

ME peace takes centre stage at UN

AP, United Nations

The key international players trying to promote peace in the Middle East meet on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on Friday as the UN Security Council opens a high-level debate on Israeli settlements.

The so-called Quartet, the UN, the US, the European Union and Russia is meeting at a difficult period in the region.

Israel is awaiting a new government, the Palestinians are seriously divided, and President Bush is looking for an agreement by the end of the year, although both Palestinians and Israelis have expressed doubt about achieving that goal.

Quartet members are also scheduled to attend an Iftar meal that breaks the day's fast during Ramadan with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Arab partners on Friday night. Ban also met with Palestinian

President Mahmoud Abbas on Thursday evening.

Ban is hoping to push Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and Palestinian reconciliation between Fatah, which controls the West Bank, and the militant Hamas, which controls Gaza.

Also Thursday, top EU officials met with Ryad Al Malki, the Palestinian minister of foreign affairs, in an attempt to take a greater role moving the peace talks forward.

"This meeting, which took place at crucial time in the peace process, and on the eve of the meeting of the Quartet, provided an opportunity to discuss the European Union's enhanced role in the peace process deepening relations between the European Union and the Palestinian Authority," the EU said in a statement.

But a group of leading aid agencies, including CARE, Save the Children and Christian Aid,

issued a report Thursday warning the Quartet process was failing and called for more action and less words.

"The Quartet has fundamentally failed to improve the humanitarian situation on the ground. Unless the Quartet's words are matched by more sustained pressure and decisive action the situation will deteriorate still further. Time is fast running out," David Mepham, director of policy for Save the Children UK, said in a statement.

On Friday, the UN Security Council will hold an open debate at the ministerial level on the ongoing Israeli settlement building in disputed territory. Saudi Arabia requested the debate to coincide with the General Assembly, which has brought a host of world leaders to New York.

Public speeches are expected from Saudi Arabia and the Arab League, and probably Israel

speaking in response, but no council resolution on the matter is expected.

Continued Israeli settlement construction and Israeli security concerns have clouded Middle East peace negotiations. Both Palestinians and Israelis have expressed doubt about achieving an accord before Bush leaves office.

As late as last month Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice held out hope of talks succeeding.

"God willing, with the goodwill of the parties, and the tireless work of the parties, we have a good chance of succeeding," Rice said after seeing Israeli and Palestinian leaders and summoning top negotiators for a joint status report.

Israeli President Shimon Peres told the General Assembly in his address Wednesday that despite "stagnation and regression and failure" in the peace process, "Israelis and Arabs are marching toward peace."

McCain-Obama debate remains doubtful

AP, Washington

The first presidential debate between Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama remained in doubt Friday, the very day it was to be held, embroiled in the same partisan divisions that were holding up a Wall Street bailout plan.

Obama said he intended to travel to the University of Mississippi in Oxford, where the debate had long been scheduled to begin at 9 p.m. EDT. McCain, who had proposed delaying the contest so the two presidential hopefuls could help negotiate an economic rescue plan, wouldn't commit.

"I'm very hopeful that we'll get enough of an agreement tomorrow so we can make this debate," McCain said Thursday on NBC's "Nightly News."

Obama tried to press McCain into showing up for the first of three scheduled debates between them, saying they should be able to handle the 90-minute forum and the financial crisis at the same time.

"Senator McCain has no need to be fearful about a debate," Obama told reporters. "He's a person of strong opinions and he's been expressing them on the campaign trail."



Indian Christians hold placards and banners while shouting slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday. The protest rally was staged to draw attention to continued anti-Christian violence in the southern Indian state of Karnataka and the eastern state of Orissa.

Deposed Thai PM will not return to stand trial

AP, Bangkok

A Thai court issued a fourth arrest warrant for toppled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on Friday, but his spokesman insisted that the former leader would not return to Thailand to stand trial.

Thaksin, who was ousted from power in a 2006 coup, recently fled Thailand to escape a string of corruption charges.

Thaksin's personal spokesman, Phongthep Thepkanchana, told reporters at the Supreme Court on Friday that Thaksin and his family would not return to Thailand to stand trial.

"Thaksin and his family are now living in London and he will not return to face any trial in the near future," Phongthep said.

The Supreme Court issued a fresh warrant Friday because Thaksin failed to report to court in an abuse of power case tied to an irregular lottery allegedly run by Thaksin, his former Cabinet and other officials.

Phongthep is one of the dozens of former Thaksin officials charged in the case. Phongthep, along with the other defendants who attended court Friday, were released on bail. The court set the next hearing for late December.



