

Abbas, Haniyeh agree to defuse tensions in Gaza

US to give \$86m for Palestinians

REUTERS, Gaza/ Jerusalem

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh said yesterday he and President Mahmoud Abbas had agreed to keep gunmen from their rival Hamas and Fatah factions off Gaza's streets after clashes in which eight were killed.

Factional fighting has surged in Gaza and the occupied West Bank since Abbas challenged the ruling Hamas faction by calling for early parliamentary and presidential elections after talks on forming a unity government failed.

After late-night emergency talks, Haniyeh said he and Abbas had agreed to "withdraw all gunmen from the streets and deploy police forces to keep law and order."

Abbas made no public comment, but a diplomat who attended the talks and declined to be identified confirmed an agreement had been reached. It was the first meeting between Abbas and Haniyeh in two months.

Similar pacts in the past have been shattered swiftly by violence and Gazans said they feared another eruption of bloodshed later in the day when Thursday's dead are buried.

In a move that could fuel tensions, the United States will provide \$86 million to strengthen security forces loyal to Abbas, expanding US involvement in Fatah's power struggle with Hamas.

In fighting between rival Palestinian groups in the Gaza

Strip on Thursday, a policeman loyal to Haniyeh's governing Hamas movement was killed by Fatah gunmen.

Blaming the shooting on bodyguards of Colonel Mohammed Ghareeb of the Preventive Security Service, Hamas gunmen then besieged his home in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahiya, killing Ghareeb and six of his men and wounding his wife.

Clashes also erupted in the nearby Jabalya refugee camp, where at least 30 people were wounded, hospital officials said.

The fighting spread overnight to the occupied West Bank, where unidentified gunmen critically wounded a Hamas activist near the city of Nablus, Hamas officials said.

Also on Friday, Israeli forces raided the village of Attil near the West Bank town of Tulkarm in a search for a wanted Islamic Jihad militant, witnesses said.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration will provide \$86 million to help security forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, expanding US involvement in his struggle with Hamas, according to documents seen on Friday.

The US money will be used to "assist the Palestinian Authority presidency in fulfilling PA commitments under the road map (peace plan) to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism and establish law and order in the West Bank and Gaza," according to a US government document.



Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya (L) meets with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas late Thursday in Gaza City. It was the first meeting of the two leaders in two months to discuss the deteriorating situation and factional fighting in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

20 feared dead in Pak Kashmir landslide

AFP, Muzaffarabad

More than 20 people were trapped and feared dead yesterday when a landslide triggered by recent rain hit their vehicle in the Pakistan-administered zone of Kashmir, officials said.

"Two people have been rescued but more than 20 were still trapped inside the vehicle buried in the landslide," senior administration official Bashir Mughal told AFP.

The tragedy happened near Kotli, about 210km south of the state capital Muzaffarabad, devastated by a massive earthquake some 15 months ago, he said.

The victims were in a packed minibus travelling to the mountainous region of Kotli from the northern Pakistani city of Rawalpindi.

"We don't know the exact number of fatalities but the two survivors said there were more than 20 people in the minibus," he said, adding that rescue teams were trying to retrieve the vehicle.



Iraqi Sunni Arabs pray at the grave of hanged former president Saddam Hussein in his home village of Awja yesterday. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said in an interview published Friday that the execution of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was shameful, unthinkable, and turned the ex-dictator into a martyr.

Saddam could have been hanged in a 'more dignified way': Bush

REUTERS, Baghdad

US President George W Bush said Saddam Hussein could have been hanged in a "more dignified way" and one his closest Arab allies said yesterday a video of Shia officials taunting him on the gallows was "barbaric."

In Bush's first comments on Saddam's unruly televised hanging, which has inflamed sectarian passions in Iraq ahead of his announcement next week of a new Iraq strategy, he said he expected the Iraqi government to conduct a full investigation but said the ousted leader was given justice.

"I wish, obviously, that the proceedings had ... gone in a more dignified way. But nevertheless, he was given justice," said Bush, who is planning to change his top military and civilian officials in Baghdad in moves that would wrap

up a change of officials responsible for the war.

"We expect there to be a full investigation of what took place," Bush told reporters in the White House on Thursday.

President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, one of Washington's closest allies in the Middle East, joined the growing chorus of criticism, saying pictures of the execution were "revolting and barbaric."

Violence in Iraq has heightened regional sectarian and ethnic tensions between the mainly Sunni Muslim Arab world and Shias who dominate Iraq and neighbouring, non-Arab Iran.

In an interview with Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth, Mubarak said the timing was "unreasonable" and that he had written to Bush asking him to postpone the execution. The Iraqi government has said the US envoy asked for a two-week delay.

Nepali king spurns salary

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's embattled King Gyanendra and his family have not drawn their annual salary since the new government slapped tax on the royals' income in May, a report said yesterday.

