

Israeli planes pound Hamas targets

Infighting plunges Gaza into chaos

AP, Gaza City

Israeli planes pounded Hamas targets and rival Palestinian factions exchanged bursts of automatic weapons fire outside Gaza City's Islamic University yesterday.

The volatile mix of Israeli strikes and Palestinian infighting plunged Gaza deeper into chaos.

Five Palestinians were killed in a single airstrike by Israel, which said it was responding to Hamas rocket attacks on southern Israel a campaign that showed no sign of subsiding Friday. Hamas fired three rockets at the town of Sderot, where three people were injured by shrapnel and several others were treated for shock.

The sound of gunfire and explosions from fighting between Hamas and Fatah rang out for the sixth

straight day in Gaza. Outside the Islamic University a Hamas stronghold, one person was wounded from the exchange of fire but it was not immediately known from which side.

Members of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' presidential guard and other Fatah loyalists were advancing on Hamas fighters from different directions and the house of the university's dean was attacked by rocket propelled grenades, according to Hamas. However, presidential guard spokesman Ali al-Kaisi denied his group was involved in any attack on the university.

The university's president, Kamelen Shaath, appealed for an immediate halt to the violence.

"Universities must be outside the circle of violence and I appeal to

the president and all the wise people on both sides to try and spare the university the agony of this fight," he said.

In six days of mayhem, 46 Palestinians have died in the infighting and another 17 were killed in Israeli strikes.

The fighting between Hamas and Fatah has all-but destroyed a two-month-old power sharing deal between them, and brought them close to all-out civil war. The Israeli strikes have introduced a new layer of violence and uncertainty though a senior army official, speaking on condition of anonymity because no official decision has been made, said Israel had no immediate plans for a major ground offensive to halt rocket fire.

Israeli aircraft fired missiles east

of Gaza City on Friday, killing five Palestinians, at least two of them Hamas militants, and wounding six people, Hamas and local doctors said. The military said the target was a Hamas headquarters building. Two other strikes followed but there was no word of any casualties, Palestinian doctors said. The army said it struck at a squad that fired rockets into Israel.

The Palestinian street battles were down from their height two days ago, but the latest cease-fire worked out between the sides was not holding. Gunfire could be heard in many areas, and gunmen who had promised to withdraw from the streets were still manning road-blocks and taking up positions on rooftops.



PHOTO: AFP

Police investigators and media representatives walk around the Char Minar gate in Hyderabad yesterday following a blast at the nearby Makkah Masjid Mosque. A bomb tore through one of India's oldest and biggest mosques, killing five people and wounding 24 others as thousands of worshippers attended Juma prayers.

Indo-US nuke talks delayed

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A key meeting between top negotiators of India and the US on their civilian nuclear deal delayed due to differences between the two sides on some of its provisions.

Indian External Affairs Ministry said on Thursday that no particular date had been fixed for the visit by US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns to New Delhi. But US said after Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshanker Menon's trip to Washington earlier this month that Burns would be travelling to India by the end of May.

India and the US have exchanged drafts of the proposed agreement to operationalise the nuclear deal and both sides are trying to fine tune the language of the contentious provisions in the civilian nuclear deal, which is acceptable to the two sides, sources here said.

The differences by and large centre around India's right to reprocess nuclear fuel to be supplied to its civilian reactors and the controversial issue of whether India would continue to get nuclear materials if it tests another nuclear device.

EU, Russia clash over democracy at summit

AFP, Volzhsky Utyos

Russia and the European Union clashed on Friday over tolerance of political opinion in Russia during a contentious summit.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed concern after anti-Kremlin campaigners planning a protest near the summit venue were prevented from travelling there by Russian authorities.

"I hope that they will be able to express their opinion," Merkel told a joint news conference at the end of the two-day summit.

Putin testily defended "preventive measures" taken by Russian police ahead of the rally, comparing these to common practice in European countries, and said anti-Kremlin protesters sometimes sought to provoke police action.

The Russian leader, in turn, criticised the treatment of ethnic-

Russians in EU members Estonia and Latvia as "unworthy of Europe" and accused Estonian authorities of causing the death of a Russian national during riots last month.

"They didn't just disperse demonstrators. They killed one demonstrator. He was injured and he wasn't helped so he died. We demand that the criminals be brought to account," Putin said.

Hundreds of ethnic-Russians rioted after Estonian authorities relocated a controversial Soviet war monument. Russia responded with fury to the move, while European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said it was "a sovereign decision."

