

## UN accuses Israel of using excessive force in Gaza

Palestinian state issue needs focus, says Rice

AFP, Reuters, Nusseir/Ramallah

UN humanitarian coordinator Jan Egeland yesterday blasted Israel's strike last month on the sole power plant in impoverished Gaza as a "clear" example of disproportionate use of force.

Palestinian officials at the plant warned it would take months and cost millions to repair the transformers, which have been non-operational since the raid, enforcing electricity rationing and provoking health concerns.

"This is a very clear disproportionate use. Maybe this is the clearest of it all," Egeland told reporters as he toured the Gaza power plant which had supplied 70 percent of the power to the 1.4 million residents.

Israel fired eight missiles into the plant's six transformers not long after midnight on June 28, launching a huge offensive after two Israeli soldiers were killed by Palestinian militants and a third snatched in a cross-border raid.

"This plant is more important for hospitals, for sewage, and for water of civilians than for any Hamas man or (Islamic) Jihad man with some kind of a missile on his shoulder who doesn't need electricity, as a mother trying to care for her child."

Before the strike, the Gaza Power Generating Company plant pumped out 140 megawatts and provided 70 percent of Gaza's electricity needs.

Today, Israel provides residents of one of the most densely populated places on earth with 57 percent of their power needs, Stuart Shepherd, UN

humanitarian affairs officer, told AFP. People in Gaza were "going through a crisis of very little water, very little electricity" causing "more diarrhoea, more diseases and more suffering," Egeland said.

A total of 114 Palestinians and one Israeli soldier have now been killed in Israel's offensive, which the army said intends to stop Palestinian militants from firing rockets into Israel and to recover missing Corporal Gilad Shalit.

"Missiles have to stop and destructive incursions have to stop," Egeland said.

Palestinian militants on Tuesday nonetheless fired three rockets into southern Israel, lightly wounding one foreign worker.

Inspecting the ruined transformers with Egeland, Rafiq Mailha, project manager at the plant, said direct

losses amounted to 10 million dollars, rising to more than 15-16 million dollars taking production losses into account.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said yesterday there was a need to remain focused on establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel despite the crisis in Lebanon.

Rice met Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas after visiting Lebanon and Israel, where she discussed the two weeks of fighting with Hizbollah guerrillas.

"Even as the Lebanon situation is resolved, we must remain focused on what is happening here, in the Palestinian territories," Rice told a news conference. "On our desires to get back to ... (the) vision of two states living side by side in peace."



US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice walks with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas for a meeting at his office in the West Bank town of Ramallah yesterday.

## Israel using cluster munitions in Lebanon

Says HR group

AFP, New York

Human Rights Watch said Monday that Israel has used artillery-fired cluster munitions in Lebanon, killing a civilian, and called on the Jewish state to immediately cease the practice.

The New York-based rights group said researchers on the ground in Lebanon confirmed that Israel staged a cluster munitions attack on the village of Bidla on July 19, leaving one person dead and injuring 12 civilians, including seven children.

The report said researchers had also photographed cluster munitions in the arsenal of Israeli artillery units stationed at the Lebanese border.

"Cluster munitions are unacceptably inaccurate and unreliable weapons when used around civilians," Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, said in a statement. "They should never be used in populated areas."



A Lebanese fireman extinguishes fire caused by an Israeli air strike close to Beirut's international airport Monday.

## Humanitarian solution in Lebanon a priority

World powers gather in Rome for ME crisis talks

AFP, Vienna/Rome

Improving the humanitarian situation in Lebanon and drafting a "solution package" to the conflict will be at the top of the agenda in Middle East crisis talks today in Rome, the EU's external relations commissioner said in Vienna.

"We really need humanitarian access," Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said, echoing calls by other Western leaders for Israel to open safe corridors in Lebanon to allow aid to flow into the war-torn country.

"At the same time, there must be a political solution. Rome can be the beginning of a solution package," she said.

World powers converged yesterday for a Middle East crisis conference in Rome today, struggling to halt the bloodshed in Lebanon and Israel but split over ceasefire calls.

US Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice, who was expected in Rome later in the day, has resisted calling for an immediate ceasefire, saying the priority is carving out a lasting resolution.