The king and family members have not approached the government for the first tranche of their 23.7 million rupee (329,000 dollar) salary and allowances, the English language daily Kathmandu Post reported, quoting unnamed government officials.

The royal palace used to collect its annual household budget within 48 hours of it being announced, the newspaper said.

"It is really surprising the palace has not drawn the money even after six months into the fiscal year," the newspaper quoted an official as saying.

Palace officials were not available for comment.

Nepali rebel, govt arms registration to begin mid-January: UN

AFP, Kathmandu

The United Nations will be ready to start registration later this month of Maoist and army weapons as part of an historic deal to end Nepal's decade-long civil war, a UN official said yesterday.

Under the peace pact formalised in November that ended the bloody insurgency, the government agreed to let the Maoists join the government in return for placing their arms and fighters in camps under UN supervision.

The deal also provided for the army to put one-third of its 93,000-strong force along with some weapons under UN supervision.

"Teams provided by United Nations Development Program are on a standby position to begin registration from 15 January, initially of weapons and later of combatants," senior UN official Ian

Martin told reporters here.

Thirteen UN arms monitors had already arrived in Nepal and would operate in two teams, one from Kathmandu and the other from Nepalgunj, 510km west of the capital, starting Monday after completing training.

The Nepal army has agreed to store its weapons in one of its barracks on the outskirts of Kathmandu, he said.

More UN representatives were due to arrive in the next few days and the balance of the 35-member monitoring force so far approved would be ready for deployment as of January 15, he said.

The UN official said 111 Nepali ex-servicemen who served in the Indian and British armies will be "deployed to the seven main cantonment sites late next week" to enable a 24-hour presence at weapons storage sites until the arrival of a full UN team.

Leftists to campaign against Indo-US deal

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's main communist party, which shores up the federal coalition, said on Thursday it would launch a campaign against a controversial nuclear deal with the United States, saying it was not in the country's interests.

Legislation approved by the US Congress last month backing the landmark deal had objectionable clauses and coerced India to align its foreign policy with that of the United States, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) said.

"The actual terms set out in the legislation does not offer 'full civilian nuclear cooperation'," the party said in a statement after its central committee met in the eastern city of Kolkata.

The party, whose support is crucial to the survival of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's coalition, urged the government not to proceed with the deal until all its "extraneous terms and foreign policy implications" were cleared.

"The Central Committee calls upon the party to launch a campaign

against the dangers inherent in the Indo-US nuclear agreement," it said, without elaborating on the campaign.

President George W. Bush last month signed into law the bill approved by Congress, a major step towards allowing India to buy US nuclear reactors and fuel for the first time in 30 years.

But it still must be approved by the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and again by the US Congress before nuclear trade can start.

The US Congress attached several conditions to the law, which have not gone down well with New Delhi, and Singh has said further tough negotiations were likely over a bilateral agreement the two countries need to sign.

Those negotiations are due to begin this month and Washington has said it hopes to get the approvals it needs by the middle of this year.

Under the bill, the US president would be required to end the export of nuclear materials if India tests another nuclear device as it did in

1998.

The US president is also required to report to Congress annually on whether India was cooperating with international efforts to restrain Iran's nuclear programme.

Critics say the bill fails to guarantee uninterrupted fuel supplies for civilian reactors and prevents India from reprocessing spent fuel.

The deal has also been strongly opposed by the US non-proliferation lobby, which says Washington is undermining efforts to curb the spread of nuclear weapons by cooperating with India, which has tested nuclear devices and not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Although Bush has hinted he may not be bound by the Congress changes, the CPI-M said it was not satisfied by such a "subjective interpretation".

"A new president assuming office in 2008 can decide to abide by the provisions of the law," it said. "A majority in (India's) parliament are against proceeding with the bilateral agreement on the terms set out by the United States."

'IEA must do more to engage China, India'

AFP, Tokyo

The International Energy Agency (IEA) must do more to engage heavyweight oil consumers China and India if it is to remain relevant, its next executive director said Friday.

"The first job for me is how we can really engage these non-members," in the agency's efforts to promote energy security, said Nobuo Tanaka, who becomes the IEA's first non-European head from September, replacing France's Claude Mandil.

"Without engaging these big non-member consuming countries, the relevance of the IEA could be undermined," he told reporters at the Foreign Correspondents' Club.

The IEA's efforts to promote energy efficiency "will clearly be restricted without the involvement of China and India," added Tanaka, who is currently a director at the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development.

The IEA was created during the 1973-74 oil shock to act as energy policy advisor to members of the OECD, to which China and India do not belong.



US Representative Keith Ellison, Democrat of Minnesota, takes his oath of office using the holy Quran during a ceremonial swearing in with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (L) and his wife Kim (C) at the US Capitol Thursday in Washington, DC. Ellison is the first Muslim elected as a US Congressman.

