

Israel cautions against legitimising Hamas

Militants planning tour of Muslim states

AP, AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's foreign minister cautioned the international community yesterday against going down the "slippery slope" of legitimising Hamas, criticising Russia's decision to invite the militant group to Moscow for talks.

Hamas leaders confirmed Saturday they plan to travel to Moscow this month for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. They said they did not expect Russia to impose conditions for the trip, despite US calls for Moscow to send a clear message that Hamas halt attacks on Israel and recognise the Jewish state.

Moreover a Hamas delegation is expected to visit several Muslim countries in the coming days, including Turkey and Iran, a senior leader of the radical Palestinian movement said yesterday.

Ismail Haniya, who led Hamas to victory in last month's general election, told AFP that members of a delegation who were currently in Doha had received invitations to several other countries.

"The delegation will go to Sudan today or tomorrow and after Sudan we expect to go to Turkey. They also have a visit to Saudi Arabia in their programme."

Putin extended the invitation to Hamas last week, following its sweeping victory in Palestinian elections last month. The invitation, later supported by France, infuriated Israel, which fears the international resolve to shun the militant group is weakening.

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni urged the international community to stand firm against Hamas, which has killed hundreds of Israelis in suicide bombings.

"The Russian position is currently not accepted in the international community," Livni told Israel Radio. "Part of the danger is going down the slippery slope of first talking, then starting to understand why, then supporting with money, then granting legitimacy. This is a phenomenon that needs to be acted against."

The militant group, which remains committed to Israel's destruction and has been branded a terrorist organi-

sation in the US and Europe, is to form a new Palestinian government in the coming weeks.

Sami Abu Zuhri, a Hamas spokesman in Gaza, said Russia and Hamas would engage in a dialogue during the militant group's visit to Russia.

"We are going to present our positions ... about the political developments and issues related to the rights of our people," Abu Zuhri said on Saturday. "Russia will listen to Hamas and Hamas will listen to Russia."

Although an official date for the visit hasn't been set, Abu Zuhri said he expects it to take place in the second half of February.

Putin's position runs counter to the stand recently taken by the so-called Quartet of Middle East peace negotiators, comprising Russia, the U.S., the European Union and the UN. The Quartet, which backs the "road map" peace plan, has called on Hamas to renounce violence and recognize Israel, and has threatened to withhold hundreds of millions of dollars in desperately aided need to the Palestinian Authority once Hamas takes power.

Alarm in UK over 'abuse' of Iraqis

AFP, London

The British government yesterday faced fresh controversy over the conduct of its troops in Iraq after a tabloid newspaper published video footage purporting to show savage abuse of young Iraqis.

The ministry of defence had ordered Saturday an "urgent investigation" into the video, reported in the mass-circulation News of the World, in which a group of teenagers are seen to be ruthlessly attacked by soldiers.

"If it is true, this is unacceptable behaviour. Those who are responsible will be brought to trial," British finance minister Gordon Brown told BBC television.

He added: "This will be acted on; the investigation should take place; the name of the British forces around the world is one we must defend and protect and be safeguarded by taking the action that is necessary."

The newspaper said that the scenes were filmed by a corporal who can be heard encouraging his colleagues — described by the tabloid as "a rogue squad of British soldiers" — in a running commentary.

The fuzzy video showed the troops dragging four young protesters off a street and into an army compound where they were punched, kicked and hit with batons, the report said.

Brown added: "The people who will be most annoyed about this are our loyal hard-working, decent troops... 80,000 of whom have served with great distinction in Iraq and in that region.

"They will see this as a slight on the great work they are doing in the line of duty," said Brown, seen as the favourite to succeed Prime Minister Tony Blair when he steps down.

The video tape -- thought to have been made in 2004 during street riots in southern Iraq, where British forces are concentrated -- is said to show a minute's worth of the attack, with 42 blows counted.

The News of the World claimed the video's cameraman could be heard laughing and saying: "Oh yes! Oh Yes! You're gonna get it. Yes, naughty little boys. You little fuckers, you little fuckers. Die. Ha Ha."

Labour lawmaker Jeremy Corbyn called for troops alleged to be involved to be suspended.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani women activists burn an effigy of Danish cartoonist during a protest rally in Karachi yesterday. Thousands of Pakistanis held protests across the country over cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) published in European dailies.

Sharon in critical condition after surgery

AP, Jerusalem

Ariel Sharon was stable but critical after an emergency surgery to remove nearly 2 feet of his large intestines, his seventh operation since suffering a debilitating stroke last month, the hospital treating the premier said yesterday.

The four-hour operation on Saturday was successful, but the Israeli leader's already slim chances for recovery were even dimmer, doctors said. Sharon has yet to awaken since his stroke on Jan. 4.

Israelis closely followed their 77-year-old leader's latest ordeal, with TV stations repeatedly breaking into regular programming for updates, but the country already has come to terms with his departure from politics.

Sharon's political heir, Ehud Olmert, quickly took the reins as acting prime minister after Sharon's stroke, and appears poised to lead Sharon's centrist Kadima Party to victory in March 28 elections.

Sharon was rushed to surgery Saturday morning after doctors, who had noticed abdominal swelling, conducted a CT scan and a laparoscopy, or insertion of a small camera through the abdominal wall.



PHOTO: AFP

Wild swans are seen in a Venice lagoon Saturday. The highly pathogenic strain of H5N1 bird flu has been detected in wild swans in Italy, the first cases in the European Union, Italian Health Minister Francesco Storace said Saturday.

Europe scrambles to contain bird flu

AFP, Rome

European officials were scrambling yesterday to contain outbreaks of bird flu after cases of the deadly H5N1 strain of the viral disease were for the first time confirmed in EU members Greece and Italy as well as in Bulgaria.

Italian health officials held a crisis meeting Sunday after the discovery of H5N1 in southern Italy.

The meeting was chaired by Health Minister Francesco Storace and brought together health officials from Puglia, Calabria and Sicily -- the southern regions where the virus was found in migrating swans.

The health official for Puglia, Alberto Tedesco, told the meeting that strict control measures were already in place, ANSA news agency reported.

Another expert attending the meeting, Antonio Limone, said the situation was "under control" in agricultural zones and on the markets.

Storace said Saturday that the highly pathogenic strain, responsible for the deaths of some 90 peo-

ple, mainly in Asia, had been found in a total of 21 dead swans, five of them with a virulent form.

The European Commission reacted calmly to the news that the virus had for the first time crossed into the 25-member bloc, after having previously infected birds as close as Romania and killed four people in Turkey.

Storace tried to calm fears by saying that no one had caught the virus directly from wild birds.

But hospitals in Sicily said they would test patients showing flu symptoms to determine the type of infection.

Five chickens found dead near the Sicilian town of Caltanissetta were undergoing tests.

In a bid to calm possible consumer fears Italian poultry lobby officials said their "products are undergoing the most severe tests in Europe".

Greek poultry farmers also stressed that bird flu detected near the northern city of Salonika Saturday among three wild swans "does not concern farm birds."

N Korea warns Seoul of 'nuke war' over WMD drill

AFP, Seoul

Stalinist North Korea has warned South Korea against sparking "nuclear war" by joining a US-led international drill aimed at intercepting weapons of mass destruction, state media said.

Rodong Simnun, the official communist party mouthpiece said late Saturday Seoul's participation in the drill would be "conspiring with the US in its moves for a war of aggression."

"It is also a dangerous act of bringing the disaster of a nuclear war to the Korean Peninsula," Rodong said in a dispatch carried by the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

South Korea said last month it would send a team to "observe" a US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) drill off Australia in April and that it would get briefed regularly on the initiative.