

British PM pledges more support for Palestinians

AFP, Bethlehem

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown yesterday pledged further economic aid to the Palestinians aimed at bolstering the US-backed Middle East peace process.

"We have pledged 500 million dollars for economic development in Palestine over three years to 2011," Brown said following a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the occupied West Bank town of Bethlehem.

"I can announce today a further commitment of 60 million dollars, 30 million of which we will give as direct budgetary support, bringing our total support to the Palestinian Authority this year to 175 million dollars."

In keeping with his "economic roadmap to peace" Brown pledged support for a new mortgage finance authority, which he said would assist with the financing of some 30,000 new Palestinian housing units and generate up to 50,000 new jobs.



British Prime Minister Gordon Brown (L) is welcomed by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as he arrives at Abbas' headquarters in the West Bank city of Bethlehem yesterday. Brown met Israeli and Palestinian leaders Sunday on his first visit to Jerusalem since becoming premier in a bid to bolster peace negotiations and economic development.

US warns Iran as nuke talks yield no deal

AFP, Geneva

World powers' latest bid to make Iran halt its nuclear programme stalled Saturday as high-level talks involving US and Iranian officials ended without a deal and Washington warned of possible further "confrontation."

"It was a constructive meeting, but still we didn't get the answer to our questions," EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said after the talks in Geneva that aimed to get Tehran to give up its disputed nuclear programme in return for a package of incentives.

"There is always progress in these talks, but insufficient," he said, adding that the Iranians were expected to respond to the latest incentives within two weeks.

He did not overtly address the question of further sanctions, but the US State Department after the talks warned Iran to accept the incentives or face "further isolation."

"We hope the Iranian people understand that their leaders need to make a choice between cooperation, which would bring benefits to all, and confrontation, which can only lead to further isolation," spokesman Sean McCormack said in a statement.

Detailing the proposals on the table Saturday, Solana said the international community proposed that "we refrain from (further) Security Council resolutions and for Iran to refrain from nuclear activity including the installations

of new centrifuges" for processing uranium.

"We are looking forward to an answer from Iran in this question... in a couple of weeks," he said.

Russia's deputy foreign minister Sergei Kisliak, who attended the talks, was quoted by the Ria-Novosti news agency as saying that he too expected a response from Iran in two weeks.

"We hope that the two weeks we agreed on with the Iranians will help Iran to specify its stance on our proposals," he said.

Iranian, European and US officials, including US State Department official William Burns, attended the talks in Geneva's historic Town Hall as part of a bid to resolve the long-running dispute over Tehran's nuclear programme.

In Washington, McCormack said Burns "delivered a clear simple message" that the United States would only engage in negotiations with Iran when it halts uranium enrichment.

Western countries suspect Iran is secretly trying to develop a nuclear bomb and the United Nations has imposed several sets of sanctions against Tehran over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment.

Iran denies seeking nuclear weapons, insisting that its programme is designed to provide energy for its growing population for the time when its reserves of fossil fuels run out.

World powers have offered to

start pre-negotiations during which Tehran would add no more uranium-enriching centrifuges and in return face no further sanctions.

Solana said that no fixed date had been set for this meeting, which could be held over the telephone and might only feature deputy officials rather than another high-level encounter.

Iran's top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili described Saturday's talks as "constructive and progressing," in comments to reporters afterwards.

"We have understood better our mutual positions," he said.

"There are points in common and points that are not in common," Jalili added. "We have agreed to discuss this."

The Iranian representative compared the diplomatic process to weaving traditional Persian carpets: progress in cases "moves forward in millimetres," he said.

"It's a very precise work, in certain cases it's a very beautiful endeavour and hopefully the end result, the final product, would be beautiful to behold," Jalili said.

The attendance of Burns, the number three official at the State Department, marked a major policy shift by Washington, which has not had any diplomatic relations with Iran since 1980 following the Islamic Revolution.

McCormack said Burns did not meet or speak separately with any member of the Iranian delegation.

US should leave as soon as possible: Iraqi leader

AP, Berlin

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki says US troops should leave Iraq "as soon as possible," according to a magazine report, and he called presidential candidate Barack Obama's suggestion of 16 months "the right timeframe for a withdrawal."

In Baghdad, however, the chief spokesman for al-Maliki issued a statement Sunday saying the prime minister's comments were "not conveyed accurately" by Germany's Der Spiegel magazine.

Spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said al-Maliki did not endorse a specific timetable but instead discussed an "Iraqi vision" of US troop withdrawals based on negotiations with Washington and "in the light of the continuing positive developments on the ground."

The Der Spiegel article, released Saturday, quoted al-Maliki as giving apparent backing to the withdrawal plans discussed by Obama the Illinois senator and likely Democratic nominee has pledged to withdraw combat troops from Iraq within 16 months if he is elected.

"That, we think, would be the right timeframe for a withdrawal,

with the possibility of slight changes," al-Maliki was quoted as saying. "Those who operate on the premise of short time periods in Iraq today are being more realistic. Artificially prolonging the tenure of US troops in Iraq would cause problems."

