

Israel carries out punishing attacks as violence spirals

7 Palestinians, 2 Israelis killed

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel heaped retaliatory punishment on the Palestinian Authority Wednesday, killing seven Palestinians and losing two of its own soldiers in bloody overnight attacks throughout the Gaza Strip.

Seven Palestinians and two Israeli soldiers were killed Wednesday during army operations in the Gaza Strip in the 17-month-old Intifada's bloodiest week so far.

As the unprecedented round of tit-for-tat violence continued, three Palestinians were killed in an Israeli army incursion at Abassan near Khan Yunis in the south of the Gaza Strip, medical sources said.

Two Israeli soldiers were also killed during fighting with the Palestinians during the incursion, Israeli military sources said. According to Palestinian security sources, 14 Palestinians were captured.

Israeli F-16 fighter jets also fired at least one rocket on Palestinian security buildings in the northern part of Gaza City Wednesday, injuring at least three civilians, Palestinian security and hospital sources said.

In a statement the army said that "special units, infantry and engineers, had operated overnight Tuesday to Wednesday in the north, the south and the centre of the Gaza Strip against Palestinian terrorists and their infra-structures".

The statement said that during the incursion around Khan Yunis and Abassan the army had destroyed three homes belonging to militants on Israel's wanted list but did not comment further as the operation was not yet

over late Wednesday morning.

The heavy army operations came a few hours after the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the Islamic movement Hamas, claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on southern Israel, which injured three Israelis for the first time.

Israel had warned when this new weapon was first used that if one of the rockets ever hit a populated area in Israel, the army's retaliation would be radical.

In another deadly operation, Israeli marines attacked Palestinian targets in Beit Lahia, killing four Palestinians and wounding five, one of them seriously.

All in their twenties, they were named by Palestinian hospital sources as Maher Hamada and Ahmad Abu Taher, both of them members of the Palestinian navy, Mohammad al-Qoma and Najdi al-Sabagh.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Rafidiyeh Hospital in Nablus said 23-year-old Abed Razeq Khader died Wednesday from injuries sustained a day earlier in clashes with Israeli troops.

The deaths bring the overall toll from the 17-month-old Palestinian intifada to 1,378, of whom 1,043 are Palestinians and 312 Israelis.

Meanwhile, witnesses said the Israeli army encircled two autonomous Palestinian villages near the northern West Bank militant stronghold of Jenin.

Israeli infantry units backed by some 15 tanks encircled Al-Yamun, while other troops with five tanks were deployed around Silat Al-Harbiya.

Decision on genocide suite against Sharon postponed

AFP, Brussels

A Belgian court on Wednesday postponed a ruling on whether it has jurisdiction to try a suit charging Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon with genocide in the 1982 massacres in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

The court did not say when it would rule on the admissibility of the case.

The case was lodged by 23 Palestinians under a 1993 law that allows war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide cases to be tried in Belgium regardless of where the acts took place or the countries of residence of plaintiffs and defendants.

The suit against Sharon was lodged last June by 23 Palestinian survivors or relatives of those killed in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps outside Beirut, when Sharon was Israel's defense minister.



PHOTO: AFP

This undated photo released by the Army Times on Tuesday shows First Sgt. Johnathan Blossom, of the 2nd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division running for cover during a fire fight on March 3 near Sirkhankel, Afghanistan. The position was being attacked by mortar fire, rocket propelled grenades and heavy machine gun fire. US and coalition forces have been in the area for the last three days in the largest offensive yet, against remaining Taliban and al-Qaida fighters.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (R) shakes hands with the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (L) on Tuesday at the White House in Washington, DC. Bush and Mubarak discussed recent tensions in the Middle East and the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

'Indian presence in SAARC meet in Pakistan to promote peace'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan expressed hope Thursday a regional meeting of information ministers, due to be attended by arch-rival India, would promote peace in conflict-riven South Asia.

Information ministers from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) started to arrive Thursday in the Pakistani capital for their second conference aimed at improving information sharing among the seven member-states.

"As a result of this conference, I hope any tension we have within the countries will be removed," Pakistan's new Information Minister Nisar Menom said, quoted by state media.

"When their leaders meet, they may have any acrimony between any two members of the SAARC, and, I think, this is the time to relook

at and rethink about our priorities," said Menom, a former country head of IBM who was appointed Tuesday by President Pervez Musharraf.

India's Broadcasting Minister Sushma Swaraj is due to attend the meeting, making him the first Indian government minister to visit Pakistan since a December 13 attack on the parliament in New Delhi sent tensions spiralling between the two countries.

The nuclear-armed rivals have massed around 800,000 troops on their common border since the attack, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

Menom said it was "a good omen for SAARC" that all seven member states -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka -- are participating.

Nepalese Information Minister Joya Prakash Prasad Gupta, who arrived Wednesday, said he was

optimistic the meet would promote understanding.

"We have some problems within the countries, every country is facing a lot of problems and we hope these kinds of meetings will help promote understanding," Gupta said.

In Nepal the army is fighting a six-year Maoist insurgency which has claimed the lives of more than 2,600 people.

Bhutanese Deputy Information Minister Dasho Leki Dorji said information technology could help develop the region.

"Information communication technology can be used to great advantage of the region, we harness this for the development of our people," he said.

