



European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana (L) talks with Palestinian lawyer Shrahbil al-Zaim outside the ruin of the American International School, destroyed during Israel's 22-day offensive, in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday.

EU envoy visits Gaza amid truce talks

AP, Gaza City

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana toured the war-torn Gaza Strip on Friday the highest ranking European official to visit the territory since it was overrun by Hamas militants nearly two years ago.

Solana's visit to Gaza was a sign of increasing international engagement in the long-isolated Palestinian enclave.

His tour comes amid a flurry of talks on an Israel-Hamas truce, reconciliation between Palestinian factions and donations for Gaza's reconstruction after Israel's devastating offensive.

That offensive, which ended Jan. 18, was aimed at

halting near-daily rocket fire from Gaza at Israeli towns, but fire has persisted since the fighting stopped in the absence of a long-term truce deal. Militants launched one rocket that exploded near an Israeli communal farm Friday morning, causing no injuries, the Israeli military said.

Solana was not slated to meet with representatives of Hamas, boycotted internationally as a terror group.

"I came to express solidarity with the people of Gaza and to tell them that we will be helping them in the reconstruction process," Solana said, standing at the ruins of the American International School of Gaza, destroyed by Israeli bombs during the

offensive.

An international conference on Gaza's reconstruction is set to begin Monday in Cairo. Solana said the EU hoped to "get the money that will be necessary to reconstruct the destruction that has taken place in this period of time."

The Palestinians hope to raise \$2.8 billion at the conference. The US is expected to pledge \$900 million.

On Friday, the EU's executive office said it will give \$556 million in aid to the Palestinians in 2009, including support for rebuilding Gaza. It said the pledge is to be made at Monday's conference. It was not clear how much of that sum will be spent in Gaza.

Pro-Thaksin protesters end Bangkok rally

AFP, Bangkok

Supporters of, ousted Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra yesterday abandoned a protest camp outside the prime minister's office but vowed to continue their fight to unseat him.

Hundreds of red-clad protesters have been besieging Government House -- Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's office -- since Tuesday in a bid to push for new elections in Thailand, which has already seen months of political upheaval.

Leaders of the so-called "Red Shirts" had vowed to wage a "protracted" campaign against the two-month-old government, but despite attracting 10,000 people Tuesday, numbers dwindled throughout the week.

No military agenda in nuclear plan: Iran

AFP, Tehran

Former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said yesterday Tehran's atomic plans were not of military nature, urging Russia to complete Iran's long-delayed nuclear power plant.

"In the Friday prayer sermon, we don't make false promises. Therefore I declare that Iran's nuclear plan is not to build weapons... and we are ready to prove it in negotiations," he said in a sermon carried live on state radio.

"You are planting a false notion in public minds," the senior cleric said of what he described "unthoughtful words of the main enemies of the Islamic revolution in the past two days after the virtual launch of the Bushehr plant."

Mujahideen man reveals details of Mumbai blasts

CNN-IBN, New Delhi

As Mumbai police make preparations to bring perpetrators of November 26 terrorist attack to book, another terror story is being unravelled.

Exclusive information with CNN-IBN's sister channel IBN7 reveals that a top Indian Mujahideen (IM) operative, Sadiq Sheikh, who is in Maharashtra Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) custody, has revealed on camera the modus operandi of Delhi blasts on October 25, 2005, and Mumbai blasts on July 11, 2006.

"All five of us arranged local train passes for the first class compartments beforehand. We also had local train timetable with us so that we could find out the train as per our convenience," says Sadiq in the recorded confession, which IBN7 has in possession.

US ends ban on media photos of war dead

AFP, Washington

Defence Secretary Robert Gates announced Thursday he had lifted a ban on media coverage of the return of flag-draped coffins of fallen soldiers from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, reversing a controversial policy dating back to 1991.

The decision would leave it up to the families of the dead soldiers if the media would be allowed to film or photograph the coffins at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, Gates said at a news conference.

China urges US to mend ties as military talks resume

AFP, Beijing

China called on the United States yesterday to ease military tensions between the global powers, as the two sides resumed defence talks here following a rift over planned US arms sales to Taiwan.

The talks had raised hopes of cooperation on security issues and dialogue on long-standing tensions, four months after China cut off military exchanges in anger over the proposed 6.5-billion-dollar US arms package to Taiwan.

China's offer to once again hold the annual talks was widely seen as an olive branch extended to the new administration of US President Barack Obama.

But the head of the Chinese delegation appeared to signal a bold tone in his opening remarks, emphasising that there were problems between the two sides and it was up to the United States to fix them.

"China-US military relations remain in a difficult period. We expect the US side to take concrete measures for the resumption and development of our military ties," Qian Lihua, co-chair of the talks and defence ministry press director, said in comments quoted by the state-run Xinhua news agency.

