

Israeli military closes passage into Gaza

GAZA CITY, Nov 19 : The Israeli army closed the Karni crossing into Gaza Strip from Israel today, a move that blocks food and basic goods from entering the Palestinian territory, Israeli and Palestinian officials said.

The Karni crossing is closed until further notice following an armed attack by Palestinians against an Israeli convoy in the area, an army spokesman told AFP.

Palestinian officials confirmed the closure of the crossing, through which imported commercial goods enter the Gaza Strip.

Earlier, a 14-year-old Palestinian who was throwing stones died after he was shot in the chest by soldiers at the crossing. Eight other Palestinians were wounded in the incident, hospital officials said.

The Israeli army had earlier sounded a positive note for the first time in seven weeks of violence that has wracked the Palestinian territories.

Senior commanders said there had been a drop in fire in the Gaza Strip and West Bank after Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat ordered a halt to shooting from areas under their control.

Meanwhile, the Israeli military said today a Palestinian policeman who killed an Israeli soldier at the weekend was likely working alone, and that police in the territories were cracking down on gunmen after an order by their

leader Yasser Arafat.

"According to initial information from the investigation, the shooting was an individual initiative, from what Palestinian officials have told us," General Yom Tov Samia, a regional commander in the southern Gaza Strip, where the deadly shoot-out took place on Saturday, told Israeli radio.

Palestinian officials announced an unprecedented probe into the incident.

The shooting came a day after Arafat said he had ordered a halt to fire at Israeli targets from Palestinian-controlled areas. It was his first public statement repudiating violence since the launching of an Intifada or uprising seven weeks ago.

Before dawn on Saturday, 28-year-old Palestinian policeman Daha Salama Said entered the outpost at the Kefar Darom Jewish settlement in the southern Gaza Strip and unleashed fire on soldiers, killing 21-year-old Baruch Plum from Tel Aviv and wounding two others, one critically, before Israeli soldiers shot him dead.

After the shoot-out, Samia said Israel reserved the right to retaliate, but Palestinian officials announced an immediate investigation and urged the army not to seek revenge.

On Sunday, Samia toned down his language and commended Palestinian police for lowering the incidence of fire from their territories.

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Palestinian police are starting to act with apparent success against the gunmen. For the first time in a long while there were only five cases of shootings overnight in the Gaza Strip, compared with 15 to 20 every night for the last few weeks," Samia said over the radio, in response to a question whether Arafat's appeal was kicking in.

Another Israeli commander in the West Bank noted a similar drop in fire on the West Bank.

For the first time since the beginning of this conflict, Palestinian police are starting to react. But we don't know whether or not the police are arresting the gunman or are content to isolate them," said Colonel Noam Tibon, commander in the West Bank town of Hebron, where Jewish settlers live in enclaves among the Palestinian population.

"A new tendency is arising, but we must wait to see if it lasts on the ground," Tibon said.

Earlier, US Defence Secretary William Cohen warned Saturday during a Gulf tour that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could run out of control and spread into neighbouring countries.

He also warned that the United States must remain on maximum alert against possible further terrorist attacks in the region.

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Visiting US President Bill Clinton is mobbed by a crowd of Ho Chi Minh City residents as he tours the streets yesterday. --AFP

Clinton ends Vietnam visit

HO CHI MINH CITY, Nov 19 : President Bill Clinton wrapped up his landmark reconciliation visit to Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City Sunday, receiving an ecstatic welcome from tens of thousands at the scene of America's humiliating retreat from the war, reports AFP.

Massed crowds of waving and cheering Vietnamese brought the former Saigon to a standstill early Sunday as they welcomed the first American head of state to return since the US-backed Southern capital was taken by North Vietnamese troops in 1975.

Surging throngs were packed outside the old presidential palace where communist tanks crashed through the gates during the fall of Saigon and formed an almost unbroken line from the city centre along the five-kilometre (three-mile) road to the airport.

"It was here 25 years ago when the Americans left and I am very honoured today to see President Clinton," said Trinh Quang Dai, 44.

US Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky, leading talks on a trade deal signed in July, called the reception "tremendous" and "heart-warming ... something all of us will always remember, most particularly the president."

The rapturous welcome accorded Clinton and his wife Hillary on their last scheduled foreign trip has taken Vietnam's communist regime, based in the north, by complete surprise and there were signs of irritation

between countries, including Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon, enjoy more freedom and richer public lives.

Queen Rania of Jordan, Egypt's Suzanne Mubarak and others, activists in their own right, were using their charisma and influence to campaign on behalf of women in this three-day meeting of women leaders and gender-equality campaigners.

Development will not achieve its goals unless women participate in it as complete and effective partners in all fields," Queen Rania told an audience of more than 2,000. She called for "legal and legislative reforms that achieve equality and justice for women."

