

## 2 Palestinians killed in Israeli raid in Gaza

REUTERS, Beit Lahiya

Israeli troops raided a Palestinian-ruled town in the Gaza Strip on Sunday, killing two people and destroying a three-story apartment building in an operation to raze the family homes of Islamic militants, witnesses said.

Residents of Beit Lahiya said 30 armoured vehicles, backed by three helicopter gunships, rumbled into the town late on Saturday and cut it off from Gaza City, seven km away, before leaving about three hours later.

Gunmen crouched in graffiti-covered alleyways, bobbing up to fire at the Israeli forces. Crowds of unarmed men cheered them on from a safe distance.

Hospital officials said a 32-year-old man had died in a neighbourhood which had seen fighting and 20 other local people had been wounded.

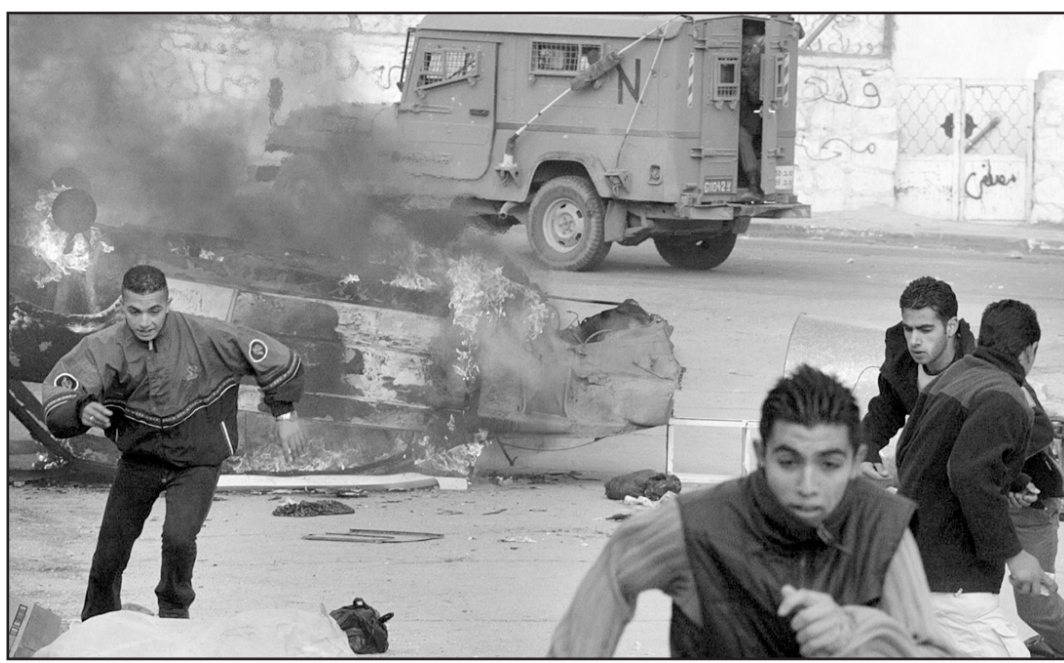


PHOTO: AFP  
Palestinians run away after throwing stones at an Israeli army jeep during clashes in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Saturday. Two more Palestinians were killed by Israeli gunfire in Gaza City. The death brought to 2,733 the number of people killed since the start of the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation 26 months ago, including 2,004 Palestinians and 678 Israelis.

## US sets up hi-tech military command centre in Qatar

Threat of war still hung over Iraq: Qatari FM

AFP, Washington

The United States has deployed in the Gulf state of Qatar a state-of-the-art command centre that could be used to direct large-scale military operations throughout the Gulf region, a US defence official said Saturday.

The deployment, officially in preparation for a military exercise, comes as the administration of President George W. Bush is considering using force against Iraq if it refuses to give up its chemical and biological weapons, long-range means to deliver them as well as nuclear technology.

