

# Israeli tanks, bulldozer move deep into Gaza

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli forces moved deep into Palestinian territory in Gaza yesterday after a grenade attack on a military post, as Israel officials rejected a key point of a plan aimed at stopping seven months of violence.

Near a main intersection in central Gaza, Palestinians threw hand grenades at an Israeli outpost in Gaza, and Israel responded by sending tanks and a bulldozer 700 meters (yards) into Palestinian-controlled territory, their deepest penetration yet.

A police post and five houses were destroyed. Palestinians going through the rubble of their homes fled when Israeli soldiers fired in their direction, witnesses said. Palestinian cars were lined up behind a roadblock after Israeli soldiers cut off the main road through Gaza.

Meanwhile, Israel rejected a key point proposed by an international commission appointed to study seen months of fighting between Palestinians and Israel.

The US State Department welcomed the report by the commission, headed by ex-US Senator George Mitchell. It called for an end to violence by both sides for

a halt to Israeli settlement building in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Palestinian Planning Minister Nabil Shaath said the Palestinians accept the Mitchell plan and hope Israel would do the same, to "put an end to this nightmare."

However, Israel rejects the call to stop settlement construction. Cabinet minister Danny Naveh, who often speaks for the government, said Friday that halting construction meant to accommodate natural growth in the settlements "is something that from the practical point of view, not to mention the principle, is impossible."

Naveh said Israel has decided not to build new settlements. The settlements are not the root of the problem; rather, Arafat's "strategic decision of terrorism," he told Israel radio.

Palestinians say that Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza are illegal confiscation of their land. They want to set up a state in the West Bank and Gaza and demand that the settlements be removed. Palestinian leaders often refer to settlement construction as Israeli aggression.



PHOTO: AFP

A delegation from the leftist Israeli Meretz Party meets with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (C) Thursday in Gaza City. Arafat held a series of talks with the Meretz delegates and former Israeli justice minister and leading dove Yossi Beilin on saving the moribund peace process.

## US, Chinese officials hold talks to defuse tensions

AP, Honolulu

As officials from the United States and China held their highest level meeting since the spy plane crisis, Beijing's finance minister on Thursday signaled the Chinese were ready to set the incident aside to prevent a further deterioration of Sino-US relations.

Finance Minister Xiang Huaicheng and US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neil met on the sidelines of an annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank, primarily to discuss economic issues.

A US official said O'Neill would not raise issues related to the spy plane that remains in China but did not rule out such discussion.

Before the session with O'Neill, Xiang told reporters "there has been

satisfactory resolution to the troubles" between Beijing and Washington.

He also said Beijing did not see the dispute as having strained relations more severely than past diplomatic showdowns.

Xiang gave no indication new agreements had been reached on the issue but made it clear the conflict would not remain an obstacle to returning US-Chinese relations to a more normal footing.

"Secretary O'Neill (and I) share a consensus that we need to talk" to resolve any outstanding issues, Xiang said. "I trust Secretary O'Neill will ask me whatever questions he has and tell me whatever he wishes to tell."



PHOTO: AFP

Cuban President Fidel Castro (L) and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad point towards a new building in the Putrajaya capital yesterday before entering the prime minister's office for bilateral talks. Castro is on his first visit to Malaysia.

## 5 soldiers killed in blast in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

At least five paramilitary soldiers were killed and three critically wounded in a powerful landmine blast by separatist militants in north-eastern India's Assam state, officials said yesterday.

A police spokesman said militants of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) triggered the blast on a convoy of security force vehicles which was escorting election officials and carrying ballot boxes late Thursday.

The incident happened near Sonari in eastern Assam's Sivasagar district, 420 kilometres (260 miles) from the state capital Guwahati.

## 4 executed in China's biggest tax fraud case

AFP, Beijing

Four people were executed in China's biggest ever tax fraud case Friday, while 167 others remain under investigation in the 32 billion yuan (3.9 billion dollar) scam, state press reported.

Lin Sucun, Huang Wenlong, He Tao and Huang Zhenchi were put to death after the high court in the southern province of Guangdong issued execution orders Friday, an official with the Shantou intermediate People's Court told AFP.