"It is time for a new Middle East," Rice said in Jerusalem before the start of talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, part of a regional tour that included a surprise visit to bomb-battered Beirut.

"A durable solution will be one that strengthens the forces of peace and democracy in the region," she said.

Rice was set to arrive Tuesday evening in Rome, after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan who landed earlier in the day for the heavily guarded, three-hour conference.

Ferrero-Waldner said the European Union would support UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's proposals for a solution but that the priority

was to help "those who are dying of hunger and thirst over there."

She also called for a ceasefire and end to the conflict, saying these were the conditions on which an international peacekeeping force might be sent to Lebanon. Such a deployment would be discussed in Rome, she added.

The commissioner urged the United States, which has up to now balked at international calls for an immediate ceasefire, to exert pressure on Israel but said all the participants in the conflict needed to take steps towards de-escalating the crisis.

"We hope for a certain readiness (on the part of the United States) towards a ceasefire," she said, adding "just as important is that Lebanon exercise sovereignty over its entire territory."

## ME fighting threatens Iran diplomacy

AP, Tehran

Iran insists it will not be drawn into the Middle East fighting between Israel and Tehran's Hezbollah clients but may be unable to avoid fallout on the already difficult diplomatic struggle over its nuclear programme hardening positions on all sides, experts on the talks said Monday.

Outside Iran, the fighting could sharpen the resolve of Western powers and others that fear Iran wants to build a nuclear weapon and is using what it calls a civilian programme as a cover for that ambition. Inside the country, hard-line forces might become increasingly unwilling to make concessions.

One of the immediate worries is that Iran could set off a regional arms race and bring new risks to an area brimming with tensions.

The fighting in Lebanon and the Hezbollah rocket attacks highlight concerns that nuclear material, whether from Iran or elsewhere,

could in the future find its way into the hands of militant groups like Hezbollah who want to destroy Israel.

"This will certainly be on the Western mind," said Ahmad Bakhsaie, a political affairs researcher at Azadi University in Tehran, who has written extensively on the Iran's nuclear positions. "No one is saying this is possible or could even happen, but just the thought will likely increase the pressure on Iran."

Earlier this month, a private nuclear watchdog group, the Nuclear Threat Initiative, criticised world leaders for not following through on pledges to secure nuclear sources. The Washington-based group said tons of nuclear material remains "dangerously vulnerable to either outsider or insider theft."

The report did not mention Iran by name but called on leaders in the Group of Eight the world's richest nations to take stronger steps to close all gaps in nuclear security.

## Asean members call for immediate truce in ME

Israel condemned for excessive use of force

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi led Southeast Asian countries in a chorus of condemnation yesterday against Israel's "excessive" military operations in Lebanon.

Abdullah, the chairman of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), called for an immediate ceasefire in the Middle East, warning that the situation threatened international peace and security.

His comments came shortly before US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is currently holding crisis talks in the Middle East, was due to attend a regional security forum here.

"We should not tolerate Israel's excessive military reprisals against Lebanon," Abdullah said as he opened the bloc's annual meeting of foreign ministers in Kuala Lumpur.

"The collective punishment inflicted upon the Lebanese people and the destruction of towns and cities are unconscionable. The military

incursions into Lebanese territory are (in) blatant disregard for Lebanon's sovereignty."

He added: "The United Nations Security Council should take action to call for an immediate ceasefire, deploy a United Nations peacekeeping force to implement the ceasefire and prevent an invasion of Lebanon."

Abdullah, who also chairs the 57-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference, called for Asean to speak out about the "plight of the Palestinians".

"I feel that we in Asean must make our voices heard, loudly and clearly, that we cannot continue tolerating the subjugation and repression of the Palestinian people by Israel," he said.

The Middle East peace process was now "in tatters" because of the violence, he added.

Asean, whose 10 members include the world's most populous Muslim nation Indonesia and mainly Muslim Malaysia, lashed out at the

Jewish state in a separate statement late Monday.

It condemned Israel's "disproportionate, indiscriminate and excessive use of force", saying such actions would threaten efforts towards reviving peace talks with the Palestinians.

"We call for an immediate ceasefire and urge the international community and the United Nations Security Council to get all parties in the conflicts to adhere to the ceasefire under UN supervision," the statement said.

