

Rice urges Arab states to 'search' for ME peace

AFP, Ramallah/Aswan

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was holding talks with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas yesterday after urging Arab allies to find a way of reviving peace negotiations with Israel.

But in a sign of the gulf between Israel and the Palestinians, both sides traded heated accusations as Rice embarked on the second leg of her tour following two days of talks in Egypt.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert accused Abbas of violating commitments to the Jewish state, while one of Abbas's senior aides charged that Israel was trying to avoid serious peace talks.

"I would hope that every state would search very deep to see what it can do at this crucial time to finally

end this conflict," Rice said after meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the southern city of Aswan.

Rice has been hoping to revive a long-dormant plan for a broad Arab-Israeli peace floated five years ago and on Saturday met foreign ministers and intelligence chiefs of the so-called "Arab quartet," which includes Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

On her fourth visit to the region in as many months, Rice said she hoped increased involvement from Washington's Arab allies could help rekindle moribund peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

Israel initially rejected the take-it-or-leave-it Arab initiative but has recently spoken more positively of the plan as a starting point for nego-

tiations, as long as it is revised to specify that Palestinian refugees can return to Palestinian-controlled areas, not to the Jewish state.

Arab leaders are expected to discuss the initiative at their two-day annual summit due to kick off on Wednesday in Riyadh.

In Egypt, Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said the ball was in Israel's court.

"Egypt is committed to this initiative and we hope the other party, the Israeli side will deal with the initiative in a positive manner," he said. "We should wait for the Israeli side and then we move ahead towards negotiations."

The latest flurry of diplomatic efforts has been described as the biggest push for Israeli-Palestinian peace since talks under Bill Clinton's administration collapsed

more than six years ago.

But the formation of a Palestinian national unity cabinet with radical Islamic movement Hamas and Abbas's Fatah faction scuppered US and Israeli plans to sideline Hamas and seek to revive peace talks directly with Abbas.

Olmert, who refuses to recognise the new government, voiced his displeasure at Abbas just hours before both leaders were to hold separate talks with Rice.

"The Palestinian Authority chairman blatantly violated a series of commitments given to Israel, especially a commitment not to form a national unity government before the release of Gilad Shalit," Olmert told the weekly cabinet meeting.



United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (L) shakes hands with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (R) after a press conference at the Palestinian Authority headquarters or Muqataa in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday.

Fire kills 10 at Moscow striptease club

AP, Moscow

Fire broke out in a Moscow striptease club early Sunday, killing 10 people, an Emergency Situations Ministry spokesman said.

The cause of the blaze had not been determined, but some witnesses said it broke out during a "fire show" that was part of the club's nightly entertainment, said Yevgeny Bobylev, a spokesman for the Moscow division of the Ministry.

The preliminary accounts indicated that a performer in the show inadvertently set his clothing on fire and that in turn ignited a nearby one-gallon container of flammable liquid, Bobylev said.

He said all the deaths were due to suffocation. About 150 people were evacuated, including four who were hospitalised.

The club, called 911, was located on the premises of the Lenkom theater, a well-known stage in downtown Moscow not far from Pushkin Square. The club's Website describes it as offering striptease and erotic entertainment.



PHOTO: AFP

Rescue workers search for victims in the debris of a collapsed house in the city of Wajima, in Ishikawa prefecture after a massive earthquake hit northern Japan yesterday. One woman was killed and dozens more injured when a 6.9-magnitude earthquake rocked Japan's main island of Honshu.

Japan quake leaves 1 dead, 170 injured

AP, Tokyo

A powerful, deadly earthquake struck Japan early yesterday, killing at least one person and injuring 170 others as it violently shook buildings and triggered a small tsunami that hit the coast, officials and media reports said.

The magnitude-6.9 quake struck at 9:42 a.m. local time off the north coast of Ishikawa prefecture (state), Japan's Meteorological Agency said, about 225 miles northwest of Tokyo. The agency issued a tsunami warning urging people near the sea to move to higher land.

A small tsunami measuring 6 inches hit shore about 40 minutes after the quake, the agency said. The warning was lifted about an hour later.

