

Quartet urges Palestinian govt to recognise Israel

Gazans hope unity deal will bring peace

AFP, Washington/ Gaza City

The international Quartet pushing the Middle East peace process on Friday urged the next Palestinian national unity government to recognise Israel.

"While awaiting formation of the new Palestinian government, the Quartet reaffirmed its statement of February 2 regarding its support for a Palestinian government committed to nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the roadmap," the group said in a joint statement released by the US State Department.

The statement said the Quartet -- the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States -- will meet in Berlin on

February 21 "to continue their consideration of these developments, and to review formation and implementation of the agreement on the government."

"The Quartet will discuss the way ahead at the February 21 meeting," the statement added.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and US President George W. Bush have laid out a Middle East strategy focused on rallying what they call "mainstream" Arab forces to isolate "extremists" backed by Syria and Iran.

Washington has largely ignored the Quartet for most of the Bush administration, and a ministerial meeting February 2 was the first in five months.

Rival factions Hamas and Fatah have condemned the failure of the

major powers involved in Middle East peacemaking to end a punishing Western aid embargo on the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, after months of bloodshed, disillusioned Palestinians were only cautiously optimistic Saturday that a power sharing agreement between warring factions would bring calm to shellshocked Gaza.

The deal, signed in Mecca on Thursday by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Khaled Meshaal, the exiled boss of the Islamist Hamas movement, promises an end to the internecine bloodletting that has wracked the Gaza Strip since Hamas took power 11 months ago.

"We have endured very difficult days," said Maher Al-Khadry, 35, a

shopowner in Gaza City.

"That is why as soon as this agreement was announced I ran into the streets to celebrate with my people... Still, I am very afraid the fighting will return again," Al-Khadry added.

Past agreements have also promised calm between the dueling rivals, but invariably unraveled within days, heaping more violence and death on Gaza's desperate residents.

"There have been many agreements in the past and they all were ignored and fell apart. We hope this time that all sides are serious about making the agreement stick," said Mohieddin Jaber, 44.

Rebels kill 5 in India's restive northeast

AFP, Guwahati

Suspected militants Friday shot dead five people, including government officials and security personnel, in an ambush in India's restive northeastern state of Manipur, police said.

The attack took place Friday morning in Ukhrul district, some 80km northeast of state capital Imphal, when heavily armed militants strategically positioned on a hillock fired at a convoy, Dorji Lattu, police chief of the area told AFP.

Another person was injured in the attack in the remote area near the Myanmar border.

The dead include three paramilitary personnel and two state government officials, who were on their way back after completing their duties during the first phase of polls to the provincial legislature that ended Thursday, he said.

The other phases of the three-stage vote will be held on February 14 and 19.

The militants took the weapons of the dead troopers, Lattu said, before escaping.



A US made Boeing Globemaster takes off during the fourth day of Aero India 2007 at The Yelahanka Air Force Station in Bangalore yesterday. India's biggest air show set the clock ticking for the subcontinent's richest military contract: an order for 126 fighter planes potentially worth nine billion dollars.

al-Qaeda-linked group posts chopper video

AP, Baghdad

An insurgent group linked to al-Qaeda posted a Web video Friday showing what it said was the downing of a US military helicopter this week. Seven Americans were killed in the crash.

The US military has said it did not believe the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter was shot down in the crash Wednesday northwest of Baghdad.

But a US official, who was not authorised to address the topic publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, said "the video appears to be legitimate" meaning that it shows a Sea Knight crashing.

The two-minute video which says it shows the "downing of US aircraft on Feb. 7" shows a helicopter that appears to be a Sea Knight flying. An object trailing smoke is seen in the sky nearby, and then the craft bursts into orange and red flames, with a spray of debris emerging from it.

It is not clear whether the object is a rocket, and it cannot be clearly seen connecting with the craft. In the footage, the helicopter heads downward, but appears to be at least partially in control, though smoke and bright flames are trailing from it. The helicopter then disappears behind a line of trees as it hits the ground.

Militants blow up gas pipeline in Pakistan

REUTERS, Islamabad

Suspected militants blew up a major gas pipeline in Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan on Saturday, disrupting supplies to over one million people, gas officials said.

Baluch nationalists have waged a low-scale insurgency for decades. Attacks on government infrastructure, including gas pipelines and power pylons were frequent in early 2006, but there was a lull after Pakistani forces killed one of the rebels' main leaders, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, late last year.

"The pipeline was blown up by explosives around noon and we are now trying to assess the damage," Sheikh Nawaz, General Manager of the state-owned Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC) told Reuters.

He would not say when the supplies could be resumed.

The 16-inch diameter pipeline was ruptured in the Tilli Kambrani area on the outskirts of the provincial capital Quetta, halting supplies to the city.

