



US envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell (L) meets with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo yesterday. Mitchell met Mubarak on the latest leg of a regional tour aimed at reviving stalled Middle East peace talks.

US hopes for Iran's nuke answer by autumn: Gates

Obama admn pushes Arabs for improving ties with Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Washington hopes Iran will respond to overtures on its nuclear drive by September, Defence Secretary Robert Gates said on Monday amid a US push to jumpstart stalled Middle East peacemaking.

Gates, one of three top US officials in the region this week, said on a visit to Jerusalem that Israel's long-term security and regional stability were ultimately dependent on a "sustainable comprehensive Middle East peace."

"The president is certainly anticipating or hoping for some kind of a response (from Iran) this fall, perhaps by the time of the UN General Assembly" which opens in September, Gates said at a press conference

with Israeli counterpart Ehud Barak.

Washington and Israel, widely considered the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear armed state, suspect Iran is trying to build atomic weapons under the guise of a civilian nuclear programme, a charge Tehran denies.

"Israel remains in its basic position that no options should be removed from the table, despite the fact that at this stage a priority should be given still to diplomacy and sanctions," Barak said.

US President Barack Obama said in May after meeting Israel's hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he would assess whether Iran was serious about nuclear talks by the end of this year.

Mitchell is later due to visit the occupied

West Bank for talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, before meeting Netanyahu on Tuesday.

US Middle East envoy George Mitchell, meanwhile, called on Arab states to fully normalise relations with Israel after he met Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo to push for a comprehensive peace.

"By comprehensive I mean peace between Israel and Palestinians, between Israel and Syria, between Israel and Lebanon and the full normalisation of relations between Israel and the countries of the region," he said.

"We're not asking anyone to achieve full normalisation at this time, we recognise that will come further down the road in this process."

Int'l task force warns of hike in Somalia piracy

AFP, Manama

The multinational anti-piracy force operating off the coast of Somalia warned on Monday of an increase in attacks when the monsoon season ends in the next few weeks.

"The Combined Maritime Forces are warning mariners of an anticipated increase in piracy incidents when the southwest monsoon ends in the coming weeks, and are reiterating that merchant mariners must continue to take proactive action to help prevent piracy attacks," said the US Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain.

The world's naval powers have deployed dozens of warships to the lawless waters off Somalia over the past year to curb attacks by pirates.

N Korea hints at dialogue with US over nukes

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday hinted at a new dialogue over its nuclear arms, in what observers said was a direct overture to the United States -- despite a US refusal to abandon broader international talks.

A statement from the North's foreign ministry, carried by state media, said there was a "specific and reserved form of dialogue" that Pyongyang would entertain over the nuclear impasse.

The comments came after a war of words between North Korea and the US during an Asean meeting last week in which Pyongyang's roving ambassador declared existing six-party talks "already dead."

The US has repeatedly refused to sidestep the multilateral meeting -- which groups the two Koreas, the US, Russia, China and Japan -- and has insisted there is no chance of direct talks.

North Korea's foreign ministry Monday again dismissed the forum.

"Any attempt to side with those who claim the resumption of the six-party talks without grasping the essence of the matter will not help ease tension," a foreign ministry spokesman said in a statement carried by state media.

"There is a specific and reserved form of dialogue that can address the current situation."

The spokesman did not elaborate on what form such a dialogue could take.

"What Pyongyang calls for is a direct US-North Korean dialogue," Kim Yong-Hyun, a North Korea expert and professor at Seoul's Dongguk University, told AFP.

The North quit the six-party talks after the UN Security Council censured it for a long-range rocket launch in April. In May it also staged its second nuclear test.

The Council has since imposed tougher sanctions, including an expanded arms embargo and beefed up inspections of air, sea and land shipments going to and from North Korea.

China, Taiwan leaders in historic exchange of messages

AFP, Taipei

The leaders of Taiwan and China yesterday exchanged their first public messages in 60 years, officials said, reflecting warming ties that observers say could pave the way for an unprecedented summit.

Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou received a congratulatory message from Chinese President Hu Jintao after being elected leader of the island's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party at the weekend, state-run media in China said.

"I would like to congratulate you on your election to the Kuomintang chairmanship," Hu was quoted as saying in his message, delivered in his

capacity as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party.

