

Abbas ready to start MidEast peace talks

Arrives in Paris to meet Sarkozy

AFP, Bogota

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas yesterday said he was willing to restart peace negotiations with Israel "at any moment."

"We are in favour of peaceful negotiations leading to the creation of a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel," Abbas said in Bogota, where he is on a Latin American tour to rally support for UN recognition.

"We are at any moment willing to return to the negotiating table if Israel is of the same mind," he said, during an event where he was declared an honorary citizen of Bogota by the city's mayor.

The Middle East Quartet -- the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union -- has called for a resumption of negotiations.

Israel on Sunday accepted with reservations a plan proposed by Quartet envoy Tony Blair, while the Palestinians have said there will be no negotiations until Israel freezes settlement -- a demand they say is written



into the Quartet proposal.

Meanwhile, Abbas's envoy said Abbas and French President Nicolas Sarkozy will meet in Paris in the coming days to discuss the Palestinian bid for UN recognition.

Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki said Abbas would depart for France after meeting yesterday with Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos on the request for UN Security Council recognition of a Palestinian state.

Both Colombia and France are on the 15-member council.

"We are going to have a meeting with the French president Sarkozy on the same subject, because France is also a permanent member of the Security Council," Maliki told AFP Monday.

Abbas was scheduled to visit Caracas yesterday to meet Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez. The leftist Chavez has long championed the Palestinian cause and has hosted Abbas on previous occasions.

Israel to legalise disputed outposts

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu has capitulated to heavy pressure from the settler lobby to find ways of legalising settlement outposts built on private Palestinian land, Haaretz newspaper said yesterday.

According to the paper, he has ordered Justice Minister Yaakov Neeman to set up a task force to explore ways of legalising such construction, contradicting a decision taken earlier this year to raze all such buildings.

The decision to set up a task force was taken after heavy pressure from the settler lobby and right-wing activists following the demolition in early September of three structures in Migron outpost near the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Further demolitions in another four outposts are expected to take place by the year's end.

The decision to demolish Migron and other outposts built on private Palestinian land was taken in February when Netanyahu and three other ministers met with Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein, Haaretz said.

At the meeting, they agreed to raze a number of outposts built on private land while at the same time working to retroactively legalise any illegal construction in both settlements and outposts built on state land.

Hagit Ofra, who works with the Israeli settlement watchdog Peace Now, said 70 outposts were built either partially or completely on private Palestinian land.

Ofra said she was "surprised" by the decision to set up a task force, which was most likely a move to "buy time" and stave off the upcoming round of outpost demolitions.

"I find it very hard to believe that they can get away with legalising such a land grab," she said.

Ukraine ex-PM jailed for power abuse

AFP, Kiev

A Ukrainian judge yesterday sentenced former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko to seven years in jail for abusing her powers in a 2009 gas deal with Russia, a verdict that is set to harm ties with the European Union.

Amid emotional scenes in the packed court, judge Rodion Kireyev said the 10 year contract for gas imports from Russia had sustained heavy losses for Ukraine and ruled that her actions were criminal.

"The court rules that YV Tymoshenko intentionally used her powers to criminal ends," Kireyev said in his judgement. "The court finds her guilty and sentences her to seven years in prison."

Kireyev said Tymoshenko sustained a loss to state gas firm Naftogaz of 1.5 billion hryvnia (\$190 million) by agreeing the 10 year contract.

He also ruled that Tymoshenko would herself have to pay back the losses sus-



Yulia Tymoshenko

tained. EU officials have warned that a conviction would severely jeopardise Ukraine's hopes of signing an association agreement with the European Union this year which would be a first step towards its goal of joining the bloc.

The former Orange Revolution leader immediately denounced what she said was a verdict ordered by her arch enemy Viktor Yanukovich.

"We will fight and defend my good name in the European court," Tymoshenko said. "We have to be strong and defend Ukraine from this authoritarianism."

Tymoshenko insists that the case is a vendetta pursued by Yanukovich to eliminate her from politics after their tight tussle in 2010 presidential elections.

Hundreds of Tymoshenko supporters gathered outside the court in central Kiev in a tense standoff with security forces as the verdict was read out.

Syria must reform fast: China

AFP, Beijing

China urged Syria yesterday to move faster to implement reforms, a week after Beijing infuriated the West by blocking a UN resolution against President Bashar al-Assad's deadly crackdown on protests.

It is the first time that China has veered away from its longstanding policy of non-interference in the affairs of Syria, which has been rocked by anti-government protests and violence since earlier this year.

"We believe the Syrian government should move faster to honour its reform pledges and swiftly start to push forward the inclusive political process with the broad participation of all parties in Syria," foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin told reporters.

His comments come as Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visits Beijing.

Both China and Russia, veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council, blocked the UN resolution last week, drawing strong condemnation from countries such as the United States and Britain.

But on Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Moscow and Beijing were ready to propose a new UN resolution on Syria that would condemn violence carried out both by Assad's regime and the opposition.

Liu said the original draft resolution against Syria "threatened to use sanctions".

"We believe this is not conducive to stability in Syria," he added.

Liu said China hoped the UN Security Council would "ease the tensions in Syria and help promote political dialogue", as Syrian opposition forces step up their efforts to unseat the embattled Assad.

Egypt deputy PM resigns after clashes

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian Deputy Prime Minister Hazem al-Beblawi resigned yesterday following deadly clashes in the capital that left 25 people dead, the official MENA news agency reported.

Beblawi -- one of two deputy prime ministers who also has the finance portfolio -- said he tendered his resignation after Sunday's deadly clashes "which shook the security of the society, which is the government's responsibility" to ensure.

"Although the government is not directly responsible, in the end, the responsibility falls on its shoulders," Beblawi was quoted by MENA as saying.

Meanwhile the UN human rights office yesterday urged Egyptian authorities to ensure that any probes into clashes which killed 25 people, mostly Coptic Christians, be conducted in an impartial and independent manner.



Released Pakistani prisoners wave after they crossed over to Pakistan at the India-Pakistan Wagah border post yesterday. The Indian government in a goodwill gesture released twelve Pakistani prisoners.

Anti-Gaddafi fighters seize Sirte police HQ

AFP, Sirte

Fighters from Libya's new regime seized the police headquarters in the centre of Muammar Gaddafi's hometown Sirte yesterday as they moved in for the kill against the strongman's remaining diehards.

Meanwhile, National Transitional Council (NTC) fighters were gearing for a fresh onslaught on the desert town of Bani Walid, another remaining bastion of forces loyal to the ousted dictator, prompting civilians to flee.

In Sirte, jubilant NTC combatants celebrated the takeover of the strategic police building, which they found to be deserted.

In contrast to Monday, when NTC forces were pounded with rockets and gunfire as they battled Kadhafi loyalists street by street, they met no resistance on Tuesday as they edged into the city centre.

Iranian actress awarded jail term, 90 lashes

PTI, Melbourne

Actress Marzieh Vafamehr has been sentenced to a year in jail and 90 lashes by an Iranian court for her role in an Australian film on the limits imposed on artists in the Islamic republic.

The film My Tehran for Sale which won the 2009 Independent Spirit Inside Film award and the jury award for best feature film at the Trimedia Film Festival in 2010 has been directed by Iranian-Australian Granaz Moussavi.

The movie tells the story of a young actress in Tehran whose theatre work is



Marzieh Vafamehr

banned by the authorities.

The film has been shot entirely on location in Tehran and was premiered at the Adelaide Film Festival in 2009, included rarely seen images of modern urban Iran and revealed how young Iranian people live behind closed doors.

The Iranian-origin actress, who appears in the movie without a 'hijab' and with a shaved head, was first arrested in Tehran in July after the film was heavily criticised by Iran's conservative commentators.

Iranian authorities have not released details of the charges against her.

Afghan opium production sours

BBC ONLINE

Opium production in Afghanistan rose by 61% this year compared with 2010, according to a UN report.

The increase has been attributed to rising opium prices that have driven farmers to expand cultivation of the illicit opium poppy by 7% in 2011.

Last year opium production halved largely due to a plant infection which drastically reduced yields.

Afghanistan produces 90% of the world's opium - 5,800 tonnes this year - the main ingredient of heroin.

Analysts say that revenue from the drug has helped fund the Taliban insurgency.

Farmers who responded to the survey described economic hardship and lucrative prices as the main reasons for the increase.

Nearly 80% of the opium grown in Afghanistan is being produced in provinces in the south, including Helmand and Kandahar, which are among the most volatile in the country.

CHOLERA EPIDEMIC 2,466 died in west, central Africa

REUTERS, Geneva

A cholera epidemic sweeping through west and central Africa, one of the biggest in the vast region's history, has infected more than 85,000 people, killing at least 2,466 so far this year, United Nations aid agencies said yesterday.

The virulent diarrhea disease is spreading quickly along waterways between and within countries, causing an "unacceptably high" rate of fatalities, the UN Children's Fund Unicef said.

"The size and the scale of the outbreaks mean the region is facing one of the biggest epidemics in its history," Unicef spokeswoman Marixie Mercado told a news briefing in Geneva.

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