

Abbas trashes talks with Hamas 'terrorists'

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas delivered a withering attack on Hamas Wednesday in his first public speech since the Islamists' takeover of Gaza and ruled out any dialogue.

Abbas accused Hamas of carrying out killings against his security forces "unprecedented" in Palestinian history and plotting its takeover at the behest of foreign powers.

He said the Islamists had given Israel an "excuse to punish an entire people" and even accused the group with which he uneasily shared power for 15 months of having plotted to kill him.

"It was a premeditated plan agreed between Hamas leaders in Gaza and abroad, with foreign

elements from the region," he said of the Islamists' seizure of control in the territory last Friday after a week of ferocious fighting.

"No dialogue with putschists, murderers and terrorists," he thundered in an address to a meeting of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, of which he is chairman but of which Hamas is not a member.

Abbas strongly defended his decision to dismiss the Hamas-led national unity government last Thursday and swear in an emergency cabinet at the weekend that Hamas has dismissed as an illegitimate lackey of Israel and the United States.

"Our main objective is to prevent the chaos from spreading to the West Bank," he said, adding that the new government of technocrats led by US-educated prime minister

Salam Fayyad was the "clear answer to the coup."

Israel has seized on the formation of the new government in the West Bank -- the first without Hamas representation since the Islamists routed Abbas's secular Fatah faction in parliamentary elections early last year -- as an historic opportunity to relaunch the peace process.

Israeli Foreign Tzipi Livni telephoned Fayyad Wednesday to open dialogue with his government after the 15-month hiatus while the Islamists of Hamas -- blacklisted as a terror group by Israel and the West -- were in power.

The European Union, which like the United States, said it would resume direct aid to the Palestinian Authority, said Wednesday it was making its first transfer of 22 million euros (29.5 million dollars).

Abbas called for an international conference to be convened to oversee the relaunch of the moribund peace process, like the Madrid conference of 1991 that helped pave the way for the secret talks that led to the 1993 Oslo accords.

"We call for negotiations to resume ... and in the framework an international conference the details of which we will agree" with the Israelis, he said.

A meeting of the top diplomats of the Middle East peace Quartet -- US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, UN chief Ban Ki-moon and EU envoy Javier Solana - set for June 26-27 in Egypt was reportedly called off because of the crisis stemming from Hamas' bloody takeover of Gaza.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani policeman fire teargas shells towards protestors during a protest against regular power cuts in Karachi on Wednesday night. Pakistan's worst electricity shortage in memory has sent rioters onto the streets of several cities and poses a fresh headache for embattled President Pervez Musharraf.

Riots in Pakistan over power outage

AFP, Karachi

Hundreds of people protesting against power cuts ransacked a KFC outlet and two banks in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi, police said yesterday.

Police fired tear gas to disperse the mob late Wednesday and security remained tight across the sprawling port city, whose 12 million inhabitants are experiencing the worst electricity shortage in memory.

"The situation really went bad after the attack on KFC and on public and private vehicles. Security has now been tightened and forces have been deployed at sensitive places," city police chief Azhar Farooqi told AFP.

He said more than a dozen people had been arrested.

The protesters began by hurling stones and using burning tyres to block the main road leading to the airport in eastern Karachi, resulting in a massive traffic jam, witnesses said.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of Jammu and Kashmir People's Freedom League burn effigies of British author Salman Rushdie during a protest in Srinagar yesterday.

Now Lanka can shoot down rebel jet

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military now has the capacity to shoot down Tamil Tiger light airplanes which have bombed four targets on the island this year, the government said Wednesday.

The enhanced capability means the island's only international airport will soon reopen for night flights after its closure earlier this year as a precaution over the attacks, a government spokesman said.

"The night time curfew at the airport will end from July 1," Keheliya Rambukwella told reporters.

"The air force has assured us that they received material to detect and identify Tiger planes," he said.

Military officials said the decision came after better radar was installed to track low-flying aircraft belonging to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The airport shut for night flights in May.

Kasuri rules out imposition of martial law in Pakistan

PTI, AFP, Washington

Notwithstanding the unabated protests against the suspension of the Chief Justice, Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid M Kasuri has ruled out imposition of martial law in the country while conceding that the Pervez Musharraf regime had "underestimated" the public reaction.

"...I hope we will never resort to martial law. Martial law is unconstitutional. So when he (Musharraf) has repeatedly said he will work within the confines of the Constitution, I have no reason to doubt that," he said.

When asked about the recent protests over the sacking of Chief Justice Iftikhar M Chaudhry and if indeed it was a mistake on the part of the government, Kasuri said that "...the government has put up a case which it finds pretty strong, but that's not the issue. The issue is public reaction... probably the government had underestimated the public

reaction, because the government thought it was acting according to the Constitution."

