

UNSC mulls resolution on Israeli action in Gaza

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council has discussed a proposed resolution condemning the Israeli demolition of Palestinian houses in the Gaza Strip's Rafah refugee camp and calling for it to stop immediately.

But the measure, which diplomats said had broad support on the council, was met with a counter-proposal by the United States, which has regularly blocked council action criticising its close ally Israel.

"We believe the council has the duty to condemn such collective punishment," said Nasser al-Kidwa, the Palestinian observer at the United Nations on Tuesday.

"I think it's time for the international community to say (that) we are fed up with this situation," he said.

Britain proposed other amendments between the two positions, and it was not immediately clear how the final text would shape up before being presented for a vote expected on Wednesday.

"It would be good if we could all be united," said Britain's UN ambassador, Emyr Jones Parry.

More than 1,000 Palestinians have already been forced onto the streets since the demolition of nearly 90 buildings in Rafah's impoverished refugee camp last week, the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees UNRWA said.

The US proposals, obtained by AFP, softened some of the language against the Israeli actions and added other sections pressing the Palestinians to crack down on anti-Israeli attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli tank passes a heavily damaged building yesterday on the third day of a deadly incursion into the Gaza strip refugee camp of Rafah. Israeli troops forged ahead today with a massive operation in the southern Gaza Strip which has already left at least 20 Palestinians dead in one of the bloodiest raids of the whole intifada.

Systemic problems at Abu Ghraib

For relatives of prisoners, court martial means nothing

REUTERS, Washington

Systemic problems existed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq where US troops abused Iraqi prisoners, the head of the US Central Command said yesterday.

Gen. John Abizaid, who is responsible for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, told the Senate Armed Services Committee: "We will follow the trail of evidence wherever it leads. We will continue to correct systemic problems. We will hold people accountable and, in accordance with the Uniform Code of Military Justice, we will take appropriate action."

"From evidence already gathered, we believe that systemic problems existed at the prison and may have contributed to events there," he said.

Abizaid told the committee he took personal responsibility but said the abuse would not deflect US forces from their task in Iraq.

Also testifying were Army Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of ground forces in Iraq, and Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, deputy commander for detainee operations in Iraq.

Committee Chairman John Warner, a Virginia Republican, said it was time for US top military leaders to face American and world public opinion.

Sen. Carl Levin, a Michigan Democrat, said he wanted to know

about warnings from the International Committee of the Red Cross that Iraqi prisoners were being abused that surfaced as early as May 2003, months before the US military launched its first investigation.

In Iraq, a US special court-martial sentenced Spc. Jeremy Sivits to the maximum possible one year in prison and ordered him discharged from the army for bad conduct over the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

But for anguished relatives who have heard nothing about loved ones jailed at this scandal-dogged Iraqi prison, yesterday's court martial of a junior soldier who abused detainees was meaningless.

Many Iraqi men and women outside the jail doubted that those chiefly responsible for the abuse will ever stand in the dock.

As the prison gates opened early yesterday and a handful of prisoners were allowed out, their detainment over, relatives surged forward to beg for news about their loved ones still inside.

That is all that matters. The fate of Sivits could not be less important.

"I couldn't care less. I've just been freed, that's all that matters," said Nessaiif Jassim, heading towards a minibus due to take him to Baghdad.

Jailed from November 2003 to

April 2004, Tawfiq al-Jabburi comes to the prison everyday, desperate for information about his brother, who is still a prisoner.

"I don't believe in this trial at all. I know the Americans, I know them very well, because I spent six months inside for no reason at all. What justice are you talking about?"

"This is too late," said another man who would give his name only as Hossam. "The torture dates back a long time. And if the photos hadn't been leaked, the soldiers would have had no worries," he added.

For him, true justice would have been to try the soldiers before Iraqi courts.

"I don't trust American justice."

"He should be executed!" insisted Hussein Saleh, sliding his forefinger across his throat in a mock beheading. Then he calmed down.

"I'm sorry, but I'm angry. We're all angry. My two sons have been jailed in here for three months and I have no idea why," he said, gesturing towards the prison.

"As for justice ... I think it's a play being acted out in Baghdad."

Questions about the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of their US guards is not discussed here anymore. What matters are brothers, husbands and sons: to know why they were jailed and when they will be freed.

Reuters staff accuses US troops of abuse

REUTERS, Baghdad

US forces beat three Iraqis working for Reuters and subjected them to sexual and religious taunts and humiliation during their detention last January in a military camp near Falluja, the three said on Tuesday.

The three first told Reuters of the ordeal after their release but only decided to make it public when the US military said there was no evidence they had been abused, and following the exposure of similar mistreatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad.

An Iraqi journalist working for US network NBC, who was arrested with the Reuters staff, also said he had been beaten and mistreated, NBC said on Tuesday.

