

Top UN rights official warns against 'licence to kill' in Iraq, ME

AFP, Geneva

The UN's top human rights official on Friday sharply criticised violence in Iraq and in the southern Gaza Strip, warning that security forces in both places did not have a "licence to kill".

UN acting High Commissioner for Human Rights Bertrand Ramcharan was deeply concerned about the deaths of more than 40 people in a US bombing raid in western Iraq and of Palestinians during an Israeli offensive in Rafah, southern Gaza, a spokesman said.

"The High Commissioner wants to stress, for both of these incidents, that even though there might be security considerations and related concerns, there is no license to kill," UN spokesman Jose Diaz told journalists.

Ramcharan reiterated "the duty of protection of human rights even in time of armed conflict", he added.

The US military has acknowledged that 41 people were killed in an airstrike mid-week in western Iraq, insisting it had targeted foreign fighters in the desert.

But Iraqis, who said they lost friends and relatives, maintained the attack hit a village just outside the town of Qaim, on the Syrian border, where a wedding had been celebrated.

"The High Commissioner stresses the responsibility of the occupying forces to ensure the safety and welfare of Iraqi civilians and to refrain from excessive use of force and indiscriminate attacks," Diaz said.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army on Friday withdrew most of its troops from Rafah, southern Gaza Friday, after tanks and helicopters were used this week to disperse a protest against an Israeli operation to raze dozens of homes there.

Ramcharan was "deeply disturbed by the consequences of Israel's recent military operations in the Gaza Strip, particularly in Rafah and the disproportionate use of force," Diaz said.

Meanwhile, Indonesia on Friday condemned the killing of Palestinian protesters by Israeli troops, calling the action "brutal and savage."

"We strongly condemn the killing and wounding of Palestinians who were demonstrating peacefully, many of whom were women and children," foreign ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa said.

"Israel's brutal and savage action, which was further exacerbated by the demolition of Palestinian homes, is clearly against international law and must be stopped," he said.

Israel pulls most troops out of devastated Rafah

Hundreds of Israelis call for end of raid

AFP, Rafah

The Israeli army yesterday withdrew most of its troops from Rafah in southern Gaza, where more than 42 Palestinians have been killed since the start of a devastating raid.

The rubble of dozens of homes razed this week by Israeli army bulldozers lined streets marred with huge craters in the town and its adjoining refugee camp, located near the border with Egypt.

Israeli forces abandoned the Tal al-Sultan neighborhood of Rafah, where they used tanks and helicopters to disperse a protest on Wednesday against their "Operation Rainbow", killing 10 Palestinians, including children.

A tank and a bulldozer remained at the edge of the neighborhood, blocking all access.

Meanwhile, eight more Palestinians were killed Thursday as Israeli forces pushed on with an unprecedented raid in southern Gaza despite censure from the United Nations and criticism from Washington and London.

Among those killed was Khalid Abu Anza, 37, the local head of the armed wing of the radical movement

Hamas, who died in a morning air strike.

Palestinian anger was further inflamed when an Israeli court convicted Fatah leader Marwan Barghout, the man seen as the inspiration behind the intifada, for a series of murders.

Five of the victims were killed in overnight air strikes in the Jenaina neighbourhood of Rafah and the Brazil quarter of the neighbouring refugee camp.

Two others were shot by troops in the neighbourhood of Tal al-Sultan.

Their deaths brought to 42 the number of people killed since the start of Operation Rainbow early Tuesday.

An Israeli army spokesman said the operation, launched early Tuesday to stamp out cross-border weapons smuggling and arrest wanted militants, was continuing and that the troop withdrawal was merely a "redeployment."

He said soldiers were still searching for tunnels believed to be used to smuggle weapons from Egypt into the Gaza Strip, but acknowledged that no new tunnel had been discovered since the

launch of the raid.

Eleven such tunnels have been destroyed since the beginning of this year, the spokesman said.

In the Salam and Brazil neighborhoods of Rafah, only a few tanks and armored vehicles were still in position early Friday, although a curfew remained in effect.

Armored vehicles fired sporadically at Palestinian youths throwing stones, according to an AFP correspondent on the scene.

