



Palestinians carry an injured demonstrator after Israeli soldiers threw tear gas during a protest against Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank on Friday in the village of Burin, near Nablus.

Occupation destroys chance of peace with Israel, says Abbas

AFP, United Nations

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas warned Friday that the occupation of Palestinian land destroys all chance of peace with Israel.

"I warn that that policy of illegal colonisation and the construction of the annexation and separation wall pursued by Israel, the occupation force, destroys all chance of restarting the peace process," Abbas told the United Nations General Assembly.

Settlement construction, which Israel has refused to freeze despite pressure from the international community, is the main stumbling block in attempts to restart Middle East peace talks that have been on hold since Israel launched a devastating war on the Gaza Strip in December 2008.

US President Barack Obama on Tuesday held his first three-way meeting with both Abbas and Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in an attempt to restart talks, but failed to achieve a breakthrough.

During the meeting, Obama largely set aside the row over settlement issues aside and called for a speedy return to final status negotiations between the two sides, which delve into the fate of Jerusalem, Israeli security, Palestinian refugees and the borders of a future Palestinian state.

"Time is short and the risks are accumulating because of the continued suffering of the Palestinian people, who are weighed down by the last foreign occupation in the world," Abbas said.

"We call on the world to ensure that international law prevails and to put pressure on Israel until it stops all its settlement activities in the Palestinian territories, including east Jerusalem."

The Palestinian Liberation Organisation, which Abbas

heads, is "the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people to achieve a just and lasting peace based on international resolutions," he said in a shot at the Islamic movement Hamas.

He also called for the lifting of an Israeli blockade imposed on Hamas-ruled Gaza, and denounced Israel's "devastating aggression," which lasted 22 days and killed over 1,300 Palestinians in the impoverished coastal enclave.

The Palestinian leader also emphasised that continued settlements "will obliterate" any agreement ending the conflict and creating two states living side by side, as called for by the international community.

"How can we imagine holding negotiations on borders and Jerusalem while Israeli bulldozers create facts on the ground to impose the borders that Israel wants?" Abbas quipped.

Merkel scraps for votes in final election drive

AFP, Berlin

Chancellor Angela Merkel made an 11th-hour push for votes yesterday, on the eve of an election expected to return her to power but perhaps not in the new coalition she wants.

"We are going to fight to the end because every vote counts," she told a crowd of around 1,000 people waving orange "Angie" placards and chanting "Angie, Angie."

"We are the only party in Germany to govern the economy sensibly," she said, adding: "Voters will decide tomorrow how quickly we get out of this crisis."

"We are fighting for the German jobs of the future."

Merkel, 55, has won plaudits at home and abroad for steady leadership through the crisis that has hit Europe's top economy harder than most, and surveys indicate Germans are in no mood for change at the top.

"This pastor's daughter from the east has governed with such self-confidence in the past four years that many of the 62.2 million voters will choose her even though they do not like her party. They

US military action against Iran would only 'buy time'

Says Gates

AFP, Washington

Any possible military action against Iran would only "buy time" and delay Tehran's nuclear programme by about one to three years, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said Friday.

"The reality is there is no military option that does anything more than buy time," Gates told CNN.

"The estimates are one to three years or so," he said when asked about the impact of possible military options on Iran's disputed nuclear sites.

The Pentagon chief meanwhile told ABC television's "This Week" programme that "the Iranians have the intention of having nuclear weapons," but stressed that whether Tehran had formally decided to develop them "is in doubt."

Iranian President

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad earlier quipped that a nuclear enrichment plant whose existence was disclosed by Western leaders on Friday had not been kept secret and that US President Barack Obama should apologise for accusing Tehran of violating international law.

"Not a chance," said an unequivocal Gates.

The United States has been tracking for years the Iranian uranium enrichment plant buried into a mountain near the holy city of Qom, which one US official said was "the right size" to produce weapons-grade uranium but of no use for nuclear fuel production.

But Gates, a former CIA chief, said the revelation did "not necessarily" challenge a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that found Iran had

halted its nuclear weapons development programme in 2003, a judgment challenged by Israel and other US allies in Europe.

"What it does mean is that they had a covert site, they did not declare it. If this were a peaceful nuclear programme, why didn't they announce this site when they began to construct it? Why didn't they allow IAEA inspectors in from the very beginning?" asked Gates.

"This is part of a pattern of deception and lies on the part of the Iranians from the very beginning with respect to their nuclear programme. So it's no wonder that world leaders think that they have ulterior motives that they have a plan to go forward with nuclear weapons."

His comments -- in interviews with talkshows to be

aired in full on Sunday -- followed demands from world leaders Friday that UN nuclear inspectors be given access to the previously undisclosed plant as Western powers threatened to slap tough new sanctions on Tehran.

The defence secretary told CNN's "State of the Union" programme that while the United States would not rule out the use of force, there was still time for diplomacy and sanctions to persuade Iran to give up uranium enrichment work that Washington believes is designed to develop nuclear weapons.

"The only way you end up not having a nuclear-capable Iran is for the Iranian government to decide that their security is diminished by having those weapons as opposed to strengthened," he said.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Chhattisgarh MP's son shot dead

INDO-ASIAN NEWS Service, Raipur

Suspected Maoists in Chhattisgarh Saturday shot two sons of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader and Bastar MP Balram Kashyap, killing one of them, police said.

"Maoists fired several rounds at Kashyap's sons, Dinesh and Tansen, when they were at a Mahashthami Durga Puja celebration in Bastar district," a top police official told IANS.

The incident took place in a temple in Bhampuri area of Bastar, some 300 km south of here.

Mao's grandson no general yet

AFP, Beijing

A spokesman for Mao Zedong's grandson has denied media reports that the revolutionary leader's descendant had been made a general in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), a report said Saturday.

"Mao Xinyu can be appointed only next year before the anniversary of the foundation of the People's Liberation Army (August 1)," Guo Jinliang, private secretary for Mao Xinyu, was quoted as saying by the Guangzhou Daily.

Taiwan islands vote 'no' to casino

AFP, Makung

Residents of Taiwan's Penghu group of islands on Saturday voted against hosting a new casino following the repeal of a law banning such gambling facilities.

Of 73,651 eligible voters who took part in a referendum, 17,359 voted against a casino in the Taiwan Strait archipelago, against 13,397 votes in favour and 298 invalid votes, the Penghu county government said.

Critics of gambling hailed the outcome, to the disappointment of those who had argued that casinos would help boost the local economy.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel waves to supporters as she arrives at the Germany's Christian Democrats Union (CDU) party's final campaign rally yesterday at the Treptow Arena in Berlin, one day ahead of parliamentary elections. Germany's rival politicians make their final pleas for votes on Saturday, the last day of campaigning for a tense election that is forecast to hand Chancellor Angela Merkel a second term in office.

Laden asks European countries to quit Afghanistan

AFP, Nicosia

al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden has called on European countries to end their alliance with the United States and withdraw their forces from Afghanistan, the SITE Intelligence Group monitoring service said on Friday.

"An intelligent man doesn't waste his money and sons for a gang of criminals in Washington, and it is a shameful thing for a person to be in a coalition whose supreme commander has no regard for human life and intentionally bombs villagers from the air," the US-based SITE quoted bin Laden as saying.

Attacks in London and Madrid would be understood by Europeans if they were to see what the United States did in Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda chief said in a new audio

message released on Jihadi Internet forums.

Its authenticity cannot be independently verified.

The audio message, posted on Friday, was contained in a near-five minute video from the As-Sabah media branch of al-Qaeda showing only a still image of bin Laden, SITE said.

noting that English- and German-language subtitled versions of the video were posted.

"Were you to see what your American ally and his helpers did in northern Afghanistan, and how they packed thousands of Taliban into freight containers like sardines and locked them inside until they died or were thrown into the river, you would understand the causes of the bloody events in Madrid and London," the video quoted bin Laden assaying.

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