

Israel urges int'l community to shun Palestinian cabinet

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called yesterday for the international community to maintain a boycott of the new Palestinian unity government amid signs the West may be easing its stance. The Palestinian cabinet, uniting long-time rivals Fatah and Hamas, met for the first time in Gaza City and by video link in Ramallah on Sunday, vowing to confront rampant lawlessness and end a crippling international aid freeze.

"The government platform includes some extremely problematic elements which can't be accepted by Israel or the international community," Olmert told his cabinet which passed a resolution ruling out talks with the Palestinians.

Olmert said he would maintain contacts with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, but warned that relationship would be further strained by Abbas's agreement to share power with Hamas, which is responsible for scores of suicide attacks against Israel.

Israel's closest ally the United States said it was ready to deal with

government ministers who are not members of Hamas, regarded as a terrorist group by Israel and the West.

"Individuals who are not members of foreign terrorist organisations but who do hold office in the unity government, we do not rule out contact with those individuals," said Micaela Schweitzer-Bluhm, spokeswoman for the US consulate in Jerusalem.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya presented his government's programme to parliament on Saturday and made overtures to the Jewish state, including a vow to secure the release of a captured soldier and expand a truce in the Gaza Strip.

However, Haniya -- a member of Hamas -- also proclaimed Palestinians' right to all forms of resistance, rejecting a key international condition for acceptance.

Israel says the new government has failed to meet any of the international demands -- that it renounce violence, recognise Israel and honour past peace accords.

Olmert urged the Quartet of Middle East peace mediators -- the United States, European Union,

United Nations and Russia -- to stand by their boycott, imposed last year when the hardline Hamas took power.

"We expect the international community not to fall for the new Palestinian unity government and to continue with the same line it has taken all along, the way of isolating the government which does not accept the Quartet principles," Olmert said.

But some Western nations seem ready to step up ties with the Palestinians now that a unity cabinet, which includes several widely respected Western-educated ministers, has come to power.

The US consulate spokeswoman said Washington will maintain ties with Abbas, who is due to meet US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on March 24 in Ramallah and again on March 26 in Amman, according to Abbas's office.

In Berlin, the German presidency of the European Union said it was prepared to cooperate with a government, which adopted a platform in line with internationally set conditions for Middle East peace.

Norway said on Saturday it

would normalise ties with the Palestinian government, while France has invited foreign minister Ziad Abu Amr to Paris and Russia has also signalled readiness to work with the new coalition.

"The walls of isolation and the aid embargo are cracking," Abu Amr told Israel's Ynet news website.

"At a time when we are accepting a large part of the international demands and are adopting a moderate political platform the Israeli government continues to be blindly stubborn," the US-educated diplomat added.

Ending the crippling boycott and restoring order to Gaza's lawless streets are chief priorities for the Fatah-Hamas government.

Finance minister Salam Fayyad, a US-educated former official with the International Monetary Fund who is widely respected in the West, warned on Saturday that the government would not survive without international aid.

Abbas, meanwhile, appointed Mohammad Dahlan, the controversial Fatah strongman loathed by Hamas, as national security adviser.



Protesters sit on a highway while clashing with police after leaving the protest route near the Pentagon during an antiwar rally Saturday in Washington, DC. Organised by the ANSWER coalition, the protesters marched from the National Mall to the Pentagon to mark the fourth anniversary of the war in Iraq.



Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya (CL) and President Mahmud Abbas (CR) chair the first meeting of the new Palestinian unity cabinet in Gaza City yesterday. The new Palestinian government held its first cabinet meeting yesterday, vowing to confront rampant lawlessness and end a crippling international aid freeze but facing a continued Israeli boycott.

NANDIGRAM KILLING Maoists call strike in 4 Indian states

AFP, Bhubaneswar

Indian Maoist rebels, suspected of killing 55 police in an attack last week, on Sunday called for a strike across four eastern Indian states to protest the police shooting 14 villagers.

