

Israeli, Palestinian leaders 'to meet within days'

Gaza truce holds despite clash

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is soon to meet Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, Israeli public radio reported yesterday, citing an unnamed senior official.

The meeting is due to take place "within upcoming days," it quoted the official as saying, adding that no firm date has been set.

Abbas said Thursday that he hoped to meet with the Israeli leader before the end of the year. It would be the first meeting between the two men since an informal encounter in Jordan six months ago.

When questioned about the report by AFP, Olmert's spokeswoman Miri Eisin said: "We have not yet fixed a date."

At a press conference in Ramallah, Abbas also said that "no

date has been set" for the encounter.

The report comes days after visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair called for an initiative to jumpstart the Middle East peace process, which has been in a slumber for six years.

A senior Palestinian official has told AFP that the initiative would be worked out in coordination with the United States, and would be unveiled by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her expected visit to the region early next year.

Olmert last week paid a surprise visit to Jordan, whose King Abdullah II has warned of "disastrous" consequences if progress is not made in the peace process in the next six months.

Abbas is due to travel to Jordan Monday.

Meanwhile a civilian died overnight in Gaza in clashes between Hamas and a powerful local clan, but otherwise a truce aimed at halting violence between rival Palestinian factions held for a third day on Friday.

Armed with light weapons and rocket launchers, fighters from Hamas and the clan clashed just after midnight (2200 GMT Thursday) in eastern Gaza City near the home of Hamas's hardline foreign minister Mahmud Zahar.

A civilian, Ayman al-Girgawi, was mortally wounded in the battle that lasted for more than an hour, with long bursts of automatic fire breaking the calm of the night.

Two clan members were killed in clashes with Hamas earlier in the week.

Witnesses said that several Hamas supporters and at least five

clan members were seized during the night in tit-for-tat abductions.

In the northern West Bank town of Nablus, six Palestinians were wounded, two of them seriously, in clashes between Hamas and the rival Fatah faction of president Mahmud Abbas, medics and witnesses said.

The fighting erupted when Fatah loyalists tried to prevent Hamas supporters from organizing a celebration to mark the movement's 19th anniversary.

In a separate incident, two children were lightly injured by an explosion in a militant training zone in central Gaza Strip.

Otherwise, a ceasefire between the rival factions largely held for a third straight day after four days of streetfighting in Gaza killed 14 people and wounded dozens earlier in the week.

India, Pakistan swap prisoners

AFP, Islamabad

India and Pakistan started Friday a two-day swap of detained illegal fishermen and immigrants including children as part of attempts to improve ties between the nuclear rivals, officials said.

New Delhi released 57 Pakistani nationals many from Indian prisons while Islamabad freed 70 Indian fishermen and others in Pakistani jails and was set to hand them over Saturday to authorities, officials said.

The South Asian rivals often seize each other's fishermen for violating their respective zones in the Arabian Sea.

"Most of them had strayed across the border by mistake," said a border official who wanted to remain nameless.

The hand over of Pakistani

prisoners took place at the border at Wagah in the northern Indian province of Punjab, officials said.

They included 30 fishermen and 27 others including three women and three children.

The Indian prisoners, mostly fishermen, some of whom have been in jail for two years, but also including 20 children, were released and would be handed over at the same border crossing on Saturday, a Pakistani official said.

"Some 70 fishermen including 20 children were released Friday," jail chief of the Pakistani province of Sindh, Yameen Khan, told AFP.

"There are still 431 Indian fishermen in Pakistani prisons," Khan said.

The Indian foreign ministry, however, said it was disappointment at the low number released by the

Pakistan side.

"India has confirmed the national status of 412 Indian fishermen but is disappointed that Pakistan has decided to release only 50 of them," it said in a statement, contradicting the numbers given by Pakistani officials.

Pakistani and Indian foreign ministers in October last year agreed that fishermen and civilians who strayed across the border should be allowed consular access within three months of their arrest.

The deal and an agreement on swapping prisoners was made within the framework of a peace dialogue launched in January 2004 between the two nuclear-armed states, which have fought three wars, two over Kashmir, since gaining independence from Britain in 1947.