US President George W. Bush (C) makes remarks on the economic crisis during a meeting with bipartisan and bicameral members of Congress including the presidential candidates Republican John McCain (L) and Democrat Barack Obama (R) in the Cabinet Room on Thursday at the White House in Washington, DC.

Malaysian PM may resign in March

AP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's ruling party signalled Friday that the increasingly unpopular prime minister may step down by March, but pledged to allow him a "dignified" exit from politics.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said after chairing an emergency meeting of the United Malays National Organisation that he will announce within two weeks whether he will defend his post as the party's chief in March party elections.

Every prime minister since Malaysia's independence in 1957 has been the UMNO president.

Abdullah said the party's policy-making body decided Friday to postpone the elections to choose its leaders, by three months, to March to "facilitate early transition" of power.

He refused to confirm if this meant he would not contest the elections, saying he would reveal his decision before Oct. 9, when the party's district officials start meeting to nominate candidates for the ballot.

"It will be my decision whether

to contest or not. You can go on guessing but the decision will be mine," Abdullah told a news conference.

Abdullah has been facing calls to step down to take responsibility for leading the UMNO-dominated National Front ruling coalition to disastrous results in general elections last March.

The prime minister previously promised to hand over power to his deputy, Najib Razak, in 2010 instead of 2013 when his term ends. But party dissidents said that was too long and demanded that he retire before the ruling party's next elections.

"We have taken cognisance of the views of the party members," Najib said Friday.

By postponing the elections, UMNO's top leaders appear to have struck a compromise that would allow the 68-year-old Abdullah to exit gracefully.

Trade Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who has urged Abdullah to consider retiring earlier, said Friday's decision might indicate that March "is the new deadline" for Abdullah to hand over power.

Hindu-Christian clashes kill 1 more in India

AP, Bhubaneswar

About 50 Christians armed with knives, sticks and stones hacked a Hindu man to death in the eastern Indian state of Orissa in the latest outbreak of sectarian violence that has left 27 people dead, police said Friday.

Police officer Kishore Pradhan said the attack in the town of Raikia was one of two that took place Thursday in Kandhamal district.

In the other, about 500 Hindus attacked and burned about 50 Christian homes and two prayer halls in Beherasahi village, Pradhan said. The residents fled their homes and no injuries were reported, he said.

Hindu-Christian clashes in Kandhamal started Aug. 24 following the killing of a Hindu religious leader. At the time, police blamed Maoist rebels active in the area, but right-wing Hindu groups blamed local Christians and set fire to a Christian orphanage. The violence then spread to include mob attacks on churches, shops and homes.

On Thursday, the federal government in New Delhi asked the Orissa state government to take quick steps to restore peace.

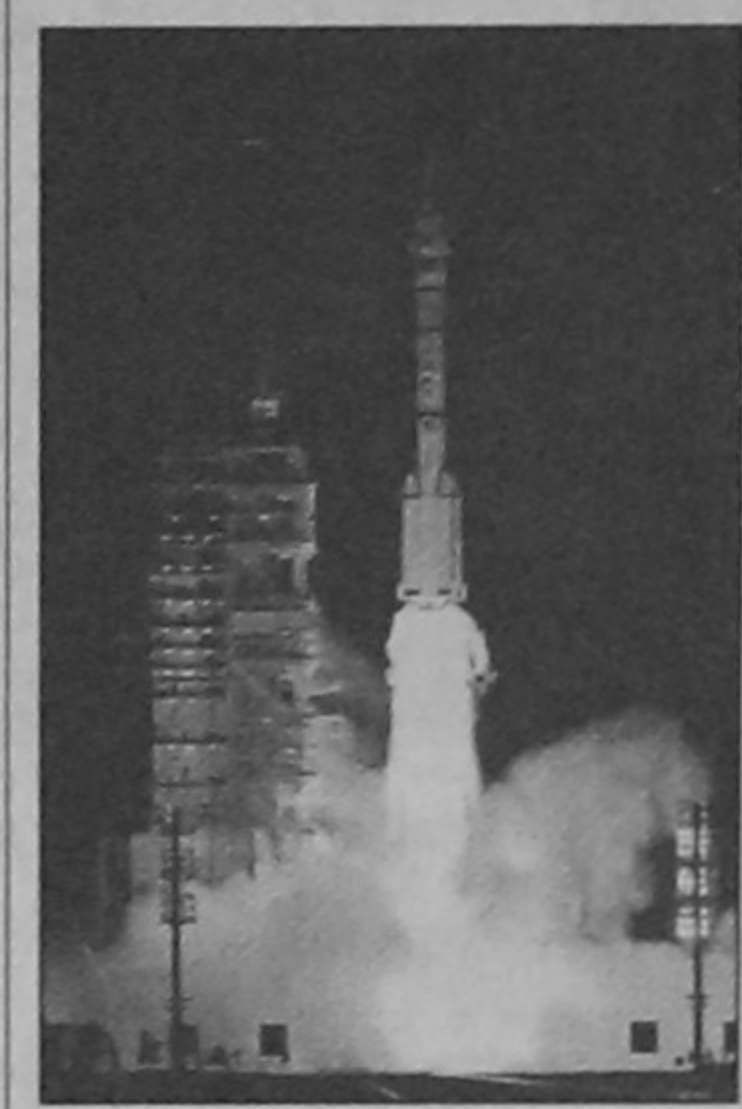
The Orissa government was told that the continuing violence is "a matter of serious concern and cannot be allowed to continue," the federal Home Ministry said in a statement.

