



Thousands rally for Hamas in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Tens of thousands of Hamas supporters rallied in Gaza City yesterday to mark the 19th anniversary of the Islamist movement's founding amid escalating tensions with the rival Fatah faction.

Supporters came from across the Gaza Strip to hear Hamas leaders, including Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniya, speak to the crowds of people waving green flags and portraits of top figures in the ruling party.

The show of force comes after gunmen attacked Haniya's convoy Thursday night, killing one of his bodyguards and wounding his son, as the Islamist premier returned from a fundraising trip to Arab countries and Iran.

Hamas accused its Fatah rivals of trying to assassinate Haniya, charges which Fatah denied.

PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian security forces clash with supporters of the ruling Hamas party in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Twenty-six people were injured, one critically, when police blocked hundreds of pro-Hamas demonstrators from marching on the city's central square after Juma prayers.

Europe asks Iran, Syria to behave 'responsibly'

AFP, Brussels

European Union leaders warned Iran and Syria yesterday against meddling in the affairs of their neighbours and demanded they adopt more "responsible" stances if they hope to improve ties with the bloc.

"The European Council expresses its concern about the negative impact of Iranian policies on stability and security in the Middle East," EU heads of state and government said in conclusions from their Brussels summit.

"The European Council underlines that Iran needs to play a responsible role in the region." They expressed regret that, in

the dispute over its nuclear program, Iran had rejected a package of incentives in exchange for stopping its enrichment of uranium, and encouraged the United Nations Security Council to take action.

And they denounced a conference on the Holocaust in Tehran this week that presented Nazi Germany's systematic slaughter of six million Jews during World War II as a matter of historical debate.

"The EU condemns any denial of the Holocaust as a historical fact, either in whole or in part," the leaders wrote.

On the latest political crisis in Lebanon sparked by anti-government protests organized by

the Iranian- and Syrian-backed militia Hezbollah, the EU pressed the country's neighbours not to meddle in Lebanese affairs.

"The European Council calls upon all Lebanese and regional actors to show responsible leadership and full respect for Lebanese democratic institutions," they wrote.

"Syria must end all interference in Lebanese internal affairs and actively engage in the stabilisation of Lebanon and the region. Syria needs to do so to be in a position to develop normal relations with the international community, including with the EU."

Opposition Shias and Christians launched mass street protests

December 1 in a bid to topple the Western-backed government.

The bloc is divided over how to contend with Syria, recognizing it is key to resolving the crises in Lebanon, Iraq and between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier travelled to Damascus this week for talks with President Bashar al-Assad and held out the prospect of economic incentives if Syria became a "constructive" partner in the region.

But EU heavyweights such as France have ruled out negotiations until Syria demonstrates a significant turnaround in policy.

Iran votes seen as test for Ahmadinejad

REUTERS, Tehran

Iranians voted yesterday for local councils and a powerful clerical body in the first electoral test for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his allies since he swept to office in 2005.

The votes for municipal councilors and members of the Assembly of Experts, in theory Iran's most powerful institution, will show if the president's rivals are regaining popularity even if the results have no direct impact on policy.

Forecasting results in the Islamic Republic is hampered by a lack of reliable opinion polls but several voters in Tehran said they would back candidates close to the president.

"He (Ahmadinejad) has listened to the young, defended our nuclear rights, and traveled to the provinces

to solve people's problems there directly," said Ali Damabi, 18, voting in a working-class neighborhood of south Tehran.

Ahmadinejad, the son of a blacksmith who says the government must be more in touch with people, waited in line for about half an hour to vote at a mosque in east Tehran and was swamped by supporters, many of whom handed him notes requesting his help.

Although outranked in power by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Ahmadinejad's anti-Western and anti-Israel statements have alarmed the West.

Any indication his popularity is waning is likely to be taken as a welcome sign among Western countries worried Iran is building nuclear arms. Iran denies this.

Blair under fire after Saudi arms deal probe halted

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair came under fire yesterday after fraud investigators stopped a probe into a weapons deal with Saudi Arabia due to concerns it would damage Britain's national interests.

However, shares at defence group BAE systems soared and workers celebrated amid fears they could have lost jobs if the Saudis had pulled out of a new multi-billion pound deal.

Thursday's announcement by Attorney General Lord Peter Goldsmith was slammed as a blow to Britain's reputation in business by the opposition Liberal Democrat party and a former minister in the governing Labour party.

Japan declines to back Indian nuke drive

AFP, Tokyo

Japan and India agreed yesterday to start talks on a free trade deal to bring the Asian democracies closer, but Tokyo declined to immediately support letting New Delhi into the civilian nuclear club.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met his counterpart Shinzo Abe and signed a deal to launch negotiations, to be completed within two years, on a free-trade pact.

While the talks are at an initial stage, the agreement holds symbolic value as Abe has repeatedly said he seeks closer ties with fellow democracy India to compensate for frequent tension with China.

