

Israel may target new Hamas PM: Mofaz

Radical group vows to keep up fighting

AP, AFP, Jerusalem/Dubai

Israel's defence minister said Tuesday that the Islamic militant Hamas group's prime minister-designate, Ismail Haniyeh, is not immune from an Israeli targeted killing.

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz told Israel's Army Radio that Israel's policy of pinpointed killings has proven to be effective, and will continue.

"There is no question about its efficacy," Mofaz said. "Look what happened to Hamas in the years it conducted an untrammelled suicide bombing war against us. When we started the targeted killings, the situation changed."

"We will continue the targeted killings at this pace," he added. "No one will be immune."

Hamas, the militant Islamic group sworn to Israel's destruction, swept January parliamentary elections and is in the process of forming a Cabinet. It has rejected international calls to renounce its violent and anti-Israel ideology, but has maintained a year-old moratorium on suicide bombings.

Asked if Hamas' prime minister-designate would be a target if Hamas were to resume its attacks on Israel, Mofaz responded: "If Hamas, a terror organisation that doesn't recognise agreements with us and isn't willing to renounce violence, presents us with

the challenge of having to confront a terror organisation, then no one there will be immune. Not just Ismail Haniyeh. No one will be immune."

Salah al-Bardawil, a Hamas spokesman, denounced Mofaz's comments.

"This statement and Israeli practices on the ground reflect the bloody, inhumane and inflammatory character of the Zionist enemy," al-Bardawil said. "We are not seeking immunity or mercy from Israel. We are in a confrontation. The side that is most steadfast is the side that will survive."

On Monday, two Islamic Jihad militants and three Palestinian bystanders were killed in an Israeli

pinpoint attack in Gaza City. Two of those killed were children.

Meanwhile, the suprema of Palestinian radical group Hamas vowed Monday to continue armed struggle against Israel and declared that the Palestinian Authority had accomplished nothing by recognising the Jewish state.

"The demand that Hamas and the resistance movements lay down their weapons and become political parties is unrealistic and has nothing to do with the Palestinian reality on the ground," said Meshal in an interview broadcast on Dubai-based Arab news channel Al-Arabiya after the end of his landmark visit to Moscow Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian youth throw stones at Israeli soldiers during clashes in the northern West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. The director of a Hamas-linked prisoner support group, Saed al-Masri, was arrested with his brother during an Israeli army incursion. One Israeli soldier was wounded in the operation.

Manhunt for clerics behind Pak clashes

AFP, Miranshah/Islamabad

Pakistani troops yesterday searched for two pro-Taliban clerics accused of instigating the worst fighting near the Afghan border since the start of the "war on terror", officials said.

Sporadic clashes erupted overnight although the situation was mostly calm amid a curfew in the town of Miranshah, where 140 militants have died in days of fierce fighting that erupted on Saturday.

Security forces arrested seven suspects in overnight raids in Miranshah, the main town in the troubled North Waziristan tribal region. Elders and local officials were in talks to end the violence.

"We are desperately searching for the two main culprits, Maulvi Abdul Khaleq and Maulvi Sadiq Noor, but we still do not have any information about their whereabouts," a senior security official told AFP.

Officials said Noor and Khaleq have been trying to impose strict Islamic laws in Miranshah and are closely linked to the Taliban, the fundamentalist regime ousted from Afghanistan in a US-led invasion in late 2001.

British, Pak PMs talk terror, Kashmir

AP, London

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and British Prime Minister Tony Blair discussed counter-terrorism, trade cooperation, interfaith ties and the Kashmir issue in a London meeting, Blair's office has said.

Aziz also thanked Blair, during a meeting on Monday, for the help Britain provided after massive earthquake that killed about 87,000 people and left an estimated 3 million homeless in Pakistan's north last year, Blair's office said.

The two leaders also addressed a conference on Asian aid and development, where Aziz said internal conflicts, terrorism and the challenge of securing enough energy, water and food posed the biggest threats to the continent's growth.

"Water security will be critical for survival and future growth," he said. "Food security for countries with large populations will be essential."

UK unveils new immigration system

BBC ONLINE, London

A new points-based immigration system for workers who want to come to the UK from outside the EU has been unveiled by the Home Secretary Charles Clarke.

