

Armed militias obstacle to Palestinian state

Says Fayyad

AFP, Ramallah

The continued existence of armed militias is an obstacle to the promised Palestinian state, Western-backed Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said on Thursday.

"Building towards statehood and independence on the one hand, and continuing to tolerate armed militias on the other, are two mutually exclusive paths that will never meet," Fayyad said in an interview with the foreign press.

"We are learning that from experience. We need to deal with this. That's the key principle that needs to be understood, and understood clearly, and that has to be implemented."

"Today that's what we are beginning to do in the West Bank and that is something that should be generalised."

"We simply cannot go back to a situation where matters are taken into the hands of the people acting outside of the... Palestinian authority. This is the key requirement," he

said in the wide-ranging interview in English at his Ramallah office.

Fayyad, an economist widely respected in the West, was named premier by president Mahmud Abbas two months ago, after fighters from Islamist Hamas routed forces loyal to the moderate leader in the Gaza Strip on June 15.

The takeover has left the Palestinians deeply divided, with the Western-backed Abbas controlling the occupied West Bank and the Western-shunned Hamas ruling Gaza.

In its wake, the West has sought to boost Abbas, isolate the Islamists, and to jumpstart the dormant peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians.

Saying that actions done in the name of armed resistance had hurt the Palestinian cause, Fayyad said his government was committed to "non-violent steadfastness."

"We know that practices that were engaged in under this heading of armed resistance were most detrimental to our cause," he said.

"To me, a child scaling a checkpoint trying to go to his school is a form of resistance. It's non-violent steadfastness. That's our programme."

Hamas had blasted Fayyad for not including the term "resistance" in the programme of his government published in late July. Asked about the incident, he said:

"We live up to commitments we made and there was a key commitment that the PLO had made on behalf of all the Palestinian people going back to 1993 in which we had committed to renouncing violence as means of getting to where we need to get, which is to free our people of occupation, to end it."

On the peace front, Fayyad said that Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have started to discuss "political" issues ahead of an international peace conference called by US President George W. Bush for this autumn.

"Up until the last meeting, the discussions had focused on transitional issues... day to day issues,

not the political ones."

"That discussion has started and we are pleased that these issues are being discussed."

"It is important to build on that" ahead of the conference.

"We are looking for a serious process... a process leading to a framework agreement where the parameters are clarified, specified."

"Then, before the meeting that was called by President Bush, it will be important to give that process an important push forward, toward translating that framework into a concrete agreement that can be implemented."

Fayyad said that early elections would eventually be held in the Palestinian territories, but that no date has been set.

"We are trying to stabilise the situation to go back to the people," he said. "We'll do that when it's feasible. Is it feasible now? Obviously not."

"But elections will take place, both in Gaza and the West Bank."



A firefighter is searching with a sniffer dog for trapped people under the remains of the main church of Pisco, more than 300 km south of Lima, after a massive 7.9-magnitude earthquake rocked Peru on August 15. Officials battle to help victims of the powerful earthquake that devastated several Peruvian coastal cities killing more than 500 people.



US chief nuclear envoy Christopher Hill (L), China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Wu Dawei (3rd L), North Korean delegate Ri Gun (3rd R), Japan's delegate Akio Suda (2nd R) and Russia's delegate Grigory Berdennikov (R) pose with performers. They visited the Imperial Palace Museum after their second day of the 2nd Working Group Meeting of Denuclearisation of the North Korean Peninsula in Shenyang, the capital city of northeast Liaoning Province yesterday.

N Korea aiding in atomic shutdown, says IAEA

AP, Vienna

North Korea is cooperating with UN experts supervising the shutdown of its plutonium-producing reactor and monitoring its other nuclear facilities, the International Atomic Energy Agency said yesterday.

In a report prepared for next month's meeting of the agency's 35-nation board, IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei said his experts have been able to monitor and verify the nuclear programme's status "with the cooperation of the DPRK," the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

In Shenyang, China, the chief US nuclear negotiator said two days of technical talks on North Korea's nuclear programme ended Friday with progress on the process of declaring and disabling the country's nuclear facilities.

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The working-group session achieved some common ideas that will move forward the process of declaring and disabling Pyongyang's nuclear facilities, Christopher Hill said.

