

Militants end ME truce

Palestinian rebels blow up UN club

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian militants marked the end of a truce agreement yesterday by firing a barrage of rockets towards southern Israel and detonating explosives in a beachfront UN club in Gaza City.

The targeting of both Israel and the United Nations served as a double blow to the crumbling authority of Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, who had issued a desperate appeal to tackle what he acknowledged was a state of anarchy.

The main Palestinian factions had signed up to a truce brokered by Abbas in March, agreeing to "cool down" their campaign of attacks against Israel at least until the end of the year.

Abbas had strong hopes that the militants would agree to extend the truce but a recent upsurge in rocket attacks, prompting Israel to reassert control over parts of the northern Gaza Strip, had illustrated that its days were numbered.

Confirmation that the factions no longer feel bound by the so-called "tahdiya" came with state-

ments from three groups, which claimed credit for a series of rocket attacks into Israel.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the armed wing of Islamic Jihad said in a joint statement they had fired two rockets at the southern Israeli town of Sderot while the Popular Resistance Committees said in a separate statement it had fired rockets at army posts and at a kibbutz in Israel.

An Israeli military spokeswoman confirmed that rockets had been launched but said there were no reports of them hitting their targets.

"Several launches were identified but nothing landed inside Israel," she told AFP.

The armed wing of Hamas, responsible for the majority of attacks during the five-year uprising, also confirmed that it was ending its adherence to the truce.

The resumption of attacks by Al-Aqsa, a group nominally loyal to the ruling Fatah faction, is particularly embarrassing for Abbas and highlights the deep divisions within the movement which had

huge problems just on agreeing a list of candidates for parliamentary elections on January 25.

Abbas has been a consistent critic of rocket attacks and has urged the factions to stop regarding themselves above the law.

Rather than reverse a tide of lawlessness since Israel left Gaza in September, Abbas has presided over a worsening of the chaos.

Foreign aid workers based in Gaza have increasingly become targets of the wrath of disaffected youngsters drawn to the armed factions.

A recent spate of kidnappings has prompted the United Nations to withdraw all but a handful of its foreign staff.

However the organisation was still the target of a gunman overnight who stormed the UN beachfront club, beat up a lone security guard on duty and then detonated a number of hand grenades, according to Palestinian security sources.

The UN club, which overlooks the Mediterranean, is the only place which serves alcohol in the territory.

While thousands of Palestinians

are employed by the United Nations in Gaza, the number of international staff has been slashed in recent months as a result of the mounting security crisis.

A UN source told AFP that the club had not been open for New Year celebrations as only three international staff remain in the territory.

"All but three foreign staffers have left Gaza and they are under strict orders not to leave their base after nightfall," said the source.

The attack came only a day after the end of the latest hostage drama in Gaza when a British rights worker and her parents were freed, more than 48 hours after being abducted.

Despite repeated pledges, Abbas has failed to tackle the lawlessness of Gaza where gunmen, operating in the name of "resistance" to Israel, act above the law.

In a speech marking the 41st anniversary of Fatah, Abbas warned that the violence was playing into the hands of Israel and undermining the Palestinian dream of statehood.



PHOTO: AFP
Allly Sun of Panama City, Panama wears 2006 glasses as she celebrates New Year in New York's Times Square. A million people filled the area around Times Square to welcome the year 2006.

Revellers ring in New Year

AFP, New York

Revellers around the world rang in the New Year with the usual fireworks and fanfare accompanied by calls for peace from the US and Iraqi presidents.

In New York's Times Square, hundreds of thousands crowded amid tight security and special tributes to those who brought relief to the hurricane-devastated city of New Orleans.

Braving freezing temperatures and sleet, close to one million people crammed into the "crossroads of the world" for the traditional centrepiece of New Year celebrations across the United States.

The square erupted in song, cheers and a cloud of confetti after the crowd counted down the last seconds of the year watching the traditional crystal ball make its midnight descent to illuminate the giant numerals 2006.

In New Orleans itself, crowds gathered in the historic French Quarter to bid farewell to a tragic year in which more than 1,000 people were killed in the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Storms in California forced the cancellation of a street party in Los Angeles at which pop stars the Black Eyed Peas were to perform. In the San Francisco area, thousands of people were evacuated to shelters due to mudslides and floods.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani Kashmiri shepherds handle a flock of goats they walk in snow yesterday in Pir Chanasi some 38km from devastated city of Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan Administered Kashmir. Rain and snow that hit quake-battered areas of Pakistan on the eve of the New Year have brought more misery and hardship, survivors said.