Lot more action needed on Mumbai mayhem

India tells Pakistan

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Colombo

Holding a secretary-level meeting with Pakistan for the first time after the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, India Thursday urged its neighbour to do more to bring the perpetrators to book and 'take credible action to dismantle the resources of terrorists'.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon held talks with his Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir on the sidelines of the 36th session of the Saarc Standing Committee in Colombo. He conveyed India's firm stance with regard to the Mumbai attack and insisted on the need for 'some positive results'.

This is the first time after the Mumbai attacks in November last year - in which over 170 people were killed and which India blamed on Pakistan-based terror-

ists - that secretary-level talks have taken place between the two countries on bilateral ties.

"We have recognised what Pakistan has done, but there is a lot more to be done. We need to see them moving forward," Menon told Colombo-based Indian journalists.

"They should bring the Mumbai attack perpetrators and take credible actions to dismantle the resources of the terrorist in their own country," he said.

Pakistan's Federal Investigative Agency has filed charges against eight men suspected to be involved in the Mumbai attacks. Six of them have been arrested. The seventh is Ajmal Amir Kasab, the lone terrorist captured alive during the terror strikes, while the eighth is still at large.

"We need some positive results. It is

not an easy situation. We will judge (Pakistan) by what they do," he said.

Asked whether the foreign ministers of both the countries would meet in Colombo on the sidelines of the Inter-Summit Sessions of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Council of Ministers' meeting, Menon said: "Nothing has been decided so far."

He said India knew that Pakistan has started a legal process, while India has started one on its own, stressing that India has no problem with the people of Pakistan.

"We are obviously in a new phase of relationship after Mumbai attack, though we kept our dialogue going. For us the Mumbai attack has changed the situation entirely," he said.

"There is a civilian government and they need to demonstrate," Menon said.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (R) and his visiting Iraqi counterpart Jalal Talabani walk along the red carpet to review the honour guard during a welcome ceremony in Tehran yesterday.

Iraqi forces can fill US pullout gap

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's leaders believe their forces have the muscle to ensure the country's security after US troops pull out under orders from President Barack Obama, but foreign advisors are less optimistic.

Only a day before Obama is to announce that US combat troops will leave by August 2010, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said: "We have faith in our armed forces and our security services, to protect the country and consolidate security and stability."

Top US officials said Obama, an early opponent of the US-led 2003 invasion, would announce later on Friday all that combat forces would leave Iraq by August

2010 and there would be a full withdrawal by late 2011.

Some 142,000 American troops are now stationed in Iraq.

Under a so-called Status of Forces Agreement signed with Baghdad last year, Washington had already agreed to withdraw all its combat troops by the end of 2011.

Following the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's US masters entirely dismantled the armed forces and police, starting the task of rebuilding amid a violent insurrection and confessional killings.

Today, after the expulsion of around 24,000 people with links to Islamist militia, the official strength of the police force stands at 560,000.

"There is no doubt that

Iraqi forces are capable of ensuring the country's security. We have already tested them and they are capable of assuming their responsibilities and standing up to threats," interior ministry spokesman General Abdel Karim Khalaf told AFP.

The defence ministry now boasts a force of 260,000 troops, and has the ultimate target of creating one that is 300,000-strong. This would be armed with modern equipment, M-16 assault rifles and F-16 fighters whose acquisition is under negotiation.

In support of this, the government has earmarked eight billion dollars to the security forces in a major slice -- 12.6 percent -- of the 2009 budget.

50 killed in south Sudan fighting this week: UN

AFP, Khartoum

Fighting in the key southern city of Malakal this week has killed some 50 people and left another 100 wounded, a UN official said yesterday.

"According to our estimates, drawn from on-the-ground observations and different sources, the violence has resulted in about 50 deaths and 100 wounded" among both combatants and the civilian population, the official said.

Fighting erupted on Tuesday between former rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which now runs south Sudan, and supporters of Gabriel Tang, a former militia leader who fought alongside the Sudanese army in the 1983-2005 civil war.



This undated image, courtesy of Professor Matthew Bennett of Bournemouth University, shows a fossil footprint in Ileret Kenya.

