

Quartet prepare ME peace roadmap

Israeli army stages incursions

AFP, Gaza City

Seven Palestinians were injured early Friday as Israel continued its operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a day after diplomats from the Middle East Quartet agreed to publish a "roadmap" for peace in the region.

The injuries occurred as Israeli armoured units launched two raids into the Nuseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip and into the northern West Bank town of Jenin, Palestinian medical and security sources said.

All seven sustained light to moderate gunshot wounds when an armoured unit, accompanied by bulldozers, carried out a brief raid into the Nuseirat refugee camp, the head of Deir al-Balah hospital told AFP.

Exchanges of fire broke out as troops moved into the camp to arrest an activist from the radical Hamas group, Abdul

Hakim al-Jahjuh, but he escaped unharmed, security sources said.

During the incursion the electricity was cut off and troops bulldozed one of the camp's roads, they said.

At the same time, a column of some 25 Israeli tanks and jeeps entered Jenin and its adjacent refugee camp, sparking exchanges of fire with Palestinian gunmen, the security sources said, adding they imposed a curfew on the area.

Elsewhere in the West Bank, the army imposed for the third day running, a ban on a thousand Palestinians from returning to their homes in the northern refugee camp of Tulkarem, saying it would remain in force while the hunt was still on for wanted militants in the camp.

Aged between 15 and 45, they were rounded up on Wednesday for an identity check at one of the camp's

schools, which is run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) that helps Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA has filed an official complaint over the usage of its premises for such activities.

An army spokesman expressed his "regrets" for the difficulty caused to the civilian population by this unprecedented measure, but he confirmed that "the fight against terrorism", and notably preparation for suicide attacks, made it necessary.

Sixteen Palestinian suspects were arrested during a Tulkarem raid in the early morning, including Hadi Amashari, a leader of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, public radio said.

A Palestinian security source confirmed Amashari's arrest and said that another man, one of the leaders of the Al

Aqa Martyrs Brigades, an armed group linked to Fatah, had also been arrested in Tulkarem.

The army could not initially confirm the information, saying only one wanted Palestinian was arrested during the morning in a village close to the southern West Bank town of Hebron.

As Israel's military operations continued unabated in the Palestinian territories, the Middle East Quartet announced it would publish the peace roadmap, unchanged, as soon as a new Palestinian government was sworn in, an official said in Brussels.

"There is a consensus not to modify the road map finalized by the quartet on December 20 in Washington," said the official, after a meeting of diplomats from the US, the UN, Russia and the EU.

Boat capsizes in Gujarat: 16 bodies recovered

PTI, Ahmedabad

Police have recovered 16 bodies of the pilgrims, who were missing since Thursday after a boat carrying 42 persons capsized near Jogeshwar village in Bharuch district of Gujarat.

"While 14 bodies were recovered this morning, two were found during the rescue efforts late last night", Bharuch district superintendent of police AV Vasava said.

The boat, carrying 42 people including 10 women, from Katpar to Jogeshwar was caught in a storm and had capsized where the Narmada river meets the Gulf of Cambay in Bharuch district, about 200 km from here.

The passengers were undertaking 'Parikrama'.

However, 25 pilgrims had managed to swim to the shore.

Jet crashes in Punjab: 4 killed

PTI, Mullampur Dakha, Punjab

Three women and a child on ground were killed and five persons were injured, four of them seriously, after a Mig-23 fighter of the Indian Air Force crashed in a residential area in Mullampur Dakha, Punjab on Friday morning.

A correspondent, who rushed here from Ludhiana found two houses on fire with fire tenders from Ludhiana and nearby areas trying to control the same. The killed were stated to of one family as the fighter fell on the house of a tractor mechanic Bhola.

His house and another in the immediate neighbourhood had caught fire. Four bodies had been found from the debris and more could not be ruled out, rescue workers at the spot told PTI here adding the five injured, including four with about 90 per cent burns, had been rushed to Dayanand Medical College Hospital at Ludhiana, 22 kms from here.



