

Israel, US will shun Palestinian govt

REUTERS, AP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said yesterday he and President Bush agreed to shun a Palestinian unity government unless it accepted international demands on policy toward Israel.

"A Palestinian government that does not accept the Quartet's conditions, cannot receive recognition and there will not be cooperation with it," Olmert said, referring to calls by international mediators for a unity government to recognise Israel, renounce violence and abide by existing interim peace accords.

"I spoke about this on Friday with the President of the United States, and I can tell you the Israeli and US positions are completely identical," Olmert said in broadcast remarks before talks later in the day with visiting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Olmert said at the start of the

weekly Cabinet meeting that he and President Bush had spoken by phone on Friday about a Palestinian power-sharing accord whose platform falls short of meeting those demands, posed by the so-called Quartet of Mideast negotiators the US, European Union, UN and Russia.

"A Palestinian government that won't accept the Quartet conditions won't receive recognition and cooperation," Olmert said. "The American and Israeli positions are totally identical on this issue."

The comments come ahead of a three-way meeting with the Palestinians on Monday.

In a further indication of tensions before the meeting, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas canceled a press conference that had been scheduled to follow their one-on-one talks Sunday afternoon, Abbas' office said.

Rice is to meet with Olmert later Sunday after her talks with Abbas, a moderate who favors peacemaking. All three are to get together Monday in what initially was to have been a summit designed to try to revive long-stalled peace talks.

However, the summit has been overshadowed by Abbas' attempts to finalize a power-sharing agreement with the Islamic militant Hamas whose platform does not meet the international community's demands that the Palestinian government disarm, recognise Israel and accept existing accords.

Israel and the US agree that their governments will not work with the emerging Palestinian coalition if it does not moderate its policies toward Israel.

But neither Washington nor Israel have said, however, that they would boycott Abbas, who, as head of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, would head any peace talks.

Negotiations broke down more than six years ago in an explosion of violence between the two sides.

After meeting in Jerusalem on Saturday, Rice and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni reiterated their demands that any Palestinian government toe the international line.

Livni said the power-sharing agreement Abbas and Hamas reached earlier in the month in Saudi Arabia does "not meet the requirements" of the international community.

Rice said the United States would not judge the new Palestinian government until it has been established, but acknowledged the coalition talks were overshadowing Monday's summit. Abbas aides have said they were warned by US officials that Washington would boycott a government with the platform agreed to in Saudi Arabia.



US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is joined by Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas (C) as she leaves his office in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Rice went into talks with Abbas as a new US peace initiative looked in danger of unravelling.

Thousands of British troops to return home in May

AFP, London

Britain will reduce its contingent of just over 7,000 troops in Iraq by almost half in May as it hands the main province of Basra over to Iraqi army and security forces, a newspaper reported Sunday.

A spokesman at the Ministry of Defence said the News of the World report was "speculation," adding that any troop withdrawal will depend on security conditions and consultations with Britain's allies.

The newspaper said around 3,000 British troops will be withdrawn in May, even though a withdrawal had not been expected until November. It speculated that tough regional elections in May had influenced the decision.

A senior government source quoted by the newspaper said: "The situation in Basra has reached a stage where troop withdrawals are now possible."



PHOTO: AFP

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (R) meets with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (C) and his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (L) in Tehran yesterday. Close allies Assad and Ahmadinejad Sunday night pledged they would work together to confront US and Israeli "plots" in the Middle East.

Syria, Iran vow unity against US plots

AFP, Tehran

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was winding up his latest trip yesterday to Iran as the two allies, accused by Washington of stirring trouble in the Middle East, pledged to work even more closely.

Assad, on his second trip to Iran since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took power in August 2005, Sunday met supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Iran's top security official Ali Larijani, official media reported.

The Syrian president had on Saturday met with Ahmadinejad, warning against the dangers of disunity between Sunni and Shia Muslims, in particular in multi-confessional Lebanon and Iraq.

"We should cooperate and work to make the public aware of the sinister aims of the United States and the Zionists," Assad said in his

meeting with Ahmadinejad, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

"Iran and Syria support the peoples of the region and the enemies will only reach their goals by creating pessimism and disunity amongst Muslims," he added.

Ahmadinejad agreed that "we should be careful about the enemies' efforts to create division and conflict amongst Muslims and make sure they do not reach their sinister goals."

"Under the current conditions it is necessary that Islamic countries preserve their vigilance, unity and wisdom to prevent the establishment of new conspiracies," he added.

Accompanied by Foreign Minister Walid Mualllem and Vice President Faruq al-Shara, Assad also met former president and current head of Iran's top political

arbitration body Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. He was due to leave Iran later Sunday.

"Creating conflict between Shias and Sunnis in Iraq and Lebanon is the final card that America and its allies have... they try to cover their failure with false propaganda," Assad told Rafsanjani.

Assad was the first world leader to visit Ahmadinejad following his election victory -- just five days after he took office -- and relations have remained strong ever since.

The Iranian president visited Damascus in January 2006, where he held talks with Assad and the Syria-based political leaders of Palestinian militant groups.

Assad's latest visit to Tehran comes at a time when both Syria and Iran have been accused by the US of "meddling" in the region. Both vehemently deny the charges.

Malaysian bill aims to curtail movements of foreign workers

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia will soon introduce a foreign workers bill which proposes confining foreigners to their work premises under constant monitoring to prevent rising crime, a top minister said yesterday.

