

Pakistan's ISI, a hidden, frustrating power for US

REUTERS, Islamabad

Top US defense officials are concerned some elements of Pakistan's main spy agency may be interacting improperly with the Taliban and other insurgent groups, said a Pentagon spokesman.

Colonel David Lapan said Pakistani army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, himself a former spy chief, was aware of US concerns about the military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency and shared some of them.

Here are some questions and answers about the ISI, the most powerful intelligence agency in Pakistan, a country the United States sees as indispensable to its efforts to tame a raging Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

HOW POWERFUL IS THE ISI?
The shadowy military intelligence agency has evolved into what some describe as a state within a state.

Widely feared by Pakistanis, it is believed to have a hidden role in many of the nuclear-armed nation's policies, including in Afghanistan, one of US President Barack Obama's top foreign policy priorities.

The ISI is seen as the Pakistani equivalent of the US Central Agency (CIA) -- with which it has had a symbiotic but sometimes strained relationship -- and Israel's Mossad.

Its size is not publicly known but the ISI is widely believed to employ tens of thousands of agents, with informers in many spheres of public life.

Hardline elements within the ISI are capable of being spoilers, no matter what

position a Pakistani government might take, a reality the US and Afghan governments should take into account if they attempt to exclude Pakistan from negotiations with the Afghan Taliban.

WHAT ABOUT THE ISI'S PAST?
Created in 1948, the ISI gained importance and power during the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and is now rated one of best-organized intelli-



gence agencies in the developing world.

The ISI along with the United States and Saudi Arabia, nurtured the Afghan mujahideen, or Muslim holy warrior guerrillas, and helped them win the war. It helped to plan many of their operations and was the main conduit for Western and Arab arms. It later helped create the Taliban.

Although Pakistan officially abandoned support for the Taliban after joining the US-led war against al-Qaeda and Taliban, critics, including Western military commanders in Afghanistan, say it has maintained its ties with, and support for, the Afghan Taliban. The military

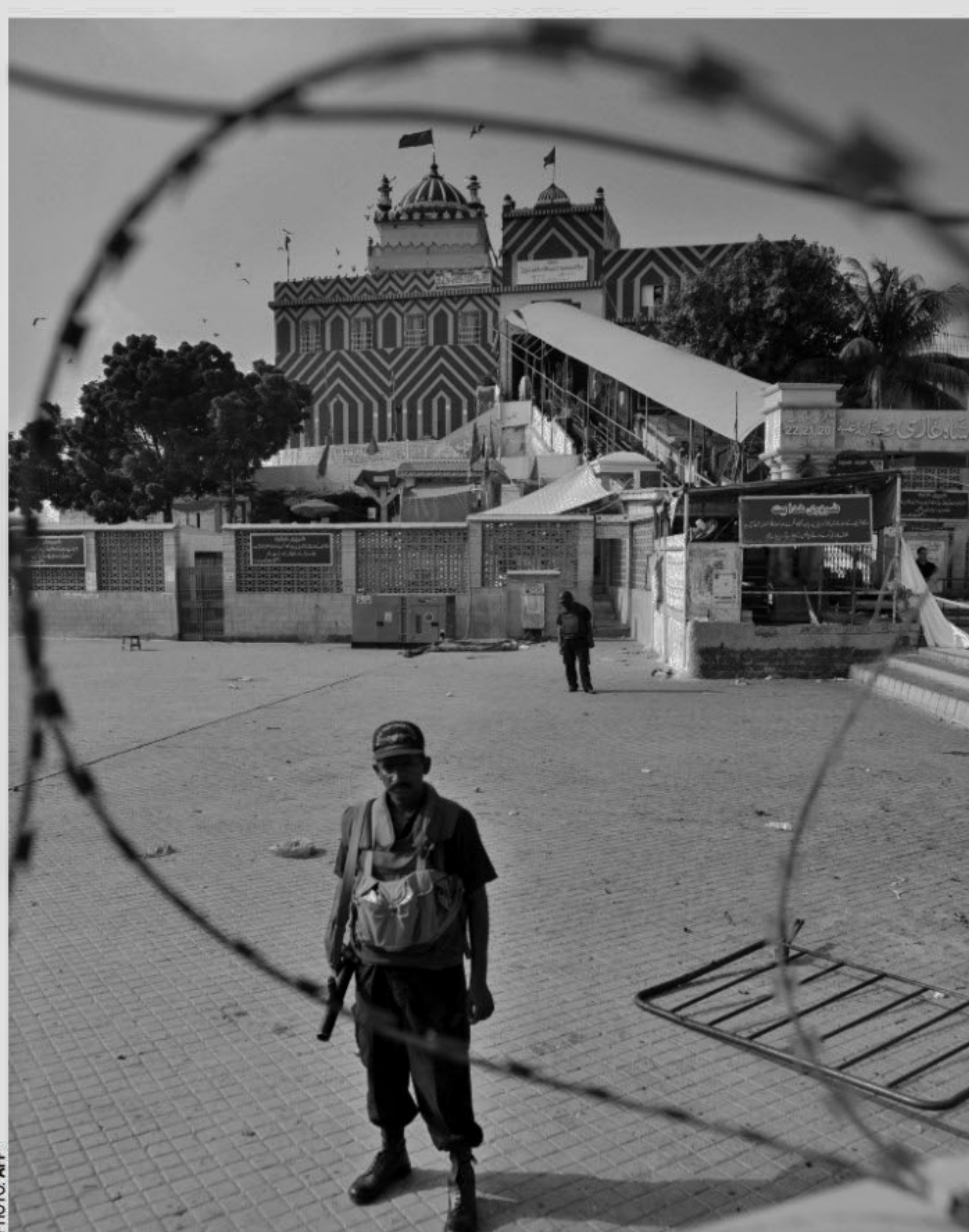
denies supporting the Taliban but says agents maintain links with militants, as any security agency would do, in the interests of intelligence.

