

Israel plans to create buffer zone in Gaza

The move may torpedo ME peace effort

AP, Jerusalem

Israel's army has developed a plan to create a "buffer zone" inside the edge of the Gaza Strip to halt the latest wave of Palestinian rocket attacks, military officials said yesterday.

Such Israeli action would likely torpedo a six-month truce in the Gaza Strip and could threaten US efforts to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Meanwhile, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will travel to Jordan on May 15 to meet with King Abdullah, the prime minister's office said Tuesday.

Olmert and the king will meet in the ancient city of Petra on the sidelines of an annual gathering in Jordan of Nobel Prize laureates.

In a setback to US efforts on the peace process, the State Department announced Monday that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cancelled an upcoming visit to the region, citing the uncertain political situation after an Israeli commission found Olmert's government mishandled

last year's war in Lebanon.

The Gaza cease-fire has sharply reduced fighting, but militants have continued to fire homemade rockets into southern Israel. The rocket fire has spiked in recent days, including two more projectiles launched Tuesday. No injuries were reported in Tuesday's attack, the army said.

On Monday, Israel carried out a rare airstrike in Gaza, attacking a car carrying rockets near the Israeli border, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert warned he was losing patience with the rocket barrages.

The military's plan for a 300-yard-deep zone inside Gaza is one of several options Israel is considering to counter the rocket fire, the military officials said on condition of anonymity since they were not allowed to discuss the plan with the media.

Ghazi Hamad, spokesman for Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, called the proposal a "dangerous idea."

"It will cause more confrontations. It won't provide stability," he said.

Military commanders have

presented the plan to Olmert's Cabinet but it has not yet been approved, the officials said. The plan will be debated by senior Cabinet ministers next week, Haaretz reported Tuesday.

Israel periodically carries out "pinpoint" operations on the edges of Gaza to halt rocket launchings. The military's plan calls for a greater presence that would be constant in some places, the officials said.

The plan also calls for an increase in attacks on rocket launchers, including airstrikes on high-ranking militants who oversee the firings, the officials said. Olmert has already agreed to slightly expand the area in the Gaza Strip in which the army can operate, Haaretz said.

Israel has grown increasingly concerned by arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip and the rocket fire. Senior military officials have been pushing for approval of a large land offensive in the Gaza Strip to stop the rocket fire, but other security chiefs are opposed to such a complicated operation in the densely-populated coastal area that could exact many Israeli troop casualties.

N Ireland 'now a place of peace and promise'

Says Irish PM

AFP, Belfast

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern said Tuesday the current generation in Northern Ireland should be the last to feel the "anger and pain of old quarrels" as self-rule was restored to the province.

Speaking after Protestant firebrand Ian Paisley and his former Catholic rival Martin McGuinness were sworn in as leaders of a power-sharing government in Belfast, Ahern said he hoped centuries of division could be ended.

The new self-rule government in the British province showed that "peace is not impossible and conflict is not inevitable," Ahern said at the inauguration of the 108-member Northern Ireland Assembly in the Stormont Parliament Buildings.

"We can put the divisions of the past behind us forever. Northern Ireland is now a place of peace and promise."

"Today relationships on this island and between Ireland and Britain stand transformed."

"As we step from this place of history, we must be resolved that this should be the last generation on which these islands to feel the anger and

pain of old quarrels."

Set up under the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement, power-sharing institutions were restored Tuesday after they were suspended for nearly five years.

Northern Ireland has a chance to throw off the "chains of history," British Prime Minister Tony Blair said Tuesday as former Catholic and Protestant rivals were sworn in to share power in Belfast.

"Look back and we see centuries pockmarked by conflict, hardship, even hatred among the peoples of these islands," he said after Protestant firebrand Ian Paisley and former Catholic militant Martin McGuinness were sworn in.

"Look forward today and we see the chance at last to escape those heavy chains of history," he added in a speech, flanked by McGuinness, Paisley and his Irish counterpart Bertie Ahern.

Referring to "this beautiful but troubled land," he added that Tuesday's inauguration reflected the fundamental principle on which the peace process has been based: the acceptance that the future of Northern Ireland can only be governed successfully by both communities working together."



