

Israel okays Gaza strikes to clear rocket zone

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel has given a green light for intensified airstrikes inside the Gaza Strip to enforce a buffer zone meant to stop Palestinian militants from firing rockets, officials said yesterday.

But in a sign of growing friction over the cross-border violence, Palestinian security forces said they had refused an Israeli request to evacuate the area.

The makeshift rockets rarely cause casualties, but could have big political fallout as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon campaigns for re-election on the strength of a pullout from Gaza this year that he said would boost Israel's security.

Despite the withdrawal, the rocket firing has not stopped, and Israel has mounted air and artillery strikes at Gaza.

Militants say the rockets are to avenge Israeli raids in the occupied

West Bank as well as its strikes into the Gaza Strip.

On Thursday, four Israeli soldiers were wounded when a rocket hit their base after Israeli troops killed three militants in the West Bank. One rocket fell on Friday.

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz's office said that, after discussion on Thursday, "he has ordered a restriction of movement in those areas from which the Palestinian terrorist organizations fire rockets into Israel."

Another security source made clear that this meant use of air power, not ground operations.

But Palestinian forces said they had refused an Israeli request to evacuate the border zone and were continuing their own efforts to prevent rocket firing from amid the rubble of former Jewish settlements at the border.

"We will not move one inch," said

Assayed Shaban, commander of forces in northern Gaza. "We are also making a 100 percent effort to prevent rocket firing."

The cross-border violence has quickly soured any hopes that the Gaza pullout could lead to a quick return to peacemaking.

Israel rules out any talks on statehood in the West Bank and Gaza until the Palestinian authorities disarm militants, a process that is meant to start under a US-backed peace plan.

Israeli security sources said further steps were being considered if the rocket fire did not stop. These include cutting off Gaza's electricity -- a proposal denounced by human rights groups as collective punishment.

A ground offensive to re-occupy parts of Gaza is unlikely unless rockets cause heavy casualties, the sources said.

The stakes are particularly high

for Sharon ahead of the election on March 28, for which the ex-general quit his rightist Likud to move toward the political centre.

Opinion polls suggest Sharon's Kadima party has a big lead.

But more attacks, particularly from Gaza, could strengthen the hand of his main challenger from the right, Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, who denounced the Gaza pullout as a surrender to Palestinian militants that would only encourage attacks.

A dramatic surge in violence could also create problems for a Palestinian parliamentary election on January 25, and potentially force a delay.

Militants said they would keep up the barrages whatever Israel did. "We will not tremble from these threats," said Abu Abir of the Popular Resistance Committees.

Duma adopts controversial bill on NGOs

AFP, Moscow

A controversial bill that restricts the activities of non-governmental organisations in Russia easily passed its third and final reading yesterday in the lower house of parliament.

The draft, attacked by the West as a threat to civil rights but defended by the government as necessary for national security, won support from 357 members of the Duma and was rejected by just 20 lawmakers.

There were seven abstentions. After its first reading in late November, when non-governmental organisations, Washington and the European parliament, among others, criticised the text, President Vladimir Putin asked legislators to revise the draft law.

The bill's detractors said the original legislation could lead to the closure of any association that criticised the government.

Although some 74 amendments were made during the bill's second reading on Wednesday, Russian NGOs derided the changes as minor.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis take to the streets holding up banners and the national flag in the northern city of Samarra, 125 km from Baghdad yesterday. Thousands of Sunnis took to the streets of Baghdad and Samara calling for the annulment of the Dec 15 election results.

Terror warnings put Indonesia on alert

AP, Jakarta

Indonesia deployed thousands of troops to guard churches yesterday amid warnings that al-Qaeda linked militants were planning Christmas terror attacks in the world's most populous Muslim nation.

Islamic groups also offered to help protect churchgoers.

Maj. Gen. Firman Gani, the Jakarta police chief, said Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists might use the holidays to retaliate for the death last month of bomb-making expert Azahari bin Husin. He was gunned down in a police raid.

His shadowy network is blamed for at least five suicide bombings targeting Western interests since 2002 including Oct. 1 restaurant attacks on Bali island that together killed more than 240 people.