Two of the three Reuters staff said they had been forced to insert a finger into their anuses and then lick it, and were forced to put shoes in their mouths, particularly humiliating in Arab culture.

All three said they were forced to make demeaning gestures as soldiers laughed, taunted them and took photographs. They said they did not want to give details publicly earlier because of the degrading nature of the abuse.

The soldiers told them they would be taken to the US detention center at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, deprived them of sleep, placed bags over their heads, kicked and hit them and forced them to remain in stress positions for long periods.

The US military, in a report issued before the Abu Ghraib abuse became public, said there was no evidence the Reuters staff had been tortured or abused.

5 Iraqis killed in clashes near shrine

AFP, Karbala

Five Iraqis have been killed and nine wounded in nearly 24 hours of heavy clashes in the holy city of Karbala, medics said yesterday.

"The bodies of three civilians have been brought to the hospital since Tuesday evening and nine wounded have been admitted," said Ali Ardawi, chief administrator at the casualty department of Karbala hospital.

He added that three of the wounded were in a serious condition. Later, he told AFP that two other bodies had been brought to the hospital morgue.

An AFP correspondent said heavy fighting between the militia of radical Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr and coalition troops rocked the central Abbas Street near the holy shrine of Imam Abbas from 5:00 pm (1300 GMT) to 8:00 pm.

British soldier arrested over fake abuse photos

AFP, London

At least one British soldier has been arrested over the fake Iraqi abuse photographs published in the Daily Mirror newspaper, Britain's defence ministry said.

"At least one soldier has been arrested in connection with the Mirror photographs," an Ministry of Defence (MOD) spokeswoman told AFP late Tuesday, confirming that this was the first arrest over the controversial pictures.

The soldier was being questioned by the special investigations branch as part of their probe into the publication of faked photographs supposedly showing British soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners, she said.

He has not been charged, the spokeswoman said, and it was not clear if he was being detained overnight.

The Daily Mirror on Friday issued a humiliating apology for running the pictures and sacked its bullshy editor, Piers Morgan.

British parliament closed after Blair hit in question time

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The House of Commons has been suspended during Prime Minister's question time after what appeared to be purple powder was thrown at Tony Blair.

Mr Blair was speaking during his weekly half-hour appearance in the Commons when a projectile filled with purple powder hit him on his back. MPs were immediately evacuated. Early tests suggest the powder was "benign" and not dangerous.

Fathers 4 Justice claimed responsibility for the incident. Scotland Yard confirmed that two men had been arrested.

The incident comes just weeks after a £600,000 temporary security screen was installed in the Commons.

It appears the projectile may have been thrown from an area of

the gallery reserved for MPs' guests and notable visitors.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and Chancellor Gordon Brown, who were sitting either side of Mr Blair, both looked up at the public gallery as the dust descended at 12.18 BST.

MPs were seen waiting something away from themselves as the House was suspended.

A spokesman for Fathers 4 Justice said two members of the group were involved in the incident to highlight MPs' failure to help fathers gain access to children through the courts.

Labour MP Kevin Brennan said a stain was "clearly visible" on the back of Mr Blair's jacket as the dust hit him.

Tory ex-minister Michael Portillo said he thought "one dose" of the dust had been thrown "before the prime minister

reacted".

"The prime minister only appeared to look round to his side at the second dose," he said.

"I thought it was likely to stain his coat or something, but as far as I could see, it was actually falling behind him."

Commons leader Peter Hain said: "This was a serious incident. I have asked for an immediate report on the circumstances and what additional security provisions may be necessary."

Liberal Democrat MP Mark Oaten, who was in the chamber during question time, said he heard a large shout from the public gallery area from an individual who appeared to be "running forward".

"He threw what looked like a paint ball at the prime minister and shouted Fathers 4 Justice," he said.

Giuliani to testify before 9/11 panel

AP, New York

Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, whose steady, reassuring presence after the Sept. 11 attacks led some to dub him "America's mayor," was no stranger to prickly public confrontation during his years as head of City Hall.

That experience may come in handy Wednesday, when Giuliani could be forced or feel compelled to defend the work of his most trusted aides before the Sept. 11 commission.

On Tuesday, his deputies were publicly challenged over what some panel members said were long-running problems with the city's emergency response systems.

"The mayor's prepared to present the facts tomorrow," said his spokeswoman Sunny Mindel, adding he is "very sympathetic and empathetic" to the families of the 2,749 people killed at the World Trade Center.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian protestors burn a British flag as they chant anti-occupation slogans during a demonstration against "US and British crimes in Iraq" outside the British embassy in Tehran yesterday. The demonstrators, some holding national flags (R) and copies of the Koran, hurled a grenade and petrol bombs at the embassy, before security forces charged them with clubs.