"I sincerely hope that our parties will continue to push for peaceful development of cross-strait ties and mutual political trust, and jointly work for the welfare of the people of the two sides so as to lead to the great renaissance of the Chinese people," Hu said, according to Xinhua news agency.

The leaders of China and Taiwan engaged in discreet communication in the mid-1980s, as they tried to improve ties following decades of hostility. But any back-channel notes exchanged then were not made public.



Chinese Vice President Jia Qinglin (R) speaks with Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) party chairman Lien Chan (2nd L) as Lien's wife Lien Fang-yu (L) looks on during a meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday.

Palin's future mysterious

AFP, Anchorage

With a challenge to the media and Washington, and a list of her achievements for the state, Sarah Palin has stepped down as Alaska governor, but gave few clues about where she is headed.

"It is because I love Alaska this much, sir, that I feel it is my duty to avoid the unproductive, typical politics-as-usual lame duck session in one's last year in office," said Palin, who was the state's youngest governor and first female governor.

"With this decision now I will be able to fight even harder for you, for what is right and for truth. And I have never felt you need a title to do all that," Palin told a cheering crowd at a state picnic.

But her farewell address in Fairbanks, Alaska, Sunday, less than a month after she abruptly announced her resignation on July 3, provided little insight into her plans upon leaving office.

Ahmadinejad under fire as minister sacked

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was grappling yesterday with a new political crisis that has weakened his standing even among his hard-line supporters as he prepares to unveil a new government.

Ahmadinejad has come under fire over the sacking of his intelligence minister on Sunday and was dealt another blow when his culture minister quit over what he said was a weakened government.

Iran has been in turmoil since Ahmadinejad's bitterly disputed re-election in a June 12 presidential poll triggered a wave of mass public protests and the worst unrest since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The post-election chaos has also exposed deep divisions within the ruling elite in the Islamic republic and led to open criticism of not only Ahmadinejad but also supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"A chaotic day for the government," thundered the front-page headline of the conservative Tehran Emrouz newspaper after the weekend cabinet drama.

The Mehr news agency quoted an "informed source" as saying Intelligence Minister Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejele was sacked following a "verbal quarrel" with Ahmadinejad at a cabinet meeting over his controversial pick for first vice president.

Esfandiar Rahim Mashaie finally stepped down as first vice president on Saturday after the all-powerful Khamenei intervened in the crisis and personally ordered Ahmadinejad to dismiss him.

Ejele's dismissal has set off a chorus of criticism even among the conservative wing in Iran just days before Ahmadinejad is to be sworn in again on August 5 and then set about forming a new cabinet.

MP Ali Motahari urged

Ahmadinejad to "control his nerves."

"It looks as if he is intentionally bringing tension to the country. If the removal of the minister is because of this (objections to Rahim Mashaie's appointment) it is an ugly act because then it becomes a personal matter and has nothing to do with the country's interests."

The appointment of Mashaie, who last year provoked controversy by saying Iran was a "friend of the Israeli people," had angered hardliners even in Ahmadinejad's own camp.

"Dismissal -- the consequence of objecting to Ahmadinejad," was the headline in the hardline Khabar newspaper.

MP Mousalreza Servati said 200 MPs had written to Ahmadinejad asking him to "correct his behaviour so that he follows the leader's opinion seriously."



Outgoing Alaska Governor Sarah Palin (L) and her husband Todd (C) congratulate incoming Governor Sean Parnell during the annual Governor's Picnic on Sunday at Pioneer Park in Fairbanks, Alaska. Sean Parnell was sworn in as the new Governor and Craig E. Campbell the new Lieutenant Governor.

Iraq short of 1.5 million houses, says UN

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq has a housing shortfall of 1.5 million homes and the situation will worsen in the coming years as more and more Iraqis migrate to cities, the United Nations said yesterday.

The country also requires an additional 4,000 primary schools, while half of the 15,000-odd schools already in use require major rehabilitation, the UN's urban development agency said in a report outlining its plans in Iraq over the next three years.

UN-HABITAT noted that Iraq's total hous-

ing stock is around 2.8 million homes, a shortfall of at least 1.5 million houses, while more than half of Iraq's urban population was living in slum-like conditions.

