

24 killed in 3 days as fierce clashes rage on in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Fighting between rival Palestinian forces erupted again yesterday in the Gaza Strip, where 24 people have been killed in the fiercest bout of internecine bloodletting since Hamas won elections a year ago.

Three Palestinians died overnight as militants from the ruling Hamas clashed with Fatah gunmen loyal to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahiya, witnesses said.

Hamas militants fired anti-tank rockets and mortar shells at the headquarters of a Fatah-controlled police force in Gaza City and blew up the home of a senior aide to Fatah's Gaza strongman, Mohammad Dahlan.

Throughout Gaza, the warring factions have set up road blocks and continue to trade bursts of machine-gun fire.

Twenty-three Palestinians have died in the clashes and at least 50 injured since Thursday evening,

according to medical sources.

The three-day surge in violence has torpedoed talks on forming a national unity government and left the impoverished Gaza Strip teetering on the brink of civil war.

Among the victims in the latest flareup were an 11-year-old boy snared in the crossfire Saturday night and a two-year-old child killed by a stray bullet during a firefight in the southern Gaza town of Khan Yunis Friday.

The unprecedented infighting has turned the Gaza Strip into a ghost town as shopkeepers boarded up shops and stayed in the relative safety of their homes.

The tension threatens to spread to the West Bank, where Palestinian police swinging batons and firing into the air, clashed on Saturday with 200 Hamas supporters who rallied to denounce the shooting of a Hamas member in Tulkarem.

The rival factions are each blaming the other for provoking the violence, which is only exacerbating

the woes of Palestinians already suffering a crippling economic crisis because of a Western aid freeze.

Hamas has called for Abbas, who is in Davos, Switzerland for the World Economic Forum, to return immediately to the Palestinian territories to help put an end to the mounting bloodshed.

The Arab League condemned the latest fighting as "irrational and unacceptable," while Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood lashed out at both parties to the conflict.

"They speak responsible words and yet the fighting continues," said Muslim Brotherhood supreme guide Mohammed Mehdi Akef.

UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, Alvaro de Soto, called on all parties "to cease clashes and comply with international humanitarian law by refraining from acts which endanger civilians."

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference also expressed "deep regrets" over the clashes and urged "the Palestinian leadership to return

to the national dialogue table."

Hamas's rise to power in a parliamentary elections in January 2006 pitted the Islamic Resistance Movement against the ousted Fatah party which clung to the presidency in a divided Palestinian government that was left paralyzed and powerless to rule.

Palestinians are also struggling to survive under a Western-led aid boycott against a defiant Hamas, which refuses international demands that it recognise Israel, renounce violence, and abide past peace deals.

The duelling factions have tried for months to work out a power-sharing agreement to draw a line under the rapidly escalating violence, but those talks have repeatedly collapsed.

Clashes broke out last month after Abbas called for early elections, a move Hamas dubbed an attempted coup. Subsequent fighting killed more than 30 people between mid-December and early January.

Olmert's party backs Peres for president



Shimon Peres

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima party will name senior statesman and Nobel peace laureate Shimon Peres as the party's candidate for president, a senior government source said yesterday.

"Kadima ministers have agreed to name Shimon Peres as the party's candidate for the presidential election," the source told AFP.

President Moshe Katsav, who

faces indictments for rape, sexual harassment and other charges, was granted a leave of absence from his post Thursday.

Although parliament cannot hold a fresh election for president until Katsav resigns or after his mandate runs out in July, speculation has already started on who could replace the disgraced head of state.

Peres, who lost to Katsav for the post in an upset election defeat in 2000, is so far is the public's

favourite, with support of between 40 and 45 percent of Israelis, according to two opinion polls released on Thursday.

Although members of his entourage have said that Peres is interested in the president's post, he has not officially thrown his hat in the ring.

The 83-year-old is regarded as Israel's elder statesman, having served twice as premier, three times as foreign minister and three times as defence minister.



PHOTO: AFP

Mourners carry the body of Bader Abu al-Garaya, 11, during his funeral in Gaza City. Fighting between rival Palestinian forces erupted again yesterday in the Gaza Strip, killing 24 people in the last 3 days.

Indian writer Kamleshwar Prasad dies

AFP, New Delhi

Award-winning Hindi writer and journalist Kamleshwar Prasad Saxena, best known for a novel that explored how nations fracture through an allegorical court trial, died late Saturday at the age of 75.

A prolific writer of some 30 books that explored contemporary Indian society, Kamleshwar died of a heart attack in New Delhi.

His novel, "Kitey Pakistan" (How many Pakistans?), published under the name "Partitions" in English, was an attempt to understand the bloody division of India as it won independence from its British rulers in 1947, which created Pakistan.

