

# Israel edges away from Palestinian vote ban

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday edged away from a ban on voting in east Jerusalem for next month's Palestinian parliamentary election in order not to give leader Mahmud Abbas a pretext to delay the ballot.

The polls, to take place on January 25 across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, are the first legislative elections since 1996 and could radically re-draw the political scene with radical group Hamas to participate for the first time.

Last Wednesday, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office said Israel would bar those in occupied east Jerusalem from participating in the vote, triggering a furious Palestinian response and speculation that the vote may be delayed.

But following a call from the United States for both sides to resolve the dispute, a senior Israeli official appeared to be backing off

the hard line.

A Sharon aide told AFP on Sunday that the administration "will contemplate" the possibility of Palestinians voting at five polling stations in east Jerusalem, which Israel occupied in 1967 and has since annexed.

"Israel has no intention of giving Mahmud Abbas an excuse to cancel the election because he fears a victory for Hamas and allow him to accuse us before the international community of being responsible for his decision," he said.

Palestinians in east Jerusalem were allowed to vote both in a Palestinian presidential election last January and in legislative polls in 1996.

Washington has billed the January election as a milestone in Palestinian democratic development and last week expressed confidence the east Jerusalem dispute could be resolved.

"It is an issue that the Palestinians and the Israelis have worked through before," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Wednesday.

"I would expect that they would work through once again this issue and find a solution that is acceptable to both sides," he added.

Four days later the Israeli government line appeared to have softened.

"Israel's final decision on the Palestinian election in Jerusalem will be taken when Mahmud Abbas's Palestinian Authority definitely confirms that elections will be held on the scheduled date," said the Sharon aide.

Tough competition from the powerful Islamist movement Hamas, gearing up to contest its first Palestinian parliamentary election, could pose a serious threat to the decade-long grip on power enjoyed by Abbas's Fatah party.

The faction has been in disarray over the vote, initially registering two separate lists of candidates, one compiled of the old guard and a second made up of young politicians campaigning for reform, for the vote.

Fatah has since decided on the single list to clamp down on divisions and maximise its chances of success, although Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei has since withdrawn from the race.

The same senior official told AFP that Israel was prepared for possible "collapse" in the Palestinian Authority that could render Abbas incapable of imposing law and order, faced with the political might of Hamas.

"At this point, Mahmud Abbas is so weak in relation to Hamas that he is unable to implement the smallest decision," said the source.



Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas attends a dinner at the church of the Nativity on Saturday in Bethlehem, ahead of Christmas mass at midnight. Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah (C) presided the mass and delivered his customary sermon calling for peace in the Holy Land.

## Pope sees signs of hope in ME

AP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI said in his Christmas Day message yesterday that signs of hope in Iraq, the Holy Land and Lebanon need to be reinforced by actions on the ground.

Benedict also urged protection for those suffering "tragic humanitarian crises" in Darfur, Sudan, and other parts of Africa, and called for the settlement of "dangerous disputes" in Asia and continued dialogue on the Korean peninsula.

It was Benedict's first Christmas "Urbi et Orbi" message Latin for "to the city and to the world" and he continued the tradition of Pope John Paul II by using the speech to review conditions around the world and lament the violence and poverty that afflict so many.

The message was delivered from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica, the same velvet-draped balcony where Benedict uttered his first public words as pope. Hours earlier, he celebrated his first midnight Mass inside St. Peter's, in which he prayed for peace in the Holy Land.

## Tsunami prayers mark Christmas in Thailand

REUTERS, Khao Lak

Simple Buddhist ceremonies marked Christmas Day in Thailand's tsunami zone yesterday as relatives of victims remembered their loved ones on the eve of the Indian Ocean disaster's first anniversary.

"I will have to die before I can forget," said 80-year-old Thai Sorjia Aiwasakul, who lost her son, daughter-in-law and niece in the December 26 tragedy, which killed an estimated 231,000 people in Asia and Africa.

Thailand's official death toll stands at 5,395.

