



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton walks hand-in-hand with Israeli President Shimon Peres (L) after their meeting in Jerusalem yesterday. Hillary said Washington was committed to Israel's security and called for a halt to Gaza rocket fire as she kicked off her first official visit to the Jewish state.

Durable Gaza truce 1st step in ME peace: Hillary

Israel ready to hit Gaza anew over rocket fire, warns Livni

AFP, Jerusalem

A lasting Gaza truce is the first step towards Middle East peace but cannot happen unless Hamas halts rocket attacks, visiting US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Jerusalem yesterday.

"The first step right now, not waiting for a new government, is a durable ceasefire. But that can only be achieved if Hamas ceases the rocket attacks," Hillary Clinton said at a press conference with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.

"These attacks must stop and so must the smuggling of weapons into Gaza," she added.

Hillary Clinton went on to affirm Washington's commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saying that, regardless of the make-up of Israel's next government, working

towards such a solution was "inescapable."

As foreign minister Livni led US-sponsored peace talks with the Palestinians that were relaunched in November 2007, but the two sides made little progress and the talks came to a halt after the outbreak of the Gaza war in December.

US President Barack Obama has nevertheless vowed to actively pursue the peace process and has appointed a special envoy, veteran diplomat George Mitchell, to coax both sides back to the negotiating table.

But Israel's next government will likely be a right-wing coalition led by hawkish former premier Benjamin Netanyahu, who has said he will focus on building up the Palestinian economy instead of immediately pushing for a final settlement.

Meanwhile, Israel warned yesterday

that it will not shy away from hitting Hamas-run Gaza again if rocket fire from the enclave continues.

The threat came as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton kicked off her first official visit to the Jewish state aiming to push forward hobbled Middle East peace talks.

"If it turns out that Hamas has not got the message, it will be hit again," outgoing Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni told public radio hours before meeting Clinton in Jerusalem.

Israel launched a devastating war on Gaza on December 27 in response to rocket fire, an offensive that killed more than 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis in 22 days.

Hamas and Israel both announced unilateral ceasefires on January 18, which have largely held despite violations by both sides.

First US cargo for Afghanistan crosses Russia

AFP, Moscow

Russia has allowed a first shipment of US equipment bound for Afghanistan to cross its territory in support of Western operations there, Interfax news agency said yesterday.

The report cited unnamed diplomatic sources saying that the shipment, containing non-lethal supplies for US troops, had reached Russia's border with Kazakhstan.

"The transit of US non-military cargoes is being carried out within the framework of the agreement reached last year between Russia and Nato on the delivery of non-military cargoes for the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) in Afghanistan," the sources were quoted as saying.

The shipment was a "first test of similar cooperation with the United States," said one source, according to Interfax.

Obama offers Moscow missile defence deal

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama has written his Russian counterpart about links between controversial US plans to deploy a missile defence system in Europe and the Iranian threat, a senior US official said Tuesday.

The official was responding to a report published Tuesday in The New York Times that Obama, in a secret letter to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, offered to halt deployment of the missile defence shield if Iran end any efforts to build nuclear weapons to ballistic missiles.

"President Obama sent a letter to Medvedev covering a broad range of topics, including missile defence and how it relates to the Iranian threat," the White House official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The official offered no further details of the letter, or when it was sent.

But the Times said the letter was delivered to Moscow by "top administration officials" three weeks ago.

Moscow has been angry for years over former president George W. Bush's plans to place missile defence sites in Poland and the Czech Republic, saying the move was directly aimed against Russia.

Bush officials said it was intended to counter missile threats from states such as Iran, which Washington accuses of trying to develop nuclear weapons.

Iran has rejected repeated calls by the UN Security Council -- of which Russia is a permanent member -- for a halt to uranium enrichment, despite three sets of sanctions being imposed for its defiance.

While the officials cited by The New York Times said Obama's letter did not make a direct link between halting the missile defence effort and Russia helping pressure Iran to drop its nuclear ambitions, "the letter was intended to give Moscow an incentive to join the United States in a common front against Iran."

"It's almost saying to them, put up or shut up," a senior official was quoted as saying.

"It's not that the Russians get to say, 'We'll try and therefore you have to suspend.' It says the threat has to go away."

Moscow has not responded, but the issue was expected to come up when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meets Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Friday in Geneva.

On Sunday, Medvedev was quoted in Moscow as saying that Russia was awaiting new US proposals to resolve the missile defence dispute.

Indian politicians seen as corrupt, inefficient

Reveals survey

AFP, New Delhi

A majority of Indians believe their politicians are inefficient, corrupt and in politics only to make money, according to a survey published yesterday, a day after elections were announced.

