

Mideast officials fly to US as talks crisis looms

AFP, Jerusalem

Top Israeli and Palestinian officials yesterday headed for the United States where they were expected to seek ways to break a deadlock over settlements which is threatening to sabotage peace talks.

Israeli President Shimon Peres left shortly after midnight on a four-day visit to coincide with the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, and a few hours later Defence Minister Ehud Barak set off for talks in Washington.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, currently in Amman, was also to fly to New York on Sunday evening for the annual sitting, with efforts under way to arrange a meeting with US President Barack Obama, a senior Palestinian official told AFP.

"There are also preparations for a meeting between (Israeli premier Benjamin) Netanyahu, Obama and Abbas," he said. "There is an expectation that they will meet."

Twin car bombs kill 29 in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Two near-simultaneous car bombs rocked the Iraqi capital yesterday, killing at least 29 people and wounding 111 in the city's deadliest day in a month.

The violence was the worst to hit Iraq since US troops declared an official end to combat operations on September 1, and comes with no new government yet formed since a March general election.

The twin blasts struck near the Aden junction in north Baghdad and in the residential district of Mansur in the west of the capital at around 10:10am (0710 GMT), AFP journalists and security officials said.

An interior ministry official put the death toll at 29 -- 19 in the Aden explosion and 10 in Mansur.

"It was a minibus -- the driver stopped and told people nearby that he was going to go see a doctor," said Abu Abdullah, 40, who was near the site of the Aden bombing. "A few minutes later, it exploded."

An AFP journalist at the scene said the blast, against a National Security department office building, left a crater three metres (10 feet) in diameter and that security forces had cordoned off the area.

He reported blood, torn scraps of clothing and shards of blackened metal littered across

the street, adding that the national security building had collapsed in on itself and several houses nearby had been badly hit.

In Mansur, another AFP journalist reported seeing several bloodied bodies on the street, with many cars burned out and two buildings destroyed, while nearby houses were also badly damaged.

The explosion was outside an office of mobile phone company Asiacell, he said, but it was unclear if the office was the target.

"When the bomb exploded, all of our papers and chairs were thrown into the air and we were flung to the floor," said one Asiacell employee who did not want to give his name.

"Everybody wanted to run away from the building, but fire and smoke was blocking our way," he said, adding that two of his colleagues were killed in the blast and more than 10 wounded.

The man, in his 20s, himself suffered wounds to his head, his clothes were covered in blood and dirt, and his car was badly burned.

A medical official at Al-Yarmuk hospital in west Baghdad said it had received 10 dead bodies and treated 59 people, including 11 women and two children.

Also on Sunday, a father and son were killed when a magnetic bomb was attached to their car in Ghazaliyah, west Baghdad, the interior ministry official said.



Participants of the traditional Oktoberfest costume parade wave as they parade through the streets of Munich, southern Germany, yesterday. The world's biggest beer festival Oktoberfest runs until October 4, 2010.

PHOTO: AFP

5 US soldiers charged over Afghan murders

REUTERS, Washington

Five US soldiers in Afghanistan's Kandahar province have been charged with murdering three Afghan civilians, The Washington Post reported yesterday.

In its early edition, the Post cited Army charging documents as saying the infantry personnel, including one staff sergeant, murdered the civilians between January and May of this year.

The Post cited military court documents and interviews with people familiar with the case to allege the killings "were committed essentially for sport by soldiers who had a fondness for hashish and alcohol."

The accused, who also include seven other members of the 5th Stryker Combat Brigade charged with lesser offences, denied wrongdoing through lawyers and family members, the newspaper reported.

NOVEMBER ELECTIONS

Obama urges blacks to vote and 'guard the change'

REUTERS, Washington

President Barack Obama, seeking to fire up an important part of his support base ahead of November's elections, told black leaders on Saturday he wanted their support to "guard the change" he was delivering.

"I need everybody here to go back to your neighborhoods, and your workplaces, to your churches, and barbershops, and beauty shops. Tell them we have more work to do. Tell them we can't wait to organize. Tell them that the time for action is now," he told the Congressional Black Caucus.