"The people must come to terms with the fact that governments in these states are agents of imperialist forces, and should rise to fight their anti-people agenda," the rebels said in a statement issued in the eastern state of Orissa.

The rebels called for a strike on Tuesday in Orissa, as well as in the eastern states of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

In Nandigram village in West Bengal on Wednesday, police shot dead 14 protesters who were trying to prevent the compulsory purchase of land to build an industrial park.

On Thursday, Maoist rebels killed 55 police in an attack on a jungle security post in eastern Chhattisgarh state, one of their worst ever attacks in the four-decades-old insurgency.

Maoist rebels are active in half of India's 29 states, particularly in many of the regions that have seen the worst violence over land acquisition for industry under India's plan to set up Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

Orissa has been a hub of agitation against the zones -- privately run enclaves with world-class infrastructure and tax breaks to lure investment.

The state has allotted huge tracts to the steel industry in recent years, and political activists in the state claim as many as four million locals face displacement by foreign and domestic industries as a result.

A protest against the construction of a Tata steel complex in Orissa's remote Kalinga Nagar area led to the shooting deaths of 13 villagers last January.

"From Kalinga Nagar in Orissa to Nandigram in West Bengal, the story is the same -- the governments acting in tandem with capitalist forces to build mega-industries by forcefully evicting the farmers," the Maoist statement said.

N Korea nuclear talks move forward Say envoys

AFP, Beijing

The six-nation agreement on shutting down North Korea's nuclear arms programme is "on schedule" after negotiators agreed on some key implementation details in talks yesterday, the US envoy said.

Pyeongyang and Washington also agreed on how to finally lay to rest a lingering row over North Korea funds frozen in a Macau bank by US sanctions, a top Chinese diplomat was quoted as saying by state-run media.

US negotiator Christopher Hill said participants in talks in Beijing reached consensus on key points of the February 13 disarmament accord, including what constituted a "shutdown" of Pyongyang's main nuclear reactor and the role that the watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency will play in verifying compliance.

Marchers call for an end to Iraq war

REUTERS, Arlington

Thousands of anti-war demonstrators, some carrying yellow and black signs reading "US out of Iraq now!" marched on the Pentagon on Saturday, one of several protests worldwide to mark four years of war.

The march, on a cold, cloudy and windy St. Patrick's Day, comes just before the fourth anniversary of the start of the Iraq war on Tuesday and 40 years after a similar protest at the Pentagon over the Vietnam War.

On a stage in the Pentagon parking lot, speaker after speaker demanded the end of the war in Iraq and some called for President George W. Bush's impeachment. A flag-draped coffin was displayed near the stage bearing a picture of a young soldier killed in Iraq.

"We're here in the shadow of the war machine," peace activist Cindy Sheehan said. "We need to shut it down."

Wearing a black ski cap, Sheehan said soldiers like her son,

Casey, who was killed in Iraq, were being sent "to die for nothing."

A woman for the group that organised the protest told the cheering crowd, "Impeach Bush, impeach Cheney, impeach Gates." The latter references were to Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Robert Gates.

Jonathan Hutto, a 29-year-old active-duty sailor who served in Iraq, urged the demonstrators to tell lawmakers "to get a backbone and spine" and stop the war.

The march began near the Vietnam War Memorial, just a few blocks from the White House, and proceeded across the Potomac River toward the Pentagon.

A smaller group of war supporters held a counter-demonstration with signs that said: "Win the war or lose to jihad." "Our troops are shedding their blood to keep terrorists from America," and "St. Patrick: Drive the Democrats from our land."

Lankan navy destroys 2 Tiger ships

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's navy yesterday sank two cargo vessels believed to be smuggling weapons and explosives for Tamil Tiger rebels, the defence ministry said.

Sri Lankan naval craft shelled the first ship after it failed to stop for an inspection and opened fire on the navy, ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said.

He said a second vessel in the area was also challenged and it too had opened fire at the navy, prompting a sea battle.

"Both vessels were attacked and they exploded and sank," Samarasinghe said.

The defence ministry in a statement said the vessels had no flags or other identification markings.