"He was the son I liked most. Even though a year has passed I still cry about him each day. I still cry every day," she said as saffron-robed monks intoned Buddhist chants at Wat Ban Muang on Khao Lak, the coastline where most of Thailand's victims died.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the temple served as a temporary morgue for the hundreds of bodies of foreign holidaymakers

and Thais dragged from the waves and debris.

On Sunday, it hosted around 300 mourners -- both Thai and foreigners -- seeking a chance for quiet reflection before Monday's planned mass commemorations.

"We wanted to come here to remember those who died," said 17-year-old New Yorker Joann Johnson, who is teaching English and art at a school in the nearby fishing village of Ban Nam Khem, which has been totally rebuilt in the last year.

While many of the physical scars of the tsunami have disappeared with the reconstruction in Thailand, the mental scars of victims -- and orphans in particular -- remain.

"There are many at my school who lost their relatives. It's a very difficult time right now for the kids," said Johnson, who was accompanied by her parents and two sisters.

## Shias reject calls for fresh polls in Iraq

16 people killed in violence

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Hundreds of Shias spilled into Baghdad streets on Sunday to support their governing coalition, which took a large lead in the Dec. 15 elections and has been the target of opposition vote-rigging accusations.

Sunni Arab groups staged smaller demonstrations in the western Anbar city of Fallujah and in eastern Baqouba to support demands for a rerun of the parliamentary elections, which they claim were tainted by fraud.

At least 16 people were killed in violence around Iraq yesterday.

Two mortar rounds also landed near the heavily fortified Green Zone, and a roadside bomb damaged an American tank on a highway east of Baghdad. There were no immediate reports of injuries. AP

Television News footage and photos showed an Abrams battle tank in flames.

A suicide car bomber slammed into two Iraqi army vehicles in central Baghdad, killing five soldiers and wounding seven police and civilians, police Maj. Mohammed Younis said.

Gunmen shot dead an Iraqi interior ministry civil servant and a mortar round slammed into Baghdad's high-security 'Green Zone' Sunday injuring a policeman, an interior ministry official said.

An explosive device also targeted US soldiers in the south of the city, but there was no immediate word as to casualties.

In the sprawling Shia slum of Sadr City, about 1,000 demonstrators held a rally to support preliminary results showing the governing United Iraqi Alliance, a religious

Shia coalition, leading in the elections. They also chanted slogans denouncing former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shia whose party seems to have fared badly. His party has joined Sunni Arab groups complaining about the results.

The Alliance has called on Iraqis to accept the results and has been moving ahead with efforts to form a "national unity" government.

But the Shia religious bloc also deepened the post-election turmoil by claiming that Islamic extremists and Saddam Hussein loyalists were at the forefront of those questioning the results.

In Fallujah, hundreds of demonstrators took part in a demonstration organized by the local government to protest the elections. All public offices were closed in the former insurgent stronghold.



Indian Christian tsunami survivor children offer prayers during a Christmas mass at a church in Nagapattinam some 350km south of Chennai yesterday. India lost more than 16,000 people in the December 26, 2004 tsunami as villages were wiped out along its southern coast and on the Andaman and Nicobar island chain.

## Tsunami failed to bring peace in Lanka

AP, Banda Aceh

Last year's tsunami, which devastated Indonesia's Aceh province and killed 131,000 people there, served as a catalyst for the government and separatist rebels to end one of the longest wars in modern history.

In Sri Lanka, however, the giant waves that left 31,000 dead there had the opposite effect.

Initial hopes that the disaster could lead to an easing of tensions between Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels quickly faded amid bickering over reconstruction aid, and there are fears the island will return to civil war despite a 2002 cease-fire.

Although the 130-year conflict in Aceh was considered more intractable than Sri Lanka's 22-year civil war, analysts note that both sides in Indonesia already were moving toward peace before the disaster struck.

When they returned to the negotiating table in Finland several weeks after the Dec. 26 tsunami inundated Indian Ocean coastlines, they were ready for rapid progress

reaching a deal just seven months later.

