

Israeli cabinet approves Fatah prisoner release

Fayyad to hold meeting with Israelis

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's cabinet yesterday approved releasing 250 Palestinian prisoners allied with president Mahmud Abbas in a move aimed at boosting the moderate leader in his battle for authority with Islamist Hamas.

The cabinet passed the measure, which applies only to prisoners who are members of Abbas's Fatah party, by a vote of 18 to seven, a senior government official told AFP.

The release was promised by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during a Middle East summit in Egypt in late June as a goodwill

gesture to Abbas, whom Israel would like to bolster after security forces loyal to the moderate leader were overrun in Gaza by militants from Hamas.

Palestinians welcomed the move as a "good start," but criticised its unilateral nature.

"We hope that all prisoners will be freed and our government will work toward this aim," information and justice minister Riyad al-Malki told AFP. "We will continue our pressure on the Israeli government to release all the prisoners."

But chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat criticised the fact the decision was not taken in coordina-

tion with the Palestinian side.

"A solution of the question of ... Palestinian prisoners will not be found by unilateral measures and gestures here and there," he said.

Speaking at the start of the cabinet meeting, Olmert said the prisoner release was aimed at encouraging Palestinian moderates.

"We are not doing this gesture out of some illusion that through it, we will change the face of the Middle East," said the Israeli prime minister.

"But we are doing it out of hope that we can use any means possible to strengthen moderate elements in

the Palestinian Authority, to encourage them to move in a direction that could allow conditions to begin real talks," he said.

Olmert on Saturday rejected a preliminary list of names to be released drawn up by the Shin Beth internal security agency and the justice ministry, as the sentences of several of the people on it were due to end soon anyway.

Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad was on Sunday due to meet with senior Israeli officials after secretly encountering Defence Minister Ehud Barak last week, an official at his office told AFP.

Iran officials visit detainees in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Iranian diplomats made their first visit to five Iranians that US authorities are holding in Iraq on suspicion that they were training militants there, the US military said yesterday.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said he hoped the visit Saturday to the detainees, who have been held since January, would help ease tensions between Iran and the United States.

The detention of the five Iranians by US troops on Jan. 11 in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil has been a point of contention between Tehran and Washington at a time when the Iraqi government is trying to get the two to resolve their differences.

US authorities have said the five included the operations chief and other members of Iran's elite Quds Force, which is accused of arming and training Iraqi militants.



An Iraqi Shia carries a combo picture of Shia firebrand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr (R) and Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (L) as he takes part in a protest in Baghdad's Al-Amil district yesterday demanding the release of Sadrist leader Jasim al-Hasnawi who was arrested earlier this week in Baghdad. PHOTO: AFP



Indian people celebrate outside the 17th century Mughal-built Taj Mahal mausoleum in Agra early yesterday. Indians handed out sweets and set off fireworks outside the Taj Mahal to celebrate its inclusion in a list of "new" seven wonders and promised discounts to tourists. PHOTO: AFP

UK faces 15-yr fight against extremism

Says security chief

AFP, London

Britain faces a 15-year battle against Islamist extremism, a former Royal Navy chief turned security minister said yesterday, as police got more time to question five suspects over three failed car bombings.

Sir Alan West, who was appointed security and counter-terrorism minister by Prime Minister Gordon Brown last month, told the Sunday Telegraph that Britain was facing its greatest threat yet.

West, formerly head of the Royal

Navy, added that new emphasis was needed, with prevention of radicalisation at its heart.

"This is not a quick thing. I believe it will take 10 to 15 years. But I think it can be done as long as we as a nation apply ourselves to it and it's done across the board," he was quoted as saying.

His comments came as Brown called for more international information flow on potential terror suspects.

"If there is information in one country about the potential recruitment or the actual recruitment of

someone to a terrorist group, then that should be information that's flowing to another country," he told Sky News television.

"I think it is very important that we tighten this up and it is something we are looking at as a matter of urgency."

Just two days after Brown took over from Tony Blair, two car bombs were discovered in central London on June 29. A flaming Jeep Cherokee slammed into Glasgow airport's main terminal the following day.