Ancient Kenya fossil footprints show modern feet

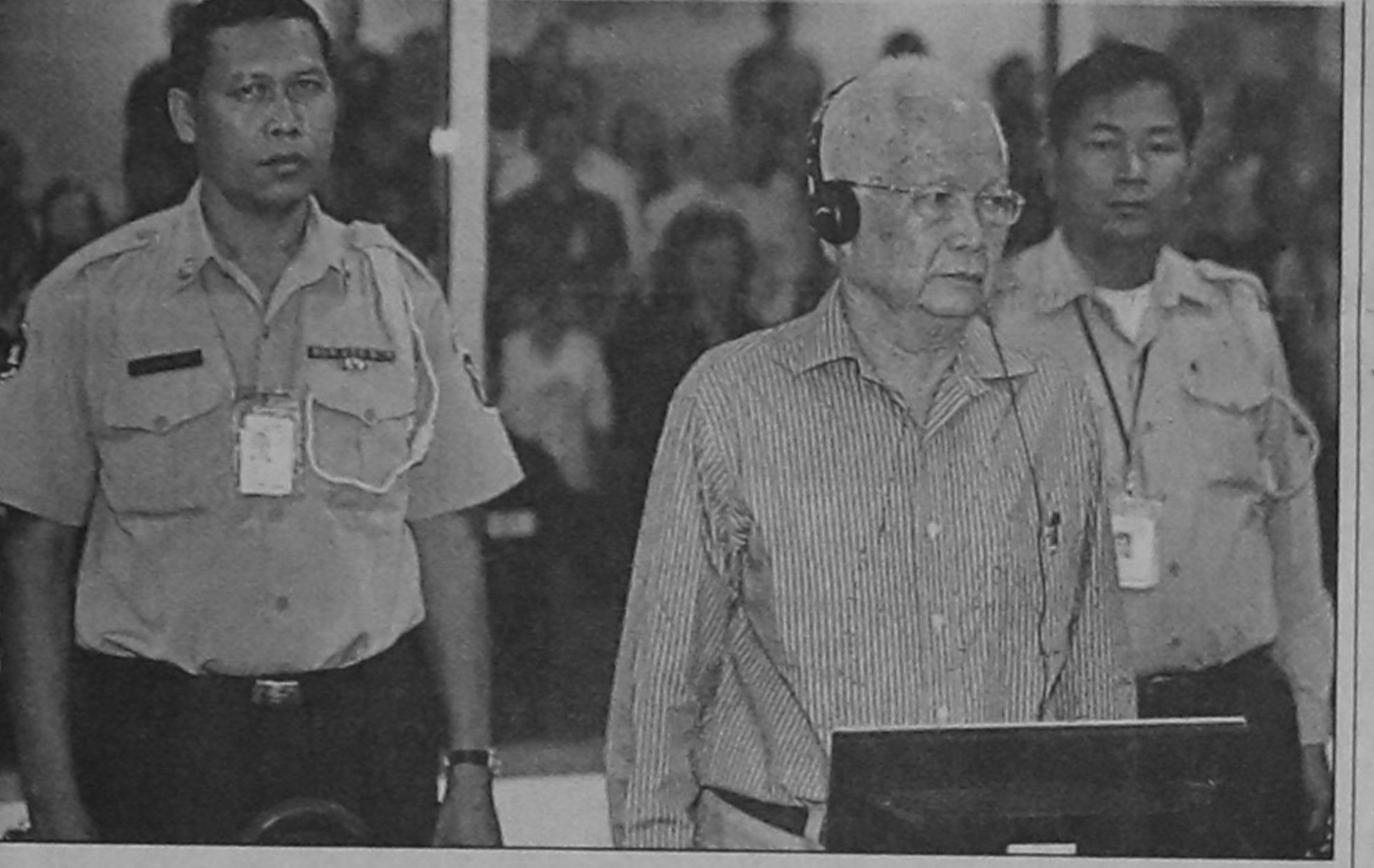
AFP, Washington

Anthropologists have uncovered ancient fossil footprints in Kenya dating back 1.5 million years, the oldest evidence yet that our ancestors walked like present-day humans, a study showed Thursday.

The footprints were discovered in two sedimentary layers near Ileret in northern Kenya and revealed an essentially modern human-like foot anatomy.

The impressions came from the Homo ergaster, or early Homo erectus, the first hominid whose longer legs and shorter arms corresponded to the body proportions of the modern Homo sapiens, the study's authors said.

The footprints provided information on the soft tissue form and structure that are not usually available in fossilized bones, explained Matthew Bennett of Bournemouth University in Britain.



Former Khmer Rouge head of state Khieu Samphan (C) stands in the courtroom during a pre-trial chamber public hearing at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (ECCC) in Phnom Penh yesterday. Khmer Rouge court has adjourned pre-trial hearing of Khieu Samphan to April 3.

US not trying to topple N Korea govt: Hillary

AFP, Washington

The United States has no intention of trying to topple North Korea's regime despite concerns about its behaviour and questions over succession, a senior US official said Thursday.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said that the United States wants to negotiate with North Korea's government, which signed a now-deadlocked six-way deal to end its nuclear drive in exchange for aid and security guarantees.

"We are not looking to change the North Korean government. That's not for us to do," Christopher Hill, the assistant US secretary of state for East Asia who negotiated the six-nation deal, told reporters in Washington.

Former US president George W. Bush in 2002 branded North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" along with Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Iran. The communist state later cited US hostility in testing an atom bomb.

