

Palestinians poised to announce truce deal

Four more killed in Israeli Gaza raid

AFP, Gaza City

Four Palestinians were killed during an Israeli raid in Gaza City to arrest a senior Hamas member early Friday as talks between the two sides appear on the cusp of leading to a ceasefire deal.

Violence on the ground showed little sign of abating Friday despite the ongoing ceasefire talks and imminent arrival in the region of US President George W. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice.

Sources at the Israeli foreign ministry said Rice was due to arrive in the region Saturday for two days of talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials aimed at kick-starting implementation of the peace "roadmap."

A senior Palestinian source earlier said she was due to arrive Friday for talks in the West Bank city of Jericho with senior Palestinian security officials.

Heavy fighting between Israeli troops and Palestinians in Gaza City early Friday left four Palestinians dead after troops moved in to arrest a wanted member of the radical Hamas group, Palestinian security sources and Hamas said.

The target, Adnan al-Ghoul, a senior member of Hamas' armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, escaped unharmed, but his son and nephew were killed when troops demolished the Ghoul house.

Ghoul's son, Mohammed, 24, was crushed to death as troops razed the building. The body of Ghoul's nephew, Imran, 33, was also found under the

rubble, medical sources, the family and Hamas sources said.

Both were also members of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades.

Mohammed Abu Ataya, a 26-year-old Palestinian who belonged to the armed wing of the radical Islamic Jihad, was shot dead outside the house, as was a fourth man, named as Zakaria al-Saidi. Medical sources said he was not a militant.

The deaths brought to 3,371 the number of people killed since the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000, including 2,542 Palestinians and 769 Israelis.

The clashes broke out after more than 10 tanks backed by two helicopters, surrounded the house and opened fire on it, provoking a volley of fire from those inside.

Shortly afterwards, troops placed explosives around the house and the one next door, blowing them up, the sources said.

A statement released by the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades confirmed that two of its militants had died in the army raid and vowed to "continue the resistance until the occupation of our country ceases."

In an unusual twist, the group placed responsibility for the violence squarely on the shoulders of senior US officials for their support of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands.

"The American administration headed by Bush, (Secretary of State) Colin Powell, Rice and (Bush spokesman Ari) Fleischer are responsible for Israeli crimes," it said.



South Korean Kwon Oh-kyun (R) cries as he hugs his North Korean brother Kwon Oh-kil (L) during a family reunion at a North Korean resort hotel in Mount Kumgang on Friday. The reunion is in line with an inter-Korean accord reached earlier this month by the two Koreas to allow 100 people from each side to have temporary reunions with relatives separated since the 1950-53 war.

PA predicts LTTE attacks in 2 weeks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga's party Friday warned that Tamil Tiger rebels were ready to launch a major attack within two weeks and said security forces were ill-prepared to fight back.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) said it wanted the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to heed their warning and take precautionary measures.

"We warn the government that the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) is preparing for an attack in the eastern province in the next two weeks," PA spokesman Sarath Amunugama told reporters here.

He said the PA had information from their party organisation in the region about the impending assault that could end the bilateral truce that has been in place since February 23 last year.

Amunugama declined to say what the target of the attack would be.

His remarks came two days after Kumaratunga expressed fears that the LTTE was gearing up for war as Norwegian-backed peace talks remained deadlocked.



Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf (L) signs the US House of Representatives' International Relations Committee guest book with committee Chairman Henry Hyde, Republican of Illinois on Thursday on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Musharraf said he was confident the US Congress would not block a three billion USD aid package promised to his country by President George W. Bush.

Cook challenges UK's Iraq dossiers

AP, London

Broadcasting Corp. radio, disagreed.

"For me, the real issue is that we were told things as a justification for war which have plainly turned out to be wrong since the war was over," Cook said.

"The 45-minute readiness of weapons of mass destruction, the fact that Saddam had rebuilt production facilities for chemical weapons, which we can't find, although they were supposed to be big factories."

"That he had a nuclear weapons program, which we can't find, although that would have involved a big industrial site."

"That he was buying uranium from Africa, which we now know was based on forged documents."

"All of those were in the September dossier, all of them were wrong," Cook said.

"I am rather puzzled and rather worried that the prime minister and (his communications director) Alastair Campbell continue to describe that document as accurate. It plainly was not accurate."

Cook, in an interview with British

Assam braces for floods as Brahmaputra swells

AFP, Guwahati

Authorities issued fresh flood alerts in the flood situation for about 10 days but again we find the Brahmaputra rising alarmingly and threatening to burst its banks," Assam's flood control minister Nurzamal Sarkar told AFP.

"We have put all our officials and workers on high alert as we have received reports that the Brahmaputra has breached several mud dykes."