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Progress on resolving the dispute over North Korea's nuclear programmes has quickened since a February agreement which also involved Japan, South Korea, China and Russia under which the North pledged to make a full declaration of all its nuclear programmes and disable them in exchange for heavy fuel oil and other energy assistance.

North Korea shut down its sole operating nuclear reactor in July as part of that agreement. The sides now have to work out the technical details surrounding North Korea's full declaration of its nuclear programmes, and a schedule and methods under which they would be disabled.

Hill said the declaration and disablement of the facilities could go ahead at roughly the same.

Indian govt declares nuke test right

Uproar in Parliament

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Amidst the spectacle of an angry walkout by its Left supporters, the government declared in the Lok Sabha that it had the sovereign right to conduct a nuclear test as the Indo-US nuclear deal continued to plague Parliament for another day yesterday.

Proceedings in both Houses were disrupted with the vociferous Opposition, supported by the Left supporters of the government, charging the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, with misleading the House on the India-US nuclear agreement.

"There is nothing in the bilateral agreement that the government has entered with the US that will tie the hands of a future government to undertake a nuclear test," the external affairs minister, Pranab Mukherjee, said in a brief statement after Left and the NDA Opposition

members stalled proceedings.

The members were livid over the statement of the US State Department spokesman who had said all nuclear cooperation with India would be terminated if New Delhi tested an N-bomb. The government still did not have the authentic version of the statement made by the US State Department spokesman, Mukherjee pleaded.

"India has the sovereign right to test and would do so if it is necessary in national interest. The only restraint is our voluntary unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, declared by the previous (NDA) government and being continued by the successor government," Mukherjee said. "There is nothing in the bilateral agreement that would tie the hands of a future government or legally constrain its options. A decision to undertake a future nuclear test would be India's sovereign decision."

Apartheid-era S African minister spared jail over attempted murder

AFP, Pretoria

South Africa's apartheid-era police minister Adriaan Vlok was handed a 10-year suspended jail sentence Friday after pleading guilty to the attempted murder of a leading black activist 18 years ago.

In a plea bargain with prosecutors, Vlok, his former police chief Johann van der Merwe and three other former security officials, all admitted seeking to kill Frank Chikane in a case that has reopened the debate on justice for crimes committed during white-minority rule.

Chikane, now a top aide to President Thabo Mbeki, was secretary general of the South African Council of Churches -- one of the bodies leading the fight against the racially oppressive apartheid sys-

tem. The 1989 plot involved lacing his clothing with poison.

Vlok, 70, who last September asked Chikane for forgiveness and washed his feet as an act of penitence, said he was relieved the case was over and fully accepted his role in the crime.

"My involvement in (apartheid) had also been wrong. I have to accept responsibility for it. I do so now."

Van der Merwe received the same sentence as Vlok, while the other defendants -- former major-general Christoffel Smith and colonels Gert Otto and Johannes Van Sladen -- were given five-year suspended prison terms.

Talking to reporters afterwards, Vlok said there had been a list of people to be "neutralised".

UN could soon debate fresh sanctions on Iran

AFP, United Nations

A third UN resolution imposing sanctions on Iran over its controversial nuclear programme could come as early as September, diplomats said as Washington raised the heat on the Islamic republic.

Five months after the last round of sanctions was approved, three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council -- United States, France and Britain -- support such a move, while Russia and China are more hesitant.

With resolutions 1737 (December 2006) and 1747 (March), the Security Council imposed then increased sanctions on Iran for refusing to halt sensitive uranium enrichment activities.

The sanctions aim to convince Tehran to stop enriching uranium and building a heavy-water reactor in Arak, and to cooperate fully with the inspectors from the International

Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

After vowing that its nuclear programme is for peaceful civilian aims, Tehran has not changed its stance and leaders have vowed that nothing will force it to halt uranium enrichment, which can be used to produce nuclear weapons.

Washington fears the programme is a cover for nuclear weapons building and, in turn, has pressed for new measures, including via the United Nations.

On Wednesday the United States announced it planned to designate the Iranian Revolutionary Guards as a "terrorist" group, possibly in the coming weeks.

The Guards are an elite force of 100,000 troops whose influence stretches into the fields of business and politics and would be the first national military branch included on the US terror list.

