



US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (L) shakes hands with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas in Amman yesterday on her latest shuttle diplomacy mission to raise Arab support for new efforts to revive the stalled Middle East peace process.

Arabs push ME peace plan

Rice shuttles between rivals

AFP, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice shuttled between Israeli and Palestinian leaders for a second day Monday as Arab states revived a five-year-old peace plan to positive noises from Israel.

As Arab foreign ministers gathered in Saudi Arabia endorsed their 2002 peace blueprint and called for contacts with all parties including the Jewish state, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said he was willing to join a meeting of Arab leaders.

A four-way meeting with Israel, Palestinians, Arab moderates and the Middle East peace Quartet -- the European Union, the United Nations, United States and Russia - has reportedly been at the centre of discussions between Rice and regional leaders during her tour.

"If such an invitation would come my way, I would look at it in a very

positive way," he told a joint press conference in Jerusalem with UN chief Ban Ki-Moon, who is also touring the region.

"Assuming I would get a visa, I would not hesitate to participate," he said.

Olmert also said Israel could look favourably on the Arab peace plan that he has previously spurned.

"If moderate Arab countries try to advance the process along the lines of the Saudi initiative I will look at it as a very positive development."

Rice met Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in Jordan, where she was seeking moderate Arab support for her peace efforts, before heading back to Jerusalem for fresh talks with Olmert.

A senior US official travelling with Rice said a meeting between Olmert and leaders of pro-Western Arab states Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates would be "a good idea" but added "it's a little premature."

The official said it remained uncertain whether countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which have no formal ties with the Jewish state, would agree to attend a summit with Israeli leaders.

In Amman, the Palestinian leader told Rice that Olmert needed to be ready to talk about the substance of the peace process if intensive talks were to resume.

"President Abbas told the US secretary of state that it is not enough to Israel to want to talk to us about humanitarian and security issues," chief negotiator Saeb Erakat told reporters.

But the Palestinian leader later expressed "optimism" over Rice's latest peace mission, her fourth in as many months.

"Things are moving forward," he said after talks with King Abdullah II who also met Rice.

King Abdullah in turn "expressed hope that Israel would react positively to the Arab peace initiative"

and "urged Israelis not to waste this historic opportunity."

Rice plans to present a "parallel" approach for advancing the deadlocked peace process at a press conference after her new talks with Olmert, US officials said.

The goal is to develop a replacement strategy for three-way diplomacy Rice launched last month by bringing together Abbas and Olmert.

US efforts to jump-start peace negotiations faltered after Abbas's secular Fatah party joined a power-sharing government led by the Islamic movement Hamas last month.

The United States and its international partners regard Hamas as a terrorist group and will meet only non-Islamist members of the new cabinet.

6 killed in gunbattle at Pakistani school

AP, Peshawar

Police challenged a group of suspected militants yesterday at a high school in northwestern Pakistan after hearing that they wanted to "motivate" students for holy war, sparking a gunbattle that left six people dead, police said.

Five militants and one police officer were killed in the shooting at the privately run Oxford Public School in Tank, a town about 60 miles from the Afghan border, said Javed Khan, a local police officer. It was unclear whether any students were hurt.

Khan said the militants told the administrators of the boys' school to assemble the students so the militants could address them.

"They wanted to speak with the boys and motivate them for jihad," Khan said by telephone from Tank.

Iran's military warns US against any attack

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards warned the United States against attacking the Islamic Republic, a news agency reported on Monday, two days after the United Nations imposed new sanctions on Iran.

International tension over Iran's disputed nuclear programme has risen further in recent days, sending oil and gold prices higher. The West suspects Iran is seeking to make atom bombs, a charge Tehran denies.

Iran said on Sunday it would limit cooperation with the UN's nuclear watchdog and vowed not to halt its atomic plans "even for one second"

after the UN Security Council voted to impose new arms and financial sanctions on Tehran.

The United States, leading efforts to isolate Iran over its nuclear ambitions, has said it prefers a diplomatic solution to the crisis but has not ruled out military options.

"If America starts a war against Iran, it won't be the one who finishes it," Morteza Safari, naval forces commander of the Revolutionary Guards, was quoted as saying by the ISNA news agency.

"Our people will not even allow one American soldier to enter our country," he said in the southwestern city of Shoush.

The Revolutionary Guards is the

ideologically-driven wing of Iran's armed forces, with a separate command structure from that of the regular military.

Naval Guards units on Friday seized 15 British navy personnel in the Gulf, sparking a diplomatic crisis.