Analysts say the main preoccupation of the ISI, and the Pakistani military, is the threat from nuclear-armed rival India and it sees the Afghan Taliban as tools to influence events, and limit India's role, in Afghanistan.

The ISI was heavily involved in the 1990s in creating and supporting Islamist factions that battled Indian forces in the disputed Kashmir region. Some of those groups have since joined forces with the Pakistani Taliban to attack the state, including the ISI. That militants alliance may be the biggest threat to Pakistan's long-term security, analysts say.

WHAT ABOUT THE ISI'S CURRENT LEADERSHIP?

Lieutenant General Ahmad Shuja Pasha is the director general of the ISI and a close ally of Kayani. Pasha is seen as anti-Taliban, unlike some of his predecessors, and analysts suggest he is using the ISI to broker some sort of deal between factions of the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government. Although he is seen as relatively moderate, the ISI is almost certain to come under a new wave of pressure as the United States gets increasingly frustrated with the army's perceived reluctance to go after Afghan Taliban fighters who cross the border to attack Western forces in Afghanistan. But the strategic interests of the ISI, headquartered in a sprawling, well-guarded complex in Islamabad, will invariably come first, analysts say.



Pakistani police commandos cordon off the shrine of Sufi Saint Abdullah Shah Ghazi yesterday day after two teenage suicide bombers blew themselves up at the shrine killing nine worshippers, including two children, and injuring at least 64.

French court approves veil ban

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

France's highest court has approved a law banning full-face veils in public -- with the exception of mosques -- eliminating the last hurdle for the ban.

Those behind the law argue that it will protect women's rights. Its critics, however, say that it stigmatises Muslim women and it is a breach of religious freedom.

The court found the law to be constitutional, bar in the case of places of worship.

"The ban on covering the face in public places cannot constrain the practice of religious freedom in places of worship that are open to the public," the court said in its judgment, a nominal nod to religious freedoms.

The decision in favour of the law by the constitutional council came as a surprise to many. The court had warned that the ban -- which includes the niqab and the burqa, but not the hijab -- might be unconstitutional.

Afghan security contractors fund Taliban: US Senate

BBC ONLINE

Heavy US reliance on private security in Afghanistan has helped to line the pockets of the Taliban, a US Senate report says.

The study by the Senate Armed Services Committee says this is because contractors often fail to vet local recruits and end up hiring warlords.

The report demands "immediate and aggressive steps" to improve the vetting and oversight process.

Some 26,000 private security personnel, mostly Afghans, operate in Afghanistan.

Nine out of 10 of them work for the US government.

Private security firms in Afghanistan provide guards for everything from diplomatic missions and aid agencies to supply convoys.

In August, Afghan President Hamid Karzai gave private security companies four months to end operations in Afghanistan.

"All too often our reliance on private security contractors in Afghanistan has empowered warlords, powerbrokers operating outside Afghan government control," Democratic Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate committee, said.

"These contractors threaten the security of

our troops and risk the success of our mission," he added.

The report found that some contractors have had little training, while others were warlords linked to "murder, kidnapping, bribery and anti-coalition activities".

The document gives several notorious examples, including a man the Americans nicknamed Mr White -- after a character in the violent film Reservoir Dogs -- and his two brothers.

