

Myanmar slams US, Japan over UNSC move

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar yesterday accused the United States of fabricating allegations in order to haul the military-run country before the UN Security Council, state media said.

The ruling junta also unleashed a rare condemnation of Japan for reversing its position on Myanmar.

Japan has previously joined with China and Russia in opposing UN Security Council action against Myanmar, but was among 10 of the 15 council members, which voted last Friday to place the junta on its agenda.

"It is clear that the United States first decided to put Myanmar on the UN Security Council agenda and sought fabrications for support of its decision," the official New Light of Myanmar daily said.

The US has been pressing for months for Myanmar to be forced onto the council's agenda, arguing that drug trafficking, the mounting numbers of refugees, human rights abuses and the growth of AIDS cases in the Asian nation represent a threat to international peace and security.

In its first response since the council's decision, the junta also lashed out at Japan, the country's war-time occupier, saying Tokyo had abandoned a neighbouring Asian country to curry favour with the US.

Unity govt to recognise Israel's right to exist

Says Abbas in talks with Livni

REUTERS, United Nations

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas reassured Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni that a national unity government he was negotiating with Hamas would recognise Israel's right to exist, an aide said.

Abbas and Livni discussed a range of issues late on Monday from abducted Israeli soldier Cpl. Gilad Shalit to how to revive the road map for Middle East peace, said chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat.

Meeting on the sidelines of the opening debate of the new General Assembly session, the two also discussed preparations for a long-delayed meeting between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Not just one but "a series of meetings" was anticipated between Abbas and Olmert, Erekat told reporters.

He said he hoped the Israeli soldier could soon be released

along with Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, but that he did not want to talk about the efforts to free them because it could derail a deal.

Livni told reporters the "important and constructive" talks touched on the situation in the Palestinian territories, how to promote peace, and the next steps.

"Firstly and the most important issue for Israel is the unconditional release of Gilad Shalit," she said.

It was crucial that any Palestinian government of national unity recognise violence, recognise Israel and accept interim peace deals between Israel and the Palestinians, she said.

Asked if a unity government would accept those conditions, Erekat said Abbas's position was clear.

"When we say that an agreement was reached that any Palestinian government will honour commitments and obligations of the PLO and the Palestinian national author-

ity, that is what President Abbas means," he said.

The meeting was Livni's second with Abbas since Hamas came to power in March, sparking a freeze on most foreign aid to the Palestinian territories, how to promote peace, and the next steps.

Speaking on Israel Army Radio, Livni said, "The idea is to create a permanent channel of dialogue" with Abbas.

"It is clear the only plan now on the table is the road map," she noted, referring to a US-backed blueprint for reciprocal confidence-building moves leading to negotiations and creation of a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel.

Olmert recently shelved his plan to unilaterally remove dozens of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, while strengthening major enclaves.

Public opinion in Israel has soured against such pullbacks after the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon and frequent rocket

attacks from Gaza, which Israeli soldiers and settlers quit last year.

Abbas and Hamas have been in talks on a unity government in a bid to lift the sanctions, but Abbas aides said on Sunday the president froze talks after Hamas made clear it would not accept interim peace deals with Israel.

However, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas said talks were only delayed while Abbas was in New York.

The UN Security Council meanwhile firmed up plans for a meeting on Thursday to discuss a plea by the 22-nation Arab League to resuscitate the Middle East peace process.

The meeting will be a public session where the council's 15 members will be represented by their foreign ministers or senior officials, diplomats said.



Palestinian children collect clothes and other items from the rubble of a home after it was flattened in an Israeli air strike, in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah yesterday. No injuries were reported from the raid.

Nepali traders protest Maoist extortion

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Hundreds of businessmen rallied in Nepal yesterday to demand an end to extortion by Maoist rebels and greater security from the government, witnesses and business leaders said.

"Stop extortions immediately", read some of the placards held up by protesters taking part in the demonstration organised by the Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries (FNCCI), an umbrella business group, in Birgunj, a major business town 60 km south of Kathmandu.

"Extortions and other acts of intimidation by the Maoists or their trade union have forced many industries or businesses to close," FNCCI President Chandi Raj Dhakal told Reuters.

Earlier this month, Nepal's key foreign donors, including the United States, urged the rebels to end extortion and intimidation, saying their actions were hurting the economy of one of the world's poorest nations.

The Maoists, who have been observing a ceasefire with the security forces since May and are holding talks with the multi-party government, say they collect only "voluntary donations" and do not force businessmen to pay up.