Churchill was willing to let Gandhi die

AFP, London

Winston Churchill, Britain's World War II prime minister, was prepared to let Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi starve to death if he went on hunger strike while interned during the war, archives released in London showed yesterday.

He thought Gandhi should be dealt with like any other detainee if he refused food.

Churchill's tough line was recorded during war cabinet meetings, which also showed Britain's confusion over how to handle the charismatic Indian leader's stance of peaceful opposition.

The notes record Churchill as saying Gandhi should stay in detention and "let him do as he likes".

War fear grips Nepal as Maoist truce nears end

REUTERS, Kathmandu

A new year dawned in revolt-torn Nepal yesterday amid growing fears of fresh violence as the Maoist rebels' unilateral truce neared its end.

The rebel ceasefire, first announced for three months in September and later extended for another month under popular pressure, is due to expire at midnight on Monday.

King Gyanendra, who seized absolute power 11 months ago, has refused to match the truce while the guerrillas have accused his royalist government of provoking them to break it.

Still, the four months saw fewer killings.

"An end to the ceasefire would naturally mean resumption of

violence," said Yubaraj Ghimire, editor of Samay, a weekly magazine. "But there is still some hope that the Maoists will continue with their unilateral ceasefire for some time."

The truce neared its end amid unconfirmed reports that the Maoists, who hold sway in the countryside, were now setting their sights on the high-security capital, Kathmandu, which has so far been spared major attacks.

The rebels are fighting to establish one-party communist rule in the mountainous Himalayan nation, one of the world's poorest.

The revolt, now nearly 10 years old, has killed more than 12,500 people and delayed national as well as local polls.

On Friday, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan

expressed concern that fighting could resume and urged the government to join the ceasefire.

Annan also called on the rebels to extend the truce, saying that the people had benefited from the de-escalation of violence in the last four months.

But analysts said the royalist government, which asserted recently that it had broken the rebels' "backbone", was unlikely to take heed as it believes the rebels cannot be trusted.

"Continued refusal by the state to reciprocate the ceasefire would not only discredit it further but establish that it is the government which is more responsible for the possible resumption of conflict and the likely bloodshed," Ghimire said.

Five children, woman burned alive in Bihar

REUTERS, Patna

Five children and a woman were burned to death in their home yesterday by a rival family over a dispute about missing buffaloes in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, police said.

The gruesome incident took place at dawn in Raghupur town, about 40 km southeast of Patna, the state's capital.

"The house was set on fire when the victims were all asleep. Only the man in the family managed to escape," a local police officer told Reuters by telephone.

Three people had been arrested in connection with the case, he said.

ANALYSTS SAY

Talks key to halting Lanka's slide to war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka could slide back into civil war early in the New Year unless the government and Tamil Tiger rebels agree to meet face-to-face and save their fragile truce, according to analysts and mediators.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, who won November polls promising a brand new peace process that would have sidelined Norwegian peacebrokers, has toned down his hawkish pre-election rhetoric and invited Oslo to continue its role.

But analysts and diplomats warn the ceasefire in effect since February 2002 is close to collapse.

The most serious warning came late last week from the head of the Norwegian-led ceasefire monitoring panel, Hårgup Haukland.

He said "war may not be far away" in the tropical Indian Ocean island nation where at least 83 people were killed last month despite the truce.

The upsurge in violence has also

overshadowed efforts to recover from the December 2004 tsunami that killed 31,000 people and left one million homeless.

Rajapakse told reporters last week he was keen to have a negotiated settlement to the conflict and was ready to grant extensive devolution of power to minority Tamils similar to the system of government in neighbouring India.

"Yes, the president is softening his pre-election hard line but I think it is still not enough to revive the peace process," said Sunanda Deshapriya, a director at the private Centre for Policy Alternatives think-tank.

He said both the rebel Liberation Tigers and the government were engaged in a "proxy war" and neither appeared to be willing to back down and make a serious attempt to resume peace talks urgently needed to prevent the country returning to war.

The three-decade-old ethnic conflict between the majority

Sinhalese and minority Tamils has claimed over 60,000 lives. Four major peace attempts and several ceasefires have collapsed in the past.

Norwegian diplomats said Oslo's International Development Minister Erik Solheim was expected here later this month on a three-day visit to help bring the parties back to the negotiating table.

Solheim said in a statement he was concerned about an upsurge in shootings and explosions.

"I'm deeply worried by the recent outbreak of violence in Sri Lanka," he said. "To check the spiral of violence, it is urgent that the two parties sit down together to examine ways of maintaining the ceasefire."

Sri Lanka had initially insisted talks with the Tigers be held within government-controlled areas of the island, a demand rejected by the guerrillas, who wanted to stage a meeting either in their territory or abroad.