

Fragile ceasefire holds in Gaza for 2nd day

AFP, Gaza City

A fragile ceasefire aimed at halting deadly clashes between rival Palestinian factions held in Gaza for a second day yesterday as president Mahmud Abbas urged all sides to consolidate the truce.

No clashes between Abbas's Fatah party and the ruling Hamas movement have been reported since early Wednesday, when a four-hour gunbattle in southern Gaza City killed two Fatah loyalists hours after a new truce went into effect.

Abbas urged the rival factions to respect the truce again on Thursday, following a similar call the night before.

"I call upon my people to show responsibility and work to consolidate the calm in the Gaza Strip," he

told a press conference in Ramallah. "I'm convinced that everybody wants security and civil peace."

Hundreds of people, waving the Palestinian standard, gathered in front of the parliament building in Gaza to call on the rivals to respect the truce and restart talks on forming a coalition government.

"O Hamas, O Haniya, we want a government of national unity immediately," they chanted. "Enough with the battles, we want to live in security."

Abbas reiterated that despite his call for early elections on Saturday — a move that was roundly rejected by Hamas and sparked four days of factional fighting that killed 13 people and wounded dozens — he was still open to forming a coalition government with Hamas.

But no preparations for a new round of dialogue has begun, Abbas's spokesman told AFP.

"We are insisting on the need for dialogue, but no preparation is under way for a new round of dialogue," Nabil Abu Rudeina said.

A Hamas spokesman told AFP that the ruling Islamists were also favourable to dialogue.

"The dialogue is the only way to solve our problems. There is certain confusion because of the incidents of late, but there is no alternative to dialogue to form a unity government," Ghazi Hamad, a spokesman for the Hamas government, told AFP.

Hamas said that Prime Minister Ismail Haniya was ready to meet with Abbas in Jordan, as suggested earlier in the week by King Abdullah II.

"We have not received an official invitation. If such an invitation is sent to us, we will accept," he said.

The latest truce announced by Abbas and Haniya late Tuesday — after a previous ceasefire between the factions held barely for 24 hours — came after the Palestinian president spoke by phone with Abdullah, who offered to host a meeting between the two rival leaders.

Abbas, who said he was prepared to "respond favourably" to the invitation, was due to travel to Jordan on Sunday.

The deadly Palestinian clashes, which have raised fears of civil war, erupted after Abbas announced his intention to call early presidential and parliamentary elections as a way to resolve a months-long stand-off with the ruling Islamists.



Armed Fatah militants take part in the funeral procession of fellow activists Mahmud and Ashraf Dogmash in Gaza city Wednesday. Two Fatah activists were killed in clashes with Hamas loyalists on the Gaza Strip overnight despite a new ceasefire between the two rival Palestinian movements.

Turkmen leader dies, succession meeting called

REUTERS, Ashgabat

Turkmenistan's President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov died on Thursday after 21 years of iron rule in which he crushed all dissent and made his Central Asian state one of the world's most isolated countries. He was 66.

State television and government sources said Niyazov, who basked in a unique and bizarre personality cult while ruling a country with the world's fifth-biggest natural gas reserves, died overnight of cardiac arrest.

His funeral was set for December 24 and the government fixed December 26 for the desert state's highest representative body to meet to decide on a successor. Until then, Deputy Prime Minister Kurbanguly Berdimuhamedov will be acting head of state.

Sadr mulls month-long unilateral truce

AP, Baghdad

Radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who heads a militia feared by Iraq's Sunnis, is considering a one-month unilateral ceasefire and may push his followers to rejoin the political process after a three-week boycott, officials close to him said.

The issue is expected to come up at a meeting Thursday in the holy city of Najaf between al-Sadr and a delegation representing the seven Shia groups that form the largest bloc in Iraq's parliament, the Shia officials said on condition of anonymity because of the secrecy of the talks.

Half the delegates travelled to Najaf on Wednesday night, and were gathered Thursday morning at the home of the country's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, an official in al-Sistani's office said on condition of anonymity because of political sensitivities. The others were travelling to Najaf on Thursday, he said.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (R) shakes hands with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri (L) during an official meeting in Kermanshah Wednesday. US President George W Bush again rebuffed calls for expanded talks with Iran and Syria on Iraq, warning Tehran about its nuclear programme and Damascus about destabilising Lebanon.