Asean's tough stance represents a significant departure for the bloc, which has emphasised the crisis in the Middle East this week despite normally staying low-key about the region.

Abdullah's comments were some of the toughest comments ever from a leader who promotes a moderate brand of Islam, and who in the same speech urged Asean to unite against global terrorism -- a key plank of US foreign policy.

## Pakistan links reactor report to arms race with India

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistan has linked a US report suggesting that it is building a powerful nuclear reactor to its race with neighbour India, saying it was New Delhi, and not Islamabad, that introduced the nuclear weapons state in South Asia.

Foreign Office spokesperson Tasnim Aslam defended Pakistan's standpoint, saying it was "not the first country" to introduce nuclear weapons into South Asia. She was apparently referring to India, The News said.

Taking a what's-new-about-it stance, she avoided directly answering questions posed on the report's findings. "This ought to be no revelation to anyone because Pakistan is a nuclear weapon state," Aslam said. "(But) I have no specific comments on Pakistan's facilities."

"We were not the first to test nuclear weapons in this region and that remains our position," Aslam

said, adding: "We do not want an arms race in this region."

The Washington Post newspaper reported on Monday, citing independent analysts, that Pakistan is building a powerful nuclear reactor for producing plutonium.

Summing up Aslam's non-committal reaction to the report, The News pointed out: "But the Post quoted a senior Pakistani official as acknowledging a nuclear expansion was under way."

"Satellite photos of Pakistan's Khushab nuclear site show what appears to be a partially completed heavy-water reactor capable of producing enough plutonium for 40 to 50 nuclear weapons a year, a 20-fold increase from Pakistan's current capabilities," the Post said on its website, citing a technical assessment by Washington-based nuclear experts.

If verified, the move would signal a potential new escalation in the region's arms race, the newspaper observed.



Tunisian woman shouts anti-Israeli slogans during a demonstration in Tunis to show solidarity with the Lebanese and Palestinian people, victims of Israeli airstrikes targeting Hezbollah militiamen.

## '600 militants killed in Afghan drive in 45 days'

AFP, Kabul

More than 600 rebels have been killed in the past 45 days of the biggest anti-Taliban operation since the hardliners were removed from government in 2001, the US-led coalition said yesterday.

Since June 10 "more than 600 enemy fighters have been killed," US military spokesman Colonel Thomas Collins told reporters in Kabul. Operation Mountain Thrust, involving about 10,000 Afghan and coalition troops and support staff, is focused on southern Afghanistan where the militants are active and kicked off mid-May.

Thirty foreign troops, most of them from the US-led coalition, have died in combat in the same period. Another 30 had died from the start of the operation. The latest was a US soldier who died in an attack in Kunar province on Monday.

Afghanistan's main human rights watchdog has estimated that more than 600 civilians have been killed or wounded in insurgency-linked unrest in this year.

About 70 percent of the casualties were caused by Taliban-linked attacks, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHR) told AFP last week.

## Hydrocarbon lakes on Titan

AP, Los Angeles

Scientists said Monday they have found the first widespread evidence of giant hydrocarbon lakes on the surface of Saturn's planet-size moon Titan.

The cluster of lakes was spotted near Titan's frigid north pole during a weekend flyby by the international Cassini spacecraft, which flew within 590 miles of the moon.

Researchers counted about a dozen lakes six to 62 miles wide. Some, which appeared as dark patches in radar images, were connected by channels, while others had tributaries flowing into them. Several were dried up, but the ones that contained liquid were most likely a mix of methane and ethane.

"It was a real potpourri," said Cassini scientist Jonathan Lunine of the University of Arizona.

Titan is one of two moons in the solar system known to possess a significant atmosphere similar to that of primordial Earth. But scientists have long puzzled over the source of its hazy atmosphere rich in nitrogen and methane.

Scientists believe methane gas breaks up in Titan's atmosphere and forms smog clouds that rain methane down to the surface. But the source of methane inside the moon, which releases the gas into the atmosphere, is still unknown, Lunine said.

