

Israel releases more than 250 prisoners

AP, Ramallah

Israel released more than 250 Palestinian prisoners yesterday in an attempt to bolster moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in his power struggle with Hamas.

Most of those released were from Abbas' Fatah movement. Prominent among the freed prisoners was 61-year-old Abdel Rahim Malouh, second-in-command in a small PLO faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which assassinated an Israeli Cabinet minister in 2001.

Shackled prisoners wearing civilian clothes were put aboard buses at the Ketziot prison camp in southern Israel's Negev Desert early Friday and then headed for the West Bank. The transfer was scheduled to be completed around

noon when the prisoners were to meet Abbas at his Ramallah headquarters and visit the grave of Yasser Arafat, who is buried there.

Israel holds about 9,200 Palestinian prisoners, most of whom were arrested during the past seven years of Israeli-Palestinian fighting. Almost every Palestinian family has had a member in Israeli jails at some point, and the fate of the prisoners is one of the most emotionally charged issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For Palestinians, the prisoners are heroes in the struggle for statehood, and large-scale prisoner releases are seen as an effective way for Israel to back Abbas in his confrontation with the Islamic militants who took the Gaza Strip by force last month.

However, Israel refuses to free inmates serving time for wounding

or killing Israelis, in part for fear of a public outcry. None of the prisoners being freed Friday was directly involved in attacks on Israelis, according to Israeli officials.

Earlier this week, families of victims of Palestinian attacks tried to stop the release with a Supreme Court appeal, but the court backed the government.

Public Security Minister Avi Dichter, a former head of the Shin Bet internal security service, supported the release. "This is certainly an acceptable risk Israel is taking in order to strengthen the regime of Abu Mazen," he said earlier this week, referring to Abbas.

Palestinian officials said they hoped more inmates would be freed soon.

"This release breaks the ice between us and the Israelis on the

issue of prisoners," said Ziad Abu Ein, the Palestinian deputy minister of prisoner affairs.

Abu Ein said the prisoners being freed had an average of three years left on their sentences.

In the West Bank village of Assileh Haresieh, 60-year-old Jamila Jaradat was eagerly waiting for her 39-year-old son Mohannad, who had served 18 years of a 20-year term. "The first thing, I will get him married," she said.

The releases came after a top PLO body, the Central Council, endorsed Abbas' call for early presidential and legislative elections.

Abbas hopes to sideline Hamas with new elections, but his high-stakes gamble is also bound to set off new confrontations with the Islamic militants and cement the West Bank-Gaza divide.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian family members embrace and welcome their freed relative (L) upon arrival at the Muqataa leadership compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday following his release along with 255 others by the Israeli authorities.

Ethiopia frees 38 jailed opposition figures

AFP, Addis Ababa

Ethiopia yesterday released 38 opposition figures, days after sparking an international outcry by slapping them with heavy jail terms over incidents that followed disputed 2005 polls.

The group was pardoned by President Girma Woldegiorgis on Thursday and witnesses and relatives told AFP that they were released from their prison in Kaliti, 25 kilometres (16 miles) from the capital.

"They have been freed and are heading to Addis," a witness said on condition of anonymity.

On Monday, Ethiopia's high court had slapped heavy jail terms on 43 opposition figures accused of seeking to "overthrow constitutional rule" in the aftermath of disputed 2005 legislative polls.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani lawyers celebrate after the Supreme Court reinstated suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry outside the SC Building in Islamabad yesterday.

Jubilant Pak lawyers call on Musharraf to quit

AFP, Islamabad

Lawyers for Pakistan's chief justice said yesterday that military ruler President Pervez Musharraf should quit after the country's supreme court overturned his suspension of the judge.

Hundreds of attorneys awaiting the verdict erupted in cheers after the court threw out charges filed on March 9 by Musharraf, under which Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry stood accused of misconduct and abuse of power.

"Pervez Musharraf should resign because the charges were illegal and have been declared null and void by the highest legal authority in the country," Ali Ahmad Kurd, a senior lawyer for Chaudhry, said outside the court in Islamabad.

"The doors of this building are from now onward closed to the generals and now no general will force martial law, and today, a new

Pakistan has emerged from this court decision," Kurd said.

Munir Malik, one of Chaudhry's lawyers and the president of the Pakistan Supreme Court Bar Association, called the verdict a "historic moment".

"This is a new dawn for Pakistan," Malik told AFP.

"This supreme court has vision and courage. The basis of a free and independent judiciary has now been founded in Pakistan."

General Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999 and retains the dual position of army chief and president.

