

## Israel attacks Gaza despite Arafat's peace moves

AFP, Gaza Strip

Israel renewed its military campaign against Palestinian targets yesterday, sending helicopter gunships to attack security buildings in the Gaza Strip despite Yasser Arafat's renewed pledge to crack down on Islamic militants.

Two US-made Apache attack helicopters fired nine missiles into three buildings in one compound in Rafah, on the border with Egypt, but there were no casualties as the buildings had been evacuated, a security source said.

"There were at least nine missiles aimed at the Force-17 building and military intelligence office in Rafah, those two buildings were destroyed and there was damage to the police headquarters," the source said.

An electric power transformer was also blown up and Rafah was completely blacked out, he added.

Force-17 is Palestinian leader Arafat's elite bodyguard unit.

It was the second round of air strikes against Palestinian security targets in the Gaza Strip in as many days, and the fourth this week in retaliation for suicide attacks by Palestinian militants in Israel last weekend.

The attack came despite security talks between Israel and the Palestinians Friday brokered by a US peace envoy, as well as Arafat's announcement he had arrested about half the militants on Israel's most-wanted list.

"Zinni gave me the night before yesterday a list of 33 men wanted by Israel and I arrested so far 17 of them," Arafat said in a rare interview on Israeli television. Israel said it had asked for 36 top militants to be arrested.

Arafat also said he was extending his "hand for peace with Israel for the sake of our children, despite everything."

"I am ready to implement all the agreements which have been concluded," with Israel, Arafat told the interviewer, reiterating that his Palestinian Authority had publicly accepted a truce with Israel.

A spokesman for the US State Department, Philip Reeker, said the security talks convened by peace envoy General Anthony Zinni were "constructive and focused on security ... specifically practical steps to combat terror and violence."

US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Friday also reacted to suggestions that Israel was trying to remove Arafat from power by saying he was still the recognised leader of the Palestinian people.

However, he also said that Arafat, whom Israel holds personally responsible for not cracking down on the militants responsible for the suicide attacks, should do more to rein in the extremists.

"Yasser Arafat remains the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, the recognised leader of the Palestinian people," Powell said on a flight from Brussels to the capital of Uzbekistan.

Sharon has denied any plans to get rid of Arafat, with his spokesman saying "the prime minister has pledged to Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher and US President George W. Bush that he will not hurt Arafat personally."

However, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres also said following Arafat's interview that removing the Palestinian leader from the political scene would be the "biggest mistake in the history of the state of Israel."

## Tajikistan opens Afghan border crossing for aid

AFP, Dushanbe

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov opened a key river crossing into Afghanistan for humanitarian aid convoys today and pledged full support for post-Taliban reconstruction at talks with interim Afghan foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah.

"The first convoy of trucks carrying 250 tonnes of humanitarian aid will cross the Lower Pyandzh on Sunday morning heading for Kunduz in Afghanistan," border guard spokesman Alexander Kondratyev said, who added that its final destination would be Kabul.

The ferry crossing has been closed to traffic and pedestrians since September 2000 when the Taliban militia seized control of the port of Sherkan on the Afghan side of the river.

But the move to reopen the border point came as Rakhmonov held talks with Abdullah about the most effective way for Tajik authorities to help rebuild war-shattered Afghanistan.

## Japan gets first peek at royal heir

AP, Tokyo

A week after giving birth to a baby girl, Japanese Crown Princess Masako yesterday checked out of the palace hospital cradling the infant in her arms and giving the public its first glimpse of the royal family's newest member.

Masako and her husband Crown Prince Naruhito, grinned broadly as the mother held her baby - named Aiko on Friday - before a bank of television cameras broadcasting live from the hospital entrance.

Aiko, wrapped tightly in a long white cloth with only her face and a shock of short hair protruding, slept soundly, her lips slightly ajar and her cheeks pink in the chilly outside air.