It is also accused in Christmas Eve church bombings five years ago that left 19 dead.

"The terrorists have said they will use the momentum of Christmas and the New Year celebrations to carry out attacks," Gani told reporters, adding that there were also indications that Jemaah Islamiyah may be changing its tactics.

India, US make significant progress on nuke deal

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

India and the US have made "significant progress" in realising the goal of civilian nuclear energy cooperation with New Delhi unveiling a credible separation plan of its civilian and military nuclear facilities.

The crucial separation plan was unveiled for the first time by Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran during his discussions with his counterpart, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns on Thursday.

The plan, which reportedly seeks to place a large number of India's civilian nuclear facilities under international safeguards, received a positive response from top US officials, including US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, diplomatic sources said.

"Significant progress was achieved in developing a mutual understanding of the steps needed to advance the early implementation of the agreement," said a press release issued by the Indian embassy at the end of Saran's two-day visit on Thursday.

During Saran's visit, the two sides "exchanged views" on the implementation of their respective commitments on nuclear energy cooperation under the July 18 joint statement.

The finer details of implementing the agreement were discussed during the second meeting of the joint working group (JWG) on civil nuclear energy cooperation. The JWG was co-chaired by Saran and Burns.

The next JWG meeting is likely to be held in January 2006 in New

Delhi.

The separation plan, once it is officially approved by the Bush administration, will be presented to the US Congress, which will take a final call on changing tough domestic non-proliferation laws in favour of India.

Both sides are, however, upbeat about the outcome of this process and are hopeful that decisive steps for implementing the deal could be taken before US President George Bush's visit to India early next year.

"The two sides expressed satisfaction at the progress achieved in taking the Indo-US strategic partnership forward and agreed that President Bush's forthcoming visit to India would be a landmark event in India-US relations," said the Indian embassy.

New York subways, buses roll again

REUTERS, New York

Subway trains and buses were rolling again in New York yesterday after transit workers ended a three-day strike that caused havoc in America's most populous city at the height of the holiday season and which may have cost the economy \$1 billion.

"Thank God," said Patrick Cunningham, who works on Wall Street, in a sentiment echoed by millions of New Yorkers who had struggled without the subways and buses that normally carry 7 million people a day.

Buses began to pick up passengers late on Thursday after another chaotic evening commute and a few subways went back into service around midnight. Officials said a least one train would operate on

each line and that they hoped to have something resembling full service by the Friday morning commute.

Transport Workers Union Local 100 leader Roger Toussaint said the union's executive board voted overwhelmingly to end the strike despite not reaching a new contract.

City officials have estimated the economic hit from the strike at \$1 billion during the three days. It came in the week before Christmas and Hanukkah when retailers, restaurants and other service industries would normally be at their busiest.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg welcomed the resolution and said he was hopeful the Christmas shopping season could still prevail. "There's still plenty of time for people to shop," he said.

Nepali Maoists to allow aid agencies to work

Rebels kill 2, abduct 400 civilians

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist guerrillas have said they will allow international aid agencies to work in the country's impoverished areas where the rebels, waging a deadly revolt against the monarchy, have a strong presence.

"We ... have instructed cadres and local people's representatives to cooperate," Maoist chief Prachanda said in a statement.

In the past the rebels have demanded money from aid agencies or beaten their staff, forcing them to scale back projects in rural areas.

In May, Maoists beat up a woman working for a project in west Nepal funded by four international aid

agencies, including the World Food Programme, forcing them to suspend work in the area.

But the Maoists appeared to be coming under popular and political pressure to allow aid workers to operate in the desperately poor country, analysts said.

The average Nepali lives on a daily income of less than \$0.60 a day and the nine-year revolt had pushed the country deeper into poverty.

Prachanda pledged to respect the guidelines that govern the operations of the United Nations and other agencies, which include the safety of aid workers involved in sectors ranging from health care to irrigation and farming.

Earlier Nepal's Maoists have killed

two civilians and abducted more than 400 in two separate incidents in recent days, the Royal Nepalese Army said Thursday evening.