Assam's revenue minister Mithias Tudu added that a second bout of flooding would add to the misery of the people.

"Villagers affected by the first wave of floods are still staying in makeshift camps as their homes have been washed away," said Tudu, adding that meagre resources would now have to be diverted to addressing fresh problems.

Local authorities, mindful of last year's record-breaking floods in Assam, hastily erected sandbag barriers.

"We are fighting against all odds to try to minimize the devastation ... We do not have enough funds for relief and rescue operations," said flood control minister Sarkar.

"This time the federal government is still to release any funds to tackle the annual floods. We are somehow managing with our own limited resources."

At least 10 districts in Assam are bracing for floods with weather officials predicting heavy showers over the weekend.

"The second wave of flooding has always been more devastating ... We are terribly worried," said Tudu.

Mastermind of Riyadh blast in KSA custody

Reuters, Washington

The mastermind of the May bombings in Riyadh has been taken into custody in Saudi Arabia, US and Saudi officials said on Thursday.

Saudi officials said the suspect, Ali Abdulrachman Saeed al-Faqa'asi Al-Ghamdi, also known as Abu Bakr al-Azdi, a senior Saudi-based al-Qaeda operative, surrendered to the Saudi assistant minister of interior for security affairs.

But the US official said the man was "captured."

"This is a major arrest and a huge victory in the war against terrorism," Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, said in a statement.

"Al-Ghamdi is in custody and under interrogation. We hope that our interrogations will provide information that will lead to additional arrests," he added.

Musharraf moots 4-step to resolve Kashmir row

ANI, Washington

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said a four-pronged approach must be followed to amicably resolve the Kashmir dispute.

He said first India and Pakistan must come forward to hold dialogue, then accept the centrality of the Kashmir dispute, discard whatever is unacceptable to India, Pakistan and Kashmiris, and lastly, evolve a solution which suits to all the three parties.

Musharraf, who was in Washington on a three-day official visit, said that the US officials accept that the step-by-step approach was the realistic way for moving forward toward the resolution of the Kashmir dispute for peace in South Asia.

He said this while speaking to newsmen after meeting the US legislators at the Committees of International Relations in Washington on Thursday, The News reported.

Earlier, during the meeting with the legislators, he urged the House and the Senate to review the situation in the context of human rights violations, such as killings taking place in Jammu and Kashmir. He once again favoured third-party mediation between India and Pakistan to resolve the bilateral issues.

The Pakistan President said his country wanted peace and cordial relations with India, and that it could come only after resolving the Kashmir issue.

Apparently hinting at not giving up Kashmir merely for the sake of ensuring peace in the region, the erstwhile military ruler said, "every country has an inherent right to guard its sovereignty. Pakistan also talks on the basis of sovereign equality and guards it jealously. Nothing can coerce us and no one can dictate to us on these parameters."

AFP adds: Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf on Thursday renewed his push for a Mideast-style peace roadmap on Kashmir,

Putin ends Britain trip after burying Iraq row

AFP, London

Russian President Vladimir Putin was to fly home Friday at the end of a state visit to Britain during which London and Moscow sought to put behind them an acrimonious dispute over Iraq.

Putin and his wife Lyudmila spent four days at Buckingham Palace as personal guests of Queen Elizabeth II, one of the highest honours granted to a foreign leader, in the first such state visit from Russia for 129 years.

After Downing Street talks Thursday with British Prime Minister Blair, the Russian leader said Moscow was willing to support the occupying US and British forces in their reconstruction of Iraq, although he called for a legitimate government.

The two leaders' profession of friendship was reinforced by the signing of a major energy deal involving British oil major BP. The agreement makes Britain the biggest foreign investor in Russia.

Musharraf outlined his four-point plan designed to bring the bitter rivals sufficiently close to make major concessions needed for a permanent solution to their feud over the divided Himalayan region in talks with US members of Congress.

Two days after a summit with President George W. Bush, Musharraf warned that an immediate search for solutions to the conflict would fail, as they would be rejected by extremists on both sides.

"Don't talk of solutions," Musharraf told reporters after meeting members of the Senate Foreign Relations committee.

"If you talk of solutions now, you will not make any progress. Therefore go step by step, cross the bridge when you come to the bridge, and that is hit for a solution when you reach a stage where the solution is possible."



Sgt. Warren Waldrop (C) and Spc. Jason Hill (L) with the 957th Engineer Company stop and search a fisherman's boat on the Tigris River on Assault Combat Support Boats during a morning patrol around Baghdad on Friday. The US Army will soon work with the Iraqi police on the boats so that the local police department can add river patrols as part of the daily operations.

