



Iraqis gather at the site where a car bomb exploded in central Baghdad yesterday, ripping through popular Shia market areas and killing at least 71 people and wounding more than 150.

US won't abandon Afghanistan: Gates

REUTERS, Rawalpindi

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said yesterday the United States would not repeat the mistake of neglecting Afghanistan and allowing it to become a haven for Islamic militants.

Gates, after meeting Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf near the Pakistani capital, thanked Pakistan for its help in the war on terrorism and for efforts to better police the lawless border that Taliban insurgents use as a safe haven.

"My first visits to Pakistan were over 20 years ago and were in connection with our mutual effort to help the Afghans drive the Soviet troops from their territory," Gates said.

"After the Soviets left, the United States made a mistake. We neglected Afghanistan and extrem-

ism took control of that country," he said, citing the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. "We won't make that mistake again. We are here for the long haul."

Pakistan has been an important ally to the United States in counter-terrorism activities, but relations have been strained as US officials point to Taliban sanctuaries on the Pakistani side of the porous border as a major cause for the revival of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

Gates' remarkable 30-hour side trip for a one-hour visit with Musharraf appeared to be an attempt at delicate diplomacy.

It followed Gates' January trip to Afghanistan, where US commanders detailed the Taliban's use of Pakistani territory and told him militant attacks from Pakistan into Afghanistan had surged.

Hurry up on elections, UN tells Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

The United Nations mission in Nepal on Monday told the Himalayan nation's government to get a move on and organise scheduled elections crucial to the impoverished country's future.

Under the terms of a peace deal struck late last year between the interim government and Maoist rebels, Nepal is supposed to hold elections by mid-June for a body that will redraw the constitution.

But the head of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), Ian Martin, said the deadline could be missed, leaving the country stuck in political limbo and the peace process exposed to more pressure.

"I would urge the political parties to heed the very timely call of the chief electoral commissioner for urgent decisions and action in approving much needed legislation," Martin told reporters.

Myanmar accused of widespread rape of ethnic minority women

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar's military rulers have subjected minority ethnic Karen women to rape, sexual assault and forced labour as part of a bloody campaign against their people, a women's group said yesterday.

The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), led by exiles based in neighbouring Thailand, said it had documented more than 4,000 cases of abuse over the past few years in scores of villages in eastern Myanmar along the Thai border.

Lanka sinks rebel boat, 10 Tigers killed

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Navy destroyed a suspected Tamil Tiger boat and damaged another off the island's north-east coast before dawn on Monday killing around 10 rebels, officials said.

The rebel boat sank around 40 km north of the strategic northeastern harbour of Trincomalee, and sailors found what they believe to be the remains of a slain suicide bomber in the damaged boat.

"The Navy detected two boats at around 4:30 in the morning (2300 GMT Sunday) ... and we have engaged in the sea and from land," said Navy Spokesman Commander DKP Dassanayake. "We have destroyed one boat and recovered another fitted with weapons."

It was not clear how many people were aboard the boats, but Dassanayake said he suspected around 10 Tamil Tigers were killed and the Navy was scouring the sea for bodies.

PALESTINIAN UNITY GOVT DEAL

Israel mulls suspending contacts with Abbas

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel is considering suspending contacts with moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas if his new unity government with Hamas does not meet international demands, Israeli officials said yesterday.

The unity deal and Israel's response could hamper US efforts to revive long-stalled peace talks. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice plans a three-way summit with Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem on February 19.

"One option under serious discussion is severing contacts with Abu Mazen," said one of the officials involved in the deliberations, referring to Abbas by his nickname.

An Israeli defence official said ties with Mohammed Dahlan, a top Abbas aide who had spearheaded Fatah's power struggle with Hamas, were also in doubt. Dahlan took part in the unity talks though his role in the new Palestinian government is unclear.

"Things are really in the air," the defence official said.

Israeli officials said any suspension may only be temporary. Top advisers to Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and other ministers were to meet later on Monday to consider the options.

Olmert's spokeswoman, Miri Eisin, declined to comment on what

she called "hypotheticals."

Olmert said on Sunday it was too soon to pass judgment on the unity government, but top Israeli officials said the agreement between Abbas and Hamas failed to meet the three conditions set by the "Quartet" of Middle East peace mediators for ending the crippling economic sanctions imposed after Hamas came to power last March.

