

## 6 more Palestinians killed in Israeli raid

1,000 told to leave home, ME quartet to meet to talk peace roadmap

AFP, Gaza City

Israel stepped up its operations early Thursday in Palestinian territories, killing six people in a helicopter and tank raid in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as the relative lull that accompanied the start of the war in Iraq further dissolves.

The Israeli army expelled 1,000 Palestinian men of fighting age from their homes in a West Bank refugee camp and told them not to return until they had finished their hunt for militants.

Four of the Palestinians killed in pre-dawn operations Thursday were in the southern Gaza refugee camp of Rafah, where the army mounted an incursion with around 40 tanks and a number of bulldozers, sparking a fire fight.

Mahmoud Shaath, 24, was killed by an Israeli tank shell while Wissam al-Shaar, also 24, and Ibrahim Shaluf, 18, died when they were hit by a rocket fired

from a helicopter.

Walid al-Ledawi, 19, died later from shrapnel wounds after the missile attack.

Eight other Palestinians were injured, two of whom were in a critical condition during the incursion which penetrated up to one kilometre (0.62 miles) into the camp close to the Egyptian border, Palestinian security sources said.

A tank fired two shells and soldiers also opened fire while two assault helicopters circled overhead before one of them shot a rocket towards the camp, the sources said.

Four Israeli soldiers were slightly hurt during the operation when their armoured vehicle overturned after the explosion of a remote-controlled device, Israeli military sources said.

"Our forces combed the sector and carried out searches, then demolished four abandoned houses under which tunnels could be dug to smuggle arms from Egypt," the army said in a state-

ment after the operation wound up.

In the West Bank, a Palestinian teenager was shot dead by Israeli troops in the town of Qalqilya, Palestinian sources said.

Jihad Mazal, 14, was killed on the doorsteps of his home as soldiers opened fire during an incursion in the northern town, they said. Several tanks and jeeps took part in the raid, during which two Palestinians were arrested.

Elsewhere, an activist with the Islamic radical group Hamas was shot dead by Israeli soldiers, security sources said.

Khaled Rehan, 28, a member of the Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, opened fire on Israeli soldiers when they tried to arrest him at a house in Nablus, and he was killed in the return fire.

The latest deaths take the toll to 3,126 since the start of the intifada in September 2000. The figure includes 2,349 Palestinians and 719 Israelis.

The army said it also destroyed

overnight the home in Tulkarem of Mahmoud Marmarsh, a Hamas activist who in May 2001 carried out a suicide attack at a shopping centre in Israel that killed five Israelis and wounded 74.

Meanwhile, representatives from the Middle East Quartet, working together to develop a road map for peace in the region, were to meet Thursday in Brussels to further move towards ending hostilities between Israelis and the Palestinians, diplomats said.

The meeting will bring the EU's special Middle East envoy Miguel Angel Moratinos together with top UN, Russian and US representatives "to discuss the modalities to publish and implement the road map for the Middle East," a diplomat told AFP.

The road map foresees a series of steps necessary to end violence and the eventual creation of an independent Palestinian state.



PHOTO: AFP

Nguyen Duc Kham (F) 67, along with an unidentified SARS victim, receives treatment at Hanoi's Bach Mai hospital on Thursday. The new patient, from Ninh Binh province, 100 km south of Hanoi, is the first such case in ten days in the country where there are so far 59 cases of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) of which four were fatalities. Woman at right is a nurse.

## Indonesia declared SARS a 'nat'l threat'

AP, Jakarta

Vice President Hamzah Haz declared a deadly flu-like disease a "national threat" on Thursday while Indonesia prepared to grant health officials emergency powers to forcibly quarantine and treat patients with the illness.

"We must treat this as a national threat," Haz told reporters in Jakarta, the capital. "If not, this will be a new burden for all of us."

Indonesia has no confirmed cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, but is preparing for the possibility because of an outbreak in neighbouring Singapore and other Asian countries.

One woman has been hospitalised in the central Javanese town of Semarang with SARS-like symptoms but health ministry officials said it's too early to say if she has the illness.

Schools on Batam, an Indonesian island off the coast of Singapore, have been closed from Thursday to Sunday as a precaution, local officials said. In Singapore, four people have died from the disease and 95 others have come down with it.

