

8 Palestinians killed in Israeli offensive

AFP, Gaza City

Israel pressed its month-long offensive into the Gaza Strip yesterday with eight Palestinians, including a 12-year-old boy, being killed in military strikes around Rafah in southern Gaza.

At least six of the dead were militants, although it was not known to which armed groups they belonged, Palestinian hospital and security officials said.

Twenty-six other people - six of them children - were wounded in the Israeli operations around Rafah, hospital officials said, adding that several of the injured were in a critical state. Several women were among the wounded.

Anis Abu Awaad, the boy who died, was killed along with three militants in an air raid, while a tank shell killed two other militants early on Thursday, security officials said.

OIC demands truce

Israeli offensive in Lebanon may launch new wave of terrorism

AFP, Putrajaya

Muslim nations yesterday demanded an immediate ceasefire in the Middle East and warned that boiling anger over the Israeli offensive in Lebanon could launch a new wave of terrorism.

With Muslims around the world enraged by the carnage in Lebanon, where the death toll has topped 900, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) convened an emergency meeting here to map out a unified Islamic response.

Key nations from the 57-nation bloc, including Iran as well as allies of the US "war on terror" such as Turkey and Pakistan, condemned what they called the "relentless

Israeli aggression" and called for an immediate truce.

In a joint statement they accused Israel of "blatant and flagrant" human rights violations in carrying out "indiscriminate and massive" air strikes in their three-week-old campaign against the Shia Muslim Hezbollah militia.

"We demand that the UN Security Council fulfil its responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security without any further delay by deciding on and enforcing an immediate and unconditional comprehensive ceasefire," they said.

They said Israel should bear "full responsibility for the consequences of its aggression."

The United States has declined

to back international calls for a ceasefire and indicated that Israel's ground and air war was justified by the fight against terrorism.

But Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the OIC chairman who called Thursday's meeting, warned that Muslim anger across the world was deepening over the bloodshed in Lebanon.

"Muslims are angry even in moderate Muslim countries," Abdullah told a press conference after a day of talks that led to the group's statement.

"We fear that a new wave of angry people may join the ranks of terrorism and take their own actions," he said.

Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the OIC's Turkish secretary general,

earlier told delegates that the "Islamic Ummah (community) is outraged."

"They are perplexed in the face of gross double standards applied by the international community," Ihsanoglu said.

"Anger is spreading all over the Muslim world. I am afraid that the anger of the Muslim masses is being transformed into permanent hatred against the aggressors and their explicit and implicit protectors."

One of the key Islamic leaders at the one-day meeting, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, reportedly said behind closed doors that wiping out Israel would solve the current crisis.



Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (L) shares a light moment with Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz as they arrive for a working lunch during the Meeting of Friends of the Chair of the 10th Islamic Summit Conference in Putrajaya yesterday.



Lebanese men inspect a destroyed bridge after it was attacked by an Israeli air strike in the northern Lebanese region of Akkar, near the Syrian border, Wednesday. Israel launched fresh air strikes on Beirut yesterday after a lull of several days, while UN powers inched toward agreement on a Security Council resolution to end the three-week-old conflict.

PROPOSED LEBANON PEACE FORCE Command, logistics pose main problems

AFP, London

The biggest obstacle to creating an international peacekeeping force in Lebanon is determining who will lead it, while questions remain over troops and transport, defence analysts said on Thursday.

The two most likely and experienced candidates to lead the peacekeepers would be the European Union or France, with both the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) excluded because of their involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The United States would be seen as the wrong actor in the region, Nato is seen by some as the wrong actor, as well," Tim Williams,

head of the European Security Programme at the London-based defence think-tank the Royal United Services Institute (Rusi), told AFP.

"There is an image concern. The question of who is going to command it has still not been resolved."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said in British newspaper interviews Thursday that he wants some 15,000 foreign troops to be deployed in southern Lebanon to help end its fight with Hezbollah.

But according to RUSI, the EU has little experience leading a force that large. The 7,000-strong troop deployment in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the largest the EU has handled to date, it said.

Civil war 'more likely' in Iraq: British envoy

10 killed in Baghdad market blast

AFP, London/ Baghdad

Britain's outgoing ambassador to Iraq has warned that civil war is the "more likely" outcome there than a transition to stable democracy, according to details obtained by the BBC yesterday.

William Patey reportedly told British government ministers in a confidential memo that Iraq was likely to break-up along ethnic lines because of the continuation of sectarian violence.

The ambassador made the assessment in his final telegram - which the BBC said it had seen - before leaving

the Iraqi capital last week.

It was addressed to Prime Minister Tony Blair and senior ministers, including the foreign and defence secretaries plus military top brass, it added.

Patey wrote: "The prospect of a low intensity civil war and a de facto division of Iraq is probably more likely at this stage than a successful and substantial transition to a stable democracy."

He went on: "Even the lowered expectation of (US) President (George W.) Bush for Iraq - a government that can sustain itself, defend itself and govern itself and is

an ally in the war on terror - must remain in doubt."

The British government has been optimistic about Iraq's future but Patey's memo appears at odds with the official line.

Meanwhile, ten people were killed and 20 wounded when a bomb tore through a downtown Baghdad marketplace on Thursday, said an official from the defence ministry.

The powerful blast hit Shorjah market in an area selling electrical appliances, sending a dirty plume of yellow dust up over the city skyline.

HRW slams Israeli air raids on civilians

REUTERS, Beirut

Israel's military appears to have deliberately bombed civilians in Lebanon and some of its strikes constitute war crimes, US-based rights group Human Rights Watch (HRW) said yesterday.

HRW said Israel's contention that Hezbollah fighters were hiding among Lebanese civilians did not justify its "systematic failure" to distinguish between civilians and combatants.

"In some instances, Israeli forces appear to have deliberately targeted civilians," HRW said in a statement accompanying a report released on Thursday.

"The failures cannot be dismissed as mere accidents and cannot be blamed on wrongful Hezbollah prac-

tices. In some cases, these attacks constitute war crimes."

At least 646 Lebanese, mostly civilians, have died in the strikes. The mounting toll, compounded by Sunday's bombing of the Lebanese village of Qana in which 54 civilians died, has fueled international outcry against Israel's tactics in the three-week-old war.

Israel says its strikes destroy Hezbollah infrastructure and stop rocket attacks that have killed 56 and caused large-scale evacuations in Israel.

HRW Executive Director Kenneth Roth said in the many cases of civilian Lebanese deaths investigated by the rights group, the location of Hezbollah members or their weapons stores appeared to have no bearing on the areas attacked.