The words of America's first black president showed a deliberate effort to recapture the enthusiasm that had helped him win the White House in 2008, after polls showed African-Americans much less likely to vote than whites this year.

"It's not surprising that a lot of people may not be feeling that energized or that engaged right now," he told an annual awards ceremony hosted by the organization representing black members of the U.S. Congress.

"A lot of folks may be feeling like politics is something they get involved in every four years when there's a presidential election, but they don't see why they should bother the rest of the time,"



he said.

Republicans could make big gains in November as high unemployment and slowing growth turns voters away from Obama's Democrats, potentially costing them control of Congress.

A Gallup survey in early September found only 25 percent of blacks had given "quite a lot" or "some" thought to the November 2 congressional ballot, compared to 42 percent of whites.

This represents a much larger gap than during the presidential election in 2008, when the two groups were about equal in their intention to cast a ballot.

High turnout in the African-American community, together with the enthusiastic support of young voters, was a striking feature of the 2008 election and an important part of Obama's strategy in securing the White House.

Success in repeating at least part of that performance in the upcoming mid-term poll, when voter turnout is traditionally low, could make a big difference to congressional Democrats running in close races. All 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and 37 of 100 Senate seats are up for grabs.

"The last election was a changing of the guard -- now we need to guard the change," Obama said.

AIR INDIA BOMBING Canadian convicted of lying

AFP, Vancouver

The only person ever convicted in the 1985 Air India bombings was found guilty of one count of perjury Saturday in this western Canadian city.

Inderjit Singh Reyat, a Sikh immigrant to Canada, already served more than 15 years in prison for manslaughter and making the bombs in the so-called Air India case of June 1985, when two suitcase bombs were planted on planes leaving Vancouver.

One exploded at Japan's Narita airport, killing two baggage handlers as they transferred cargo onto an Air India jet. The second tore apart Air India flight 182 as it neared the coast of Ireland, killing all 329 people aboard.

The downing of Flight 182 was the second-worst airline attack in history, behind the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

Prosecutors argued that Canadian Sikh extremists had sought to bring down Air India jets in retaliation for the Indian government's June 1984 attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Sikhism's holiest shrine.

Gunmen fire on tourist bus in Delhi Injure two Taiwanese

AFP, New Delhi

Attackers on a motorbike opened fire with a sub-machine gun on a tourist bus outside New Delhi's main mosque yesterday, injuring two Taiwanese sightseers, police said.

The incident came just a fortnight before the start of the Commonwealth Games, when 7,000 foreign athletes and officials are expected in the Indian capital, and just days before a court ruling on a flashpoint religious dispute.

Meanwhile in the evening, Indian Mujahideen (IM) claimed responsibility of incident and threatened the Government against holding the Commonwealth Games, adds ANI.

The gunmen struck outside the Jama Masjid mosque in the ancient walled city, a top tourist attraction, leaving one of the two Taiwanese -- who are aged 26 and 27 -- seriously hurt, medics said.

Witnesses said two men wearing raincoats and helmets arrived on a motorcycle outside the mosque, with the passenger opening fire first at the mosque and then at the tourist minibus as passengers disembarked.

"According to our preliminary investigation, they (the gunmen) finished off an entire magazine of their sten gun," assistant police commissioner Jagbir Singh told AFP, referring to a light sub-machine gun.

One of the victims was shot in the stomach and was being operated on, said Amit Banerjee, head of Lok Narayan Jay Prakash Hospital, where the hurt tourists had been transferred.

The other has a superficial head wound that is not life-threatening, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Thai anti-government "Red Shirt" protester reacts after lighting a candle in memory of those slain during rallies in April and May as they gather at the Ratchaprasong intersection in downtown Bangkok, the focus of their two-month rally, yesterday. Thousands of "Red Shirts" massed to mark four years since a coup ousted Thaksin Shinawatra and to commemorate those slain in a May crackdown on their protests.

