

# Israel seizes 33 senior Hamas officials

Abbas calls for truce

AFP, AP, Jerusalem

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas called for a halt to rocket fire and a truce with Israel yesterday after the army seized 33 senior Hamas figures in latest crackdown aimed at stopping the Gaza salvos.

"We don't need these futile firings of rockets and they have to cease so that we can reach a reciprocal truce with the Israelis in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank," Abbas told reporters at a joint press conference with visiting EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

Asked if Israel's arrests of the Hamas members were justified, Solana said "No," and also appealed for an end to Israeli air raids in Gaza, rocket fire and Palestinian infighting.

"The temperature has been

going up too much and it's time to get the temperature down," he said ahead of a meeting later with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem. "No violence is going to resolve any problems."

The 33 officials from the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), including Palestinian education minister Nassereddin al-Shaer, three lawmakers and at least seven mayors, were seized in overnight raids centred on the northern West Bank city of Nablus.

Bloodshed in Gaza over the past week and a half -- a renewed bout of gunbattles between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah and more air raids by Israel -- has sparked widespread international concern and threatened to torpedo efforts to revive the moribund peace talks.

Palestinian information minister Mustafa Barghuti appealed for international intervention after what he said were "kidnappings... a massacre of Palestinian democracy and an aggression against the Palestinian Authority and its institutions."

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz told army radio the move to seize members of the majority partner in the Palestinian unity government was "a message to armed wings of terrorist organisations to stop their rocket fire."

An Israeli military spokesman said the 33 were detained because they "supported the firing of rockets."

"The Hamas terror organisation is currently involved in enhancing the terror infrastructure" in the occupied West Bank and "exploits

governmental institutions to encourage and support terrorist activity," the army said.

The arrests came amid continuing Israeli air strikes on Hamas targets in Gaza, which were resumed after a six-month ceasefire in response to a sharp increase in rocket attacks by militants, including those of Hamas.

The Israeli air raids have so far killed 13 civilians and 25 militants, but have failed to halt rocket fire, with nearly 130 crashing inside Israel over the past week and a half, killing one, wounding 16 and sending hundreds fleeing the town of Sderot that has borne the brunt of the barrage.

One civilian wounded in the air raids died on Thursday, medics said.



PHOTO: AFP  
Palestinians firemen extinguish fire at a shop attacked by an Israeli warplane in Gaza city Wednesday. Two people were wounded and shops in central Gaza City were damaged in three Israeli air raids overnight.

## 38 killed in Siberian mine blast

AFP, Moscow

A gas explosion ripped through a Siberian mine yesterday, killing 38 people in the latest in a grim catalogue of Russian mining disasters.

The disaster came weeks after the worst mining accident in post-Soviet Russia occurred at a nearby mine owned by the same company, Yuzhkuzbassugol, killing 110 people.

"Thirty-six people died and two are missing," a spokesman for the local branch of the emergency situations ministry told AFP following Thursday's blast.

The methane gas explosion happened deep underground during the morning shift at the Yubileynaya mine near Novokuznetsk, in west Siberia's Kemerovo region.

Officials said that 217 miners were below ground at the time.

Six of the survivors were injured, two of them seriously, while a rescue operation was under way to find the two missing miners.

At the mine's entrance an AFP reporter saw around 40 relatives tearfully awaiting news of loved ones, amid heavy rain.



PHOTO: AFP  
Activists of Pakistani opposition parties chant anti-Musharraf slogans during a protest rally in Lahore yesterday. President Pervez Musharraf said that recent political violence over the suspension of Pakistan's chief justice was the result of a "conspiracy" to stoke up ethnic tensions.

## Violence is a result of conspiracy to stoke ethnic tensions Says Musharraf

AFP, AP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf said yesterday that recent political violence over the suspension of Pakistan's chief justice was the result of a conspiracy to stoke ethnic tensions.

Around 40 people were killed in Karachi on May 12 during the country's worst ethnic clashes for two decades -- the bloody climax to two months of protests against the removal of top judge Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

Thousands of President Gen Pervez Musharraf's opponents demonstrated in several Pakistani cities Thursday, the first street protests since a burst of political violence deepened a crisis clouding his plans to stay in power.

About 3,000 lawyers, opposition activists and civil rights campaigners gathered for about an hour in

the centre of the eastern city of Lahore, chanting "Musharraf, go!" and calling for the restoration of democracy.