Indian media hails Sonia's decision

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The Indian media today hailed the decision of Congress chief Sonia Gandhi not to accept the post of Prime Minister as a "stunning political sacrifice" that will enhance her stature.

"There will be enormous sympathy and respect for Sonia Gandhi's decision" was the editorial comment of the widely-respected national daily "The Hindu".

"Having made her point (by leading Congress to victory in parliamentary elections), the Italian-born Congress President, who could have been Prime Minister by Wednesday, has grown

enormously in political and moral stature," it said.

Another leading daily "The Hindustan Times" said "rare is the Indian politician who turns away from power when it is offered to him or her on a platter. Sonia Gandhi is now the only person in Indian history to have turned down the post of prime minister not just once but twice. The first time she declined the office was in 1991, it was possible to argue that she was in mourning (after her husband Rajiv Gandhi's assassination) and that she was not a political person."

"By stepping aside to make way for another candidate (for the post of prime minister), Sonia has emulated a tradition of renunciation that ironically has long been held to be the pinnacle of Indian civilisational thought," said an editorial in The Times of India newspaper.

"Sonia can now rest assured, though, that her stock will go up much here as internationally," it said adding "by the same token those in the BJP and the RSS who have spearheaded a hate campaign against her must know that they have come out of this sordid drama looking like street bullies."

"Whichever way you look at Election 2004, it belonged to only one person: Sonia Gandhi," said the daily.

The Indian Express newspaper

said "by choosing to humbly decline to take up the prime minister's post, she has played a masterstroke....it allows her to assume the high moral ground and signal that she was by no means enamoured of power for its own sake but power for the principles she believes in."

"She has thus neatly disarmed her political opponents of the one weapon they had hoped to use against her," the newspaper commented.

"The BJP and those of its allies who supported this petty-mindedness there are some honorable exceptions have emerged from the affair much diminished," it added.

Nepal king agrees to meet opposition leaders

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's king agreed yesterday to opposition demands to negotiate with their full leadership in a bid to defuse a crisis over royal control of the Himalayan kingdom, a party leader said.

Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, a staunch royalist hand-picked by King Gyanendra, resigned May 7 after more than a month of angry protests in Kathmandu against the monarchy.

Nepal has since been in political deadlock with the opposition demanding the king invite leaders of the five main parties together to the palace and not individually as he

had proposed.

"The king has agreed to meet the protesting opposition parties' leaders jointly Wednesday evening to discuss ways to end the current political impasse in the country," said a leader of the largest party, the Nepali Congress.

He said the five-party alliance was locked in a meeting to prepare an agenda. Gyanendra fired the elected government in October 2002 accusing it of failure to govern Nepal and to end a bloody Maoist insurgency.

The meeting with the king would come on the second day of a three-day strike called by the rebels which has shut down the kingdom.

US removes Sudan from rogue list

PTI, Washington

The United States has removed Sudan from the list of states sponsoring terrorism for its cooperation in tackling the menace. "US is taking Sudan off the list of State sponsors of terror because of its cooperation in this regard," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

However, Boucher has criticized Sudan for its lack of cooperation in permitting international food supplies to reach Darfur, where the government is fighting the local population.

He said that the Sudanese "have been playing games" and denying permits to humanitarian workers to help the people of Darfur.

Pentagon halts payments to Chalabi's INC group

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon has halted its monthly payments of \$340,000 to Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress, former exile group, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz has said.

"That was a decision that was made in light of the process of transferring sovereignty to the Iraqi people. We felt it was no longer appropriate for us to continue funding in that fashion," Wolfowitz told a senate hearing on Tuesday.

The final payment was made this month, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said.

Chalabi has long been viewed with distrust by the CIA and the State Department, but was closely aligned with hawks in the Pentagon, which flew him and an INC militia into southern Iraq shortly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