## Vajpayee endorses US plan to slash nuclear arsenals

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee endorsed yesterday Washington's plan of slashing nuclear arsenals as US deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage held talks here on international security issues.

"We have welcomed President (George W.) Bush's suggestions for steep reductions in nuclear arsenals and a move away from further development of offensive nuclear technologies," Vajpayee said at a defence research award ceremony in New Delhi.

"We have also welcomed his offer of consultations with allies and

major powers on a new framework of security.

"We believe that a genuine process of consultations, taking into account existing arrangements in the security architecture, can promote the search for a stable, new global security framework."

Armitage held talks Friday with Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, who also holds the defence portfolio, on the US plan to build a missile defence shield, as New Delhi appeared supportive of some elements of the project.

He was also to meet Vajpayee, National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra and India's main opposition Congress party leader, Sonia

Gandhi, before concluding his visit.

Referring to New Delhi's nuclear tests in Pokhran in India's north west three years ago, Vajpayee said the world had a much better appreciation now of his country's perceptions on the security environment which guided that decision.

"Political and economic pressures are now gradually giving way to a more pragmatic understanding of ground realities. We have also demonstrated that we are a responsible nuclear power, which is neither a proliferation threat nor an exporter of sensitive nuclear or missile technology.

## Indian voters experience electronic voting

AFP, New Delhi

Indian voters tested the country's first large scale use of electronic voting Thursday as millions queued up at polling stations where all they had to do was to press a button.

Moving away from the age-old system of stamping ballot papers, around 150,000 Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) were despatched to far-flung Indian villages and main city centres in five states which went to polls.

An estimated 132 million voters spread across the states of Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Pondicherry were eligible to use the brand new machines.

Almost 90 per cent of Thursday's voting was done through the EVMs, Indian election officials said.

Declaring the use of EVMs a "success," India's chief election officer M.S. Gill told reporters that the shift from ballot papers to electronic voting was a "historic jump" and promised they would be deployed in future elections.

"We are aiming to have fully electronic voting in the next parliamentary elections. That is the Election Commission's slogan for elections in the new century - EVMs in the booth and identity cards in the voters' hands," Gill said.

Brushing aside complaints and allegations of malfunctions and tampering, Gill's deputy Subash Pani dismissed reports as baseless.

"There are no major reports of the EVMs malfunctioning anywhere. They are running smoothly and the voters are responding well, as per reports received here," Pani told the news agency United News of India.



PHOTO: AFP

Two of the white tiger triplets born in the zoo of Romaneche-Thorins, near Paris, play with their mother Ying (L) on Thursday. "Triplets are exceptional" according to zoo owner Rene Livett, announcing the rare event which happened on March 21. The two male cubs Kumpa and Tcha weigh 7.5 kilos each (16 pounds) and Myeko, the female cub, weighs six kilos (13 pounds).

## Rebels declare State of Emergency in Aceh

AFP, Banda Aceh

Separatist rebels yesterday declared a state of emergency in the restive Indonesian province of Aceh in response to a military crackdown, as eight more civilians died in violence.

The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) warned it was ready to confront the armed forces head-on unless soldiers topped their alleged attacks on civilians.

Sofyan Daud, GAM's deputy commander in the Aceh region of Pase, urged guerrillas to "step out of their camps to concentrate on thwarting the Indonesian military operations which are resulting in the deaths of innocent people."

"As of Thursday Aceh has been in an extreme state of emergency because Indonesian forces have begun entering villages by day and night in full uniform and combat gear," Daud told AFP by telephone.

"We the GAM soldiers are ready to deal with the situation." The GAM, which has been fighting for independence for resource-rich Aceh since the mid-1970s, was last month declared a banned organisation by the government, which dispatched 1,100 fresh troops to the province.

The crackdown followed a year of inconclusive talks held in Geneva and shaky truces between the two sides, which failed to stem bloodshed which has left more than 500 dead already this year.

The bodies of five unidentified men were found buried in separate pits, some two meters apart, on a beach near Pulau Kayu village in South Aceh on Thursday, a local journalist said.