The poll by the Times of India found 83 percent of respondents felt politicians were corrupt while 59 percent believed the main motive of most politicians in the world's biggest democracy was financial gain.

Another 72 percent believed most Indian politicians are inefficient, said the survey, which interviewed an unspecified number of people in 10 major cities nationwide.

"The bad news for the politicians is their own ratings are uniformly poor," said the Times report, which appeared a day after authorities announced general elections would be held in stages over a month from April 16.

The survey "shows how all-pervasive the revulsion with the political class is and how much the leaders are regarded as a venal lot," the newspaper said.

Some 44 percent of respondents predicted politicians would remain corrupt.

But the survey found just over half of voters optimistic they would have no choice but to improve if faced with electoral defeat or being disciplined by regulatory bodies like the Election Commission because of corruption.

Some "voters are convinced that they can force the politicians to mend their ways by voting out non-performing candidates in the coming elections," the Times report said.



An Indian rickshaw puller waits for customers in front of a Congress Party billboard featuring images of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, All India Congress Committee Chairman Rahul Gandhi and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi on a street of Dimapur in Nagaland yesterday. Nagaland will join 17 states of India in the first phase of national elections on April 16.

Tensions as China begins parliamentary season

AFP, Beijing

China's annual parliamentary season opened in Beijing yesterday under tight security with lawmakers focused on easing social pressures amid the global economic crisis and tensions over Tibet.

China's ruling Communist Party has made it clear it wants to use this year's two gatherings to showcase its ability to fend off the worst impacts of the downturn, which has already thrown millions of Chinese out of work.

Both sessions of parliament are set to focus on using a four-trillion-yuan (585-billion-dollar) government stimulus package announced last year that is aimed at boosting economic growth and maintaining social stability.