The state's top elected official, Navin Patnaik, told reporters that there were still "stray incidents of violence in Kandhamal." He said his government has asked New Delhi for thousands more paramilitary troops to help restore order.

Already, thousands of local police and paramilitary troops have been deployed in the affected district and the area is under an overnight curfew and large public gatherings have been banned.

Relations are usually peaceful between Christians, who account for 2.5 percent of India's 1.1 billion people, and Hindus, who make up 80 percent.

However, Orissa has a history of Hindu-Christian clashes, usually sparked by Hindu suspicions over missionary work. Hard-line Hindu groups claim that Christian missionary groups are forcing or bribing people to convert. Christian churches deny anyone has been pressured or paid to change their religious beliefs.



The Shenzhou VII spacecraft lifts off from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northwest China at 9:10 pm (13:10 GMT) on Thursday. China launched its riskiest space flight yet, sending three men into orbit around the earth on a mission that will include the nation's first ever space walk.

China's astronauts spend 1st day in orbit

AP, Jiuquan

China's three astronauts spent their first day in orbit Friday spoiled with a spicy 80-dish menu as they prepared for the most dangerous part of their mission -- the nation's first space walk.

The voyage of the Shenzhou VII, China's third manned foray into space, has proceeded without a glitch since it blasted off from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northwest China late Thursday, state media said.

"We feel physically sound," the trio, led by Zhai Zhigang, reported back to ground control after blast-off, Xinhua news agency reported.

At 4:04 am (2004 GMT Thursday) the Shenzhou VII entered into a round orbit around Earth from its initial oval orbit, a complicated manoeuvre which makes it possible for the three to get down to the real business of the journey.

The three spent most of the day assembling and testing the space suit that one of the astronauts -- most likely 41-year-old Zhai -- was to put on for an unprecedented walk in space scheduled for Saturday, Xinhua said.

Zhang Jianqi, one of the chief engineers for China's space programme, said keeping three men in the spacecraft, and then sending one outside, would be a "big test".

2 terror suspects arrested on KLM flight

AP, Berlin

German police commandos grabbed two terrorist suspects from an Amsterdam-bound flight early Friday before the plane took off from Cologne, police said.

A 23-year-old Somali man and a 24-year-old German born in Somalia were arrested before the KLM flight left the airport, North Rhine-Westphalia state police said.

A KLM spokeswoman said on NOS news in the Netherlands that police boarded the plane when it was at its "point of departure" and grabbed the two suspects.

Everyone was then forced to leave the plane, and there was a "baggage parade" to see whose bags belonged to whom, she said.

No further details were immediately available.

Germany's top-selling Bild newspaper, citing police sources, said the two had been under observation for months and a suicide note was found in their apartment saying that they wanted to die for the "jihad" or "holy war."

India, Pakistan to attend Sydney nuclear disarmament confce

AP, Canberra

India and Pakistan will attend an international nuclear disarmament conference for the first time in Sydney next month, Australia's government said Friday, even though the nuclear-armed foes have consistently shunned a nonproliferation treaty.

The 15-member International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament will meet Oct. 19-21 to "shape a global consensus" on improving the 28-year-old Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty before it is reviewed in 2010, the government said in a statement.

"The commission's two-year mandate is to reinvigorate the global debate on the need to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons and for nuclear disarmament," Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was quoted as saying.

