

Israeli army may stay in WB till fencing is completed

6 more Palestinians killed in Gaza helicopter raid

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army could stay in the Palestinian cities it has occupied in the past few days at least until the barrier it is building to seal off the West Bank is completed, a senior Israeli official said Monday.

The first section alone of the planned 350 kilometre (220 mile) line of fences, walls and ditches which was begun a week ago in a bid to keep suicide bombers out of Israel is expected to take four to six months to finish.

"In the short term we cannot fight terrorism effectively without a military presence in Area A," the parts of the Palestinian territories given autonomy under the 1993 Oslo accords, cabinet secretary Gideon Saar told army radio.

"In the longer term it is possible that other elements such as the construction of a fence will allow other arrangements to ensure security", he added.

"There is no doubt that in the present situation it is difficult to see how we can fight terrorism without a military presence on the ground."

The Israeli army has reoccupied all but two of the eight main cities in the West Bank as part of its "Determined Path" operation launched after suicide attacks which killed 26 Israelis in Jerusalem last week.

Early Monday they completed the takeover of Ramallah, surrounding the headquarters of

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for the third time in a month.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres ruled out on Sunday a long-term reoccupation of the West Bank, saying in an interview with CNN, "We do not intend to stay there forever. We do not intend to dismantle the Palestinian Authority."

But he refused to put a time limit on the army's campaign, adding, "They will stay as long as will be necessary."

Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer told CBS television reoccupation was "the last thing" Israel wished to carry out but said that the military operation was necessary and legitimate self-defence.

If the violence subsides, Israeli forces would withdraw in a "short time," Ben Eliezer said.

Meanwhile, two Israeli helicopters fired missiles early Monday at two cars on the southern Gaza Strip, killing six Palestinians, Palestinian hospital sources said.

Security officials said the attack near the town of Rafah was a "targeted assassination" carried out by the Israeli army.

They said the victims were riding in two cars when they were hit by helicopter missile fire. The identities of the dead were not immediately disclosed.

Arizona burns in sea of fire

25,000 evacuated from US town

AFP, Show Low

A monster wildfire bore down on a town in the western US state of Arizona after two blazes merged Sunday into a giant fireball that forced 25,000 residents to flee, officials said.

Fierce flames were creeping into the town of Show Low, which was abandoned by its 8,000 residents late Saturday, but a shift in the fire's pattern eased its intensity, saving the town from immediate destruction.

"The fire has reached the western part of Show Low, but we had some good luck in that its head dissipated and developed into four heads, which slowed the intensity of the blaze," said Cartha Icenhower of the US Forest Service.

"That has given firefighters a chance to go into the town, douse homes and put out cinders that could spark fires. Even though the fire is burning out of control, there is still hope for Show Low," she said.

Two huge wildfires burning since last Tuesday joined earlier Sunday to form one mega-fire that has so far scorched 154,400 hectares (386,000 acres) -- or 1,560 square kilometres (603 square miles) -- of land.

Desperate efforts were under-

way by around 2,000 firefighters, backed up by tanker aircraft and helicopters, to prevent the two fires from joining up.

The fires, with flames leaping 150 meters (500 feet) and igniting huge fireballs, have destroyed 115 homes and sparked the evacuation of six towns, forcing 25,000 people from their homes.

On Saturday terrified residents packed up trucks and cars, after the order to evacuate Show Low in the scenic White Mountains about 290 kilometres (180 miles) northeast of the major city of Phoenix.

Most took only the bare essentials, stopping only to buy food and water at the local convenience store before fleeing to one of the many school gymnasiums sheltering evacuees.

Strike teams of fire engines and bulldozers stood by in the town, waiting under a sky so blackened by smoke they could stare directly at the red disk of the sun.

By Sunday, the town's streets were deserted by all but firemen, while white cloths fluttered from the doorknobs of empty houses -- a sign to the firefighters that they have been abandoned.

Officials said the blaze, fuelled by bone-dry vegetation, high temperatures and winds, was the worst

in the history of the forest fire-prone region.

"The countryside is like a tinder-box and the fires have a life of their own and make their own conditions," said Dorman McGann of the Forest Service, which is coordinating efforts to fight the blaze.

The only objective, he said was to save lives, adding that around 2,000 homes in the area were saved after being doused with water and firefighting chemicals.

