

Israel on alert after Gaza strike

Court orders halt to barrier work

AFP, Gaza City

Israel was on high alert yesterday after the killing of three Palestinians in an air strike near Gaza City, as judges ordered a halt to work on a section of the controversial West Bank barrier near Jerusalem.

Another wanted Palestinian militant was killed Sunday, prompting Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei to accuse the Israelis of trying to wreck attempts to broker a ceasefire.

Police reinforcements were deployed in large numbers along the Green Line which separates Israel from the West Bank in a bid to prevent any infiltrations by would-be Palestinian suicide attackers after the Israeli helicopter strike late Saturday in which an Islamic Jihad military chief was killed, security sources said.

The main Erez border crossing between the Gaza Strip and the Jewish state was closed, preventing thousands of Palestinians from traveling to their work in Israel or in a neighbouring industrial zone.

Mahmud Jouda, 30, a top leader of Al-Quds Brigades, the armed wing of the Palestinian radical group, was killed alongside fellow militant Amin al-Dahduh, 42, in the Gaza strike on Saturday night.

His 20-year-old cousin Ayman, not affiliated to the group, was also killed, medical and security sources said.

An Israeli military spokesman said the strike targeted "a vehicle carrying senior Islamic Jihad terrorists who were responsible for planning a number of terror attacks against Israeli civilian and military targets".

Israeli security services fear any reprisals will be launched from the West Bank, where authorities are building a massive barrier which they say is designed to foil suicide attacks.

At funerals for the three victims Sunday, Islamic Jihad said the barrier would not protect Israel.

More than 4,000 Palestinians turned out to pay their last respects to Jouda, as his body was taken in a cortege from Gaza City to the nearby Jabalya refugee camp. The two cousins were also buried in Gaza.

"The wall will not prevent us from carrying out more attacks," one Jihad follower told the crowds via loud-speaker.

Israel's supreme court Sunday ordered the suspension of construction of a section of the barrier northwest of Jerusalem where two Palestinian protesters were killed last week, judicial sources said.

The suspension order, which will remain in force until next week, allows the court to examine appeals presented by residents of eight Palestinian villages in the West Bank against construction of the barrier on their land.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian residents of the West Bank village of Biddu demonstrate in front of the Israeli Supreme Court in Jerusalem yesterday against the construction of the controversial Israeli "security" barrier which goes over their land.

US pays for tip-off on sons of Saddam

REUTERS, Washington

The informant who helped lead the US military to ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's two sons has been paid most of a \$30 million reward for the tip-off, the State Department said on Saturday.

"The informant who gave us information on the whereabouts of Uday and Qusay Hussein has been paid the bulk of the reward within the last couple of days, and has control over payment of the balance of the reward," said State Department spokeswoman Joanne Moore. "The informant and his family have been relocated."

Uday and Qusay Hussein were killed in a firefight with American troops in July, in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. The US government had offered a \$15 million reward for information leading to the capture of each son and a \$25 million reward for their father.

Saddam surrendered to American forces in December and is being held US custody. No reward is expected to be paid for Saddam's capture because he was located by the US military.

US terms ties with India good, engagement with Pakistan constructive

PTI, Washington

Citing the Bush Administration's foreign policy success in developing better relations with Asian countries, the US has described its ties with India as "good" and its engagement with Pakistan as "constructive".

"For many years, it was thought that it was not possible to have good relations with all of Asia's powers. It was thought that good relations with China came at the expense of good relations with our ally Japan that good relations with India came at the expense of constructive engagement with Pakistan. The President has changed this paradigm," US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said.

"Our Asian alliances have never been stronger. Forces from Australia, Japan, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines are making important contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States

has negotiated free trade agreements with Singapore and Australia.

"We are working with the 21 nations of the Asia Pacific Cooperation Forum on an ambitious agenda designed to bolster economic growth and promote common security. And at the same time, we are building a candid, cooperative and constructive relationship with China that embraces our common interests but never loses sight of our considerable differences about values," Rice said speaking at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Sun Valley.

She also stressed the need to deal with "freedom deficit" in the Middle East by spreading there the values of democracy.

About Russia, she said Russia's democracy is "uneven" and its success not yet assured.



PHOTO: AFP
Visiting French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin (R) shakes hands with Pakistani Prime Minister Pervez Musharraf (C) next to Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri in Islamabad Saturday. De Villepin held talks with President Pervez Musharraf and other Pakistani officials on regional security.

France backs Pakistan in anti-terror fight

AFP, Islamabad

France has pledged support to Pakistan with a view to promoting stability in Asia, given the vital role envisaged for Islamabad in the struggle against terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The backing was voiced by French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin who ended a 24-hour visit to Pakistan yesterday, when he left for Japan.

