

# US withdraws UN text backing ME peace process: Diplomat

APP, United Nations

The United States Friday withdrew a resolution it presented to the UN Security Council endorsing the relaunch of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks agreed in Annapolis, a diplomat here said.

Pressed for a reason -- possibly that Israelis and Palestinians were not consulted before the text was drafted -- US officials refused to be drawn, although their statements indicated some embarrassment.

"We looked at this matter, talked about it and at the end of the day the Secretary (of State Condoleezza Rice) believes that the positive results of Annapolis speak for themselves," said State Department spokesman Sean McCormack.

"You take a look at all the positive effects that came out of

Annapolis and we were not sure that we saw a need to add anything to the conversation. Sometimes the results of the events speak for themselves," he added.

The US draft said the council "endorses the programme of action for negotiations and implementation of outstanding obligations ... agreed upon by the Israeli and Palestinian leadership at Annapolis, Maryland on November 27, 2007."

On Thursday, after the session at which the draft was submitted, the US ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, said Security Council members intended to discuss the text with the parties involved.

His comments appeared to suggest that Israel and the Palestinians had not been consulted before the text was drafted.

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And there were even doubts whether the US State Department had been informed that the text was to be presented Thursday.

Khalilzad's deputy, Alejandro Wolff, on Friday was a bit more forthcoming: "There were a series of consultations and the upshot was that there were some unease with the idea of that type of product, and the focus, we all realised again, should be placed and remain on Annapolis and the understanding that was reached there."

A senior US government official, who asked not to be named, told reporters: "I don't think anybody saw the need for a resolution."

"Inevitably when you get into this process, you have to do a cost-benefit analysis. Yeah, sure there might be some slight benefit by passing such a thing."

## Candidacy of Sharif's brother rejected

AFP, Lahore

The candidacy of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's brother was rejected Saturday because of pending criminal charges against him, Pakistan election authorities said.

Shahbaz Sharif, president of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and former chief minister of Punjab province, said he would challenge the rejection in court.

The government presiding officer said Shahbaz Sharif's bid for candidacy had been turned down, after other candidates objected that he was unable to run for office, citing pending charges of murder and default on a bank loan.

"In view of the objections raised by other candidates, the nomination papers of Mr Shahbaz Sharif are rejected," officer Ashtar Abbass said.

Shahbaz had filed his papers to seek office for a constituency in Lahore, the capital of Punjab and stronghold of the Sharif brothers.

Shahbaz with his brother and their industrialist family was sent into exile in 2000, one year after General Pervez Musharraf ousted then-premier Nawaz Sharif from power in a bloodless coup.



Hostage-taker at Hillary's office surrenders

AFP, Portsmouth

A man claiming to be armed with a bomb took over one of US presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton's campaign offices for more than five hours Friday before surrendering to police.

The man, believed to have a history of mental illness, walked into the New Hampshire office at around 1:00 pm (1800 GMT), taking three women, a man and a baby hostage and reportedly demanding to speak to the former first lady.

Hillary Clinton, who was near Washington at the time of the incident, said after the drama ended that the tense standoff had been hard on her and her campaign.

"It's been a very difficult day, personally and emotionally," Clinton told reporters, adding that she had been in touch with the families of those being held hostage throughout the day.

"I'm so grateful this day has ended well," said the former first lady, who was due to travel to New Hampshire to thank law enforcement officers.



PHOTO: AFP  
Members of a local voting commission in Moscow prepare their polling station for today's Russian parliamentary election. Final preparations were underway in Russia for elections expected to hand a sweeping victory to President Vladimir Putin's party, just three months before presidential polls.

## All eyes on Putin as Russia prepares to vote today

AFP, Moscow

Final preparations were underway in Russia on Saturday for parliamentary elections expected to hand a sweeping victory to President Vladimir Putin's party, just three months before presidential polls.

From Kamchatka to Kaliningrad, some 109 million voters are eligible to cast ballots on Sunday in Russia's fifth parliamentary elections since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Putin is standing as the lead candidate of the United Russia party and has said that a convincing victory would give him a mandate to continue playing a role in politics after he steps down in March of next year.