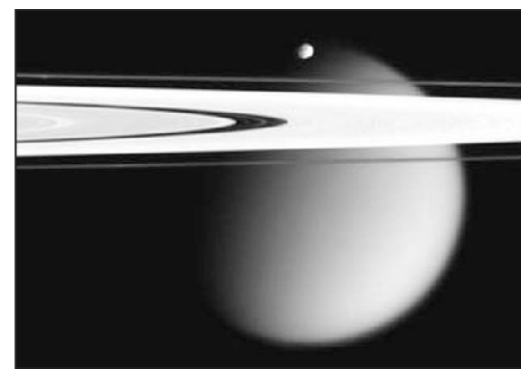
Last year, Cassini found what appeared to be a liquid hydrocarbon lake about the size of Lake Ontario on Titan's south pole. But the recent flyby marked the first time the spacecraft spied a multitude of lakes.

Cassini's next Titan encounter will be Sept. 7, when

it will be 620 miles away.

Cassini, funded by NASA and the European and Italian space agencies, was launched in 1997 and took seven years to reach Saturn to explore the ringed planet and its many moons. The mission is managed by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.

Cassini's accompanying probe, Huygens, developed and controlled by the ESA, touched down on Titan in 2005.



This March 12, 2006 file photo provided by NASA and taken by the Cassini spacecraft shows the small, battered Epimetheus and smog-enshrouded Titan, with Saturn's A and F rings in the foreground.

## Iraqi rivals discuss reconciliation

AP, Cairo

Representatives of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian groups discussed ways to reconcile Tuesday and end the escalating sectarian violence threatening to break up the country.

Some 30 delegates representing Shias, Sunnis, Kurds and other smaller minorities are participating in the discussions sponsored by the Cairo-based Arab League. Insurgents are not represented at the talks, which are intended to prepare for a national reconciliation conference in Baghdad next month.

The discussions in Cairo opened as Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was set to meet President Bush at the White House. The two leaders are expected to discuss plans to bring more US troops to Baghdad following the apparent failure of a six-week-old plan to beef up security in the Iraqi capital.

The Baghdad area recorded an average of 34 major bombings and shootings for the week ending July

13, the US military said. That was up 40 percent from the daily average of 24 registered between June 14 and July 13.

US officials believe control of Baghdad the political, cultural, transport and economic hub of the country will determine the future of Iraq. But the city's religiously mixed communities have become the focus of sectarian violence.

Iraq's army and police, which are heavily Shia, have had trouble winning the trust of residents of majority Sunni neighbourhoods. Al-Maliki's plans for curfews and other measures have had no lasting effect.

At least 2,567 members of the US military have died since the war began in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.

Arab League Undersecretary-General Ahmed Ben Heli said the three-day discussions were designed to work out an agenda for the August meeting, which he said should include loyalists to former President Saddam Hussein.

## INDO-AMERICAN N-ENERGY DEAL

# US lawmakers call for release of nuke report

AFP, Washington

Democratic lawmakers on Monday accused the US government of withholding a report containing information that could hurt chance of congressional passage of a US-India nuclear energy deal.

Representative Ed Markey, co-chair of the House of Representatives' bipartisan task force on proliferation, called for the release of the State Department document, which he said identifies entities "known to be engaging" in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation activities.

"It would be absolutely unacceptable if the State Department purposefully withheld information relating to Indian entities engaged in proliferation of weapons of mass destruction until after the Congress considers the US-India nuclear

agreement," Markey said.

"If the Congress is going to vote to open up the flood gates of nuclear cooperation with India, we need to know whether or not India is capable of preventing proliferation by its citizens or companies," Markey said.

Under the Iran-Syria Nonproliferation Act the US administration must submit a report to Congress every six months identifying every foreign person engaged in WMD-proliferation activities.

The last report was released in December 2005, making the current one more than one month overdue. Other Democrats joined Markey in accusing the State Department of purposefully withholding the document because its contents would thwart the administration's push for passage of the US-India nuclear cooperation accord.

"Given the grave concerns about the nonproliferation implications of the India nuclear deal, it is staggering that the State Department could be failing to provide Congress with information about illicit transfers of nuclear and chemical weapons related technology and goods from entities located in the state of India," said Representative Barbara Lee, a member of the House International Relations Committee.

Ellen Tauscher, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, added: "At a time when the international community is threatened by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, it is critical that the administration release its report on persons that may have provided or received sensitive technology from Iran and Syria -- two rogue nations with a poor record in this area."