PHOTO: AFP

An elderly woman prays at Wong Tai Sin Temple in Hong Kong wearing a mask to protect against a killer outbreak of pneumonia on Friday. Hong Kong people are flocking to temples to pray for people with the disease known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) which has infected over 700 people in the territory with 17 people dead.

HK battles fresh outbreak

WHO experts in S China to nail down cause of SARS

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Hong Kong battled on Friday to stop a new hospital outbreak of a highly infectious global virus, while World Health Organization (WHO) experts in southern China tried to nail down the source of the disease.

More than 10 staff at Hong Kong's United Christian hospital have fallen ill with the disease in the last few days, raising fears a new wave of infections was just beginning and the epidemic in the territory was far from being contained.

"It's worrying," Hong Kong Hospital Authority director Ko Wing-man said of the new outbreak at the hospital, which is treating more than 100 other victims of the disease.

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which has killed 81 people and infected nearly 2,400 worldwide after first showing up in China's southern province of Guangdong, has triggered precautionary moves in a growing number of countries.

Israel is the latest country to allow

family members of its consulate staff to leave Hong Kong, a spokeswoman at the consulate told Reuters. It was not clear how many had left.

The United States moved on Thursday to offer non-emergency staff and all dependents at its embassy and five consulates in China free flights out on a voluntary basis.

Washington had confined such a move only to diplomatic staff in Hong Kong and the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou on Tuesday, but extended that decision to all of China on Thursday.

Late on Thursday, Canada announced it would cancel a big medical convention by the American Association for Cancer Research because some doctors, especially those who were caring for SARS patients, feared they could spread the disease.

A team from the WHO, which first warned against travel to southern China and Hong Kong because of the disease, is hunting for clues to the source of the virus in Guangdong.

Hong Kong's Cable Television

reported on Friday that the Guangdong Disease Control Center now had data showing patients in the early stage of the outbreak were cooks and bird vendors, and that it suspected the virus was linked to animals.

Still little is known about SARS. In Hong Kong, scientists are tracing how the latest batch of medical staff got infected, and also the source of a sudden explosion of SARS in one housing estate, where more than 200 residents were infected last week.

"We have been briefing staff to take very serious precautions," said a spokeswoman for the Hospital Authority.

Police are also hunting for at least 200 people who had been exposed to the disease but who escaped a quarantine order earlier this week. Officials fear a new outbreak anytime from these people, as a two-to-seven day incubation is now passing.

In Australia, three Canadian children were isolated in a hospital with one diagnosed as probably having the disease.

Nepali king seeks mass support for peace

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra Friday called on the country to support planned peace talks between the government and Maoist rebels aimed at ending seven years of insurgency.

"Individuals, parties and civil society should contribute to the success of peace process that is already underway," the king told a civic reception in his honour in Dhanagadhi, 340 km west of Kathmandu.

"It will be against the popular will of the Nepali people if anyone tries to thwart this (peace process)," he added.

Tens of thousands of people from different western districts braved drizzle to attend the function for the king and Queen Komal.

saying 4,000 army and other security personnel had been deployed at the venue, as parts of western Nepal are strongholds of Maoist rebels.

The guerrillas and the government declared a ceasefire in January and said they were willing to hold talks to end the violence which has killed more than 7,800 people since 1996.

A code of conduct for the talks was signed last month, but a date has not yet been set.

Gyanendra also spoke up for the monarchy, which the rebels have in the past said they want to abolish.

Rebels abduct, kill 23 in Assam

PTI, Guwahati

Twenty-three bodies of Dimasas people, who were abducted and killed by Hmar Peoples' Convention (HPC), were recovered from jungles at Nastul hills in Assam's Cachar district on yesterday night, police said in Guwahati on Friday.

The HPC terrorists had abducted about 28 people from Dimasa community of three villages on March 31 before killing them on the spot in Sonai police station area and setting ablaze about 450 hutments, police said.

