

Sharon ignores Bush's personal appeal

Dr M will take up Palestinian issue with US President

TEL AVIV, Sun. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon stuck to his guns today in the face of a personal appeal by US President George W. Bush to pull Israeli forces out of Palestinian cities.

The Israeli army's chief spokesman, Brigadier-General Ron Kitrey, said the military had received no orders to change its plan despite a telephone call from Bush to Sharon last night.

"At the moment, things are going ahead as we planned," Kitrey told Army Radio.

The 10-day-old Israeli offensive in the West Bank began after a Palestinian suicide bomber struck in an Israeli hotel during a Passover holiday meal.

In the West Bank city of Nablus, Israeli Apache helicopters and tanks fired on Palestinian targets early today, witnesses said.

In fighting yesterday, soldiers and gunmen battled alley by alley in the crowded Jenin refugee camp.

The Israeli army said at least 35 Palestinians and seven Israeli sol-

diers had been killed in the past 48 hours in Jenin, a stronghold of Palestinian militants.

In a test of wills with Washington's chief Middle East ally, Bush demanded a pullback "without delay", but Sharon stopped short of promising an immediate end to an operation in which scores of Palestinians and 13 Israeli soldiers have been killed.

Bush told Sharon a renewed US peace mission was at stake, a senior administration official said. Secretary of State Colin Powell will visit the Middle East this week in a bid to revive ceasefire talks.

"I expect Israel to heed my advice," Bush said yesterday at a news conference in Texas with visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who the President said shared his view.

But Sharon promised only to end the campaign "as expeditiously as possible", the senior US official said. Sharon's office said he told Bush that "Israel will make every effort to accelerate" the operation.

In Venice, the Spanish Foreign Minister said the European Union would discuss introducing sanctions against Israel if it continued to reject calls for a ceasefire in the Palestinian territories.

"We discussed the possibility (of sanctions) at the last general council in Luxembourg," Josep Pique said on the sidelines of a meeting. Spain currently holds the rotating EU presidency.

Meanwhile, in Langkawi, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he would discuss the conflict in the Palestinian territories with Bush during his visit to Washington next month (May 11-15).

The Prime Minister will convey to the American President the stand taken at the Special Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers on Terrorism.

Asked about Bush's invitation to him to visit the US, Dr Mahathir said: "It's good because maybe I can give my opinion."

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Dr M: Israeli military action promotes terrorism

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"I have promised to the Palestinian representative that I will try to explain their problem to President Bush."

Dr Mahathir said this after a private luncheon with a group of foreign businessmen at the Rebek Marina Resort.

On whether he would urge Bush to help resolve the conflict, Dr Mahathir said: "Yes, we will try (to convince Bush to intervene)."

He said Malaysia had called on the international community to stop the attacks on the Palestinians.

"But it seems Israel is very stubborn and arrogant so much so that it even refused to accept the European representative (dispatched to Israel)."

Dr Mahathir also said the Israeli action against the Palestinians was one of the factors that would promote terrorism.

Asked whether he was conveying the session's stand to Bush because

the US President viewed Malaysia as a spokesman for the OIC countries, Dr Mahathir said:

"I don't know how President Bush regards us, but my responsibility is to explain the OIC's views in efforts to fight terrorism."

Dr Mahathir is on the last day of his three-day visit to Langkawi. Earlier today, he attended a discussion with 18 US Congressional staff members at the Berjaya Resort.

The closed-door discussion was organised by the US-Malaysia Exchange Association.

Also at the discussion were association president Tan Sri Megat Junid Megat Ayub, Umno supreme council member Datuk Jamaluddin Jarjis and former Inspector-General of Police Tun Hanif Omar.

Asked whether the discussion produced a concrete outcome, Dr Mahathir said:

"I don't know, but I think it is good of them to come so that we can explain what Malaysia is all about. I think people understand Malaysia better."