Blair wanted to resign before Iraq war

Says ex-press chief

AFP, London

Tony Blair wanted to resign as British prime minister without fighting a third general election, his former communications director Alastair Campbell told the Sunday Times.

Campbell, whose long-awaited diaries are published Monday, told the newspaper that Blair wanted to announce his decision in mid-2002, nine months before the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

But Campbell said he warned Blair that he would become a "lame duck" prime minister, even if he reasoned it would allow him to make unpopular decisions without worrying that he would be voted

out at the ballot box.

"We had been going through a lot of crap," he explained, adding the idea was abandoned because of the pressure of events and the impending military action in the Gulf.

Blair eventually announced in September 2004 that he would not contest a fourth general election as leader of the governing Labour Party but said he would serve a full third term of office.

Many political commentators have said that this "pre-announcement" to resign did make him a "lame duck" after the 2005 general election as the media focused increasingly on when he would step down, as he did not specify a date.

Maliki may face vote of no-confidence

AFP, Washington

Senior Iraqi politicians, with possible tacit backing from US Vice President Richard Cheney, are planning to ask soon for a no-confidence parliamentary vote against Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as a step toward bringing him down, CBS News reported Saturday.

The report said the no-confidence vote will be requested on July 15 by the largest block of Sunni politicians, who are part of a broad political alliance called the Iraq Project.

The group wants a new government run by ministers who are appointed for their expertise, not their party loyalty, the television

network said.

The Iraq Project is known to the highest levels of the US government. Its plan, CBS News said, was discussed in detail during Vice President Cheney's most recent visit to Baghdad, when he met with the Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi.

Maliki has announced his own alliance to try to save his government, but even his vice president says that's little more than a short-term fix, according to the report.

"Cosmetic change is not going to serve the interests of Iraqis, is not going to stabilise, is not going to improve security, what we need is much bigger than that," said Hashimi, the leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party.

Hollywood divorce town catches '7/7/7' marriage fever

AFP, Los Angeles

In a town of fairytale Hollywood weddings that often end in divorce, officials reported a surge in marriage license requests from couples seeking to wed on Saturday's mystical "7/7/7" date.

The Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk office in Los Angeles said demand for marriage licenses was up 15 to 20 percent this week as couples hoped marrying on July 7, 2007, would help guarantee the vow "till death do us part."

About 200 marriage licenses are issued on a typical day in July in Los Angeles County, said Kathy Treggs, division manager of marriage licenses and ceremonies.

Las Vegas, known as the wedding capital of the world, was also expecting a record number of ceremonies as thousands of lovers gambled on lucky number 7.

'Pyramids still only wonder of the world'

AFP, Cairo

Egypt said Sunday that the pyramids of Giza remained the only wonder of the world, snubbing a contest in which seven "new" wonders were selected by Internet and telephone voters as having "no value."

Seven new wonders of the world, including the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal in India, were selected at a star-studded event in Lisbon Saturday after nearly 100 million voters made their choice out of a list of 21 sites.

"This contest will not detract from the value of the pyramids, which is the only real wonder of the world," Egypt's antiquities supremo Zahi Hawass told AFP.

He said the competition "has no value," because "the masses do not write history."

Democrats have daggers drawn for Bush

AFP, Washington

With daggers drawn for a weakened White House, congressional Democrats return from a short recess this week plotting to further undermine President George W. Bush's waning political sway.

Even as Bush's signature immigration reform bill was strangled in the Senate last month, Democratic leaders were mapping out new

misery for a president beset by rock-bottom poll ratings, the three bloodiest months for US troops in Iraq since the war began in 2003 and a fraying Republican support base.

Nearly half a dozen Republicans Senators recently broke ranks with Bush urging him to change course in Iraq.

After a six-week hiatus, Democrats plan an new attack on the unpopular war, and have

besieged the White House with subpoenas over simmering legal and constitutional showdows.

A House of Representatives committee meanwhile is planning on making political hay by probing Bush's decision to commute a two-and-a-half year sentence imposed on former White House aide Lewis "Scooter" Libby, over a scandal sparked by the leaking of a CIA spy's identity.