Fiji traitors given life sentences

AFP, Suva

Two convicted traitors were Friday sentenced to life imprisonment with heavy minimum terms to serve for their role in Fiji's 2000 coup.

The sentences, described by High Court Justice Andrew Wilson as internationally without precedent, came after Parliament retrospectively scrapped the mandatory death sentences and issued new sentencing guidelines 11 days ago.

Former politician Timoci Silatolu was sentenced to life with a minimum nine years, from Friday, to be served. Journalist Jo Naita was given life with a minimum of seven years. The men have already served three years in Suva Prison since their arrest.

BBC blames UK for putting 'unprecedented pressure'

AFP, London

The BBC Thursday accused the British government of putting it under "unprecedented pressure" in a row sparked by the public broadcaster's claims that Downing Street embellished intelligence to beef up the case for war on Iraq.

The government's director of communications, Alastair Campbell, a key aide of Prime Minister Tony Blair, wrote to the BBC earlier, asking whether it stood by its reports and demanding a reply by the end of the day.

'Pyongyang offered deal on nukes'

THE DAILY YOMIURI/ ANN, Tokyo

During its talks with China and the United States in April, North Korea offered to "solve" concerns over its missile and nuclear development programs in exchange for economic assistance and normalization of diplomatic relations, sources said Thursday.

In what Pyongyang reportedly called "generous solutions," it listed measures to be taken by Japan, the United States and the two Koreas.



This frame grab from Al-Arabiya satellite channel shows ex-Iraqi information minister Mohammed Said al-Sahhaf (L) in his first television appearance since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in an interview with the Arab TV news channel on Thursday. Sahhaf told Al-Arabiya that he had turned himself in to US forces who released him after questioning. "I went to the Americans ... through some friends, and was questioned about a number of issues related to my (past) work... after the interrogation, I was released," Sahhaf said.

Sahhaf on Arab TV after US questioning

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Baghdad

Former Iraqi information minister Mohammed Saeid al-Sahhaf, who earned the nickname "Comical Ali" during the Iraq war, appeared on Arab television Thursday saying he had surrendered to US troops only to be freed.

Sahhaf, 63, became an unlikely media star during the war, winning his stripes as a hero to many in the Arab world while Western audiences gasped and then chuckled at his bravado.

Sahhaf, who was not on the US "most wanted" list, gained his unflattering nickname for proclaiming the defeat of US forces even as American troops advanced into Baghdad, and for his habit of handling loaded weapons during news conferences.

"Via some friends, I went to the Americans ... and there was an interrogation about a number of issues concerning my work," a tired-looking and thin Sahhaf said in a clip aired by Dubai-based al-Arabiya. "After the interrogation, I was released."

He appeared without his familiar military fatigues and beret, but with now gray, close-cropped hair.

"A difficult situation has passed by, not for one person but for everyone," he said in measured tones in another clip, referring to the fall of Baghdad to US forces. Al-Arabiya said it would air the interview in full Friday at 3 p.m. EDT.

US military spokesmen were not immediately available for comment.

The figure of Sahhaf spawned a mini industry in the West involving T-shirts, mugs, dolls and videos, and a raft of Web sites poking fun at his rhetorical style.

In the Arab world, Sahhaf gained fame during the conflict for his colorful use of the Arabic language, using archaic insults to describe the invaders which had commentators throughout the region debating their meaning and poring over dictionaries.

British army suspends arms searches

AFP, London

The British army has ordered searches for weapons to be suspended in the area of southern Iraq where six British military police were killed this week, the Independent newspaper reported Friday.

The military has agreed to a two-month cooling-off period in Al-Majar Al-Kabir, a Shiite town in British-controlled southern Iraq, about midway between Baghdad and Iraq's second city of Basra, the paper said.

The Independent added that the policy may be extended to other areas while a review takes place on whether the local civilian population is allowed to carry guns.

The six soldiers Tuesday became the first British troops to die in a hostile incident since US President George W. Bush declared the Iraq war over on May 1.

Several London-based newspapers reported that the troops displayed photographs of their wives and children after surrendering in a last attempt to save themselves as they were cornered in a police station by an angry mob.

Ali Al-Ateya, a radio journalist who had followed the British soldiers as they entered Al-Majar Al-Kabir, told the Daily Express: "They wanted to show them, 'We are just like you, look we have wives and children too'."

"They hoped this would save them from the killers but it did not. They were not shown mercy."

British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said in London Thursday that the killing of the six soldiers may have been triggered by a misunderstanding over an end to weapons searches.

Hoon said: "I think, certainly, that the fact that we have decided to call off (weapons) searches on Monday clearly hadn't been properly understood by the local population, and not communicated properly to them."