

Israel declares all-out 'war' on Islamic Jihad

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel declared all-out war on Islamic Jihad yesterday, launching air strikes on its Gaza Strip stronghold and putting its leaders in the crosshairs after a suicide bomber killed five in a marketplace.

As the funerals took place for the victims of Wednesday's attack in Hadera, officials said they were taking the gloves off against Jihad in the absence of any firm action from the Palestinian Authority.

The five dead were the first Israelis to be killed by Palestinian militants since Israel pulled its troops and settlers out of the Gaza Strip.

The pullout had raised hopes in the international community of a

genuine breakthrough in the Middle East peace process but Israeli commentators warned that the public must get used to continuing attacks.

Army chief of staff General Dan Halutz was quoted as declaring a "war to the bitter end" against Islamic Jihad after convening a meeting of defence chiefs late Wednesday.

Security sources said Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz gave the green light for the resumption of 'targeted killing' operations against the masterminds of attacks such as the one in Hadera, carried out by a 21-year-old from the northern West Bank village of Qabatiya, near Jenin.

The army also announced a general closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Jihad said the attack was to avenge the death of their West Bank military leader who was killed in a gunfight with Israeli troops at the weekend.

"We will hit Islamic Jihad very hard. We will not give them any respite," a source close to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told AFP.

"We will not allow the West Bank to become a new Iraq and we will use every means possible in our offensive, including targeted operations."

Around a dozen Palestinians, including members of Jihad, were arrested overnight by the Israeli army while the air force carried out three air strikes over Gaza without causing casualties.

Two of the attacks targeted access routes into Gaza City and the nearby

town of Beit Hanun and a third hit open fields in the north of the territory.

Residents living in Gaza City said jet fighters had screeched overhead throughout the night, triggering sonic booms and keeping most people awake through the early hours.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas condemned Wednesday's attack, saying it was counter-productive and warned that he would not tolerate people taking the law into their own hands.

Israeli officials, however, say there is no sign of Abbas taking on headline groups such as Jihad and the larger Hamas movement.

EU slams Iran president's comments on Israel

AFP, Hampton Court

European Union leaders yesterday condemned "in the strongest terms" Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's call for Israel to be "wiped off the map".

The 25-member bloc said such incitement to violence was "despicable and unacceptable", in particular as the comments were made on the same day as a deadly suicide attack in northern Israel which killed at least five people.

"Such comments will cause concern about Iran's role in the region, and its future intentions," said a statement issued on behalf of the EU leaders by the bloc's current British presidency during a summit near London.

US lawmakers cautious on nuke deal with India

REUTERS, Washington

Key US congressional leaders said on Wednesday they would resist hasty action on an agreement President George W. Bush has reached with India allowing US nuclear cooperation with the Asian state.

Republican Rep. Henry Hyde (news, bio, voting record), who chairs the House of Representatives International Relations Committee, bristled at statements that implied the assent of Congress to the agreement, announced by Bush in July, was assured.

"I do not understand how these statements could be made with

Congress having yet to be fully consulted ... Indian authorities know more about this important proposal than we in Congress," Hyde said at a congressional hearing.

Undersecretary of State R. Nicholas Burns has said he expects the agreement, considered a priority by the Bush, would be approved before the president visits India in early 2006.

But Hyde, a prominent member of Bush's own party, which controls Congress, said there were "many unknowns surrounding the overall agreement (and) there is much work to be done before that (congressional) assent can be given."

Four out of five experts who testified to the committee criticized the nuclear deal but said the damage could be minimized if changes were made, like requiring India to end production of fissile material for nuclear weapons.

For 25 years the United States led the global fight to deny India access to nuclear technology because it developed nuclear weapons and, in May 1998, tested them.

But Bush, aiming to improve ties with the world's largest democracy, dropped this approach in a July 18 agreement permitting US nuclear cooperation with India.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians gather around a crater caused by an Israeli missile in Beit Hanun town, in the northern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Israel declared a war to the bitter end against Palestinian militants, launching air strikes on the Gaza Strip and putting Islamic Jihad leaders in the crosshairs after a suicide bomber killed five.

15 killed in Indian bldg collapse

AFP, Lucknow

At least 15 people were killed and 23 injured when a two-storey building collapsed after an explosion thought caused by a leaky gas cylinder in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, police said yesterday.

"Around half a dozen people are still buried under the debris," said police spokesman Ghulam Abbas. Of the injured, 11 are in serious condition, he added.