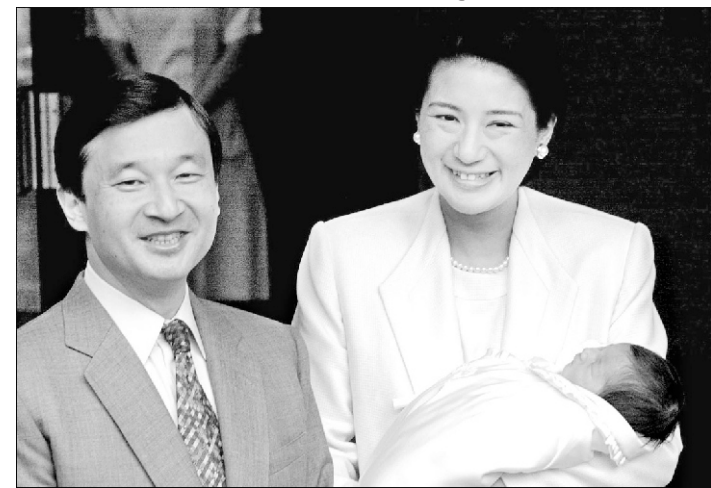
After bowing to nurses and doctors, the family left the palace complex in a limousine and proceeded to their residence in central Tokyo.

Masako, in a white dress suit, waved to cheering crowds as the royal cavalcade drove through streets lined with Rising Sun flags.

Mother and daughter were in good health, a palace spokesman said on condition of anonymity. The new father has visited them in the hospital every day since the birth, he said.

At home in a specially refurbished room, Aiko will be placed in a cradle once used by her grandfather, Emperor Akihito, and his three children.

It has been a busy week for the



Crown Prince Naruhito (L) and Crown Princess Masako smile as the royal couple leaves the Imperial Hospital in Tokyo yesterday. One week after the birth of the princess, the royal couple gave the public its first glimpse of the royal family's newest member.

royal family, with tens of thousands of well-wishers flocking to the imperial palace to celebrate the arrival of Masako and Naruhito's first child after eight years of marriage.

On Friday, the baby was given her name - written with the Chinese characters for "love" and "child" - in an elaborate ritual that dates back about a century in its current form.

Yesterday, however, the only scheduled event was a brief tea ceremony in which Naruhito would offer his thanks to medical and palace staff for their help in Aiko's delivery, according to the spokesman.

Although Masako was to turn 38 today, there were no birthday celebrations planned, he said.

As the eldest son of Akihito and Empress Michiko, Naruhito, 41, is heir to the throne. The birth of the princess has intensified discussion of whether the government should abandon the current males-only law in favour of one that would allow a woman to assume the throne.



Afghan women crowd around as they rush to register themselves as teachers at the Manochehry high school in Kabul yesterday. Women teachers who were previously not allowed to work during the rule of the Taliban regime rushed to register themselves to be teachers for the next school term in spring next year.

## New Afghan rulers no better than Taliban: Women's group

AFP, Tokyo

The interim administration for Afghanistan agreed earlier this week will be no better for Afghan women than the Taliban regime it replaces, a member of an Afghan women's group said Friday.

"Unfortunately the situation is the same as it was between 1992 and 1996 (when rival factions fought for the power in Kabul). We don't see any positive changes yet," Mariam Rawi, a member of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), told reporters at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan.

"You must not trust the reports you are getting. The reality is the same. We are in refugee camps inside Afghanistan."

"Yesterday we had some reports that Northern Alliance soldiers cut off the ears of 10 men who shaved their beards and some women have been beaten up because they were not wearing the burqa (shroud-like full-length veil)," said the woman who uses the pseudonym Rawi for security reasons.

For the same reason she continues to wear the burqa, albeit in a brilliant electric blue.

Between 1992 and 1996, Kabul was in a deadly vortex of vicious factional fighting which left tens of thousands of civilians dead.

"Many atrocities happened in those four years: 90 per cent of Kabul was destroyed by fighting between those groups," Rawi said.

"There was killing, execution and (they were) raping women - 10 year-old girls and 70 year-old women. With the guns in their hands they could do whatever they wanted."

After seizing power in 1996, the Taliban "continued the killings and torture," she said.

