

Israeli army stages new incursion into Gaza

Two Romanian immigrants killed in blast

AFP, Gaza City

The Israeli Army entered the Palestinian-controlled Gaza Strip yesterday at the Kissufim border crossing, soon after two Romanian immigrants were killed there in an explosion, a high-ranking Palestinian security official said.

Israeli soldiers, supported by tanks, armoured vehicles and bulldozers, razed land, destroying trees and crops, the official said.

Two Romanian immigrant workers were killed and two were injured, one seriously, in the explosion by the Kissufim crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip, an Israeli army spokeswoman told AFP.

All four casualties were civilians.

The death brings the overall toll to 520 from the fighting in Israel and the Palestinian territories since late September, when the Palestinian Intifada, or uprising against Israeli occupation, erupted.

They comprise 426 Palestinians, 78 Israelis, 13 Israeli Arabs, one German and two Romanian immigrants.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has decided to slash by more than half funds earmarked for Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, military radio reported Thursday.

Sharon has decided to cut the proposed fund of 375 million dollars, under a programme entitled "return to normal life in the settlements", to 150 million dollars, the radio said.

Sharon's spokesman Raanan Gissin confirmed that the planned

increase in the settler fund would be cut, without giving any details.

"This programme will be cut like the rest of the state budget within the framework of the economic policy of the government of national unity aiming to reduce the deficit," Gissin told AFP.

The aim of the programme is to strengthen security for the settlements, which have been regularly targeted by Palestinians since their uprising or Intifada against Israeli occupation erupted in late September.

But the radio said that would be delayed in order to find a compromise with settler officials.

The fund has been criticised as "provocative" by the United States, but government secretary Gidon Saar denied that Israel's settlement policy was in any way influenced by the views of Washington.

Describing the figures given by the radio as "inflated", he said the plan should be submitted to cabinet within some 10 days.

He said the extra cash would provide the settlers with such amenities as armoured cars in which to drive on West Bank roads, but would not be used for new settlement building.

Some 200,000 settlers live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which were captured by Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and another 200,000 in east Jerusalem, which was annexed by Israel following its seizure.

The settlers voted en masse for Sharon in the February election, which ousted former prime minister Ehud Barak, who was poised to give up most of the settlement lands as part of a peace deal with the Palestinians.



PHOTO:AFP
All India Anna Dravid Munetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) leader and former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Jayalalitha Jayaram (2nd from L) speaks to a voter as she waits in line along with her long time aide Sashikala (L) prior to casting her vote in Madras yesterday. Though Jayalalitha has been barred by the Election Commission of India from contesting the current assembly elections after she was convicted of corruption, her AIADMK party is leading in the polls.

Taliban threaten to close main UN office

AFP, Kabul

Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel warned yesterday that the ruling Taliban militia would close the main United Nations office here if its New York mission was shut down.

"If they expel our representative, we will expel them and if they close his office and dismiss him we will close the UNSMA (UN Special Mission to Afghanistan) office in Kabul and dismiss its personnel," Mutawakel told a news conference.

The Taliban's foreign ministry has already ordered the UNSMA to close its four military-political offices in the country, in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Mazar-i-Sharif, but had said the main UNSMA office could continue to operate.

Plotters can campaign for polls: Arroyo

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo yesterday agreed to allow two fugitives wanted for a failed power grab to campaign freely in Senate elections in a move aimed at easing tensions.

Arroyo approved an opposition request that Senator Gregorio Honasan and former national police chief Panfilo Lacson be allowed to rejoin the hustings without fear of arrest.

The two close allies of jailed ex-president Joseph Estrada dropped out of the campaign trail and went into hiding after police ordered their arrest on charges they helped organise a bloody siege by the deposed leader's supporters on the presidential palace on May 1.

Russia loses contact with 4 sats after fire

AFP, Moscow

Russia has lost contact with four military satellites yesterday after a serious fire broke out at a mission control centre belonging to its armed forces' space division, its chief Anatoly Perminov said.

"We have full control over all other military space structures," Perminov said in an interview with RTR television, adding that links with the four satellites could be restored at another control centre.



