

Israel threatens tougher action against militants

ME situation remains sensitive, warns Abbas

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday threatened tougher military action against militants in the occupied Gaza Strip should Palestinians continue to open fire against Jewish settlements and Israeli territory.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas voiced concern that the situation remained so sensitive that the smallest provocation could trigger large-scale clashes while militant group Hamas reserved its "right to avenge Israeli aggression".

"We must act in a more aggressive manner than we have so far," Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim told public radio.

"Until now, we have acted with moderation and restraint because

we want to have calm in the run-up to the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, but it is conceivable to proceed with the evacuation under (Palestinian) fire.

"If the Palestinian Authority does not get the message, we will make it understand," Boim added.

Israel on Wednesday launched its first air strike since January against Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip who were preparing to fire mortars at a Jewish settlement as violence, injuring a Hamas member who later died.

The man was pronounced dead less than 24 hours after another Hamas militant died following a shoot-out with Israeli soldiers in southern Gaza.

The violence threatened a fragile de facto truce which Palestinian

militants have been observing since January and which was cemented by a landmark Middle East peace summit in February.

It also raised to 4,759 the number of people killed since the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation erupted in September 2000, including 3,697 Palestinians and 988 Israelis, according to an AFP count.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was to gather his top military officials later Thursday to decide on Israel's response to a succession of Palestinian mortar attacks aimed at Jewish settlements and claimed by the armed wing of Hamas.

"If terrorism continues until the pullout we should repress it before going ahead with the withdrawal," said Boim, hinting that disengage-

ment plan may have to be delayed if the violence continues.

The Israeli government's plans to evacuate all 8,000 Jewish settlers from the occupied territory this summer has been slammed by critics as rewarding militant attacks during the more than four-year Palestinian uprising.

But a source close to Sharon told AFP there was "no question of changing the dates of the pullout".

"If things continue to escalate, we will strike in such a way... that they will be forced to stop," the official warned.

Echoing recent comments from Sharon, he accused Abbas of doing nothing to disarm militants and of mistakenly allowing Hamas to contest legislative elections without first disarming its armed wing.

Nobel laureates glimpse elusive path to safe future

AFP, PETRA, Jordan

Nobel Prize winners pooled their collective brainpower to tackle the problems of "a world in danger" and yesterday pinpointed the poor, oppressed and marginalised as holding a key to the future.

The laureates meeting in Jordan's ancient rock-carved city of Petra focused in a two-day conference on four main areas -- peace and security, economic development, health, environment and science, and education, media and culture.

In a region noted for its wars, and with neighbouring Iraq giving daily examples of bloodshed, the delegates called for peace to be promoted by linking economic development and education to efforts to end conflict.

In a statement issued after the two-day meeting, they pinpointed inequity and injustice as the "root causes of terrorism" and underscored the needed to strengthen democratic institutions and foster economic development.



PHOTO: AFP

Hollywood actor Richard Gere (C) speaks to 1998 US chemistry Nobel Prize winner Walter Kohn (L) at a gala dinner in the ancient city of Petra, 230km south of Amman Thursday. The Dalai Lama and former US president Bill Clinton are among the Nobel laureates and celebrities gathered in Petra on yesterday with the lofty goal of trying to fix the world's woes. A total of 36 of the world's top thinkers in economics, medicine, physics and literature attended the conference, being hosted by Jordan's King Abdullah II and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Elie Wiesel.

Koreas fail to break nuclear impasse

AP, Seoul

The two Koreas concluded their first face-to-face talks in 10 months yesterday without making any progress on the impasse over the North's nuclear program, although they did agree to hold Cabinet-level talks next month.

The agreement came hours after word emerged of a secret meeting last week between US and North Korean officials. The focus of both efforts was to get Pyongyang to rejoin six-nation talks on getting it to abandon its nuclear program, but the reclusive communist country which regularly uses brinksmanship to wring aid from the West clearly resisted any public commitment.

The US Embassy in Tokyo said

American officials met with North Korean officials in New York last week.

"This channel is used to convey messages about US policy, not to negotiate," an embassy official said on condition of anonymity.

The meeting was first reported in The Boston Globe on Thursday.

A statement issued Thursday at the conclusion of the two-day meeting between the Koreas said both nations agreed to work for peace on the Korean Peninsula. It said a follow-up Cabinet-level meeting would be held June 21-24 in Seoul, and South Korea would begin providing 200,000 tons of fertiliser to the North starting May 21.

