

# US asks Palestinians, Israel to do more for peace

AFP, Ramallah

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pushed Israel and the Palestinians yesterday to renew peace talks dealt a major blow Israel's deadly assault on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip.

Rice arrived in the West Bank political capital of Ramallah for talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas after flying into Israel from Cairo, where she told both sides to do more to fulfill their peace plan obligations.

"The rocket attacks against innocent civilians in their cities... it needs to stop. No Israeli government can tolerate that," Rice said, referring to the near-daily volleys launched from Gaza at southern Israel.

"There also needs to be an active peace process," she said at a joint press conference in Cairo with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abu Gheit on the first stop of her latest Middle East tour.

In a rare admission of Israel, she said: "We need to see both sides

exercise their roadmap obligations in a serious way, and frankly there is a lot more that both can do."

The internationally drafted peace blueprint calls on Palestinians to bring law and order to the territories and for Israel to halt settlement activity, but has made little progress since it was adopted in 2003.

Rice began her new peace mission just a day after Israel pulled its troops out of Gaza after a series of air strikes and a massive ground offensive that killed more than 120 Palestinians in less than a week.

The blitz caused Abbas to suspend peace talks that were revived just three months ago under Washington's stewardship and to halt contacts with Israel.

The negotiations were relaunched to great fanfare at a US conference in November but have made little headway since because of the Gaza situation and Israeli settlement activity in the occupied West Bank.

Rice accused Iran of arming Hamas, the Islamist group that

violently seized power in Gaza in June, and said the United States would help arm and train security forces loyal to Abbas.

"It is very clear that Hamas is being armed, and it is very clear that they're being armed in part by the Iranians," she said.

"If Hamas gets armed by the Iranians and nobody helps to improve the security capabilities of the legitimate Palestinian Authority security forces that's not a very good situation."

Rice, whose country is Israel's staunchest ally, also called on the Jewish state to do more to prevent the loss of civilian life in its offensives, with women and children among those killed in the Gaza blitz.

"I have told the Israelis that when they are engaged in defending themselves they need to be aware of the effects of those operations on innocent people... and what can happen the next day," she said.

Abul Gheit said Hamas was "part of the Palestinian equation"

and would have to be dealt with future negotiations, and accused Israel of "exaggerating" military operations in Gaza aimed at stemming the rocket fire.

Hamas's seizure of Gaza, which is one of the most densely populated areas on the planet, complicated peace efforts as it effectively divided the Palestinians into two separately ruled entities.

But Rice voiced confidence in the chances of success for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process despite the Gaza violence.

"I continue to believe that they can get to a deal by the end of the year," Rice said on the plane taking her to Cairo. "The Annapolis process is hardly underway. We are three months into trying to resolve conflict that has been going on for 50 years."

Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert agreed in Annapolis to lay down the framework for a future Palestinian state by the end of US President George W. Bush's mandate in January 2009.



Palestinian children take part in a candle-light vigil held to protest against Israel's bloody assault on the Gaza Strip outside the Church of the Nativity in the West Bank biblical town of Bethlehem Monday. Israel vowed to keep hitting Gaza even as troops pulled out of the Hamas-run territory after clashes that killed more than 110 Palestinians and dealt a major blow to Middle East peace talks.

# Musharraf hints at contacts with PPP

THE DAILY TIMES, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has hinted at the formation of a coalition government of Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in the Punjab.

During his meeting with a 15-member group of MPAs-elect of the Punjab Assembly at President's House on Saturday, Musharraf said that efforts were on to form a coalition government of PML-Q and PPP in the Punjab to ensure continuity of the ongoing development projects, especially in the constitu-

encies of PML-Q MPAs.

Talking to Daily Times, an MPA who attended the meeting, quoted the president as saying that the leaderships of both PPP and PML-Q were in contact with him and he was striving to cobble together an alliance of both parties for continuation of his policies. Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi and Hamid Nasir Chattha led the MPAs, while another group of 15 PML-Q MPAs will meet him in the next few days.