Jerusalem calm after day of clashes

AFP, Jerusalem

Calm returned yesterday to Jerusalem's streets a day after Palestinian demonstrators clashed with police over Israeli renovations near the revered Al-Aqsa mosque leaving 35 people wounded.

"Things are calm and quiet now," police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told AFP. "Police are continuing the security measures in and around east Jerusalem and we'll prevent any further riots or disturbances from taking place."

The renovations which triggered the clashes near the Old City's Dung Gate are scheduled to resume next week, having broken off for the Sabbath Jewish day of rest, Rosenfeld added.

Muslim leaders in Jerusalem, meanwhile, promised to continue their protests against the work to a stone ramp leading from Dung Gate to Al-Aqsa mosque compound, the site Jews call the Temple Mount and known as the Noble Sanctuary to Muslims.



Damaged vehicles are seen at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) office after an explosion in Peshawar yesterday. An explosion rocked the office of ICRC in northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, damaging several cars.

Nepali Maoists keep on extortion, say donors

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's key foreign donors have accused former Maoist rebels of extortion, kidnapping and violence despite joining an interim parliament last month under a landmark peace deal.

The Industrial Security Group -- which includes representatives from France, Germany, India, Britain and the United States -- said on Friday Maoists were targeting businesses in violation of a November peace pact with the government.

"Again, the Maoists are demanding money, lodging and food from the businesses and residences in the (Kathmandu) valley," a US embassy statement issued on behalf of the group said.

"If Maoist abuses ... continue, Nepal's private sector will be choked and investment will cease."

Human rights groups have also accused Maoists of kidnapping and extortion despite signing the peace deal.

Maoist spokesman Krishna

Bahadur Mahara denied the allegations: "We are collecting voluntary financial assistance from the people for next week's public meeting in Kathmandu."

The Maoists entered into a peace process with the multiparty government formed after King Gyanendra was forced to end his absolute rule following weeks of mass protests last year.

The former rebels' alleged use of violence and intimidation violated a peace deal signed with the government late last year and was "at complete odds with their new status as members of the interim parliament," the statement said.

Human rights groups have also accused the Maoists of continuing abductions.

"Although the cases of abductions and extortion have dropped significantly after the peace deal, it has not completely stopped," said Rupesh Nepal, an official at the Informal Sector Service Centre (Insec), a leading local rights group.

A total of 232 people have been abducted by the Maoists from

various parts of the country, mainly for indoctrination, since the peace accord was signed, Nepal said.

Some have been freed while are still being held by the Maoists, he said.

The Maoists denied the accusations.

"Such allegations have been made to tarnish our image," Maoist leader Dinanath Sharma told AFP on Saturday.

Sharma did say his party was collecting donations from people to organise a massive rally in Kathmandu next Tuesday but added, "We have not forced anybody to provide financial assistance, people are voluntarily contributing."

The Maoist rally will be addressed by party chairman Prachanda, also known as "the fierce one."

February 13 marks the beginning of the Maoist insurgency in 1996 that left at least 13,000 people dead in aid-dependent Nepal, one of the world's poorest nations.

Blast at ICRC Pak office damages vehicles

REUTERS, Islamabad

An explosive device thrown into a compound damaged four vehicles belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in northwest Pakistan on Saturday, but there were no casualties.

"Early in the morning something was thrown inside the ICRC compound in Peshawar and damaged four vehicles and some property, but caused no injuries or fatalities," ICRC spokesman Raza Hamdani told Reuters.

The ICRC has suspended field operations in Peshawar pending a security review while police investigate.

This is the second attack on a foreign aid agency in North West Frontier Province this week.

On Monday, a grenade was thrown at a compound of the US Save the Children aid group in Battagram, wounding two Pakistani employees.

11 Taliban, 4 police killed in new Afghan violence

AP, Kandahar

Four policemen and 11 Taliban have been killed in fresh violence in southern Afghanistan, as a suicide car bomb narrowly missed a Nato military convoy.

The Taliban fighters were killed Friday in an Afghan and International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) operation in Kajaki district of the southern province of Helmand, provincial police chief Mohammad Nabi Mullahkhail said Saturday.

British forces with Isaf have been trying to clear the area of militants to allow the resumption of work to rehabilitate a hydropower project that could supply power to 1.8 million people.

The violence follows the death of 10 Taliban on Thursday in the same area, who were killed in clashes with Afghan and British troops, police said.

Gates to meet Musharraf in Pakistan next week

AFP, Islamabad

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates will visit Pakistan early next week for talks with President Pervez Musharraf on the threat from Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan, official sources said.

It will be Gates' first visit to the key US ally in the "war on terror" since he came to office late last year. He is expected to fly to Afghanistan afterwards.