Israeli military sources said infantry units that had been deployed Thursday in the two areas had been pulled out.

Meanwhile, nearly 1,000 Israelis yesterday marched on a Gaza Strip checkpoint to demand an end to the Israeli army's deadly raid in Rafah and a full withdrawal from the territory, an AFP photographer reported.

Demonstrators marched two kilometers (one mile) to the Kissufim border crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip, yelling "No to War Crimes" and "No to the occupation".

The protest was organized by several pacifist groups and army reservists who have refused to serve in the Palestinian territories.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians carry their belongings as Israeli tanks are positioned (background) at Brazil neighborhood in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah yesterday. The Israeli army withdrew most of its troops from Rafah in southern Gaza, where more than 42 Palestinians have been killed since the start of a devastating raid.

US air raid kills 3 Afghan civilians

REUTERS, Tani

Three Afghan civilians were killed and two wounded in a pre-dawn swoop by US helicopter gunships in Afghanistan's southeastern province of Khost yesterday, angry villagers said.

The attack in Tani village to the south of Khost town came after a patrol of US soldiers was fired at, Khost's Mayor, Jalil Ahmad Hasani, told Reuters. US patrols often call in close air support when they come under fire.

"The report we have indicates that three civilians, including two women, have been killed in the aerial bombardment and several others wounded," he said.

Villagers at the scene said no US patrol had been fired on, adding that Afghans had wrongly identified the house to the Americans as a hideout for al-Qaeda or Taliban.

"The Americans acted on wrong information and bombed our village," said Ayoub, whose father was in hospital for wounds inflicted during the air strike.

"We had a family feud and I think the Americans have taken the other side's word for it that Taliban and al-Qaeda people were hiding here."

Residents confirmed that three people, including two women, were killed when their house came under fire from four helicopter gunships, and two people were wounded in the same neighborhood.



PHOTO: AFP

India's Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi (L) her son Rahul (C) and India's incoming Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) sit as they pay tribute to the former Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi on the thirteenth anniversary of his death at his cremation memorial site BirBhumi (Land of the Brave) in New Delhi yesterday. Rajiv was murdered May 21, 1991, allegedly by Sri Lankan separatists in the town of Sriperumpudur some 55kms south-west of Madras.

Manmohanomics at work again?

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

The man who crafted India's economic reforms a decade back, Prime Minister-designate Dr Manmohan Singh, has taken up the challenge once more.

With the din over disinvestment still resounding and the mayhem in the bourses still fresh, Dr Singh Thursday set out the new government's economic agenda, promising to continue reforms, including privatisation, but with a "human face".

At an unscheduled press conference, Dr Singh ruled out disinvestment of PSUs in strategic sectors, like oil and gas majors ONGC and GAIL, to protect "workers' interests". "There is no intention to privatise them," he said. But he endorsed the commitment of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance to build strong private and public sectors while pursuing "selective disinvestment".

Asked about the Left's role in the new government's reform process, Dr Singh said: "Life is never free from contradictions and the coalition government will try to promote a strong and stable government and create relations with allies to fight against poverty, ignorance and disease. They (Left parties) are also great patriots."

"Privatisation was not part of our ideology. We believe India needs a strong private sector and it needs a strong public sector," he added. Similarly, he said, nationalised banks will remain in the public sector domain. "If they can't compete on equal footing with the private sector or become a drag on the exchequer, then by all means they will be allowed to raise resources from market through disinvestment," Dr Singh said, even as he promised that workers' interest will be protected at the same time. However, he was silent on the issue of mergers of large and small banks.

It's speculated that this may perhaps figure in the Budget to be presented soon.

Dr Singh said that if PSUs, while remaining as public enterprises, wanted to raise resources through disinvestment or sale of part of their equity, "they are most welcome". Wherever public sector enterprises want to compete with the private sector, domestic or foreign, there was no reason why they should not be allowed to go forward, he said. This, some analysts point out, was exactly what former disinvestment minister Arun Shourie had suggested for ONGC.