"I agreed with Prime Minister Singh to upgrade the bilateral relationship to a strategic global

partnership," Abe said at a joint press conference.

The two leaders also agreed to boost people-to-people contacts and to start annual visits to each other's countries. Singh is the first Indian premier to visit Japan in five years.

"I am deeply satisfied with the outcome of my visit and I'm glad that Prime Minister Abe has accepted my invitation to visit India next year," Singh said.

But Abe withheld support on one of Singh's major issues -- nuclear cooperation.

Singh reached a landmark deal with US President George W. Bush to allow nuclear exports to India, which in turn would put civilian-use facilities under safeguards of the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (C) and his wife Akie (R) join Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursharan Kaur (L) to light an Indian traditional lamp to launch the India-Japan Friendship Year 2007, at a hotel in Tokyo on Thursday.

Death of Tamil negotiator a new blow to Lanka peace

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's moribund peace process suffered another setback with the death of the top Tamil Tiger negotiator who was regarded as a moderate among hardliners, analysts said Friday.

Anton Balasingham, 68, who had spearheaded the peace efforts of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), died of bile duct cancer at his London home on Thursday.

"Balasingham had an institutional memory and it would be very difficult for the LTTE to replace him," said Sunanda Deshapriya, a director at the independent think-tank Centre for Policy Alternatives.

"He was someone who was amenable to negotiations and was willing to show flexibility. To find a political figure like him would be a serious challenge to the Tigers. His death is a setback to the peace process."

Tiger chief Velupillai Prabhakaran mourned the death saying it came at a time when the LTTE needed Balasingham's skills more than ever.

"A source of unwavering strength in the political and diplomatic efforts of our freedom movement, and the light of our nation is extinguished," Prabhakaran said in a statement.

"It is an irreplaceable loss for our



PHOTO: AFP

LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran (L) speaks with rebels' London-based chief negotiator Anton Balasingham in Kilinochchi, northern Sri Lanka in a file photo. The top peace negotiator for Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels, Anton Balasingham, died at his home in London on Thursday.

entire nation and for me," he said from rebel-held territory in the north of Sri Lanka.

"Bala Annai (elder brother) has a permanent historic place in the growth and the spread of our movement. He was its elder member, its ideologue, its philosopher and, above all, my best friend who gave me encouragement and energy."

"He was with me from the very beginning of our movement, sharing its challenges and hardships.

He was the central figure in all our diplomatic efforts."

Prabhakaran conferred the title of Voice of the Nation on Balasingham, whose funeral was to be held in London.

He was the main contact for peace broker Norway and others involved in attempts to solve the Sri Lankan conflict, which has claimed 60,000 lives since 1972.

His December 2002 offer to consider a federal state instead of full-blown independence marked a

watershed in the guerrilla campaign.

Sources close to the rebels said Prabhakaran was upset that Balasingham had committed to such a drastic shift in policy, but never publicly chided him.

Balasingham described himself as "Mr. Prabhakaran's voice" and was regarded as the only member of the LTTE who could argue with the feared leader.

The avuncular Balasingham, who married an Australian, presented a bundle of contradictions in the movement.

He was never a combatant but rose to be the chief ideologue and negotiator, willing to talk to the journalists Prabhakaran shuns.

"He may have been responsible for restraining the Tigers to some extent," said defence analyst Namal Perera. "With his death, there could be more fireworks from the Tigers."

The last round of peace talks in October, which illness prevented Balasingham from attending, ended in failure and were followed last month by a vow from Prabhakaran to renew the struggle for independence.

Former rebel turned politician Dharmalingam Sithadthan said Balasingham's 30-year-plus association with the Tiger chief gave him unprecedented clout within the movement.

US scientists unveil new quake tracking system

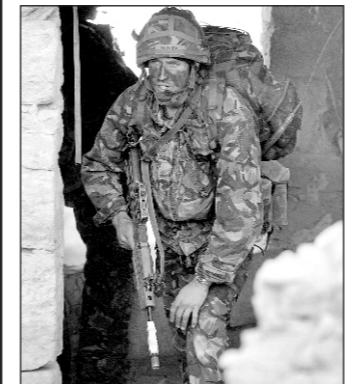
AFP, San Francisco

US scientists on Thursday unveiled a new system they hope will improve the accuracy in forecasting the likelihood of earthquakes in the long-term.

In a presentation at the annual meeting of the American Geophysical Union, researchers revealed a method, which combines geological records with GPS tracking to help assess earthquake risk.

"This is the most realistic model to date," said Kaj Johnson, a geophysicist from the University of Indiana. "This is something that people have been asking for years now - it's the next step."

Earthquake probability assessment requires accurate determination of how fast a fault moves. Prior to the advent of GPS technology, scientists relied solely on paleoseismology, a complex method of digging trenches along fault lines and mapping the signatures of past earthquakes over thousands of years.



