

# Egypt, Palestinians warn of 'explosive situation' in Gaza

Four more killed by Israeli troops

AFP, Cairo

Egypt and the Palestinians warned yesterday of the explosive situation in the impoverished Palestinian territories which are struggling against a devastating economic and political blockade.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas was in Cairo for talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on how to lift the aid boycott and deadly violence in the Gaza Strip.

The two discussed "the situation on the Palestinian front and the explosive security situation in the Gaza Strip," the official MENA news agency said, after four Palestinians were killed by Israeli fire in the territory.

Troops shot dead three members of the armed wing of the

Islamist Hamas and wounded a fourth, a Palestinian medical source and the Israeli army said.

Another Palestinian, a farmer, was killed by Israeli tank fire in the southern Gaza Strip, a security official said, bringing to 5,674 the number of people killed since the Intifada erupted in 2000, most of them Palestinians.

Last week Israeli raids killed nine Palestinians, prompting Hamas armed wing the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades on Tuesday to declare a five-month truce over.

But Abbas on Saturday vowed to restore order, saying that "the only way to stop this aggression is to return to a complete calm in Gaza, then in the West Bank," MENA reported.

"This had been agreed, but unfortunately it was violated by

Israel and also by the Palestinian side, leading to this escalation," Abbas said.

On Friday, he met exiled Hamas political chief Khaled Meshaal in Cairo for a rare meeting, their first since the Palestinian unity government took office in March.

Speaking after talks with Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa, Meshaal warned of the dangers of the economic and political blockade continuing.

"The Palestinian people will not be patient under this pressure and they have several options before them if need be," he told reporters.

"The Palestinian unity government has been in place for almost two months and the sanctions remain the main issue for the Palestinians, after they had large

hopes following the formation of the government," Meshaal said.

The unity government, uniting Fatah and Hamas around the same cabinet table for the first time, took office after Abbas and Meshaal reached a power-sharing accord in Saudi Arabia in February.

That deal sought to end months of factional fighting between the two that killed scores of people after Hamas won Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006.

The new government has since battled to end the diplomatic and economic boycott imposed by the West on the previous Hamas-led government for its refusal to recognise Israel and abide by past Israeli-Palestinian agreements.



In this hand out picture released by the Palestinian President's Office (PPO) Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas talks with exiled Hamas political chief Khaled Meshaal in Cairo on Friday. This was their first meeting since the formation of the new coalition government.

## Turkish PM defiant in face of army warning on secularism

AFP, Ankara

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stood firm Saturday after the army warned it would act to defend Turkey's secular system amid fears that the country's next president would favour Islam.

The European Union, which Turkey is seeking to join, urged the army -- responsible for three past coups -- not to interfere in the democratic process as tensions mounted over the prospect of a former Islamist becoming head of state.

The army spoke out hours after parliament, dominated by Erdogan's AKP party, held an inconclusive first-round vote boycotted by the opposition Friday to elect a new president, with Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul the sole candidate.

## Saddam's birthday observed 14 killed in violence

AFP, Baghdad

Insurgents killed at least 14 people in Baghdad yesterday while further north a low turnout marked a sombre ceremony on the first birthday of Saddam Hussein since his execution.

Four humanitarian workers from the Iraqi Red Crescent were killed and three others wounded when gunmen ambushed their minibus in Baghdad's mixed Sunni and Shia district of Zafaraniyah, a security official said.

The official was not able to

provide any further details on what was latest in a series of attacks on the organisation, one of the few aid agencies still able to work, with difficulty, amid the violence.

In December, a group of gunmen abducted dozens of Red Crescent employees from the group's office in Baghdad. Many of the hostages were later released, but some are still missing.

In a separate attack in the same neighbourhood on Saturday a group of garbage collectors stumbled upon a roadside bomb, which killed one and wounded eight

others, the security official said.

In nearby Saydiyah, another mixed district, unidentified gunmen shot dead five civilians and wounded one, he added.

In Al-Risala, a Shia district of southern Baghdad, a series of mortar rounds slammed into a residential area killing three people and wounding 10 others, including women and children, the official said.

In the northern Shia neighbourhood of Khadimiyyah a civilian was killed and three others injured when a homemade bomb blew up in a public market, a police source said.

## New clashes leave 23 Taliban dead

AFP, Khost

New clashes between Taliban and troops left 23 rebels and two policemen dead, officials said yesterday, as the rebels announced they freed a female French hostage but not four men taken with her.

The woman, among a group of five people working for a French children's non-governmental organisation who were captured more than three weeks ago, was freed in the southern province of Kandahar, a Taliban spokesman said.

"We have extended the deadline for the French man and three Afghan hostages for another week," Yousuf Ahmadi said.

