

Hamas calls for new attacks on Israel

Troops kill 8 Palestinians

AP, Gaza City/ Nablus

The Islamic militant group Hamas on Sunday called for new attacks on Israel after eight Palestinians were killed in a surge of fighting over the weekend.

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum urged Palestinians to be prepared for a new round of confrontation.

"The blood of our people is not cheap," he said in a statement faxed to The Associated Press. "Therefore we are calling on ... (Hamas' armed wing) and the Palestinian resistance groups to be united in the trench of resistance and to use all possible means of resistance and to respond to the massacres."

Eight Palestinians were killed during a 24-hour surge in violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including two militants killed early Sunday during an arrest raid in the West Bank city of Nablus.

The dead also included three militants travelling together in a car in the northern West Bank, and a man in Gaza killed in an Israeli airstrike in response to a

Palestinian rocket attack.

Israeli troops killed two Palestinian militants, including a top bombmaker, during an arrest raid early Sunday, Palestinian officials said. The Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, a militant group linked to President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party, said the men were killed after Israeli troops surrounded a building where they were hiding and ordered people out. Most occupants came out, but the two militants remained holed up inside. An exchange of fire broke out, and the two men were killed, the group said.

The group said the dead included Amin Lubadi, a bombmaker who had been wanted by the Israelis for more than three years.

Palestinian medical officials confirmed the deaths of two men.

Israeli officials said they were looking into the report. They defended the earlier operations as the latest steps in their ongoing war against Palestinian militants. But Palestinian officials said the bloodshed only hurt efforts to expand a cease-fire in Gaza to the West Bank.

The fighting erupted early Saturday in the northern West Bank, an area known as a stronghold of militant groups.

The three militants were killed as they travelled in the northern town of Jenin. Palestinian officials said the men were ambushed by undercover troops, while the army said its troops returned fire after the militants shot at them.

The fighting also included a Palestinian rocket attack on the southern Israeli town of Sderot that damaged one home but caused no injuries.

The violence has threatened a ceasefire declared last November between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza. Palestinian officials have also said it jeopardised their efforts to expand the truce to the West Bank.

The Palestinian unity government, which includes Hamas, has called for an expanded truce. Hamas officials in the government have tried to separate themselves from pronouncements by the group's military wing. Israel considers Hamas in all its forms to be a terrorist group.

Iran rules out nuclear suspension ahead of EU talks

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday rejected Western calls for a suspension of its sensitive nuclear activities just days ahead of crucial talks on its atomic drive with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

"Halting uranium enrichment is definitely deleted from the literature of Iran's nuclear activities," foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini told reporters.

"In our negotiations the halting of this activity has not been on the table and going back on time is not envisaged," he added.

A suspension of enrichment -- a process that can be used both to make nuclear fuel and atomic weapons -- has been the key demand of Western powers and main sticking point for opening negotiations over the nuclear programme.

The comments come ahead of eagerly awaited talks on Wednesday at a location that has yet to be confirmed between Solana and Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani, in a bid to break the deadlock in the nuclear standoff.

The pair, who held several rounds of discussions last year, which failed to find a solution to the crisis, last met face-to-face for

informal talks on the sidelines of the Munich security conference on February 11.

It remains to be seen what result can come out of the new meeting, given Iran's insistence that it enriches uranium and the EU position that Tehran must freeze the process before full negotiations can begin.

"Negotiations which start with good intentions will have positive effects and will lead to consequences which are satisfactory for both sides," Hosseini said, without elaborating.

"What is most important in this is to confirm and guarantee Iran's right to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes based on international laws," he added.

The UN Security Council has already imposed two sets of sanctions against Iran for refusing to halt sensitive atomic activities and has threatened to take further punitive action if Tehran's defiance continues.

The United States, which accuses Iran of seeking to make nuclear weapons, has never ruled out the option of military action to bring Tehran to heel. Iran insists its nuclear drive is solely for generating energy.

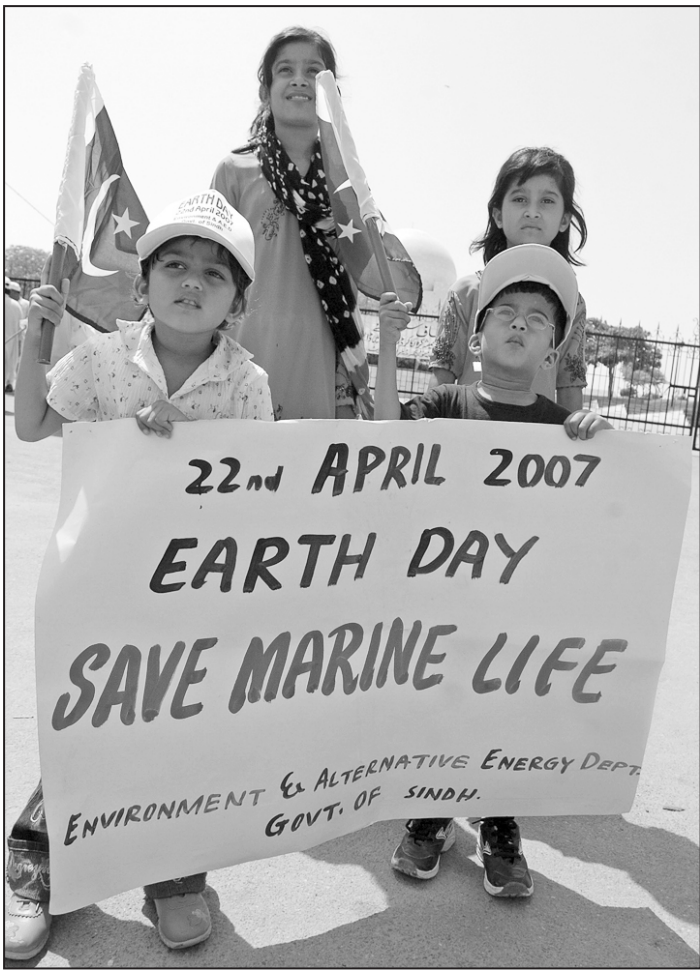


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani children hold a placard while they take part in an Earth Day rally in Karachi yesterday. The walk, which took place under the auspices of the Sindh province Environment Protection Agency, was held to foster awareness among citizens about the environment.