## Hijacked ferry boat returns to Cuba

AP, Havana

A small ferry boat hijacked in Havana Bay and forced to sail toward Florida had returned to Cuba Thursday after Cuban authorities chased it some 30 miles into international waters.

The boat left international waters late Wednesday under Cuban government escort, a US Coast Guard official in Miami said, speaking on condition of anonymity. He declined further comment.

It was unclear whether the hijackers had surrendered.

FBI agents had waited nearby on a US Coast Guard cutter as Cuban authorities tried to persuade the hijackers to give up. The men had threatened to throw some of the passengers overboard if they did not get their way, the Cuban government said in a written statement on Wednesday.

## Mudslides claim 45 in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

At least 45 people have been killed after torrential rainstorms caused floods and mudslides on the mountainous eastern Indonesian island of Flores, officials said Thursday.

As of Thursday a total of 30 people had died in the central district of Ende, district chief Paulinus Domi told AFP from Ende town.

All but one were residents of Ndunga village, which was hit by a mudslide early Monday, Domi said. The other was a fisherman caught in a storm on Wednesday.

Residents of the village, sited between two hills, were asleep when the mudslide struck. All 17 homes in the village and a bridge on the road between Ende and the island's main town Maumere were destroyed.

Around the eastern town of Larantuka, mudslides killed 10 people and swept away 81 homes early Wednesday, said district spokesman Kunradus Liwo.



PHOTO: AFP

An investigator (R) in plainclothes looks at the bodies of victims of a deadly bomb attack at a wharf in the southern Philippine city of Davao on Wednesday. At least 16 people were killed and 50 were injured in what President Gloria Arroyo called a "terrorist attack."

## 3 mosques bombed after blast in S Philippines

16 killed in wharf bomb explosion

AFP, Manila

Bombs exploded outside three mosques in the southern Philippine city of Davao Thursday just hours after a blast in a nearby wharf left 16 people dead in what have been described as terrorist acts.

The mosque bombings came shortly before President Gloria Arroyo arrived in predominantly-Christian Davao to meet with investigators and inspect the damage from the deadly blast late Wednesday.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks on the wharf and the mosques, which Arroyo blamed on

"terrorists."

The wharf blast late Wednesday left 16 people dead and 50 others injured, but there were no casualties in the successive attacks on the mosques.

Police said they were investigating whether the wharf bombing was connected to a similar March 4 attack on the Davao international airport in which 22 people were killed and 150 others injured.

That bombing was blamed on the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which has been waging a rebellion for an independent Islamic

state in the south since 1978.

MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu warned that that the mosque bombings "could have been aimed at really igniting a Muslim-Christian war in Mindanao."

Military vice-chief of staff Lieutenant General Rodolfo Garcia said attacks might be "a retaliatory action" but added that this should not be allowed to become a "religious confrontation."

Davao city, some 950 kilometres (590 miles) south of Manila, is the commercial capital of the southern Philippine island of Mindanao.

## China slams US HR record in Afghan, Iraq wars

AFP, Beijing

China Thursday slammed growing American unilateralism as the root of blunt human rights violations around the world, especially during the war in Afghanistan and the ongoing war in Iraq.

A report issued by the State Council, China's cabinet, slammed the rights record of the United States in retaliation to a State Department global human rights report this week that skewered China for its gross violations.

"The United States is following unilateralism in international affairs and has frequently committed blunt violations of human rights in other countries," said the long-winded eight-part report carried by Xinhua news agency.

On the Iraq war, the United States "has openly violated the purpose and principles of the UN Charter, has caused casualties of innocent Iraqi civilians and serious humanitarian disasters."

## Naga rebels, Delhi to talk next week

PTI, New Delhi

In a bid to further the Naga peace process, informal discussions between NSCN (I-M) leadership and Centre's special emissary K Padmanabhaiah are likely to be held abroad next week.

These consultations would be followed by another round of formal talks in New Delhi in the next few months, Padmanabhaiah said.

"While it is difficult to put a time-limit as to when the peace accord would be finalised, the climate at present is extremely favourable for working out a settlement," he said.

Replying to questions on various aspects of the Naga peace process, he said the newly-elected coalition government in Nagaland was not only favouring the process, but it also has three major NDA partners and nine NDA ministers.

