

# Violence flares as thousands join *Nakba* rallies in Gaza

## Tel Aviv warns Syria

AFP, Gaza City

Thousands of Palestinians poured into the streets of the Gaza Strip and West Bank yesterday to commemorate the "catastrophe" that befell them with the establishment of the Jewish state half a century ago, with scattered clashes erupting with Israeli troops.

At noon, sirens wailed to signal the start of three minutes of silence, causing traffic to halt and engines to idle, as crowds of Palestinians stood in a sea of red, black, green and white flags.

In Gaza City, marches soon resumed down streets whose walls were painted with scenes of war and homelessness caused by Israel's creation in May 1948, while mourners joined funeral processions for Palestinians killed by the Israeli army the day before. "We will survive," read one banner.

State television broadcast war footage from five decades ago and played nationalist songs, while Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat made a televised address saying there could be no peace without the right of return for those made homeless after 1948.

Lawyer Majed Jaffarawi, who joined the mass rally in Gaza City, said he believed Palestinians would one day win their rights.

"Since Oslo (the 1993 peace agreement), all of us thought our suffering was on the way to ending," said Jaffarawi, whose farmland, gardens and a factory were razed by Israeli troops during the current uprising.

"Suddenly we find we have gone back 53 years," he said. "For 53 years Israeli governemnts have tried everything but until now they haven't tried peace. They will find out that in history, no army can break people's ideas.

"In the near or far future, we will have our liberty."

In a blaze of gunfire blasted in to the air, the bodies of two policemen killed in the West Bank on Monday were taken from Gaza City's hospital morgue and carried through the streets by hundreds of mourners packed into trucks and buses.

Meanwhile, Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer warned Syria to "think carefully" Tuesday after a new Hezbollah attack on Israeli military positions from southern Lebanon.

"I hope that the Syrians, who are responsible for what happens in Lebanon and without whom nothing happens in that country, will reflect seriously on their next decisions," Ben Eliezer said on Israeli military radio.

The minister was speaking in reaction to an incident on Monday, when anti-tank rockets were fired at an Israeli army position in the disputed Shebaa Farms area at the junction of the Israeli, Lebanese and Syrian borders.

No one was hurt in the attack.

Israel captured the Shebaa Farms from Syria during the 1967 Middle East war, and the territory is now claimed by Lebanon, with Syrian approval.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat responds to the overnight killing of five Palestinian policemen by the Israeli Army near the West Bank town of Ramallah during a press conference at his headquarters in Gaza City on Monday. Arafat condemned the killings as an "assassination" and warned that Israel would have to pay the price.

## 11 crushed to death in China by excavator

AFP, Hong Kong

Eleven people were killed, including a pregnant woman, when a man drove an excavator into a crowd in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen after failing to secure a loan, a report said yesterday.

At least 10 others were injured when the excavator ploughed into a night market in the Longgang district of Shenzhen on Monday, the China-backed Ta Kung Pao daily said.

The driver was shot dead by police when he tried to resist arrest.

The paper said the man had tried to borrow money from the company he worked for but the manager was unable to get him any because the cashier was not in the office.

He beat up the manager before stealing the digger.

## Australian prefers jail to voting

AFP, Canberra

A 66-year-old man says he is determined to go to jail rather than visit the ballot box under Australia's compulsory voting laws.

Bill Smithies refused Tuesday to pay a fine imposed for not voting during Australia's 1999 referendum on whether the country should remove Britain's Queen Elizabeth II as head of state.

Smithies, who lives in the national capital of Canberra -- where a lot of politicians spend a lot of time -- described Australia's system of compulsory voting as "mindless".

"I am often asked when I go overseas what is so deficient about you Australians that you alone virtually in the world have to be frogmarched to the polling booths," he said.

"What is deficient about Australia is the mentality of its politicians."

A magistrate on Monday fined Smithies 50 dollars (25 US) and charged him 350 dollars (175 US) in costs for failing to vote.

# Norway envoy returns to revive Lankan truce hope

AFP, Colombo

Norwegian envoy Erik Solheim arrived in Sri Lanka Tuesday in his latest bid to secure a so-far elusive ceasefire accord between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels.

Solheim's second visit in two weeks is aimed at hammering out a deal on a truce that could clear the way for face-to-face negotiations between the Colombo government and the rebels, diplomatic sources said.

Norwegian embassy spokesman Tomas Stangeland said Solheim was due to hold talks with President Chandrika Kumaratunga and travel to the rebel-held Wanni region.