"There are roughly 28 shelters, and it consists of all the command-and-control equipment that allows to basically establish a forward-based headquarters," Central Command spokesman Lieutenant Commander Nick Balice told AFP.

The hardware was developed and tested earlier this year in Tampa, Florida, where the Central Command is based, and recently shipped to As Sayliyah military base in Qatar where the war game dubbed Internal Look will be launched early next month, according to Balice.

As many as 1,000 US military personnel, including top war planners, are

being deployed to Qatar in advance of the exercise, in which Central Command head General Tommy Franks and the commanders of the Navy, Army and Marine Corps units in the region will take part.

The game will begin at an undisclosed date in early December and will last 7-10 days. Its scenario remains secret.

Meanwhile, Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani warned here Saturday that the threat of war still hung over Iraq despite the return of UN arms inspectors to the country.

"I am unhappy to say that ... the danger of war still exists," he told reporters after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Iraq and Israeli military activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"We hope that things unfold well," he said about the resumption of Iraqi arms inspections, adding that he wished to see "the Iraqi people avoid any misfortune."

Concerning the Palestinians, Sheikh Hamad said he and Mubarak leaders had not discussed in detail the US-backed roadmap to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state by 2005.

## India pledges to prevent AIDS from spiralling out of control

AFP, Guwahati

Thousands of people in India's northeast pledged Sunday to prevent AIDS from spiralling out of control in a region where the disease has already assumed epidemic proportions.

Schoolchildren, health workers and rehabilitated drug addicts, holding placards and singing specially-composed songs, marched through the streets in seven north-eastern states to mark World AIDS Day.

Government figures put the toll of HIV-positive Indians at four million, although unofficial estimates suggest the number is closer to five million.

## Advani urges world to 'ostracise terror states'

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani Sunday stepped up his offensive against Pakistan, urging the international community to "ostracise terror states," local media reported.

"Innocent civilians, women and children are being made targets," Advani was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

"This poses a grave threat not only to the common man but also to democracy, civilisation and human-

ity. The earlier the world realises it, the better it would be for humanity."

Speaking at a parade on the outskirts of the capital by the Border Security Force (BSF), which guards India's frontiers, Advani said: "Terrorist organisations are dangerous but terror states are far more dangerous... The international community should ostracise such terror states in the interest of democracy, civilisation and humanity," a reference to arch-rival Pakistan.

India accuses Pakistan of supporting "cross border terrorism" in Kashmir -- India's only Muslim

majority state -- where more than 37,500 people have died since the start of an Islamic anti-Indian rebellion in 1989.

Pakistan denies sponsoring militants and insists it only offers moral and diplomatic support to what it calls a Kashmiri freedom struggle.

Advani's statement comes a day after he issued a direct challenge to Pakistan to drop its alleged support for the Muslim insurgency in Kashmir and fight another war over the disputed Himalayan territory.

## Total solar eclipse on Wednesday

AFP, Paris

In an age that scoffs at superstition, there will occur next week a sight guaranteed to tingle the spine of the most hardened sceptic: A total solar eclipse.

In a celestial show that reaches into the soul to inspire dread and awe, the Moon will inch across the face of the Sun and briefly blot out its life-giving light.

Starting in the southern Atlantic at 0550 GMT on Wednesday, the shadow will race eastwards, streak across southern Africa and head across the Indian Ocean before traversing South Australia.

## Pak coalition faces meltdown

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's fragile coalition government, loyal to President Pervez Musharraf, is struggling to avert a possible meltdown after a key parliamentary ally withdrew support this week, party officials and analysts say.

The ethnic-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which holds 17 seats in the 342-member National Assembly, renounced its support for the army-backed Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) on Wednesday -- just days after the government was sworn in.

The MQM said the new civilian government had reneged on a promise to open to its members so-called "no-go" areas in the commercial capital of Karachi. The areas were created a decade ago to avoid violence between the MQM and a rival faction.

The party's votes were crucial in securing the PML-Q's Jamali Zafarullah the prime ministership on November 21, which he won by a margin of just one vote in the full assembly.

The PML-Q alone controls 118 seats in the house, but it attracted the MQM, 10 dissenting members from the 81-strong opposition Pakistan People's Party, and several minor Musharraf-allied parties to win a majority for Jamali.

The withdrawal of support means that a mandatory vote of confidence in the prime minister by the national assembly, which must take place by late January, faces failure.

The threat draws the PML-Q back to the position it faced after the country's October 10 polls, when the resulting hung parliament led to weeks of intensive inter-party haggling over forming government.

"We are trying to mend fences with MQM and are also exploring other options to secure support from other groups represented in the parliament," PML-Q spokesman Azeem Chaudhry told AFP.

The party has renewed negotiations with the six-party far-right Islamist alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which scooped 60 seats in the elections to win the balance of power in the assembly after campaigning on an anti-US platform.

## Major oil slick to hit Spanish coast

AFP, La Coruna

A 9,000-tonne oil slick from the sunken oil tanker Prestige, which threatens Spain's northwestern coastline, is expected to wash ashore on Sunday.

So far, the slick has remained off the stricken Galician coast but bad weather conditions have hindered attempts to prevent the fuel washing ashore, with the slick expected to hit the coast within hours.

Atrocious weather has made it difficult for the eight specialised anti-pollution vessels which have formed a barrier off Cape Tourinan.

The fleet, including two ships from France, two Dutch, one British, one German, one Belgian and one Norwegian vessel, have already managed to sweep up some 3,000 tonnes from previous slicks.

## UN admits Iraq's advance knowledge of inspection

AFP, Baghdad

The chief of a suspected weapons site in Iraq was tipped off to a "surprise" visit by UN arms inspectors Saturday, a spokesman for the arms inspectors in Baghdad admitted.

"He was informed the day before (Friday) that the team was coming to remove an air sampler and install a new one," Hiro Ueki, spokesman for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), told AFP after having denied any forewarning at a press briefing.

"Um al-Maarik Company, which the IAEA team visited today, 30 November, was notified by the IAEA team in advance that two of their technicians would review the status of the remaining video surveillance," he said.

The site is known to have been used previously to develop and build the Al-Hussein missile, an Iraqi version of the Scud.

Iraq admitted in 1995 having filled 25 Scud warheads with anthrax and/or other toxins.

Ueki made the comments by telephone shortly after reporters pressed him during a briefing on remarks by an Iraqi official who told journalists he had prior notice of a visit by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) experts.

The complex, 15 kilometres south of Baghdad, was among sites inspected Saturday as part of what are meant to be surprise inspections under UN Security Council Resolution 1441.

A disarmament team spent three hours at the complex known as Um al-Maarik (Mother of All Battles), Iraq's term for the 1991 Gulf war.

At UN headquarters in New York, meanwhile, the Security Council was gearing up for a week of intense activity on Iraq which, it has said, must end with a full and honest disclosure by that country of its most dangerous weapons programmes.



PHOTO: AFP  
French President Jacques Chirac follows the coffin containing the ashes of French writer Alexandre Dumas into the Pantheon on Saturday in Paris during the official ceremony commemorating the transfer of his ashes.

## Pak nukes may fall into terrorists' hands: Putin

AFP, New Delhi

Weapons of mass destruction in Pakistan could fall into the hands of "bandits and terrorists," Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday in an interview with an Indian newspaper.

Putin, who arrives for a three-day official visit to India on Tuesday, told the Hindu newspaper that the international community needed "to have a clear picture of where those weapons are, in what status, in what condition they are and what will happen to them in future."

Putin said Russia was worried that the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) "could fall into the hands of bandits and terrorists."