"The corpses were clearly victims of violence. They were buried at a depth of 50 to 75 centimeters (20 to 30 inches) below the ground," he said.

"The bodies were discovered when a group of children playing on the beach saw a dog tugging on an object attached to a human hand sticking out of the sand."

The body of Mak Pri, 35, the wife of an Indonesian soldier, was found with bullet wounds and torture marks in paddy fields in Ceureuok village on Thursday, police Assistant Senior Commissioner Sumardi (eds: one name) said.

In a third incident another two bodies were found, those of Husaini Abdul Rahman, 40, and Bakhtiar Usri, 30, in Pidie district, according to local GAM spokesman Abu Razak.

Both victims had been shot by troops conducting a raid on Bidok Ulim village in Pidie, Razak said. The GAM said there was only one way out of the emergency, with Daud demanding a withdrawal of Indonesian troops and their return to Jakarta.

## US fails to convince Moscow over missile shield

AFP, Moscow

The United States failed to convince Russia of the need to deploy its planned missile defence shield during high-level talks yesterday in Moscow, the Russian foreign ministry's chief spokesman said.

"It looks like the American side did not provide adequate arguments for scrapping the international security system of the past 30 years," Alexander Yakovenko told journalists after the two hours of discussions.

Led by Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, an 18-strong delegation is in Moscow on the last leg of a tour of European capitals to explain Washington's plan to set up a 60-billion-dollar system to intercept missiles.

The Russian foreign ministry

spokesman said the discussions had a "substantive character" but added that "so far there are more questions than answers."

Wolfowitz's spokesman during high-level talks yesterday in Moscow, the Russian foreign ministry's chief spokesman said.

"The meeting started with the Americans giving their presentation and the Russians after an hour had not responded," he told reporters.

Last week President George W. Bush confirmed his intention to forge ahead with the US missile defence system (MD) to protect the United States from missile attack by "rogue states" such as Iran, Iraq and North Korea.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Miss World Diana Hayden of India, arrives for the presentation of "Distance" directed by Hirokazu Kore Eda at the Palais des Festival in Cannes on Thursday. "Distance" is presented in the competition for the 54th Cannes Film Festival.

## Hope for peace fades as Tigers deny accord

AFP, Colombo

Peace prospects dimmed in Sri Lanka Friday as Tamil Tiger rebels and peace broker Norway denied Colombo's claim that a deal for direct talks to end decades of bloodshed had been agreed.

Oslo's peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, played down an imminent deal hours after the Colombo government announced it had reached agreement with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on starting negotiations.

The LTTE flatly denied a government statement, issued by Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, which said there was agreement "on several matters" and that a foundation had been laid to hold peace talks.

"We wish to deny emphatically that any agreement has been reached so far on any issues," the LTTE statement said.

## 10 Indonesian volcanoes placed on alert

AFP, Jakarta

Ten of Indonesia's 129 active volcanoes have been placed under "alert" following a rise in seismic activity, the Jakarta Post reported yesterday.

The head of the Mines and Energy Ministry's volcano mapping department, Eddy Mulyadi, said the restless volcanoes spread from Sumatra island in the west to Flores island in the east and Sulawesi in the north.

The rumblers include Mount Marapi in West Sumatra, Anak Krakatau in the Sunda Straits, Mount Kerinci in Jambi on Sumatra, Mount Ijen and Mount Semeru in East Java, Mount Merapi in central Java, Mount Soputan and Mount Lukon in North Sulawesi, and Mount Inelika on Flores.

## Snake takes revenge on drunk

AFP, Sydney

A snake being tormented by a drunk in an Australian coastal resort on Friday responded by almost choking the man to death, police said.

The incident occurred in the early hours of Friday morning in the hippie town-cum-yuppie resort of Byron Bay, on Australia's eastern seaboard.

Police said a 39-year-old man was wandering about the town with a two-metre (six foot) python, which he used to harass passersby before repeatedly hurling the snake against a wall.

Two police officers arrived to find the man, clearly a little the worse for wear, had retrieved his companion and was parading with it around his shoulders, Sergeant Miles Adams, of Byron Bay police, said.