After firing warning shots across the bows the navy shelled the ships, the ministry said, adding the sea battle occurred in deep water off the island's Arugam Bay coast.

"The naval ships observed huge explosions onboard the vessel,

confirming that it was carrying explosives and war-like material to the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)," the ministry said immediately after the first vessel was said to have been sunk.

It said the second vessel retaliated with gunfire just after noon (0700 GMT).

"Naval gunfire resulted in massive explosions setting the vessel ablaze, confirming the suspicion that this vessel was also engaged in gun running for the LTTE," the ministry said.

There was no immediate word from the Tamil Tigers.

The navy carried out a similar attack on February 28 and sank an identical craft off the island's southern coast, according to defence authorities here.

There have been stepped up clashes between suspected Tamil Tiger ships and the Sri Lankan navy in recent months amid heavy fighting in the island's northern and eastern regions.

Israel, US scale back war game amid Iran face-off

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli and visiting US forces are holding a biennial air-defence exercise this month but on a reduced scale, partly out of reluctance to stoke tensions with Iran, Israeli security sources said yesterday.

They said the exercise, dubbed Juniper Cobra, this year involves fewer troops and advanced computer simulations -- rather than live-fire drills -- of anti-missile systems such as Israel's Arrow-II and the American-made Patriot PAC-3.

"Given the regional situation, especially with Iran, and other factors, we have opted for a much lower profile than previously," an Israeli security source said.

Israel and the United States accuse Iran of trying to produce nuclear weapons that could be mounted on long-range missiles.

Iran insists its atomic ambitions are peaceful but has defied foreign demands that it curb projects with bombmaking potential.

The showdown has stirred speculation that Israel or the United States could mount military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, a move for which Tehran has vowed to retaliate.

Should Washington decide to go it alone against Iran, it may try to garner Arab support by keeping Israel out of the attack.

But continued forbearance by Israel, which is assumed to have the Middle East's only atomic arsenal, would hinge on the Jewish state feeling protected from any Iranian missile salvoes.

US and Israeli officials described Juniper Cobra as routine and not intended to address a specific regional threat.

A US army spokeswoman,

Major Peggy Kageleiry, said the scale of the exercise was affected by equipping problems and Israel's war against Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas last year.

"We ran out of time to plan a large live-fire operation," Kageleiry told American military affairs journal Defence News.

According to the report, this year's exercise marks the first time that Israel has tested the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system, a counterpart to the Arrow, which destroys incoming missiles in the atmosphere.

The Israeli army declined to discuss Juniper Cobra in details, saying in a statement only that it is "part of a routine training cycle designed to validate interoperability of air defence systems."

3 children killed in Thai school attack

AP, Bangkok

A deadly attack on an Islamic school in Thailand's restive south that left three students dead and seven injured sparked hundreds of Muslim villagers to rioted Sunday in protest.

Police blamed the attack in the southern province of Songkhla on Muslim insurgents, but villagers said they didn't believe Muslims were behind the violence.

More than 500 protesters gathered outside the school, parading the dead children's bodies through the crowd and setting fire to two buildings at a nearby government-owned school. Some hurled stones at police.

The attack occurred late Saturday evening at the Bamrungsart Pondok school, a Muslim boarding school in Songkhla province, said police Col Thammasak Wasaksiri.

Attackers hurled explosives onto the school grounds and opened fire with assault rifles into the sleeping quarters of the school, Thammasak said.

Musharraf defends removal of judge

AFP, Islamabad

President Gen Pervez Musharraf defended his decision to remove Pakistan's chief justice and insisted Saturday that he had no personal differences with the former top judge.

Musharraf has faced a growing crisis since March 9, when he suspended Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry over unspecified allegations that the judge had abused his authority.

Many lawyers, retired judges and opposition leaders consider Musharraf's action an effort to remove a strong-willed judge ahead of parliamentary and presidential elections.

On Friday police used tear gas, rubber bullets and batons to stop supporters of Chaudhry from reaching the Supreme Court, where he was to appear before a panel of five judges hearing his case.