"The terrorists have killed two civilians and abducted more than 400 in two separate incidents in the past several days," the army said in a press release.

"The rebels shot dead Shyam Sundas and Judas Sundas at Timma Village in Bhojpur district on December 17," it said.

In another incident, Tuesday, the Maoists abducted at least 400 civilians including children, women and elderly people from Tarakhola, Pandav and Adhikari Chowk in the far-western Baglung district, it said.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai policemen inspect a bomb-damaged car in Narathiwat province southern of Thailand yesterday. A bomb exploded in Thailand's restive south injuring six people including two police officers.

'Lethal cold threatens Pak quake survivors'

AFP, Islamabad

Thousands of Pakistan's quake survivors are caught in a desperate struggle for survival in the Himalayan cold and need urgent help, an international aid group said yesterday.

"The falling temperatures could be lethal," British-based Oxfam director Barbara Stocking told a news conference after a tour of areas ravaged by the October 8 earthquake in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and northwestern province.

The warning came three months after the country's worst natural disaster that killed more than 73,000 people and left an estimated 3.5 million homeless.

Around 1,000 US troops and Nato units have been helping Pakistan in relief and rehabilitation efforts of survivors, shuttling supplies by helicopter and treating the injured at field hospitals.

Stocking called for an enhanced international response to the United Nation appeal for around 550 million dollars, launched in November,

which had so far brought in only 40 percent of the needed funds.

Children are falling sick in the freezing temperatures suffering from respiratory ailments while heating has been a problem because of the risk of tent fire, Stocking said.

She said Oxfam had provided shelter to 127,000 people and improved water and sanitation conditions for some 150,000.

"There is so much more that needs to be done urgently. We need to improve conditions in the spontaneous camps and reach those who have stayed further up the mountain," she said.

Oxfam urged the international community to honour its pledges and deliver resources to prevent another humanitarian catastrophe.

Pakistan has received aid pledges of more than six billion dollars, of which two billion dollars is in the form of grants.

Congress hands Bush string of setbacks

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush is ending the year with a series of setbacks in Congress, where his divided Republican majority has failed to deliver on many of his top legislative priorities.

On Thursday, the White House put a brave face on its failure to secure long-term renewal by the Congress of a controversial package of anti-terrorism powers known as the Patriot Act.

"I consider it a victory for the American people," White House spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters after lawmakers chose not to extend the legislation indefinitely, as Bush had sought.

"These vital tools remain in place," said McClellan. "We're going to continue to work to get it reauthorised."

The House of Representatives voted on Thursday to renew the Patriot Act by one month, just one day after the Senate backed a six-month extension. The Senate approved the one-month extension

late Thursday.

The White House had initially flatly refused to approve a short-term extension of the Patriot Act, portions of which were due to expire at the end of the year, but eventually bowed to the compromise.

Echoing recent statements by Bush, McClellan accused Democrats on Wednesday of trying to rack up points ahead of mid-term elections, in which Republicans could already be hindered by the corruption allegations faced by several party members, including Representative Tom DeLay of Texas.

In the economic realm, the administration narrowly avoided a rejection of its 40-billion-dollar budget cut plan on Wednesday.

By a 51-50 vote, senators adopted legislation to trim the federal deficit by nearly 40 billion, with Vice President Dick Cheney casting the tie-breaking vote in his role as president of the Senate.

Cheney had been called back to Washington early from a Middle East trip in the event he would be

needed to cast such a vote.

The plan calls for cuts in health spending and student loans.

But another 453-billion-dollar bill to finance the US military was blocked by Democrats outraged by a provision -- which they say does not belong in a defence bill -- that would allow for oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Proponents of the measure fell four votes shy of securing the 60 votes needed to proceed to a vote on the bill.

Bush had earlier urged the Senate to pass the legislation, which includes 50 billion dollars in emergency funding for US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"It's an obligation of every member of the United States Senate to provide necessary funding for our troops on the front lines so that we can fight and win the war on terror," Bush had said.