Space rock gives Earth a close shave

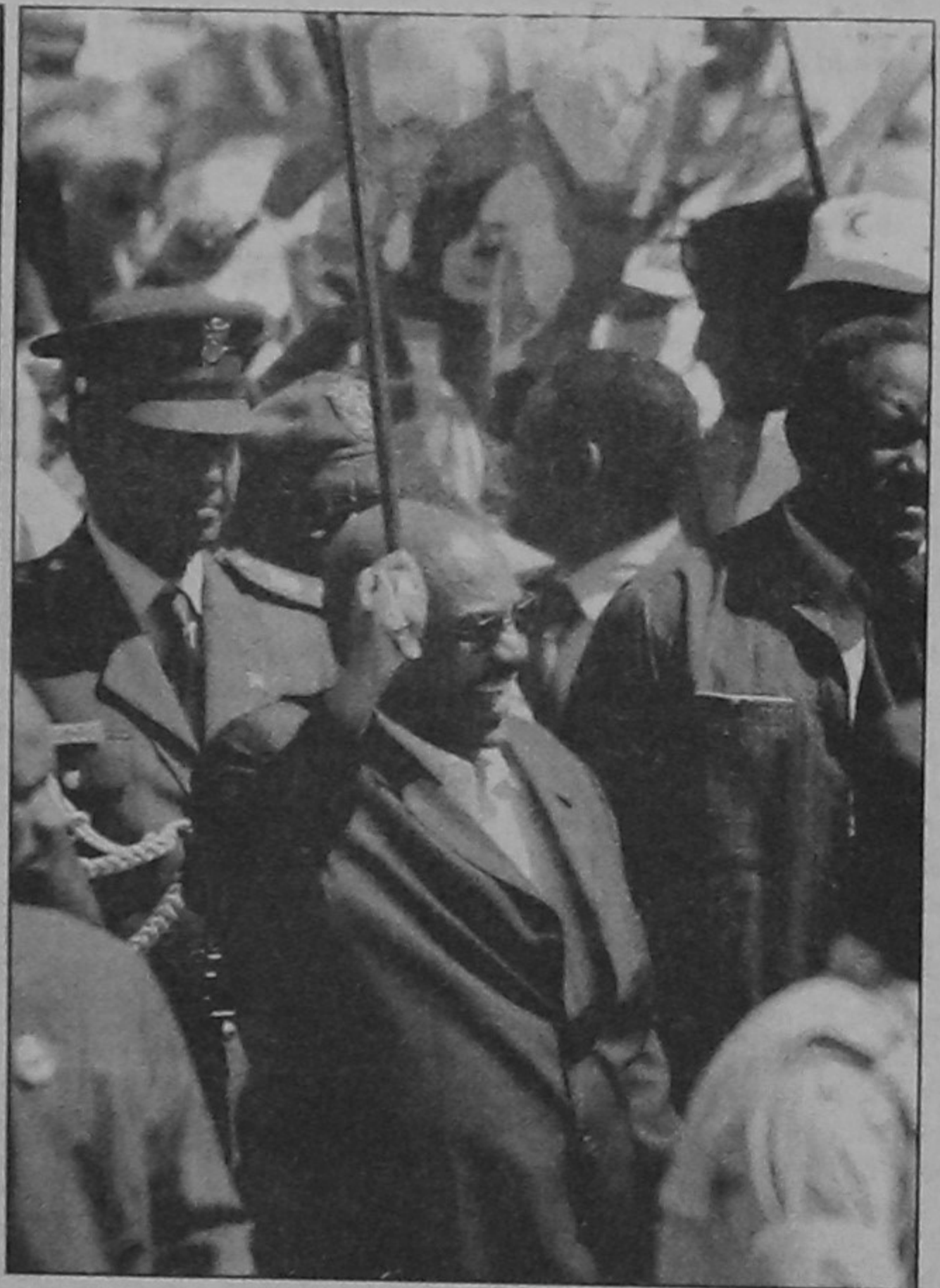
AFP, Paris

An asteroid of a similar size to a rock that exploded above Siberia in 1908 with the force of a thousand atomic bombs whizzed close past Earth on Monday, astronomers said yesterday.

2009 DD45, estimated to be between 21 and 47 meters (68 and 152 feet) across, raced by at 1344 GMT on Monday, the Planetary Society (http://planetary.org/news/2009/0302_Space_Rock_Sw_oops_by_Earth.html) and astronomers' blogs reported.

The gap was just 72,000 kilometers (44,750 miles), or a fifth of the distance between Earth and the Moon and only twice the height of satellites in geosynchronous orbit, the website space.com said.

The estimated size is similar to that of an asteroid or comet that exploded above Tunguska, Siberia, on June 30 1908, flattening 80 million trees in a swathe of more than 2,000 square kilometres (800 square miles).



Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir waves his walking stick as he opens a hydro-electric dam on the Nile River at Merowe, north of Khartoum yesterday. Beshir said at the inauguration that he regarded any decision by the International Criminal Court on whether to seek his arrest for alleged Darfur war crimes would be worthless.

ICC has war crimes 'evidence' against Beshir: Prosecutor

AFP, The Hague

Strong evidence has been compiled against Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir of his involvement in war crimes in Darfur, the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor said yesterday.

"We have strong evidence against Beshir," Luis Moreno-Ocampo told reporters on the eve of an announcement by ICC judges on whether they would seek Beshir's arrest for war crimes in the western Sudanese region.

"We have more than 30 different witnesses who will present how he managed and controlled everything," Moreno-Ocampo added.

The prosecutor said he had been sleeping "very well", and was prepared for any outcome.

If the judges dismissed his application for an arrest warrant in its entirety, he would appeal. If they approved the application only partly, he would analyse the reasoning before deciding how to proceed.

In July last year, Moreno-Ocampo asked a pre-trial chamber to issue a warrant for Beshir's arrest on 10 counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

He reiterated his allegation Tuesday that genocide was being committed in camps for

people displaced from their villages in Darfur.

"The weapons in the camps are rape and hunger. Five thousand people are dying each month."

As for witnesses, Moreno-Ocampo said some were being protected "because we foresee what is happening now: they are attacking people who they believe could be our witness."

Evidence has emerged, he added, that prominent Darfur leaders had been offered money, by people saying they were agents of the Sudanese government, "to talk against us... to say they were our witness and they were lying."

The decision of the judges is set to be announced at 1300 GMT at a press conference in The Hague, the seat of the court.

If the warrant is granted and an arrest carried out, the 65-year-old Beshir would become the first head of state to be hauled before the ICC since the court opened its doors in 2002.

Beshir said on Tuesday he regarded any decision by the ICC on whether to seek his arrest would be worthless.

"Any decision by the International Criminal Court has no value for us," Beshir said at the inauguration of a dam on the Nile north of Khartoum.

"It will not be worth the ink it is written on."

Raul Castro clears out Fidel's cabinet, installs his own

AFP, Havana

Cuban President Raul Castro replaced several members of his cabinet on Monday, putting his stamp on the government a year after assuming power from his older brother Fidel.

In a sign that he is emerging from the shadow of the former president and revolutionary icon, Raul Castro, 77, fired foreign minister Felipe Perez Roque and moved cabinet chief Carlos Lage, two long-time lieutenants in the previous administration.