Home Affairs Minister Mohamad Radzi Sheikh Ahmad said the foreign workers bill would provide legislation to oversee Malaysia's 2.6 million foreign workers and ensure they "do not go astray".

Mohamad Radzi said the bill required employers "to provide proper accommodations at the workplace, where it is properly monitored, where they have systems to ensure that the workers do not go astray".

"If they do go out anywhere, there is some sort of a procedure involved," Mohamad Radzi told reporters.

On Saturday, Malaysia's police

chief had reportedly suggested confining foreigners to their work premises and putting them under 24-hour surveillance to prevent crime.

Inspector-General of Police Musa Hassan said the move would deter them from getting involved in rising criminal activity, the New Straits Times reported.

"Under the plan, foreign workers, the majority of whom are contract workers, will be placed in their kongsi (workers quarters) at (their) work site and have their activities monitored by the contractor, even after working hours," Musa was quoted as saying by the newspaper.

Asked if the government agreed to the practise of foreign workers having to register with their employers if they wished to go out during breaks or days off, Radzi said it was one of the items recommended in the bill.

Republicans foils Democrats' move to repudiate Bush

AP, Washington

The Senate gridlocked on the Iraq war in a sharply worded showdown Saturday as Republicans foiled a Democratic bid to repudiate President Bush's deployment of 21,500 additional combat troops.

The 56-34 vote fell four short of the 60 needed to advance a nonbinding measure identical to one the House passed Friday. Seven GOP senators broke ranks, compared with only two during an earlier test on the issue.

Democrats swiftly claimed victory. "A majority of the United States Senate is against the escalation in Iraq," said Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

"As for the Republicans who chose once again to block further debate and protect President Bush, the American people now know they support the escalation" in troops.

Republicans blasted the Democratic leadership for refusing to allow a vote on an alternative that ruled out any reduction in money for troops in the field.

"There is no place for chicanery at a time of war," said Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. "Even some of the president's most strident opponents know that. They know that the only vote that truly matters is a vote on whether to fund the troops."

Pak forces determined to seal Afghan border

REUTERS, Lwara Fort

Pakani troops in Lwara Fort on the Afghan border are on guard, but not for invaders from Afghanistan. They're trying to stop militants crossing in to Afghanistan to battle US-led Nato troops.

The red, brick fort sits on a small, barren plain surrounded by snow-streaked mountains, several hundred metres from the Afghan border.

Brigadier Rizwan Aktar, commander of the fort, points from its high walls to a fracture in a nearby line of hills -- the Chandi Gap, a

notorious militant crossing point, he says.

But he told reporters on a week-end tour of border defences in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal region he and his men were determined to stop infiltration into Afghanistan: "The people who want to create any nonsense, we are going to control them."

Pakistan is a major US ally in the war on terrorism but US officials appear increasingly frustrated about the help a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan is getting from the Pakistani side of the border.

Taliban leaders are operating from Pakistan where training, financing and recruiting are also taking place, they say.

Pakistan says it can't completely seal the 2,500 km border but it is doing all it can to stop infiltration.

But Pakistan says infiltration is a minor factor behind the Taliban surge. Rather, it's a cocktail of Afghan factors including anger over civilian deaths in military attacks, corruption and the booming drug trade that's fuelling the Taliban war, it says.

UN confirms Nepali Maoists disarmed

AFP, Kathmandu

The United Nations said Sunday it has finished registering soldiers and arms from Nepal's former Maoist rebels, a key part of a peace deal with the government to end a decade of civil war.

"The registration of the Maoist weapons and their soldiers in all the seven cantonment sites was completed on Saturday," said Kieran Dwyer, spokesman for the UN mission in Nepal.

The rebels agreed to UN moni-

toring at sites across the Himalayan nation in November last year as part of the peace deal to lay down arms and join the political mainstream.

The former rebels received 80 seats in a new 330-seat interim government's parliament in January, and the arms registration -- if accepted as accurate by the government -- is expected to pave the way for the Maoists to join the cabinet.

"The UN is preparing a full report on the result of the registration process and the report will be deliv-

ered to the government and the Maoists in a day or two," Dwyer said.

He declined to provide details about the number of registered People's Liberation Army soldiers and their weapons, saying the number would be revealed only after the UN had consulted with the former rebels and government.

But the Maoists on Sunday put the figure of soldiers registered at 32,000, well above other estimates that put the figure around 12,000.

Pakistan freezes funds of two Islamic charity groups

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan yesterday froze the bank accounts of two Islamic charities and shut down their offices as part of a crackdown on militants after several recent suicide bombings in the country, officials said.

"Offices of Al-Akhtar Trust and Al-Rashid Trust have been sealed and their bank accounts have been frozen," senior government official Ghulam Mohammad Mohtaram told AFP.

"They will not be allowed to give ads in local newspapers for donations."

He said the move followed reports that the two organisations were "providing funds to other organisations involved in illegal activities."

The government also banned any publications by the two organisations, he said. However, there will be no restriction on their welfare activity, he added.

The Interior Ministry in Islamabad said action was being taken against the two charities as well as some militant organisations.

"We have banned these organisations and are taking action to seal their offices, close their websites and publications and freeze their bank accounts," the chief of the ministry's Nation Crisis Management Cell, Javed Iqbal Cheema, told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Smoke rises from the Pakistan National Shipping Corporation (PNSC) building after a fire erupted in Karachi yesterday. Five people trapped in the PNSC building after a fire erupted have been retrieved safely as firefighters struggled to extinguish the blaze in the 15-storey building.