

Israel resigned to Hamas participation in elections

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel was increasingly resigned yesterday to Hamas standing in January's Palestinian elections after US President George W. Bush failed to voice opposition to the Islamic militant movement's participation.

Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom had said last week that it would be "madness" for Hamas to be allowed to take part but the government now appears to have backed down from threats to disrupt January's ballot in the absence of support from its chief ally.

Israel had been hoping that Bush would use a summit with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas last week to pressure him to bar Hamas from the elections.

But Abbas said that he managed to

persuade Bush that it would be better to encourage Hamas's embrace of democracy despite its continued designation by the United States as a terrorist organisation.

A source close to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon sought to play down the disagreement with Washington, saying the differences were purely tactical.

"There is only a tactical difference - we believe that Hamas cannot take part in elections as long as it carries out terrorism. The United States thinks otherwise, but agrees with us that any negotiation with Hamas should be ruled out," the source told AFP.

"We refuse to consider any representative of Hamas as a legitimate partner, but we will not prevent Hamas from participating in the election as we have no intention of

intervening in the ballot," added the official on condition of anonymity.

"While we are opposed to the participation of Hamas in elections on the grounds that it is a terrorist organisation, we do not envisage arresting political officials who are not implicated in attacks."

Interviewed on Israeli radio, Justice Minister Tzippi Livni failed to take the opportunity to demand that Hamas be prevented from standing in the elections but instead called for the international community "to put pressure on Hamas to renounce terrorism".

"The fact that Hamas wants to take part in the elections should make it sensitive to such pressure," she added.

Rice, Straw for action over Hariri killing

REUTERS, London

A UN report on the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri is "very serious" for Syria and the international community must act, the United States and Britain said on Sunday.

In a joint interview with BBC Television, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw ratcheted up pressure on Damascus, saying the report implicated senior Syrian figures in the assassination and indicated attempts at a cover-up.

"I am quite sure that when the international community gets together we will decide what to do but it can't be ... just left lying on the table," Rice said.

"This really has to be dealt with. There is ... the very strong impli-

cation that Syria was involved somehow in the assassination of former prime minister Hariri. So these are very serious charges," Rice said.

Washington is working to arrange a quick high-level UN Security Council meeting to consider a response to the investigation by chief UN investigator Detlev Mehlis.

Straw, who has been touring Alabama with Rice, said: "The report indicates that people of a high level of this Syrian regime were implicated. We also have evidence from the Mehlis report of false testimony being given by senior people in the regime. This is very serious."

On Friday, Straw said UN Security Council members would consider sanctions, but acknowledged the West had to work to win support from all members for its pressure on Damascus.



Residents walk in flooded streets Saturday in Cancun after the passage of Hurricane Wilma. Seven people died and more than 1,000 homes were destroyed in Playa del Carmen as deadly hurricane Wilma lashed the popular tourist resort towns of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula.

US air raids kill 20 Iraqis

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad

US forces in Iraq killed 20 insurgents on Saturday near the Syrian border while conducting raids on houses believed to be hideouts for al-Qaeda foreign fighters, the US military said.

A statement said US forces found two large caches of weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades, mortar rounds and bomb making materials, during the raids in the western town of Husayba. It said one insurgent was captured in the operation.

The day's heaviest fighting came

when US-led forces raided five houses suspected of sheltering foreign fighters in Husaybah, a town near Iraq's border with Syria, the military said. The troops reportedly killed 20 insurgents and captured one.

The raiders found two caches of small arms, ammunition, rocket-propelled grenades, mortar rounds and bomb-making materials, the military said. Troops set off a car bomb found near one of the buildings, and the Air Force then used precision-guided munitions to destroy the houses.

Seven Iraqis, including two civilians,

were reported killed in drive-by shootings and bombings Saturday. But in the week since the Oct. 15 constitutional referendum there have been none of the major suicide attacks that militants had been staging.

Twenty-three US military personnel have been reported dead over the week, bringing the total of American dead since the war began in March 2003 to 1,996, according to an Associated Press Count. No agency keeps a comprehensive count of Iraqi deaths from violence, but an AP count found more than 3,700 killed since April 28, when the first elected government took power.

Rioting in Birmingham over rape rumour

AFP, BBC ONLINE, London

An uneasy calm hung yesterday over a Birmingham neighbourhood where a night of rioting triggered by rumours that a teenager had been sexually assaulted left a man in his 20s stabbed to death.

Some 20 people were injured, and several arrested, in Saturday's unrest in the low-income Lozells district of Britain's second city, which followed a public meeting to discuss the alleged sex attack, police said.

"It's all quiet at the moment," a West Midlands Police spokesman told

AFP by telephone Sunday, adding that there was "a high visibility police presence" in the area to deter any fresh incidents.

In an echo of violence in the same district in 1985, mobs pelted police with bricks, stones and bottles, and smashed shop and car windows with baseball bats and sticks, witnesses said. At least one car was torched.

The injured included three who were stabbed, and two who were shot, including a police officer hit by a round from a BB gun. Police said the man who was fatally stabbed was black.



A police officer films a crate of petrol bombs in Hartington Road in the Perry Barr area of Birmingham yesterday after riots had erupted on Saturday. An uneasy calm hangs over the Birmingham neighbourhood where a night of rioting triggered by rumours that a teenager had been sexually assaulted left one man stabbed to death.