A former KGB officer in power since 2000, Putin has cast the elections as a referendum on his rule, saying that a vote for United Russia would safeguard the country's oil-driven economic boom and stability.

"The result of the parliamentary elections will, without a doubt, set

the tone for the elections for a new president," Putin said in a televised address on Thursday that was aired again on Friday.

In his final pitch to voters, Putin urged them to turn out at the polls and vote for United Russia, warning that a vote for his opponents could return the country to the "humiliation, dependency and disintegration" of the early post-Soviet years.

A campaign blackout went into effect at midnight Friday as required by law, although giant United Russia posters remain prominently displayed in Moscow while those of the 10 other parties are hard to spot.

The opposition has accused the Kremlin of suppressing debate during the campaign by dominating television coverage on state media, confiscating their election leaflets and arresting members.

Former chess champion turned Kremlin critic Garry Kasparov has dismissed the elections as a "farce" and warned that Putin was leading the country toward dictatorship.

## 27 killed in fresh Lankan clashes

AFP, AP, Colombo

At least 27 people were killed in fresh fighting in Sri Lanka's embattled northeast, the military said on Saturday, marking the latest violence in the long-running ethnic conflict.

At least 11 Tamil Tiger rebels were killed and 49 injured in heavy clashes across northern defence lines in Mannar early on Saturday, the defence ministry said in a statement.

"Pre-emptive strikes are continuing," said the ministry, putting government losses at three soldiers killed and 10 injured.

Elsewhere, 13 rebels were killed overnight in separate fighting near the guerrillas' stronghold in the north of the island, the military said, adding that it destroyed a rebel bunker but suffered no casualties.

There was no comment on the reported rebel casualties from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who have been fighting for an independent homeland for minority Tamils in the island's north and east since 1972.

More than 70,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

Tens of thousands of people have died in the separatist conflict, one of Asia's longest running wars.



Dancing diva's comeback film banned in UP

AFP, Lucknow

An Indian state has banned a film featuring Bollywood superstar Madhuri Dixit because it allegedly offends low-caste Hindus, an official said on Saturday.

The government of India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh had objected to lyrics from the title song of the film in which Dixit -- called the "dancing diva" for her graceful moves -- plays a choreographer.

## Sunni bloc boycotts Iraq parliament after crackdown on leader

Qaeda militants raid village, kill 13

AFP, AP, Baghdad

"When I went to meet him I was stopped and told that he is under house arrest. This is a violation of the rights of an MP who wants to come to the parliament," Samaraie said.

After his statement the bloc's MP walked out of the assembly hall. Mahmud al-Mashhadani, the Sunni parliament speaker, joined later.

Meanwhile insurgents raided a village north of Baghdad Saturday, killing at least 13 people, officials said.

"al-Qaeda militants early this morning attacked the village of Duailiyah in which 13 people were killed and several wounded," said police Colonel Hazim Yasin from the nearby city of Baquba.

Another police officer in Baquba said the dead included women and children. He said eight people were wounded in the assault in which militants also burned several homes.

"It will increase political tension

at a time when Baghdad is relatively peaceful," the Front said in a statement before the walkout.

The Iraqi army said the car bombs were found near Dulaimi's offices in Baghdad's Hail neighbourhood and later detonated.

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## Gulf Arab states wary of Iran's nuclear plans

AFP, Dubai

The six Gulf Arab states whose leaders meet in Qatar on Monday for a two-day summit are increasingly suspicious about Iran's nuclear ambitions, which they fear could spark a new regional conflict.

Tehran's nuclear programme is expected to be high on the agenda of the Doha summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which groups Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The GCC states "support the peaceful efforts deployed to solve the Iranian nuclear crisis, because any escalation would only complicate the situation," GCC Secretary General Abdelfrahman al-Attiyah told AFP.

"I solemnly invite all parties, including Iran, to use the language of reason and dialogue, away from confrontation and escalation," he said of the standoff with the international community over Tehran's programme of uranium enrichment.

Western nations suspect Iran is using its nuclear programme to develop a nuclear bomb covertly, despite Iranian denials, the United

States and its allies are pressing for stronger UN sanctions against Tehran.

