

Palestinians unveil new unity cabinet

Israel refuses to recognise it

AFP, Gaza City/ Jerusalem

Palestinians unveiled a new unity cabinet yesterday they hope will usher in a new era by stopping months of deadly factional violence and ending a crippling international aid boycott.

The new coalition unites the radical Islamist Hamas movement with president Mahmud Abbas's secular Fatah party and was formed after weeks of wrangling over the lineup.

"We hope that this government will mark the start of a new era and enable us to turn the page," prime minister-designate Ismail Haniya of

Hamas said after submitting the list of ministers to Abbas.

"We are going to do everything in our power to strengthen national unity, obtain a lifting of the siege imposed on the Palestinian people and improve our links with the international community."

The Palestinian parliament is expected to vote on the new cabinet on Saturday.

The international Quartet for Middle East peace -- the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States -- slapped an aid freeze on the Palestinian government a year ago when Hamas, considered a terror group by Israel

and the West, came to power. It has insisted that the Palestinian government renounce violence, recognise Israel and agree to abide by past peace deals for the flow of funds to resume and it was not yet clear whether it would modify the approach.

The EU said it would stick to its wait-and-see stance until it had a chance to study the new cabinet lineup.

"As we have said many times we are going to wait and see... we have to wait and see the list," EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said in Germany.

Israel said on Thursday rejected

any contacts with the new Palestinian unity government, denying earlier statements by a senior official that it could work with it under certain conditions.

"The Israeli position remains the same," government spokeswoman Miri Eisin told AFP in the first official reaction to the new Palestinian cabinet lineup unveiled on Thursday.

Israel said it would be ready to work with the new cabinet under certain conditions, but stuck to its official stance that it would not recognise the unity government if it did not agree to abide by Western demands.

Blair refuses to say sorry for Iraq war

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted yesterday that the US-led coalition is doing the right thing in Iraq, stressing the country is not at civil war despite mounting violence there.

In a television interview days before the March 20 fourth anniversary of the US-led invasion, he again refused to apologise for backing military action, insisting that deposing Saddam Hussein was justified.

"The British soldiers, the American soldiers have done extraordinary work in Iraq, they've made great sacrifices," he told Sky News.

"It's a tragedy that so many have lost their lives. But they have not lost their lives because we have been trying to do the wrong thing in Iraq... We've been trying to do the right thing."

A total of 133 British troops have been killed in Iraq since 2003, along with some 3,200 from the United States.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian activists of the ruling Congress Party stage a silent protest as they block roads in Kolkata yesterday against the police firing in Nandigram, a village some 120km south of Kolkata. A total of 14 villagers died after police opened fire on protesters against the planned building of an industrial zone in West Bengal.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian activists of the ruling Congress Party stage a silent protest as they block roads in Kolkata yesterday against the police firing in Nandigram, a village some 120km south of Kolkata. A total of 14 villagers died after police opened fire on protesters against the planned building of an industrial zone in West Bengal.

14 Indian farmers die in police firing

Angry villagers set fire to govt office

AP, Kolkata

Farmers angry over plans to build an industrial park on their land set fire to a government office yesterday in a second day of unrest in eastern India, authorities said, as the death toll from violence the day before rose to 14.

Police responded with baton-charges and tear gas, dispersing mobs of angry protesters who then quickly regrouped elsewhere.

The clashes mirrored earlier violence in Nandigram that in January prompted the federal government to suspend plans to establish scores of Special Economic Zones intended to attract overseas investors with generous tax breaks. Most of the zones, including the one that was to be set up in Nandigram, are to be built on farmland.

The violence began Thursday when about 2,000 farmers gathered outside a hospital where those

injured a day earlier were being treated. They soon began chanting angry slogans and marched toward a local government office, setting fire to the building, the Press Trust of India reported.

On Wednesday, police opened fire on thousands of protesting farmers who were attacking officers with rocks, machetes and pickaxes. Eleven of those shot died either immediately or soon after, and another three succumbed to their injuries overnight, said Raj Kanodia, a senior police officer.

Thirty-six others were wounded Wednesday, and there were no reports of deaths or injuries Thursday.

The shootings prompted widespread outrage in New Delhi, the capital, and in the state of West Bengal, where Nandigram is located.

"The thought uppermost on my mind and that of all sensitive people is, 'Was this spilling of human blood not avoidable?'" said West Bengal

state Gov Gopal Krishna Gandhi, a grandson of Indian independence leader Mohandas Gandhi. His role is largely ceremonial.

In New Delhi, lawmakers from the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena, two right-wing Hindu nationalist groups, shouted "Communists are murderers" and forced the adjournment of the house for the day before any business could be conducted.

Meanwhile, the High Court in Kolkata ordered India's Central Bureau of Investigation to investigate Wednesday's shootings.

The trouble in Nandigram first erupted on Jan. 7 after the leak of the government plan to acquire 22,000 acres of land in the area and build a petrochemical plant and shipyard.

The hastily formed Bhumi Uccched Pratirodh, or Land Acquisition Resistance Committee in the region's Bengali language, organised protests that quickly degenerated into violent clashes.

Iraq confirms Saddam aide's death sentence

AFP, Baghdad

An Iraqi appeals court yesterday confirmed the death sentence on Taha Yassin Ramadan, former vice president to executed dictator Saddam Hussein, for crimes against humanity.

Ramadan, who was born in 1938, is likely to be hanged by the end of this month, a senior Iraqi official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

He was sentenced on February 12 by the Iraqi High Tribunal, which is trying former regime officials, for his role in the slaughter of 148 Shiites from the town of Dujail in the 1980s.

His sentence was automatically reviewed by the appeals panel, which confirmed the execution by hanging.