Even though the European Union has no such plans to place

the Revolutionary Guards on its terrorist list, French ambassador to the United Nations Jean-Maurice Ripert told reporters that Paris believes Iran needs to be dealt with "very firmly."

"Unfortunately it appears that the Iranians have still not delivered what the Security Council has asked them to do and we will reach a time when we will have to again boost the international sanctions," he said.

"I am not sure that we have the choice of waiting until October to bring this matter before the Security Council," he added.

At the end of July, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said "there will probably be a third (UN Security Council) resolution in relation to Iran soon and I believe that that is a way forward that is working and will work."



An Indian rickshawpuller makes his way alongside a rickshaw van through a flooded street of Kolkata yesterday. Heavy overnight rain threw life out of gear in the metropolis and adjoining districts of the West Bengal state.

India can emulate nuke powers by not staging tests: US

AFP, Washington

The United States said Thursday that India could emulate other major nuclear powers by not testing atomic weapons, amid debate over the fate of a bilateral nuclear deal if New Delhi conducted a test.

"We are not testing and I don't think you see advanced nuclear countries around the world testing. And certainly, we don't encourage other states to do that," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

"All of that understood, you know, India is a sovereign country," he told reporters when asked to comment on raging debate in India over whether it enjoyed the right to test nuclear weapons under the landmark US-India civilian nuclear energy deal.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told parliament this week that the deal would not curb India's right to test nuclear weapons, saying New Delhi retained the "sovereign right to test and would do so if it is necessary in the national interest."

But the United States responded by saying that the nuclear deal's operating agreement contained provisions for "full termination" of all nuclear cooperation with India, as well as requiring the return of any items, including reprocessed fuel, covered in the pact, if India tested atomic weapons.

Boats take ballots for Maldives referendum

AFP, Boduhithi

Ballot boxes travelled by boat to far-flung atolls in the Indian Ocean nation of the Maldives ahead of a landmark referendum on Saturday to decide the country's political future.

Voters are being asked to choose between a US-style presidential style or a Westminster parliamentary system but the fine print of both has yet to be spelled out by government.

"All ballot boxes -- 427 in total -- have been sent to the atolls and the surrounding resort and industrial islands," election official Shauaid Yousuf said. "In total, 194,000 people are registered to vote."

"The votes will be counted at the atolls and the results faxed to our office in Male to ensure results are announced as quickly as possible," Yousuf said.

In this resort island of Boduhithi, election officials were due to arrive with ballot boxes early Saturday to allow local staff to cast their votes.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who has ruled this honeymoon destination since 1978, is staging the referendum ahead of the first multi-party elections slated for 2008.



A boat with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Denmark's Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen onboard navigates through a fjord near Ilulissat in Greenland Thursday. Merkel and German Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel visit Greenland to see the extent of damage to melting glaciers.

Tamils pressured to withdraw cases

Says rights group

AFP, Colombo

The government of Sri Lanka is pressuring minority Tamils to withdraw court cases against the authorities for forcibly evicting them from the capital, a rights group said Thursday.

The group, the Civil Monitoring Committee, said they suspected pro-government elements had planted a bomb in a low-budget hostel occupied by members of the Tamil community as part of the pressure tactics.

"We have reasonable suspicion that the bombs were planted yesterday to put pressure on the residents there to withdraw their cases against the police," committee spokesman Mani Ganeshan said.

"We have seen similar things in the past and the government is responsible for this pressure," the spokesman said.

There was no immediate reaction from the government.

But the defence ministry Wednesday said that two Claymore mines and three hand grenades were found at the Ideal Guest Inn following a tip-off.

Seven men who had challenged the forced eviction of nearly 400 Tamil men, women and children from the capital Colombo in June were staying at the Ideal Guest House.

"The seven petitioners are now under pressure to withdraw the case that is before the Supreme Court," Ganeshan said.

Last month, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court allowed a challenge to the eviction, which was carried out during a drive against the Tamil Tiger rebels.

The court permitted the challenge on the grounds that anti-torture provisions of the constitution may have been violated by police and troops. It fixed a formal hearing for November 28.

The court was initially petitioned by a lobby group, the Centre for Policy Alternatives, which was later joined by those directly affected by the crackdown.

The lobby group complained that hundreds of Tamils were dragged out in their night clothes by security forces and taken out of Colombo in buses, violating their basic rights.