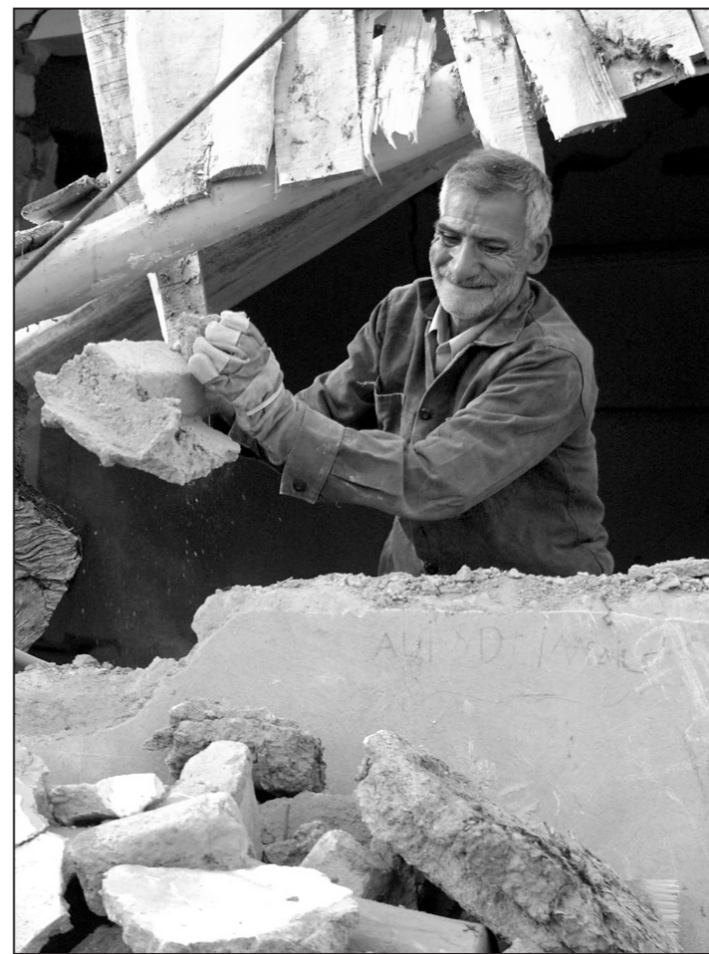
Arizona Governor Jane Hull described the blaze -- which officials believe was started by people either accidentally or as an act of arson -- as "a freight train racing towards us."

Attempts to dig ditches and build firebreaks to slow the advance of the fire failed when the huge flames, spurred by their own internal winds, jumped the barriers and consumed the bone-dry vegetation of the area.

"You can't attack this monster, it's too fierce," McGann said earlier.

"We are forced into the unusual situation of having to fight a defensive battle rather than an offensive one."

Forest Service officials however said the burn rate of the fire, which had more than doubled in size between Saturday and Sunday, had slowed by nightfall on Sunday.



An Iranian man removes debris from a destroyed house in the village of Changoreh in Qazvin province on Monday after it was hit by an earthquake late Saturday. Hundreds of people were killed and thousands injured.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepali king talks Maoist rebellion with India

AFP, New Delhi

Nepal's King Gyanendra Monday started a round of talks with Indian leaders on the first day of his state visit, with a violent Maoist rebellion in his country expected to top the agenda.

The king, who arrived late Sunday on his first official visit since taking the throne last year, was formally welcomed at India's presidential palace earlier Monday.

Indian President K.R. Narayanan, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh were at the palace to greet the king and his wife, Queen Komal.

"I look forward to exchanging views and gaining (from) the depth and scope of several of your promi-

nent and prestigious leaders and their vision and maturity," the king told reporters at the welcoming ceremony.

"First and foremost I would like to thank his excellency (the president) for giving us this invitation. We are very pleased to be in India," he said.

"I come with the good wishes of the people and the government of Nepal to the people and government of India."

The king later went into talks with Vice President Krishan Kant. He was due later to hold separate meetings with Vajpayee, Singh and Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani.

Vajpayee last met King Gyanendra during his visit to Nepal in January during a South Asia summit in January.

India has pledged military sup-

port to Nepal as it battles a Maoist insurgency that started in 1996 and has claimed more than 4,300 lives.

The insurgency has taken on a new intensity since November, when the rebels broke a ceasefire. Nepal has been under a state of emergency since then.

The kingdom is also in political turmoil with the Nepali Congress, the chief political party for more than half a century, effectively splitting in two last week.

Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has called early elections for November.

Gyanendra's visit comes shortly after the anniversary of the killing of 10 members of the royal family on June 1, 2001.

Kashmir is 'another Palestine in the making': Musharraf

AFP, London

The dispute between India and Pakistan over the disputed Kashmir region is "another Palestine in the making", Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf said in a British newspaper interview published on Monday.

"I keep telling the United States and everyone: we must understand the dangers of this region," Musharraf told the Independent.