As freed hiker returns, Iran presses US to release Iranians

AFP, Washington

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pressed Washington to release eight Iranians as a "humanitarian gesture" in an interview aired yesterday as freed American hiker Sarah Shourd returned home.

"Iran was the country that released Sarah. We haven't even received a note from the United States on that," Ahmadinejad complained in the interview with ABC's "This Week," calling her release "a huge humanitarian act."

Shourd, 32, arrived at Dulles International Airport outside Washington days after being released on 500,000 dollars bail by Iran, which is still holding two other American hikers, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, more than a year after they were detained along with Shourd.

"It would not be misplaced to ask that the US government should take a humanitarian gesture to release the Iranians who were illegally arrested and detained here in the United States," Ahmadinejad said.

When asked if Iran would respond to an appeal by the mothers of the two remaining American hikers for their release, Ahmadinejad said their cases were in the hands of the judiciary.

"They violated the law," he said. "Do you want violators to be released? Is that what you're asking me?"

The three Americans were arrested inside Iran on July 31, 2009 after setting out on a hike from Iraqi Kurdistan.

They were accused of "spying and entering the country illegally," but the trio said they had inadvertently strayed across a rugged unmarked border.

Swedes go to polls marked by far-right advance

AFP, Stockholm

Swedes voted in a general election yesterday expected to hand victory to the centre-right government and deliver seats to an emerging far-right party for the first time.

Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt was vying to see his four-party Alliance become the first right-leaning government to win a second term in nearly a century.

That would spell a decisive end to the rival Social Democrats' 80-year domination of Swedish politics and their role as caretakers of the country's famous cradle-to-grave welfare state.

Early voting was slower after the polls opened at 8:00 am (0800 GMT), but turnout is traditionally around 80 percent in Sweden and 2.2 million of the seven million electorate had already cast their ballots in advance.

Daniel Forsling, a 33-year-old teacher, voted in the heavily immigrant Stockholm suburb of Rinkeby. "I've been pretty sure about who I would vote for... I hope the right bloc will win."

Four separate opinion polls published a day before the election handed a comfortable, albeit shrinking, lead to the 45-year-old Reinfeldt's government, although it remained unclear if he would secure a parliamentary majority.



Sarah Shourd

Lanka bans BBC from covering civil war hearings

BBC ONLINE

The BBC has been blocked from covering public hearings about Sri Lanka's civil war in former rebel-held territory.

For three days, civilians will have the chance to give evidence on life under the Tamil Tigers or LITTE.

The government says the Commission on Lessons Learned and Reconciliation is working to prevent a repeat of the conflict.

A senior defence ministry official said he could not allow the BBC to attend the sittings, due to start on Saturday.

An important part of the commission's work is to meet ordinary Tamil civilians who were displaced by the war and suffered severe trauma, injury or the loss of close family members.

Afghanistan vote count begins amid fears of fraud

AFP, Kabul

Allegations of fraud and a low voter turnout overshadowed vote counting in Afghanistan's parliamentary election yesterday after widespread and deadly Taliban violence targeted the key poll.

Western supporters praised the more than four million Afghans who, according to preliminary figures, took part in Saturday's election, compared with the 4.8 million valid votes cast in last year's presidential poll.

The bodies of three election workers were found Sunday in northern Balkh province, the head of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) said, following the country's second parliamentary polls since the Taliban was overthrown in 2001.

The death toll from the day's violence was not finalised, but NATO said at least 22 people were killed, while the interior ministry put the number so far at 15.

Election observers said polling day was rife

with complaints of delayed poll station opening, intimidation, ineligible voters, misuse of registration cards, proxy voting, poor ink quality and shortages of ballot papers.

The Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) said it was compiling reports of irregularities.

"The main types of complaints are the bad quality of the indelible ink and the use of fake voting cards," ECC spokesman Ahmad Zia Razaat said.

Among those to complain was the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), which said that voting had been affected by insecurity, violence and irregularities including ballot stuffing.

"Taking these problems into account, FEFA has serious concerns about the quality of the elections," the monitoring group said.

Violence had been expected after the Taliban announced it would attack polling centres, election workers and anyone who turned out to vote.