Describing the reforms process as an effort to realise Rajiv Gandhi's dream "to make 21st century India's century", he said education and health for all, improved environment, housing for slum dwellers and increased agricultural production will be his main targets. The CMP, Dr Singh said, will create an industry-friendly environment.

Indo-Pak talks to resume May 25

US support to Pakistan is bipartisan: Kasuri

ANI, Islamabad

Welcoming Indian prime minister-elect Manmohan Singh's statement to give priority to the ongoing peace process with Pakistan, the Foreign Office spokesman Masood Khan said Thursday, that the pledge was both positive and constructive.

In an interview with the Voice of America, Khan was quoted by The News as saying that the Pakistan Government would be sending a team of officials to New Delhi to carry forward the dialogue process.

Talks are scheduled for May 25 and 26, he added.

"Initially, there was some confusion about the continuation of the dialogue process, the uncertainty has been vitiated by the statement of prime minister-designate Dr Manmohan Singh," Khan was quoted as saying.

"These are very important talks as India and Pakistan are nuclear weapon states and we want to talk about nuclear stewardship, crisis management, risk reduction and a number of other nuclear-related

issues."

Khan said, "we should have foreign secretary-level talks as per the calendar, which was agreed between the two foreign secretaries. So, we hope that other meetings will also be held as planned."

Meanwhile, the United States is giving Pakistan bipartisan support due to its geo-political importance and strategic location in the international comity of nations, claimed Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri after a series of meetings with key American legislators.

Addressing a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Colin Powell at the end of three days of bilateral talks, Kasuri was quoted by The News as saying that Pakistan and the United States today enjoyed a multi-layer and multi-faceted relationship, which would expand further in times ahead.

On the issue of terrorism, Kasuri said it was not in anyone's interest, and therefore, all steps were being taken to root it out.

More detainees complain of bad treatment after release from Abu Ghraib

AFP, Amariyah

The first detainees to arrive home from Abu Ghraib jail in Iraq yesterday emerged from three battered buses, clutching their bags, blankets and complaining bitterly.

Many said they did not know why they had been picked up. Others complained they had been treated badly. One claimed he had been ordered to clean his tent using only a toothbrush.

"They treated everyone badly at Abu Ghraib. Sometimes they put the detainees on the ground and put their shoes on people's heads," said Dr Abdulwadood Ahmed, a physical education teacher at Tikrit University.

He said he had been picked up

by the US ten months ago and accused of possessing weapons, being a member of Saddam's Fedayeen militia and attacking coalition forces.

During his time behind bars, he was shuttled between Camp Bucca in southern Iraq and Abu Ghraib, where he said conditions were far worse.

Asked what he thought about the Americans, he gestured to the soldiers checking off names and then shook his head.

Ahmed was one of about 60 who had just arrived in a convoy headed by a couple of Army Humvees after a short journey of a couple of miles (three kilometers) from Abu Ghraib to a base of the paramilitary Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (ICDC) here.

Pakistan accuses US troops of border intrusion

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan accused US troops yesterday of making an incursion into its territory while hunting al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, the second such incident this month.

The troops intruded into a border village in the North Waziristan tribal region on Thursday and searched several houses before moving back into Afghanistan, military spokesman Major-General Shaukat Sultan said.

"We have already lodged a protest with the United States," military spokesman Major-General Shaukat Sultan said.

Earlier this month, US troops intruded into the same region and

searched shops and a petrol station, prompting a protest from Pakistan.

The Pentagon has said the incursion was inadvertent but Afghan officials and US have repeatedly charged that al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters have launched attacks inside Afghanistan from the safety of Pakistan's tribal region.

The latest incursion came on the day that Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf vowed to eliminate al-Qaeda militants hiding in Pakistan's wild tribal region.

Pakistan, a key ally in the US-led "war on terror", has deployed thousands of its own troops on its Afghan border to round up foreign militants but has said it would not allow US forces to operate inside its territory.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Shia Muslims shout anti US slogans as they display placards during a demonstration in Islamabad yesterday. The demonstrators protested against the desecration of holy sites in Iraq as clashes resumed between US-led coalition troops and the militia of radical Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr.