

Blair meets Abbas as shaky truce holds

REUTERS, Gaza

British Prime Minister Tony Blair met the moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas yesterday to lend him support after a shaky truce between Abbas's forces and the Hamas government took effect in the Gaza Strip.

Abbas's Fatah and Hamas accused each other of violating the cease-fire but said it was still in effect in the wake of days of heavy fighting that pushed Gaza to the brink of civil war. They said some hostages held by both sides had been freed overnight.

Witnesses said the Hamas Islamists had also withdrawn their police force from a number of streets.

Fighting escalated after Abbas called on Saturday for fresh presi-

dential and parliamentary elections, a move intended to break political deadlock with Hamas and lift crippling Western sanctions on its administration.

Officials from Hamas and Fatah were expected to meet on Monday to try to cement the cease-fire. Previous deals to end internal fighting this year have quickly collapsed.

Blair, on a drive to revive Middle East peace negotiations, arrived in Israel just before Hamas and Fatah announced the deal on Sunday night.

He was meeting Abbas in the West Bank city of Ramallah and will hold talks later with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem. Blair has backed Abbas's call to hold early polls, saying the international community should support the

president.

There was sporadic gunfire overnight in Gaza, including an incident in which two members of a Hamas-led police force were wounded just after the truce was announced. Residents denied reports of a dawn gunbattle around Abbas's home in Gaza.

"Calm is continuing despite the fact that there were some serious violations," said Abdel-Hakim Awad, a Fatah spokesman.

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said: "Hamas will abide by the agreement... The issue is also dependent on the commitment of the other side."

Presidential guards were still maintaining tight security around Abbas's office, which came under mortar attack on Sunday. The president was not in Gaza at the time.

Abbas's guards were also still in charge of the Hamas-led Agriculture and Transport ministries, although they allowed several employees to enter.

Forces loyal to Hamas and Fatah fought street and rooftop gunbattles across Gaza on Sunday in which at least three people were killed and 20 wounded.

Hamas, which surprised the once dominant Fatah to win elections in January, has said it would boycott new polls. The two factions tried for months to form a unity government to end their power struggle, but the talks foundered, partly over Hamas's insistence on not recognising Israel.

The truce calls for the factions to withdraw their fighters, and for Abbas's forces to end their siege of the ministries.



PHOTO: AFP

British Prime Minister Tony Blair (L) speaks as Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas listens during a joint press conference at the Palestinian Authority Muqataa headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday.

British police arrest man over prostitute murders

REUTERS, London

British police arrested a 37-year-old man yesterday on suspicion of murdering five prostitutes, according to officers investigating one of the country's most dramatic serial killings of recent times.

The bodies of five naked women, who all worked as prostitutes in the town of Ipswich, eastern England, were all found over a period of 11 days this month, dominating television and newspaper headlines.

Police Chief Superintendent Stewart Gull said the man had been arrested at his home near Felixstowe, a port town to the south east of Ipswich, at about 7:20 a.m.

"He has been arrested on suspicion of murdering all five women - Gemma Adams, Tania Nicol, Anneli Alderton, Paula Clennell and Annette Nicholls," Gull said. "The man is currently in custody at a police station in Suffolk, where he will be questioned about the deaths later today."



PHOTO: AFP

A man reads the front page of the British Sunday Mirror newspaper dated Sunday, featuring an interview and pictures of 37 year-old supermarket worker Tom Stephens, who has been arrested Monday in connection with the murders of five prostitutes in the Ipswich area of Suffolk.

Indian politician's son guilty of model murder

REUTERS, New Delhi

The son of an influential member of India's ruling Congress party was found guilty on Monday of murdering a model in 1999, in a retrial of a controversial case, which has transfixed the country.

Jessica Lal, 34, was tending the bar at an exclusive party in New Delhi when she was shot dead by Manu Sharma, the son of a Congress party politician, apparently for refusing to serve him a drink after the bar had closed.