Ahmadinejad opponents win elections

AP, Tehran

Opponents of Iran's ultra-conservative president won nationwide elections for local councils, final results confirmed Thursday, an embarrassing outcome for the hard-line leader that could force him to change his anti-Western tone and focus more on problems at home.

Moderate conservatives critical of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won a majority of seats in last week's elections, followed by reformists who were suppressed by hard-liners two years ago. Analysts said the president's allies won less than 20 percent of local council seats across the country.

The vote was widely seen as a sign of public discontent with Ahmadinejad's stances, which have fuelled fights with the West and led Iran closer to UN sanctions.

Bush's India statement raises Congress worry

REUTERS, Washington

A statement by President George W Bush issued in connection with the just-signed US-India civil nuclear cooperation law has raised concerns that Bush may try to circumvent some of Congress' intentions, lawmakers and analysts say.

The statement, clarifying Bush's views on law and policy, was issued after he signed new legislation on Monday permitting US sales of nuclear fuel and reactors to India for the first time in 30 years.

In the statement, Bush said his signature "does not constitute my adoption of the statements of policy (in the law) as US foreign policy." Also in responding to reports mandated by Congress, he would consider how releasing data requested

by lawmakers might "impair foreign relations."

In one of its most controversial directives, Congress stipulated in the law that presidents should report annually on India's cooperation in restraining Iran's nuclear programme, which Bush has condemned as a major international threat.

"With his recent signing statement, once again the president has shown he views Congress as a nuisance rather than an equal branch of government under the Constitution," said Sen Thomas Harkin of Iowa, a Democrat whose party will control a majority of the new Congress to be sworn in next month.

It was "outrageous" that the president has repeatedly stated the greatest threat to US national

security is a nuclear Iran, yet explicitly rejects Congress' declaration that it shall be the official policy of the United States that India will not use its nuclear technology to help develop Iran's nuclear weapons arsenal," Harkin said in a press release.

In the statement, Bush also said he considered as only "advisory" a congressional directive prohibiting nuclear transfers to India that conflict with guidelines of the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, which the United States helped establish years ago to restrain nuclear trade.

Democratic Rep Edward Markey of Massachusetts said this shows Bush is "reserving the right to ignore the Nuclear Suppliers Group."

Passengers stranded as fog hits flights in London

REUTERS, London

Thousands of passengers were stranded yesterday as heavy fog in southern England grounded hundreds of flights during one of the busiest travel periods of the year.

About 500 people spent the night at London's Heathrow after British Airways cancelled all domestic and some European flights to and from the airport due to poor visibility.

Airport operator BAA, which

was bought by Spain's Ferrovial earlier this year, warned of overcrowding and delays for people trying to visit families for Christmas, or flying off for winter holidays.

At least 350 out of 1,300 flights at Heathrow were grounded.

"We are advising people to check with their airline before leaving their homes," a BAA spokesman said.

Heathrow, the world's busiest international airport, was shrouded in thick fog for a second day, prompt-

ing air traffic controllers to impose tight restrictions on flights.

The airport's Managing Director Mark Bullock urged passengers to check with airlines before going to the airport.

"It is very, very unfortunate that passengers are unable to travel, especially at this time of year," he told BBC radio. "If they could avoid bringing friends and relatives with them that would help ease congestion."

'Nuclear talks bringing China and US closer'

AFP, Beijing

Six-nation talks aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear programme may be struggling but the chief US envoy said Thursday they were strengthening ties between the United States and China.

While the two world powers are often in dispute on trade, human rights and other issues, US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill said they had found common ground over the North Korean nuclear crisis.

"The six-party talks have been a major opportunity for the US and China to work together on, frankly, a central issue of concern and one that absolutely needs to be solved," Hill told reporters.

US official confirms Israeli PM met Saudis

AFP, Washington

A senior US diplomat implicitly confirmed Wednesday a report that Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had met with senior officials from Saudi Arabia.

Dick Jones, the US ambassador to Israel, said he had no detailed information on the meeting in Amman first reported by an Israeli weekly publication when asked by journalists about rumours of a diplomatic warming between the two countries.

