

Hamas, Fatah strike new ceasefire deal

Israel won't let up in its strikes against militants

AP, Gaza City

Negotiators from the rival Hamas and Fatah movements reached a new ceasefire deal yesterday, a senior aide to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said.

The agreement was worked out in a meeting at the Egyptian Embassy in Gaza, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to discuss the matter with reporters.

Previous agreements reached in the past week of deadly factional fighting quickly collapsed, and it was not clear if this one would hold. Under the new truce agreement, both sides pledged to pull their fighters off the streets and to exchange hostages later Saturday.

Earlier, Israel's defence minister warned that Israel will not let up in its strikes against Hamas and that militants firing rockets on Israeli border towns should be "very afraid." But Amir Peretz also said the time is not right for a major ground offensive in Gaza.

The Hamas rocket barrage on Israeli border towns came during a week of deadly clashes between the Islamic militant group and Abbas' Fatah movement. A series of Israeli air strikes has driven Hamas fighters out of their bases and prompted accusations that Israel is helping Fatah.

Peretz insisted Israel is not interfering in the internal fighting. However, he also said that "we certainly would like the moderate forces to emerge with the upper hand," a reference to Fatah.

Shortly after Peretz spoke on Israel Radio, an Israeli aircraft fired missiles toward a rocket squad near the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanoun, the army said. Hospital officials said two Palestinians were killed and four wounded in the strike. Earlier Saturday, missile strikes demolished two suspected Hamas metal workshops.

Saturday's deaths brought to 22 the number of Palestinians killed in air strikes in the past week.

In Gaza City, Hamas and Fatah gunmen clashed near the Islamic University, a Hamas stronghold, and two Fatah fighters were injured.

The weeklong Hamas-Fatah fighting has killed more than 50 Palestinians and wounded dozens. The clashes have all but destroyed a coalition deal between the two rivals.

Abbas spoke late Friday to the supreme Hamas leader, Damascus-based Khaled Mashaal, who urged senior Hamas and Fatah officials to meet.

Militancy rising: Musharraf

8 govt officials, 4 police officers kidnapped

AP, AFP, Islamabad

President Gen Pervez Musharraf acknowledged that Islamic militancy was increasing across Pakistan and said tough measures were needed to counter it, as pro-Taliban militants had kidnapped eight government officials and four police officers.

Musharraf made his remarks in an interview aired late Friday by the private Aaj television channel after four plainclothes officers were captured while patrolling in the capital, Islamabad, near the Lal Masjid mosque, notorious for launching its own anti-vice campaign.

The president said that militancy in Pakistan was increasing, and "we need to strongly counter it." Musharraf did not elaborate.

His comments came as Abdul Rashid Ghazi, a cleric at Lal Masjid, said his students detained the officers because they were standing outside a seminary linked to the mosque despite an agreement with authorities that police would not be deployed there.

He said the abductions were in retaliation for intelligence agents detaining eight or nine of its students in the past two weeks. However, he said the police would be freed later Saturday because they were not intelligence agents.

Area police official Mohammed Dilshad confirmed the abductions, saying negotiations with Lal Masjid were under way, and the issue would hopefully be resolved "very soon."

critics have accused Musharraf's government of appeasing the religious vigilantes despite concerns that pro-Taliban hard-liners, intent on enforcing a stringent version of Islamic law or Shariah, are gaining sway in Pakistan.

Last month, female students at Lal Masjid on a freelance anti-vice campaign sprung to prominence by kidnapping an alleged brothel owner and forcing her to make a confession. The mosque later declared it had set up its own Islamic court, and threatened music and movie shops to close.

Earlier dozens of gunmen ambushed a vehicle carrying eight government officials and kidnapped them in a troubled northwestern tribal region of Pakistan, officials said yesterday.

The officials, including five



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani police officer Gulfam (R) and city magistrate Chaudhry Frasad (L) get into a car after negotiations with the Red Mosque administration in Islamabad yesterday. A tense stand-off developed between police and Islamic radicals at a mosque in the Pakistani capital after four officers were held hostage overnight.



PHOTO: AFP
British Prime Minister Tony Blair holds a press conference with his Iraqi counterpart Nouri Maliki (far R) and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (C) in Baghdad yesterday. Tony Blair flew into Baghdad yesterday for a surprise final visit to Iraq as Prime Minister.

Blair's farewell tour makes stop in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Outgoing British leader Tony Blair, whose premiership has been dominated by his unpopular decision to join the 2003 invasion to topple Saddam Hussein, arrived in Iraq yesterday for his seventh and final visit as prime minister.