The woman, who has been named in the media only as Celine, was carrying a message to the French government that it must "cut its military assistance to Afghanistan," he said.

## Bomb rocks int'l airport in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

A bomb exploded at an international airport in northwest Pakistan yesterday causing slight damage to the building, officials said.

It was a low intensity timed device planted outside a cafe near the entrance to the departure lounge at Peshawar International Airport, area police officer Iftikhar Khan said.

Peshawar is the capital of North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan.

## Top EU official calls for US-Iran talks

AP, Brussels

The top EU foreign policy official urged the United States Friday to engage Iran in direct negotiations about its nuclear programme and other issues to try to stabilise the Middle East.

Javier Solana, the EU's foreign and security affairs chief, told an annual trans-Atlantic security conference he came away from two days of talks in Ankara with Iran's top nuclear negotiator this week believing that Ali Khamenei, Iran's spiritual leader, was ready for direct talks with Washington.

"The United States must engage" with Iran, said Solana, who is to meet with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Washington on Monday.

He said Washington's hostility toward Tehran only served to reinforce "a situation in which Iran is considered as a country that cannot be organised into some sort of dialogue."

The Bush administration has long seen Iran as a destabilising factor in the Middle East and a direct threat to Israel.

Solana urged Rice and other officials to ignore the overheated

language coming out of Tehran most of it directed at Israel and explore dialogue with the Iranian leadership to recognise its importance to regional stability.

On Thursday, Solana completed two days of talks with Ali Larijani, Iran's top nuclear negotiator. Solana was acting on behalf of the international community, which is demanding that Iran suspend uranium enrichment in exchange for a package of economic and political inducements, including help in developing a peaceful nuclear energy programme.

## Taliban says French woman released

AP, Kabul

The Taliban said Saturday it has freed a French aid worker who was kidnapped more than three weeks ago along with another French citizen and three Afghan colleagues. The French Foreign Ministry confirmed that a hostage had been released.

Purported Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi said the French woman was handed over to tribal leaders in the Maywand district of southern Kandahar province. His claim could not immediately be verified.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi woman kisses the tomb of executed former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the northern Iraqi village of Awja yesterday. In another reminder of the gulf that divides their warring communities, Iraqis remembered Saddam Hussein's era Saturday at two starkly different ceremonies. One honoured the memory of the former dictator, another laid more of his victims to rest.

## US, Japan take hard line on North Korea

AFP, Camp David

US President George W Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, holding their first US summit, warned North Korea Friday that global patience with its nuclear promises is "not unlimited."

The two allies, looking to build their personal relationship, signalled the Stalinist state of possible new sanctions after Pyongyang missed an April 14 deadline to shut down a key atomic reactor.

Bush warned that the United States, Japan and their partners China, Russia and South Korea "are patient" with North Korea, "but our patience is not unlimited" and stressed "we have the capability of more sanctions."

Abe, speaking through an interpreter, said: "Should the North Koreans fail to keep their promise, we will step up our pressures on North Korea. And on that point, again, I believe we see eye to eye."

After roughly two hours of talks, which yielded a joint statement on energy security and climate change,

the leaders headed into a cheeseburger lunch as Bush renewed pressure on Japan to fully lift its curbs on US beef.

"The Japanese people will be better off when they eat American beef. It's good beef, it's healthy beef; as a matter of fact, I'm going to feed the prime minister and his delegation a good hamburger today for lunch," said Bush.

Abe also brought up North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens. Japan has refused to fund the February deal to supply North Korea with energy in exchange for its nuclear disarmament unless there is progress on the issue.

"We agree that the current state of the six-party talks, as well as North Korea's attitude towards the abduction issue, are regrettable and we'll work for closer coordination between our two countries to achieve progress," he said.

But Bush declined to say if resolving the abductee issue was a precondition for taking North Korea off the US terrorism list when explicitly asked by a reporter.

## Indo-US officials move to salvage nuke deal

AFP, New Delhi

India and the United States will try to iron out differences next week over a crucial civilian nuclear deal amid impatience by Washington over the slow pace of talks, officials said yesterday.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon will be in Washington on Monday and Tuesday to hold negotiations with US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns to propel the dialogue forward.

The talks have been stalled mainly over concerns in India that the agreement will seek to curtail the country's nuclear weapons programme.

India has a "very clear approach" on the deal, Menon said in a report tabled in parliament on Thursday,

even as Washington expressed its unhappiness over the dialogue last week.

His comment came after US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in Washington there was "some frustration on the part of the administration as well as Congress on the pace of these negotiations."

Indian officials tried to downplay the US remarks.

"When you hold talks, there are bound to be differences," said a senior government official, who did not wish to be named.

The talks are to implement an accord struck in July 2005 giving India access to US nuclear fuel and technology for civilian use without requiring New Delhi to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty as required by US law.