

Israel to keep on Gaza offensive until GI freed

Tel Aviv thumbs down global outcry

AP, Jerusalem

Israel will push forward with its offensive in the Gaza Strip until Palestinian militants release a captured Israeli soldier and halt their rocket attacks, top officials said yesterday, rejecting international criticism that the army has used excessive force during a nearly two-week operation in the coastal area.

The officials spoke a day after Prime Minister Ehud Olmert rejected a call by the Palestinian prime minister for a cease-fire. The offensive, launched in response to the soldier's capture, has caused widespread destruction in Gaza and left more than 40 Palestinians dead.

"The simplest thing really is to release the soldier, stop the rocket fire and then things will return to

normal," Justice Minister Haim Ramon, who is close to Olmert, told Israel Radio.

"The goal of the operation is simply to stop the terrorism," he added, saying the operation will continue until the Palestinians take action.

At the weekly Cabinet meeting Sunday, ministers expressed unanimous support for Olmert's refusal to negotiate with the militants, his rejection of the truce offer and his decision to continue the Gaza offensive, participants said.

Israeli ground troops entered Gaza on June 28, three days after Palestinian militants crossed into southern Israel and captured an Israeli soldier, Cpl. Gilad Shalit, 19. While the army's initial aim was to free the soldier, the mission was expanded to halt continuing rocket

attacks from northern Gaza.

Israeli forces have battered the coastal strip with heavy artillery barrages and airstrikes in the army's largest operation in Gaza since troops and settlers withdrew last summer.

Palestinian hospital officials say 44 Palestinians have died in the offensive and more than 160 have been wounded. One Israeli soldier was killed last week.

In Gaza City, hundreds of people joined a funeral procession for the family. The body of 6-year-old Rawan Hajaj was carried on a bloodstained stretcher, her face exposed and body covered in a flag of the Islamic Jihad militant group. In a show of unity, gunmen from rival Palestinian factions fired into the air.

Late Saturday, the United

Nations accused Israel of widespread human rights violations and hardship to civilians. It said the operations "have seen innocent civilians, including children, killed, brought increased misery to hundreds of thousands of people and .. will wreak far-reaching harm on Palestinian society."

Israeli officials rejected the criticism.

"Anybody who calls this operation disproportionate has no clue about the facts on the ground. We have been attacked and bombarded for months and weeks," Cabinet minister Yitzhak Herzog said Sunday. "With all due respect to all those who criticize us, if anything of this nature would have happened in their homeland, they would have acted much worse."



PHOTO: AFP

Police investigators and rescuers work near the tail-end of a Russian Sibir company Airbus A-310 that crashed at Irkutsk airport yesterday. At least 150 people died when a Russian Airbus plane veered off a runway and caught fire while landing early Sunday in the Siberian provincial centre of Irkutsk.

Saddam trial enters last phase today

AFP, Baghdad

The turbulent trial of Saddam Hussein on charges of crimes against humanity enters its last phase today as defence lawyers make their closing arguments without a key member of their team.

On Monday, the attorneys will begin to present their closing arguments defending Saddam and seven others from charges that in the 1980s they killed 148 Shias in the village of Dujail after the former president escaped an assassination bid there.

Chief prosecutor Jaafar al-Mussawi told AFP, "this may take two to three days but no more".

In the previous 35 sessions of the trial, which started in October, the prosecution argued that the Shia killings were unlawful, while the defence insisted it was a legitimate action against those responsible for planning to murder the head of state.



PHOTO: AFP

Three children weep during the funerals of three members of the Hajaj family yesterday who were killed Saturday during an Israeli air raid. Six-year-old Rawan, a Palestinian girl, her elder brother Mohammed, 23-years-old, and their mother Amneh were killed in Israeli air strike on a house east of Gaza City.

Iraq security meeting wraps up in Iran

AFP, Tehran

Officials from Iraq and its neighbours yesterday wrapped up a two-day conference aimed at improving security in the violence-stricken country, amid an Iranian campaign for the withdrawal of foreign troops from its neighbour.

As the host of the meeting of foreign ministers Iran also used the event to launch a fresh attack on Israel -- with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calling for Islamic countries to mobilise and "remove" the Jewish state.

A final statement said delegates had "expressed their full support" for the Iraqi government and a "free, independent, democratic and unified federal Iraq based on good-neighbourly relations, non-interference in each others' internal affairs and respect of international and bilateral treaties."

