



PHOTO: AFP

Right-wing Jewish settler gather early yesterday on the grounds of the former Jewish settlement of Homesh, in the Israeli occupied Palestinian West Bank, close to the northern city of Nablus to reoccupy it.

# Arabs set for peace offensive at summit

Israeli, Palestinian leaders to meet regularly

AFP, AP, Riyadh/ Jerusalem

Arab leaders gathered in Saudi Arabia yesterday for a summit which will formally relaunch a long dormant Arab plan for Middle East peace and actively seek negotiations with Israel.

The annual meeting of heads of state, which kicks off on Wednesday, comes after US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appealed to Arab governments to "begin reaching out to Israel" by building on the peace blueprint first adopted at a summit in Beirut in 2002.

Arab foreign ministers agreed to revive the plan in preparatory talks on Monday. The blueprint offers Israel full normalisation of relations if it withdraws from all lands it occu-

pled in 1967, and permits the creation of a Palestinian state and the return of Palestinian refugees.

Saudi Arabia, a US ally and author of the blueprint, lobbied fellow Arab states to endorse the plan's revival, leaning particularly on the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which now leads a government of national unity with the Fatah party of president Mahmud Abbas.

Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniya and Abbas flew into Riyadh aboard the same plane in a show of unity.

Exiled Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal also reportedly assured Saudi Arabia that the group, which does not recognise Israel, will back whatever consensus the Arab summit reaches on the peace plan.

Palestinian foreign minister Ziad Abu Amr, an independent in the new unity cabinet who is seen as an acceptable interlocutor by the West, told AFP that the international community should "isolate Israel" if it spurns the Arab peace offer.

Earlier Israeli and Palestinian leaders have agreed to meet every two weeks to discuss day-to-day issues, but also a "political horizon," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced Tuesday after shuttling between the two sides for three days.

Rice also said her envoy will try to set benchmarks for implementing a ceasefire, including the halting of rocket fire from Gaza, and for improving the flow of Palestinian travellers and goods through Israeli crossings.

# Iran trashes conditional nuclear talks offer

AFP, AP, Tehran/ Vienna

Iran rejected yesterday UN Security Council conditions that it suspend uranium enrichment in return for talks on its controversial nuclear programme.

"If suspending uranium enrichment is a prior condition for negotiations, it is impossible to respond positively to this," Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Mostafavi said in remarks reported by the ISNA student news agency.

The international community has demanded that Iran suspend enrichment, which it fears could be used to make nuclear weapons. Tehran rejects the demand, insisting its nuclear programme is for peaceful energy purposes.

On Saturday the Security Council unanimously approved further sanctions against Iran for persistently refusing to stop enriching uranium.

The resolution, agreed after days of behind-the-scenes bargaining, blocks all Iranian arms exports and freezes the overseas assets of 28 additional officials and institutions linked to Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

It also restricts financial aid or loans to Tehran, and sets a fresh 60-day deadline for Iran to comply with UN demands or face "further appropriate measures."

"We are continuing our peaceful nuclear activities under the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the International Atomic Energy

Agency, and in this context we are ready for talks with the agency and Security Council members," Mostafavi said. After the resolution was approved, the five permanent members of the Security Council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany issued a statement saying the crisis should be solved through negotiations.

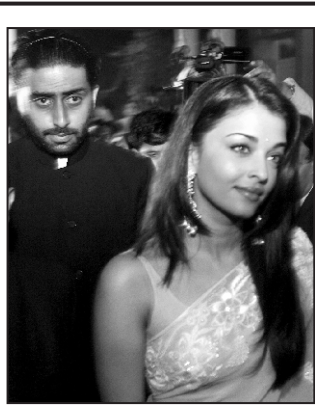
European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana was then tasked with contacting Iran's lead nuclear negotiator, Ali Larjani, to discuss how such talks might resume.

A top European envoy on Monday renewed an offer from six world powers to talk with Tehran over its nuclear ambitions, and a senior Iranian negotiator agreed to

stay in contact in an effort to find common ground.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana's telephone conversation with Ali Larjani, Tehran's top nuclear negotiator, was the first exchange between the representatives of Iran and the international community since the UN Security Council toughened its anti-Iran sanctions because of the Islamic republic's refusal to freeze uranium enrichment.

Solana spokeswoman Cristina Gallach emphasised it was not a negotiating session but more a message to the Iranian side that the international community was interested in "renewing ... talks and solving in a negotiated matter" differences separating the sides.



## Ash to wed Abhishek on April 20

AFP, Mumbai

Former Miss World Aishwarya Rai will marry her actor boyfriend Abhishek Bachchan next month in one of the most high-profile Indian weddings of the year, reports said yesterday.

The ceremony will be held on April 20 at the Bachchan residence in Mumbai, where the country's Hindi-language film industry is based, the Times of India reported on its front page.

Calls to Rai's media manager and the Bachchan household for comment went unanswered.

"The wedding will be a small, private affair with only close family and friends in attendance, and it will be held at the Bachchans' residence," the Press Trust of India quoted an unnamed source as saying.

Rai, a leading Bollywood actress, and Bachchan, son of legendary screen icon Amitabh Bachchan, got engaged on January 14, capping months of media speculation about their relationship.

The couple have been dubbed "Abhiash," a melding of their two names in the fashion of "Brangelina" for Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie.

Rai is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful women in the world and Bachchan, who is one of Bollywood's leading men, was voted the sexiest Asian man by a British newspaper last year.

# Myanmar vows to crush opponents

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar put on a show of might and defiance at its annual military parade Tuesday, with junta chief Than Shwe displaying few signs of his reported ill health in his new capital city.

