

Israel lashes out at UN for Gaza killing probe

Palestinian human shield blocks Israeli strike

AFP, Jerusalem/ Gaza City

Israel lashed out yesterday against a UN resolution calling for a probe into a botched Gaza shelling as ministers convened to discuss the ongoing battle against Palestinian rocket attacks.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert criticised the UN General Assembly resolution calling for a fact-finding mission to probe an Israeli shelling that killed 19 Palestinians this month, as three Israelis were wounded by Palestinian rockets.

"I view it severely," Olmert told the cabinet meeting, more than 10 days after artillery slammed into private homes in Beit Hanun killing mostly women and children in

northern Gaza.

"We have no doubt that it is the State of Israel which must respond to attacks on civilians. We have expressed our deepest regret over this."

"But those who preach morality and roll their eyes have yet to see fit to initiate a resolution in condemnation of those who are shooting with the goal of hitting civilians as a long-range, systematic policy," Olmert added.

The premier vowed to do everything to help residents on the frontline of rocket attacks as Israel called off an air strike on a militant's home in the northern Gaza Strip after several hundred Palestinians formed a human shield.

"We will continue to do what we need in order to assist those at the forefront of the struggle, facing Qassam fire in the south," Olmert said.

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz warned again that "those responsible for rocket fire would pay the price".

Overnight several hundred neighbours flocked to the house in the Jabalya refugee camp after receiving a warning it would be destroyed, but an Israeli military spokesman said the strike was called off because of the crowds.

The military called off the strike after several hundred Palestinians late Saturday formed a human shield around the house, home of wanted militant Wael Barud of the

Resistance Committees.

"Basically yes," a military spokesman said when asked if the raid was aborted. "We don't want to hurt uninvolved civilians. The terrorists are using uninvolved civilians as human shields."

Palestinians were yesterday celebrating victory over Israel in a Gaza refugee camp after a human shield of hundreds prompted the military to abort a threatened airstrike.

"This is a victory for the Palestinian people. It is a defeat for the Israeli F-16s," said Ahmed Fuad Barud, a 33-year-old militant in the radical Popular Resistance Committees.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) talks with British Prime Minister Tony Blair during a meeting in Lahore yesterday. Blair and Musharraf pledged to bolster cooperation in the West's "difficult global struggle" against Islamic extremism.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists from India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shout anti-Chinese slogans and wave party flags during a protest in New Delhi yesterday against the forthcoming visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to India. The demonstrators were protesting against the recent comments of the Chinese Ambassador to India during a television interview claiming the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as Chinese territory.

Pact with Pakistan akin to al-Qaeda probing 9/11

Says BJP

PTI, Bangalore

Senior BJP leader LK Advani yesterday criticised the government for setting up an anti-terror mechanism with Pakistan, saying such an arrangement was akin to a joint probe into the September 11, 2001 strikes by the US and al-Qaeda.

Advani also attacked Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for his statement that Islamabad was a victim of terrorism.

Addressing a rally, Advani said the anti-terror mechanism was something similar to a "joint investigation into Mumbai train blasts by a Mumbai DIG or DGP and Dawood Ibrahim" and a "joint probe into the September 11, 2001 terror strikes in the US by America and al-Qaeda".

He said the prime minister blamed Pakistan for the Mumbai train blasts and "after a few days said in Havana that Pakistan was also a victim of terrorism".

Nepal rebels collect arms ahead of peace deal

REUTERS, Dasharathpur

After drilling his troops beneath the trees in the foothills of Nepal's Himalayas, vice-commander "M Star" congratulated them on a job well done.

"We have been fighting for a long time to destroy the old regime, supported by the old army, and in this great class struggle, we have been successful so far," he said.

The men and women under his command, dressed in camouflaged combat fatigues, most carrying old-fashioned bolt-action rifles, greeted his words with the raised fist of the Maoist "red salute".

Thousands of Maoist rebels are collecting in 28 camps around the country as part of a peace deal due to be signed on Tuesday and supposed to end a decade-long insurgency that has claimed more than 13,000 lives.

The rebels are due to lock up their weapons before the signing under United Nations supervi-

sion, although they will retain the keys to the stores.