"These dangers can only be averted if we resolve the Kashmir dispute. We must do that. Otherwise, there is another Palestine here in the making."

He added: "Kashmir needs to

be resolved. I also say it needs to be resolved in a peaceful manner. But if the other side does not want to resolve it, then we are stuck again."

Musharraf denied reports that Richard Armitage, the United States' deputy Secretary of State, resorted to threats in order to pressurise him to halt cross-border infiltration of Islamic militants into India-controlled Kashmir.

"We had a congenial and good interaction where he understood exactly our point of view. No, there has been no threat whatsoever," the Pakistani leader insisted.

Musharraf dismissed recent conciliatory steps taken by India

as "cosmetic", adding: "They are easing their own problems."

Tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, who were on the brink of war at the end of May, have eased somewhat after frantic diplomatic efforts, particularly by the US.

But between them, the two South Asian nations still have one million troops massed along their common border.

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both. It has been the cause of two of the three wars between them since they gained independence from Britain in 1947.



Nepal's King Gyanendra tosses rose petals on the memorial of Mahatma Gandhi, the founder of the Indian nation, in New Delhi on Monday. Gyanendra, in India on his first official visit since ascending to the throne in June last year, will spend six days in India at the invitation of Indian President K.R. Narayanan.

PHOTO: AFP

Indian police on alert after al-Qaida threat in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

Delhi police said Monday they had tightened security after receiving threats from Muslim militants including Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

Delhi Police Commissioner Ajai Raj Sharma said there were growing extremist threats to key establishments in the Indian capital.

"We have been alerted to the possibility of strikes by international terrorist groups including al-Qaeda," Sharma said.

"We have received information from intelligence agencies that

Islamic terrorists might try to attack key installations in the capital. They could also try to target VIPs and foreign diplomats," he added.

Sharma said in view of this police had increased security around Delhi's Chanakyapuri diplomatic neighbourhood.

"We have taken the necessary precautions to protect the city's diplomatic enclave, airports, railway stations, bus stops and key installations," said Sharma.

An attack on a bus and army camp in May by Islamic militants fighting Indian rule in Kashmir which left 35 people dead, mostly women

and children, sent tensions between India and Pakistan soaring.

The rivals had already massed a million troops on their common border after a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament that killed 14 and which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based rebel groups active in Kashmir.

During his visit to New Delhi earlier this month, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said members of al-Qaida had slipped into Kashmir and might try to provoke a war between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

Baby girl new member of Gandhi dynasty

AFP, New Delhi

India's most powerful political dynasty added to its lineage on Monday when Priyanka Gandhi, the great granddaughter of the country's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, gave birth to a baby girl.

"She gave birth to a baby daughter at 5.30 in the morning at Ganga Ram Hospital (in New Delhi)," a spokesman at the residence of her mother Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the opposition Congress party, told AFP.

Priyanka, 30, who had a son two years ago, is popular in India and is often seen as a successor to her mother as the leader of the Congress Party.

Cabinet reshuffle on Vajpayee's card

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is expected to reshuffle his cabinet later this month, a senior government official said Monday.

"A reshuffle in the cabinet is likely to be carried out by the end of June," the official from the prime minister's office, who declined to be named, said.

The official hinted that some ministers could be dropped and new faces brought in both from inside the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party and from its allies in the 20-party coalition government.

'Mahathir expected to quit soon'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is expected to quit soon, despite retracting his resignation from his party posts at the weekend, party sources and diplomats said Monday.

"From now to December it may be a transitional period for (Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad) Badawi to take on the leadership," a senior member of Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) told AFP.

Kashmir's border villagers have nowhere to go

AFP, Jammu

Madan Lal, 65, dozes under a tree with hot winds blowing around a camp of displaced people in a government school in the border district of Samba in disputed Kashmir.

Tired and dejected, Lal says his life is an endless drag.

"I am waiting compensation for my six acres of land occupied by the Indian troops since January to lay

mines," he says, worrying about feeding his six-member family.

Ujjagar Singh, 70, head of the border village Chanducheck, has seen three India-Pakistan wars.

Now living in Bana Singh Sports Stadium relief camp in Samba, Singh has a similar story to tell. His land has also been taken over by the army. Anti-tank mines have been sowed into his harvest-ready fields.

Since December last year, when armed militants attacked India's

parliament, tensions between India and Pakistan have been soaring.

Both countries have massed troops on the border. Indian forces occupied most of the border villages, displaced villagers and laid mines on their fields.

Now, homeless and hopeless in their own land, people like Lal and Singh live in relief camps, awaiting government compensation as India and Pakistan try the diplomatic route to resolving their discord.