Some 15,000 troops took to the echoing parade ground of the military-ruled nation's newly built capital Naypyidaw for Armed Forces Day, marching in the shadow of statues of old Burmese kings and flags bearing army crests.

Senior General Than Shwe, who stood in the morning sun without faltering for about one hour, delivered a speech rebuking countries such as the United States, which have taken the junta to task over human rights and democratic reform.

Judging from lessons of the history, it is certain that powerful

countries wishing to impose their influence on our nation will make any attempt in various ways to undermine national unity," he said.

He also vowed to "crush, hand-in-hand with the entire people, every danger of internal and external destructive elements obstructing the stability and development of the state."

After his 10-minute speech, a medal-bedecked Than Shwe inspected the troops, standing upright out of the sun roof of his stretch Mercedes.

The parade began as the sun rose over Naypyidaw, a city the military secretly carved out of the jungles of central Myanmar.

The arena had an almost festive atmosphere, with smiling generals keen to show off the new capital to foreign media, allowed to travel here for the first time.

# US nets 2 leaders of Iraqi car bomb cell

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

US forces captured two leaders of a major car bomb cell responsible for attacks that killed around 900 Iraqis, mostly in the Shia district of Sadr City in Baghdad, the US military said yesterday.

It said in two separate statements that the two men were caught during operations in Adhamiya, a mainly Sunni Arab area in northern Baghdad, on March 21.

"It is estimated that since November, the car bombs from this cell have killed approximately 900 innocent Iraqi citizens," one of the statements said.

It said another 1,950 had been wounded.

US and Iraqi forces are engaged in a major security crackdown in Baghdad aimed at stopping sectarian violence that has been killing

hundreds of people a week in recent months.

American commanders have said the crackdown has succeeded in substantially reducing the number of people killed by sectarian death squads, but car bombs and other bombings have remained a problem and US forces have stepped up efforts to disrupt insurgent cells responsible for them.

US military spokesman Major Steven Lamb said the two men were part of the same cell but he had no information on whether they were linked to al-Qaeda or another insurgent group.

The Iraqi government and American commanders say al-Qaeda and other Sunni Arab insurgent groups are responsible for most of the major car bomb attacks in Baghdad.

# Japan sends defence mission to Nepal

AFP, Tokyo

Japan yesterday deployed a small defence team to Nepal to monitor the country's ceasefire, the first mission since officially pacifist Tokyo created a full-fledged defence ministry.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet decided at a meeting to dispatch six personnel to Nepal to observe arms control for a year, a defence ministry official said.

The six -- unarmed military personnel -- will help monitor weapons and soldiers as part of the UN mission observing the accord that ended the Himalayan kingdom's bloody decade-long Maoist insurgency.

Japan, which was forced by the United States to renounce its right to armed forces after World War II, has been slowly expanding its military operations overseas.

In January, Japan created a full-fledged defence ministry for the first time since 1945, upgrading the former Defence Agency which was lower in rank than cabinet-level ministries.

With the change, Abe's conservative government also listed overseas peacekeeping activities as a mission for Japan's military, which are known as the Self-Defence Forces.

# LTTE air force a threat to S Asia: Rajapakse

AFP, Colombo

The emergence of the Tamil Tigers as the world's first guerrilla outfit with its own planes could be a threat to South Asian security, Sri Lanka's president said yesterday.

The rebels on Monday successfully flew over the island's main military airbase and escaped unscathed after dropping several bombs.

"The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) using combat aircraft is not only a problem for us. It is a threat to other nations too," President Mahinda Rajapakse was quoted as saying by his office.

Rajapakse has also ordered an investigation into the major security lapses that allowed the attack -- which has seriously embarrassed the island's defence establishment -- to take place even though the planes were spotted on radar.

"Ours is not the only country facing a terrorist threat. At a time when India, Indonesia and several other countries face this problem, it is significant that the LTTE has acquired an air capability," the president said.

Military analysts say the Tigers, who are known to possess at least two Czech-built Zlin-143 single-engine four-seater aircraft and an airfield, could be the world's first rebel outfit to use its own planes in a combat role.

In May last year, Sri Lanka's airforce bombed the rebel airfield at Irinamadu, in the rebel-held Wanni region. The Tigers had also denied

access to the area to Scandinavian truce monitors.

Despite a February 2002 truce arranged by peace broker Norway, both the Tigers and government forces have been locked in a new wave of fighting since December 2005.

In India, security experts and officials agreed that the LTTE's action was a cause for concern, but were divided over a strategy to tackle the rebels.

"Whatever happens in the neighbourhood will affect India, directly or indirectly, sooner or later," D.R. Karthikeyan, a top security expert who probed the LTTE's 1991 assassination of former premier Rajiv Gandhi, told Times Now TV network.

"We have to impress upon the Sri Lankan government that peace is possible only when there is justice," he added, repeating international calls for a compromise in the long-running war.

Indian opposition leader Subramoniam Swamy, an outspoken critic of the Tigers, said New Delhi had to wake up to the LTTE's new military reach.

"The LTTE is not only operational in Sri Lanka: it has links with all terrorist groups in India," Swamy told reporters.

"I have maintained that we all in the region must have clarity, and that will come if we say the LTTE is part of the problem and not part of the solution," he said, pushing for a tougher Indian line against the rebels.



PHOTO: AFP

A Sri Lankan air force soldier checks the interior of a vehicle at a checkpoint outside Air Force Headquarters in Colombo yesterday. The emergence of the Tamil Tigers as the world's first guerrilla outfit with its own planes could be a threat to South Asian security, Sri Lanka's president said.