

Gunbattles rage in Gaza shattering truce

4 killed in Israeli raid, 14 others in factional fighting

AFP, AP, Gaza City

Fourteen Palestinians were killed in Gaza yesterday as factional fighting raged for a fourth day, shattering a new truce and threatening to plunge the Palestinians into a new political crisis.

The bloodshed has renewed fears of a full-scale civil war in Gaza and has left the fragile government uniting president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party and the Islamist Hamas teetering just two months after it assumed office.

In a move that could further spiral the internecine violence that has killed 38 people in four days, an

Israeli aircraft bombed a Hamas training camp in Gaza, killing four and wounding several others, medics and witnesses said.

Hamas said the missiles struck one of its military buildings in the town. The Israeli army confirmed its aircraft fired on southern Gaza, but did not give details.

Palestinian officials said the strike killed at least four people and injured 14 others, including one critically. Palestinian rescue officials said several people were buried under rubble after the strike.

Gaza's streets remained largely deserted except for prowling armed men as civilians covered

indoors, stores were shuttered and schools were closed.

As international calls for a halt to the violence increased, Abbas and Hamas's exiled political supremo Khaled Meshaal agreed to halt the bloodshed.

In a telephone call, Abbas and Meshaal "agreed on the necessity to put an end to the bloody events between Hamas and Fatah in Gaza," information minister Mustafa Barghouti told AFP.

Deputy prime minister Azzam al-Ahmad told AFP that Abbas could declare a state of emergency.

"We have requested with other ministers present in Ramallah a meeting with the president to take

measures to put an end to the current crisis," he said.

Abbas was due to discuss the spiralling violence at a meeting of the Palestine Liberation Organisation in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank later in the day.

Wednesday's bout of violence, the deadliest since the latest fighting began on Sunday, erupted just hours after the rival factions announced for a third time that they had agreed a truce.

Five Fatah men were killed as a result of a brazen attack by Hamas on the Gaza home of the pro-Fatah Palestinian security supremo, Rashid Abu Shbak.



PHOTO: AFP

French president Jacques Chirac (C) welcomes his successor Nicolas Sarkozy upon his arrival at the Elysee Palace for the formal handover of power ceremony yesterday in Paris. Sarkozy, a 52 year-old former interior minister was elected president on May 06, easily beating the Socialist Segolene Royal on a promise of radical economic and social change.

Chirac era ends as Sarkozy takes over

AFP, Paris

A new era opened in France yesterday as rightwinger Nicolas Sarkozy took over as president from Jacques Chirac in a ceremony at the Elysee palace.

Sarkozy vowed to usher in a period of deep reforms to help his country adapt to a fast-changing world.

In a symbolic handover of powers, Chirac passed on the launch codes to France's nuclear arsenal and briefed Sarkozy on current agenda items before being driven from the Elysee palace for

the last time.

A 21-gun salute rang out from the Invalides esplanade across the river Seine, as the official results of Sarkozy's election victory were read out to an audience of invited guests in the palace's ornate main reception hall.

"The people have given me a mandate. I will carry it out. I will carry it out scrupulously, with the desire to be worthy of the trust that the French have placed in me," the rightwinger said in a 10-minute televised address.

"I will defend the independence of France. I will defend the identity

of France. I will ensure respect for state authority, and above all its impartiality.

"There is a demand for change. Never have the risks of inertia been so great for France as they are now in this world in flux where everyone across the world is trying to change quicker than the others, where any delay can be fatal," he said.

Among guests at the Elysee were Sarkozy's wife Cecilia, their 10-year-old son Louis and the four grown-up children they have from previous marriages. Small crowds lined the street outside.

Pak govt asks SC to throw out top judge's petition

AFP, Islamabad

Lawyers for the Pakistani government asked the Supreme Court yesterday to throw out a petition by the country's top judge against his suspension, which has provoked a wave of deadly protests. President Pervez Musharraf suspended chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on March 9 on misconduct charges, including that he had abused his position to get top police jobs for his son.

Clashes erupted between rival political activists in the southern city of Karachi at the weekend as the judge tried to hold a rally there, leaving around 40 people dead.

The Supreme Court on Monday began a hearing into Chaudhry's petition, in which he has challenged his suspension as well as a judicial inquiry into misconduct charges by a panel of five senior judges called the Supreme Judicial Council.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Muslim women hold placards as they stage a protest against Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi yesterday.

Myanmar junta rounds up Suu Kyi supporters

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar authorities briefly held 15 supporters of detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday, bringing the number rounded up in just two days to 55, activists said.

The crackdown comes ahead of a May 27 review of her house arrest, which is expected to be extended further by the military-run state.

Myo Min Soe, a youth member of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, said he and 14 others were arrested Wednesday morning as they left a pagoda after praying for the release of the democracy icon.

"Altogether 15 people were arrested this morning for no reason.... We have been released after one hour of detention," he told AFP.

Lanka will not depend on aid: President

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president vowed yesterday not to depend on foreign aid after Britain said it would suspend debt relief to its former colony until Colombo improves its human rights record.

President Mahinda Rajapakse said he would accept "genuine aid," but will not depend on it, his office quoted him as saying during a meeting with local newspaper editors at his residence.