PHOTO: AFP

Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, (L) Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, (2nd L) British Prime Minister Tony Blair, (3rd L) Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain (2nd R) and First Minister Ian Paisley (R) meet in the First Minister's office at the Northern Ireland Assembly, Stormont, in Belfast, Northern Ireland yesterday. Northern Ireland leaders met Tuesday to swear in former Catholic and Protestant rivals Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness as the British province's new first minister and deputy first minister.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is greeted by US President George W. Bush and US First Lady Laura Bush on the North Portico of the White House upon arrival for a State Dinner on Monday in Washington, DC, the first white-tie and tails event of the six-year Bush presidency.

Iran accepts compromise at nuclear meeting

AP, Vienna

Iran yesterday accepted a compromise on the agenda of a 130-nation nuclear conference, clearing the way for the meeting to approve it and end six days of deadlock that threatened to doom the gathering to failure.

The issue stalling the meeting since it opened April 30 had been Tehran's refusal to accept a phrase calling for the "need for full compliance with" the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Delegates said Tehran feared the

language could lead to its becoming a target at the meeting because of its refusal to meet UN Security Council demands to cease uranium enrichment and other parts of its nuclear program that could be misused to make nuclear weapons.

A South African proposal accepted by consensus Tuesday will put an appended statement specifying that "all provisions" of the treaty must be fully observed. An allusion for the need for the United States and other nuclear weapons states to disarm.

Pressure mounts on Musharraf to end military rule

AP, Islamabad

An extraordinary mass rally in support of Pakistan's suspended chief justice is increasing the pressure on President Gen Pervez Musharraf to end nearly eight years of military rule.

He still appears to have the backing of fellow generals and the US, but the growing protests and a blizzard of legal challenges to his suspension of the top judge have thrown plans for another presidential term into turmoil.

"This is a middle-class revolt for the rule of law," said Ayesha Siddiqi Agha, a political analyst. "Musharraf's options are narrowing by the day."

Loyalists insist that Musharraf's March 9 decision to suspend Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry was nonpolitical. But many observers suspect a ploy to

remove an independent-minded judge who could obstruct the general's plans to stay in power. Chaudhry, who became chief justice in 2005, has a reputation for challenging government actions and human rights abuses.

On Sunday, an estimated 20,000 people, most of them lawyers and opposition party supporters, gathered in downtown Lahore, Pakistan's main eastern city, after Chaudhry traveled 170 miles in a grand convoy from Islamabad.

After weeks of carefully avoiding comments that could be construed as political, Chaudhry declared in a speech broadcast live by private TV networks that dictatorship had had its day.

"The dictatorial system of government and the concept of concentration of power is now ended," Chaudhry said. "All these are bitter lessons of history."

Sarkozy win sets off riots in France

AP, Paris

The leader of France's defeated Socialists appealed for calm yesterday after a second night of post-election violence left cars burned and store windows smashed.

Nicolas Sarkozy, the conservative who beat Socialist Segolene Royal in a runoff Sunday, is a divisive figure whose tough language and crackdowns on crime and immigration have angered many on the left and in the immigrant-

heavy suburban housing projects that erupted in riots in 2005.

Some 730 cars were burned nationwide Sunday night and 592 people arrested, police said.

Late Monday night, several hundred people massed again at the Place de la Bastille in Paris, breaking windows in nearby shops and starting street fires. Riot police dispersed them, and about 100 people were arrested, police said Tuesday. A handful of cars were ignited in the area.

Indian MP jailed for life for abduction

AFP, Patna

An Indian court yesterday jailed for life a federal MP over the abduction and disappearance of a political activist in 1999.

District Judge Gyaneshwar Prasad Srivastava pronounced the verdict on four-time federal MP Mohammed Shahabuddin, from Siwan, soon after the court convened in Patna, capital of Bihar state.

Shahabuddin -- a member of Railways Minister Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal party, a regional party that is part of India's ruling coalition -- was also fined 10,000 rupees (250 dollars).

He was accused of involvement in the abduction and subsequent disappearance of Communist Party of India (Marxist) worker Chhote Lal Gupta eight years ago.

The influential MP's supporters said an appeal would be made to a higher court.

HR body asks Nepal to free child soldiers

AP, Katmandu

An international human rights group asked Nepal's former communist rebels Tuesday to immediately free children who have been in their armed forces.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said in a statement that thousands of child soldiers who are confined in camps under a peace accord should be freed and allowed to return to their families.

The group said it has written a letter to Nepal's Minister of Women, Children and Social Welfare Khadga Bahadur Bishwakarma "to secure the Maoists cooperation with the United Nations and child protection agencies to allow children to return home without further delay."