The violence started between pro- and anti-government camps but developed into fighting between Mohajirs, or people whose families fled India after partition in 1947, and Pashtuns hailing from northwest Pakistan.

"There are certain elements who gave ethnic colour to the crisis in a bid to create further chaos and cause more bloodshed in Karachi," Musharraf told a public rally in the central town of Dera Ghazi Khan.

"However the conspiracy hatched by these elements cannot work as political groups have already begun discussing ways to promote and preserve peace in Karachi," he said in the televised address.

## US issues sanctions warning to Iran

Armada enters Gulf

AFP, Washington

The United States threatened new UN sanctions to punish Iran's nuclear drive as it ratcheted up tensions with the biggest display of naval power in the Gulf in years.

Hours after a bristling US armada led by two aircraft carriers steamed into waters near Iran for exercises Wednesday, Iran defied the threats and pledged that its controversial atomic programme was expanding.

"The enemies aim to prevent us from using peaceful nuclear technology, not for scientific reasons but because they want to eradicate the roots of the principles of the Islamic Republic," Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Thursday.

"With God's help and power we are getting closer to our final aims because the enemy is exerting its last pressure on the Islamic republic and it will have no result," he said.

A day earlier, the UN nuclear watchdog said Iran was defying UN Security Council demands to stop enriching uranium and was expanding the work, leading the way for world powers to discuss a new sanctions package.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said that Iran continues to enrich uranium, which can provide fuel for civilian reactors but also make nuclear bombs.

That prompted warnings from US officials of further UN punishment unless Iran curtails its nuclear development, which the

Islamic republic insists is devoted to civilian energy.

"Iran is once again thumbing its nose at the international community," US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns said, even as US and Iranian envoys prepared for historic talks on Iraqi security in Baghdad next Monday.

Iran denied obstructing IAEA inspections, but White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe said the report by the UN atomic watchdog was damning.

The IAEA assessment "is a laundry list of Iran's continued defiance of the international community and shows that Iran's leaders are only furthering the isolation of the Iranian people," he said.

## Lebanon asks militants to surrender or face fire

Thousands of refugees flee fighting

AFP, Nahr Al-Bared

Lebanon issued an ultimatum to Islamic fighters holed up in a Palestinian refugee camp to surrender or face further attack, raising fears yesterday of a resumption of fierce fighting that has claimed 69 lives and sent thousands fleeing.

Lebanon was also hit by its third bomb attack in four days, further shaking the fragile security of a country battling deep political and sectarian tensions.

Thousands of refugees crowded into makeshift accommodation in northern Lebanon overnight after taking advantage of a ceasefire between the army and Islamist militants and fleeing the Nahr al-Bared camp, the epicentre of the three days of gunbattles.

Women carrying children and men with a few belongings continued to stream out of the besieged camp on foot under the watchful eyes of soldiers posted outside.

Relief agencies are hoping to get more aid to those still inside the once densely populated shantytown, battered by army shelling into a war zone of shrapnel-scarred houses, rubble-strewn streets and burnt out shells of cars.

Lebanon's defence minister flatly ruled out negotiations to end the standoff with Fatah al-Islam, raising speculation of a new battle in the deadliest internal fighting since the 1975-1990 civil war.

"The army will not negotiate with Fatah al-Islam, which has two choices: either surrender or the army will take the military option," Elias Murr said on Arabic satellite television Al-Arabiya.

The al-Qaeda-inspired Sunni militia, which is entrenched in the squalid camp near the shores of the Mediterranean, said it would abide by the ceasefire it declared on Tuesday but was ready to fight again.

"We respect the truce, but we will not surrender. If we are

attacked, we will fight until the last drop of blood," spokesman Abu Salim told AFP.

At least 69 people, including 30 troops, 19 Palestinian refugees, 19 militants and one Lebanese civilian, were killed in the fighting which erupted early Sunday.

Meanwhile, France's new Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner was due in Beirut to show solidarity with Lebanon at "this critical time."

The Western-backed Siniora said his government's goal was to "eliminate the Fatah al-Islam phenomenon" after the fighting stoked fears it could spread to other Palestinian camps and further worsen sectarian and political tensions.