"If we are offered genuine aid we will take it. If not we will forget about aid and do our job," the

president said. "We will not be dependent on aid."

The president's office said he was commenting on the "reported suspending of aid by Britain."

"Today, we use our own money for resettlement work. We did not wait till the international non-governmental organisations came with their money," the president said.

"The work is going on successfully. We are providing electricity to people being resettled. New roads are being built in these areas."

The suspension of foreign aid to

Sri Lanka was announced by Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development Gareth Thomas earlier this month.

He said Colombo must address Britain's "rights concerns."

"Further debt relief payments cannot be made until that happens," he said.

Germany earlier halted aid to Colombo on similar grounds.

A British High Commission spokesman said Britain is right now withholding three million dollars in aid due to be paid.

Arroyo predicts polls victory

AP, Manila

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo predicted a big victory for pro-administration candidates in the House of Representatives, but the opposition warned yesterday of possible plots to rig the snail-paced vote count.

Arroyo described Monday's midterm congressional and local elections as "good, peaceful, free and fair," but opposition leaders said that portrayal represented "mental dishonesty" and demanded the national police take responsibility for the deaths of more than 120 people since campaigning began in January.

In the latest attack, communist guerrillas ambushed an army convoy helping guard a road where ballot boxes were being transported in northern Abra province, killing seven soldiers, army spokesman Lt. Col. Ernesto Torres said.

5 die as Taliban clash with Pak forces

AFP, Peshawar

Taliban militants fought running battles with security forces Wednesday in the Pakistani town of Tank, killing five civilians in a rocket blast at a bus stop, officials said.

A further 17 people, including five security officials, were injured after the fighting broke out in Tank, a northwestern town that adjoins the volatile Waziristan tribal area on the Afghan border.

"The militants fired several rockets from three directions and one of them hit a group of people waiting at the bus stand, killing five civilians," local district police chief Zulfiqar Cheema told AFP.

Sarkozy - a moderniser

BBC ONLINE

France's president-elect Nicolas Sarkozy casts himself as a moderniser, championing a clean break with the country's traditional ruling elite.

In a hotly-contested presidential campaign he fought an intriguing contest with Socialist candidate Segolene Royal.

As a highly combative interior minister and UMP leader he has sharply divided opinion in France - not least by adopting a tough stance on immigration.

He famously described young delinquents in the Paris suburbs as racaille, or "rabble".

That blunt comment - made before the 2005 riots - encouraged some critics to put him in the same category as far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Sarkozy, 52, pushed through

measures to curb illegal immigration - including deportations - and to integrate skilled migrants into French society.

But he has also advocated positive discrimination to help reduce youth unemployment - a challenge to those wedded to the French idea of equality. His call for state help for Muslims to build mosques was also controversial.

Correspondents say that one of the big questions now is whether he will be able to temper his abrasive style to play the traditional unifying role of the president of France.

Unlike most of the French ruling class, Sarkozy did not go to the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, but trained as a lawyer.

The son of a Hungarian immigrant and a French mother of Greek Jewish origin, he was baptised a Roman Catholic and grew up in Paris.

EU to crack down on employers hiring illegal immigrants

AFP, Brussels

European employers hiring black market workers could face sanctions ranging from fines to jail terms under a proposal made yesterday by the European Commission aimed at curbing illegal immigration.

The proposal, which must be endorsed by a majority of the 27 EU countries in consultation with the European Parliament, would also make employers liable for lost wages, taxes and social security costs and could disqualify them from public tender.

The measures would be a minimum requirement across the bloc. At the moment all member states, apart from Cyprus, have laws against blackmarket labour but only 19 impose criminal penalties.

The application of such laws also varies widely from those where little action is taken, like Britain, to

the Netherlands where harsh penalties are imposed.

The Commission's proposal aims to reduce a "pull factor" for illegal immigration "targeting the employment of third-country nationals who are illegally staying in the EU."

The measures are aimed at employers and not workers.

As a preventive step, they would oblige employers recruiting someone from outside the EU to check their residence permit or other papers and notify their national authorities that they are hiring the person.

Those who fail to do so could be fined, including the cost of sending an illegal immigrant home, forced to pay outstanding wages, taxes and social costs and lose public subsidies or the right to tender for up to five years.

Between four to eight million people are estimated to be living illegally in the EU, with 500,000 illegal immigrants arriving every year.

India sees nuke accord on track ahead of talks

AFP, New Delhi

India said yesterday a landmark nuclear energy agreement it signed two years ago with the United States was on track ahead of a visit by the US envoy for further negotiations on the deal next week.

The pact, which is the centrepiece of energy-starved India's new ties with Washington after decades of frosty Cold War relations, will give the nation access to long-denied Western civilian nuclear energy technology.

"The two sides are continuing discussions with a view to finalising the bilateral cooperation agreement in civil nuclear energy," Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee told parliament, according to a Press Trust of India report.

US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns is expected in New Delhi next week for talks with Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon to finalise an agreement to enable the deal to be put into operation.

India agreed as part of the deal to separate its civilian and military nuclear facilities and to allow the civilian sites to be inspected.

Mukherjee denied reports that the agreement was in danger because of differences on various aspects of the pact.

"It's not true," he said.

But differences do remain to be addressed, including over a clause that says the US would cease fuel supplies if India breaches its unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing.