

Gaza pullout sharpens Fatah-Hamas rivalry

Hamas vows no let-up in armed struggle

AFP, Ramallah/ Gaza City

Israel's departure from the Gaza Strip has sharpened the rivalry between Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas's Fatah faction and the Islamists of Hamas, both hailing it as a victory for their different approaches.

Abbas, the moderate Palestinian Authority president who has frequently criticised the armed uprising against Israeli occupation, sees the pullout after 38 years as a vindication of his pragmatic strategy.

Hamas, whose military wing the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades has been behind the majority of anti-Israeli attacks since the Intifada

erupted five years ago, argues it was the "resistance" that forced the arch-enemy to flee.

Islamic militant group Hamas vowed to continue its armed struggle until all Palestinian land was freed from occupation, despite Israel's historic withdrawal from the Gaza Strip yesterday.

"The liberation of the Gaza Strip is not the end of the road to comprehensive liberation. We will not rest until we liberate all Palestinian land, crowned by Jerusalem," Ismail Haniya, a leader of Hamas in its Gaza stronghold, told reporters.

"We have to protect the armed resistance... and we continue the armed resistance to liberate and

defend our people," he said, calling the road ahead "difficult and long".

Armed militants from both Hamas and its smaller rival Islamic Jihad were among hundreds of Palestinians who poured into the abandoned Jewish settlements early Monday to celebrate the Israeli departure.

Palestinian voters will be able to give their verdict on January 25 in only the second-ever parliamentary elections.

Unlike the first ballot a decade ago, Hamas has decided to participate in the next poll, heartened by its strong showing in municipal elections.

Many voters have become increasingly dismayed with Fatah,

the movement founded by the late Yasser Arafat which has dominated Palestinian political life for the last four decades.

For many, Fatah has become a by-word for corruption and incompetence.

Their disillusionment could well increase if they expect the fortunes of Gaza, one of the most poverty-stricken and overcrowded parts of the world, to be swiftly turned around with the exit of the Israeli occupation.

In recent speeches and interviews Yasser Abbas has argued it is time to focus on security and the economy, and accept that defeating Israel is not on the cards.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian policemen fix a Palestinian flag on the roof of an abandoned Israeli synagogue in the former Jewish settlement of Neve Dekalim in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Israel closed the door on four decades of occupation of the Gaza Strip yesterday, handing control to triumphant Palestinian forces.

India to replace Kashmir troops with police

AFP, Srinagar

Federal police will take over from paramilitary troops in Indian Kashmir by 2007 because violence has fallen sharply since India and Pakistan began peace talks last year, a senior officer said yesterday.

India in 2002 said it would cut its Border Security Force (BSF) troops posted in Kashmir and replace them with federal police, said senior border force officer J.B. Negi in the summer capital Srinagar.

"The BSF is being replaced in four phases," said Negi, adding under the first two phases in 2003 and this year, 20,000 of the 50,000 troops were pulled out from counter-insurgency operations.

He said the remaining border troops would be replaced by federal police over the next two years.

The replacement process gained momentum a week after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh held his first-ever high-level talks with moderate separatists.

Separatists in Kashmir have called for a reduction of troops whom they say are guilty of human rights violations.



PHOTO: AFP

French President Jacques Chirac (R) speaks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday at the Elysee palace in Paris. Manmohan Singh met Chirac for talks on obtaining French help in developing its nuclear energy and military capabilities.

France backs India's nuclear energy plans

Submarine, Airbus deals confirmed

AFP, Paris

France yesterday said it backed India's plans to develop nuclear energy after winning two multi-billion-euro contracts for the sale of Airbus aircraft and conventionally powered submarines.

"France recognises the need for full international cooperation with India in the civilian nuclear field and will work towards that by collaborating with other countries and with the Nuclear Suppliers Group," French President Jacques Chirac and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said after meeting in Paris.

"France welcomes the firm commitment by India to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the measures it has taken and intends to take in that

regard," they said in a joint statement, issued in French.

"In this context, the two countries are working to seal a bilateral cooperation agreement in the nuclear field."

The Nuclear Suppliers Group comprises 30 countries including Britain, France and the United States, which work together to direct the development of atomic energy in the world while enforcing the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

India, which is not party to the treaty and which tested nuclear weapons in 1998, has already won approval for its civilian nuclear energy programme from the United States and Britain.

Rebels rocket US-UK consulates in S Iraq

AFP, Basra

Iraqi rebels launched a rocket attack on a US-British diplomatic compound in the southern city of Basra as American and Iraqi troops yesterday tightened their grip on the insurgent bastion of Tal Afar.

al-Qaeda linked groups pledged deadly revenge attacks -- including the threat of chemical weapons -- over the Tal Afar assault, prompting Interior Minister Bayran Bager Sulagh to charge that they have "lost their senses".

Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari, who on Friday had given the go-ahead for the assault after days of deadly clashes failed to dislodge the rebels, has gone to the northern town "to show his defiance of the terrorists", Sulagh said.

Overnight, four 107mm Chinese-built rockets slammed into ousted dictator Saddam Hussein's former Basra palace which houses both the US and the British consulates, a Western diplomat said.

"There were no casualties or injuries, and no significant structural damage," according to the US embassy.

The attack was the latest in a series of attacks which have increased tension in an area that has remained relatively free of the deadly insurgency engulfing much of the rest of the country.

On Sunday, a British serviceman was killed and three injured in a bomb attack in Basra, six days after two more British soldiers were killed in a roadside bombing near the city.

The Danish battalion com-

mander in the area, Colonel Flemming Toft, suggested the recent spike in violence might be linked to the October 15 referendum on the constitution, or result from the fact rebels were having to redeploy because of coalition pressure further north.

"The Americans are making it pretty hot for them elsewhere," he said.

In northern Iraq, where a joint US and Iraqi force of some 10,000 men has been conducting a wide-scale counter-insurgency operation to recapture Tal Afar, insurgents were melting away after initially offering resistance.

"A majority of terrorists left the town without fighting," according to interior ministry commando General Adnan Sabet

India, Pakistan swap 600 prisoners

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and Pakistan yesterday swapped nearly 600 civilian prisoners across the Wagah border in Punjab state amidst scenes of high emotions and celebrations, marking another high in the peace process between the two countries.

While India released 152 Pakistani prisoners, including 51 fishermen, Pakistan set free 435 Indians who have been languishing in jails in that country for years.

As the two iron gates across the white William Radcliffe line that separates India and Pakistan at Wagah opened last morning, the prisoners from both sides walked to freedom and stepped into the soil they belong, heralding a new chapter in their lives.

Earlier, the prisoners were brought to Wagah border from jails in different regions of India and Pakistan for handing over to their respective authorities.

Welcoming the exchange of

prisoners, local member of parliament of Amritsar and former Indian cricketer Navjot Singh Sidhu said "it is a good beginning and the desire for peace on both sides of the border is growing."

"After all, the culture on both sides of the border is the same and what happened today marks a good start which will bring good results," the MP said.

The exchange of fishermen, agreed to between the two countries at their Home Secretary level talks here late last month, comes two days before Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh meets Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in New York where the two leaders are expected to review the progress of the peace process between the two sides.

One of the biggest swaps of prisoners between India and Pakistan yesterday symbolised a marked shift in the confidence building measures between the two nuclear-powered South Asian neighbours.

Bush admn takes more heat over Katrina

State fumes over refugee plight

AFP, Baton Rouge

Louisiana disaster chiefs on Sunday blasted the US government for alleged foot-dragging in providing temporary housing for hundreds of thousands of Hurricane Katrina survivors.

The storm-battered state urgently wants its citizens out of refugee shelters across 10 US states and into longer-term accommodations, because some may not be able to return home for months, if ever.

But the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema) -- already facing furious criticism over its handling of the disaster -- is not moving fast enough, charged Colonel Jeff Smith, deputy head of Louisiana's Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

"We have real concerns right now with the assistance we are getting from Fema on temporary housing," fumed Smith.

"We have raised this issue now for days. We do not feel this process is working fast enough," he told reporters in Louisiana's capital Baton Rouge, in an unusually direct official attack on the embattled agency.

"We feel like there needs to be trailers rolling and things happening that are not happening as quickly as they should at this point," Smith said, adding that state officials had complained of the problem to US Vice President Dick Cheney when he visited Baton Rouge last week. "We want our citizens back here."

But Fema spokesman David Passey dismissed the claim, saying the agency was doing everything it could to offer temporary accommodation to refugees and that the first 10 families were moving into Fema-supplied trailers.

"We believe that the effort is progressing very well," he said. "We have more than 1,000 manufactured homes and trailers moving in this direction," he said in Baton Rouge.

The criticism came as the administration of US President George W. Bush came under intense fire from politicians and victims over a lack of official preparedness and the grindingly slow pace of the relief effort.

Fema chief Michael Brown was removed two days ago as the government point man on the Katrina crisis as he became the focus of a public and political firestorm that has put a severe strain on the administration.

Typhoon kills 14 in China

AFP, Shanghai

At least 14 people were killed in China as Typhoon Khanun ground its way inland, causing widespread damage and forcing the evacuation of more than a million people in coastal areas.

Khanun, the 15th typhoon to hit China this year, slammed into the eastern province of Zhejiang Sunday, with a preliminary death toll of 14 in that area alone, the Ministry of Civil Affairs said on its website.

Pakistan seeks West's help for peaceful nuclear use

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan called on the United States and other Western countries yesterday for help developing civilian nuclear technology that would meet its growing energy needs.

The call came while President Pervez Musharraf was in New York, where he will meet US President George W. Bush later this week on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Muhammad Naem Khan declined to say whether Musharraf, an ally in Washington's war on terrorism, would take up the issue with the US president.

"We would like the developed countries, especially the Western countries and the United States to extend cooperation to Pakistan for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy," Khan told his weekly news briefing.