The row with Estonia is one of many disputes between Russia and countries in formerly Soviet-dominated central Europe that joined the European Union in 2004.

Military strike on Iran would be catastrophic

Says Pakistani PM

AFP, Amman

Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said yesterday that a military strike on Iran over its nuclear activities would be "catastrophic" and hoped US-Iranian talks this month would reduce tensions.

"The use of force to solve this issue will have catastrophic implications for the whole Umma (Muslim nations) and for the whole world," Aziz told a press conference in Amman.

"We are pleased to see that Iran will be engaging in a dialogue with the United States and we hope that leads to a reduction of tensions in the region," said Aziz, who is in Jordan to attend a G11 summit of developing countries.

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki announced in Islamabad on Thursday that envoys from Iran and the United States are to meet in Iraq on May 28 for talks on the country's security crisis.

"Nothing but Iraq is on the agenda for Iran and US talks," he said.

The May 28 talks are believed to be the first official bilateral ambassadorial encounter between the arch-foes since they mothballed relations after Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution.

Ties between Tehran and Washington have been bedevilled by both the Iranian nuclear row and the situation in Iraq, where the United States accuses Iran of aiding militant Shia groups and

attacking US forces.

Tehran denies that it arms Iraqi insurgents and says that its nuclear programme is entirely peaceful.

Turning to the G11, Aziz said he hoped the grouping -- Croatia, Ecuador, Georgia, Honduras, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Paraguay, Sri Lanka and El Salvador -- could "gradually build into a platform to promote free trade."

"The developing world needs today trade more than anything because trade is permanent. Trade creates an industrial base and jobs which will drive growth forward," he said.

Pakistan, he added, has no plans to set up diplomatic ties with Israel before a solution is found to the Palestinian issue.

Bush threatens fresh sanction against Iran

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush warned Thursday that the United States and Britain would push for new UN sanctions against Iran if the Islamic republic refuses to rein in its suspect nuclear programme.

"If we're unable to make progress with the Iranians, we want to

work together to implement new sanctions through the United Nations," Bush told reporters at a joint press conference with outgoing British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The United States and Britain would "continue to make it clear that Iran with a nuclear weapon is not in the interest of peace in the

world," Bush said.

Shortly after Bush spoke, a senior Iranian official told the semi-official news agency Mehr that Iran installing 3,000 centrifuges at its uranium enrichment facility at Natanz, which could allow it to process enough nuclear material to build one atomic bomb per year.

Hamas 'plot to kill' Abbas revealed

AFP, Gaza City

An alleged plot by Hamas militants to assassinate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was revealed on Thursday as deadly factional fighting resumed in Gaza and Israeli air strikes targeted the violence-wracked territory.

The plot was claimed hours after Abbas called off a trip to Gaza for talks aimed at reaching a definitive ceasefire between fighters from his Fatah party and Hamas that has left nearly 50 people dead and 100 wounded since Sunday.

"Abu Mazen's (Abbas's) visit to Gaza was cancelled after the discovery of a tunnel under Salaheddine Road full of explosives placed by the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades to blow up (his) convoy," said a senior security official, referring to Hamas's military wing.

"The explosives were found on the route that Abu Mazen takes to travel to Gaza," the source added,

speaking from the Palestinian political capital of Ramallah in the West Bank.

An official in Abbas's office confirmed the report but Abu Obeida, spokesman for the Hamas armed wing, told AFP "these reports are aimed at poisoning the atmosphere in Gaza. We deny them completely."

Earlier, a source close to the president told AFP that Abbas did not want to go to Gaza until he was sure Hamas was firmly committed to the latest truce, which had already given way to fighting.

As the Palestinian crisis worsened, Israeli aircraft carried out four air strikes on Gaza, killing five people in retaliation for rockets being fired on Israel from the territory.

The first attack hit the headquarters of a Hamas paramilitary force, killing one person and wounding 30. Barely two hours later, a Hamas fighter was killed when Israel fired on a car in Gaza City.

28 killed in fresh Lanka violence

AFP, Colombo

At least 25 suspected Tamil Tiger rebels and three civilians have been killed in fresh violence in Sri Lanka, the military said yesterday.

Security forces shot dead five members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a jungle area around the eastern lagoon town of Batticaloa on Thursday evening, officials said.

The Sri Lankan military is trying to oust the LTTE from the east seen by the rebels as part of what should be their future separate state -- and confine them to a single area in the north of the island.

Military officials also said three civilians were killed by unidentified gunmen in the northwestern coastal area of Mannar, where troops claimed they killed 20 Tiger rebels during a 24-hour period ending Thursday morning.

Troops on Thursday recovered bodies of six of the members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the Madhu area, about 260km north of Colombo, the

ministry said.

"Since yesterday, 20 LTTE terrorists were killed during conflict with troops," the ministry said in a statement. There was no immediate word from the Tigers.

The military claims came after the army said that Tiger rebels shelled military positions along their de facto border in northern Sri Lanka Thursday, prompting the closure of the frontier post into rebel-held territory.

The Omanthai check point, which is at the entrance to the northern Wanni region that is dominated by the LTTE, closed indefinitely following Thursday's shelling, the army said in a statement.

"The closure will remain until the ground situation returns to normality," the statement said.

Government forces and the rebels have been trading long-range fire across their defence lines in the northern region where security forces have been making incursions into rebel territory in recent weeks.

French President names new Cabinet

AP, Paris

President Nicolas Sarkozy named his first Cabinet on Friday, radically revamping the government, with nearly as many women as men and humanitarian crusader Bernard Kouchner as France's new foreign minister.

Other appointments included former Prime Minister Alain Juppe, in charge of the environment, an area Sarkozy says is a priority, and Jean-Louis Borloo as minister for the economy.

The Cabinet, trimmed to 15 ministers, offered both youth and experience, and near-equal distribution among the sexes. Former Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie was named as interior minister, and Sarkozy campaign adviser Rachita Dati will head the Justice Ministry.

Sarkozy had promised a new ministry for immigration and national identity, a top focus on environmental issues and near-gender equality all while parting the Cabinet down from 16 full ministers and 15 junior ministers under his predecessor, Jacques Chirac.

Wolfowitz fall brings more bad news for Bush

AFP, Washington

The announcement by Paul Wolfowitz Thursday that he was stepping down soon as World Bank chief marked yet another blow for US President George W Bush as his Republican administration nears its end.

Wolfowitz, one of the key neoconservative engineers of the strategy that led the United States to war in Iraq, owed his post at the World Bank to the Bush administration, even though he had not served the president since 2005.

The White House had resolutely stood by its former deputy defence secretary as the month-long scandal over a pay package Wolfowitz secured for his girlfriend unfolded, but in past days, as World Bank directors discussed the scandal, its support began to crumble.

"We would have preferred that he stay at the bank, but the president reluctantly accepts his decision," the White House said in a statement just after Wolfowitz announced he would resign effective June 30.

"The president will have a candidate to announce soon, allowing for an orderly transition that will have the World Bank refocused on its mission."

Wolfowitz's departure was a reminder of the tough times facing the Bush camp, but analysts

pointed out that even the very public fall from grace of a longtime pal was hardly at the top of Bush's list of concerns.

"This is one of the least of his worries," said political analyst Larry Sabato. "Remember this was a soft landing job for Wolfowitz after he left the Pentagon."

"Iraq is his biggest worry and I would even put Attorney General (Alberto) Gonzales as more of a problem than Wolfowitz," said Sabato, referring to Bush's loyal supporter who is at the centre of a scandal over the allegedly political sackings of nine federal prosecutors.

The chaos brewing in Iraq is a source of constant pressure for Bush, who has until September to come up with a new, last-ditch strategy amid increasing opposition from the Democratic-controlled Congress, which wants to set a deadline for withdrawal. Waning support for the war exacted a heavy toll on Bush's Republicans during the November election and the party's loss of seats in the House and Senate means Bush is facing stormy times ahead.

The electoral defeat sealed the fate of former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who Bush stood by for months just as he has with many of his loyal allies.

Thailand launches media crackdown

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's military-backed government launched a nationwide radio crackdown on Friday, after closing three broadcasters, which aired comments from ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

"The public relations department is checking content on every community radio station to see whether it violates our national security," Phachern Khamphoe, deputy director general of the department, told AFP.

The announcement of security checks on 3,000 community stations came a day after authorities shut down three Bangkok outlets, which broadcast telephone calls from Thaksin, who now lives in London.

The former prime minister has remained in self-imposed exile since the military overthrew his twice-elected government in September last year.

While he has previously spoken to international media following the coup, Thaksin's foray this week marked his first contact with local media since the military takeover.

Thai authorities on Friday filed complaints against Confidant Radio and Taxi Driver Community Radio, saying the two anti-junta stations were set up "illegally."