Chaudhry's backers say Musharraf suspended him because he was an obstacle to his aim to stay on as head of the powerful military in defiance of the constitution, which says he should quit the post by the end of 2007.

Heavy fighting kills 15 in Lanka

AP, Colombo

Separatist Tamil rebels attacked a military post in northern Sri Lanka with mortars and gunfire early yesterday, sparking an hourlong battle that killed at least 12 combatants. In a later attack, soldiers killed three rebels in eastern Sri Lanka.

The attacks came a day after the government held a formal military ceremony celebrating its recapture of the east from the rebels. The Tamil rebels, who still control a virtual state in the north, have vowed to retaliate for the military's offensive in the east.

About 2:30 a.m. Friday, the rebels struck, attacking soldiers guarding the front lines in the Mannar district separating government-held areas from rebel territory in the north.

The military repelled the attack, which killed three soldiers and wounded four others, said Lt Col Upali Rajapakse, a senior military

officer. He said troops killed at least nine rebels and wounded 24.

However, rebels said they killed 10 soldiers and lost only four of their fighters. It was not possible to reconcile the conflicting death tolls given by the two sides. Both often inflate the other's casualties and lower their own.

Rebel military spokesman Rasiiah Ilanthirayan said the attack on the army post was meant as a pre-emptive strike. "This camp was causing a lot of harassment to our fighters," he said.

Steinar Sveinsson, a spokesman for the Scandinavian mission monitoring a tattered 2002 truce, said he had no information about the latest clash.

Also Friday, army troops killed three rebels in the eastern Batticaloa district, said a military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media.



JK Rowling

Rowling bids her boy wizard goodbye

AP, Edinburgh

Harry Potter's life hangs in the balance. Millions of fans are holding their breath. Meanwhile, his creator is baking a cake and keeping her secret.

On Saturday, readers around the globe will learn the schoolboy wizard's fate with the publication of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," the seventh and final book in JK Rowling's fantasy series. Will Harry defeat his evil nemesis, Lord Voldemort, and restore order to the wizarding world? Will he die in the attempt, as many fans fear and as Rowling, an expert narrative tease, has hinted? "Harry's story comes to a definite end in book seven," is all she will say a few days before publication, serving up tea and home-baked sponge cake in her comfortable Edinburgh house. Writing the final words of the saga felt "like a bereavement."

That sounds ominously final. So have we really seen the last of the staff and students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?

Pakistani elders, tribal militants hold talks

AP, Miranshah

A 45-member delegation of tribal elders began talks with militant leaders near the Afghan border yesterday in a bid to stem the spiralling violence that erupted after Islamic extremists scrapped a peace deal.

Pakistan's government has attached high hopes to the success of the peace talks in Miranshah, the main town of the troubled North Waziristan tribal region.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court was set to rule Friday on an appeal by Pakistan's top judge against his suspension by President Gen. Pervez Musharraf that has triggered political turmoil.

Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry's suspension in March sparked protests by lawyers and opposition parties that have grown into a powerful pro-democracy movement just as Musharraf faces a rising tide of Islamic militancy.

It has been described as the biggest challenge to Musharraf since he seized power in a bloodless 1999 coup. A defeat for Musharraf would further undermine his standing, which has been

crumbling both among voters and his political allies.

Suicide attacks, shootings and a siege and army raid on a mosque in Islamabad have killed about 288 people in Pakistan so far this month, raising concern about the threat posed by Islamic extremists and the country's political stability.

In the latest attack, a suspected militant struck his explosive-laden car with a small checkpoint on the outskirts of Miranshah on Friday, killing one soldier and three passers-by, according to two local security officials.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of their job, said the attacker detonated the car bomb when asked to halt.

The attack comes a day after three suicide bombings in northwestern Pakistan and the south killed at least 51 people.

Violence has spread from Pakistan's tribal areas to the capital and elsewhere since last week when militants abandoned a 2006 peace deal they signed with the government to stop attacks on troops and officials.

The militants ended the agree-

ment after the army's bloody assault on Islamabad's Red Mosque last week.

On Friday, tribal elder Malik Nasrullah told The Associated Press before entering talks with militant leaders he was "optimistic" the peace deal with the government could be revived.

"We will meet with them to request that they reverse their decision to end the peace agreement," said Nasrullah.

The meeting came a day after a suicide bomber driving a car hit a convoy carrying Chinese workers, killing 29 Pakistani bystanders and police, and prompting Musharraf to call for national unity against extremists.

Thursday's attack targeting a minibus carrying about 10 Chinese technicians occurred as their convoy was passing through the main bazaar in Hub, a town in Baluchistan province near the southern port city of Karachi.