But Dhakal said many businesses had closed down in the past few months because of what he termed "unreasonable" demands for higher wages and better working conditions by pro-rebel labour groups, who have called regular strikes.

Eight killed in eastern India caste clash

AFP, Ranchi

Eight people have been killed in a clash between a tribal group and low-caste Hindus in eastern India, police said yesterday.

The violence erupted after members of the Mahto caste insulted tribal group members in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, senior local police official Gauri Shankar Rath told AFP.

"Six tribals and two members of the Mahto caste were killed," he said, explaining the low-caste Hindus had opened fire on their pursuers and were eventually lynched.

The incident took place late Monday in the state's Gumla district, 170km from state capital Ranchi.

Coalition forces press anti-Taliban drive

11 Taliban killed in clashes

AFP, Kabul/ Kandahar

Afghan and international forces forged ahead yesterday with anti-Taliban offensives in the west and east of Afghanistan after a fresh wave of suicide attacks that killed 21 people including four Canadian soldiers.

Three powerful blasts Monday near the southern city of Kandahar, in Kabul and in Herat in the west were blamed on the extremist Taliban movement, which has stepped up its insurgency as foreign forces push into rebel strongholds.

Afghan police and troops, together with hundreds of Nato soldiers from Italy, Spain and the United States, began the offensive codenamed Operation Wyconda Pincer in western Farah province Monday.

Ship with arms for LTTE originated in Indonesia, more on the way: Lanka

AFP, Colombo/ Jaffna

A ship suspected of ferrying weapons to Tamil rebels that was sunk by the Sri Lankan military originated in Indonesia and more vessels may be on the way, a government minister said yesterday.

The ship was sunk Sunday off Sri Lanka's east coast by naval ships and aircraft after a tip-off from a neighboring country, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said, without elaborating.

"We know that the ship originated from a port in Indonesia and there could be at least two other similar ships," Rambukwella said. "We are on the look-out and obviously we had good information from a friendly country."

Rambukwella said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were probably trying to smuggle in artillery and anti-aircraft missiles after suffering a string of setbacks in recent clashes with the military in the north and east.

There has been an upsurge in violence in the decades-old ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka with more than 1,500 people killed since December in tit-for-tat killings, despite a ceasefire in place since 2002.

Fighting has been particularly intense around the Trincomalee district, home to a major airbase and naval port, and in the northern peninsula of Jaffna, where both sides say hundreds of soldiers and civilians have died since August.

Proposed Indo-Pak pact deserves a fair trial

India PM tells sceptics

REUTERS, New Delhi

A proposed India-Pakistan pact to jointly fight terrorism deserves a fair trial, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said, but would be threatened if Islamabad does not do more to curb militant groups.

Under the plan agreed last week at a meeting between Singh and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on the sidelines of a summit of Non-Aligned Movement nations in Cuba, the two countries will set up a joint agency to tackle terrorism.

"I do think it is a new beginning, I hope it works, but if it does not work, then also we have to deal with the consequences," Singh told reporters on board his aircraft before he returned to New Delhi late on Monday.

"It is quite obvious to Pakistan that things cannot be business as usual if terrorism is not under

control -- or if the government of Pakistan is seen not to be willing to work with us to control terrorism," Singh said in comments posted on his official Website.

Singh and Musharraf also agreed that top diplomats would return to the negotiating table after India put off peace talks as investigators suspected a Pakistani hand in the July 11 bombings in Mumbai, which killed 186 people.

"There is an explicit commitment on the part of Pakistan to say they will work with us to do all that is in their control to control this scourge," Singh said.

Islamabad rejects Indian allegations that it allows its territory to be used for organizing militant attacks in India.

But, underlining the risks to the fragile peace process, police in the western Indian state of Gujarat said on Tuesday they had

arrested four suspected members of a Pakistan-based guerrilla group blamed for bombings in New Delhi in October last year and in the holy Hindu town of Varanasi this year.

Gujarat police officer Manoj Shashidhar said the four men, believed to be from the Lashkar-e-Taiba, were being questioned for involvement in the Mumbai rail bombings.

Earlier, Singh said the proposed deal with Pakistan to fight terrorism together was a step forward.

"I cannot say that we have bought forever security for our country," he said. "All I can say is we have made an advance. Let us give it a trial."

The details of the proposed pact have not yet been worked out but officials said the two sides will try to identify joint counter-terrorism initiatives.