They say they have achieved their main aim, agreement to hold elections to a special assembly to draft a new constitution and, they hope, end a centuries-old monarchy.

"We are confident there will be peace, because the party has assured us what we want will be achieved peacefully," said 19-year-old Abhinay, who joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) three and a half years ago and has just arrived at the site of one of the camps in western Nepal.

"Killing our own people is not a good thing, so we are happy there will be peace."

Hundreds of rebels have descended on the small village of Dasharathpur, 350 km west of Kathmandu, beside a former government agricultural research station where the Maoists hope to set up a riverside camp.

For the time being they have

been billeted in local houses and mill around the streets, many in casual clothes with their weapons hidden. Some played volleyball in a nearby field as a dozen tailors made hundreds of new uniforms.

Well drilled in the Maoist rhetoric of "the struggle against exploitation by feudal aristocrats", many nevertheless told moving stories of why they joined the insurgency.

"My brother was a teacher," said 20-year-old female soldier Manneyeta, dressed in a girlish pink T-shirt and camouflage trousers.

"The army came and asked him to come along. They took him to a river and shot him dead."

Manneyeta, with pink and yellow plastic flowers in a bracelet around her wrist, said neither she nor her brother had been Maoists. But her brother's death forced her into the rebel army at the age of just 15.

AFGHANISTAN FLOOD

Bad weather hampers aid delivery

AFP, Herat

Dozens of people were still missing and rough weather had hampered aid deliveries three days after heavy floods killed nearly 60 people in western Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

Around 100 others were still missing after flash floods washed away mudbrick villages in the remote western province of Badghis on Thursday.

Afghan authorities helped by the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) and some aid organizations have been trying to reach the disaster-stricken area by air and ground to deliver aid, officials said.

But Isaf spokesman Major Luke Knittig said that the aid had not been delivered to the actual affected areas due to bad weather and other difficulties.

He said food, medicine and other aid packages were flown into the nearby towns and were likely to be delivered to the victims by Sunday noon.

"It's not an easy operation," Knittig told AFP.

Low-caste Tamil Nadu woman sold to highest bidder

REUTERS, Mumbai

A low-caste woman, the president of a village panchayat in Tamil Nadu, was auctioned off to a high-caste landlord for rupees 215,000 (\$4,810), a report said on Sunday.

Winning the bid for the illiterate farm worker, Balamani Veeman, meant that the landlord could take commissions on the village contracts that only she could approve, the Indian Express newspaper said, quoting villagers who attended the auction.

"Veeman had protested, "but the (village) elders did not listen", the paper quoted her husband as saying.

While there is no formal relationship between them, the fact that the woman is of low caste and the winning bidder a member of the upper-caste Thevar community means that she will agree to his demands on the question of commissions.

Violence mars Lankan president's first year

Weekend violence kills 35 in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse came to power promising a new approach to peace. But as he marks the end of his first year in office Sunday, the country continues to be wracked by violence, pushing its defence budget to a record high.

When he ran for the presidency, Rajapakse was widely regarded as a hardliner and dubbed the "war candidate" by Tamil rebels.

He promised a new approach to bring an "honourable peace" to the tropical island nation racked by more than three decades of ethnic conflict that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

But after winning the election, he said he would instead persist with the Norwegian-backed peace initiative supported by his predecessor.

Since then, 3,422 people have been killed in ethnic violence, defence ministry figures show.

The violence resulted in a 45-percent increase in defence spending to 1.29 billion dollars in the 2007

budget.

In fresh violence, at least 35 people died in weekend sea, air and land battles between Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels and security forces, according to claims by both sides yesterday.

The Sri Lankan navy said it killed at least 15 Tiger guerrillas after sinking three craft off the island's northwest coast on Saturday. Helicopter gunships and supersonic jets also bombed rebel boats, the navy said.

However, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they sank at least two Sri Lankan patrol craft and that 10 sailors died.

The sea battle came as Tiger rebels set off a powerful landmine in the northern district of Vavuniya that killed five soldiers and wounded two more, police officials said.

The president, who turned 61 Saturday, justified the soaring defence spending by citing escalating Tamil Tiger attacks that have dogged his rule.