Suzanne, one of the conference organisers, said they must find ways to respect the social differences that distinguish Arab countries while still cooperating to attain the summit's main goal: creating a better life for Arab women.

The status of women varies between countries in the Arab world. While women in some parts of the Gulf, such as the conservative Saudi Arabia, are required to be covered from head-to-toe and are not allowed to drive, their counterparts in more

7 Bangalees among 14 massacred in Tripura

GUWAHATI, India, Nov 19 : At least 14 people were killed today and 13 critically wounded in a renewed spurt of ethnic violence in the restive far-eastern Indian state of Tripura, police said. reports AFP.

A Tripura police spokesman said heavily-armed separatist rebels of the militant tribal National Liberation Front stormed the village of Boroholoi, about 200 km north of the state capital Agartala, and gunned down seven Bangalees.

"It was a clear case of tit-for-tat," he said.

Sunday's violence in Tripura's Kanchanpur area comes just four days after earlier ethnic clashes there.

The unrest started after members of a Bangalee rebel group

threw a bomb at a passing jeep, killing three tribals, and injuring seven others.

Incensed tribals then staged a counter-attack, killing three tribals.

In May, ethnic violence in Tripura, where tribal and Bengali-speaking rebels are staging separate campaigns for independence or autonomy for decades in the region's seven states.

Nearly 50,000 people have died in insurgency-related violence.

Arab woman leaders call for their better lives

CAIRO, Nov 19 : Ten of the Arab world's first ladies come together in an unusual gathering Saturday, pushing for the improved status of women in their male-dominated societies, reports AP.

Queen Rania of Jordan, Egypt's Suzanne Mubarak and others, activists in their own right, were using their charisma and influence to campaign on behalf of women in this three-day meeting of women leaders and gender-equality campaigners.

Many women, though, are struggling to change the status quo and have achieved some gains. This year in Egypt, for example, avid campaigning helped women reverse laws that prevented them from obtaining divorce and traveling abroad without their husbands' permission.

Mubarak said Arab women should build on their achievements and use them as motivation for beating future challenges.

Many of the speakers, representing the 19 countries participating in the summit, underlined the importance of meeting the demands of the modern society while still preserving Arab identity, tradition and beliefs.

Presenting a more positive, well-rounded image of Arab women in the face of negative stereotypes was another challenge tackled on Saturday.

Sohia Arafat, wife of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, blamed the

media for negatively stereotyping Arab women as "ignorant, submissive and deceived."

Arafat called for changing such a mentality inside and outside the Arab world. She demanded a fair portrayal of Arab women, reminding the audience of women's role in liberating their Arab countries from occupation.

Other speakers feted the struggle of Palestinian women and pledged support to the Palestinian causes.

Arab League Secretary-General Esmat Abdel-Meguid applauded the Palestinian mother who courageously sacrifices her loved ones to "fight with unbreakable will for the freedom of their country and children."

More than 230 people, the vast majority Palestinian, have been killed in seven weeks of fighting in Israel and the Palestinian areas.

Angela King, the United Nations' special adviser on women, said the role of women becomes even more important in such conflicts.

King said women in the region are a valuable resource and should effectively work toward peacemaking. "Women with men have a vital role to play in peace-making ... There's no sustainable peace without gender equality."

Delayed triplets

BEIJING, Nov 19 : A Chinese woman gave birth to a set of twins five days after having a baby girl, a report said today, reports AFP.

The 29-year-old mother gave birth to the first baby, who weighed 1.5 kilograms, on November 9 at her home in Chongqing city, southwestern China, the Beijing Morning Post reported.

She did not realise she was carrying triplets, but felt movement in her stomach and went to hospital for a checkup two days later.

On November 14, she gave birth to the twins, who were born five minutes apart.

It is unusual for one or more babies in triplets to be born so far apart, the report said.

Colonel Than Tun, the military liaison between the junta and the National League for Democracy (NLD), said Aung San Suu Kyi and other detained party leaders were allowed out in certain circumstances.

"We are not preventing them from going out if there is a legitimate reason," Than Tun told AFP, adding that NLD deputy leader Tin Oo had recently attended the funeral of one of his relatives.

Some 2,200 residents said they had abandoned their homes in the Keumire area of the Indrapuri sub-district on Saturday, after soldiers and police moved in to hunt down separatists, alleged to have abducted several officials.

"We are afraid of becoming the victims and therefore we are forced to flee and leave our homes, our fields and our livestock," an elderly refugee, declining to identify himself, told AFP.

Aung San Oo's legal move comes a month before the 12th anniversary of his mother's death, which marks the expiry on the statute of limitations in property claims.

The lawyer said Aung San Oo wanted to stake his claim over half the property so that he could donate it to charity in line with his mother's wishes.

Asked about the ramifications of a law which forbids Aung San Oo, as a US citizen, from owning property here, he cited a special proviso that allows ownership to be won as long as it is not subsequently retained.

