

Israel rules out early strike on Iran

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli chief of staff General Dan Halutz yesterday ruled out the prospect of a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear installations in the near future.

"I don't think that a military intervention against Iran's nuclear installations should be necessary in the short term," Halutz told army radio.

"There is no threat to the existence of the state of Israel as long as Iran does not possess nuclear arms."

Israeli politicians and military commanders have recently stepped up warnings about Iran, which the Jewish state and the United States accuse of trying to develop a nuclear arsenal. Iran denies the charge, saying its nuclear programme is merely designed to meet energy needs.

Israeli fears were heightened when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in October called for the Jewish state to be "wiped off the map."

US, UN back Iraq vote as protests mount

US air strike, bombing kill 14

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

The United Nations and the United States rebuffed calls by Sunnis and secular Shias to re-run Iraq's parliamentary elections as protests against the vote continued yesterday.

And a previously unknown group claimed the kidnapping of French engineer Bernard Planche, threatening on Wednesday to kill him if France did not "end its illegitimate presence in Iraq" in a video shown on Al-Arabiya television.

A spokesman for the White House followed up the UN's unequivocal backing for the December 15 election with his own statement of support, with both institutions promoting the formation of a coalition government.

"I don't think most are suggesting that there needs to be a re-run

because it is the belief that the elections were fair. And that is our view as well," said White House spokesman Trent Duffy.

In a demonstration in the northern oil hub of Kirkuk, hundreds of Sunni Arabs and Turkmen protested election results that gave a dominant position to the Kurdish Alliance in this flashpoint city.

"We demand the re-running of elections," said one of the banners at the demonstration, while others condemned alleged electoral fraud, indirectly accusing Shias and Kurds.

The past two days have seen thousands demonstrate in Baghdad as well as predominantly Sunni Arab cities such as Samarra and Tikrit, calling for a re-run of the election or the formation of a national unity government.

In a letter to the Iraqi people following a visit earlier this month, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld assumed the Iraqis would do exactly that.

"We look forward to supporting your wise decisions in fashioning a broadly based government that can earn the support of all elements of the Iraqi people," said Rumsfeld, even as Kurdish and Shia political leaders met to discuss the shape of the nation's first full-term government.

Lengthy haggling over the formation of the government at the beginning of the year is widely believed to have squandered the momentum of January's elections for an interim parliament -- something the United States is believed to want to avoid this time around.

Earlier US fighter jets dropped

two 500-pound bombs on a village in northern Iraq, killing 10 Iraqis they suspected of planting explosive devices on a nearby road, the US military said yesterday.

The incident occurred on Tuesday in a small village near the town of Hawija, 50km southwest of Kirkuk, the military said.

The pilots were flying a routine patrol when they saw three men digging holes by the side of a major road and planting bombs in them, a statement said.

A suicide bomber blew himself up next to a police patrol car yesterday, killing four policemen and wounding five, an interior ministry official said.

The attack took place near an interior ministry entrance.



PHOTO: AFP
 Wrapped in an Iraqi flag and holding a banner that reads, "No to sectarianism, No to racism", a youth demonstrates with other residents in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk yesterday, calling for a rerun of the December 15 elections.

Wildfires char 100 homes in Oklahoma, Texas

AP, Cross Plains

Linda and Kenneth Dixon recently turned down an offer to buy their quaint renovated farmhouse, deciding instead to stay put and fill it with new furniture.

But after wildfires charred more than 100 homes and killed at least five people in Texas and Oklahoma, the Dixons inspected the only thing left of their dream home: a charred, smouldering heap.

"We didn't take any clothes, and now it's all gone," Kenneth Dixon said Wednesday night while eating at First Baptist Church, where the American Red Cross set up a shelter. "I didn't want to go back out there today. I just didn't want to see it again."

Severe drought, wind gusts of 40 mph and temperatures reaching the low 80s set the stage for the fires in Texas and Oklahoma, which authorities believe were mostly set by people ignoring fire bans and burning trash, shooting fireworks or throwing out cigarettes.