The quake toppled buildings, triggered landslides, cut power, interfered with phone service, broke water mains and snarled public transportation. At least one person was killed and 170 others were hurt along the country's Sea of Japan coast, media reports said.

"We are doing our best to rescue the victims," he said. "We are also doing our best to assess the extent of the damage."

The government will dispatch police and defence forces to the quake zone to assist in disaster relief, Shiozaki said.

Fear of aftershocks and more

landslides caused by the loosening of soil waterlogged by overnight rains continued to plague the quake zone.

Television footage of the quake showed buildings shaking violently for about 30 seconds. Other shots showed collapsed buildings and shops with shattered windows, streets cluttered with roof tiles and roads with cracked pavement.

Many of the injured people suffered burns or were hurt by falling objects and broken glass, media reports said.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhide Shiozaki confirmed the death as a 52-year-old woman. Public broadcaster NHK said she was crushed by a falling stone lantern.

"We are doing our best to rescue the victims," he said. "We are also doing our best to assess the extent of the damage."

The government will dispatch police and defence forces to the quake zone to assist in disaster relief, Shiozaki said.

Britain seeks access to sailors caught in Iran

REUTERS, Tehran

British diplomat in Tehran told Reuters.

"We have repeated the line asking for their release. We asked for details of where they are and asked for consular access," the diplomat said.

"The (Iranian Foreign Ministry) promised to look into these requests and dialogue is continuing," the diplomat added.

Iran's semi-official Fars news agency reported on Saturday that the 15 sailors and marines had been transferred to Tehran. But this has not been independently confirmed.

Iranian forces captured 15 British sailors and marines on Friday at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which marks the southern stretch of Iraq's border with Iran.

It has sparked a diplomatic crisis when tensions are already high with the West over Tehran's nuclear programme. The UN Security Council imposed new sanctions on Iran on Saturday.

Britain's Ambassador Geoffrey Adams met Iranian Foreign Ministry official Ebrahim Rahimpour to discuss the issue at London's request, a

return.

"It requires some very careful and intense diplomacy," Straw said.

Britain said two boatloads of Royal Navy sailors and marines had searched a merchant vessel on a UN approved mission in Iraqi waters when Iranian gunboats encircled and captured them.

An Iraqi fisherman who said he saw Iranian forces detain them, said on Saturday the ship British forces were searching was anchored in Iraqi waters.

The incident sent oil prices to a three-month high on Friday. It took place a day after Iran launched a week of naval war games along its coast, including the Gulf's northern reaches, which give access to the oil output of Iraq, Iran and Kuwait.

Ethnic violence endangers Nepal peace process: US

AFP, Kathmandu

which represents an ethnic group living along the border with India, and the Maoists threatened retaliation.

The United States condemned Wednesday's killings and called on the government to arrest and prosecute all the perpetrators, regardless of their political or ethnic affiliation.

"If unity and inclusiveness are not promoted, further bloodshed may result and Nepal's peace

N Korea threatens to scuttle nuke talks

AFP, Beijing

North Korea vowed yesterday to bolster its "self-defensive deterrence," warning a military exercise launched by South Korea and the United States could jeopardise nuclear disarmament talks.

The exercise had clouded the atmosphere of six-party talks on the North's nuclear weapons programmes, the North's state newspaper Minju Jonson said in a commentary.

"This may entail such serious consequences as escalating the tension between the DPRK (North Korea) and the US and scuttling the six-party talks for the settlement of the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, arranged with so much effort."

The warning came as the week-long RSOI (Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration) and Foal Eagle exercise began across South Korea Sunday. The allies say the exercise is purely defensive.

But North Korea has condemned Washington for carrying

out the exercise while negotiations are underway with Pyongyang as part of six-nation talks over the North's nuclear programmes.

"If the aggressors ignite a war on this land, the army and people of the DPRK will resolutely retaliate against them with merciless deadly blows," the Korean National Peace Committee said in a statement.

North Korea would bolster its "self-defensive deterrence" for defending its dignity and sovereignty, it said.

The North has used the words "self-defensive deterrence" when referring to atomic bombs since its nuclear test last October.