The incident occurred late Wednesday in Kanpur, 80km southwest of the Uttar Pradesh state capital Lucknow.

About 35 families occupied the 36-room building. "Most of the families were workers from leather tanneries," Abbas said.

The blast was probably triggered by a leak in a cooking gas cylinder, Abbas said.

Most of the casualties were women and children as male members of the families had gone to a nearby mosque when the blast took place, said Vijay Shankar Singh, chief medical officer of the Kanpur hospital.

US envoy moots Iraq troop pullback

Two US soldiers killed in Baghdad

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi political parties fine-tuned strategies yesterday for mid-December elections as the US envoy said political progress could allow the United States to withdraw some of its troops next year.

"I do believe it's possible that we could adjust our forces, downsizing them in the course of next year," US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad told media in Washington.

"That's possible given the positive political developments and the continuing growth in the capabilities of the Iraqi forces."

His comments echo hopes within the US administration that political progress and stronger security forces might allow a reduction of US troop numbers from around 140,000 at present.

The remarks also came as three Sunni Arab parties unveiled an alliance to contest general elections scheduled for December 15 after the new Iraqi constitution was adopted despite strong Sunni opposition.

However chronic insurgent violence in Iraq showed no sign of a let-up, with a suicide car bomber targeting a US patrol in the relatively quiet southern Baghdad neighbourhood of Karrada, killing a civilian and wounding several others.

Two more US soldiers died in eastern Baghdad, while an Iraqi was killed and eight others wounded by a suicide car bomb in a southern neighbourhood, security and hospital sources said.

US fatalities stood at a total of 2,003 since the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, according to an AFP tally, after two soldiers were killed by a makeshift bomb in eastern Baghdad on Wednesday.

At least nine Iraqis died Wednesday in various Iraq attacks, while the bodies of eight men shot dead were found near Tikrit, in northern Iraq.

However Yelmaz Jaafar, the sister of housing and construction minister Jassem Jaafar who had been kidnapped with a pair of fellow engineers near Tikrit two days earlier, was released.

Two al-Qaeda members, one a cell leader accused of taking part in at least three videotaped beheadings, have been killed in Iraq, the US military said on Wednesday.

The suspected cell leader was killed during a raid on a house in Mosul on Saturday, while the second al-Qaeda member, identified as Abu Du'a, was believed to have died in an air strike near Qaim in western Iraq on Wednesday.

SANCTIONS THREAT TO SYRIA

China, Russia oppose draft resolution

AP, United Nations

China and Russia, two veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council, made clear in a first round of meetings that they would oppose a draft resolution threatening sanctions against Syria unless the document undergoes changes, diplomats said.

US Ambassador John Bolton played down the disagreement Wednesday over the resolution aimed at getting Syria to cooperate with UN investigators probing the assassination of Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafik Hariri. The document is co-sponsored by the United States, France and Britain.

"When a rocket is launched, as it picks up speed and moves down range, it goes through a period of aerodynamic turbulence much like Security Council resolutions," Bolton said. "We're now in the period of aerodynamic turbulence."

The discussion was the first airing of views about the resolution, meant to force Syrian cooperation with a UN investigation of Hariri's death led by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis. In a report last week, Mehlis implicated top Syrian and Lebanese security officials in Hariri's Feb. 14 assassination and accused Syria of not cooperating fully with his probe.

Jeb Bush takes blame for slow Wilma aid

AP, Miami

Gov. Jeb Bush took the blame Wednesday for frustrating delays at centres distributing supplies to victims of Hurricane Wilma, saying criticism of the Federal Emergency Management Agency was misdirected.

"Don't blame FEMA. This is our responsibility," Bush said at a news conference in Tallahassee with federal Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who oversees the agency.

Many Floridians were still struggling to find food, water, ice and gas on the third day of recovery from Wilma, waiting in line for hours sometimes in vain. Miami-Dade's mayor called the distribution system flawed and said at least one relief site of 11 in his county ran out of supplies.

The 21st storm in the busiest Atlantic hurricane season on record, Wilma killed at least 27 people. Florida's official death toll doubled from five to 10 Wednesday, and the storm also killed at least 12 people in Haiti, four in Mexico and one in Jamaica.



PHOTO: AFP

Frank Scafani holds a candle and sign in honour of fallen soldiers from the Iraqi war during an anti-war protest on Wednesday in San Francisco, California. Demonstrators across the country are silently protesting American deaths in Iraq after the 2,000th war related death of a US soldier was announced on October 25.