"They said women had to wear the burqa, could have no education, (were) deprived of primary rights, but the seeds of this violence had been planted before. The Northern Alliance people said schools had to be destroyed because they were 'gateways to hell' and 'doors to prostitution'."

One RAWA delegate took part in the Bonn talks on forming a new

Afghan administration at the invitation of royalist supporters of former king Mohammed Zahir Shah, 87, but Rawi believes Muslim fundamentalists came out of the talks best.

"The key positions are in the hands of fundamentalist leaders," Rawi said.

She said the only way to bringing peace and security to a country ravaged by two decades of war was to send in UN peacekeeping forces to disarm the rival groups, and "stop the support of other countries for fundamentalists there."

The women's group which Rawi described as both a militant political group campaigning for democracy and women's rights, and a non-profit organisation running orphanages, mobile clinics and classes in literacy and basic crafts has 2,000 members, mostly in Afghanistan, Rawi said.

She was visiting Tokyo to receive the Asia Human Rights Award and 500,000 yen (4,015 dollars) in cash from the Foundation for Human Rights in Asia.

## Britons warned of possible X'mas terror attacks

AFP, London

British Home Secretary David Blunkett has warned that Britain could face a terrorist attack over the Christmas period.

He made the comment in a BBC television interview late on Friday as he criticised opponents of his emergency anti-terrorism legislation.

"God willing, there won't be an attack on us over Christmas and New Year, because all those who tell me we are not the ones who do not have the security and intelligence information which, for my sins, I carry," he told the BBC.

"And that information tells us that because of our alliance, quite rightly, with the United States, and because of our vulnerability, we are at risk."

"And it is on those grounds we act to secure ourselves," he added.

Earlier Blunkett had insisted he would not give in to what he termed

"deliberate sabotage" by the House of Lords, Britain's upper house of parliament, which has brought a series of amendments to his proposed terrorism legislation.

He said it was essential the legislation was passed as drafted and warned that Britain remained at risk from terrorist attack.

The amendments would restore the right to judicial review for detained terror suspects and would restore Convention of Human Rights protection against detention without trial.

Later the Home Office, Britain's interior minister, denied that Blunkett was budging from the government line that there was no specific terrorist threat to Britain.

"He was expressing a general hope that we would not see more attacks in view of aiming to get the Bill (legislation) through by Christmas," a government spokesman said.

## Four shot dead by militants in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Tribal militants have shot dead at least four people in two separate attacks in India's troubled north-eastern state of Assam, officials said yesterday.

A police spokesman said the bullet-ridden bodies of two tribal Adivasi Santhal woodcutters were recovered Friday from Mohamaya reserve forest in western Assam's Dhubri district, 310 kilometres from Assam state capital Guwahati.

"A group of heavily armed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) militants captured the two woodcutters in the forest and tied them to a tree before gunning them down from a close range," the police official told AFP by telephone from Dhubri.

In another incident close to the Mohamaya forest, two more dead bodies of woodcutters were found with multiple injuries inflicted by crude implements.

The outlawed NDFB, fighting for an independent homeland for the Bodo tribes, have been attacking the minority Adivasi Santhals in the area aimed at driving them out from the Bodo-dominated western districts.

## UN conference on biological weapons stalled

AFP, BSS

A UN-sponsored international conference on controlling the production and storage of biological weapons has been adjourned for nearly a year at the suggestion of the United States.

The Geneva conference broke up Friday without agreement, and the next round of talks are not planned until November next year, a UN statement said.

The breakdown, after three weeks of high-level talks attended by 91 countries, came after Washington balked at a declaration aimed at enforcing a 1972 convention on the development, production and stockpiling of biological weapons.

Washington pointed the finger North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Sudan and Syria for not playing by the convention's rules and continuing to produce biological weapons.

"So, the real question is how we deal with the question of no compliance," US negotiator John Bolton told reporters on the margins of the meeting.

## The reign of Taliban ends

AP, Kabul

In the five years that the Taliban ruled, the Islamic militia became inextricably linked to Osama bin Laden. He financed their warriors, built their roads and, eventually, brought about their collapse.