The exercise is "harmful to the settlement of the nuclear issue and peace of the Korean Peninsula and driving the situation to a phase of confrontation and war," it said.

The committee also warned the exercise would drive inter-Korean relations to collapse.

The exercise focuses on a mock battle aimed at preparing for the sudden arrival of US reinforcements, US officials said earlier. It also features anti-commando

operations and computer war games.

As part of the exercise, the USS Ronald Reagan, a cruiser and two destroyers have joined tens of thousands of US and South Korean soldiers.

Outside a sprawling US military compound in Seoul, riot police Sunday blocked a march by about 1,000 South Korean anti-war activists who chanted slogans.

"The exercise threatens peace on the Korean peninsula as it comes amid international efforts to denuclearise the peninsula following the February 13 six-party agreement," the protesters said in a statement.

The US has stationed tens of thousands of troops in the South since the Korean war began in June 1950 with an invasion by the North.

Currently some 29,500 US troops are stationed here to assist 680,000 South Korean forces facing up to North Korea's 1.1-million-strong military.

First political parties formed in Bhutan

AFP, Kathmandu

The remote Himalayan nation of Bhutan got its first two political parties ahead of elections next year to pave the way from monarchy to democracy, local media reported.

The formation of the parties comes days after the chief election official complained about lack of interest in the elections.

On Saturday, national daily newspaper Kuensel reported the creation of the People's Democratic Party and the Bhutan People United Party, without elaborating on their platforms.

Both parties are heavily stocked with retired government officials, businessmen and community leaders. The election commission has set July as the deadline for registration of parties for the 2008 polls.

"We expect at least three credible political parties to come forward," chief election commissioner Dusho Kunzang Wangdi said.

Landlocked Bhutan's transition to democracy began in 2001 when former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck handed

over the powers of daily government to a council of ministers.

In December, he abdicated the throne in favour of his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, to give the Oxford-educated royal more exposure to governance in the kingdom of around 600,000 people.

A 34-point draft constitution unveiled in 2004 has been sent to the Bhutanese people for their views ahead of a nationwide referendum on the document by late 2007.

The constitution will replace a royal decree of 1953 giving the monarch absolute power.

The election panel has planned a primary round of balloting in which the 400,000-strong electorate will vote for political parties of their choice.

The two parties with the highest number of votes will then field candidates for the general elections, the winners of which will go on to form a new National Assembly.

Thousands flee Lanka fighting

AFP, Colombo

Thousands of Tamil civilians were on the run in northern Sri Lanka yesterday as troops and Tiger rebels traded artillery fire across a de facto border, with both sides claiming heavy casualties.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said about 2,000 men, women and children fled their homes in the district of Mannar, where heavy fighting has raged since Thursday.

Unidentified gunmen shot dead five civilians -- three in the north and two in the east -- on Sunday afternoon, police said, adding the victims were villagers who had supported the ruling party government.

One government soldier was killed and three more wounded in Mannar district in the latest shelling, the defence ministry said Sunday. It said troops retaliated in kind and inflicted unspecified casualties on the guerrillas.

The ministry estimated that at least 49 Tiger rebels were killed in the

latest fighting. The military placed its own losses at 10 dead and 46 seriously wounded, with another 45 listed as minor casualties.

The LTTE said it lost 13 combatants and claimed to have killed 60 government troops. Both sides are known to overestimate losses suffered by the other.

Thousands of civilians living along the de facto border separating Tamil Tiger territory from the rest of the island fled to the safety of public buildings to avoid shelling by both sides, local officials said.

They said about 300 civilians had crossed the front lines Saturday and entered government-held areas, where they were provided with food by government troops.

The Tigers said the refugee crisis in Mannar had compounded problems for relief workers already grappling to feed nearly 300,000 internally displaced people in the island's embattled regions.



PHOTO: AFP

A Sri Lankan policeman (L) picks up a "dog tag" retrieved from the body of a suspected Tamil Tiger rebel and shows local female magistrate Sriyani Wijewickrema (C) at the hospital in the eastern town of Ampara Saturday following a clash between security forces and Tiger rebels.