

Israel pounds Gaza harbour as pressure mounts on Arafat

Palestinian coast guard ship destroyed

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli naval boats shelled the harbour in Gaza City early Saturday, destroying a Palestinian coast guard ship, after the Palestinian Authority ordered the arrest of three of its own officials on suspicion of smuggling arms by sea.

The action came amid allegations that the Authority was smuggling arms into the Gaza Strip, after the Israeli navy boarded and seized an arms-laden freighter in the Red Sea last week.

The harbour area was rocked by the resounding sound of at least two shells being launched as the early morning attack left some boats ablaze and destroyed a fuel dump, security sources said.

The Palestinian Authority on Friday ordered the arrest of its own officials, including a senior naval officer, for their alleged role in the affair in which the Karine A, stocked with 50 tonnes of weapons, was intercepted, officials in Gaza said.

It has accused admiral Fethi Razem, advisor Fuad Shubaki and arms buyer Adel Moghrabi of responsibility for the foiled smuggling operation.

an official said.

All three men have also been implicated by the Israelis in the affair.

The Palestinian leadership also renewed its commitment to halt all anti-Israeli attacks as ordered by Arafat on December 16.

Israel alleges that the Palestinian Authority ordered the cargo of weapons, a charge the Authority has denied.

The harbour shelling destroyed two boats, one of which was the Palestinian naval vessel, the Gindalla, an Israeli military statement said.

Colonel Omar Akawi, who had skipped the Karine A, had previously commanded the Gindalla, the statement said. The Karine A's chief mechanic, Riyad Abdullah, had also served in the same capacity aboard the Gindalla.

The statement said the Palestinian installations were targeted because one of the two gunmen who attacked an isolated army border post on Wednesday and killed four Israeli soldiers belonged to the naval police.

Those two gunmen, who also died during the

attack, are to be buried later Saturday in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, on the border with Egypt.

The Gaza wharf attack followed a second straight day of Israeli incursions into the Gaza Strip, which included the bulldozing of dozens of homes, and which were in retaliation for the killing of the soldiers.

The army had sent tanks into Rafah and used bulldozers to tear up the runway at the nearby Palestinian airport on Friday and were continuing to dig up the runway Saturday morning, a military statement said.

The attack on a main symbol of Palestinian power caused extensive damage to the facility, but no one was hurt. The runway had been under repair after a similar raid in early December following a wave of devastating Palestinian suicide attacks.

The army also destroyed an abandoned house in Rafah after it was discovered to be covering a tunnel used to smuggle arms from Egypt, the army said in a separate statement.

Catholic postal worker shot dead in Belfast

AFP, Belfast

A Roman Catholic postal worker was shot dead early Saturday by masked gunmen as he left work at a post office in north Belfast, police said.

Two men approached Daniel McColgan, 20, as he was parking his vehicle and proceeded to shoot him a number of times in the body. He was pronounced dead on arrival at hospital, police said.

The post office was located in Barna Square in Rathcoole, a fiercely loyalist and Protestant neighborhood of the city.

Shortly after the killing, police found a burning car in the neighbourhood which they believe was connected to the killing.

The Red Hand Defenders, regarded as being a cover name for the main loyalist paramilitary groups, the Ulster Defence Association-Ulster Freedom Fighters and the Loyalist Volunteer Force, claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement.

The loyalist paramilitaries are opposed to the peace process which has seen the creation of a devolved power-sharing assembly for the troubled region.



Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf (R) walks with visiting Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri at the Chaklala military airbase in Rawalpindi, some 25 km from Islamabad on Saturday. Hariri arrived here on a brief visit to hold talks with Pakistani officials on bilateral and international issues.

UN moves to salvage Colombian peace talks

AFP, Bogota

Colombia's largest guerrilla group is set to hold a second round of talks Saturday with a special UN envoy aimed at saving flagging peace talks in rebel-controlled territory, as government soldiers await orders to march into a rebel safe haven.

The first meeting between UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special advisor on Colombia, James LeMayne, and rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) concluded Friday after nearly four hours on a positive note, both sides reported.

The United Nations envoy met with rebel representatives in the town of Los Pozos, inside the Switzerland-sized zone in southern Colombia ceded to the FARC in November 1998 as an incentive to peace talks.