Asked when US forces would leave Iraq, he responded, "As soon as possible, as far as we're concerned."

In the interview, al-Maliki said he was not seeking to endorse Obama.

Sadiq al-Rikabi, an adviser to al-Maliki, said later that Iraqi officials do not intend to be "part of the electoral campaign in the United States."

"We will deal with any administration that comes to power," he said.

White House spokesman Scott Stanzel said Saturday: "In the interview, the Prime Minister made clear that any decision will be based on continuing positive developments as he and the president both did in their joint statement yesterday. It is our shared view that should the recent security gains continue, we will be able to meet our joint aspirational time horizons."

Obama meets Karzai

AFP, Kabul

US Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama yesterday met here with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who has been criticised by the Illinois senator for not doing enough to rebuild his war-torn country.

An official in Karzai's office told AFP the talks had taken place in the capital, but gave no details about the meeting.

Obama has made Afghanistan a key focus of his foreign policy pledges, saying it -- not Iraq -- should be the focus of the so-called "war on terror" and promising to send more troops to battle insurgents here if elected.

He has been critical of Karzai's government, telling CNN it had "not gotten out of the bunker and helped to organise Afghanistan and (the) government, the judiciary, police forces, in ways that would give people confidence."

"So there are a lot of problems there," Obama said in an interview with CNN earlier this month.

His comments drew immediate fire from Republicans, who accused him of insulting a key US

"war on terror" ally and ignoring multiple assassination attempts against Karzai.

Before his talks with Karzai, Obama and two US senators accompanying him started the day with breakfast with US troops at a US military camp in Kabul.

On Saturday they met senior military commanders at the main American base at Bagram, north of the capital, for a briefing on the international effort to quell the insurgency being fought here by the Taliban and other extremists.

The delegation later flew to a base in eastern Afghanistan, close to the border with Pakistan, where they met Afghan officials and more of the 36,000 US soldiers stationed here.

Obama has accused the Bush administration of allowing al-Qaeda and the Taliban to regroup by diverting vital US forces to the war in Iraq.

He has said that if he wins the White House in November, he would commit at least two more combat brigades, up to 10,000 men, to Afghanistan, while downscaling the size of the force in Iraq.

Nato airstrikes kill 9 Afghan policemen

Four other civilians killed in separate coalition raid

AFP, Herat/Kabul

Nine policemen and four civilians were killed in Afghanistan yesterday in international military air strikes called in when police and troops clashed after mistaking each other for Taliban, authorities said.

The "friendly fire" incident occurred before dawn when Afghan and international soldiers moved into a district in the southwest without informing police, who thought they were militants, the deputy governor of Farah province said.

"An engagement took place, each side thinking the other was the Taliban," said Mohammad Younus Rasouli.

The troops called for air support and military attack aircraft arrived and bombed a police post, he said. Nine police were killed and five wounded.

Rasouli said Nato's

International Security Assistance Force had carried out the strikes, but Isaf said it was an operation by the separate US-led coalition. The coalition confirmed an incident and said it was investigating.

Rasouli said the police chief of Farah's Anar Dara district, on the border with Iran, was among the wounded and was in a serious condition.

In a separate incident, Nato-led troops in Afghanistan accidentally killed four Afghan civilians overnight and were investigating if they were responsible for the deaths of three more, the alliance said.

The incident occurred late Saturday in the volatile eastern province of Paktika close to the border with Pakistan, the International Security Assistance Force said in a statement.

An Isaf unit fired two mortar rounds, which landed nearly one kilometre (less than a mile) from

the intended target, it said.