Stating that the victims' bodies were in decomposed state, they said search was on to recover the bodies of the five others missing and feared killed.

Police had to abandon the search operations until Friday morning due to darkness and thick jungles.

The massacre victims were shot from close range the next day after abduction, police said, adding two bodies of the 23 male victims were brought to Sonai police station.

Clashes have occurred between Hmar and Dimasas communities for quite sometime. About 15 days ago DHD (Dima Haram Daoga) terrorists had struck Hmar dominated area near Udaband in the district.

Meanwhile, Army was deployed in the affected area as a precautionary measure as tension was prevailing following the massacre.



PHOTO: AFP

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) National President Venkaiah Naidu (C), Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) and Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani (L) greets attendants of a BJP's conclave in Indore on Friday. The party, which heads the federal coalition government, is holding a two-day conclave to discuss strategy for forthcoming state and parliamentary elections.

BJP braces for polls

AFP, Indore

India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party Friday urged its top members to prepare for "semi-final" elections in four states in November ahead of next year's battle for the national parliament.

"The battle in the four states has to be taken as a semi-final for the final onslaught for 300 Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) seats for our party in the general elections next year," BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu said.

Addressing 166 delegates attending the party's national executive, the party's highest policymaking body, Naidu said the goal of 300 seats, which would provide the BJP with an absolute majority, was possible.

He said the BJP's achievements and the "direction less" opposition could help their party.

The BJP's national executive began its two-day meeting here in central India Friday with elections looming in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi and Chhatisgarh -- four key Hindi heartland states ruled by the opposition Congress party.

In recent months, the BJP has been on a decline having lost polls in Himachal Pradesh, one of the northern states it ruled earlier.

The party which currently rules in New Delhi is in power only in three of the 28 Indian states. Its main adversary, the Congress rules in 16 states.

Radical Hinduism has been the central issue in recent elections in Gujarat and Himachal, and Chief Minister Narendra Modi, accused by opposition for his role in the rioting, was the central campaigner for the BJP.

US-N Korean war 'entirely possible': UN envoy

AFP, London

War between the United States and North Korea over Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons is "entirely possible", UN special envoy Maurice Strong warned Thursday.

Paying a visit to London, Strong predicted that a UN Security Council meeting next Wednesday to discuss North Korea's quest for nuclear arms would be "very controversial."

Quizzed by reporters on the danger of a US-led war on North Korea similar to the one now underway in Iraq, Strong replied: "I think a war is unnecessary. It's unthinkable, its consequences. And yet, it is entirely possible."

"As we know from the history of other wars, so much of this often arises from breakdown of trust, breakdown of confidence, inability to read the real intentions or signals of the other. And this is certainly true here."

He added: "It's not going to be solved overnight and hopefully it's not going to escalate into conflict overnight into a war, but it could."

Strong has twice visited Pyongyang since October amidst a growing crisis as North Korea expelled UN nuclear inspectors, restarted a mothballed

nuclear reactor, withdrew from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and test-launched ballistic missiles.

Meanwhile, North Korea opposes any UN role in a crisis that it insists can only be settled through one-on-one talks with the United States and a non-aggression pact. Washington wants the issue resolved through a multilateral framework.

Strong said UN sanctions, if adopted at next week's meeting, would be seen in Pyongyang as "an act of war."

But he said he couldn't imagine that the UN Security Council would move "quickly" to impose sanctions, stressing that two permanent members, China and Russia, do not support the move.

"I don't think you can expect results from the first meeting of the Security Council. This is a process," Strong said.

John Negroponte, the US ambassador to the United Nations, said Wednesday that no decisions on the UN handling of North Korea should be expected at the April 9 meeting.

Meanwhile, diplomatic efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis switched to China Thursday after South Korea confirmed that Foreign Minister Yoon Young-Kwan would travel shortly to Beijing for talks with top officials.