civil war in recent days, Byrd said.

"Mr. Secretary, how can the Congress be assured that the funds in this bill won't put our troops in the middle of a full-blown Iraqi civil war?" he asked.

SPEECH IN PARLIAMENT

## Rahul for turning India into an educational hub

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Young Congress member of Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, son of Congress President Sonia Gandhi, delivered his maiden speech in parliament on Thursday emphasising the need to provide quality education to all and turning India into an educational hub.

Heard with rapt attention by members of both ruling and opposition parties in the House where Sonia was present and watched by his sister Priyanka and her husband Robert Vadra in the visitors' gallery, Rahul stressed the need for a complete policy reorientation of the education system to ensure the poor get opportunity to tap the benefits of education.

During his 15-minute speech with the help of a prepared text, Rahul, in early thirties, said India should have an education system that "must allow all young Indians to dream and must teach them the skills to turn those dreams into reality".

Prefacing his speech, which came during a debate on the budgetary allocation for education, with the remarks that "I'm new to politics and still have a lot to learn", he said "but if there is one thing I have learnt it is that people who are closer to a problem understand it best".