In making his first major cabinet shuffle since assuming power one year ago, the Cuban leader cited the need for greater efficiency and a consolidation of the country's unwieldy bureaucracy, saying the shakeup would lead to "a more compact and functional structure."

The move most notably replaces 44-year-old Perez Roque, Havana's chief diplomat since May 1999, with vice minister Bruno Rodriguez. A former journalist for Cuba's state-run press, Rodriguez was once Cuba's ambassador to the United Nations.

The Mexican-born Rodriguez had been a key player in developing relations with other Latin American countries and was involved in developing ties with the European Union, commentators said.

Perez Roque was seen as close to Fidel, acting as his chief of staff for a decade.

Lage, 57, retains his post as one of Cuba's vice presidents of the Council of State, but has been replaced by General Jose Amado Ricardo Guerra as cabinet chief.

Both Lage and Perez Roque had been seen as possible successors to Fidel Castro before the aging leader passed the reins of power to his brother.

The shuffle affects about 10 cabinet positions, including Cuba's commerce, farming, fishing and interior ministries.

Lanka doesn't feel like home Say many Tamils

AP, Colombo

The assaults broke in after the fighting between ethnic rebels and the military erupted again into full-scale war, storming through his family's home and calling his name.

Thanabalasingham Surendran, a member of Sri Lanka's Tamil ethnic minority, fled to the capital, Colombo. But unknown "messengers from military intelligence" kept calling and demanding extortion money. So the shop owner paid a smuggler to get him out of Sri Lanka.

As the government claims it is coming close to winning a quarter-century war with the Tamil Tiger separatists, many ordinary Tamils are giving up on their country.

Hundreds of thousands have already left, and others are desperately trying to get abroad.

In his Independence Day speech earlier this month, President Mahinda Rajapaksa appealed for everyone who left to return home to the Indian Ocean island nation off the tip of India.

But after decades of war, harassment and economic hardship, many Tamils say Sri Lanka doesn't feel like home.

Some 800,000 Tamils now live overseas and that figure is growing, especially among young men, analysts say.

"Their priority is to get out of the country," said Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, a political analyst and executive director of the Colombo-

based Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Many fear a military victory over the rebels will further embolden the nation's mainly Buddhist Sinhalese majority and make life for the mostly Hindu Tamils even harder, Tamil parliamentarian Mano Ganesan said. Tamils make up about 18 percent of Sri Lanka's 20 million people.

"We feel more vulnerable now," Ganesan said.

Many also fear other Tamil paramilitary groups will grow stronger after the rival Tamil Tigers are defeated, threatening locals, increasing their forcible conscription of young boys and demanding heavier extortion payments to fund their activities.

In the capital, armed guards pull over cars and taxis for security checks several times a day, searching for possible rebel suicide bombers. Main roads are routinely shut down for government convoys, and security cordons block areas with government offices and tourist hotels.

Few residents, Sinhalese or Tamil, are willing to talk openly, and those who do generally refuse to give their names. Tamils fear that any criticism of the country would mark them as rebel sympathizers.

"I want to live here in Sri Lanka, but I have no choice but to go overseas because of the security situation," one Tamil man said. "Many young men are in the same situation."



Activists hold signs as they participate in the Power Shift '09 rally on the West Lawn of the US Capitol on Monday in Washington, DC. Youth activists called for urgent congressional actions on climate change, energy and the economy.

EU fails to pledge climate aid to poor nations

AFP, Brussels

EU environment ministers on Monday failed to agree on how to support poorer nations to fund the fight against climate change, and kicked the problem upstairs to the heads of state and government.

"We were not quite able to reach consensus on the financing mechanism. This is an issue where the (EU) council (of nations) will need more discussion time," EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said after an elongated meeting of EU environment ministers in Brussels.

Czech deputy environment minister Jan Dursik said that "one nation wanted to keep all the options open", without naming it.

It emerged that the dissenting nation was Poland, which continued talks with the EU presidency long after some other delegations had already left the talks.

The unresolved matter will now go to EU finance ministers at their March 10 meeting

before ending up in the laps of the 27 heads of state and government at the next European Union summit on March 19-20.

The EU ministers agreed that it would take 175 billion euros per year in 2020.

EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said half of that amount would need to be found for developing nations.

Greenpeace slammed the EU's failure to help out.

"Environment ministers have ducked and passed the climate funding hot potato to finance ministers," said Greenpeace EU climate and energy policy director Joris den Blanken.

"While billions of taxpayers' money is being used to prop up failed banks and carmakers, not one euro cent is being pledged to help the developing world tackle a problem that Europeans helped create," he added.

Greenpeace and other NGOs have said the European Union should be contributing around 35 billion euros.