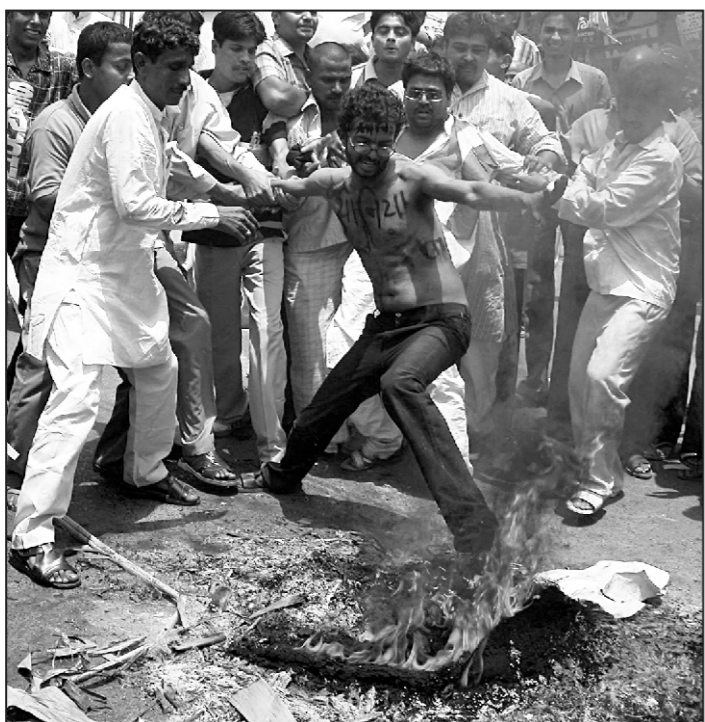


PHOTO: AFP

An Indian Congress Party supporter is restrained from setting himself on fire by fellow supporters as they take part in a demonstration in Patna yesterday to protest against the decision of Party president Sonia Gandhi to decline the position of prime minister.

Did Sonia make the right choice?

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The shock decision of Sonia Gandhi to turn down the post of prime minister caps one of the most remarkable days in recent Indian politics. But why did she make the decision?

"I never wanted to be prime minister," is what she told her party MPs late on Tuesday. It was, she said, her "inner voice" talking.

The Italian-born Mrs Gandhi's decision should end, for the most part anyway, the controversy over whether a foreign-born person should run the world's largest democracy.

Hardline members of the outgoing Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party had said they would launch street protests if Mrs Gandhi was sworn into the post. Most of its MPs were set to boycott her inauguration. It has also been reported that her son and daughter, Rahul and Priyanka, were also against their mother taking up the position.

Neither of the children have indicated that they had tried to persuade their mother to change

her mind.

"As an MP, I say she should be the prime minister," Rahul Gandhi told Indian television. "As a son I respect her decision." "Soniaji is my mother," Priyanka said. "She has taken a decision based on her inner voice. There is nothing for me to say... her party members have made a very emotional appeal [to change her mind]. I am sure she'll think about it."

Did then Sonia Gandhi spend all that time campaigning believing that she'd overcome the criticisms of her foreign roots and the fears of assassination, only for them to reemerge as India's highest political prize beckoned?

"Ultimately it's a personal decision and one cannot oppose it," veteran Communist leader Jyoti Basu said on Tuesday.

Only last Saturday, Congress party MPs had elected Sonia Gandhi as their leader in parliament. That seemed, at the time, to set the seal on her taking over as prime minister.

But then senior leader Manmohan Singh appeared to settle doubts about her intentions when he told waiting MPs that Mrs Gandhi would meet the president the following day for discussions on forming the next government.

Then the doubts resurfaced on Tuesday after Mrs Gandhi emerged from that meeting with President Abdul Kalam. In a brief interaction with journalists she said she needed more time to form a government.

As the day wore on, it became apparent that the script had changed dramatically. Television channels began flashing news that Mrs Gandhi had made up her mind to refuse the premiership.

As the news broke, Congress Party MPs and supporters gathered outside 10 Janpath - her Delhi home ever since she left the prime minis-

ter's residence in 1989, after Rajiv Gandhi lost the election.

Emotional supporters chanted: "Long Live Sonia Gandhi" and "No Sonia No Government". Others took more alarming steps to express their feelings.

Other Congress politicians were distraught. "We don't know what to do," said Salman Khursheed, who won his first election under Rajiv Gandhi. "To be told suddenly that she cannot become prime minister is something we cannot accept."

As a reluctant entrant to politics, when she was persuaded to take over an ailing Congress party in 1998, Sonia Gandhi lacked the experience and charisma of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi.

But she made up for her lack of political skill with an energetic campaign, addressing several rallies a day and covering almost 60,000 kilometres across India.

With a low-key campaign, focused on the bread-and-butter issues of jobs, food and shelter, Mrs Gandhi took the wind out of the sails of the high-powered BJP campaign

which highlighted India's burgeoning economy.

Attacked during the campaign for her foreign origins by several BJP leaders, Mrs Gandhi's victory is described by Congress as a decisive rejection of the argument. "It is nothing but a racist campaign," says Congress MP Mani Shankar Aiyar. "Sonia Gandhi has been elected by the people of India and she has led Congress to victory."

By removing herself from the post of prime minister, Sonia Gandhi may have acted because she believed she would be a liability for her party, always open to attacks by right-wing groups.

But her decision is rare in a country known for power-hungry politicians.

Despite her move, she is likely to remain a key player in the country's politics.

With one of her children already in politics and the other possibly following soon, the future of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty appears very secure.