De Villepin sought to encourage Pakistani leaders to pursue their efforts in the anti-terror campaign, in containing the spread of WMD and in promoting dialogue with India, which like Pakistan has tested nuclear weapons.

Buddhist monks plunge into Lanka politics

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Buddhist clergy has advised kings and presidents for centuries, but its decision to field candidates in April's parliamentary vote is causing consternation among politicians and officials.

The first-ever all-monk party is running in the April 2 elections called by President Chandrika Kumaratunga nearly four years ahead of schedule, and clergy candidates are causing concern to rivals as well as to election officials.

The elections commission will have to relocate hundreds of polling booths which are usually set up in temples in this majority Buddhist nation, election officials said.

With some 281 Buddhist monks contesting the 225 parliamentary

seats, setting up a voting centre in a temple would be inappropriate, they noted.

The fear that the monks could attract a sizeable number of new voters as well as those dissatisfied with mainstream politicians has led to intense criticism as well as physical attacks against them.

Officials said a Buddhist monk was wounded when he was attacked allegedly by supporters of Kumaratunga's party in the southern town of Galle on the day nominations closed last week.

State-run media controlled by Kumaratunga have unleashed a campaign against monks being allowed to contest the polls.

However, members of her alliance have also been calling for a return to the country's Buddhist

Stop the War coalition to sue Bush, Blair over Iraq

AFP, London

A coalition of groups opposed to the US-led invasion of Iraq said on Saturday it intended to take legal action for "mass murder" against British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George Bush before the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

"What has happened is the mass murder of 20,000 or so Iraqis," said Chris Coverdale, a spokesman for the Stop the War coalition, told Sky News.

"We have to ensure that Bush and Blair and all the others associated with that decision to attack and kill Iraqis are held to account for it."

Some 600 supporters of the coalition, which was formed in September 2001, met in London to prepare for a mass demonstration in the capital on March 20, the anniversary of the invasion of oil-rich Iraq.

Iraqi leaders make final push for constitution

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders made a last push yesterday to draw up a temporary constitution, a major step on the road to winning back sovereignty, as police and US-led occupation forces suffered new casualties.

After working through two consecutive nights, members of the US-appointed Governing Council were optimistic about reaching an agreement later in the day but said they would not sign the document into law before Wednesday.

The interim constitution is aimed at seeing Iraq through a transitional period and into next year. It encompasses a bill of rights, the setting up of a federal state and covers the return of the army to civilian control.

But debate on the text has sparked the council's first major row and exposed ethnic and religious divisions that until now had been kept from sight.

While admitting there were no guarantees for success, a senior official from the US-led coalition said he was optimistic that an agreement would be hammered out. "I think we will be able to finish the document today," he told reporters.

After a sensational walkout by several council members on Friday, the leaders broke off into groups working on up to 60 points that needed finalising before meeting again as a council later in the day.

Tough issues like what role Islam should play in the document, an important part of moves toward a handover of sovereignty on June 30, have been set aside until the final moment to keep the process moving forward.

"We started to learn a new trade and that is called compromise and this is new for us and that is all about democracy," council member Muwaffaq Rubaie told an overnight news conference.

"Failure is not an option, we have to get this document signed and dusted and finished," he said before heading back to the talks.

While gradual political progress was being made, the security situation in Iraq showed little sign of improvement Sunday as fresh casualties added to what has been the bloodiest month since the end of major hostilities last April.

An Estonian soldier serving with coalition forces was shot in north-west Baghdad while on a patrol investigating a homemade bomb. He later died in hospital from his wounds, an army spokesman said Sunday.

A suspect in the shooting, which took place late Saturday, was arrested.

In the northern oil city of Kirkuk, a second police officer was killed in as many days when shots were fired at his patrol Sunday. The attackers fled after an exchange of fire with police. An inquiry was launched to identify them.

S Korea eyes working group meet in March

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea aims to hold the first working group meeting on the crisis over North Korea's nuclear programs in March, Yonhap news agency quoted a senior government official as saying yesterday.

An agreement to launch working groups for regular negotiations with communist North Korea was the most significant result of the latest round of six-party nuclear talks that ended in Beijing Saturday without a breakthrough.

After four days of talks marked by what host China said was strong mistrust between the United States and North Korea, the six also agreed to hold a new round by mid-year. Japan, Russia and South Korea round out the six.

"The working group talks will be able to take place as early as mid-March or by no later than the end of March," the South Korean official told Yonhap. He said two or three lower-level meetings would probably precede a third round of six-way talks.

KSA to create body for monitoring all charity

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia said on Saturday it would create a body that will exclusively run charity work abroad, after some Saudi Islamic charities faced Western charges of funding terror.