Iraq's lack of housing is likely to become even more of a problem, the UN said, because the urban population is expected to double by 2030.

Planning Minister Ali Baban wrote in a foreword to the report that Iraq "has an increasing housing shortage ... and crumbling infrastructure and basic services, the result of years of war, neglect and lack of sufficient investment."

Hillary insists ties with Obama are strong

AFP, Washington

Hillary Clinton sought once again Sunday to dispel speculation she has a rocky relationship with President Barack Obama, her adversary in last year's White House race who picked her as secretary of state.

Media speculation has persisted about tensions between the two former rivals, with suggestions she has been a disgruntled chief diplomat

in her boss's shadow, but Hillary insisted they have "a great relationship."

"We have an incredibly candid and open exchange," Clinton said on the NBC network's "Meet the Press."

"I see him usually several times a week, at least once one-on-one. And I'm ready to offer my advice."

Hillary stressed she understood "that the election is over" and she has no designs on the White House.

65 killed as police fight Nigerian Islamists

AFP, Kano

Radical Islamists torched a police headquarters, a church and a customs office, residents said Monday, as police put the death toll in weekend religious clashes in northern Nigeria at 65.

"Five policemen have been killed, one police station burnt and 60 Taliban killed," police Inspector-General Ogbonna Onovo told reporters, referring to a Nigerian Islamist sect styled on Afghanistan's Taliban.

He said the death toll related to clashes in

the neighbouring states of Bauchi and Yobe, adding that new clashes were raging in nearby Borno state.

"They (militants) are out there in Maiduguri (Borno) now, battling with the police," Nigeria's police chief told a news conference in the capital Abuja.

Residents of the town of Gamboru-Ngala in Borno state said heavily armed members of the sect stormed the town and went on the rampage, burning a police headquarters, a church and a customs post in the early hours of Monday.

Giant pandas at further risk after Sichuan quake

AFP, Washington

More than 60 percent of the wild giant panda population in China's Sichuan province was affected by the powerful quake that rocked the region and killed thousands in May 2008, a study said Monday.

Ecologists also found that the massive 8.0-magnitude earthquake, which triggered huge landslides across the region's mountainous terrain and left nearly 87,000 people dead or missing, destroyed nearly a quarter of panda habitat close to the tremor's epicentre.

Sikhs and Hindus dread Taliban tax in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

Sitting on a broken chair outside a Sikh temple in a crowded part of Peshawar, Aman Deep Singh is frantic about his future after losing his business in Pakistan's tribal district of Khyber.

When the Taliban gave Sikhs and Hindus an ultimatum -- leave the land of your forefathers or pay an Islamic tax in protection money -- Singh packed up and left his native Tirah valley for Peshawar.

"We were living under fear. Fear of militants, fear of Lashkar-e-Islam and fear of other armed groups," said

Singh, his hair swept up in a turban, a long beard touching his abdomen and thick moustache covering his upper lip.