Lanka jets destroy rebel navy base

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan air force jets staged a fourth straight day of raids Friday against Tamil Tiger positions in the north of the island, a military spokesman said.

Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe said a dawn raid by Israeli-built Kfir jets completely destroyed a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) base at Wilawattai in the rebel-held Mullativu district.

The base belonged to the Sea Tigers, the naval arm of the rebels, he said.

The LTTE accused the military of non-stop air raids targeting civilians.

"The residents, fleeing their homes at first warning, escaped unhurt but some of their houses, mostly Tsunami relief huts, are damaged by the air strike," the rebels said in a statement.

The LTTE's military spokesperson, Rasiah Ilanthirayan, also accused government forces of killing two state employees and injuring three others in a fragmentation mine blast inside Tiger territory in Wanni district.

The explosion occurred next to a jeep transporting the officials.



Indian slum dwellers warm themselves up around a fire early yesterday in Patna, capital city of Bihar as night temperatures dropped to a minimum of 4 degrees Celsius. At least 33 people died of a cold snap which settled over northern India in the last week of December.

Iraqi PM accuses Sunni clerics of fuelling tension

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's prime minister accused a leading Sunni Muslim clerics' group on Friday of stoking tension by saying that militias were preparing attacks on Sunni neighbourhoods in Baghdad.

The Muslim Clerics' Association, an umbrella grouping of religious leaders of Iraq's Sunni Arab minority, said in a statement on Thursday that militias linked to an unnamed political group were planning attacks.

"The statement from the Muslim Clerics' Association is totally baseless and raises tension, and we hold the Muslim Clerics responsible for any action that results from this," said a statement from Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's office.

The clerics' statement did not identify the militia or say that it was Shia. But the use of the word "militia" and the suggestion of links to government parties is an unmistakable indication to Iraqis that it was

accusing Shia groups.

Sectarian tension has been particularly high over the past week, since Maliki rushed through the hanging of former president Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, and a video circulated showing him being taunted on the gallows by supporters of the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Rumors and fears of militia activity were reported by residents on Thursday but there were no reports by Friday of anything out of the ordinary in a city where dozens of bodies turn up every day, apparent victims of death squad kidnappers.

Washington has identified Sadr's Mehdi Army militia as the greatest threat to security in Iraq. Various other groups in government are linked to militias.

Sectarian attacks and threats have driven tens of thousands of people from their homes in Baghdad and many districts that used to have mixed populations have become more and more divided along sectarian lines.

al-Qaeda calls for Jihad in Somalia

AFP, Dubai

al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri called for Muslim fighters to head to Somalia and deploy guerrilla tactics used in Iraq following the rout of the Islamic courts, in an audio message released yesterday.

"I call on all Muslims to respond to the call for Jihad (holy war) in Somalia," Osama bin Laden's deputy said in the message posted on a website normally used by al-Qaeda.

"The real war will start with attacks against the Ethiopian forces of aggression," said the recording, whose authenticity could not be verified.

Ethiopia controversially helped Somalia's transitional government force Islamist forces out of Mogadishu and other strongholds late last month, with the former Islamist leaders now on the run.

Zawahiri called on Islamists to use suicide attacks, mines and ambushes against the government and also implicated the United States, which has backed Ethiopia's right to intervene in Somalia and is helping track down the fleeing fundamentalists.

No breakthrough after Israel-Egypt talks

AP, Sharm El-sheik

Overshadowed by an Israeli raid into the Palestinian territories, a summit between Israel and Egypt achieved little in reviving the long-stalled Middle East peace process, highlighting instead the disagreements between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

The summit came amid international calls for Israel and the Palestinians to make a renewed effort to end their dispute in the interest of stabilising the region in general and Iraq in particular. It also comes ahead of an expected Middle East visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice later this month.

Speaking during a news conference after meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak condemned the Israeli raid in the city of Ramallah hours earlier that killed four Palestinian civilians and wounded 20 others.

The Egyptian president said he voiced his "displeasure" to Olmert

for what had just happened and stressed that "Israel's and the region's security would be achieved only by serious endeavours toward peace."

Mubarak, a key mediator between the Palestinians and Israel, also pushed Israel to hold talks with Syria and urged it to pursue peace with the Palestinians despite the rise of the Hamas militant group.

Egypt is eager to broker peace between the Palestinians and Israel, and Mubarak said he would welcome a meeting bringing together himself, Olmert, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Jordan's King Abdullah II.

Significant obstacles block the start of a new peace process, including the continued captivity of an Israeli soldier seized by Hamas-linked militants in June. Egypt has been trying to broker a deal for Cpl. Gilad Shalit's release, and many in Israel waited in vain for a breakthrough at the summit Thursday.