Gates' visit will be closely followed by separate visits to the region by Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and two top diplomats from the United States and Britain, the sources said.

"These visits are part of a renewed focus on Afghanistan, how to deal with the threat posed by Taliban," a senior Pakistani official told AFP on Saturday.

Afghanistan suffered its bloodiest year in 2006 with more than 4,000 people killed, mostly rebels, sometimes in pitched battles between Taliban-led insurgents and Nato-led troops in regions bordering Pakistan.

Jakarta residents start clean-up after massive flood

REUTERS, Jakarta

Thousands of Indonesians were cleaning up mud and debris from their flood-damaged homes on Saturday after rains eased and waters that forced many into cramped emergency shelters begin to subside.

At the height of the flooding that began more than a week ago, officials had reported more than 400,000 people displaced by the high water, but the number had dropped closer to 100,000 as the weekend began, one official said.

"The number of evacuees is 37,348 households or 117,545 people," Rini Rahmawati, the official in charge at the sprawling capital's crisis centre, told Reuters.

No new figure on deaths was immediately available. As of Friday 57 people had been reported killed.

Following a night that saw relatively little rain in the capital itself, many turned to the task of making their homes liveable again after the worst floods in at least five years.

In central Jakarta's Petamburan district, where brown mud still covered streets and the stench from mounds of garbage pervaded the air, people were trying to dry soaked mattresses, chairs, and repairing water-damaged cars and motorcycles.



Children and women affected by floods stand in queue for relief goods in Jakarta yesterday. Floods have inundated the Indonesian capital for more than a week and claimed 80 lives.

Lankan president sees Indian role in conflict resolution

AFP, Reuters, New Delhi

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has urged neighbouring India to play a more active role in solving the tropical island's ethnic conflict, a report said.

"With the prevailing situation, India should be more sensitive," the Press Trust of India news agency quoted Rajapakse as telling the BBC.

The Sri Lankan leader said that India had played a role in diffusing tension in Nepal last year, helping to restore democracy in the Himalayan kingdom, the Indian agency reported.

"That is why I think and I believe India can still play a major role in this issue, as compared to any other country," Rajapakse said, referring to the Sri Lankan government's decades-old conflict with the Tamil Tiger rebels.

India's involvement in the Sri Lankan conflict between 1987 and 1990, when it sought to disarm the rebels, is widely seen as a disastrous episode.

New Delhi is thought to be wary

of becoming too deeply embroiled in Sri Lanka's political problems again.

But there have been growing calls for India to take a more active role amid an escalation in the Sri Lankan conflict over the last year, following the unravelling of a 2002 ceasefire agreement brokered by Norway.

India's southern coastal state of Tamil Nadu -- home to more than 60 million Tamils -- shares cultural links with Sri Lanka's Tamil minority.

The island's rebels say they are fighting for an independent homeland for Tamils. The bitter ethnic conflict has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse on Friday fired three newly sworn-in ministers after they publicly voiced dissent, a senior presidential aide said.

"Three ministers have been removed," the aide said, asking not to be named.

Iraq doomed if crackdown fails

Warns new US general

REUTERS, Baghdad

The new US military commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, said yesterday Iraq was doomed to continuing violence if a crackdown on sectarian strife now under way in Baghdad failed.

"The mission is doable The prospects for success are good. Failing that, Iraq will be doomed to continuing violence and civil strife and surely that is a prospect all must strive to avoid," he said.

"The stakes are very high," he said, speaking at a ceremony at a US base near Baghdad airport where he took command of 130,000 US troops in the country from General George Casey.

He was speaking just days after an offensive began in Baghdad that is seen as the last chance to halt the country's slide into all-out civil war.

Petraeus, a veteran of two Iraq tours and a counter-insurgency expert is widely regarded as one of the US Army's best commanders. He told senators in January that the situation in Iraq was "dire" but not hopeless.

He has urged that 21,500 extra

American troops being sent to Iraq for the campaign to be deployed as quickly as possible. Casey had been sceptical of troop increases.

The offensive is expected to build up gradually over the coming weeks and months. Tens of thousands of Iraqi and American soldiers are expected to take part.

Most of the extra troops being sent to Iraq by President Bush will be deployed in Baghdad.

Both Bush and Shia Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki are under mounting pressure to halt Iraq's descent into chaos.

More than 3,000 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed in four years of war.

Petraeus led the US Army's 101st Airborne Division in the 2003 US-led invasion and won plaudits for working closely with local leaders to stabilise the northern city of Mosul, getting involved in everything from privatisation to local elections.

He also oversaw a new US military manual on fighting insurgencies that stresses understanding politics, ethics and local culture.