PHOTO: AFP
The US Space Shuttle Discovery glides to a landing Friday at the Kennedy Space Centre, Florida. The landing concluded a nearly 13-day successful mission that advanced reconstruction of the International Space Station (ISS) in four space walks, including one added at the last moment to fix a stuck solar panel array.



PHOTO: AFP
Residents are wading through knee-deep floodwaters in Rumbai sub-district in Pekanbaru in Indonesia yesterday. Twelve people were reported dead and more than 70,000 fled their homes as floods swept the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Indonesian floods leave 12 dead

AFP, Jakarta

Twelve people were dead and dozens remained missing Saturday while more than 70,000 fled their homes as floods swept the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Villagers immediately blamed the floods on illegal logging while authorities were pushing the rescue efforts further into remote areas and fearing the worst would be discovered when flood waters subside.

"Until today (Saturday), eight people have died from floods in Matangkuli and Gayo Lues districts," the head of the public relations department in Aceh province told AFP.

"We have not been able to assess exactly how many people need to be evacuated, but according to reports so far from six districts 70,000 people have fled their homes."

He said that number could increase as communications are extended into isolated areas as heavy rains continue to hamper evacuation and relief efforts.

Uranium stolen in India

AFP, Ranchi

A container packed with radioactive material has been stolen from a fortified research facility in eastern India, prompting a major hunt and fears of contamination, officials said yesterday.

"It carries uranium and radiation and could have an adverse effect in an area of 1.5 kilometres (0.93 mile)," Jharkhand Chief Minister Madhu Khoda warned.

Khoda said the uranium was stolen nearly three weeks ago after being moved to a research site at the densely-populated town of Rajrappa from a federal atomic facility near Mumbai.

The United States and India this month signed a landmark atomic energy deal to give India access to western technology and nuclear fuel, despite warnings from critics that demand tighter security measures to prevent proliferation.

Khoda did not say to what degree the uranium was enriched to, although an official from Jharkhand's Central Mine Planning and Development Institute (CMPDI) said the missing material was not highly-enriched.

"It was not highly-enriched but neither was it just yellow cake (uranium ore) and it was meant for a project but we can't talk about

that," the official from the Ranchi-based CMPDI said on condition he not be named.

"It's useless in the hands of unskilled people," the official said without elaborating. The capsule was stolen from a CMPDI-run facility.

Rajrappa police said they were alerted to the theft on December 4.

Arjun Munda, an opposition leader in Jharkhand's legislative assembly, demanded speedy action.

"The government must initiate immediate steps to find the apparatus as it is extremely hazardous," he said in state capital Ranchi.

al-Qaeda offers US troops safe passage out of Iraq

AFP, Dubai

The head of an al-Qaeda-dominated group in Iraq offered to give US troops a month to pull out free of attack in an audiotape posted on the Internet Friday and demanded an answer within two weeks.

Abu Omar al-Baghdadi also charged that Washington had attempted to open communications through Saudi intermediaries but said he had rebuffed the overture, in the voice recording whose authenticity could not immediately be verified.

"We are offering you the oppor-

tunity to withdraw your troops in complete safety and we are expecting your response within two weeks," said the voice purporting to be that of Baghdadi, leader of a self-proclaimed Islamic emirate in western and north-central Iraq that is dominated by al-Qaeda supporters.

"We appeal to President George W. Bush to seize this historic opportunity which should allow your troops to pull out in safety," it said.

Asked whether the US administration was checking on the authenticity of the tape or if it would answer the offer, Gordon Johndroe, a White House spokesman, declined

any comment.

Bush has faced intense political pressure to overhaul his Iraq policy, following the rout of his Republican party in mid-term elections, rock-bottom approval of his management of the Iraq war and mounting US combat deaths.

A policy review by the Iraq Study Group, a bi-partisan panel, recommended that all frontline US troops be withdrawn by early 2008.

But Bush made clear Wednesday that he was opposed to any precipitate withdrawal from Iraq and that in the short term US troop numbers might even rise.



PHOTO: AFP
US snow movers work to clear the runways at Denver International Airport on Friday in Denver, Colorado. A blizzard left thousands of travellers stranded and also caused a shut down of the city and highways exiting Denver.