Mr White, who was hired to help guard Shindand airbase in the western Afghan province of Herat, was killed in 2007 by a rival Afghan security contractor.

The Americans then employed his brother, who was known as Mr White II. He is suspected of having funded the insurgents, and was eventually killed in a US raid on a Taliban meeting.

Mr White II's brother, known as Mr White III, was then appointed to provide security, and was kept on the payroll despite concerns linking him to a wave of roadside bombs in the area.

The report also says that by funding warlords with their own private militias the US is undermining its declared aim of creating a more stable Afghanistan.

It warns that the growth of a lucrative private security industry has drawn new recruits away from the Afghan police and army, where salaries are lower.

AYODHYA SUIT Three parties meet, discuss a formula

PTI, Ayodhya

Unfazed by plans of others to approach the Supreme Court, three main parties in the Ayodhya title suits yesterday held a meeting for the first time on a public platform and discussed a formula for a negotiated settlement.

Panch Ram Das of Nirmohi Akhara, Ramvilas Vedanti of Ram Janmabhoomi Trust and 90-year-old litigant Hashim Ansari held a meeting at the residence of Hanuman Ghari Mahant Gyan Das and deliberated ways to find a solution.

Later, the three men claimed they have reached a formula, which they think would be acceptable to both Hindus and Muslims, but did not elaborate. Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha and Sunni Central Waqf Board have announced they would approach Supreme Court.

Governor among 20 dead in Afghan mosque blast

AP, Kabul

A provincial governor and at least 19 other people were killed by a massive bomb blast inside a packed mosque during Friday prayers in northern Afghanistan, where insurgents have stepped up violence amid intensified Nato-Afghan military operations.

Thirty-five people were wounded in the explosion while praying at the Shirkat mosque in Takhar province, said Interior Ministry spokesman Zemer Bashary.

Gen Shah Jahan Noori, the provincial police chief, said the governor of neighbouring Kunduz province, Mohammad Omar, was killed along with 14 other people. The bomb was meant to kill Omar, who regularly attends Friday prayers at the mosque, Takhar Gov Abdul Jabar Taqwa said.

"He was the target, and the terrorists were able to kill him," Taqwa said. "This is a big loss for us because Mohammad Omar was a very brave and good governor."

Wounded people wrapped in bloodstained blankets were rushed to the hospital. One man, his face charred black from the blast, was carried on a stretcher.

No group claimed responsibility, but the Taliban have targeted Omar previously.

One of Afghanistan's 34 provincial governors, he survived at least three previous assassination attempts, including ambushes and roadside bombs. A bombing along a main highway in May 2009 slightly wounded him. Omar blamed the "enemies of peace and security."

SUU KYI'S APPEAL Supreme Court to hold hearing on October 18

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's Supreme Court announced yesterday that it would hold a hearing on October 18 on detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's latest appeal against her house arrest.

The judges will decide whether to consider the "special appeal", according to a notice posted in front of the Supreme Court in the former capital Yangon.

The Nobel peace laureate's current term of house arrest is due to end on November 13, just days after national elections that critics say are aimed at simply entrenching the junta's power.

Suu Kyi lodged the last-ditch appeal in May. She has already had her appeal rejected twice, most recently by the Supreme Court in February. Court verdicts in the army-ruled country rarely favour opposition activists.

The democracy icon, who has spent most of the past two decades locked up, had her detention lengthened by 18 months in August last year after being convicted over a bizarre incident in which a US man swam to her lakeside home.

The extension of her detention after a prison trial sparked international outrage as it effectively keeps her off the stage for the elections.

N Korean official confirms heir's succession

AFP, Seoul

A senior North Korean official has given the first public confirmation that the young son of veteran leader Kim Jong-Il will succeed his father, The Associated Press reported yesterday.

Yang Hyong-Sop confirmed the eventual ascent to power of Kim Jong-Un in an interview in Pyongyang with AP's television affiliate APTN, the US news agency reported.

The reported remarks by Yang, a leading ruling party member, marked the first time that a North Korean official has spoken openly about what will be the nuclear-armed nation's second dynastic succession.

"Our people take pride in the fact that they are blessed with great leaders from generation to generation," The Associated Press quoted Yang as saying in the interview.

"Our people are honoured to serve the great President Kim Il-Sung and the great leader Kim Jong-Il," he added. "Now we also have the honour of serving young General Kim Jong-Un."

Jong-Un, believed aged about 27, was last week appointed a four-star general and given powerful party posts, apparently confirming his status as leader-in-waiting to his ageing and ailing father.

Yang is a member of the political bureau of the central committee of the Workers' Party and vice president of the presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, the country's parliament.