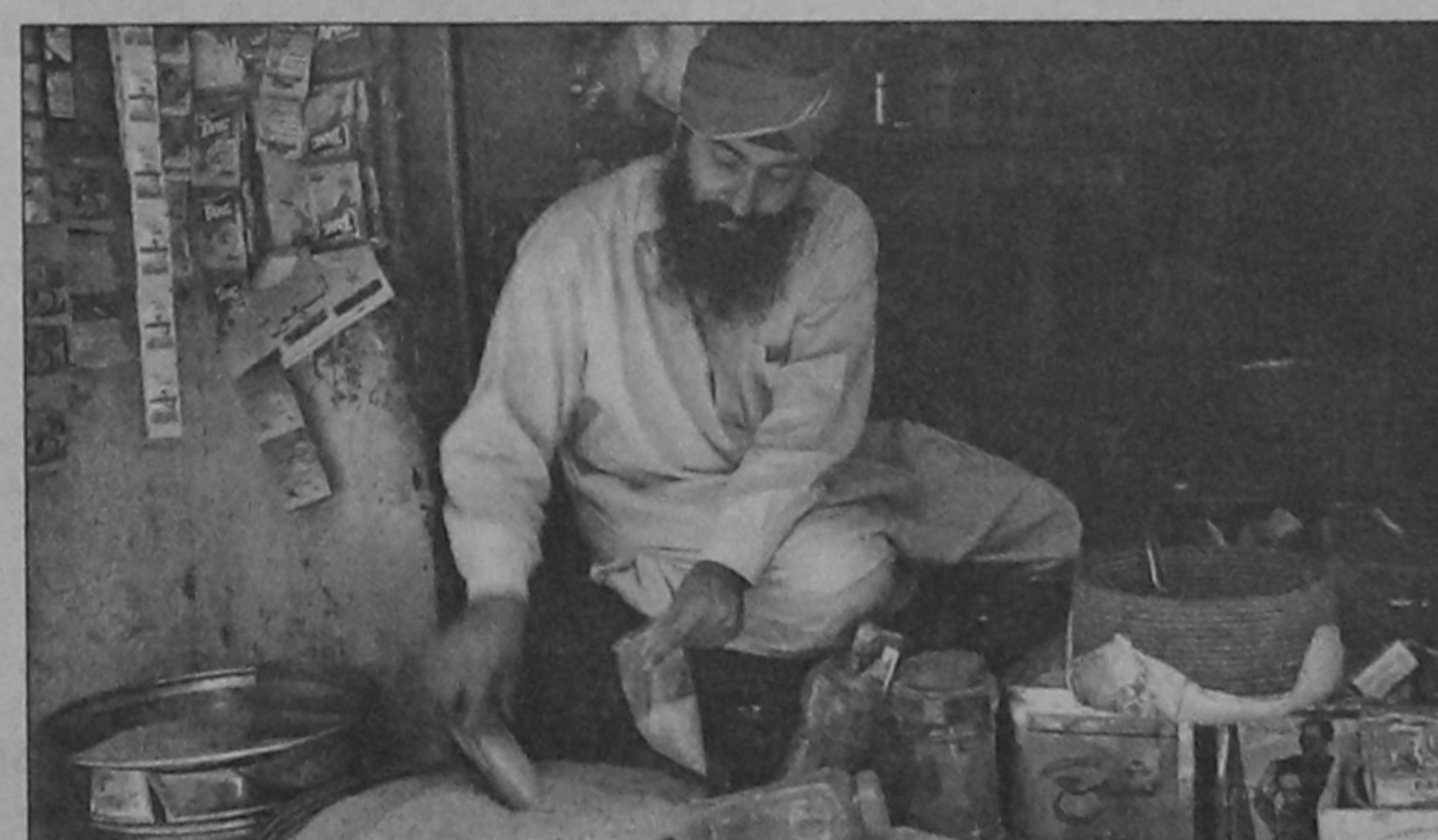
He swapped a general store in the mountains for unemployment in the northwest capital, where he struggles to feed the nine members of his family. Aman Deep is a fake name. He wants his real name hidden for his security.

As light fades to dusk, Sikhs gather for evening prayers at the Joga Singh gurdwara (temple) in a narrow street of Peshawar's Dabgari bazaar. Each man removes his shoes, washes his feet in a small pool of water and covers his head. "I am not the only one.

About 400 Sikh and 57 Hindu families migrated from (the town of) Bara and Tirah," said Singh.

Sikhs and Hindus are tiny communities in Pakistan. In the last year, hundreds have fled their homes after receiving death threats from the Taliban and other militant groups in an increasingly unstable northwest.

After US troops invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Taliban and al-Qaeda ideologues fled to Pakistan, where they have increasingly focused their campaign and where 2,000 people have perished in bomb attacks over the past two years.



This picture taken on July 9 shows a Pakistani Sikh businessman tending to his shop in Peshawar. Last year hundreds of Sikhs and Hindus have fled disparate communities after demands for protection tax from non-Muslims and receiving death threats by Taliban and other militant groups in an increasingly unstable northwest.

Sarkozy gets all clear after health scare

AFP, Paris

A smiling French President Nicolas Sarkozy left a Paris military hospital yesterday after doctors gave him a clean bill of health and said he had collapsed while jogging through simple fatigue.

Sarkozy left the Val de Grace hospital hand in hand with his supermodel wife Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, thanked medical staff and waved to journalists before getting into his official car and being driven off.

His office issued a statement confirming that doctors had found no sign of heart or neurological trouble and had diagnosed the 54-year-old as having suffered a minor fainting episode caused by overwork.