It is believed that if the suit is successful, the half share in the property would have to be given away or else be confiscated by the authorities.

This loophole raises the bizarre prospect of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been subjected to a decade of harassment by the military authorities, living in a house half-owned by the junta.

Suu Kyi to be allowed out of house arrest for court hearing

YANGON, Nov 19 : Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi will be allowed to emerge briefly from house arrest Tuesday if she chooses to attend a court hearing over her brother's claim on her Yangon home, a junta spokesman said, reports AFP.

It is believed that before her death their mother Khin Kyi expressed the wish that the house be equally shared between the two children, and stipulated that if it were sold the proceeds should be donated to charity.

Aung San Oo's legal representative in Myanmar U Han Toe said he expected the opposition leader to appear in court Tuesday.

If she or her legal representative fail to appear then the lawsuit will continue on a unilateral basis, he told AFP.

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Tug of war over Mori's no-confidence vote

THE party if they fail to voluntarily quit it.

Unless they accept our recommendations to leave the party by noon tomorrow, we will expel them," Shizuka Kamei, head of the LDP's policy affairs council, told reporters after the meeting.

Nonaka said earlier on a television talk show that it would be possible to bring forward a party presidential election scheduled for next September. But party rules should be changed at the convention to accommodate such an early contest.

Nonaka, who was one of the four LDP leaders who handpicked Mori last April in a backroom deal to replace the then comatose and dying Keizo Obuchi, said he could not rule out the possibility of Mori resigning.

But it is not a matter that would happen today or tomorrow," Nonaka said. "We should let Mr. Mori do what he should do as prime minister before he clears up his position himself."

BRIEFLY

Maoist rebels kill 2 cops in Nepal:

Suspected Maoist rebels attacked a police post in west Nepal, killing two policemen and wounding six, an official said yesterday. Reuters reports from Kathmandu.

The incident occurred on Saturday in Baglung district, about 325 km northwest of Kathmandu, the district's top bureaucrat Ratna Raj Pandey, told Reuters. Baglung is one of several districts plagued by a four-year-old Maoist insurgency aimed at overthrowing Nepal's constitutional monarchy.

Quake shakes Taiwan: A moderate earthquake shook southern Taiwan on Sunday, seismologists said. No damage or injuries were immediately reported, AP says from Taipei.

The 4.4-magnitude tremor was centered 4.4 kilometers (2.7 miles) southwest of Chiayi County, the Central Weather Bureau said. Chiayi is about 180 kilometers south of the capital, Taipei.

Two killed in Pak firing in Kashmir

JAMMU, Nov 19 : A young boy and a woman were killed when artillery and mortar shells fired by Pakistani soldiers exploded in northern Kashmir villages, Indian security forces said Sunday, reports AP.

The protest was largely nonviolent, though noisy, with music blaring from outdoor concert speakers.

However, police spokesman Rob Kouwenhoven said nine demonstrators were arrested for allegedly throwing paint bombs against the Municipal Museum next door.

Inside the conference hall, delegates from some 180 countries were haggling over draft texts of emissions ceilings, pollution trading schemes.

The crowd of protesters from around the world roared when conference chairman Jan Pronk, the Dutch environment minister, added a few sandbags to the shoulder-high barrier.

"We cannot build a dike with words alone," Pronk told the demonstrators after scaling 15

feet of scaffolding to reach the stage.

"We need to build it with action that is based on words which are agreed upon," he added, referring to the accord expected at the conclusion of the two-week conference, which began Monday.

The officials did not specify the ranks of the officers or the make of the helicopter, saying only that the aircraft caught fire after taking off and crashed.

The shells hit the homes of a 11-year-old boy and a woman in Pargwal village, 50 kilometers north of Jammu late Saturday.

Their homes were among 12 houses damaged when artillery and mortar shells hit villages surrounding Pargwal through Saturday night, said a Border Security Force spokesman, on customary condition of anonymity.

Saturday's killings took the toll in such firing to four over the past week, the spokesman said.

He described the Pakistani shelling as "unprovoked," adding that Indian troops responded to the firing. There was no immediate reaction from Pakistan.

Counties counting costs of US vote recount

MIAMI, Nov 19 : Democracy comes at a price, taxpayers in south Florida will soon be reminded, once the bill for sorting out the winner of the disputed presidential election comes due, reports AFP.

The total cost of an endless stream of ballot counts and recounts in Palm Beach, Broward and Dade counties could be months away yet, but officials expect the sum to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, as the three jurisdictions employ a small army of part time and temporary workers to help with the tallying.

Across southern Florida, officials have enlisted scores of county employees, many of whom are racking up expensive overtime hours to help scrutinise through thousands of ballots.

Hand tallies were already underway in Palm Beach and Broward counties and were set to begin Sunday in Miami-Dade, the state's most populous county.

Dade County officials