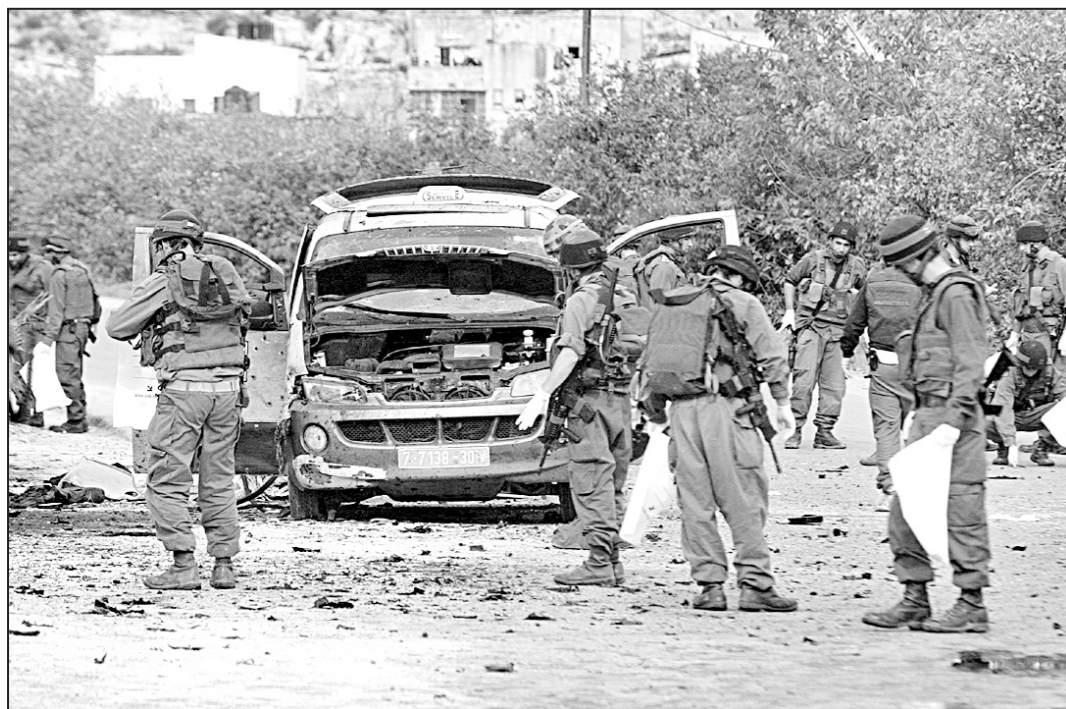


PHOTO: AFP
 Israeli soldiers inspect a damaged car at the scene of a Palestinian suicide attack on an Israeli army checkpoint near the West Bank town of Tulkarem yesterday. Two Palestinian bystanders and an Israeli soldier were killed in the attack. The bombing came as Israeli artillery batteries and warplanes continued to bombard northern Gaza after a deadline expired for Palestinians to evacuate a new security zone which is intended to stop rocket attacks.

Israeli troops keep on pounding Gaza

Soldier killed in suicide bombing

AFP, Nablus

Two Palestinian bystanders and an Israeli soldier were killed yesterday by a suicide bomber who blew himself up at an army checkpoint, as the army pounded northern Gaza with artillery fire in order to impose a 'no-go zone'.

The army had initially said that the attack at a checkpoint near the town of Tulkarem had been the work of two suicide bombers.

But sources later said that it appeared that one bomber had managed to kill two fellow Palestinians.

The attack near the northern West Bank town of Tulkarem further undermined a shaky truce as the army pounded the northern Gaza Strip with artillery fire in order to impose a 'no-go zone' and prevent

rocket attacks.

A spokesman for the army said three other soldiers were wounded in the checkpoint attack, one of whom was in a serious condition.

"We know that in addition to the soldier and bomber, two Palestinian civilians were also killed," the spokesman told AFP.

An Israeli soldier was killed, said a source in Zaka, the Jewish body parts recovery service. Three other Israelis were wounded, a military source said.

The roadblock had been set up following information that Palestinians were planning to carry out an attack inside Israel, the military source said.

"The incident happened at a roadblock which was set up after intelligence that the suicide bomb-

ers would try and enter Israel.

"From what we know at the moment, there were two suicide bombers as well as Israeli casualties," the source said.

Israeli sources said they heard a number of Palestinians were also killed but there was no immediate confirmation from local security sources.

West Bank medical sources said only that five Palestinians were wounded.

Israel has been on heightened alert for an increase in militant violence ahead of Palestinian parliamentary elections next month and has imposed a no-go zone in the northern Gaza Strip in a bid to halt rocket attacks.

The army had extended a general closure on the territories until January 3 as the Jewish state marks Hannukah, the Jewish festival of lights.

The bombing came as Israeli artillery batteries and warplanes continued to bombard northern Gaza after a deadline expired for Palestinians to evacuate a new security zone, which is intended to stop rocket attacks.

Israel's unilateral decision to impose a "no-go zone" in the far north of the territory comes as part of a concerted drive to thwart repeated militant rocket attacks launched from northern Gaza into southern Israel.

Men want facts, women seek relations on Web

REUTERS, San Francisco

Internet users share many common interests, but men are heavier consumers of news, stocks, sports and pornography while more women look for health and religious guidance, a broad survey of US Web usage has found.

The study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project to be released on Thursday finds men are slightly more intense users of the Web. Men log on more frequently and spend more time online. More men also have access to quick broadband connections than do women.

"Once you get past the commonalities, men tend to be attracted to online activities that are far more action-oriented, while women tend to value things involving relationships or human connections," said Deborah Fallows, a research fellow at Pew and author of the report.

A larger number of men surf the Internet for pleasure, with 70 percent acknowledging they go online to pass time, compared with 63 percent of women. Men are more likely than women to listen to music, view Webcams and pay for digital content.

But women are catching up in several areas measured by the survey, and intensive use by younger women suggests some of the gaps will continue to narrow.

Already, women are heavier users of e-mail, often going beyond the matter-of-fact responses of male correspondents to use e-mail to share stories, solve issues and reach

out to a wider network of friends and family.

Both genders look to the Web as a font of information and as an efficient communications tool, said Fallows in an interview.

Overall, the percentage of men and women who use the Web are nearly equal. Roughly 68 percent of men and 66 percent of women report making use of the Web, up from 20 percent of the US population Pew found in 1995, when men made up 58 percent of the online audience.

Over the past decade, men have proved more willing to engage in riskier encounters or transactions, such as joining chat rooms, bidding in online auctions or trading stocks. Auctions attract 30 percent of men versus 18 percent of women.

In addition, 21 percent of males confess to looking at porn online compared with just 5 percent of females, the Pew survey has found. This area is notoriously difficult to measure and may be underreported by survey respondents, Fallows said.

Meanwhile, 74 percent of women seek health or medical information online, far more than the 58 percent of men who do so. Thirty-four percent of women seek religious information from the Web versus 25 percent of men. Such differences mirror gender differences in the offline world, Fallows noted.