Stangeland declined to say if Solheim would meet with Velupillai Prabhakaran, the supremo of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The LTTE has said that they were given a draft of a possible ceasefire arrangement last Wednesday and they needed more time to study it.

The rebels observed their own one-sided truce for four months till April 24, but the government

refused to reciprocate it saying that a de-escalation can be part of the negotiations once the talks get underway.

Hopes of a peace deal were raised when Solheim met with LTTE leader Prabhakaran on November 1 and later announced that the rebels were serious about ending the fighting and entering a political process.

Since then however, the Norwegian peace efforts have suffered a series of setbacks. When government forces launched a major offensive last month, he described the heavy loss of life as a "definite setback" to the peace bid.

The LTTE's London-based chief negotiator was quoted as saying in press reports here Sunday that they must give careful consideration not only to a ceasefire but also the mechanics of implementing it.

Peace hopes dimmed once again last week when the LTTE and Solheim denied a Colombo government statement that the parties to the conflict had reached agreement on opening talks.

Diplomats said Solheim would face a challenging task to get both parties to agree to a truce before

opening negotiations to end decades of fighting that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

An agreement on implementing any ceasefire would also be difficult as the Tigers are expecting international monitors while the Colombo government wants minimal foreign involvement.

Diplomats said the Sri Lankan government may be willing to consider an informal truce for a limited period, while the Tigers demand an officially declared ceasefire with a formal monitoring mechanism.

The government was also ready to further ease economic sanctions on rebel-held areas, but the LTTE's demand to lift the January 1998 ban on them may still be a sticking point, diplomats said.

There had been partial gestures on both sides with the release of prisoners and hostages in recent months, but diplomats said there were still wide gaps to be bridged before the preparatory stage could be completed.

Solheim has said that Norway will give up its peace efforts if either party indicates they do not want them to continue.

# India's military units squabble for control of nuclear button

AFP, New Delhi

The three wings of India's military are locked in a showdown for control of the country's nascent nuclear arsenal, prompting the government to delay its choice, according to defence sources.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government earlier this year opened up competition for the new post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The office would have its hand on the actual nuclear button under an intricate system with ultimate control in civilian hands at the defence ministry.

The 1.3-million-strong army, the world's second largest, argues the array of nuclear-tipped guided missiles are currently rightly under its command and wants the CDS post for itself.

But the air force, the world's fourth largest, insists its capacity to launch nuclear strikes entitles it to control the arsenal.

The 137-ship navy, which is striving to extend its reach in the Indian Ocean, has also launched a campaign for the CDS post, and Chief Admiral Sushil Kumar had been viewed as Vajpayee's preferred choice.

But unnerved by the military dogfight, Vajpayee's cabinet decided last Friday -- the third anniversary of India's nuclear tests -- to temporarily suspend naming the CDS, and instead unveiled plans to integrate the armed forces.

On Monday night, the government went a step further and tried to save face by saying the establishment of the CDS was not even broached in the cabinet meeting.

After its 1998 string of nuclear test blasts, India claimed it possessed only a minimum credible deterrent, and pledged itself to the principle of no-first-use.

It was then that it unveiled the plan for a command-and-control system under the watchful eye of the CDS.

## China talks tough against NMD

AFP, Beijing

China reiterated its strong opposition to US plans yesterday for an anti-missile defence and warned it could trigger a global arms race, as a US envoy held talks here to explain Washington's position.

"This plan does not help the US side and it also harms the interests of other countries," foreign ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said at the ministry's regular bi-weekly briefing.

"It will endanger strategic balance and stability, and will also trigger a new arms race in the world."

Sun was speaking as US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly was meeting with Chinese officials, including top arms control official Sha Zukang, to calm Chinese concerns over US plans for a National Missile Defence (NMD).

In a statement to reporters before the talks, Kelly said China and the United States shared the same security goals -- peace and stability -- and that NMD would help achieve them.

## 'Man-monkeys' causing panic in Delhi suburb

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police have been ordered to shoot on sight men masquerading as monkeys after reports of attacks in Ghaziabad, an industrial suburb of the capital New Delhi, police sources said yesterday.

At least one person has died and 35 others injured in attacks or panic-stricken attempts to escape their marauders, police and media reports said.

"Shoot at sight orders have been issued to stop these monkey creatures," said a police spokesman of Ghaziabad, a sprawling township of around 150,000 located 35 km north of the Indian capital.

"We suspect there are at least two people behind these attacks," he added.

Residents of Ghaziabad and adjoining areas had reported being mauled or badly scratched by the "man-monkeys" in a string of attacks over the past few days.