## Mystery illness fear spreading faster than the disease

WHO team arrives in China

AP, Hong Kong

As scientists scramble to unravel the mystery of severe acute respiratory syndrome, a sense of crisis is spreading even faster than the illness itself.

People in Hong Kong are buying surgical masks by the thousands. Hospitals have closed in Canada, a jetliner was briefly detained and inspected in California, and the Panama Canal dispatched inspectors to check ship crews for symptoms.

A hoax that Hong Kong had been declared an "infected city" prompted panicked people to rush out and stock up on food. In Thailand, authorities turned away a French warship en route from Singapore, which has reported cases.

Economists warn it could batter Asia's economy as manufacturers temporarily shut down, consumers avoid malls and restaurants and tourists to stay away.

Severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, has now sickened more than 2,200 people worldwide and killed at least 78. Some of the alerts cropping up in infected countries are real, some aren't, but fears about the disease are gaining momentum.

In Hong Kong, authorities used barricades and tape to seal 240 people inside their infected apartment building. The next night, they were put in quarantine camps.

Hong Kong has become something of a masked city, with hundreds of thousands of people putting them on around town - some sporting creative designs such as cartoon characters or bright floral patterns. The World Health Organization recommends masks only for those in contact with victims.

"If you put on a mask but don't fasten your seatbelt in your car, that's upside down," said Dr. Guenael Rodier, WHO's head of surveillance and

response.

Doctors and nurses in Singapore have donned germ-warfare suits to get closeto patients.

The Geneva-based WHO warned people on Wednesday to avoid travel to Hong Kong and China's Guangdong province, where most of the mainland's deaths occurred. But many places have already been screening travelers.

Meanwhile, a medical team landed on Thursday in southern China for the first international inspection of the region believed to have spawned a deadly flu-like illness, while jittery governments from Hong Kong to Thailand toughened enforcement of quarantine rules to curb the disease.

After days of waiting, four World Health Organization experts arrived in China's Guangdong province to investigate how severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, was born - and how it began its worldwide spread.

## Diplomacy speeds up to resolve DPRK nuke crisis

AFP, Seoul

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis gathered momentum Thursday after a divided UN Security Council agreed to meet next week to address the stand-off.

Three months after North Korea unilaterally pulled out of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Security Council said it would convene next Wednesday, though diplomats indicated that a decision on how to handle the crisis would not follow immediately.

In an effort to pressure the Stalinist regime to abandon its atomic weapons

ambitions, the United States has been pushing the world body for months to take up the case despite reluctance from China and Russia.

The two North Korea allies fear the UN could force Pyongyang, which has said UN sanctions would be tantamount to a declaration of war, deeper into isolation, diminishing hopes of a negotiated settlement to the crisis.

John Negroponte, the American ambassador to the United Nations said Wednesday that no decisions on UN handling of North Korea should be expected at the April 5 meeting.

"There was nothing discussed today about an outcome of these consulta-

tions or any prejudgment of any outcome," Negroponte said in New York.

The International Atomic Energy Agency referred North Korea to the UN Security Council on February 12, saying the Stalinist state was in violation of non-proliferation accords after Pyongyang expelled UN inspectors from its nuclear complex at Yongbyon and withdrew in January from the NPT.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Vinod Khanna (L) greets Bollywood actor Amir Khan (R) who received the Padma Shree Award during the Civil Investiture ceremony at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi on Thursday. The civil awards were given to recipients for excellence in their respective fields. Woman at center is unidentified.

## Top Hizbul commander killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected Muslim militants shot dead a three-year-old girl and her parents in the northern region of Indian-administered Kashmir, a police spokesman said Thursday.

Gunmen believed to be separatist militants barged into the home of a former militant, Mohammed Yusuf, overnight and fired indiscriminately, killing him, his wife and their daughter, the spokesman said.

The latest killing came as Indian security forces gunned down a top Islamic militant during an encounter with rebels in Kashmir Wednesday.

Saif-ul-Islam, the chief commander of Hizbul Mujahedin group, had been arrested in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian-administered Kashmir before he was shot dead Wednesday evening, police said.

They said Indian troops and local police shot dead four other Muslim militants in two separate encounters during cordon-and-search operations in Kashmir's southern districts of Poonch and Rajouri on Wednesday.