Iran has said it was considering charging the sailors and marines, captured in the Shatt al-Arab waterway marking the southern stretch of its border with Iraq, for entering Iranian waters. Britain says they were detained inside Iraqi territory.

N Ireland rivals strike power-sharing deal

AFP, Belfast

Northern Ireland's rival party leaders Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams struck a landmark accord to share power Monday, albeit with a six-week delay, after their first-ever face-to-face talks in Belfast.

The pair met hours before a midnight (2300 GMT) deadline set by the Irish and British governments -- which still have to back the accord -- for a deal to restore self-rule in Northern Ireland following a five-year suspension.

"After a long and difficult time in our province, I believe that enormous opportunities lie ahead for our province," said Paisley, sitting only feet from Adams, who he has until now steadfastly refused to meet.

"Devolution has never been an end in itself but is about making a positive difference to people's lives," he said.

According to separate statements read out by the two leaders -- who did not shake hands for the cameras -- they agreed in principle to restore self-rule in Belfast on May 8 -- in six weeks' time, as proposed by Paisley at the weekend.

Adams said the accord "marks the beginning of a new era of politics on this island."

Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain had earlier stated that London would be willing to let the Monday deadline slip by a few weeks, if Paisley and Adams could strike a deal.



This undated picture released by Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday shows two unidentified Tiger rebels flash the "V" sign from their light aircraft somewhere in the rebel-held north of Wanni region. Tamil Tiger rebels carried out their first ever air raid on Monday, attacking a military base on a daring night-time mission that forced the temporary closure of Sri Lanka's key international airport.

US officials in contact with Iraqi insurgents

REUTERS, Baghdad

US and Iraqi officials are in contact with representatives of some Sunni Arab insurgent groups to build an alliance against al-Qaeda in Iraq, the outgoing US ambassador said on Monday.

"Embassy personnel and some military officials met (them) on several occasions and that process is continuing," envoy Zalmay Khalilzad told his final news conference in Baghdad.

Earlier the New York Times reported that Khalilzad himself had

met Sunni insurgent groups, which include nationalists and former Saddam Hussein sympathizers, last year.

Iraqi officials have had contact with insurgent groups in the past but these have never brought progress as the groups' main demand is for US troops to withdraw.

Khalilzad said he did not want to give too many details about who was involved in the talks given "al-Qaeda's efforts to derail such efforts."

al-Qaeda militants have launched a string of attacks on a group of tribes in Iraq's western

Anbar province that have formed an alliance against the headline Sunni Islamist group.

"We have had discussions with various groups. The Iraqi government has (too) ... as part of the national reconciliation programme. They have taken place, are continuing to take place," the envoy said.

"I did not say we talked to terrorists, we've talked to groups who have not participated in the political process who have ties to some insurgents who are reconcilable."

UK sailors may face charges, warns Iran

AP, London

Iran warned that 15 British sailors and marines could face charges for allegedly entering Iranian waters and rejected British requests to meet with the servicemen detained off the coast of Iraq.

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki threatened unspecified consequences for the Royal Navy crew in comments to reporters in New York on Sunday. He described the charge against them as "illegal entrance into Iranian waters."

"In terms of legal issues, it's under investigation," Mottaki said.

The capture and detention of the British service personnel increased

tensions between Iran and the West that already were high over Tehran's nuclear program and allegations that Iran is interfering with the US-led war in Iraq.

The UN Security Council agreed Saturday to tougher sanctions against Iran for its refusal to meet UN demands that it halt uranium enrichment. Many in the West fear the country's civilian nuclear research is cover for a weapons program, a claim Iran denies.

Britain and the United States have said the sailors and marines were intercepted Friday just after they completed a search of a civilian vessel in the Iraqi part of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, where the border with Iran has historically been disputed.

Afghan army sweep kills 99 Taliban in 4 days

AFP, Kabul

Nato warplanes called in by the Afghan army bombed and killed 19 militants in southern Afghanistan, taking the toll from a four-day operation to 99, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The 19 were killed in the southern province of Helmand on Sunday, it said in a statement.

The Afghan army launched the sweep of the Gereshek area of the province on Thursday, the second day of the Afghan new year.

Operation Nawrozi (New Year) is the first large operation launched by Afghan forces with Nato air support but not ground troops.

The fiercest clashes were on Thursday and left 69 militants and seven policemen dead, Afghan officials said.

The ministry said nine suspected militants were also arrested in the Gereshek area Sunday, two of them carrying the bodies of their dead comrades.

The forces also seized light weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and land mines.