"I think it is a very important development that this contact was announced. I don't have any particular details on it, but the very fact that they would be, first of all, able to communicate and be willing to communicate, shows very serious approach."



Handout picture released by LTTE yesterday shows its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran (L), his wife Mathi Wathani (2L) and other senior rebel leaders bowing their heads before a portrait of their chief peace negotiator Anton Balasingham at an undisclosed location in northern Sri Lanka after his funeral was held in London on Wednesday.

US soldiers in Iraq urge Gates to send more troops

REUTERS, Baghdad

US soldiers in Iraq urged their new boss on Thursday to send reinforcements, after their generals told Defence Secretary Robert Gates they were concerned a surge might delay the time when Iraqis take control.

Stung by defeat at mid-term elections last month, President Bush is expected to announce a new strategy in January for the unpopular war, which has so far killed nearly 3,000 US soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis.

Bush said on Wednesday one

option under review was a short-term increase in US troop levels but that he had not yet made up his mind.

Gates, in his first week on the job after replacing Donald Rumsfeld, is consulting widely for advice on the war effort.

He met US commanders and the Iraqi defence minister on Wednesday and is due to meet Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on Thursday. He said US commanders had expressed concern that a surge in US forces might delay the time when Iraqis can assume control for security.

N Korea not budging on sanctions

AP, Beijing

North Korea has refused to scrap its demand that the US lift financial restrictions against the communist country, but talks resumed Thursday to resolve the broader issue of persuading the North to renounce its nuclear efforts.

The Chinese and North Korean delegations met bilaterally at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse and other one-on-one discussions were planned for later Thursday.

US envoy Christopher Hill expressed frustration with Pyongyang's insistence that US financial restrictions be lifted before it dismantles its nuclear

programme. North Korea's Oct. 9 nuclear test showed that denuclearising the regime is an "urgent problem," said Hill, the US Assistant Secretary of State.

"I'd rather not obscure that urgent problem by talking about finances," he said. "It is difficult engaging (the North Koreans) on other subjects when they have come in with a strong view on the financial issue. This is a challenge we face."

Hill said he had separate meetings planned with China, Japan, South Korea and North Korea. He also said there were several draft proposals circulating among delegates but he refused to give details.

Komodo dragon set for 'virgin birth'

AFP, Paris

British zoologists have a Christmas tale of their own to tell: a rare giant lizard, the Komodo dragon, is about to give "virgin birth".

In a study published in the science journal Nature on Thursday, they say they have unravelled a mystery surrounding a Komodo dragon named Flora, one of two dragons at Chester Zoo, northern England.

Flora laid 11 eggs in May this year, three of which collapsed. These three eggs were opened and were found to contain embryos, showing they had been fertilised.

But who was the daddy? Flora had never mated with a male dragon or even mixed with one.



"Flora" a female Komodo Dragon is pictured at Chester Zoo in north-west England Wednesday. Flora laid 11 eggs in May this year, three of which collapsed. These three eggs were opened and were found to contain embryos, showing they had been fertilised, despite her never having mated with a male dragon or even mixed with one.

'Global flu pandemic may rival death toll of WWII'

AFP, Paris

A global pandemic of a novel, contagious and lethal form of influenza could kill as many people in a year as died in World War II, according to an estimate published on Friday by The Lancet.

In an calculation based on mortality from the "Spanish flu" pandemic that ran from 1918-20, US researchers believe 62 million people could die in the space of 12 months if a similar pathogen emerged today.

The vast majority of deaths — 96 percent — would occur in the developing world.

The study, led by Harvard University professor Christopher Murray, is based on death registration data to estimate deaths from

the 1918-20 pandemic in 27 countries.

This data was then extrapolated to the worldwide population of 2004.

But it also takes into account gains in prosperity and access to medical care since 1918, as well as countries' changes in the size and age of their populations.

Murray's team believe that between 51 and 81 million people could die, making an average of 62 million, if a similar pandemic were to occur, on the basis of 2004 data.

Historians variously estimate the death toll from World War II at between 50 million and 62 million.

The 27 countries included the United States, European nations, Argentina, India and the Philippines.