The scheme is designed to make it easier for highly skilled, younger workers to enter the country. But it will be harder for low-skilled, non-EU workers to head to Britain.

Clarke says the system will simplify immigration. But Conservative spokesman Damian

Green thinks the government will struggle to make it work.

Like similar regimes in Australia and the US, points would be earned for factors such as qualifications, work experience and language skills.

A certain number of points would be needed to be considered for a work visa, awarded for aptitude, age, experience, and the level of need in each sector.

Highly skilled workers such as doctors, engineers and IT experts would get the most points under the system, due in place from mid-2007 at the earliest.

They will be the only group able to come to Britain without a job offer.

But skilled workers, like nurses, teachers and plumbers would be able to come to the UK if they can plug shortages in the workforce.

A person applying as a low-skilled worker would be granted entry to fill specific job vacancies for fixed periods, with guarantees that they will leave at the end of their stay.

Other applicants would include students and special sectors such as sports people and employees of international companies based in

the UK, plus visiting workers - such as musicians or those on working holiday visas.

Low skilled workers, students and visitors would only be allowed entry if their home country has a formal agreement with Britain.

The points system was first announced in February last year, but Mr Clarke unveiled the details on Tuesday.

He said the new regime would simplify the movement of people into and out of Britain and replace 80 different routes into the country.

Marxists, monks to keep backing Lanka govt

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's hardline Buddhist and Marxist allies agreed to keep backing his government on Monday despite concerns over talks with Tamil Tiger rebels.

Both the Marxist JVP and Buddhist monk party the JHU have long opposed making any concessions to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who ministers met last month in Switzerland for talks aimed at stopping a return to a two-decade civil war.

"We do not believe that the LTTE Tigers will ever change their stripes," said the JVP in a statement after an all-party meeting to discuss the peace process.

"We urge the government not to be lulled into a false sense of security and become complacent."

A government official said the meeting, called to brief politicians on last month's talks in Geneva, had been cordial and the coalition remained intact.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan teens perform with traditional instruments during an event organised by a women's alliance in Colombo yesterday. The "We Can" women's alliance organised the event demanding an end to violence against women on the eve of International Women's Day.

India, Australia ink defence accord

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Burying its past suspicions of Indian naval buildup, Australia on Monday signed first-ever defence agreement with India focusing on maritime cooperation.

The memorandum of understanding (MoU), signed in presence of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Australian counterpart John Howard, envisages cooperation in joint military training, maritime security and defence research and cooperation.

It also provides a joint working group on defence, a mechanism India has with a number of other countries, including the United States, Britain and France.

The defence agreement marks a major shift in Australia's approach in the eighties and early nineties legacy of the Cold War—beset with

suspicion of Indian navy's growing clout in the Indian Ocean and South East Asia and New Delhi's strategic objectives in the region.

As part of India's "Look East" policy and growing economic and political engagement with Asean, Indian navy has in recent years held joint naval exercises with some countries of the region, including Singapore, in the Indian Ocean.

After the September 11 terror attack on the United States, Indian navy warships had escorted US cargo vessels in the Malacca Strait, which is a key sea trade route, particularly for energy supplies to the Far East.

In December last year, Indian and Australian navies had signed a pact to cooperate in mine warfare and clearance diving and joint exercises. These proposals are expected to receive a fillip through the MoU signed Monday.

Nepali Maoists to talk with parties in Delhi

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist guerrillas and opposition parties are in the process of holding fresh talks in New Delhi, the kingdom's private media reported yesterday.

A senior Maoist leader, Agni Sapkota, has confirmed that leaders of seven opposition parties and the outlawed Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) would hold fresh parleys in New Delhi to review the loose alliance between them, the Himalayan Times daily reported.

Some senior leaders of two major opposition parties, the Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist, are already in the Indian capital, the Kathmandu Post daily said.

If true, this would be the sequel to a reported secret meeting held between the two top leaders of the Maoists and leaders of the opposition front of seven parties in New Delhi late last year.

The secret meeting ended with both sides agreeing to a 12-point agreement that includes the Maoists pledging not to attack political workers and unarmed people and allowing people displaced by the 10-year insurgency to return home.

The secret understanding, when it was made public, drew mixed reactions.

It was flayed by Nepal's government headed by King Gyanendra, which came down heavily on the opposition parties as well as the Indian government, saying they were abetting terrorist activities.