"President Musharraf has assured us that development projects in our constituencies would not stop even if PML-N made the

government in the Punjab," the MPAs said.

Party sources said President Musharraf assured full support of the Centre to the MPAs for completion of development works in their constituencies. They said the president looked confident and he did not discuss the opposition's demands for his resignation. Musharraf is also likely to meet PML-Q MPAs-elect of Balochistan Assembly shortly. The sources said the basic purpose of the meeting was to keep the MPAs associated with the PML-Q and to clarify the rumours about his ouster.

# Indian prisoner back home after 35 years on Pak death row

AFP, Wagah

An Indian man, freed by Pakistan after languishing on death row for suspected espionage for 35 years, was given a hero's welcome when he returned home Tuesday, witnesses and officials said.

Kashmir Singh, 61, waved to Pakistani journalists and well-wishers before walking across the border crossing between rivals India and Pakistan at Wagah in northern Punjab state to be greeted by his family and relatives.

"I am very happy today and want to go home as soon as possible," Singh -- dressed in a white shirt and camel-coloured trousers -- told reporters at the border post before crossing to the Indian side, where his wife and three children were waiting.

"I am grateful to the President of Pakistan for giving me a new life," he added, referring to the pardon Pervez Musharraf granted him last week after hearing of his case.

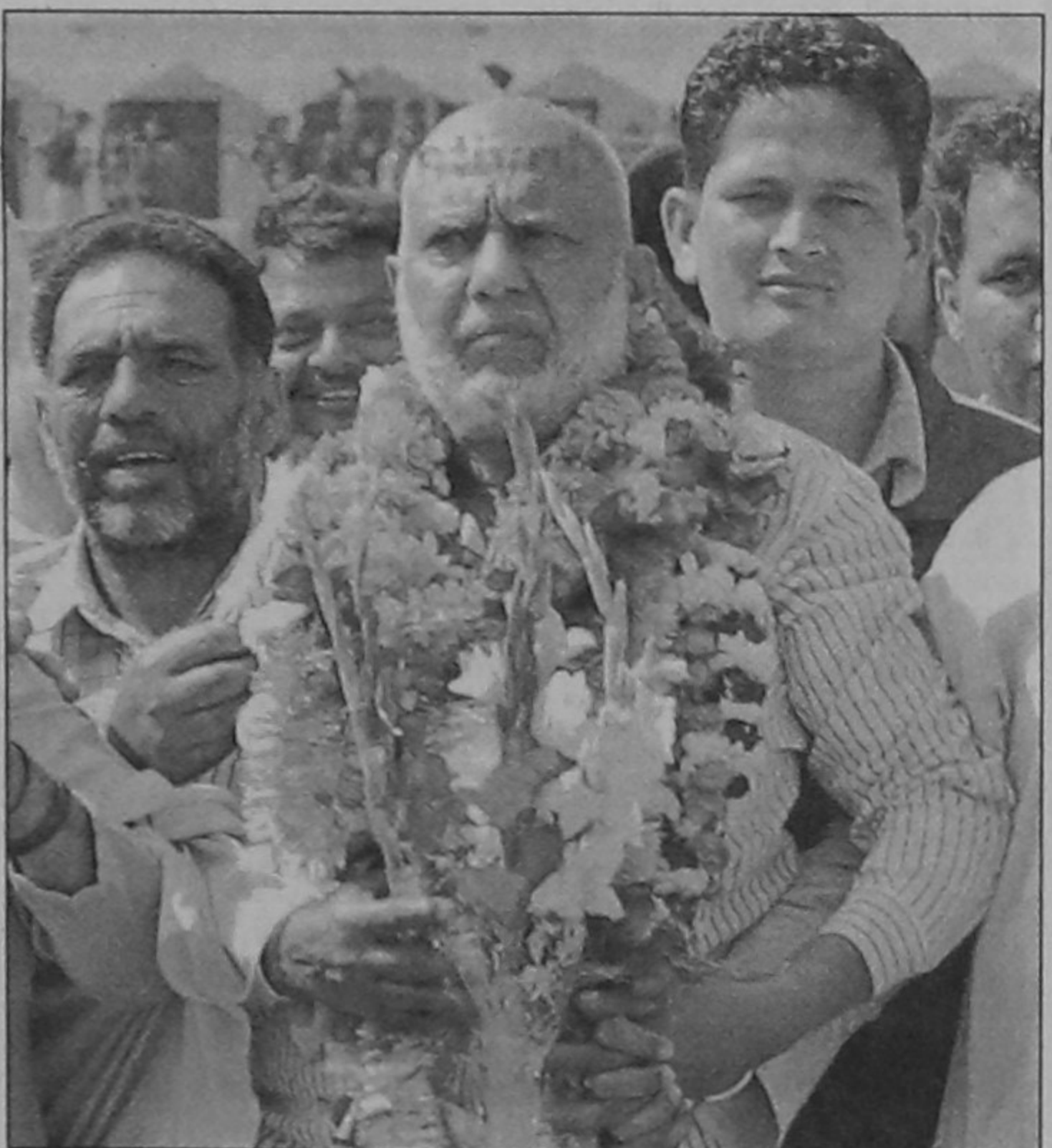


PHOTO: AFP

Released Indian prisoner Kashmir Singh (C) crosses the Pakistan-India international border at the Wagah border post yesterday. The Indian man freed from a Pakistani jail after spending 35 years on death row for spying crossed the border for a long-awaited reunion with his family.

# JOURNALIST HAMID MIR From Pakistan

## FILM ON BENAZIR Zardari disappoints Mahesh Bhatt

People of the Subcontinent have missed a chance to watch a Bollywood film on the life of Benazir Bhutto at least for the time being. Famous Indian film director Mahesh Bhatt was ready to picture the life of Benazir Bhutto.