PHOTO: AFP

Picture taken on Saturday shows Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz addressing the annual Boao conference on the Chinese resort island of Hainan island while former Australian prime minister Bob Hawke (R) looks on. Aziz is in China for an official visit during which the close allies signed a raft of bilateral agreements.

Pak leader heads for Europe talks

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf heads to Europe yesterday for a week of talks but all eyes will be on a meeting in Turkey with his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai.

It will be the first-ever visit by a Pakistani head of state to Spain, Poland and Bosnia but his talks with Karzai -- with the two men at odds over the resurgent Taliban movement -- will be the focus of international attention.

Karzai and other Afghan officials have repeatedly blamed Pakistan for failing to prevent Taliban-led militants, holed up in bases in Pakistani tribal areas along their common border, from carrying out attacks in Afghanistan.

There have even been allegations that Pakistan is actively supporting the militant Taliban, who were ousted from power in 2001 but have been waging an increasingly deadly insurgency in Afghanistan. Pakistan has denied

the charges.

Before heading to Turkey, Musharraf will meet the leaders of Spain, Poland and Bosnia for talks on trade links, defence cooperation and terrorism, the foreign ministry said.

"International and regional issues of mutual interest, including Pakistan-India relations, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Middle East and the fight against international terrorism will be discussed," it said.

Bilateral agreements on defence, air services, economic cooperation, culture, education, science and technology, banking and development of small and medium-sized enterprises will be signed, the ministry statement said.

In Warsaw, Musharraf will meet President Lech Kaczynski, Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski and business leaders.

In Madrid, Musharraf will meet King Juan Carlos I and Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

US to help Iraq recruit 40,000 troops

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq and the United States are to spend 14 billion dollars and recruit 40,000 new soldiers into the Iraqi armed forces in the next 18 months, a US military commander said yesterday.

US army Lieutenant General Martin Dempsey, who is in charge of training Iraqi security forces, said that America will spend five billion dollars and the remaining nine billion would come from Iraqi coffers.

Dempsey said the plan is driven by how "the Iraqis want their security forces to look" in the future and not just to "solve problems of today."

By end of 2007, the Iraqi army will field 170,700 soldiers -- 34,500 more than at the end of last year -- and swell from 10 to 12 divisions.

The Iraqi police force -- including local, national and border patrol units -- will grow to 198,600 personnel, up from 192,200 in December 2006.

With domestic support for continuing the four-year-old US military mission in Iraq crumbling, the military has made a priority of training competent and well-armed Iraqi forces to replace its units on the ground.

Iraqi and US security forces are

regularly attacked by insurgents, with the US military itself having lost more than 3,300 troops in the past four years and its Iraqi comrades many thousands more.

The plan will also involve equipping the existing security forces with new American-made weapons, Dempsey said.

"We intend to take out the AK-47s and replace them with M16," he said, revealing that the veteran Soviet-designed assault rifle will be replaced by its American equivalent, which is still issued to some US units.

Dempsey said Iraqi forces are currently equipped with weapons supplied by US-led coalition countries, the government of Iraq, weapons that have been donated by other countries and also those captured in raids.

In an attempt to ensure that weapons remain the hands of government forces, every soldier "will go through biometric screening" to issue them with secure ID cards tied to the issue of specific arms.

There have been many reports in recent years of Iraqi personnel selling US-issued weapons and ammunition on the open market.

Developing Iraq's tiny air force will be a tough task, the general said.

Musharraf, Benazir have clinched deal

PTI, New York

Under pressure from fundamentalist elements in his country, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf had contacted former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto three times in recent month to reach a deal that would facilitate her return, according to a media report.

His aide met secretly with her in Dubai, a media report said. The leaders discussed the deal that would drop the corruption charges against her and allow her to contest for the Parliament elections scheduled in January next year, Newsweek magazine has reported in its upcoming issue, quoting people close to the talks.

In return, her party would minimise its role in the protests and back Musharraf's bid for re-election as president in an October legislative ballot.

The clincher: Musharraf would denounce the post of Army head, returning Pakistan to civilian rule. The budding deal between the two could bring a new stability to Pakistan, Newsweek reports added.

Islamist parties are trying to capitalise the present chaotic situations, but the Benazir Bhutto deal would create a strong secular alliance, ensuring that the protests do not threaten the regime's stability, the news report said.

Arab MP resigns from Israeli parliament

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's leading Arab MP Azmi Bishara announced in Cairo his resignation from parliament yesterday and said he would stay abroad for some time.

Bishara, a vocal critic of Israel's policies towards the Palestinians, currently under investigation, complained of persecution in his home country, while hawkish Israeli MPs welcomed the resignation as a case of good riddance.

"I decided to resign a year ago and just delayed the resignation due to commitments that I had in the parliament," Bishara told reporters after a meeting in the Egyptian capital with Arab League chief Amr Mussa.

"According to law, you can tender resignations either in an embassy or the Knesset and I happened to be here when I made the decision. So I wrote the letter and presented it," he said.

The Israeli embassy in Cairo confirmed that the fiery lawmaker submitted his resignation during a meeting with the ambassador.

Bishara, who first left Israel in March and has only briefly returned to his country since, indicated he could remain abroad for some time.