

Israel in shock over Hamas victory

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel was in shock yesterday over the likely Palestinian electoral victory of radical Islamist group Hamas, which has killed hundreds of Israelis and advocates the destruction of the Jewish state.

As initial indications predicted Hamas had won and Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei announced his resignation, Israel's Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert prepared to convene an emergency security meeting.

Late Wednesday, he announced that Israel could not allow Hamas, whose charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state and which has vowed not to disarm, to join the Palestinian Authority in its current form.

The right-wing opposition

poured scorn on the government for standing by as Hamas took part in the election, which threatens to have profound consequences on Israel's own general election on March 28.

The government was biding its time Thursday and waiting for the official results, not expected until 7 pm (1700 GMT), before reacting further, as radio and television stations devoted their morning coverage to special programming.

"For now, ministers have been ordered not to talk," an official at the prime minister's office told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, who has ordered numerous military operations and targeted assassinations of Hamas military leaders, said the government had to first wait for the official results

before deciding how to react.

Olmert was late Thursday to chair a special meeting of top military brass, senior security officials and close aides such as Mofaz and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni to discuss the ramifications of a Hamas win.

The prospect of a Palestinian government led by the radical Islamist faction is the biggest crisis to face the acting Israeli leader since he assumed power when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a massive stroke on January 4.

Israel has already warned that a Hamas victory would ensure the non-existent peace process remains frozen. The international community has expressed concern it could cause problems for their relationship with the Palestinian Authority.

OBSERVERS SAY

Palestinian vote fair

AFP, Jerusalem

Former US president Jimmy Carter, heading a team of international election observers, said yesterday that the Palestinian vote had been conducted fairly and without violence.

"These elections were completely safe, fair and without violence," Carter told a news conference. "Except for the restrictions in east Jerusalem, the election process was open and highly competitive."

A final report will be issued shortly after all votes had been counted from Wednesday's parliamentary election and any possible complaints lodged by political parties or candidates, he said.

The Israeli authorities prevented candidates from the radical Islamist movement Hamas from campaigning in annexed east Jerusalem and restricted voting to

six post offices within the confines of the holy city.

The former US president charged, however, that the participation of Hamas, which has claimed victory, was inconsistent with the fundamental principle of democratic elections.

"Hamas's current political participation, which simultaneously advocates violence, is not consistent with the fundamental principle of democratic elections," Carter said in a statement.

"We hope that the elections will make a decisive move towards the renunciation of violence by all groups and toward addressing corruption and other issues."

The head of an EU monitoring team, Veronique De Keyser, summed up the election as "fair and free under severe restrictions", criticising Israeli limitations imposed by their occupation of Palestinian territory on the scope of the poll.



PHOTO: AFP

Senior Hamas leader and top candidate for the Palestinian parliamentary elections, Ismail Haniya, waves after a press conference held at his house in al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza City yesterday. Haniya said Hamas will negotiate with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas and other parties in forming a Palestinian government. A source in the central elections commission also said Hamas was ahead of Fatah with nearly all votes counted.

Saddam wants to sue Bush, Blair: Lawyer

AP, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein's chief lawyer said Thursday that the deposed Iraqi president wants President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair tried on allegations of committing war crimes.

Khalil al-Dulaimi said Saddam wants to sue both leaders, along with Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, for allegedly authorizing the use of weapons such as depleted uranium artillery shells, white phosphorus, napalm and cluster bombs against Iraqis.

"We will sue Bush, Blair and Rumsfeld in The Hague for using such weapons of mass destruction," al-Dulaimi said in Jordan, told The Associated Press in Baghdad during a telephone interview.

No complaint has been filed to the International Criminal Court in The Netherlands, but al-Dulaimi said Saddam's foreign defence team will present it "very soon."

"President Saddam intends to bring those criminals to justice for their mass killings of Iraqis in Baghdad, Ramadi, Fallujah and Qaim and abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib," the lawyer added.

Saddam also wants all Iraqis who have had relatives killed or had property damaged should receive at least \$500,000 each.

US WATCHDOG SAYS Millions wasted in Iraq rebuilding

AFP, Washington

Millions of dollars of US money intended for the reconstruction of Iraq were wasted and mismanaged by the US-run government in Iraq between 2003 and 2004, a military watchdog said in a new report.

The special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction said that the Coalition Provisional Authority had "not effectively managed" more than 2,000 contracts for central and southern provinces worth \$8.1 billion dollars.

The inspector general, Stuart Bowen, said in his report that signs of fraud had been detected and were being investigated.

US forces set free 400 Iraqis

AFP, Baghdad

More than 400 detainees being held in Iraqi and US-run prisons, including five women, were released yesterday in a move which could help free abducted US reporter Jill Carroll.

"We have released 419 detainees today including five women," a spokesman for the US detention facilities in Iraq told AFP.

A justice ministry official earlier said a total of 424 detainees were to be freed from Baghdad's notorious Abu Ghraib jail and other prisons following a review of their cases by a joint Iraqi-US board.

They included five of the nine women known to be held by US forces.

Pan-Arab television station Al-Jazeera said last week that the kidnappers of 28-year-old Carroll had threatened to kill her unless all female detainees held by US forces in Iraq were set free.

While Iraqi and US officials have denied that the releases have anything to do with Carroll's case, there is hope the move might help her regardless.

Carroll was abducted on January 7 in Baghdad, one of the nearly 250 foreigners seized in Iraq since the March 2003 US-led invasion, in a recent surge in hostage-taking in the violence-ravaged country.

"Let me assert that there is no connection between the release and kidnapping of the US reporter. The release was finalised after a review by the Iraqi-US board," the US spokesman said.

The detainees were held without charge or trial, the spokesman said.

"When they were detained we had enough evidence to indicate that they were an imminent threat to the security of Iraq and were detained as per the UN Security Council regulations. But there was no trial for a specific crime," the spokesman added.

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