Later Thursday, a suicide attacker detonated a bomb at a mosque in an army cantonment in the northwestern town of Kohat, killing at least 15 people, officials said.

INDO-US NUKE ACCORD

'Logjam' broken in talks

AFP, Washington

The United States and India have broken the "logjam" in talks to forge an implementing agreement for their landmark civilian atomic deal but a final accord remains elusive, officials said Thursday.

"We have overcome many of the outstanding issues. We just need to go the extra couple of feet," said US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns, the chief American negotiator at the talks, which were extended for a second day Friday.

"We are in an extra innings," Burns told reporters, using a baseball term. "We haven't given up and I'm very hopeful we might have an agreement."

Even if they come to an agreement on the text in Washington, it will have to be referred to the leaders of the two countries in any case, Burns said.

The two sides have been holding talks for the last two years to reach a comprehensive agreement under which the United States would provide nuclear technology and fuel to India, after Washington agreed in principle to reverse three decades of sanctions following India's nuclear tests.

At their latest round of talks in Washington, the negotiators were scheduled to end their two-day meeting on Wednesday but

extended it by two days after a breakthrough in issues that had blocked an accord, officials said.

The two sides have "broken the logjam," a US official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. He did not elaborate.

"The talks have been extended for yet another day," Indian embassy spokesman Rahul Chhabra said, adding that Indian negotiators have postponed their flight home.

'Lack of security poses threat to Nepal polls'

AFP, Kathmandu

The United Nations says that Nepal's dismal security situation poses the biggest threat to crucial elections planned for later this year in the impoverished Himalayan nation.

The country is due to go to the polls in late November to vote for a body that will re-write the constitution and decide the fate of the embattled monarchy.

However, ethnic violence in Nepal's southern plains region has cast a shadow over the peace deal and has killed at least 93 people since January.

serious threat to the electoral process," the UN said in a statement Thursday.

Nepal's former rebel Maoists ended their bloody "people's war" late last year and have emerged from the jungles and hills to enter Kathmandu's corridors of power with five ministerial positions and seats in parliament.

The Electoral Expert Monitoring Team (EEMT) is of the view that the security situation remains the most

Unlikely Pak hero makes a stand against Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

With his rambling, legalistic speeches and his lazy eye, Pakistan's chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry has become an unlikely hero for opponents of President Pervez Musharraf.

The 59-year-old, in his signature black suit, has been showered with rose petals by tens of thousands of cheering supporters on a series of roadshows since military ruler Musharraf suspended him for alleged misconduct in March.

Yet he has also become a catalyst for violence amid high tensions in this Islamic republic, including a suicide blast at a pro-Chaudhry rally in Islamabad on Tuesday and clashes in Karachi in May that left 40 dead.

On Friday, Pakistan's Supreme Court reinstated Chaudhry and overturned the charges against him, sparking jubilant celebrations outside the courthouse.

"This man has shown a lot of courage," political commentator Shafiqat Mahmood said. "If he had any personal mistakes in the past they have been superseded by his exemplary fightback against Musharraf."

Chaudhry's journey began on March 9 this year, when television footage showed him being sum-



Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry

moned to meet Musharraf, in army uniform, at his residence to answer the charges against him.

It was an unprecedented moment in the country's 60-year history and sparked outrage amongst lawyers who said the image said 1,000 words about the role of the powerful military in the country.

The charge-sheet against Chaudhry included claims that he abused his position to land a top police job for his son and get cars he was not entitled to. He was also accused of ordering intelligence agents to spy on other judges.

Mumbai building collapse death toll rises to 29

AFP, Mumbai

The death toll from the collapse of an apartment building in India's commercial capital Mumbai rose to 29 yesterday as officials called off the search for more victims.

Four people were rescued from the rubble late Thursday, taking the number of injured to 15.

"We are calling off the search," Jairaj Pathak, head of Mumbai's civic administration body told AFP.

Eight men, 16 women and five children died in the collapse, he said.

"We have removed the debris and we have not found any more bodies," he said.

Rescue workers brought in heavy equipment to move the rubble after two wings of the dilapidated seven-floor structure in a congested middle-class neighbourhood caved in late on Wednesday.

The disaster has spurred state officials to promise structural surveys of buildings in the city where such collapses are common.

"We've realised there's a need for a structural audit of buildings more than 10 years old," Maharashtra urban development minister Rajesh Tope told the state assembly.



PHOTO: AFP

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (back) escorts his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (R) after reviewing guard of honour at the Syrian al-Shaab Presidential Palace in Damascus Thursday. Ahmadinejad flew in Damascus for talks with Assad and Khaled Mishaal, exiled supremo of the Islamist Palestinian movement Hamas.