Gulf Arab leaders -- staunch US allies -- tend to avoid voicing their concerns about Iranian intentions in public.

But in an interview last month with British newspapers, Bahrain's Crown Prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, for the first time accused the Islamic republic of seeking to acquire nuclear arms.

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"When a country like Iran has the liberty to enrich uranium, there is a danger that this country will equip itself with atomic weapons," he told AFP.

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States and its allies are pressing for stronger UN sanctions against Tehran.

The statement was referring to Tuesday's meeting in the United States when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas declared their intention to reach an agreement on creating a Palestinian state by the end of 2008.

Four were killed in the attack near the southern Gaza town of Khan Yunis and a fifth died later of his wounds, the medics said.

An Israeli military spokesman confirmed to AFP that warplanes had launched an overnight raid in the Khan Yunis area, targeting "a group of terrorists."

Another two militants were

27 killed in fresh Lankan clashes

But the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website said Sri Lankan airforce fighter jets dropped "several bombs" late on Friday around guerrilla-controlled areas in the northern peninsula of Jaffna.

The military's claim could not be verified because the area is restricted and rebel spokesman Rasiah Ilanthirayen could not immediately be reached for comment.

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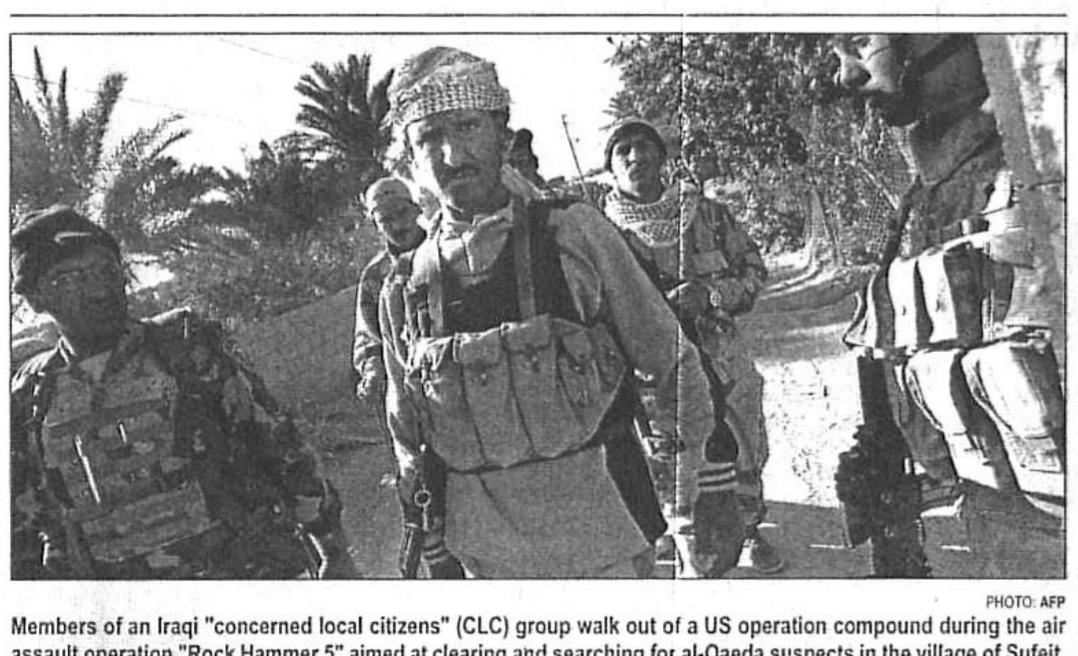


PHOTO: AFP  
Members of an Iraqi "concerned local citizens" (CLC) group walk out of a US operation compound during the air assault operation "Rock Hammer 5" aimed at clearing and searching for al-Qaeda suspects in the village of Sufet, 32km south of Baquba Friday. Dozens of suspected al-Qaeda fighters raided the Shia village of Duailiyah near Baquba Saturday, killing at least 13 people including women and children.

## Five Palestinians killed in Israeli airstrike

AFP, Gaza City

wounded in the strike, said the Brigades statement, which called the attack "the direct result of Annapolis... we will respond very toughly to this aggression."

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