As Pakistan's Geo television broadcast the clashes, police entered its offices, kicking down doors and wrecking property. One of the channel's popular news shows

was pulled off the air Thursday, apparently for its coverage of the legal crisis.

Addressing a rally Saturday in the eastern city of Pakpattan, Musharraf said he had "no personal differences" with Chaudhry, and had acted against the judge after receiving a case against him from the prime minister.

"I am blamed for everything," state-run Pakistan Television quoted him as saying.

Musharraf's comments came after authorities eased restrictions on Chaudhry and fired 15 police for attacking Geo television.

On Friday, a five-member panel of the Supreme Court hearing the case against Chaudhry ruled that the restrictions on him be lifted.

Police did not prevent people from visiting Chaudhry on Saturday, a government official said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. He said Chaudhry was also free to leave his home.

FOUR YEARS AFTER INVASION US military seeks turning point in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Four years after the invasion of Iraq, US commanders now believe a new strategy backed up by tens of thousands of extra troops at last has a chance to put an end to the sectarian slaughter.

Hard fighting and more casualties lie ahead, they warn, but with Iraqi leaders and security forces now pulling in the right direction, the military says there is reason to hope that the new security plan will prevail.

Unfortunately, these promising signs come after more than 3,200 US troops and tens of thousands of Iraqis have died in the past four years, and as public support for the war in the United States itself is plummeting beyond the point of no return.

With many candidates in next year's US presidential election likely to run on a "troops out" ticket, and the entire Middle East region in state of high tension, time is running out for General David Petraeus and his soldiers.

The new US commander took over last month trailing great expectations, but he warns it will take months for his plan to make a difference to the strength of the al-Qaeda insurgency or the savagery of the Sunni-Shia conflict.

"The Washington clock's ticking, and the Baghdad clock's ticking, and we wish we could wind the Baghdad clock a little faster," Petraeus said this week in the western insurgent town of Ramadi, while insisting politics will not distract him from the task.

The irony of this sudden urgency is not lost on officers in the

field.

While none will publicly criticise civilian officials, such as former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, they respond with wry smiles when asked why the new tactics employed by Petraeus' command were not adopted three years ago.

Instead, they talk enthusiastically of the so-called "surge strategy," which will see more than 25,000 extra US troops pour into Baghdad and by June bring total force numbers to 160,000 for the first time since 2003.

Most of these reinforcements will join Operation Fardh al-Qanoon (Imposing Law), a plan developed with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, to clear the capital of insurgents and militia fighters and then hold the ground.

Zimbabwe crisis at tipping point, Tsvangirai tells BBC

AFP, London

Zimbabwe's main opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai said yesterday that the crisis-hit country was at a "tipping point", in a telephone interview with BBC television.

Questioned about whether Zimbabwe was on the edge of a "moment of liberation," Tsvangirai responded:

"I think that this is a tipping point. Things are bad but I think this crisis has reached a tipping point and we could be seeing the beginning of the end of this dictatorship."

Turning to his recent head injuries sustained at the hands of President Robert Mugabe's security services, he added: "My physical condition is greatly improved. I am recovering."



Protesters shout slogans in Bangkok yesterday during a demonstration against the 2006 coup. At least 500 people rallied in Bangkok demanding an end to Thailand's army-installed government, which came to power six months ago after a bloodless coup.

Taliban chop noses, ears of drivers

REUTERS, Asadabad

Taliban guerrillas chopped noses and ears of at least five truck drivers in eastern Afghanistan as punishment for transporting supplies to US-led troops, officials and residents said on Sunday.

The drivers were part of a convoy headed for a coalition military base when they were attacked in the province of Nuristan on Saturday.

"The number of drivers who had their noses and ears cut varies, it is between five and eight," Ghulamullah, the police chief of Nuristan who uses only one name, said citing locals and officials in the area.

Several trucks were destroyed in the attack.

Ousted from power in 2001 in a US-led invasion, the Taliban have launched what they call a holy war against Western troops and the government in Kabul.