

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 Muntra 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 retribution.

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.

"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 closely watched by 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.

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."

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The space agencies of India and France signed on Wednesday an agreement to launch a joint satellite mission to research factors that influence weather across the globe.

The state-run Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) said in a statement that the mission will be called "Megha Tropiques" after the Sanskrit word for cloud and the French word for tropics.

It said the mission could help study tropical changes that cause drought and floods and would be launched in late 2005. The satellite would be positioned in an orbit that would help it collect data from the tropics.

The exchange of energy in the inter-tropical zone influences the climate of the rest of the planet. These systems interact with the general circulation of the atmosphere in ways that are yet to be fully understood," the statement said.

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."

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.

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