The Taliban, whose name means "students," began in 1994 as religious vigilantes committed to ridding this war-wrecked land of banditry and lawlessness.

Preaching an austere and uncompromising brand of Islam, they swept to national power in the mid-1990s, welcomed by many Afghans who were fed up with the collection of feuding warlords who ruled after the collapse of a pro-Moscow government in 1992.

The Taliban seized the capital, Kabul, in 1996, throwing out the warring factions led by Burhanuddin Rabbani. Their hard-line interpretation of Islam was like a magnet for militant Muslims worldwide.

Bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan from Sudan several months before their sweep through Kabul. He was quick to swear allegiance to the Taliban and began to pump money and manpower into the movement, according to one of its founders,

Mullah Mohammed Khaqzar.

A movement founded on the principle of law and order was transformed into the patron of a worldwide terrorist network, setting the stage for the showdown with the United States after the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

"People should look at the Taliban as a mix of good and bad," said Khaqzar. "They brought security and peace, but they imposed too many restrictions and pressure on the people and allowed foreigners to take control of our country."

Bin Laden's money and fighters bolstered the authority of the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, to impose a brutal mix of strict Quranic interpretations and tribal customs.

Afghans were forbidden to listen to music, watch television, admire artwork. Men had to wear beards as long as their fists. Women were banned from most work and from going to school. They had to gaze at the world always with a male escort - from the tiny netted hole of a burqa.

Children could not keep pet pigeons, play chess or fly kites. By the end of Taliban rule, women were not even allowed to wear shoes with hard soles. The sound

was considered provocative.

After the Taliban leadership refused to hand over their "guest" bin Laden to the United States, President George W. Bush launched an air campaign Oct. 7, throwing America's military might behind the opposition northern alliance, a collection of warlords and ethnic minorities.

For the first month, the attacks produced few results. After relentless bombing of Taliban front lines, militia defenses around the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif collapsed on Nov. 9.

Within 10 days, the Taliban had fled Kabul and most other major cities, running away in chaotic retreats to the place their movements was born, the southern city of Kandahar.

Taliban leadership agreed to surrender Kandahar on Thursday. By Friday morning, when opposition forces moved into the city, most of the Taliban were already gone.

It was unclear where the Taliban had gone or whether they would try to fight on as guerrillas against the new, UN-backed administration. Omar was nowhere to be found.

As a political force, however, it was clear the time of the Taliban was over.

## US Senate approves \$318b military Bill

REUTERS, Washington

The U.S. Senate approved a \$318 billion defence bill early yesterday that boosts pay for U.S. troops and provides the Bush administration the full funding it sought for a national missile defence programme.

On a voice vote, the Senate approved a fiscal 2002 defence spending measure that was delayed for weeks by wrangling over efforts to add emergency spending for homeland defence and New York's recovery from the Sept. 11 hijacked plane attacks.

The measure dramatically increases spending for the military as it wages the war on terrorism, providing \$27 billion more than the fiscal 2001 measure but still \$1.9 billion below President Bush's budget request.

With lawmakers rallying around Bush and the Pentagon during the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan, the bill sparked few political battles. Most notably, Republicans and Democrats set aside their differences over a planned national missile defence program.

Accepting a compromise worked out by the Senate Armed Services committee after the Sept. 11 attacks, the measure grants \$7 billion for development of the missile defence plan and gives Bush the option of using an additional \$1.3 billion for missile defence or switching it to homeland security.

It also includes an across-the-board 5 percent pay raise, the centerpiece of a broad effort to increase the quality of life in the armed forces.

Health care and retirement benefits also get a boost, and selected pay grades and positions receive pay raises higher than 5 percent. The measure also reduces out-of-pocket housing costs for military personnel as part of a program to eliminate such expenses completely by 2005.

"We believe these increases will significantly aid our ability to recruit, and perhaps more importantly retain much needed military personnel," said Democratic Sen. Daniel Inouye, chairman of the Senate Appropriation Committee's defence panel.

Added to the measure was a separate \$20 billion package of emergency spending in response to the attacks in New York and Washington, but Democrats dropped an effort to add another \$15 billion earlier on Friday.