PHOTO:AFP
South Korean protesters burn an effigy of Japanese Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi during anti-Japan rally in Seoul yesterday to protest against a Japanese history book which has drawn criticism for glossing over Korea's colonisation.

US official to brief Indian leaders on missile shield

AFP, New Delhi

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage is to brief Indian leaders here on Friday on the controversial US plan to build a missile defence shield.

Armitage, who arrives here late Thursday from Seoul, will meet Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, who also holds the defence portfolio, and National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra.

The senior State Department official is also likely to meet with Sonia Gandhi, the leader of India's main opposition Congress party, US embassy sources said.

Armitage is on a regional tour to brief US "friends and allies" on the proposed National Missile Defence system, which many European governments think is unnecessary

and will upset the strategic balance with Russia and China.

India, however, appeared to welcome the Bush proposal in a May 2 statement saying New Delhi noted the movement away from "hair-trigger alerts associated with previous nuclear orthodoxies."

"We note with appreciation the US resolve to seek dialogue, consultation and co-operation with the countries concerned towards a fulfilment of this vision," an Indian Foreign Ministry statement said.

For decades, nuclear-capable India has been seen as a close ally of Moscow. However, under Bill Clinton, New Delhi and Washington started a strategic dialogue and relations have warmed since.

The Bush administration says the missile shield is necessary to meet threats from "rogue states" such as North Korea, Iran and Iraq.

Taiwan urges China to renounce invasion threat

REUTERS, Hsinchu

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian commissioned a batch of French-made Mirage fighter jets yesterday but ruled out an arms race with China and urged Beijing to renounce invasion threats and resume dialogue.

"Without a strong combat capability, there can be no national security," Chen said at a ceremony at an air force base in Hsinchu in the north of the island.

"Without a strong combat capability, there can be no dignity of existence and bargaining chips," Chen said, referring to possible

talks with Beijing. The mainland considers Taiwan a breakaway province and has threatened to attack if it declares independence.

Chen was renewing peace overtures to Beijing two weeks after US President George W. Bush pledged to help Taiwan defend itself and offered the island its biggest arms package in a decade, including eight submarines and four Kidd-class destroyers.

But Chen said he did not want an arms race with the mainland.

"We have no intention of engaging Communist China in an arms race."

'Sino-Pak cooperation on tech transfer to go on'

XINHUA, Islamabad

Pakistani Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf has said that his country would like to increase cooperation in science and technology with China.

He expressed the wish in an exclusive interview with Xinhua on the eve of Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's visit to Pakistan that is expected to begin on Friday.

General Musharraf said, "Pakistan has a very active program of cooperation in science and technology with China. The Agreement on Scientific and Technical Cooperation between the two countries was signed in May 1976 in Beijing. So this year we are not only

celebrating the Golden Jubilee of our diplomatic relations, but also the Silver Jubilee of the S&T Cooperation between the two countries."

"Our cooperation covers all fields of science and technology including the peaceful use of nuclear technology such as in agriculture and medicine and space technology such as Geographical Information System or GIS. The Chashma Power Plant is a shining example of S&T cooperation between the two countries," he added.

General Musharraf said, "one field where we can increase our cooperation manifold to our mutual advantage is information technology."



PHOTO:AFP
Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair (left) and Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown during a press conference at Labour headquarters in London yesterday where he said the economy will be "the defining issue of the general election". At his first press conference of the election campaign, Blair said any party intending to govern had to have a credible plan on interest rates, borrowing, investment and avoiding the temptation of promising unaffordable tax cuts.

Blair puts economy at heart of campaign

AFP, London

The economy will be "the defining issue" of the British general election, Prime Minister Tony Blair said yesterday at the first press conference of his Labour party's campaign.

As the second full day of electioneering got underway in the run up to the June 7 vote, Blair sought to capitalise on Labour's economic management, which has been seen as the big success of his administration's four years in power.

He said any party wanting to govern must have a credible plan on interest rates, borrowing, investment and avoiding the temptation of promising unaffordable tax cuts.

"The defining issue of this election, like any other, is the economy," Blair said. "Economic credibility means sums that add up, policies for stability, a sense of responsibility in public finances."