The novel presents a court trial in which historical and political figures and places, including Spanish coloniser Hernando Cortez, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein and the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki appear as witnesses.

Kamleshwar was awarded the Padma Bhushan, India's third highest civilian honour, in 2006.

18 JOIN LANKAN JUMBO CABINET

Defections by opposition MPs shatter peace deal

AFP, Colombo

The defection of opposition lawmakers to support Sri Lanka's ruling party yesterday has scuttled chances for a landmark peace deal aimed at ending decades of ethnic bloodshed, officials say.

President Mahinda Rajapakse expanded his cabinet to a record 52-members to accommodate 18 defectors from the right-wing United National Party (UNP), a spokesman for the president said.

Rajapakse, who is also the minister of defence and finance, gave cabinet positions to 10 defectors while eight others were given junior ministries, the spokesman said, adding that there were several others also waiting to join.

Among the changes, Mangala Samaraweera was stripped of his foreign ministry portfolio and replaced by former investment development minister Rohitha Bogollegama.

The opposition UNP cried foul at the exodus and accused the president of accepting the defectors in violation of a deal in October to have a bipartisan approach to resolving the island's ethnic conflict.

The opposition legislators crossing over to the government would

give the president a simple majority in the 225-member legislature.

However, the president is still short of a mandatory two-thirds majority in the assembly if he wants to press ahead with any power-sharing arrangement with Tamil Tiger rebels in exchange for ethnic peace.

The UNP said it was no longer bound by an October agreement with Rajapakse to provide him with parliamentary support to work towards a peace agreement with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"Our MOU (memorandum of understanding) with the government is over," UNP leader Ravi Karunanayake told AFP. "They (the defectors) have traded national interest for their own survival."

Sri Lanka's key international backers, including the United States, European Union, Japan and India had wanted the two main majority ethnic Sinhalese parties to build on their October deal to offer a consensus plan to Tamil Tiger rebels.

Foreign aid donors had asked Sri Lanka's leaders to consolidate the deal and resume negotiations with the Tigers in line with a Norwegian-backed peace initiative. The last round of peace talks in

October ended in failure.

Almost 4,000 people have been killed in the past year in escalating violence despite a truce in place since February 2002 in the LTTE-led separatist conflict which has claimed more than 60,000 lives in the past 35 years.

Analysts and diplomats said they feared Sri Lanka's "undeclared war" could escalate.

The worsening violence was underscored Saturday when the LTTE staged an abortive attack against the main sea port of Colombo, a week after the military captured a rebel bastion elsewhere.

"I don't think we will see any movement on the peace front for some time," said Sunanda Deshapriya, a director at the private Centre for Policy Alternatives think-tank.

Freelance defence columnist Namal Perera said although the Tigers suffered a string of defeats in the island's east, they still had the ability to carry out guerrilla attacks and their suicide cadres were still intact.

"We will see ups and downs," Perera said. "It will be premature to write off the Tigers."

24 Iraqis killed in violence ahead of Ashura rite

AFP, Baghdad

At least 24 Iraqis were killed in ambushes, car bombs and firefights yesterday as Shiite Muslims headed to the shrine city of Karbala for Ashura, one of their most sacred ceremonies.

A car bomb ripped through Baghdad's Sadr City, the impoverished Shiite bastion of radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, killing eight people and wounding 18, a security source said.

"A car bomb exploded around midday (0900 GMT) in Sadr City," the source said.

The latest bloodletting comes as Iraqi and US authorities gear for a broad offensive against insurgent and militia groups engaged in a bitter sectarian war centered on Baghdad.

A new security plan foresees the deployment of more than 50,000 Iraqi police and soldiers and 35,000 US troops in the violence-infested capital, where more than 16,800 civilians were killed last year, according to the United Nations.

In another Baghdad attack, an advisor to Industry Minister Fawzi Hariri was killed along with his daughter, driver and bodyguard in an ambush, a security source said.

Gunmen raked the convoy of Adel Abdel Mohsen with automatic weapons fire in Yarmuk, western Baghdad, killing him and his daughter Acile, an engineer at the ministry, as well as their driver and bodyguard.

North of the central shrine city of Najaf, three Iraqi soldiers died and four policemen were wounded in a dawn battle that pitted Iraqi and US forces against insurgents, defence and security sources said.

Nine other Iraqis died Sunday, mostly from bombs in or around Baghdad and in the disputed northern oil city of Kirkuk.

South of the Iraqi capital, security has been beefed up along the 110 kilometres (70 miles) of highway from Baghdad to Karbala that runs through the Sunni "triangle of death", where Shiites are often attacked.

The shrine city of Karbala was on high alert as pilgrims arrived for Ashura, a commemoration of the seventh-century slaying of Prophet Mohammed's grandson Imam Hussein on the orders of Sunni caliph Yazid.