"Both sides immediately realized the catastrophe presented a unique opportunity to end the war," said Damien Kingsbury, senior lecturer at Australia's Deakin University and an adviser to the rebels' Free Aceh Movement.

Aceh, a province of 4 million people on the northern tip of Sumatra island, had been off-limits to foreign visitors since 2003, when an earlier truce collapsed and the Indonesian military launched a massive offensive to break the insurgency.

The rebels, based in Aceh's forested hills, did not suffer significant losses militarily when the tsunami hit. But they were no longer able to rely on food or logistical support from coastal villagers.

"After the dimension of the disaster became clear, we ordered our units to stop fighting and to help save lives," said Bachliar Abdullah, an exiled leader of the Aceh separatist movement who returned home two months ago after 25 years in Sweden.

As part of the peace deal, the rebels last week finished handing in all their self-declared 840 weapons. The Indonesian military, meanwhile, has withdrawn nearly 20,000 troops from Aceh, with 4,000 more slated to leave by the month's end.

In sharp contrast, expectations that the disaster would compel the Tamil Tiger rebels and Sri Lanka's government to forget their decades-old animosity faded quickly after the waves hit, partly because of disagreements over tsunami aid and deep mistrust between the two sides.

The Tamil rebels, who have been fighting since 1983 for a separate homeland for the minority Tamils in the country's north and east, claim discrimination at the hands of the majority Sinhalese. The conflict has killed some 65,000 people.

Unlike the Acehese rebels, who never managed to establish control over their province, the Tigers having already created a de facto Tamil state in the island's northeast had much more to lose if they signed a similar peace deal.

## ONE YEAR AFTER TSUNAMI Asian children tell harrowing tales

AFP, Stockholm

Swedish and Asian children who survived last year's Indian Ocean tsunami are recounting their harrowing ordeals in a museum exhibit opening in Stockholm on the first anniversary of the disaster.

The exhibit, at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities and entitled "After the Tsunami", features among other things a screen on which pictures of the children roll by as loudspeakers play recordings of the children's accounts.

In the first room, painted pale green, visitors can sit in comfortable armchairs and listen.

"Now we are all going to return to Thailand. I think that will be good, because we'll see that there is something positive, that it has changed a lot, that they are getting by and so maybe I can also get by," says Johanna, a 15-year-old Swedish survivor.

Michael, 11, is from India. "I think of my mother when I'm alone, and that's why I always try to make sure

that I'm not alone. I always try to be with other kids so I don't have all these thoughts," he says.

And Safriani, a 17-year-old from Banda Aceh in Indonesia, says she sometimes comforts herself by wearing a tee-shirt that belonged to her twin sister who was lost in the waves.

The exhibit will stay in Stockholm for five months before travelling throughout Sweden. While it is small-scale to start -- it currently features accounts from two Swedish and seven Asian children -- organisers hope it will grow as other survivors come forward to share their own stories and contribute objects to the display.

Primarily targeting children and adolescents, organisers hope to build a bond between children in the Northern Hemisphere and those in the ravaged regions in the South.



British girl, Tilly Smith, 10, who is credited with saving 100 lives by alerting people of the coming waves during the 2004 tsunami answers questions of the press along with her mother during the first anniversary of the Asian disaster in Phuket, southern Thailand yesterday.

## Zawahri praises Taliban in new audio tape

REUTERS, Dubai

al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahri praised the Taliban, saying the Islamic movement still controlled large parts of Afghanistan, according to an audio tape aired by Al Arabiya television on Saturday.

Al Arabiya said the date of the tape, which it said it had just obtained, could not be determined and made no mention of recent events.

The speaker on the tape, who sounded like earlier recordings attributed to Zawahri, said: "Muslims ... still control large parts of Eastern and Southern Afghanistan and are carrying out a consistent guerrilla warfare against the crusaders and the apostates."

The satellite television aired only a brief portion of the tape, which appeared to be of a poorer audio quality than other recordings attributed to Zawahri, Osama bin Laden's second-in-command.