The economy promises to be a major electoral battleground, with Labour and the opposition Conservatives already squaring up over the key issues of taxation and spending.

The Conservative manifesto, due to be unveiled later Thursday by leader William Hague, was set to promise a huge eight billion pounds (13 billion euros, 11.5 billion dollars) of tax cuts, much of it stemming from lower duty on fuel.

Blair offered voters a choice between "the targeted, affordable tax cuts we have made or irresponsible tax cuts (proposed by the Tories) that would threaten a return to boom and bust."

The prime minister said at his party's London headquarters there had been "a great historic shift in British politics".

"It is perhaps the most important change of recent years that Labour enters this election as the party of economic competence."

Heat wave taking deadly toll on Afghan children

AP, Jalozai Camp

With temperatures pushing past the 40-Celsius (100-Fahrenheit) mark, Afghan children living in squalor in northwest Pakistan are dying daily, mostly of dehydration and heat stroke, doctors said yesterday.

Just this week 16 people have died, most of them children, said Dr. Javed Pervaz, director of Health for the Afghan Refugees Commissionerate, a Pakistan government office.

The biggest killers have been heat stroke, dehydration and diarrhea, he said.

"We left one hell to come to

another one," said Saeed Ullah, one of 80,000 Afghan refugees living in Jalozai Camp in northwest Pakistan.

The camp is a sprawling and barren dustbowl. There are no trees and water has to be trucked in daily. The refugees have been living in tents made of plastic sheets. Some improvements have occurred in recent weeks with shipments of canvas tents to the refugees.

The United Nations has been pressing Pakistan to allow it to register the refugees in Jalozai Camp, which is the first step toward relocation and better assistance. Pakistan has been reluctant.

Peace talks with LTTE still possible: FM

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka said yesterday it was still possible to reach an understanding on peace talks with Tamil Tiger separatist rebels despite a big battle last month in which more than 400 combatants were killed.

"It is possible that some understanding could be reached about the commencement of talks," Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said in a statement on a government website.

"I can confirm that the peace process is still very much on track," he said.

A government offensive near Pallai on the Jaffna peninsula failed last month after fierce resistance

from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). More than 400 fighters from both sides were killed.

The fighting raised doubts about a peace process that has been pushed forward by Norway over the last six months.

But Kadirgamar said the fighting and the end of a unilateral rebel ceasefire that had been in place for four months had not derailed the peace process.

"The ending of the LTTE's unilateral ceasefire and the battle around Pallai have not interfered with the discussions which were going on for many months now on the question of how to arrange for the peace talks," he said.

Clinton calls for partnership between US, China

AFP, Hong Kong

Former US president Bill Clinton called Thursday for Washington and Beijing to work as partners after acknowledging recent strains in relations between the two countries.

He told the closing session of a conference here that problems and differences of opinion were bound to crop up, but their relationship did not have to be adversarial.

Clinton, who met Chinese President Jiang Zemin on the sidelines of the Fortune Global Forum on Wednesday, said he had spent time and energy in building ties between "the world's largest democracy and the oldest and largest civilisation."

US plane can't fly home, China reiterates

AFP, Beijing

China reiterated yesterday it would not allow a stranded US surveillance plane to fly back to US territory from the southern island of Hainan, but it declined to provide a reason.

"We have repeatedly stated that it is impossible for the plane to fly back from Hainan island," foreign ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said at the ministry's regular briefing.

"As to why, I can only tell you that some information in the (China-US) consultations is not to be released here because the issue has not been completed," he said.

Lanka bans rallies

AFP, Colombo

Police fired teargas to break up a protest march in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo yesterday shortly after the government announced tough emergency laws to ban demonstrations.

Some 150 members of the majority Sinhalese community tried to stage a march in Colombo's Maradana area, but police fired teargas and dispersed the crowd. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Anwar moved from hospital to prison

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian politician Anwar Ibrahim was taken back to prison yesterday after spending more than five months in hospital with a slipped disc.

Anwar was taken by ambulance from Kuala Lumpur Hospital to Sungai Buloh prison on the capital's outskirts, where he is serving a total of 15 years for abuse of power and sodomy.