## Taiwan's bid to join WHO blocked

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's bid to join the World Health Organisation (WHO) has been shot down by rival China, the foreign ministry here said yesterday.

The World Health Assembly decided on Monday not to include a proposal for Taiwan's entry to the WHO on the agenda at this year's meeting in Geneva on the grounds that no consensus was reached.

It was Taiwan's fifth consecutive attempt, backed this year by the United States, to push for observer status at the WHO, a UN body.

The proposal was submitted and supported by Honduras, Dominica, Nicaragua, Burkina Faso and others, the ministry said.

## Carts replace cars in fabled garden

AFP, Colombo

Bullock-drawn carts will replace cars at Sri Lanka's best-known botanical gardens to save the flora from noxious exhaust fumes, a press report here said yesterday.

The Peradeniya Botanical Gardens will not allow cars inside the 147-acre gardens and will instead deploy a fleet carts for those unable to stroll, the mass circulating Lankadeepa said.

The car ban was imposed when it was found that vehicle fumes were causing harmful effects on the plants and trees in the gardens built in 1816, a year after the British established colonial rule over the island then known as Ceylon.

Lord Mountbatten had his eastern command of allied troops based at the Peradeniya Gardens for a brief period during World War II.

## Masako pregnant

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Crown Princess Masako is pregnant with her first child after nearly eight years of marriage to the heir to the Chrysanthemum Throne, an Imperial Household Agency official said yesterday.

"According to medical examinations, the crown princess is three months pregnant," said the Grand Master of the Crown Prince's Household, Kiyoshi Furukawa.

The baby is due in late November or early December, he told a brief news conference.

# Arroyo ready to work with opposition

## Opponents gaining ground in Senate polls

AFP, Manila

President Gloria Arroyo sounded a conciliatory tone yesterday, saying she was willing to work with the opposition, as early election results showed her foes gaining ground in the Senate.

"It's time to move on, politics is enough," she told reporters.

"It's time to start the healing process."

Early unofficial tallies suggested Arroyo's allies might not be able to win the eight seats needed to gain a simple majority in the 24-seat legislature.

Financial markets here swooned at the prospect of legislative gridlock.

But Arroyo spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao stressed that Arroyo and allies of her jailed predecessor Joseph Estrada had indicated they were willing to cooperate.

Television and radio projections said the opposition was likely to win six seats, one more than pre-election surveys had indicated.

Estrada, who goes on trial next month for corruption, has six other allies among the 11 senators with unexpired terms to Arroyo's five.

# Berlusconi set to form govt in Italy after clear victory

AFP, Rome

Italian business magnate Silvio Berlusconi was set to hammer together Italy's 59th post-war government yesterday, after the final results of elections showed his conservative coalition winning a comfortable majority in both houses of parliament.

The results, which gave Berlusconi's House of Freedoms coalition 368 seats in the 630-member lower house and 177 in the 315-member Senate, strengthened Berlusconi's hand not only globally but also in relation to a key ally, the anti-EU and xenophobic Northern League, which scored very poorly.

With only around 3.9 percent in the lower house, the Northern League failed to reach the four percent needed to be represented under Italy's proportional representation system, although it was

expected to pick up some seats due to a first-past-the-post element in the voting system.

The results apparently meant that Berlusconi's cabinet was guaranteed of a firm base to carry out the changes promised by the tycoon in a television address late Monday, without the threat of losing its majority if the Northern League defected.

In Sunday's vote, the outgoing center-left coalition lost its majority in both houses, winning 250 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 130 in the Senate.

The hardline Reformed Communists, which did not support the center-left bloc, will have 11 seats in the lower house.

The Northern League's number two, Roberto Maroni, said that despite its poor showing the party would be represented in the government.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani arrives at a special court of Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry in New Delhi on Tuesday. Advani and 21 others, including union Sports Minister Uma Bharati and Human Resources Development Minister Murlu Manohar Joshi, are being questioned by the court for their role in the demolition of the 16th century Babri Mosque in 1992, which sparked off some of post independence India's worst Hindu-Muslim riots, killing more than 2,000 people.

# EU to try to broker peace with Afghan opposition

REUTERS, Peshawar

A European Union delegation will soon visit opposition-controlled northern Afghanistan on a peace mission, EU ambassador to Pakistan Kurt Juul said on Monday.

"We'll offer different peace avenues which they (opposition Northern Alliance) may or may not use," he told reporters at a news briefing in Peshawar, capital of the North West Frontier province bordering Afghanistan.

"We'll purely focus on the peace process and nothing else," he said.

