

US pledges to end ban on Palestinian aid

UN urges Israel to re-open Gaza crossings

AP, AFP, Ramallah/Jerusalem

The United States strengthened its offer of support for President Mahmoud Abbas yesterday, telling him an international aid embargo against the Palestinians would end as soon as he forms a new government without Hamas, aides to Abbas said.

Hundreds of Fatah gunmen stormed Hamas-controlled institutions across the West Bank, seeking revenge for the Islamic group's takeover of the Gaza Strip, while Hamas forces blew up the home of a prominent Fatah family and deployed at strategic locations to solidify their control of Gaza.

The battles between the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and the Fatah-controlled West Bank have effectively turned the areas into separate political entities, endangering the Palestinian dream of forming an

independent state in the two territories.

The aides to Abbas, speaking on condition of anonymity because the talks were closed, said the US consul general in Jerusalem, Jacob Walles, told Abbas that the US supports his recent steps and that the foreign aid embargo on the Palestinian government would be lifted the moment the new government is formed.

The international community had imposed the boycott after Hamas came to power in March 2006. The boycott continued even after Abbas' Fatah joined Hamas in a more moderate coalition.

Meanwhile, the United Nations urged Israel to re-open crossings into Gaza yesterday to avoid a humanitarian crisis in the impoverished territory sealed off from the world after the takeover by Hamas.

"The borders need to be open, we cannot collectively punish 1.5 million people in the Gaza Strip. They are already living in miserable conditions," John Ging, head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), told AFP.

Israel closed all of its border crossing points with Gaza after the Islamist Hamas, whose charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state, routed Palestinian Authority security services in the impoverished territory.

The sealed crossings include the Rafah terminal on the border with Egypt -- Gaza's only window to the outside world that bypasses Israel.

The closures have raised alarm about the impact on Gaza, a tiny densely-populated territory that receives the vast majority of its food, and all its fuel and medical supplies via Israel.

"The crossings remaining closed is not an option. The Gaza Strip is entirely dependent of the importation of not just aid, but also commercial trade," Ging said, adding that 80 percent of Gaza's population depended on foreign aid.

Israeli Infrastructure Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer said on Saturday that Israel "must allow the humanitarian aid... I don't think the Gaza Strip will survive from a humanitarian perspective for more than a month if Israel does not open the lid."

He said Israel would continue to supply electricity and water to the Gaza Strip despite the crisis, but that the crossings would remain closed for the time being.

"We will continue to supply the bare minimum (to Gaza) and help them with electricity," Ben Eliezer told public radio.



Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Khan (R) listens to Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (2R) who is talking with US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte (2L) while Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher (L) looks on during the meeting at The Prime Minister's house in Islamabad yesterday.

Suicide car bomber kills 4 in Kabul

AP, Kabul

A suicide car bomber attacked a Nato convoy in the capital Saturday and killed four civilians, Afghan officials said, a day after 10 were killed when another suicide car bomber targeted a Nato convoy in southern Afghanistan.

The attack in western Kabul on Saturday also wounded four civilians and a foreigner, said Gen. Ali Shah Paktiwal.

Zabiullah Mujahid, who claims to speak for the Taliban, claimed the group's responsibility for the blast.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force said it was looking into the report but had no immediate information.

"We were busy with our work making window frames. I heard a very strong sound, and when I turned around I saw a big fire in the street," said Mohammed Noor, 22, who owns a nearby carpentry shop. He said the blast fired bits of metal shorn from the attacker's car into his shop front.

US signals support for Musharraf

AP, Islamabad

Two senior US diplomats and a top military official offered signs of support for President Gen Pervez Musharraf yesterday, highlighting his government's fight against terrorism and remaining silent about Pakistan's growing domestic political crisis.

Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher met with Musharraf near the capital, an official at the president's office said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to media.

Adm. William Fallon, commander of US Central Command, met separately with Musharraf and praised "the excellent cooperation of the Pakistan armed forces with regard to operations against international terrorism," according to a Pakistan army statement.

Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup and became a key US ally against terrorism after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, plans to seek a new five-year term as president this fall.

But his plans are threatened by a growing protest movement at home triggered by his March 9 suspension of the chief justice and efforts to clamp down on the media.

Critics are calling for him to give up his military post and seek another presidential term only after year-end parliamentary elections, in which opposition parties hope to make gains. Pakistan's president is chosen by lawmakers, rather than in a direct vote.

The meetings came after

Boucher on Friday urged Musharraf to ensure upcoming elections are fair and told Pakistani television that the United States believes "it's time for Pakistan to move back to democratic elections and civilian rule."

However, Boucher said "the issue of a free and fair election is much more fundamental" than how Musharraf deals with the contentious issue of his occupying both the presidency and the powerful army leadership.

Remarks by some US officials have suggested that Washington is pressing Musharraf harder for democratic change. However, others including President Bush, have made clear that securing Pakistan's cooperation against al-Qaeda and the Taliban is a more pressing concern.

Space station's computers up and running

AP, Houston

Newly revived computers aboard the international space station could resume providing crucial functions including the outpost's ability to orient itself and produce oxygen on Saturday if they performed well overnight.

"If everything looks well, then I would expect we would slowly begin to activate the systems on board, including the attitude control systems," said Mike Suffredini, space station programme manager.

Treasure hunt strikes gold

AP, Tatoi

Archaeologists searching the former royal estate outside Athens have discovered a treasure trove of art and antiquities, the fate of which had been unknown since ex-king Constantine fled Greece four decades ago.

More than 200 ancient items and 300 paintings were found inside sealed containers in a stable and in the basement of the main residence at Tatoi, 25 kilometres (15 miles) northwest of the Greek capital, culture ministry officials said during a media tour of the site on Tuesday.

"It's a real treasure hunt, we are in the process of removing these marvellous items from boxes stacked in disorderly heaps," restoration supervisor Nikos Minos told AFP.

US admin debates new Iran strategy

AP, Washington

An internal debate is underway in the administration of US President George W Bush on whether the current diplomatic approach toward Iran has any hope of halting the country's nuclear programme, The New York Times reported on its website Friday.

Citing unnamed senior administration officials, the newspaper said the debate has pitted Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her deputies against the few remaining hawks inside the administration,

especially those in the office of Vice President Richard Cheney.

Cheney's aides are pressing for greater consideration of military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, the report said.

One year ago, Rice spoke in favour of the United States joining forces with Europe, Russia and China to press Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment activities.

But since then, Iran has installed more than a thousand centrifuges to enrich uranium, and the International Atomic Energy Agency predicted that 8,000 or so could be

spinning by the end of the year.

Those numbers are at the core of the debate over whether Bush should warn Iran's leaders that he will not allow them to get beyond some yet-undefined milestones, leaving the implication that a military strike on the country's facilities is still an option, the paper said.

Friends and associates of Rice say she has increasingly moved toward the European position that the diplomatic path she has laid out is the only real option for Bush, The Times said.

Arab states seek end to Palestinian crisis

AFP, Cairo

Arab foreign ministers urged both Hamas and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to step back from the brink amid dire warnings about the consequences of Hamas's seizure of the Gaza Strip.

Arab states, which had tried to smooth differences between Hamas and Abbas' Fatah movement, also decided at emergency talks which ended Saturday to set up a commission to examine the situation in the Palestinian territories.

The ministers condemned the "criminal acts" in the Gaza Strip in a statement issued after their meeting and called for a "return to the situation before the incidents."

They stressed "the need to respect the legitimacy of the Palestinian nation headed by Mahmud Abbas and respect elected institutions, including the Legislative Council," where Hamas has a majority.

Arab ministers had been due to meet on Saturday at the request of Lebanon to discuss the latest killing of an anti-Syrian politician in that country.

But they brought their meeting forward after Abbas dissolved a three-month-old power-sharing government on Thursday and the Islamists of Hamas seized control of Gaza, leaving Abbas and his Fatah movement based in the occupied West Bank.