21 killed as Islamists rid Somali capital of brutal warlords

AFP, Mogadishu

Hardline Somali Islamic militants on Sunday declared "absolute" victory over the remaining warlords in the lawless capital Mogadishu after deadly clashes that claimed at least 21 lives, marking the end of the notorious warlords' rule in the Indian Ocean city.

"We have absolutely won the fighting that started in Mogadishu this morning. We now control the whole city after we seized the last territory from warlord Qeydiid," said Sheikh Mukhtar Robow, the deputy secretary of defence for the Islamic courts.

Fighters allied to the Supreme Islamic Council of Somalia ousted their rivals loyal to warlord Abdi

Hassan Awale Qeydiid, who alongside warlord Hussein Aidid had refused to surrender and handover their weapons to the Islamists, who routed the other warlords from the capital on June 5.

At least 21 people were killed, including civilians, in deadly artillery duels in southern Mogadishu, while dozens were wounded and taken to the capital's Medina and Banadir hospitals, doctors, witnesses and militia said.

Witnesses said warlords' fighters fled from their positions, which they had held for many years, as Islamic militants on battlewagons -- pickup trucks mounted with machineguns -- established base, marking the end of warlords rule in the lawless capital.

Blair lines up replacement for embattled deputy Prescott

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair intends to replace his scandal-hit deputy, John Prescott, with environment minister David Miliband, according to press reports yesterday.

Blair was hatching a plan to appoint Miliband before heading off on holiday next month, should Prescott resign during the next few weeks, The Sunday Telegraph said without naming its sources.

The paper added that Blair's aides were keen to avoid a "nightmare scenario" of Prescott assuming responsibility for running the country -- while facing allegations of extra-marital affairs and of links with a US gambling tycoon bidding to set up a London casino.

Meanwhile, The Sunday Times reported that Miliband, 40, would become deputy prime minister following the Labour Party's annual conference in September.

In the meantime, and in the event of Prescott's resignation, Prescott could be replaced temporarily by Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett or Leader of the Commons Jack Straw, the newspaper added.

Pope winds up Spain trip defending family

REUTERS, Valencia

Pope Benedict wound up a quick trip to Valencia on Sunday, implicitly condemning some key social legislation of Spain's Socialist government, stressing that marriage had to be heterosexual and for life.

At the last major event of his 26-hour visit, the German pope presided at a mass for what organisers said was about a million people on the grounds of a sprawling futuristic arts and science complex in Spain's third largest city.

In his homily to the crowd, the pope, wearing green and white vestments, several times praised the traditional family, founded on "indissoluble marriage between a man and a woman."

The Spanish royal family attended the mass but Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero did not. His government has clashed head-on with the Church over several issues, mainly last year's legalization of gay marriage.

Koizumi heads to ME in throes of crisis

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi heads to the Middle East this week to try to help calm the worst crisis in the region in months and urge Israeli and Palestinian leaders to return to negotiations.

Koizumi is scheduled to arrive in Tel Aviv Tuesday afternoon and meet Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Wednesday in Jerusalem before moving to Ramallah for talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

During his meeting with Abbas, Koizumi plans to announce a fresh package of humanitarian assistance for the Palestinians, officials said.

Tokyo insists it will not be used to finance the Hamas administration, which won a massive election victory in January and formally advocates the destruction of the Jewish state.

"Our humanitarian assistance to Palestinians has not changed, but we will not support Hamas," a source said.

US to dangle nuclear deal in exchange for Russia's help on Iran

AFP, Washington

The United States said it is beginning negotiations with Russia on a potentially lucrative nuclear energy accord, but made clear any deal would be conditional on Moscow's full cooperation in US attempts to block Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Russia and China have been a key impediment to efforts by the United States to rally members of the UN Security Council behind its plan to slap international sanctions on Tehran in order to force it to halt uranium enrichment.

The issue is expected to be front and centre in negotiations between President George W. Bush and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, at a Group of Eight summit in St. Petersburg next weekend.

Although details of the proposed deal have not been released, it is seen as an attempt by the Bush

administration to soften Russia's recalcitrance ahead of the Bush-Putin talks and bring Moscow firmly into the US camp.

"We are initiating negotiations on a peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement with Russia," White House spokesman Peter Watkins told AFP on Saturday. "Such an agreement would benefit both the United States and Russia and indeed the world by enabling advances in greater use of nuclear energy."

He did not say when the talks would formally begin, but another official speaking on condition of anonymity said a formal announcement could be expected at the G8 summit.

The White House official, however, was adamant in linking the deal to Russia's approach to Iran and its readiness to cooperate with the Bush administration in halting what it sees as Iran's secret nuclear weapons programme.