Under a longstanding arrangement, the dozen or so camps that house about half of the 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon remain outside the authority of the government, leaving security to armed Palestinian factions.

## Car bomb kills 25 Iraqi mourners

AFP, Baghdad

A car bomb exploded at the burial ritual of a murdered local leader in the western Iraqi city of Fallujah yesterday, killing 25 people, state television reported.

US marines stationed in the city confirmed there had been an incident in Fallujah that had caused civilian casualties, according to Lieutenant Roger Hollenbeck, but could not immediately provide further details.

Iraqi state television reported that 25 people were killed, while US marines at a nearby base told an AFP photographer that initial reports from Iraqi forces at the scene put the toll at between 10 and 15 people.

Fallujah residents told AFP by telephone that the bomb attack hit mourners paying their respects to Ali Ahmed Zuwail, the nephew of tribal leader Abdel Razeq al-Issawi.

Zuwail was shot dead Wednesday.

al-Qaeda backed militants in Fallujah are locked in a deadly struggle with the local police force

and tribal levies and have been waging a campaign of assassination and intimidation against government officials.

The chair of the city council was killed in early May.

Earlier two US soldiers were killed in fighting in Iraq's restive western province of al-Anbar, the US military said on Thursday.

The latest deaths, which happened on Wednesday, brought the number of soldiers killed in May alone to 88, while 3,436 US servicemen have died since the March 2003 US-led invasion, according to an AFP count based on Pentagon figures.

The US military confirmed on Thursday that a body found floating in the Euphrates was one of three American soldiers snatched by al-Qaeda 12 days earlier, as a bomb attack hit civilian mourners at a funeral in western Iraq.

Lieutenant Colonel Josslyn Aberle of US command in Baghdad said a body found on Wednesday had been identified as Private Joseph Anzack, and that the hunt for his missing comrades would continue unabated.

## US, India '90pct' close to nuclear pact

AFP, Washington

The United States said Wednesday it was "90 percent" of the way toward sealing a historic nuclear pact with India, but the remainder looks to be tough.

Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns said he planned to visit New Delhi "in the next week or two" to try to conclude a deal that would cement a dramatic turnaround in US-Indian ties from their Cold War frostiness.

"We're 90 percent of the way there," Burns said at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank in Washington, after a long and convoluted series of meetings over the implementation of a pact first agreed in July 2005.

Indian critics fear it will hamper their country's nuclear weapons programme, nine years after the world's largest democracy staged atomic bomb tests that sparked a tit-for-tat response from arch-rival Pakistan.

Burns acknowledged that it had

"taken longer than we thought to nail down... the enormously complex" agreement, which now hinges on questions like India's willingness to admit UN inspectors to sensitive nuclear sites.

"Both sides need to compromise in order to reach a final agreement."

If sealed, the agreement would give energy-hungry India new access to nuclear power to sustain its stunning economic growth of recent years.

## 18 killed in Afghan operations, arms dump blast

AP, AFP, Kabul

Two operations in southern Afghanistan killed 18 suspected militants, including seven "foreigners," while six people died when a stash of ammunition exploded in the east, officials said yesterday.

The battles in Helmand province on Wednesday involved both foreign troops and Afghan forces. A fight in Garmsir district killed 13 suspected militants, including the seven foreigners, the Interior Ministry said.

The ministry didn't give their nationalities. However, Pakistanis fighting with the Taliban as well as Chechens and Arabs associated with al-Qaeda periodically crop up among casualties in Afghanistan.

Another five militants died in a joint operation in Helmand's Sangin district, the ministry said.

In the eastern province of Paktika, a local government leader, four policemen and a driver were killed when ammunition they were

going to confiscate exploded, said provincial spokesman Ghamia Khan.

It wasn't immediately clear if the explosion was an accident or if the cache had been rigged, Khan said. An investigation was under way.

Violence in Afghanistan has spiked in recent weeks. More than 1,800 people have died this year in insurgency-related violence, according to an Associated Press count based on US, Nato and Afghan officials.

Meanwhile, 200 people demonstrated in the province of Farah in support of an outspoken female lawmaker suspended by parliament this week over comments she made comparing parliamentarians to animals.

Malalai Joya, 29, told The Associated Press on Thursday that she has been suspended until the end of parliament's session in 2010, but that she was waiting for Afghanistan's Supreme Court to make a final decision as to whether her ouster is valid.