## Truce takes centre stage in Lankan peace talks

AFP, Oslo

Sri Lanka's warring parties will launch their first ever talks in Europe Monday focusing on a fragile truce that could make or break the Norwegian-backed peace bid, diplomats here said.

The foes are expected to conduct negotiations through their four-day talks which will also address humanitarian issues as well as contentious political matters underlying the drawn-out conflict, diplomats said.

Norwegian peace broker Erik Solheim said the current truce, in place since February 23, had resulted in the longest period of "no war" in Sri Lanka since the ethnic conflict de-generated into a full-scale guerrilla war in 1983.

Four previous peace attempts ended in failure and led to more bloodshed. A truce between 1994 and April 1995 lasted exactly 100 days till the rebels bombed naval gunboats at a port in the island's north-east.

Both sides have blamed the other for previous failures, but the latest initiative is the first involving a western facilitator and backed strongly by the US, European nations, Japan and Sri Lanka's neighbour India.

Sri Lanka's Tiger rebels took up arms in 1972, demanding a separate state for minority Tamils in a country where nearly 70 percent of the population are ethnic Sinhalese. The rebels argued they faced racial discrimination.

However, there had been breaches by both sides, raising temperatures in the embattled north-east regions although Scandinavians monitoring the truce said the violations were not serious enough to jeopardise the entire peace effort.

Solheim said the ceasefire brokered by Oslo will be reviewed in the snow-covered Norwegian capital which is hosting the Sri Lankan talks for the first time outside Asia.

"If it (the ceasefire) breaks down it will be a dangerous situation," Solheim said adding that both sides appeared keen to resolve problems relating to the implementation of a memorandum of understanding setting out the truce.

## Pakistan still not sure of Laden's presence

AFP, Islamabad

The rugged mountains hugging Pakistan's porous northwestern tribal border belt with Afghanistan have long been one of the most likely hideouts of Osama bin Laden, observers say.

The delivery in Islamabad on November 12 of an audio cassette carrying what is believed to be a recent recording of bin Laden's voice has revived speculation that the al-Qaida chief has eluded a 13-month US-led manhunt by taking refuge in a remote pocket of the border region.

"He knows the area very well," said Asad Afridi, a lawyer based in the Khyber border district.

"It may be possible for two or three days a week he's stationed in Afghanistan, then comes to the tribal areas for two or three days," Afridi told AFP.

The region is bin Laden's old home turf. He was based with some 400 Arab Mujahedin followers in the Khyber village of Tira during the war against the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation, Afridi said.

"All these Arabs know the secret ways through the mountains, very well. They are moving," he said.

Lying less than 200 km from Pakistan's capital, the area is home to Pashtun tribes, who share a common ethnicity with Afghanistan's former Taliban rulers.

It runs along a porous 1,250-kilometer (2,016-mile) border over which smugglers -- of people and goods -- melt easily.

Isolated, conservative, underdeveloped, and operating under laws separate from the rest of Pakistan, religious leaders hold sway as the main providers of education through free Islamic colleges.

## Iraq war could cost \$ 200 b

AFP, Washington

Informal estimates by US congressional staff and Washington think-tanks place the cost of a US invasion and postwar occupation of Iraq at as much as 200 billion dollars, the Washington Post reported Sunday.

If the fighting is protracted, and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein blows up his country's oil fields, economists told the newspaper that the indirect costs of the war could be even greater, reverberating through the US economy for many years.

Using different methodologies, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office and staff for the Democrat minority on the House Budget Committee have concluded that a short, decisive war involving the deployment of about 250,000 US troops could cost between 44 billion dollars and 60 billion dollars.



PHOTO: AFP  
Ms. Kim So-yun, 23, of South Korea (C) waves to the crowd after winning the title of Miss Asia-Pacific 2002 in Manila on Sunday. Ms Ksenia Volkva (r), 20, of Russia was the first runner up and Ms. Tina Chhatwal (l), 24, of India was the second runner up.