The Arab ministers appointed a commission, which includes key regional power players Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to study the latest developments in the Palestinian territories, which will "submit a report on the situation in less than a month."

Egyptian and Saudi leaders have been involved in trying to smooth differences between Fatah and the Islamist Hamas, which rose to power in 2006 elections.

The commission also includes

Qatar, Jordan, Tunisia and Arab League Secretary General Amr Mousa.

Arab League ambassadors had appealed earlier to both Hamas and Fatah to return to Egyptian-sponsored reconciliation talks, warning that the failure of such talks could have "deeply negative consequences."

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, whose country brokered a Palestinian unity government deal in the holy city of Mecca in February, said the infighting was "realising Israel's dream."

"Through their fighting, our Palestinian brothers have realised Israel's dream of setting alight the fire of discord and war between Palestinians," he told the meeting's opening session.

"Today, the Palestinians are banging in the last nail in the coffin of the Palestinian cause," he said, appealing for dialogue.

UN declares Gandhi's birthday as day of non-violence

AFP, New Delhi

The United Nations will observe the birth anniversary of Indian icon Mahatma Gandhi as the International Day of Non-Violence every year, it said in a statement yesterday.

The UN called upon all member nations and individuals to commemorate October 2 in "an appropriate manner and to disseminate the message of non-violence."

The resolution was introduced by India.

Gandhi's descendants hailed the move, but said the gesture should not only be symbolic. "It's welcome but not enough. If they have declared it as non-violence day, they should ensure that it is observed as one among member countries," said the leader's great grandson Tushar Gandhi.

NEW PALESTINIAN PM US-educated favourite of the West

AFP, Ramallah

Salam Fayyad, named the new Palestinian prime minister and due to unveil his cabinet within 24 hours, is a US-educated pragmatist widely respected in the West for his efforts to clamp down on corruption.

Fayyad said that he would announce the make-up of his new cabinet by noon (0900 GMT) on Sunday, to replace the Hamas-led unity government that president Mahmud Abbas fired after the Islamists' takeover of the Gaza Strip.

A political independent, the 55-year-old is a technocrat and former official at the International Monetary Fund and World Bank who won widespread praise for his efforts to bring greater transparency to murky Palestinian finances.

The bespectacled, immaculately-dressed Fayyad served as finance minister from 2002-2005 and then again in the short-lived Palestinian unity government formed in March, which Abbas sacked late on Thursday amid the Gaza violence.

He is a fluent English speaker who easily quotes Thomas Jefferson, the main author of the American Declaration of Independence, and passionately believes in the principles of transparency and accountability.

An articulate advocate of Palestinian rights and hopes, he has won praise from unlikely quarters



Salam Fayyad

who rarely agree on anything.

A spokesman for former hardliner Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon once said: "Everything that Fayyad is trying to do is well appreciated and is the right thing."

The liberal Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz dubbed him "everyone's favourite Palestinian."

"A professional and dedicated person" who combines "a great commitment to the Palestinian people with an integrity and a professionalism that is much needed," was how Fayyad was introduced before a speech at Washington's respected Brookings Institution think-tank in April.

"I am still concerned about some of the activities of the YCL. My hope

Carter calls on US to talk with Nepali Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

is that they will be corrected," Carter told reporters at a hotel in the capital.

"I have expressed my concern to him (Prachanda) and he has assured me he will do whatever possible to correct the problem," Carter said.

The former president's Carter Centre has been invited to provide election monitors in crucial polls planned for November.

The vote will elect a body that will rewrite Nepal's constitution and decide the future of the sidelined monarchy.

The US embassy in Kathmandu have been at pains to emphasise that Carter is visiting as a private US citizen.

Meanwhile, Nepal was urged on Friday to investigate "thousands" of disappearances during the 10-year Maoist rebellion.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the International Commission of Jurists said the government should act on a Supreme Court order to set up an inquiry.

"Nepal's new government has promised to find the truth and ensure justice for disappearances, but has been slow to make good on these pledges," HRW Asia director Brad Adams said in a statement.