Prince William

Prince William graduates from military academy

AFP, Sandhurst

All eyes were on Prince William Friday at a parade marking his graduation from Britain's elite Sandhurst military academy, in a new coming of age for the second in line to the throne.

The 24-year-old was among 227 officer cadets passing out of the academy, southwest of London, in a ceremony watched by Queen Elizabeth II and the rest of the royal family.

Following his graduation William is set to undergo another four months training in an armoured reconnaissance unit whose soldiers have to show their "patience, nerve and cunning," according to the Ministry of Defence.

'N Korea may stage 2nd nuclear test'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea may stage a second nuclear weapons test to strengthen its hand during upcoming negotiations on scrapping its nuclear programme, South Korea's new defence minister warned yesterday.

Kim Jang-Soo, a former army chief of staff, ordered the 650,000-strong military to step up combat-readiness to deter possible aggression from the North, the defence ministry said.

"We have to be thoroughly prepared to counter the possibility

of a second or third nuclear test by North Korea and a possible hostile act by it in the process of negotiations over its nuclear weapons programme," Kim said in a written order to his troops.

The six-nation nuclear talks are set to resume in Beijing on Monday, 13 months after the North walked out. They involve the two Koreas, the United States, China, Japan and Russia.

The North staged its first nuclear test on October 9, sparking international condemnation and United Nations sanctions.

Later that month North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il told China that he had no plans for a second test but that increased international pressure could trigger "further measures".

Defence minister Kim issued his order after a closed-door meeting of 130 senior commanders, including General Kim Kwan-Jin, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the army, navy and air force chiefs of staff.

Foreign ministry spokesman Choo Kyu-Ho said he had no information about a possible second nuclear test.

Iraq offers olive branch to Baathists in talks

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders have offered an olive branch to former members of ousted dictator Saddam Hussein's ruling party in a bid to kickstart a programme of national reconciliation, lawmakers said yesterday.

A small number of former Baath Party members are expected to attend the start of peace talks in Baghdad on Saturday, they said, as Iraq's embattled coalition government seeks to drag the country out of a vicious sectarian war.

The move will raise hackles among hardline Shia militants, whose majority community was persecuted by Saddam's Sunni-led regime, but is seen by many observers as a key first step in calming the violent insurgency.

Tens of thousands of Baathists and Saddam-era military officers were purged from public service in the aftermath of the March 2003 US-led invasion and many went on to swell the ranks of groups fighting the new Shia-led government.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has been cautious about revealing details of the peace talks, especially as some Shia politicians have

threatened a boycott if senior Baathists "with blood on their hands" attend.

But there is a growing consensus that more junior party members not proven to have supported Saddam-era atrocities or the post-invasion rebellion should be allowed into the political process as a gesture of reconciliation.

Nasser al-Ani, a Sunni lawmaker and the official spokesman of the conference, confirmed that Baathists living abroad were among those invited.

"Probably some Baathists will attend," he said. "At the very least they will send representatives."

"The names of attendees will be announced during the conference. We invited personalities from abroad and some might come, but most gave excuses, citing security concerns," he told AFP.

On Thursday, Maliki's spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh confirmed that the talks would be open to all-comers, without specifically mentioning Baathists.

"Dialogue shall be held with all. We shall hold talks with anyone who wants to build Iraq," he said.

Arab talks secure 'truce' in Lebanon crisis

AFP, Beirut

Arab diplomacy appeared to put the brakes on any escalation in the political standoff between Lebanon's government and the Hezbollah-led opposition, the press reported yesterday.

Local newspapers said Arab League chief Amr Mussa had secured a "truce" during his mediation trip, describing it as a "half-success" toward ending weeks of political feuding that has sparked round-the-clock opposition protests in central Beirut.

Mussa left Thursday without a deal but hailed progress on two key points between Prime Minister Fuad Siniora's Western-backed government and the Shia and Christian opposition, which is demanding a greater say in running the nation's affairs.

Mussa said anti-Syrian majority government and pro-Damascus opposition leaders had agreed to form a committee to discuss a controversial international tribunal into the 2005 assassination of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri, widely blamed on

Syria.

Mussa also sketched the broad outline of what a potential new, expanded unity government would look like and said it was among matters up for further discussion.

"A truce for the holidays," said the opposition As-Safir newspaper, deeming the Arab efforts "a half-success."

However, the sit-in around the government's offices "will continue until a national unity government is formed and until then there is no question of leaving the streets," As-Safir quoted pro-Syrian parliament speaker Nabih Berri as telling Mussa.

"What has been done is very important but to reach a definitive agreement would require a huge miracle," As-Safir quoted diplomatic sources as saying.

Prior to Mussa's visit, opposition leaders had threatened to escalate their civil disobedience actions and even form an interim government if their demands were not met.

"Escalate to where?" Siniora asked, according to an interview with the Financial Times published on Friday.