In an interview with PBS' News Hour, he indicated that Musharraf will give up his military post by the end of the year.

"On the issue of the uniform that you asked me, the Constitution allows the president to wear his uniform until the end of 2007. And he has said on many occasions that he will abide by the constitution. Any more concrete answer has to be asked of the president," Kasuri said.

The Minister said the US had "full faith" in Musharraf's assertion that he will lead the country to democracy.

"They (US) have full faith in the leadership of President Musharraf. And they've told me repeatedly that they believe when the president says that he is the man who's leading to a transition to civil democracy.

Meanwhile, the US ambassador-designate to Pakistan said

Wednesday she was confident the Islamabad government would accept the Supreme Court's eventual verdict on an appeal by the ousted chief justice.

President George W Bush's nominee for the post, Anne Woods Patterson, also said it was unlikely that Pakistan would call a state of emergency as the crisis played out.

Patterson was asked by Senator John Kerry during her Senate confirmation hearing if she was confident Pakistan's courts could resolve the crisis over the March 9 ouster of chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

"Yes, we are confident, and confident that the government will stand by the decision," Patterson said, referring to Supreme Court hearings on the case.



Prince William turns 25, entitled to share of Diana's wealth

AFP, London

Britain's Prince William turned 25 yesterday and became entitled to part of the multi-million pound inheritance left to him by his late mother, princess Diana.

The second in line to the throne is now allowed access to the income accrued on the 6.5 million pounds (9.67 million euros, 12.94 million dollars) he was left in his mother's will after she died 10 years ago in a Paris car crash.

Royal officials said they do not discuss the young prince's financial arrangements, amid media speculation that he could now have access to between 250,000 pounds and 350,000 pounds per year.

But unnamed sources quoted by Britain's Press Association (PA) news agency said the future king will not touch Diana's cash for now.

"Nothing will change on his birthday," another source told the Daily Telegraph newspaper on Tuesday.

Corruption charges against Thaksin

AP, Bangkok

Thai prosecutors filed corruption charges against ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the Supreme Court yesterday, in the first formal charges lodged against the exiled former premier.

Thaksin, who has lived in exile overseas since his government was toppled in a military coup last September, was named along with his wife, Pojarnam, in a case involving allegations of wrongdoing in a

land deal.

The attorney general's office also recommended that officials seize the 13-acre plot of land in central Bangkok, valued at \$23.7 million.

The Supreme Court said they would decide on July 10 if they will hear the case.

They were the first formal criminal charges against Thaksin since he was accused of corruption and ousted by military leaders in a bloodless coup on Sept 19.

10 die in Russian retirement home fire

AFP, Moscow

Ten people were killed yesterday in a suspected arson attack on a retirement home in the Omsk region in Siberia, Russian news agencies reported, citing officials.

Four more people were hospitalised and 303 others were evacuated unhurt during the night from the building in the village of Yekaterininskoye, Interfax newsagency said.

Local prosecutors have opened a criminal inquiry and are treating the fire as aggravated arson, the local prosecutor's press office was quoted by Interfax as saying.

'Taliban hunt spies, target Kabul'

AFP, London

The Taliban in Afghanistan are hunting Nato spies who they say have infiltrated the movement and are aiming to mount more Iraq-style suicide bombings on Kabul, a spokesman told the BBC on Thursday.

In a frank interview, Zabiullah Mujahed, a Taliban spokesman who is believed to be hiding somewhere in southern Afghanistan, admitted that Nato forces had penetrated the Taliban but said the damage was limited.

He added that the Taliban was

also recovering from allied attacks that killed some of its leaders.

"I absolutely reject the suggestion that we have been defeated. Our operation continues and gathers momentum day by day," he said, apparently speaking by telephone.

"The enemy has tried to infiltrate the Taliban ranks and has targeted our leadership. Thank God they haven't been too successful. We are trying to catch their spies," he said through an interpreter.

"Unfortunately, some have succeeded. But now we are using counter-intelligence to find these people," he added.

The spokesman also admitted that a suicide bombing in Kabul on Sunday that killed 35 people, the deadliest of the Taliban insurgency, demonstrated a new approach, including the use of suicide bombers.

"With each passing day, taking into account the enemy's tactics, we are changing our own tactics," he said.

"It is true we are increasing our pressure on Kabul, because Kabul is the capital city and the foreign troops are concentrated there," he said.

"This is our next main target.

Probably we will be successful."

"Our enemy is the same and we are repeating the tactics which they use in Iraq. They have proved effective in defeating the enemy," he added. "Our goal is the same -- the independence and freedom of our country."

The spokesman said they were not lacking in volunteers -- and if anything, the numbers were growing.