Security situation improves as armed militias quit Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Security was improving in Kabul following a big reduction in the number of armed militias roaming the capital and a build-up in international security troops ahead of a visit to the city by US Secretary of State Colin Powell next week.

Afghan troops withdrew from the streets of Kabul Friday in compliance with a directive from the new interim government.

Powell, who will also visit India and Pakistan in a bid to defuse their stand-off before heading to Japan, said he would like to discuss with interim leader Hamid Karzai how best to marshal aid for the country's reconstruction.

"Secretary Powell will travel to Kabul as part of his upcoming trip and we still reserve the right to name other stops at a future date," spokesman Richard Boucher said in Washington Friday.

When Powell arrives in Afghanistan he will become the highest ranking US official and first secretary of state to visit the war-shattered country in more than 25 years.

"I would like to have an assessment of the situation in Kabul and in the country, but mostly (I would like) to get to know the leaders," Powell said. "I don't know them on a personal basis and I would like to get to know them."

Meanwhile, the interim govern-

ment's plan to rid the streets of armed men appeared to be making good progress.

General Din Mohammad Jurhat, a senior security official in the interior ministry, said around 5,000 to 6,000 Northern Alliance soldiers had left the city since Wednesday.

"Around five or six thousand soldiers have left Kabul in a week," he told AFP. "Another five or six thousand divided between the police and the military will remain."

Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni on Wednesday ordered the Afghan military to quit the capital within three days and leave the city's security duties to Afghan police and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Bush to visit Japan, S Korea, China in Feb

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush will travel to Japan, South Korea and China in mid-February on a tour that was postponed after the September 11 terror strikes, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Friday.

"During his visit to these three countries, the president will discuss our common struggle against terrorism, economic recovery, the strengthening of our alliances in the region, and other areas of mutual interest," he said.

Bush will be in Tokyo February 17-19; in Seoul February 19-20; then stay in Beijing February 21-22 in what will be his first trip to Asia since the October APEC summit in Shanghai, Fleischer said in a statement.

Officials in Japan said that country's efforts to build an economic recovery, anti-terrorism measures and reconstruction of Afghanistan were likely to figure high on the agenda.

Police arrest 350 militants prior to Musharraf speech

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police said Saturday they had arrested over 350 militants ahead of President Pervez Musharraf's speech later in the day, which will focus on curbing extremism.

Interior ministry sources also said police in all four of the country's provinces had been ordered to guard mosques and religious places.

"The move is aimed at warding off any attempts by extremist groups to disturb law and order," an interior ministry official said.

Police in Karachi said they had detained over 200 militants from the Muslim Sunni sect party, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and the minority Shiite sect party, Tehreek-i-Jafria Pakistan (TJP) in the southern Sindh province as a preventive measure to avoid any possible backlash in case of a ban being placed on the groups.

"Police have detained over 200 militants of different sectarian groups throughout the province including Karachi," Sindh Police spokesman Ghulam-us-Saqain told AFP.

A total of 74 were detained in Karachi and the rest in other parts of the province under the Maintenance of Public Order, he said.

Police in the North West Frontier Province have rounded up more than 100 leaders and activists of the same two sectarian parties since Friday, police said.

In the central Punjab province, around 50 preachers had been arrested since Friday for violating government restrictions on the use of loudspeakers for delivering inflammatory sermons in mosques, police said.

"The roundup under preventive custody laws is part of government's drive to contain religious militancy and misuse of mosques' loudspeakers," a senior police official in the eastern border city of Lahore said.

Terrorist plot may harm racial harmony in Singapore

AFP, Singapore

Singapore officials on Saturday warned the alleged terrorist plot to attack US military targets in Singapore could undermine racial harmony in the ethnically diverse city-state.

The government on Friday released details of the alleged plot, including two "well-developed plans" to attack US military personnel and bomb US naval ships off the Singapore coast.

US, Israeli, Australian and British embassies as well as American companies were also listed as targets of the group.

The plot was uncovered after 13 suspected militants were arrested last month.

The 13 are members of a group called Jemaah Islamiyah (Islamic Group), which is part of a larger network with cells in Malaysia and Indonesia.



A Dutch soldier prepares his equipment after moving into the barracks in the outskirts of Kabul, early Saturday. The first German troops, accompanied by Dutch soldiers and one Austrian, arrived on Friday to Afghanistan to serve in an international framework under British leadership.

Fake camera fools real crooks

AFP, New York

Two crooks allegedly robbed a delicatessen and, seeing a surveillance camera, took it along -- without noticing it was fake.

Another, real surveillance camera continued to roll, capturing their every move -- which was broadcast on local television Friday.

In the video tape, New York City viewers watched two young men appear to brandish a large-caliber revolver under the nose of Ali Murad, owner of M.A. Grodny, who quickly handed over the cash in the register.

But Murad had been held up once too often.

"That's New York, you have to be a little bit smarter, you know," said Murad.

Norway spells optimism over Lankan truce

AFP, Colombo

A three-member Norwegian delegation left here Saturday after expressing "cautious optimism" over prospects for brokering a permanent truce in Sri Lanka, officials said.

The team, headed by Norway's deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen, left in three separate flights out of the Sri Lankan capital Colombo ending two days of talks with leaders here, officials said.

In a statement issued through the Norwegian embassy, Helgesen said there was an "increased level of confidence between the parties" involved in the Sri Lankan conflict.

"We are convinced that there are opportunities to move further step by step towards negotiations," Helgesen said adding, however, that the process would be challenging and that both sides would face difficulties.

Helgesen said he had discussed issues concerning the plight of

civilians living in areas held by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the formalisation of an unofficial ceasefire which both sides have been observing since Christmas.

There was no immediate announcement on formalising a permanent truce, but Helgesen said: "There seems to be a willingness and commitment from both (Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's new government and the LTTE to find common ground on these matters."

The Norwegian embassy added that Helgesen was "cautiously optimistic about the process of finding a political solution to the conflict."

The visiting delegation also met with members of minority Tamil and Muslim political parties on Friday.

Sri Lanka's Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris said they were working on confidence-building measures to lay a strong foundation for peace talks at a future date.

"We want to move step by step without raising expectations that cannot be met," Peiris said.

He said the Norwegian team, which includes special peace envoy Erik Solheim, was concentrating on the initial moves rather than arranging substantive talks between the government and the rebels.

The Sri Lankan government has dismissed as "premature" speculation in Indian newspapers that the Tiger rebels had asked for a base in southern India to conduct the talks with Colombo.

The reports said the Tigers wanted India, which banned the group after blaming it for the 1991 assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, to provide a base for talks and also take part as observers.

Indian government sources have said that they have received no such request.

Britain to share Gibraltar with Spain

AFP, London

Britain's Foreign Office has said it plans to end Gibraltar's 298-year colonial status by signing a historic agreement with Spain to share sovereignty, the British press said Saturday.

Spanish officials confirmed that the deal would be struck late this summer after 18 years of Anglo-Spanish talks on the future of Gibraltar, The Daily Telegraph said.

However, the paper said, Peter Caruana, the colony's first minister, has boycotted talks recently and rejected offers to be part of the British negotiating team.

US court accepts complaint against Laden

AFP, New York

A US federal judge has accepted a complaint filed by the family of a man killed in the September 11 attacks against Osama bin Laden and has ruled that Bin Laden could be notified of the case via print or broadcast media.

James Beasley, lawyer for the family of George Eric Smith -- who was killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center -- told AFP on Friday that US District Judge Harold Baer ruled that bin Laden could be told of the civil suit through media ads.

Those spots could be broadcast on Qatar-based satellite channel Al-Jazeera, CNN International and BBC World, and notices could be printed in newspapers published in Pakistan, Beasley said.

"The judge has agreed on the concept, to the idea of the service other than handing a paper to a person. We're still waiting for the final, what the notice is going to say," the lawyer said.

"We've got to place ads, which identify the notice of the case, in newspapers and on various television stations."

Beasley said he had proposed the unorthodox solution to the Manhattan federal judge, as it would otherwise be impossible to serve court papers to the fugitive bin Laden, whose whereabouts are unknown.

"As far as newspapers, it's a standard thing that goes back a couple of hundred years. As far as TV, I think it can be kind of unique," Beasley said.

Canadian FM to visit India, Pakistan

AFP, Montreal

Canadian Foreign Minister John Manley is to visit dispute-stricken Asian nations India and Pakistan from January 18 to 27, a ministry spokeswoman said Friday.

"Canada has a good relationship with both India and Pakistan and if we can be helpful, we are prepared to do so," said Manley, through spokeswoman Marie-Christine Lilkoff.

Tension flared between India and Pakistan after an attack on the Indian parliament on December 13 which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based militant groups waging a separatist drive in Kashmir.

US, Pakistan discuss disposition of forces in case of Indo-Pak war

AFP, Washington

Rising tensions between India and Pakistan have prompted Pakistani and US military officials to reassess the disposition of US forces in Pakistan in the event of a conflict, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Friday.

Rumsfeld said Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has been "exceedingly cooperative" and that the issues raised by the higher states of military mobilisation in India in a "very orderly and sensible way."

Among those issues, he said, was US access to Pakistani air space in the event of a conflict as well as the disposition of US forces at air bases in Pakistan.

"I think that there has been discussion about aircraft and apron space and fuel and a variety of other things," he said and Pakistan were being discussed at a Pentagon news conference.

Japanese PM in Indonesia for talks with Megawati

AFP, Jakarta

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi arrived in Indonesia on Saturday on the penultimate leg of a five-nation tour aimed at boosting economic cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asian countries.

Koizumi was greeted by Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda and several other ministers at Jakarta's Halim Perdanakusuma military airport.

He was driven to the Merdeka presidential palace where he was due to hold talks with Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Hurriyat calls for Kashmir resolution to prevent war

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's main separatist alliance Saturday called for the international community to give "urgent and serious" attention to resolving the issue of the disputed region, saying a solution had to be found to avoid a war between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan.

The statement by the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) came as Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf was due to make a speech later Saturday during which he is expected to spell out plans to curb extremist groups, including those operating in Indian Kashmir.

"The Kashmir issue needs urgent and serious world attention at this crucial juncture," the statement said.

"To avoid a fourth war between India and Pakistan, it becomes imperative on the world community to resolve the issue of Kashmir."

India and Pakistan, who have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir, have massed troops along their shared border since a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament, which New Delhi blamed on two Pakistan-based militant groups.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and funding Kashmiri militants, a charge denied by Islamabad, which says it renders diplomatic and moral support to what it calls the Kashmiri struggle for freedom.

World must reject poverty to save environment

AFP, Bangkok

The world must reject the notion of poverty as a human condition if protection of the environment and sustainable development are to be achieved, a regional environment conference was told Saturday.

Speaking at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Environment and Development, UN representative Kim Hak-Su said the world faced five choices to achieve progress on sustainability.

These included rejecting poverty as an acceptable human condition, confronting and managing globalisation, conserving natural resources, improving governance and providing the required financial resources.

"However, our real success towards that end will hinge upon the timely implementation of the initiatives," he said.

The conference, initiated by the Japanese government, aims to ratify a program that will be put to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in August.

The forum also formally adopted initiatives from a similar conference held in Phnom Penh last November to reflect the region's priorities for Johannesburg.

Kim, the UN executive secretary for its economic and social commission for Asia/Pacific, said these related to poverty reduction, cleaner production, sustainable energy and ocean management.



Fernandes visits scene of army ordnance depot fire

AFP, Jodhpur

India's Defence Minister George Fernandes Saturday surveyed the damage caused by a massive fire which killed two people and destroyed about 1,000 tonnes of ammunition at an army ordnance depot in the western desert state of Rajasthan, officials said.

"The damage is extensive," Fernandes told reporters after visiting the area with the chief minister of Rajasthan.

The blaze, which erupted at around 3:30 pm (1000 GMT) on Friday in the ammunition depot at Bikaner, close to the border with Pakistan, had been brought under control early Saturday according to Lakshman Meena, the deputy inspector general of police in charge of the area.

Mugabe has gone 'bonkers': Tutu

AFP, Johannesburg

Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe has degenerated from one of the best leaders on the African continent into a madman, former South African archbishop Desmond Tutu said on Saturday.

"It is a great sadness, what has happened to President Mugabe. He was one of Africa's best leaders, a bright spark, a debonair, well-spoken and well-read person," Tutu said in an interview in the Star newspaper in Johannesburg.