Sharma had been acquitted in February, raising widespread protests from the public and media who saw the initial verdict as evidence the rich and powerful are beyond the reach of justice. The Delhi High Court ordered a retrial after the outcry.

Pre-emptive strikes if army tries to drive out Tigers: LTTE

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers warned the army yesterday they would resort to pre-emptive strikes if the military pushes ahead with a declared plan to drive them out of rebel-held territory in the island's volatile east.

The military says more than 17,000 war-displaced have fled camps in and around the Tiger-held town of Vakarai in the district of Batticaloa, some through jungle and others by sea, since early November to escape artillery duels.

The army accuses the Tigers of using civilians as human shields and, to the shock of Nordic truce

monitors, has vowed to push them out of areas they control under the terms of a tattered 2002 ceasefire pact, which still holds on paper.

The rebels say the civilians are fleeing because of army artillery shells that have hit refugee camps and killed dozens. They deny they have held civilians against their will as some witnesses have said.

"The flushing-out plan ... is not about flushing out the LTTE, it's about displacing all Tamils," Tiger military spokesman Rasaiah Ilanthiraiyan told Reuters by telephone from the rebels' northern stronghold. "It has been happening since independence."

Ex-Iraqi minister escapes from Baghdad jail

AFP, Baghdad

A former Iraqi cabinet minister who holds joint Iraqi-US nationality escaped from a Baghdad prison on Monday, just two months after he was jailed for corruption, a government official said.

Former electricity minister Ayham al-Samarrai managed to flee from a jail under joint Iraqi-US guard in the fortified Green Zone, said the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity and was unable to provide further details.

Samarrai was sentenced to two years in jail in October after being convicted of graft by Iraq's Committee for Public Probity.

There had been reports he would seek asylum in the US embassy, but government spokesman Ali al-Dabagh told reporters at the time of his arrest that he was in Iraqi police custody and would be handed over to the justice ministry.

'Tough talk ahead on Indo-US nuke deal'

Bush set to sign the bill into law

REUTERS, New Delhi

Tough negotiations with the United States still lie ahead over a landmark civil nuclear cooperation deal, India's prime minister said yesterday, promising the country's sovereignty would not be compromised.

Manmohan Singh said India would not be bound by "extraneous" conditions attached to the deal when it was passed by the US Congress this month, rejecting efforts to constrain New Delhi's policy toward Iran or its own nuclear weapons program.

"India will find it difficult to and cannot accept any such conditions beyond those already agreed to in the understandings with the United States," he told parliament in a debate.

"Clearly difficult negotiations lie ahead."

President George W Bush is expected to sign the bill into law on Monday, a major step toward allowing New Delhi to buy US nuclear reactors and fuel for the first time in 30 years.

But Congress attached several conditions to the law, which have

not gone down well with Singh's communist allies and with the main Hindu-nationalist opposition.

Under the bill, the US president would be required to end the export of nuclear materials if India tests another nuclear device as it did in 1998.

The US president is also required to report to Congress annually on whether India was cooperating with international efforts to restrain Iran's nuclear program.

S Korean team produces three cloned dogs

REUTERS, Seoul

A team of South Korean scientists once led by disgraced stem-cell researcher Hwang Woo-suk said yesterday they had produced three cloned copies of a female Afghan hound.

The same team at Seoul National University last year produced Snuppy, the world's first cloned dog, also an Afghan hound.

"This is being done to advance medical research and it is not yet intended for people to clone their pets," Lee Byung-chun, a veterinary professor at the university and who now heads the team, told Reuters.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Seoul National University's Professor Lee Byung-chun (C) and his researchers show three genetically identical Afghan Hound clones, named Bona, Hope and Peace (L-R) during a photo opportunity at the university in Seoul yesterday.

Israelis back in cleared West Bank settlement

AFP, Nablus

Dozens of Jewish settlers returned under army escort to a former settlement in the occupied West Bank that was evacuated in 2005, witnesses and Palestinian security sources said yesterday.