Kim Jong-Il took over from his own father and founding president Kim Il-Sung, who died in 1994.

The current leader, now 68, suffered a stroke two years ago and also reportedly suffers kidney problems, making a second succession more pressing.



A Russian Soyuz rocket rises at the Russian leased Kazakh Baikonur cosmodrome yesterday, before its launch. The new International Space Station crew Russian cosmonauts Oleg Skripochka (R), Alexander Kaleri (C) and US astronaut Scott Kelly (L) wait for an order to get into the rocket. It launched at 5:10am Kazakhstan time.



PHOTO: AFP

Rescue hole to reach trapped miners today

AFP, Copiapo

The first rescue hole wide enough to pull 33 workers trapped inside a Chilean mine for two months should reach the men today, a cabinet minister said.

Mining Minister Laurence Golborne however did not commit to a date to rescue the miners, who will be pulled out one by one from the depths of a mine in a custom built cage.

"We expect to break through around Saturday," Golborne told reporters.

He said that in the best case scenario it will take "two or three days" or in the worst case "eight to 10 days after the drill has reached the miners" for the men to be pulled out.

The shaft is dubbed "Plan B," one of three attempting to reach miners trapped 700 metres underground in northern Chile since August 5.

The delay also will depend on engineers' assessment of soil and rock stability. They may opt to first insert giant metal tubes to reinforce the shaft, which could add up to one week to the operation.

In Santiago, Health Minister Jaime Manalich urged the public to be patient.

"The fact that the T-130 drill reaches the miners, as will probably happen this weekend, does not mean that they will be immediately rescued," he told reporters.

Abbas seeks Arab League backing

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, is set to present his case to the Arab League for suspending peace talks with Israel until it extends a moratorium on illegal settlement construction.

Nabil Abu Rdainah, a spokesman for Abbas, said the Palestinian leader will tell Arab foreign ministers in the Libyan city of Sirte yesterday that "resuming negotiations requires a full freeze of settlement activities" in the occupied West Bank.

"Settlement is an impediment to negotiations and creates an atmosphere in which Israel alone is to be blamed for the obstruction of the political process," he told the Reuters news agency.

US-sponsored direct peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, led by Abbas, were relaunched a month ago in Washington,

with the declared goal of reaching a two-state solution within a year.

But the talks were thrown into jeopardy in September after Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, refused to extend a 10-month freeze to the construction of Jewish settlements on occupied territory.

Abbas has said he wants to go on negotiating but cannot unless the new settlement construction is frozen for "three to four months more to give peace a chance".

But he said he would not make a final decision on the talks until after meeting Arab League ministers.

Abbas has strong backing from Palestinian leadership and public opinion to quit the peace talks over the settlement issue, though Washington has urged Arab ministers to back the talks rather than encourage Abbas to pull out.

Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-

general, has also called on Israeli and Palestinian leaders to sit down together again.

"I urge Israel to restore settlement restraint under its road map obligations and I urge Arab leaders meeting in Sirte this week to keep doors open and support [Palestinian] President Abbas."

Jewish settlement on occupied Palestinian land is one of the bitterest aspects of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Palestinians view the presence of 500,000 Israelis in more than 120 settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem as a major threat to the viability of their future state and see the freezing of settlement construction as a key test of Israel's seriousness about the talks.

Jewish settlements on occupied territory are illegal under international law but have been expanding in the West Bank for 30 years.

UK Labour leader names shadow cabinet team

AFP, London

Ed Miliband, the new leader of Britain's opposition Labour Party, unveiled his shadow cabinet team yesterday, handing ex-home secretary Alan Johnson the key finance brief in a surprise move.

Rising star Yvette Cooper becomes shadow foreign secretary while her husband Ed Balls was handed the job of shadow home secretary, Labour said.

The shadow cabinet -- the senior opposition spokespersons -- scrutinise the government, with the members of Miliband's top team shadowing the briefs of government secretaries of state.

Miliband was last month elected leader of Labour -- which lost power in May after 13 years -- promising to represent a "new generation" in British politics.

But most of those in his shadow cabinet are familiar names from the party's years in government under prime ministers Gordon Brown and Tony Blair.

"I am delighted with my new shadow cabinet, drawn from a broad range of talents across our party," Miliband said Friday. "My team is united in one central mission for the future -- to win back the trust of the British people and take Labour back to power."

"This new generation of Labour will work together to reject the pessimism of this coalition government as we set out our vision of what Britain can achieve."

The key job of finance spokesman goes to Johnson, a charismatic former postman and trade union boss who admits he would rather have been a pop star than a politician.