"Yesterday, all the nine members of the appeals court ratified the death sentence on Taha Yassin Ramadan," Judge Munir Haddad of the appeals panel told a press conference.

3 Pakistanis stoned, shot dead for adultery

REUTERS, Peshawar

Two Pakistani men and a woman were stoned and then shot to death for committing adultery after Islamist activists said they caught them in a compromising position, an official and residents said.

Sex out of marriage is a crime in predominantly Muslim Pakistan and punishable by stoning to death under Islamic laws, although that punishment has never officially been handed down.

But in remote, semi-autonomous tribal areas, jirgas or councils of elders, often decide on such issues.

A jirga in the Khyber tribal agency near the Afghan border ordered the execution of the three on Wednesday, two days after they were caught and handed over to the council for judgment, residents said.



PHOTO: AFP

Immigrants and advocates march to New York's City Hall Wednesday as they rally for immigration reform. US President George W Bush has pushed for legalising the status of some illegal immigrants who join a guest-worker programme, but rejects an outright amnesty.

Nepal to halve numbers of royal palace staff

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government said yesterday it had decided to halve the number of staff working at the royal palace, where embattled King Gyanendra is struggling to hold on to his throne.

"The cabinet meeting on Thursday decided to withdraw 50 percent of the total civil employees working in the Narayanhit Royal Palace," Deputy Prime Minister Amrik Sherchan told AFP.

The approximately 400 staff affected by the decision would be reassigned to a government ministry, he added.

Since being forced to end direct rule and reinstate parliament after mass protests last April, King Gyanendra has been stripped of most of his powers including his position as head of state.

Earlier this week, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala called for the king to abdicate -- an about-face for a premier who had previously been seen as sympathetic to the throne.

The king has been accused of trying to undermine a peace deal between the government and Maoist rebels, who are lobbying hard for Nepal to be declared a republic.

The king's ultimate fate is scheduled to be decided after elections due in June for a body that will rewrite the constitution.

A palace staffer, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that he had heard of the government plan to cut palace employees, but declined to comment further saying it was a "government matter."

King Gyanendra's Shah dynasty has a 238-year history, and Nepal's

kings have for centuries been revered as incarnations of the Hindu Lord Vishnu, the god of protection.

But the monarch has had a tough five years as king since he was vaulted to the throne by the massacre of his brother, King Birendra, and most of the royal family, by a drink-and-drug fuelled crown prince who later killed himself.

Since the king abandoned his ill-fated attempt at direct rule aimed at crushing the Maoists, he has been accused of abuse of power and has been stripped of his status as head of state.

Even the state bank has decided to remove images of the king from bank notes.

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PHOTO: AFP

An undated photo shows a Clouded Leopard at a rainforest in Borneo.

Clouded leopard declared new species

AFP, Jakarta

A clouded leopard found in the rainforests of Indonesia's islands of Borneo and Sumatra is a new species of big cat, conservation group WWF said yesterday.

The cat, covered in small cloud markings containing many spots, was thought to be the same species as a mainland Southeast Asian leopard, but tests have shown otherwise.

"Genetic research results clearly indicate that the clouded leopards of Borneo should be considered a separate species," Dr Stephen O'Brien, from the US National Cancer Institute, was quoted as saying in a WWF statement.

Some 5,000 to 11,000 cats from the newly declared species are thought to live on Borneo, while the number on Sumatra is estimated to be 3,000 to 7,000.

Numbers of Lankan refugees go up: UN

AP, Colombo

The UN said yesterday the number of refugees fleeing fighting in eastern Sri Lanka has jumped to 130,000 and appealed for immediate funding, saying there was hardly any money to help them.

"I am extremely concerned that tens of thousands of civilians have had to flee their homes once again in eastern Sri Lanka due to the new escalation in violence," said a statement from John Holmes, United Nations undersecretary-general for Humanitarian Affairs.

The statement came a day after Sri Lanka's air force bombed a major Tamil Tiger rebel base in the country's east for a third straight day.

Details about casualties and damage from the airstrikes on the Thoppigala camp were not immediately known.

The camp has been a major Tiger training center and is considered one of the rebels' last eastern strongholds after Sri Lankan forces captured swaths of rebel territory in ground and air attacks over the past year.

Iraq in some ways in civil war: Pentagon

3 more US troops killed in Iraq

AP, AFP, Washington/ Baghdad

"a baseline from which to measure future progress."

Members of the Bush administration have been loath to say that the US military is struggling to quell a civil war, and the report agreed that the term does not capture the complex situation there.

But it added, "Some elements of the situation in Iraq are properly descriptive of a 'civil war,' including the hardening of ethno-sectarian identities and mobilisation, the changing character of the violence and population displacements."

Meanwhile, three more US troops have been killed and nine wounded in fighting against insurgents in northern Iraq while a bus bombing outside a factory in a central Iraqi town killed four workers yesterday.

N Korean disarmament drive gathers steam

AFP, Beijing

The top US negotiator on North Korea said yesterday the United States had done what it could to overcome a key stumbling block to a deal on dismantling the communist state's nuclear arms drive.

As a fresh series of negotiations began in Beijing, Christopher Hill hailed a US Treasury Department decision that clears the way for the release of North Korean funds frozen in a Macau bank, one of the regime's key demands.

Hill's comments came amid cautious optimism over the tortuous disarmament process, one day after Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the UN nuclear watchdog, returned from Pyongyang saying North Korea was committed to the talks.

"I think we have fulfilled what we need to do," Hill told reporters in the Chinese capital. "I'm confident the six-party process is going to go ahead."

He also said Washington was



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani lawyers torch posters of President Pervez Musharraf and US President George W Bush during an anti-government protest rally in Karachi yesterday. Pakistan's acting top judge has summoned the Islamabad police chief and other officers for allegedly "manhandling" the country's suspended chief justice.