Helmand has seen some of the biggest attacks on militants this year, with officials admitting that parts of the province are in the control of militants allied with traffickers of Afghanistan's world-topping opium crop.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) launched a separate operation in the province three weeks ago called Achilles. It says "several Taliban extremists" have been killed but will not give numbers.

Pakistan hails tribal strategy after battles

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan said yesterday that the taking-up of arms by local tribesmen against foreign militants along the Afghan border was the result of a "successful strategy" that includes controversial peace deals.

Uzbek and Chechen insurgents fought four days of battles with Taliban-sympathising local tribes last week in the South Waziristan tribal zone, leaving up to 160 people dead, according to officials.

Pakistan signed peace deals with local pro-Taliban tribes in South Waziristan in 2005 and North

Waziristan in 2006, prompting concerns from Nato, US and Afghan officials and claims that attacks have since risen across the border.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam said last week's clashes, the first time tribesmen have tried to drive out foreigners, "shows the success of the strategy that government of Pakistan has adopted."

"We have seen that in the last few days, the local tribals have taken on the foreigners who are coming from across the border and creating problems for Pakistan, creating problems for the people of the area," she said.

SACKING OF TOP JUDGE 1,000 arrests fail to halt Pak protests

AFP, Islamabad

Thousands of opposition party supporters Monday protested against President Pervez Musharraf's removal of Pakistan's top judge, despite the arrest of about 1,000 people in a police crackdown. Military ruler Musharraf is facing perhaps the most damaging political crisis of his eight years in power since the suspension of chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on March 9.

Monday's protests were the first to be organised by an alliance of the Pakistan People's Party of former

prime minister Benazir Bhutto and a faction of the Pakistan Muslim League party of Nawaz Sharif, another former premier.

About 5,000 protesters chanting "Musharraf, Dog" and other slogans gathered amid tight security near the high court in the eastern city of Lahore, witnesses said. Some burned an effigy of the president.

"This massive response to the opposition's protest call is the beginning of a movement against President Musharraf and his government," said Naheed Khan, a female legislator from Bhutto's party.

India, US in crucial talks on nuke deal

AFP, New Delhi

India and the United States held crucial talks here yesterday to settle the details of an agreement reached last year that paves the way for sales of civilian nuclear technology to New Delhi.

The discussions are aimed at hammering out the finer details of a broader pact on nuclear cooperation struck in July 2006 and "iron out key differences," said an Indian official, who did not want to be named.

A spokesman for the United States' embassy in New Delhi said the talks, involving delicate issues

such as so-called dual use technology, which can be used for civil and military aims, would continue through the week.

"They had an initial meeting yesterday (Sunday) and are continuing talks today. Both sides are hoping to make progress on key issues," he said.

The US team is led by Richard Stratford, director of the office of Nuclear Energy, Safety and Security in the US State Department, while the Indian side is headed by senior foreign ministry officials S. Jayashankar and Gayatri Kumar.

US-Pak alliance under scrutiny as Musharraf faces crisis

AFP, Washington

The US strategic partnership with its key "war on terror" ally Pakistan has come under growing scrutiny in Washington as President Pervez Musharraf reels from his worst crisis since grabbing power eight years ago.

Concerns that Musharraf has not been doing enough to flush out extremist Taliban militia were compounded this month by his removal of a top judge that appeared to deal a blow to hopes of democratic progress in the South Asian state.

While it is not clear whether the judicial crisis will snowball, it has "shaken the aura of invincibility that Musharraf has enjoyed until now," the Washington-based Centre of Strategic and Intelligence Studies said in a report.

The threat to Musharraf's grip on power has rekindled fears in Washington whether a strategic relationship anchored in effect by

one man in Pakistan is sustainable in the long run.

"The US strategic partnership with Pakistan is in a troubled state," said Marvin Weinbaum, a former US State Department expert on Pakistan.

"It rests too heavily on the political survival of one man and a military rule facing formidable domestic challenges and declining legitimacy," he said.

Washington's preoccupation with counterterrorism since the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States has in effect given Musharraf "a pass on satisfying us on the issues of democracy, nuclear proliferation and extremism," Weinbaum said.

President George W. Bush's administration has ruled out any immediate threat of Musharraf being toppled, but the Democratic-controlled US Congress is not taking chances.



A Pakistani police officer tries to stop opposition party activists in front of giant posters of President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz during a protest rally in Rawalpindi yesterday. Thousands of opposition party supporters protested against Musharraf removal of Pakistan's top judge, despite the arrest of about 1,000 people in a police crackdown.