Accompanied by Israeli military jeeps, the settlers arrived at the site of the former colony of Homesh in the northern West Bank, the sources said.

Palestinian pupils from the nearby village of Buraq threw stones at the soldiers escorting the settlers, they added.

Limor Har Melekh-Son, a former Homesh resident and the group's spokeswoman, said the settlers were planning a ceremony on the site "to present a group of 25 families who intend to return as soon as possible and live there".

"Dozens of people are already there and hundreds more are en route for the ceremony," she said. "The mistake of withdrawing unilaterally in 2005 has been fixed."

The settlements of Homesh, Sanur, Qadim and Ganim in the northern West Bank were evacuated in August last year during Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, but the sites remained under army control as a closed military zone.

"We have to return to all the places from which Israel withdrew," Har Melekh-Son said last week. "This is the start of a process that will allow us to return to those places from where we fled."

She said the 25 families who had lived in Homesh were ready to set up home in the former settlement, if need be "in tents".

Red Crescent stops work in Baghdad

Two more US troops, 14 Iraqis slain

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi Red Crescent aid workers suspended work in war-torn Baghdad on Monday after two dozen of their colleagues fell victim to the latest mass kidnap to shock a city plagued by sectarian violence.

At least 14 Iraqis were killed in a string of bombings and shootings as new US Defence Secretary Robert Gates prepared to take office in Washington amid deepening US divisions about how to handle the crisis in Iraq.

The US military also announced that two more troops were killed in action, bringing the number of US fatalities in Iraq since the 2003

invasion to 2,946, according to an AFP count based on Pentagon figures.

A former Iraqi cabinet minister, an Iraqi-US dual national who was jailed for corruption, staged an escape from jail in Baghdad's highly fortified Green Zone, in a further sign of the rampant chaos engulfing the country.

"We have frozen or stopped temporarily activities in Baghdad, but this is not affecting civilian needs. This was logical because our main staff is still kidnapped," the Iraqi Red Crescent's secretary general Mazen Abdallah said.

"We are the only organisation working in all of Iraq. We don't want

to stop," he added, emphasising that the closure applied only to the capital.

Meanwhile, the violence continues unchecked.

In Baghdad, five people were killed and 19 wounded Monday when a car bomb exploded in a bustling marketplace in the mixed Shia-Sunni neighbourhood of Sadiyah, a security source said.

Three other people were killed in separate attacks and Iraq's disgraced former electricity minister Ayham al-Samarrai escaped from a jail under joint Iraqi-US guard in Baghdad, two months after he was jailed for corruption.

10 die in fresh Afghan gunbattles

AFP, Khost

Nine Taliban rebels and an Afghan soldier were killed and 14 insurgents were captured in fresh fighting across insurgency-hit Afghanistan.

A major firefight broke out early Monday after nearly 200 militants crossed the border from Pakistan and attacked a border checkpost in the eastern Afghan province of Khost, police said.

Five Taliban fighters and an Afghan militia soldier died in the hour-long exchange of fire, provincial police official Gul Dad said, adding that four Afghan nationals were arrested.

Pakistani militants "were also with them fighting our troops," Dad

told AFP, citing documents found on the bodies of the dead rebels. "It was a heavy battle."

Self-confessed Taliban spokesman Mohammad Hanif claimed responsibility for the attack on behalf of the ousted Islamists but said only one rebel was killed.

The fighting took place days after Afghan President Hamid Karzai publicly accused the Pakistani government for the first time of supporting Taliban rebels. Islamabad denies the claims.

Meanwhile, four Taliban insurgents were killed in a separate clash late Sunday in the southern province of Kandahar, which also left three US-led coalition soldiers injured, the US military said in a statement.



PHOTO: AFP

An Emirati woman casts her vote at a polling station in Dubai yesterday. The second phase of indirect elections to an advisory council got under way in the United Arab Emirates Monday, two days after a woman was voted into office in the first ever national polls in the Gulf country.