51 feared dead in China coal mine explosion

AFP, Beijing

Fifty-one miners are missing and feared dead after a gas explosion early yesterday ripped through an illegally-operating coal mine near Chengde city in northern China's Hebei province, the government said.

"At around 3 am on May 19 a gas explosion accident occurred at the Huanerhe mining company (state-owned local mine) in Hebei province's Chengde city," the State Administration of Mine Safety said on its website.

"Fifty-one mine workers were in the mine shaft and it is not clear if they are alive."

Tit-for-tat killings inflame sectarian tension in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A series of tit-for-tat killings has raised sectarian tension to boiling point in Iraq where Sunni religious leaders openly accused Shia militia-men of kidnapping and murdering Sunni Arabs, including clerics.

Meanwhile, top US generals offered a sober outlook on the Iraq situation, suggesting Washington's troop commitment could last years because of disappointing progress in building up local security forces and the need to bolster the government's credibility, the New York Times reported.

The US military has accused top al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarwaqi, of ordering a spate of suicide bombings this month, which has seen some 500 people killed in insurgent attacks.

And US deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick was due in Iraq for talks with Prime Minister

Ibrahim Jaafari amid fears the political process was running into trouble with an August deadline for drafting a new constitution now in jeopardy.

The Committee of Muslim Scholars, Iraq's main Sunni religious authority, Wednesday accused a Shia militia of killing Sunnis after dozens of bodies turned up in Baghdad. Some of the dead had been tortured.

"It is the Badr Organisation which is responsible for these killings. I take responsibility for what I am saying," Hareth al-Dhari, spokesman for the Committee of Muslim Scholars, told a news conference.

The Badr Organisation replaced the officially disbanded militia of the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq, one of two leading political parties in the United Iraqi Alliance, which now dominates the government.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's new defence secretary John Reid holds a rifle as he speaks to the troops at their base in the southern city of Basra, 500 km from Baghdad Tuesday.

Iran calls for mending ties with US

REUTERS, Tehran

The man thought most likely to be Iran's next president said yesterday he wanted to repair relations with the United States, but Washington had to take the first steps to end 25 years of enmity.

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in his first interview since declaring his bid for an unprecedented third term as president, also said he would never abandon the country's nuclear program, comparing such a step to ceding Iranian land.

"It is like giving away part of our territory," Rafsanjani told Reuters.

"This is our nation's legitimate right ... especially when it is in accordance with international laws and regulations."

Rafsanjani, 70, served two terms as president from 1989 to 1997 and announced last week he would run in a June 17 election. Opinion polls put him well ahead of other candidates.

Many Iran experts regard Rafsanjani as a pragmatic conservative with more power and influence to build bridges to the West than reformist outgoing president Mohammad Khatami.

In response to a question,

Rafsanjani said relations with the United States would be a major issue.

"There is no doubt that America is a superpower of the world and we cannot ignore them," Rafsanjani said at his office in a marble and mosaic palace used by the Shah of Iran until the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The United States broke diplomatic ties with Iran in 1980 after the seizure of American hostages at the US embassy. President Bush in 2002 branded the country part of an "axis of evil" with North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Uzbek troops reclaim control of border

AFP, Bishkek

Uzbek troops reclaimed control yesterday over a key town on the volatile Uzbek-Kyrgyz border and reportedly arrested local Islamist leaders, as the Uzbek government

worked to contain social unrest after last week's violent military crackdown.

For the first time since Sunday, when angry protestors set fire to government buildings and chased government authorities from Kara-Suu, Uzbek border guards

appeared at the main border crossing point of the town, which straddles the frontier between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

"Uzbek border guards have been back since 6:00 am (0100 GMT)," one border guard on the Kyrgyz side of the town told AFP, as helicopters circled overhead.

Residents from the Uzbek portion of the town, questioned in Kyrgyzstan, said that returning government forces had arrested Bakhtiyar Rakhimov, who is believed to head pro-Islamist forces

on the Uzbek side of the town, along with two of his associates. No bloodshed was reported.

It was not clear whether Rakhimov had led the protests that erupted on the Uzbek side of the town, known as Karasuv, after the deadly military crackdown in the eastern Uzbek town of Andijan last Friday.

Opposition activists have said that up to 745 people were killed in Andijan after soldiers called to disperse an anti-government rally fired indiscriminately on the crowd.