

ME Quartet tells Israel to halt settlements

Palestinians welcome call for settlement freeze

AFP, Moscow/Ramallah

The Quartet for the Middle East yesterday urged Israel to stop building settlements and set a target for a final deal with the Palestinians within two years.

The Israeli announcement of the construction of 1,600 new settler homes led the Palestinians to call for a halt to peace talks and precipitated the worst crisis in US-Israeli relations in years.

"The Quartet urges the government of Israel to freeze all settlement activity," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said after the meeting of the Quartet of the United States, the United Nations, European Union and Russia.

He said at the meeting hosted by Russia in Moscow that Israel should also halt natural settlement growth, dismantle outposts erected since March 2001 and refrain from demolitions and evictions in east Jerusalem.

East Jerusalem is the mainly Arab half

of the Holy City, which was annexed by Israel after a war in 1967.

The Quartet "reaffirms that unilateral actions taken by either party cannot prejudice the outcome of negotiations and will not be recognised by the international community," Ban added.

With the peace process stagnant, the Quartet also urged Israel and the Palestinians to resume talks on final status issues with the aim of finding a settlement within the next 24 months, Ban said.

He said such a settlement would end "the occupation which began in 1967 and result in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours."

The timing of Israel's settlement announcement had infuriated Washington -- Israel's chief ally -- coming as US Vice President Joe Biden visited the region.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Hillary Clinton late Thursday, US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said, following a tense call last week when Hillary had asked Netanyahu to order a halt to the settler plans.

Hillary on Friday described the relationship between Israel and the United States as "deep and broad, strong and enduring".

She said however that the United States stood behind the Quartet's call for a freeze on all settlement activity.

"We all condemn the (settlement) announcement and we are all expecting both parties to move toward the proximity talks," Clinton said.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat welcomed the Quartet's call, but asked also for a mechanism to "make sure that Israel does effectively halt completely all settlement activity in the West Bank and east Jerusalem."



Palestinians inspect damages following Israeli airstrikes in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah yesterday. Israeli aircraft hit several targets across the Gaza Strip but there were no reports of serious injuries.

PHOTO: AFP



(L to R) UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, former British premier Tony Blair, who is the special envoy for the Middle East Quartet, and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton enter a room for a meeting in Moscow yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Iran jails ex-vice president, reform activist

AP, Tehran

A former Iranian vice president and prominent reform activist convicted of spreading propaganda against the ruling clerical establishment has begun a one-year prison sentence, a close relative said Friday.

An appeals court upheld Hossein Marashi's conviction and sentence on Wednesday, one of many court rulings against activists and opposition figures rounded up in the turmoil triggered by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in June.

The prosecutions have dealt a major blow to a protest movement that was already hard to sustain with security forces delivering a punishing response at each attempt to rally support on the streets.

Earlier this week, opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, who was Ahmadinejad's main challenger in the election, urged the movement to press on in the next Iranian year, which begins March 21.

Deal near for Guantanamo closure, military trials

AFP, Washington

The White House is nearing a bipartisan deal with US lawmakers to close the Guantanamo Bay prison by putting more detainees on trial before military commissions, a report said yesterday.

The prospective deal would allow military tribunals to try alleged September 11 plotters and other key terrorism suspects in a sharp reversal of White House pledges for civilian trials, the Wall Street Journal said.

The idea has been championed in Congress by influential Republican Senator Lindsey Graham.

President Barack Obama's administration had announced it would try self-confessed 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and others in civilian courts in New York.

Forty eight Guantanamo prisoners would face indefinite detention as part of the compromise, the Journal said, saying that while there was insufficient evidence to convict them they were deemed too dangerous for release.

The deal's supporters are led in the White House by counsel Robert Bauer and Obama's chief of staff Rahm Emanuel.

They are lobbying for backing from key Democrats including Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin, the daily said.

Durbin's home state of Illinois would house most of the detainees still held at Guantanamo at a federal prison there that has been pegged for purchase.

"The broad framework of a deal is done," the report said, quoting a senior Democrat aide in the Senate as saying: "We're now at the 'getting serious' stage."

The Obama administration is just weeks away from a landmark decision on whether to try Sheikh Mohammed, the self-proclaimed mastermind of the 9/11 attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people, and his four alleged co-conspirators in a civilian federal court or in a military tribunal.

Obama legacy at stake as health vote looms

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama was leading his Democratic allies in an all-out campaign to win over wavering lawmakers ahead of a cliffhanger vote tomorrow on his historic healthcare overhaul.

Obama postponed a planned trip to Asia to June so that he could make 11-hour personal appeals by telephone and in person to tip the balance in his favour in the make-or-break House of Representatives test.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said the president had spoken to more than three dozen lawmakers since Monday on a hunt for the 216 votes that ensure passage, and was scrapping his visit to Australia and Indonesia to do more.

"We greatly regret the delay," Gibbs told reporters, but "passage of health insurance reform is of paramount importance and the president is determined to see this battle through."

The bill aims to extend coverage to 32 million Americans who currently have none, bringing the world's richest country closer than ever to guaranteeing health insurance for all of its citizens, with 95 percent of Americans covered.

Democratic Senator Max Baucus, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, praised Obama's ability to win over support for his top

domestic priority, telling reporters: "His personal presence helps."

The Democratic plan calls for the House to approve the Senate's version of the legislation as early as Sunday, followed by both chambers approving a set of "fixes" to make the bill more to the House's liking.

"We feel very strong about where we are," said Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a major force behind the 10-year plan, but "every vote around here is a heavy lift."

Pelosi was working to rally liberal Democrats who view the bill as too timid and conservative Democrats who fear the price to pay in November mid-term elections for passing a measure many in their districts see as overambitious.

In a huge boost for Democrats, the powerful AFL-CIO labour union declared its "strong, active support" behind the bill despite reservations about some of its contents, stressing: "We are convinced that now is the time to say 'Yes.'"

The president's Republican foes in Congress reasserted their united opposition and vowed to make every effort to derail what they called a costly and dangerous proposal that raises taxes. "We're going to continue to work closely together to do everything that we can do to make sure that this bill never, ever, ever passes," said Republican House Minority Leader John Boehner.

Mousavi vows 'year of perseverance' against Iran government

AFP, Tehran

Iranian opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi vowed a "year of perseverance" in his fight against the government, in an Internet message on Friday marking the Persian New Year.

Mousavi, who remains steadfast in rejecting the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June last year, said a "retreat would be treason to Islam, the nation and to the blood of the martyrs."

"We will face issues and problems in (the Iranian year to March 2011). Part of it goes back to the demand of the people after the election which is a rightful demand," Mousavi said in a statement posted on his website.

"These demands will continue and the New Year will be the year of perseverance for this rightful and legal demand," Mousavi said on his website Kaleme.com.

Once seen as a pillar of the Islamic regime, former premier Mousavi is now a bitter critic of the country's hardline leadership along with fellow opposition leader Mehdi Karubi.

Iran witnessed one of its worst political crisis when Mousavi, Karubi and hundreds of thousands of their supporters took to the streets after Ahmadinejad's re-election, protesting that the poll was massively rigged.

The Persian New Year, or Nowrouz, starts on March 21 and marks the arrival of spring.

Japan PM hints at keeping US base in Okinawa

AFP, Tokyo

Facing mounting pressure from Washington, Japan's centre-left Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama yesterday suggested a disputed US military base could stay on the southern island of Okinawa.

Hatoyama, who was elected last year promising a less subservient relationship with Washington, has been reviewing a 2006 pact to relocate the Futenma airbase within Okinawa prefecture and suggested in the past it may be moved off the island instead.

But Hatoyama told reporters Friday that "it is difficult to move it from the prefecture". He immediately added: "But we want to cherish what Okinawa people hope for. I'm working hard on that situation."

Scientists find proof of global warming changing natural event

ANI, London

Scientists have established the first casual link between climate change and the timing of a natural event, which is namely the emergence of the common brown butterfly.

Although there have been strong correlations between global warming and changes in the timing of events such as animal migration and flowering, it has been hard to show a cause-and-effect link.

According to a report in New Scientist, this is what Michael Kearney and Natalie Briscoe of the University of Melbourne, Australia, have now done.

The researchers compared temperature changes in Melbourne - where the butterfly is common - with recorded observations of the first brown butterfly to be seen in the spring since the 1940s.

With each decade, the butterflies emerged 1.6 days earlier and Melbourne heated by 0.14 degree Celsius.

"Overall, the butterfly now emerges on average 10.4 days before it did in the 1940s," said Kearney.

"And we know the rise in air temperature links to butterfly emergence in a cause-and-effect pattern," he added.

The pair are confident in the cause-and-effect relationship for two reasons.

First, they placed eggs of the butterfly, *Heteronympha merope*, in chambers where temperature could be controlled and found that each larval stage has a different response to warmer-than-normal conditions.



A view of a superconducting solenoid magnet at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN) near Geneva. The European Organisation for Nuclear Research said that the world's most powerful atom smasher will be brought up to unprecedented power by early April.

PHOTO: AFP

Geneva atom smasher sets record for beam energy

AP, Geneva

Operators of the world's largest atom smasher yesterday ramped up their massive machine to three times the energy ever previously achieved, in the run-up to experiments probing the secrets of the universe.

The European Organization for Nuclear Research, or CERN, said beams of protons circulated at 3.5 trillion electron volts in both directions around the 27-kilometer (17-mile) tunnel housing the Large Hadron Collider under the Swiss-French border at Geneva. The next major development is expected in a few days when CERN starts colliding the beams in a new round of research to examine the tiniest particles and forces within the atom in hopes of finding out more about how matter is made up.

Saturn rings' atmosphere made up of oxygen

ANI, Washington

Nasa's Cassini orbiter's latest snapshot of Saturn has revealed the rapidly rearranging rings of the planet, as well as colliding moonlets, and an oxygen atmosphere.

Scientists were surprised to find that the atmosphere around Saturn's rings is largely made up of oxygen.

"Most people thought the ring atmosphere would be water molecules-H2O-and their breakdown products H (hydrogen) and OH (hydroxyl)," Cuzzi said.

That the ring system would have the chemistry to turn hydrogen and hydroxyl into oxygen "was not foreseen by most."

The discovery could help solve a long-standing mystery of Saturn's rings: why some of them seem stained red.

"Perhaps the colour is imparted when metals in ring rocks interact with oxygen," said Cuzzi.

Also, the most detailed imagery of Saturn's rings yet is giving a very different and dynamic feel to the orbiting bands of ice chunks.

"Here's this giant crystalline structure, stretching two-thirds of the distance from Earth to the moon, and yet parts of it change on a monthly or weekly time scale," said planetary scientist Jeff Cuzzi, from Nasa's Ames Research Centre in Moffett Field, California.

The edges of the thickest of Saturn's rings, A and B, for example, "kind of flop back and forth, sometimes pointing one way and sometimes another, sloshing around like water in a tank," said Cuzzi, co-author of one of the new studies.

3-D invisibility cloak developed

AFP, Washington

European researchers have taken the world a step closer to fictional wizard Harry Potter's invisibility cape after they made an object disappear using a three-dimensional "cloak," a study published Thursday in the US-based journal Science showed.

Scientists from Karlsruhe Institute of Technology in Germany and Imperial College London used the cloak, made using photonic crystals with a structure resembling piles of wood, to conceal a small bump on a gold surface, they wrote in Science.

"It's kind of like hiding a small object underneath a carpet -- except this time the carpet also disappears," they said.

"We put an object under a microscopic structure, a little like a reflective carpet," said Nicholas Stenger, one of the researchers who worked on the project.

"When we looked at it through a lens and did spectroscopy, no matter what angle we looked at the object from, we saw nothing. The bump became invisible," said Stenger.

Invisibility cloaks have already been developed but they only worked on two dimensions. In other words, the objects that were supposed to be made invisible were immediately visible from the third dimension, the study said.

The "cloak" invented by the European team is the first to work on three dimensions.

It is composed of special lenses that bend light waves to suppress light as it scattered from the tiny bump the researchers were trying to make disappear, the study says.

The invisibility cloak and the bump were both minute. The cloak measured 100 microns by 30 microns -- one micron being one-thousandth of a millimetre -- and the bump it hid was 10 times smaller, said Stenger.

The researchers are working now to recreate the disappearing bump on a larger scale, but Stenger said Harry Potter's invisibility cloak would not be hanging in would-be wizards' wardrobes in the immediate future.

Small power plants

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in Dhaka Export Processing Zone-DEPZ (35MW) and Chittagong Export Processing Zone-CEPZ (44MW), and one Regent Barakkunda power plant in Chittagong (22MW).

World Bank Country Director Ellen Goldstein during her Thursday's visit to Doreen Power Plant of Tangail said the power sector persists with two severe problems -- some 2000MW shortage of power and more than 50 percent of the people having no access to electricity.

Goldstein said the WB wants private-public partnership to overcome the problems as the government alone cannot resolve the problems. The WB works in power generation and distribution in the country, she added.

The WB sources said the local financial institutions are not yet keen to finance infrastructure projects for

a longer term like 10-15 years. IPPF project is helping the local financial institutions to offer longer term financing to infrastructure projects.

In less than three years of operation, the IPPF project has delivered seven fully operational small power plants. Some 178MW of power has been already added to the national grid through private-public partnership in small power plants with support of the IPPF project.

Managing Director of Doreen Power Generation and Systems Ltd Tanzeeb Alam Siddique said, "We have done something which is very achievable. World Bank supports the government to overcome power shortage."

Doreen Power Plant at Elanga, Tangail is a gas-based power plant, which came into commercial operation in November 2008, two months ahead of the scheduled 15

months, said Tanzeeb Alam.

The project was implemented at a cost of Tk 115 crore which was jointly financed by the WB (80pc) and NCC Bank (20pc).

Eng Sultan Reza Bin Mahmud of Doreen Power said average available capacity is 90.2 percent and gas consumption 9-9.7mmcf in its Elanga plant.

Besides, the WB also supported state-of-the-art power plants at Haripur (360MW) and Meghnaghat (450MW), which are providing reliable power to the national grid. Haripur 360mw plant was the first Independent Power Plant (IPP) in the private sector.

An on-going project of the WB is supporting a 300MW peaking power plant in Siddhirganj. The World Bank is also helping the government to tender out 450MW IPP in Bibiyana and other IPPs.