"We expect the Palestinian government ... to accept all three of the international community's conditions, and that includes recognition of Israel's right to exist, full acceptance and implementation of former agreements, complete stopping of terror actions and a clear renunciation of terror and violence," Eisin said.

Olmert said on Sunday that Israel needed more time to decide whether the unity government deal was acceptable or not.

The February 19 summit with Rice was initially expected to explore the contours of a Palestinian state, but officials said the focus would be on American and Israeli concerns about the unity government deal.

The Mecca agreement made no explicit commitment to recognise Israel. A letter from Abbas reappointing Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh as prime minister contained a vague call to the movement to "abide by the interests of the Palestinian people" and "respect" past agreements and international law.

'US looking for excuse to attack Iran'

AFP, New York

White House officials are taunting Iran into an action the United States could use as an excuse for an attack, a former security official told Newsweek, the magazine reported Sunday.

"They intend to be as provocative as possible and make the Iranians do something (the United States) would be forced to retaliate for," Hillary Mann, former director for Iran and Persian Gulf Affairs at the National Security Council, which reports to the White House, told the New York newsweekly.

US relations with Iran have chilled since President George W. Bush placed Iran on an "Axis of Evil," alongside North Korea and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, in a January 2002 speech.

Earlier on Sunday, Bush administration officials in Baghdad claimed that Iranian-built bombs smuggled into Iraq had killed at least 170 US and allied soldiers since June 2004.

US officials also claim Iran is enriching uranium to make nuclear bombs, while the Islamic Republic claims the nuclear fuel will make electricity.

The New York Times reported Friday that administration officials were concerned about especially lethal roadside bombs built in Iraq, which borders Iraq.

India's governing Congress party faces the first of a string of tough mid-term tests today when Punjab state goes to the polls to elect a new state assembly.

Campaigning has been fierce, with some of the 1,050 candidates for Punjab's 117-seat assembly -- currently held by Congress -- even roping in bar dancers to lure the northern state's 16 million voters.

The election will be followed by votes on February 14 and 23 in Manipur in the northeast and Uttarakhand in the north, both of

India's ruling party faces tough tests today

AFP, Amritsar

which are also currently held by Sonia Gandhi's Congress.

After that, all eyes will be on pivotal Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, which is currently held by a regional opposition party and goes to the polls at the end of May.

Defeat in the polls would deal a major blow to Congress and could mark the resurgence of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The polls, however, have no direct bearing on the national parliament and the Congress-led federal government.

Congress wrested power in Punjab in 2002 following a bruising

electoral battle with the then ruling combination of the regional Akali Dal Sikh party and the BJP.

"Punjab is crucial as results there will have a ripple effect on India's seven other northern states, including Uttar Pradesh, and hence this no-holds barred campaigning going on there," said New Delhi political analyst Anand Ojha.

Bar dancers cast out from western Maharashtra state last year have been recruited in hordes by Punjab hopefuls to woo potential voters to pre-poll campaign rallies, witnesses said.

Israel carries out test of anti-missile system in 'message' to Iran

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel carried out a successful night-time test of its Hetz (Arrow) anti-missile missile system Sunday in what public television described as a "message to Iran".

The defence ministry confirmed the test-firing, the first since December 2005 when the military announced the system was fully operational.

"This test-firing was aimed at checking the functioning of the Hetz at night and in extreme conditions against a ballistic missile," a ministry statement said. "All the system's components worked perfectly."

Public television said that a Hetz

fired from the Palmahim base, south of the commercial capital Tel Aviv, intercepted a missile fired from a high-altitude aircraft, the television said.

Public radio said the missile firing was designed to imitate Iran's Shahab-3, which has a range sufficient to reach Israel.

Army radio noted that the firing coincided with the Iranian regime's celebrations for the anniversary of its overthrow of the Western-backed shah in the 1979 Islamic revolution.

For the first three years after its launch in 1988, the United States paid 80 percent of the Hetz project's cost, but now the costs are shared equally.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) shakes hands with US Defence Secretary Robert Gates at Army House in Rawalpindi yesterday.

Indian Congress Party supporters distribute voting slips during door-to-door canvassing in Amritsar yesterday. India's governing Congress party faces the first of a string of tough mid-term tests today when Punjab state goes to the polls to elect a new state assembly.