A decree by King Fahd approved "the establishment of a charitable body called 'Saudi Civil Council for Relief and Charity Work Overseas' which would be set up and run by a group of citizens involved in charity work and renowned for their experience, integrity and good reputation," said a royal court statement.

The council would "exclusively run all charity and welfare activities overseas," said the statement carried by the official SPA news agency.

This would enable the Saudi people to "continue assisting their Muslim brethren everywhere" in keeping with Islamic teachings while shielding Saudi welfare work abroad from any harmful activities which might undermine it or tarnish its reputation, the statement said.

The decision to establish the body was taken after the Saudi government decided to lay down "clear rules to regulate Saudi welfare work outside the kingdom," it added.

The new body would announce its statutes and modus operandi as soon as the procedures of its establishment are completed "within the next few weeks," the statement said.

A number of Saudi charities were accused by the United States of financing terrorism after the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington in which 15 of the 19 suspected suicide hijackers were Saudis.

The head of one of these charities, Al-Haramain, was dismissed last month by the Saudi minister of Islamic affairs.

The families of victims of the 9/11 attacks last August filed a civil complaint accusing three members of the kingdom's royal family as well as Saudi banks and charities, including Al-Haramain, of financing terrorism. They claimed trillions of dollars in compensation.

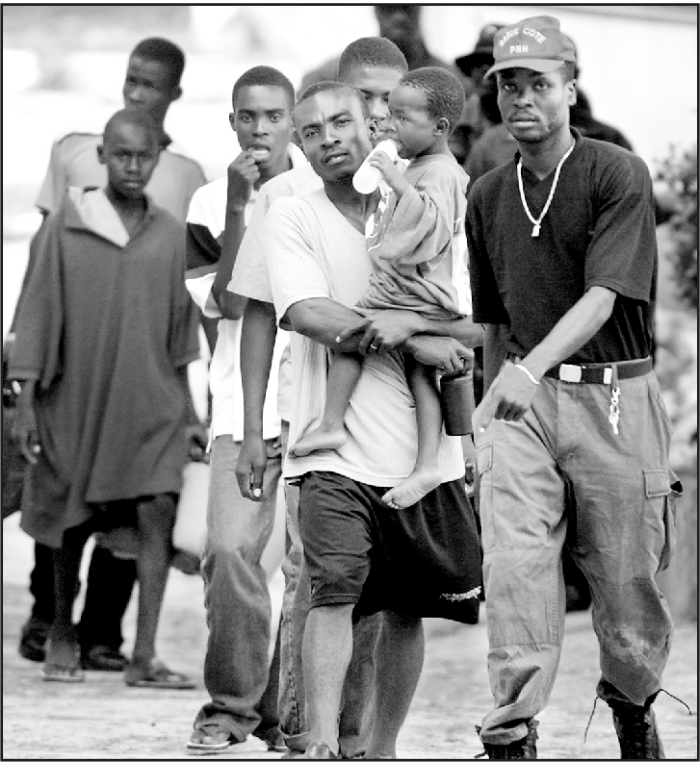


PHOTO: AFP
Haitian refugees line up moments after they were repatriated to Haiti, dropped off at the Haitian Coast Guard station in the Carrefour district of Port-au-Prince Saturday by the US Coast Guard. The refugees were returned after their boat was interdicted at sea on their way to US.

British army feared Iraq war would be illegal: Clare Short

AFP, London

British army chiefs refused to go to war in Iraq until they were reassured over its legality by the nation's top law official, former cabinet minister Clare Short told the Observer Sunday newspaper.

Faced with such doubts from the military, Britain's Attorney General Lord Peter Goldsmith hastily redrafted "prevaricating" advice to the government just days before war was launched last March, to assure the armed forces the conflict would not be illegal, the Observer reported.

Short, who earlier this week controversially claimed that London spied on UN Secretary General Kofi Annan during the tense weeks leading to the invasion of Iraq, told the paper:

"I was told at the highest level... that the military were saying they wouldn't go (to war), whatever the PM said without the attorney general's advice."

"The question is was the AG (attorney general) leant on?"

Short, Britain's former international development secretary, quit in May in protest over the Iraq invasion.

Earlier this week, she sparked controversy by alleging that transcripts of Annan's bugged telephone calls were circulated to senior British ministers.

Her claims came after British prosecutors dropped charges against an intelligence translator, Katharine Gun, who leaked a memo revealing apparent US and British plans to spy on members of the UN Security Council in the run-up to the conflict.

While Tony Blair attacked Short's revelation as "deeply irresponsible," the opposition demanded that the prime minister say directly whether she was telling the truth or not.

Blair also came under pressure to reveal the legal reasoning for joining the invasion of Iraq alongside the United States.