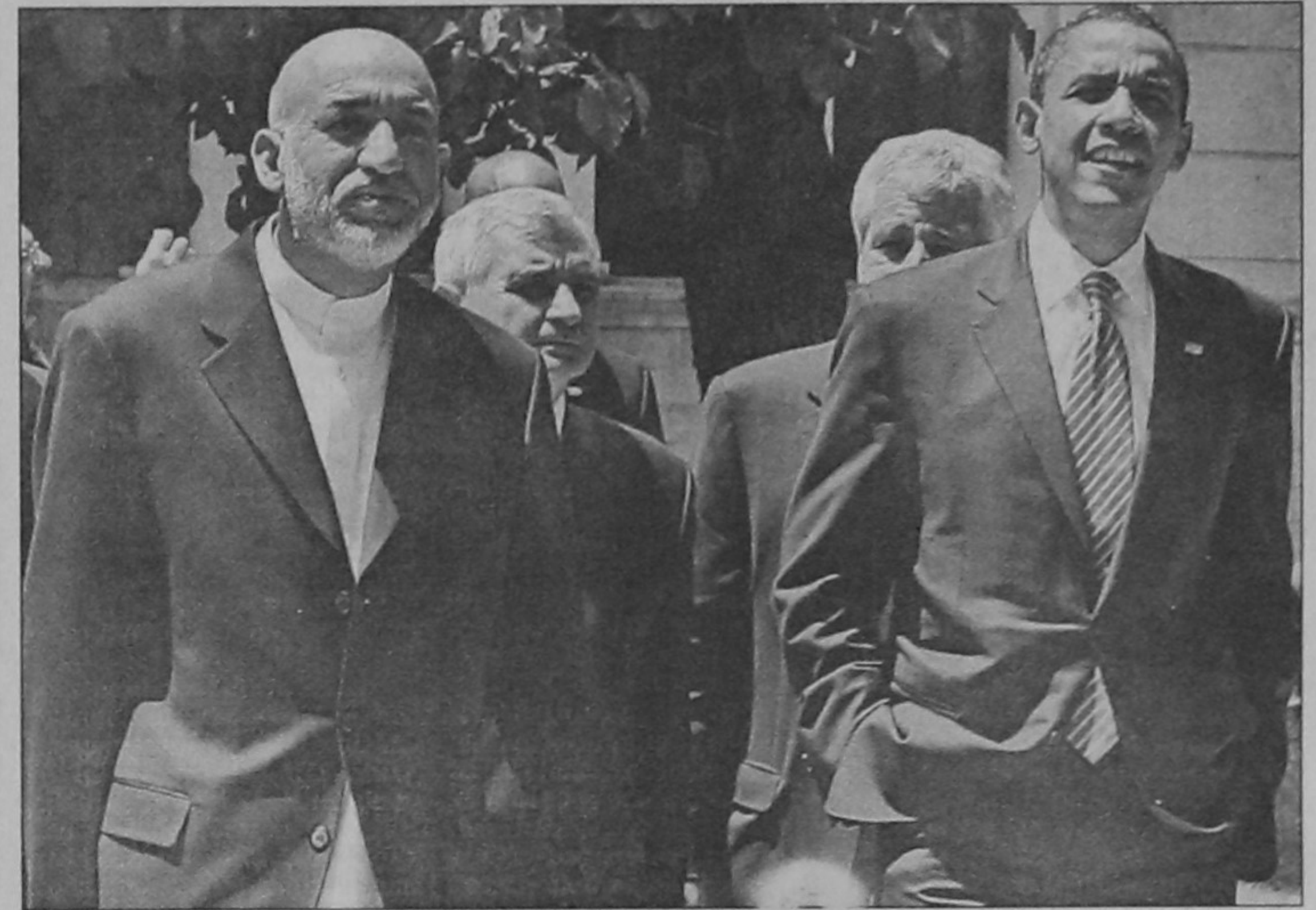
Wounded civilians later came to a local Isaf base for treatment and a medical team was sent to the area to investigate.

"An Isaf unit on a fire mission accidentally killed four civilians, with an unconfirmed further three deaths," the statement said. "Four civilians were also wounded and are now under treatment by Isaf forces."

The force said it "deeply regrets" the incident.

The incidents come as US presidential hopeful Barack Obama is visiting Afghanistan to find out how international efforts against extremist militants trying to overthrow the Afghan government are progressing.

There have been several deadly incidents of "friendly fire" in Afghanistan, where many local and international security forces are involved in a growing fight against Taliban insurgents.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai walks with US Democratic Presidential contender Barack Obama (R) prior to a meeting at the Presidential Palace in Kabul yesterday. Obama met Afghan President Hamid Karzai on a trip to assess the international effort against a deadly extremist insurgency.

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Cambodia informs UN of alleged Thai incursion

AP, Preah Vihear

Cambodia has complained to the UN Security Council that Thai forces have violated its territory near an ancient World Heritage Site temple where hundreds of troops continued to face off yesterday.

Cambodia's permanent mission in New York submitted a letter to the chairman of the Security Council and the chairman of the General Assembly to "draw their attention to the current situation on the Cambodian-Thai border," Information Minister Khieu Kanharith said.

"Cambodia is not asking for UN intervention. We still stick to Prime Minister Hun Sen's instructions to try to solve the problem peacefully between the two sides," the minister told The Associated Press in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh.

The conflict over territory surrounding Preah Vihear temple escalated when Unesco recently approved Cambodia's application to have the complex named a World Heritage Site. Thai activists fear the new status will undermine Thailand's claim to nearby land.

1st trial of Guantanamo inmate begins today

AFP, Washington

A special military trial at Guantanamo is due to open today as detainee Salim Hamdan, who worked as a driver for terror mastermind Osama bin Laden, faces the first US war-crimes tribunal since the end of World War II. Hamdan, who is from Yemen, is the first "enemy combatant" from the US "war on terror" to face a full-scale trial since the prison camp at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba was opened in late 2001.

And with a federal judge rebuffing the last-ditch attempt by Hamdan's lawyers to halt the trial, the landmark case is now set to open Monday after preliminary hearings over the past week.

Hamdan, whose trial is expected to last two weeks, faces charges of "conspiracy" and "material support for terrorism," and could receive life imprisonment if convicted.

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