Actress Shabana Azmi agreed to act as the first woman prime minister of any Muslim country Mahesh Bhatt also selected actors for the roles of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Begum Nusrat Bhutto, General Zia ul Haq, Asif Ali Zardari and General Pervez Musharraf. Mahesh Bhatt was in contact with Anela Khan, younger sister of Benazir Bhutto's political secretary Naheed Khan. She was a part of the film project as an assistant director. Bhatt planned to base his film on the revised edition of "Daughter of the East" written by Benazir Bhutto.

He wanted to sign a formal contract with Asif Ali Zardari for the copyrights of the book. He was sure that the elder sister of Anela Khan will easily get a clearance from Asif Ali Zardari.

It was a great surprise for Mahesh Bhatt when Asif Ali Zardari declined to sign an agreement with Mahesh Bhatt. Naheed Khan tried to convince the husband of Benazir Bhutto to do a favour not only for her younger sister but also for her late leader.

Zardari informed Naheed Khan that late Benazir Bhutto signed an

agreement in her life with famous Hollywood filmmaker Robert Redford and he cannot sign another agreement.

Naheed Khan never gave up. After few days she sent her husband Senator Saifur Abbasi to convince the co-chairman of PPP but Zardari again said sorry to his party senator. Some people in PPP have claimed that late Benazir Bhutto signed a contract with Robert Redford for making a film based on her autobiography in 1989.

The American filmmaker was bound to hit the box offices in five years but he could not start the project. Some sources in the Bhutto family are sure that Rober Redford will come up with a film in one year.

It is learnt that contract between late Benazir Bhutto and Robert Redford have no legal validation. Asif Ali Zardari can sign another agreement with Mahesh Bhatt but he is reluctant to do so due to some political reasons.

Asif Ali Zardari was advised by his lawyers that a film by an Indian director at this stage may have negative consequences on the murder case of Benazir Bhutto. No film could be completed without answering questions that how and who killed Benazir Bhutto. PPP lawyers are not convinced that Benazir Bhutto was killed by a bullet fired from the pistol of one assassin.

