

Abbas-Olmert meeting in Jericho today

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert meets today in the West Bank town of Jericho, a senior Abbas aide told AFP yesterday.

"The meeting will happen tomorrow in Jericho," said Nabil Amr, a political adviser to the president, in the first official confirmation of the encounter.

A senior Israeli official also confirmed the location for the talks..

It will mark the first time that the two leaders meet in the Palestinian territories, as all previous meetings have taken place in Jerusalem.

"In the talks with Olmert, president Abbas will focus on political issues and final negotiations," Amr said.

"The most important thing is to prepare successfully and well for the meeting," he said, referring to the international conference on Middle East peace called for by US President George W Bush later this year.

"Both sides will work together to resolve the Palestinian issue," he said. "They must decide on a resolution for the final issues."

"Abbas will ask Olmert to release more Palestinian prisoners, to facilitate lives of Palestinians in the West Bank

and Gaza, to lift roadblocks and stop settlements."

The meeting follows last week's visit to the region by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who was laying the groundwork for the conference amid efforts to jumpstart stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

But although Rice appeared optimistic that the two sides were ready to dive once again into the thorniest issues of their intractable conflict for the first time since 2001, it remained unclear whether they would be able to do so.

Iraq seeks to heal rifts

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's most senior leaders are to hold a crisis summit this week to find a way to heal the sectarian split in their beleaguered national unity government and head off more violence, they said yesterday.

At what one senior Western diplomat said was a "moment of truth" for Iraq's elected leaders, the Shia premier refused to accept the resignation of six Sunni members of his cabinet and promised to discuss their concerns.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on Sunday met President Jalal Talabani,

who is a Kurd, and Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi, a fellow Shia.

Tellingly, Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, the senior Sunni Arab in the government and a critic of Maliki's alleged sectarian bias, was not present, but his colleagues vowed to hold inclusive talks in the coming days.

"The prime minister's position is that he has refused to accept the resignations. This is a good thing and the door is open to discuss this topic," Abdel Mehdi announced after the meeting.

On Wednesday, Iraq's main Sunni political bloc the National Concord

Front said it was withdrawing its five ministers and deputy prime minister from the coalition, dealing a blow to the government's claims to represent all Iraqis.

Since the US-led invasion of March 2003, Iraq has plunged into an abyss of overlapping civil conflicts that have divided its rival religious and ethnic communities, and left tens of thousands of civilians dead.

Last year's formation of an elected government of national unity held out the promise of reconciliation, but Maliki's rule has been undermined by bitter sectarian rivalries both within and outside his fragile coalition.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Lebanese president and candidate Amin Gemayel shows a white flower dedicated to his assassinated son Pierre after casting his vote for parliamentary by-elections in the town of Bikfaya yesterday. Gemayel is vying to replace his son Pierre, who was assassinated by unknown gunmen on November 21, 2006. But the Free Patriotic Movement of Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun is fighting the seat with Camille Khoury, a doctor, as its candidate.

Iran demands right to nuclear technology

AP, Berlin

Iran might eventually consider suspending uranium enrichment but Tehran's right to the technology must be recognised, Iran's top nuclear negotiator said in an interview released Saturday.

Iran rejects the West's insistence that it suspend enrichment as a condition for the resumption of talks on its nuclear programme. Negotiator Ali Larijani did not address that subject when talking with the German newsweekly Focus, but was asked if a suspension was conceivable as an outcome of the negotiations.

"That is not completely ruled out," Larijani was quoted as saying. "How-

ever, we cannot be forbidden the possession of this technology."

Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency, has called for a "time out" both on enrichment and further UN sanctions against Iran.

Larijani said a "time out" would mean that "we maintain our current state of development; in other words, we leave uranium enrichment at the level it is at now," Focus reported.

"The problem is that we already have the know-how for uranium enrichment; so we cannot go backward at this point," he was quoted as saying. "It may be that the West does not like that. But that is how it is, and we must negotiate on this basis."

Iran, US to meet in Baghdad today

AP, Tehran

Iran and the United States will meet in Baghdad today to discuss ways to ease Iraq's security problems, Tehran's ambassador to Baghdad said.

The meeting to discuss a committee Iran and the US agreed to set up last month to deal with security issues would be the third between the two countries in recent months over Iraq. The first round in May broke a 27-year diplomatic freeze following the 1979 Islamic Revolution and takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran.

"The two sides will exchange views on Monday concerning the details of a trilateral security committee," state-run television quoted Ambassador Hasan Kazemi Qomi as saying Saturday.

Qomi said Iraq would participate as well, and the group would focus on "the composition and agenda of the security committee."

He did not specify the officials who would attend the meeting, but indicated the discussions would be held at the "expert" level. The prior two rounds of talks included Qomi and US Ambassador Ryan Crocker.

5 shot dead, schools set ablaze in Thai south

AFP, Yala

Militants shot dead five people, including two soldiers, in separate attacks and set public schools on fire in Thailand's insurgency-hit south, police said yesterday.

The Muslim-majority region has been hit by almost daily bombings and shootings since separatist unrest broke out in January 2004, which has killed more than 2,400 people.

Two soldiers were gunned down by militants in a drive-by shooting Sunday while riding a motorcycle in Narathiwat, one of three restive provinces bordering Malaysia.

Three Muslims were shot dead late Saturday when rebels ambushed their pick-up truck in Yala province, police said, adding two people were also

hurt.

In the neighbouring province of Pattani, attackers set alight three public elementary schools late Saturday.

Separatist rebels often attack public schools as they are seen as symbols of Thailand's attempt to impose Buddhist Thai culture on the region.

Elsewhere, a soldier was wounded in a gun battle with militants.

Thailand's army-backed government, which grabbed power following last year's coup, has offered a series of olive branches in a bid to ease violence.

But deadly attacks continue to rock the region, which was an autonomous Malay sultanate until it was annexed a century ago.



PHOTO: AFP

A guide explains children the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima yesterday. On 06 August 1945, the nuclear weapon "Little Boy" was dropped on the city of Hiroshima, causing countless deaths and injuries to those who were in the vicinity at the time.

US soldier gets 110 yrs jail for rape, slaying of Iraqi girl

AP, Fort Campbell

A soldier convicted for his role in the rape and murder of an Iraqi teenager was sentenced to 110 years in prison, the longest of four soldiers found guilty in the case.

Pfc Jesse Spielman, who was sentenced Saturday, has the possibility of parole after 10 years. The sentence capped a week of opposing views over Spielman's responsibility in the rape and murder of 14-year-old Abeer Qassim al-Janabi and the slayings of her family.

Military prosecutors did not say Spielman took part in the rape or murders but alleged he went to the house knowing what the others intended to do and served as a lookout. Spielman said he went to the house unaware of any plan.

"I don't really blame my chain of command. I don't really blame anybody," he said quietly in a statement to the court before he was sentenced. "I could have stopped it. I take responsibility for my actions."

Spielman was convicted late Friday of rape, conspiracy to commit rape, housebreaking with intent to rape and four counts of felony murder.