Bin Laden and Zawahri have eluded capture since US-led forces toppled Afghanistan's Taliban government in 2001 after the September 11 attacks on the United States blamed on al-Qaeda.



Students from eight factions shout slogans from the roof of a bus upon arrival to participate in an anti-king rally at Nayan Baneswor in Kathmandu yesterday. Over 2,000 students took to the streets to protest against the king as well as the massacre of 11 people by a soldier at Nagarkor on December 14.

## US assails conviction of Mubarak rival

AP, Cairo

A court convicted leading government opponent Ayman Nour of forging petition signatures Saturday, drawing a sharp rebuke from the United States, which called the verdict a blow to the rule of law in Egypt.

Nour was sentenced to five years in prison, capping a month-long legal process that generated widespread international criticism and strained Egypt's relations with Washington, an ally that is pressing for democratic reforms here and elsewhere in the Middle East.

"The conviction of Mr. Nour, the runner-up in Egypt's 2005 presidential elections, calls into question Egypt's commitment to democracy, freedom, and the rule of law," the White House said in a statement.

Expressing concern about reports that Nour's health has suffered from a hunger strike, the White House urged President Hosni Mubarak's government to release Nour "in the spirit of its professed desire for increased political openness and dialogue within Egyptian

society."

Nour, who finished a distant second to Mubarak in Egypt's first contested presidential election Sept. 7, had pleaded innocent to ordering forgeries of signatures on the petition used to register his Al-Ghad political party.

The guilty verdict provoked an uproar from hundreds of supporters in and around the courtroom, with some outside in the street crying when they heard it.

"God is great!" Nour and his wife, Gamila Ismail, shouted immediately.

Chief defence counsel Amir Salem cried: "This is a political verdict that will be annulled by the appeals court! This verdict will go into the dustbin of history!"

Judge Abdel Salam Gommaa gave no explanation of his findings before leaving the court, but he later released a judgment rejecting claims that the trial was politically motivated.

## Quake shakes Pakistan's capital

AP, Islamabad

A magnitude-5.2 earthquake shook Pakistan's capital and the northwestern region yesterday, but there were no immediate reports of injuries or damage.

The quake shortly after 1 p.m. shook buildings in Islamabad, where some residents ran out of their homes, Geo television reported.

The state-run Seismological Centre in the northwestern city of Peshawar said the moderate quake was centred 125km northeast of Peshawar.

A number of quakes have struck the country since a massive tremor on Oct. 8 killed an estimated 87,000 people and left more than 3.5 million homeless in northwestern Pakistan and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

Local television reported the tremor also jolted Kashmir and northwestern Pakistan. The centre said it had no reports it was felt in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and one of the zones hardest hit by the Oct. 8 quake. An Associated Press reporter in Muzaffarabad said he did not feel the quake.

## Iran rejects Russian nuclear offer

AFP, Tehran

Iran rejected an offer from Russia for the Islamic republic to conduct uranium enrichment activities on its soil, foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said.

"We have still not received the concrete offer, but it is clear that we will accept positively the propositions and the plans that recognize the right of the Islamic republic to carry out enrichment on its own soil," he told reporters Sunday.

Russia on Saturday had said its proposal to create "on Russian soil a joint Russo-Iranian undertaking to enrich uranium still stands," despite earlier indications from Tehran that it was not interested.

The Russian embassy in Tehran put the suggestion put to the Iranian government on Saturday, the Russian foreign ministry said.

"This proposal represents Russia's contribution to the search for a solution acceptable to all in the context of the settling of the situation... by political and diplomatic methods," it said in a statement.

The Europe Union wants Iran to accept the Russian idea that enrichment operations should take place in Russia without the direct involvement of Iranian scientists.

EU negotiators Britain, France and Germany restarted talks Wednesday with Iran over Western concerns about Tehran's nuclear programme and agreed to meet again in January.

Asefi, however, refused to confirm January 18 as the date for resuming negotiations.

"It is one date among others. But it is certain that the negotiations will restart in January," he said.