# China boosts military spending amid US tensions

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday its defence spending would jump 17.6 percent this year but insisted the rise was moderate, amid a flare-up in tensions with the United States over Beijing's growing military muscle.

Military spending in 2008 will reach 417.8 billion yuan (57.2 billion dollars at the end-2007 exchange rate), a spokesman for China's parliament told reporters ahead of the legislature's annual session beginning Wednesday.

As Jiang Enzhu announced the figures, he also renewed a warning to rival Taiwan that its plans for a March 22 referendum on United Nations membership was putting

an already uneasy peace between the two sides at risk.

Nevertheless, Jiang said the budget rise, following a similar jump in 2007, was not excessive, with the spending coming off a low base and helping to boost soldiers' incomes as well as beef up the military's high-tech capabilities.

"In recent years the Chinese government has moderately increased its spending on national defence on the basis of sustained, steady and fast economic growth and rapid build-up of government revenues," Jiang said.

Jiang said China's military spending was just 1.4 percent of its gross domestic product last year, compared with 4.6 percent in the United States and three percent in Britain.

# NEWS ANALYSIS Ex-Soviet Armenia splits over bloody protests

AFP, Yerevan

Ex-Soviet Armenia is deeply split following bloody post-election unrest and may face years of instability if a solution is not found quickly, analysts said.

"Armenia is facing its most difficult political situation since its independence" in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, independent political analyst David Petrosian said.

Riot police clashed Saturday with thousands of protesters who had rallied for 11 consecutive days against Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian's win in a February 19 presidential election.

Despite the leading Western observer mission saying the vote had mostly met international standards, protesters claimed the election was rigged to ensure Sarkisian's victory over opposition leader and former president Levon Ter-Petrosian.

Seven civilians and one police officer were killed as police fired tear gas and live ammunition into the air and protesters fought back with petrol bombs, sticks and stones. Dozens were injured, many from gunshot wounds.

Outgoing President Robert Kocharian ordered a 20-day state of emergency following the unrest, banning public demonstrations and censoring the news.

While many in the capital Yerevan had been expecting police to crack down on protesters, ordinary Armenians were stunned by the scale of the clashes and death toll.

"Polarisation in Armenian society is now very deep. And after this level of violence it will be very challenging for all sides to bring the situation back to normal," said Magdalena Frichova, the Caucasus director for the International Crisis Group think tank.

"It's extremely difficult to predict what will happen next." This mountainous country of about three million people -- wedged between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran and Turkey -- is no stranger to political turbulence.

In 1999, armed gunmen stormed parliament and killed seven high-ranking officials, including the prime minister.

Nearly every election since independence has been followed by mass protests and Ter-Petrosian himself sent tanks into the streets to quell demonstrations following his re-election in 1996.

But recent events have marked a new level of tension.

"Refusing to recognise the results of elections and protests are part of Armenian political culture," analyst Alexander Iskandarian of the Caucasus Media Institute said.

"But Saturday's riots marked a new peak... Ter-Petrosian is becoming more and more radical and wants nothing less than the presidency," he said.

Analysts said that with no signs Ter-Petrosian is ready to back down, it's unclear how the country will emerge from political deadlock. Authorities have already arrested some of the opposition's leadership, including two lawmakers on charges of attempting a coup d'etat.

But short of making large-scale arrests, tens of thousands of disgruntled Ter-Petrosian supporters will remain deeply opposed to Sarkisian's leadership, analysts said.

Much will depend, analysts said, on how the international community responds to the recent unrest.

After initially backing the vote, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe may choose to be more harsh in a final election report due very soon, Petrosian said.

A negative report could give the opposition fresh ammunition to challenge the result, he said, while continued backing for the election could convince the opposition it has no hope.

"Everything depends on the international community," Petrosian said.



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