"A lot of people are coming to our suicide bombing centre to volunteer," he said.

Laden may have arranged family's US exit: FBI docs

AFP, Washington

Osama bin Laden may have chartered a plane that carried his family members and Saudi nationals out of the United States after the September 11, 2001 attacks, said FBI documents released Wednesday.

The papers, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, were made public by Judicial Watch, a Washington-based group that investigates government corruption.

One FBI document referred to a Ryan Air 727 airplane that departed Los Angeles International Airport on September 19, 2001, and was said to have carried Saudi nationals out of the United States.

"The plane was chartered either by the Saudi Arabian royal family or Osama bin Laden," according to the document, which was among 224 pages posted online.

The flight made stops in Orlando, Florida; Washington, DC; and Boston, Massachusetts and eventually left its passengers in Paris the following day.

In all, the documents detail six flights between September 14 and September 24 that evacuated Saudi nationals and bin Laden family members, Judicial Watch said in a statement.

"Incredibly, not a single Saudi national nor any of the bin Laden family members possessed any information of investigative value," Judicial Watch said.

Left Front celebrates 30th anniversary in power

PTI, Kolkata

Next only to the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan which ruled the island nation for 38 years, CPI(M)-led Left Front on Thursday, earned the rare distinction of completing 30th year in power uninterruptedly in the Indian state of West Bengal.

Communist regimes are there in power in China since 1949, in Cuba since 1959, in DPR Korea since 1948, Vietnam since 1945 and also in Bolivia for a longer period of time, but considering the rule in any province of a country, CPI (M)-led Left Front has set an unprecedented record of sorts in this state.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian farmers use a 'Langal', a traditional tool to cultivate their land in a village close to Kolkata yesterday. Indian Communist government completes 30 years of continued rule in West Bengal yesterday amid stiff opposition on the issue of turning farmland into industrial hub.

Indian police charge 3-yr-old for rioting, shooting

AFP, Patna

Police in India have charged a three-year-old boy for allegedly leading a group of rioters and firing at security personnel, the toddler's uncle said yesterday.

The incident dates back to a clash in the eastern state of Bihar between villagers and police in January, when officers were pelted with stones and shot at, Dhruv Kumar Jha told AFP.

Shortly afterwards, the young Raj Kumar was "charged with throwing stones at the police and firing at them," he said.

The family ignored three summons, prompting uniformed police to turn up at their house and tell the dumbfounded parents to produce the child before the authorities.

Protests against Rushdie go on

AFP, London

Muslim anger flared yesterday after Britain defended Salman Rushdie's knighthood, with fresh protests against the novelist and Pakistani clerics bestowing a title on Osama bin Laden in response.

Hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets in Indian Kashmir and Pakistan, while Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, criticised the timing of the honour.

Rushdie was given the award on Saturday, 18 years after he was sentenced to death by Iran's hard-line clerical regime for writing what it said was a blasphemous book, "The Satanic Verses".

The Pakistani Ulema Council, a private body that claims to be the biggest of its kind in the country with 2,000 scholars, said it had given al-

Qaeda chief Bin Laden its "highest title for a Muslim warrior."

"We are pleased to award the title of Saifullah (sword of Allah) to Osama bin Laden after the British government's decision to bestow the title of 'Sir' on blasphemer Rushdie," council chairman Maulana Tahir Ashrafi told AFP.

Bin Laden has been blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington that killed nearly 3,000 people. He is widely believed to be hiding on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Later Afzal Sahi -- the speaker of the Punjab province assembly and a member of the Pakistan Muslim League party that backs President Pervez Musharraf -- said during a debate that he would obey his duty as a Muslim to murder Rushdie.

"If this man comes in front of me I will definitely kill him," he said.



PHOTO: AP

This undated combo image released by CONAF, Chile's National Forest Service, shows a 2-hectare lake at the Huemules National Park that mysteriously disappeared in the southernmost region of Magallanes, Chile.

Glacial lake vanishes in Chile

AP, Santiago

A five-acre glacial lake in Chile's southern Andes has disappeared and scientists want to know why.

Park rangers at Bernardo O'Higgins National Park said they found a 100-feet-deep crater in late May were the lake had been in March. Several large pieces of ice that used to float atop the water

also were spotted.

"The lake had simply disappeared," Juan Jose Romero, head of Chile's National Forest Service in the southernmost region of Magallanes, said Wednesday. "No one knows what happened."

A group of geologists and other experts will be sent to the area 1,250 miles southeast of Santiago in the next few days to investigate,

Romero said.

One theory is the water disappeared through cracks in the lake bottom into underground fissures. But experts do not know why the cracks would have appeared because there have been no earthquakes reported in the area recently, Romero said.

A river that flowed out of the lake was reduced to a trickle.