But Hill indicated that while the United States did not seek regime change, it was keep-

ing a close eye on succession in North Korea.

Hillary Clinton, visiting Seoul last week as part of her first foreign trip, said uncertainty about succession to North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il was complicating negotiations with the hardline state.

Kim, 67, is widely reported to have suffered a stroke last August. But Hillary Clinton's remarks about succession in the communist dynasty were unusual for a senior US official.

"What you see is the secretary reflecting a style -- that, frankly, I wish a lot of other people would use -- which is to be very honest," said Hill, known for his friendliness with reporters.

"When you look at the behaviour of North Korea in recent months, you do get the impression that some of this unusual behaviour reflects some internal developments," Hill said.

Hillary Clinton has created a new post of special representative on North Korea, with academic and diplomat Stephen Bosworth taking the job. Hill is tipped to be the next US ambassador to Iraq.

US ends ban on media photos of war dead

AFP, Washington

Defence Secretary Robert Gates announced Thursday he had lifted a ban on media coverage of the return of flag-draped coffins of fallen soldiers from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, reversing a controversial policy dating back to 1991.

The decision would leave it up to the families of the dead soldiers if the media would be allowed to film or photograph the coffins at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, Gates said at a news conference.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (C) speaks as Pakistani Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi (R) and Afghan Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar look on during trilateral talks at the State Department on Thursday in Washington, DC.

Asean unveils 'toothless' rights body

AP, CHA-AM, Thailand

A new Southeast Asian human rights body will promote fundamental freedoms, but will lack the power to punish violators such as military-ruled Myanmar, according to a draft proposal obtained yesterday by The Associated Press.

Officials attending the annual summit of the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations hailed the push to create the body as a historic first step toward confronting abuses.

The confidential draft, which outlines the proposed

powers of the future rights body, says it will "promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms." It falls short, however, of key demands voiced by international human rights groups, which say the body will have limited effectiveness unless it can impose sanctions or expel countries that violate the rights of their own citizens.

Asean traditionally shies away from criticizing its members, although some leaders said that issues of democratic reform in Myanmar and human rights abuses were being discussed on the sidelines of the meetings.

The document was presented behind closed doors to Asean foreign ministers gathered at a coastal resort in Thailand ahead of the annual leaders' summit this weekend.

The draft is the first to outline the body's proposed powers; a final one is expected in July.

"It is a historic first for Southeast Asia," said Rosario Manalo, a Philippine diplomat on the panel that drafted the human rights body's outline.

But some officials acknowledged concern that the text's lack of clout would prevent the body from being taken seriously.

China urges US to mend ties as military talks resume

AFP, Beijing

China called on the United States yesterday to ease military tensions between the global powers, as the two sides resumed defence talks here following a rift over planned US arms sales to Taiwan.

The talks had raised hopes of cooperation on security issues and dialogue on long-standing tensions, four months after China cut off military exchanges in anger over the proposed 6.5-billion-dollar US arms package to Taiwan.

China's offer to once again hold the annual talks was widely seen as an olive branch extended to the new administration of US President Barack Obama.

But the head of the Chinese delegation appeared to signal a bold tone in his opening remarks, emphasising that there were problems between the two sides and it was up to the United States to fix them.

"China-US military relations remain in a difficult period. We expect the US side to take concrete measures for the resumption and development of our military ties," Qian Lihua, co-chair of the talks and defence ministry press director, said in comments quoted by the state-run Xinhua news agency.

Britain admits terror transfer in 'rendition' case

AFP, London

Britain admitted for the first time Thursday handing over two terror suspects captured in Iraq in 2004 to US agents who transferred them to Afghanistan for interrogation, in a case of rendition.

Defence Secretary John Hutton said the two men, who were detained in February 2004, remain in US custody in Afghanistan five years later.

"Two individuals were captured by UK forces in and around Baghdad, they were transferred to US detention in accordance with normal practice and then moved subsequently to the US deten-

tion facility in Afghanistan," he told lawmakers.

Hutton said the men were suspected members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistan-based militant group blamed by India for last year's terror attacks on Mumbai, which killed more than 165 people.

"The US government has explained to us that they were moved to Afghanistan because of a lack of relevant linguists necessary to interrogate them effectively in Iraq," the minister said.

Washington had assured Britain that the men were being kept in "a humane, safe and secure environment" in Afghanistan, he added.

The transfer of the men, which was uncovered in a review of detainees held by British forces in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003, raises uncomfortable questions for Britain about collusion in extraordinary rendition.

Rendition is the term used to describe the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) practice of secretly flying terror suspects to countries where torture is not illegal for interrogation.

Hutton added: "In retrospect, it is clear to me that the transfer to Afghanistan of these two individuals should have been questioned at the time."