Blair, who was making an unannounced visit before he steps down from office in June, planned to reassure Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that his departure will not bring an end to Britain's support.

Shortly after Blair arrived in the capital's Green Zone, three mortar rounds or rockets exploded in the heavily fortified compound, wounding one person, said US Embassy spokesman Lou Fintor said.

One round struck the British Embassy compound, according to security officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release the information. It was not known if Blair was in the embassy at the time.

Indian cops seek clues to mosque blast

AFP, Hyderabad

Police sought clues on Saturday to a "sophisticated" blast at a historic mosque that killed 11 people and triggered clashes, which left five dead in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad.

The powerful explosion occurred Friday afternoon at the 17th-century Mecca Mosque and was followed by protests in which police opened fire to subdue rioters angered by the attack staged on the Muslim holy day.

Police said earlier that 10 people died from the blast in the capital of southern Andhra Pradesh state and four others had been killed in the ensuing protests. Two more people died of injuries on Saturday, officials said.

"The toll now is 16 -- 11 in the blast and five in the police firing," said state chief minister YS Rajasekhara Reddy at a joint press conference with Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil.

Fifty-six people were still being treated for injuries in hospital, while three had been discharged, Reddy added.

Lawmakers aim to revise immigration deal

AP, Washington

The fragile coalition that produced this week's immigration deal risks being picked apart by forces across the political spectrum as the measure begins moving through Congress.

Lawmakers want to revise key elements, such as letting millions of illegal immigrants stay in the US, favouring skills and education over families and setting out the terms of a new temporary worker programme.

Any one of the changes has the potential to sink the whole measure, which was unveiled with fanfare Thursday but was still being drafted late Friday.

Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, who helped negotiate the compromise, called it "very well-balanced," and cautioned against revisions that could upset the framework.

"You take something out and you're creating a problem throughout the system. You may think that you're only tweaking one part," Gutierrez said in an interview. "We've got to be very careful as to what is proposed to change."

Shipwreck yields \$500m coin haul

AP, Tampa

Deep-sea explorers said Friday they have hauled up what could be the richest sunken treasure ever discovered: hundreds of thousands of colonial-era silver and gold coins worth an estimated \$500 million from a shipwreck in the Atlantic Ocean.

A chartered cargo jet recently landed in the United States to unload hundreds of plastic containers packed with the 500,000 coins, which are expected to fetch an average of \$1,000 each from collectors and investors.

"For this colonial era, I think (the find) is unprecedented," said rare coin expert Nick Bruyer, who was contracted by Tampa-based Odyssey Marine Exploration to examine a batch of coins from the wreck. "I don't know of anything equal or comparable to it."

Citing security concerns, the company declined to release any details about the ship or the wreck site.

Company co-founder Greg Stemm said a formal announcement will come later, but court records indicate the coins might have come from the wreck of a 17th century merchant ship found off southwestern England.

Because the shipwreck was found in an area where many colonial-era vessels went down, the company is still uncertain about its nationality, size and age, Stemm said, although evidence points to a specific known shipwreck.



PHOTO: AP
In this photo provided by Odyssey Marine Exploration, Odyssey co-founder Greg Stemm, left, examines coins recovered from the 'Black Swan' shipwreck with an unidentified member of the conservation team on Thursday at an undisclosed location.

Gunmen kidnap 3 Indians in Nigeria

AP, Port Harcourt

Gunmen dynamited the front gate of a residential compound in southern Nigeria yesterday and kidnapped three Indians in an attack that left one Nigerian dead, the military said.

Security forces intervened before seven other Indian nationals could be taken away from the compound in the main oil city of Port Harcourt, military spokesman Maj Sagir Musa said.

One Nigerian civilian died in the pre-dawn attack, he said. There were no casualties among the security forces.

The attackers entered the compound after setting dynamite against the front entrance and detonating the charges, Musa said. The Indians' employer was not immediately known.

5 family members massacred in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Five family members, including two boys aged four and eight, were hacked to death yesterday in a town just outside the Sri Lankan capital in what police said may have been a family feud.

Unidentified attackers killed KW Tillakaratne, 36, his wife, their two children and the children's aunt at Delgoda, about 40km northeast of here, police said.

"It is difficult to imagine that anyone can kill children like this," a crime scene police officer told reporters. "We are trying to establish a motive. It is most likely some sort of a deep family feud."