Muslim MP shot dead in UP

AFP, Lucknow

A Muslim state legislator was shot dead Wednesday outside the governor's official residence in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, a police spokesman said.

Legislator Manzoor Ahmed was shot as he was taking part in a demonstration organised by his regional Samajwadi Party.

He succumbed to injuries on the way to hospital, police said.

Supporters of Ahmed's party had caught one of the two suspected assailants and handed him over to police, the police spokesman said.

There was no immediate information regarding a motive, but the killing came amid heightened Hindu-Muslim tensions following an eruption of sectarian violence in western Gujarat state last week that has claimed more than 600 lives.

Afghan warlords hold meet to talk on army

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's most powerful warlords came together Wednesday with interim government leaders and United Nations officials for a landmark conference to discuss security in the war-torn country.

The conference on building a national army was attended by all of Afghanistan's major warlords, including Abdul Rashid Dostam and Ismail Khan, as well as interim leader Hamid Karzai and UN special representative Lakhdar Brahimi.

"Since the establishment of the interim administration, the defence ministry has taken gradual steps towards the creation of a national army," Defence Minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim told the conference.

Malaysia departs 1,000 Filipino migrants

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

About 1,000 Filipinos have been deported from Malaysia's Sabah state after the biggest crackdown on illegal immigrants in decades, reports said Wednesday.

They were given one-way tickets and put on a ferry Tuesday bound for Zamboanga city in the southern Philippines from Sandakan town in Sabah, which lies on Borneo island, the Star newspaper said.

The New Straits Times said the latest deportations brought the total number of Filipino illegals deported from Sabah since early this year to 4,477.

Gujarat turns to 'night watchmen' to keep rioters at bay

AFP, Ahmedabad

During the day Bhavin Vadgama works as a finance manager with an architectural firm and at night stands guard to protect his family and friends from rioters.

In residential complexes in Ahmedabad, both Hindus and Muslims, form groups of 25 to 30 volunteers and keep their eyes peeled for people moving around their neighbourhood by dark.

Some of the older men in their 30s carry batons and iron rods to protect themselves in the event of a mob attack.

India's western state of Gujarat has seen the worst Hindu-Muslim blood-letting in a decade which has left over 580 people dead in the past five days.

"To ensure security within our private apartment complex we have to be alert all night," said 30-year-old Vadgama. "It is a tedious job but usually we take turns keeping watch."

His Rajdeep Park residential apartment block, which was attacked by a mob last week, is in a Muslim neighbourhood and has narrow lanes leading to the entrance.

"All the people in the group know the residents around the area. So we keep a watchful eye on any outsider," Vadgama said.

"Every once in a while in the night we go up onto the terrace and hide there to see if anyone has dared to come in," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Hindu Holy women shout slogans as they came to take part in a ritual for the construction of the Ram Temple near Karsevak Puram in Ayodhya on Wednesday in Uttar Pradesh. Indian Muslims are mulling a compromise formula offered by a hardline Hindu group to resolve a long-standing row over a disputed religious site in the northern town of Ayodhya.

Norwegian general in Wanni region to talk to Prabhakaran

AFP, Colombo

A retired Norwegian general went Wednesday to rebel-held areas in northern Sri Lanka to finalise a Scandinavian team's oversight of a truce between the government and Tamil Tigers.

Trond Furuhoide travelled in a military helicopter to the Wanni region, which is held by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Government spokesman G.L. Peiris said Furuhoide was expected to hold talks with LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran on arrangements to monitor the ceasefire, which went into effect on February 23.

Norway, which has been mediating between the government and the rebels, is currently assembling a

monitoring team consisting of 18 Scandinavians.

Three Norwegians, including Furuhoide, arrived here Saturday and another 12 monitors were expected to arrive here between Thursday and Sunday, with the others arriving later, Peiris said.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has complained that entrusting a foreigner to oversee the truce is a violation of Sri Lanka's sovereignty.

But Kumaratunga's spokesman Harim Peiris said the president, who is an arch-rival of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, would not take action on the matter.

"The president will not do anything about it," Harim Peiris said, adding that the president supported the peace process although she had serious concerns about the truce agreement.

Arabs set to endorse Saudi peace plan for ME

AFP, Jeddah

After securing the support of Syria and the Palestinian Authority, the Saudi initiative for peace in the Middle East is set to become a pan-Arab peace plan, diplomats and analysts said Wednesday.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Palestinian international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath both visited Saudi Arabia this week and held lengthy talks with Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz.

The prince is now due to present his ideas to the Arab summit in

Beirut on March 27 and 28 to transform it into a pan-Arab push for peace.

Shaath declared full support for the initiative launched last month by the de facto ruler of the oil-rich kingdom, and guardian of the holiest sites in Islam.

The official Saudi Press Agency reported immediately Tuesday night that Assad had "voiced his country's support for Crown Prince Abdullah's ideas aimed at reaching a just and comprehensive settlement in the region."

The two leaders held "positive

and successful talks ... concurring on all issues they discussed."

And the Syrian press on Wednesday backed that up.

Assad and Abdullah had "identical points of view," said SANA news agency and "stressed that a just and comprehensive peace in the region can be reached only if Israel withdraws from all the Arab territories occupied in 1967, including Syria's Golan Heights."

Assad "expressed his satisfaction with Saudi Arabia's position," according to the agency.