A delegation of Islamabad-based EU envoys visited the southern Afghan city of Kandahar two weeks ago for similar talks with officials of

the ruling Taliban movement when it proposed a halt to the fighting.

Swedish Ambassador Peter Tejler, who represents the EU Presidency, said the delegation was disappointed at the end of its meeting with the Taliban authorities.

"They were clearly not willing to take advantage of the efforts of the UN Secretary General's special envoy for peace," he said.

Juul said the EU was working in close collaboration with the UN special envoy for Afghanistan, Frances Vendrell, to help end more than two decades of civil war. "We'll not bring any competing initiative regarding peace in Afghanistan," he said.

# Unmarried couples soaring in US

AP, Washington

Along with the population growth of the 1990s came big changes in the face of the American household: the number of unmarried couples soared by 71 per cent, dwarfing the increase in married couples.

The number of women raising children without fathers at home surged, too up 25 per cent between 1990 and 2000 while living alone was up 21 per cent compared with a 7 per cent increase in married-couple households.

These are some of the latest details from the 2000 census. The data being released Tuesday offer the headcount's first look at America

beyond race and ethnicity.

There is further evidence that issues that popped up in recent years based on changing family structure such as domestic partner benefits and same-sex marriages will keep getting attention.

"Social norms have changed. The neighbours don't whisper behind your back as often," said Dorian Solot, co-founder of the Alternatives to Marriage Project.

The data did not detail how many of those in unmarried partnerships were same-sex couples. That information, as well other more specific relationship data, could be released as early as next month.

# 12 killed in Pakistani sectarian clashes

AFP, Islamabad

At least a dozen people have been killed in three days of intense skirmishes between two groups from rival religious sects in Pakistan's northwestern tribal belt, officials and reports said Tuesday.

Officials said sectarian hatreds were fuelling the clashes, involving heavy weapons such as rockets, after the violence between the Shiite and Sunni groups erupted Saturday over a water dispute.

"Residents of Tari Mengal and Pewar villages in Khurram agency (North West Frontier Province) have been fighting for the last three days and we do not know how many people have been killed so far," said a local official who refused to be named.

# Parliament certain to impeach Wahid, says Speaker

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian House Speaker Akbar Tanjung said yesterday that he was certain that a special session of the upper house of parliament would force embattled President Abdurrahman Wahid from office.

He said he expected the upper house would decide that Wahid had violated the state guidelines and his oath of office, an act tantamount to his impeachment.

Tanjung said that the lower house, the People's Representative Council (DPR), which he chairs has already deemed that Wahid had violated the state policy guidelines, his oath of office and a decree of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), the national assembly.

## US population getting older

AFP, Washington

Falling birth rates, advances in medical technology and the ageing "baby-boom" generation helped push the median age of the US population last year to an all-time high of 35.3 years, the Census Bureau said Tuesday.

The news, released in a report on characteristics of the population, is likely to fuel the debate over whether the Social Security retirement system should be reformed to protect its financial stability.

The point where half of the US population is older and half younger jumped from 32.9 years in 1990, primarily due to a 49 percent jump in the number of 45- to 54-year-olds, the Census report said.

In contrast, the growth of those 65 and older -- the age at which people can begin to collect government retirement benefits -- is the smallest in the history of the Census, the report said.

# Japan backs US missile talks with China, Russia

AFP, Tokyo

Japan backed the United States' missile talks with China and Russia yesterday, saying Tokyo "understands" Washington's plan to develop a national missile defence system.

"It is a good thing that the United States is in talks with concerned countries, particularly Russia and China, on this issue," Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said to a lower house budget committee.

"We support such a position by the United States and Japan will continue to discuss the missile defence issue with the United States," Koizumi said.

US President George W. Bush has dispatched three delegations to capitals around the world to explain and counter criticism of the National Missile Defence (NMD) project, which Washington says is needed to prevent attacks by rogue states such as North Korea or Iraq.

# China opposes Taiwan president's visit to US

AFP, Beijing

China said it strongly opposed the upcoming visit to the United States by Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian, and criticised Washington for granting Chen a visa.

"China strongly opposes any country, including of course the United States, allowing permission for Chen Shui-bian to visit under any name or style of visit," foreign ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said.

Sun said China had "expressed strong dissatisfaction and opposition" through diplomatic channels over the issue of a transit visa to the president who heads Taiwan's independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party.



PHOTO: AFP

Naresh Kumar (L), envoy of India's pointman on Kashmir, K.C. Pant, delivers a letter to Kashmiri leader Shabir Shah yesterday with answers to queries raised by Shah on peace talks to decide the future of the Himalayan region.