Australia's former foreign minister, Gareth Evans, will co-chair the event with Yoriko Kawaguchi, an ex-foreign minister in Japan, the

government said. Senior Indian diplomat Brajesh Mishra and Pakistan's ex-army chief Jehangir Karamat are to be among the delegates.

Evans has recently said all nuclear powers including those who have refused to join the nonproliferation treaty such as India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel must be included in the new process if the world is to ever achieve disarmament.

Commissioners from five nuclear powers United States, China, Russia, Britain and France will attend, as well as representatives from Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Germany, Norway, South Africa and Mexico, the statement said.

Ron Huiskens, a nuclear proliferation expert from the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, said the inclusion of India and Pakistan was significant because neither country had been directly involved in such negotiations since the treaty came into force in 1970.

Myanmar police defused 2nd bomb in Yangon

AP, Yangon

Police defused a bomb just five minutes before it was set to explode in Myanmar's main city near the site of another blast that wounded seven people, a state-controlled newspaper reported yesterday.

Thursday's explosion occurred at a bus stop near City Hall, a site that was central to street protests led by Buddhist monks a year ago against the impoverished country's military rulers.

The second device was set to go off at 11:45 a.m. Thursday, but police defused it at 11:40 am, the Myanmar Ahlin daily reported. It was discovered just 10 feet from the site of the earlier bomb, the report said.

The unexploded bomb was attached to a cassette player, the newspaper said, without elaborating.

At least 31 people were killed when troops fired on protesters Sept. 26-27, 2007, violently crushing the peaceful uprising and sparking global outrage. The anti-government protests were the biggest demonstrations in Myanmar in 20 years. The junta has been in power since 1962.



Pakistani Rangers and police officers inspect the destroyed hideout of suspected militants after an operation in Karachi yesterday. Three Pakistani militants blew themselves up after police raided their hideout on Friday, preventing a major attack in the country's biggest city Karachi, police said.



Leader of India's Trinamool Congress (TMC) party Mamata Banerjee gestures as she addresses a rally in Kolkata yesterday. Hundreds of TMC activists observed the day as 'Singur Divas' (Singur day).

US should hold direct talks with Iran

Says IAEA chief

AFP, Berlin

The United States should hold direct talks with Iran to settle the dispute over Tehran's nuclear programme, the head of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog said in an interview published Friday.

In this matter, "it is not Europe who is in charge, but the United States," Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung daily.

"The faster there are direct negotiations, the better are the chances of reaching a solution," he said, in comments published in German.

"If the United States sits down at

a table with North Korea, a regime that is not considered democratic and which also possesses nuclear arms, I don't understand why they can't negotiate with Iran," he added.

The UN Security Council has imposed three rounds of sanctions on Iran for refusing to suspend uranium enrichment, a process which can be used to make the fissile material for a nuclear bomb.

The West says Iran aims to produce an atomic bomb -- a charge Tehran strongly denies. But China and Russia have been reluctant to seek new sanctions against Iran despite its continued defiance of the UN nuclear watchdog.

EU monitors in Georgia as operation gears up

AFP, Tbilisi

Dozens of monitors from across the European Union arrived in Georgia Friday for a mission aimed at easing tensions in the war-torn country, a diplomat close to the mission said.

As they arrived, both Russia and Georgia urged the EU to take a tough stance with the other party.

Nearly 70 observers arrived by plane from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Spain and Sweden, while a Romanian group came by ship, landing in the Black Sea port of Poti with armoured cars, said the diplomat.

About 300 unarmed EU observers are due to be in position on October 1 as part of a peace deal

tackling the consequences of last month's war between Georgia and Russia over the South Ossetia rebel region.

Russia has committed to drawing its troops back to their "pre-conflict positions" by October 10 as part of the deal brokered by the EU to end August's fighting.

"We're confident that as of the first we'll be ready to start our work," said the diplomat close to the mission, who requested anonymity while the mission had not yet formally launched.

With observers being sent from 22 EU countries, he said preparations were well advanced on training the observers and establishing headquarters and field offices.

Many observers have a police or military background. They include

a large contingent of French gendarmes, while others are experts in human rights and judicial issues.

The mission's mandate is controversial, with the EU arguing the monitors should have full access to all of Georgia while Russia says they are not to enter the rebel regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Moscow says it will retain 7,600 troops.

A senior official in the EU mission was to hold talks with Russia's military to coordinate the EU deployment with the pull-back of Russian troops.

Some analysts in Georgia doubt Russia will withdraw from areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that were under Georgian control until last month but fell into rebel hands.