



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinians inspect a destroyed compound used by Hamas's Executive Force after an Israeli air strike in Gaza city yesterday. Israeli aircraft Saturday again pounded targets in the Gaza Strip as the main armed factions mulled a truce call from Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to end "futile" rocket barrages.

Five killed as Israel hits Hamas targets in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli aircraft again pounded targets in the Gaza Strip yesterday, as the main armed factions discussed a truce call from Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to end "futile" rocket barrages.

But Hamas put the onus on Israel for any hope of an end to the rocket fire, demanding that it stop shooting first.

And amid the question of presenting a common front toward Israel, a senior Palestinian security chief resigned, underscoring continuing tensions between Abbas's Fatah and Hamas.

At least five Palestinians were killed and eight wounded in four air raids mid-morning on buildings used by the paramilitary Executive

Force loyal to senior Palestinian coalition partner Hamas, medical sources said.

The bodies of three Palestinians were found under the rubble of a building destroyed in one of the attacks, in Zeitun settlement south of Gaza City. Six people were wounded, including three critically, two of whom died later.

Two other Executive Force posts were attacked, one in the nearby Shati refugee camp, in which four people were wounded, and the other at Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip.

A fourth raid targeted a militant training camp at Khan Yunis, also in the south. No casualties were reported.

At least 45 Palestinians have been killed in air strikes on Gaza

since May 16, which Israel says are aimed at preventing militants from firing rockets into Israel. Those attacks have killed one Israeli and wounded 19.

Late Friday, two members of the military wing of Hamas were killed in a missile strike on their vehicle in Gaza City, medical sources said.

The strike followed renewed rocket fire -- claimed by Hamas -- against the southern Israeli town of Sderot, in which three civilians were wounded.

Also, Israeli aircraft attacked a guardpost at the Gaza home of Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, a senior member of Hamas, witnesses said, but the military denied Haniya was the target.

Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers

arrested a Hamas cabinet minister during an overnight raid in the occupied West Bank, Palestinian sources said.

Minister of state Wafsi Qabha was taken from his home during a raid by Israeli troops, his wife and Palestinian security sources said.

Israeli forces detained 33 senior Hamas figures in the West Bank on Thursday, including education minister Nassereddin al-Shaer.

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz justified the arrests in the face of international criticism, saying they sent a "message to the military branches of terrorist organisations to stop their rocket fire."

The raids have also targeted Hamas's smaller rival, Islamic Jihad.

Troops head to Kiev as Ukraine crisis talks restart

AFP, Kiev

Troops loyal to Ukraine's President Viktor Yushchenko tried to enter the capital Kiev yesterday, the interior ministry said, as the feuding president and prime minister restarted crisis talks.

Negotiations between Yushchenko and Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich on their bitter power struggle began more than two hours late, following a first round of talks Friday evening that ended with no sign of progress.

Tensions rose when the interior ministry, which is generally loyal to Yanukovich, said ministry troops commanded by a Yushchenko ally were headed toward the capital.

The deputy head of the ministry, Mykhaylo Korniyenko, told journalists that 82 vehicles carrying 2,050 soldiers were headed toward Kiev, but that "practically all of them have been stopped in different places."

Bush celebrates victory after signing Iraq war bill

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush celebrated victory yesterday after he signed into law a long-sought bill committing 100 billion dollars to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Congress voted yesterday to provide our troops with the funding and flexibility they need to protect our country, and I was pleased to sign the bill today," Bush said in a statement Friday.

"Rather than mandate arbitrary timetables for troop withdrawals or micromanage our military commanders, this legislation enables our servicemen and women to follow the judgment of commanders on the ground," he added.

The president's Democratic foes in Congress had ceded to his demands to strip timelines for troop withdrawals out of the war funding bill passed Thursday. But Democrats have vowed fresh efforts to end the conflict.

Bush reiterated that the measure sets the stage for pressing the fragile government in Baghdad to make progress on national reconciliation.

"Iraqis need to demonstrate measurable progress on a series of benchmarks for improved security, political reconciliation and governance," the statement said, referring to provisions in the bill.

Bush had earlier told reporters: "I look forward to continuing to work with the prime minister and his government in meeting those expectations," referring to Iraq's Nuri al-Maliki.

Bush's signature on the bill cements a short-term truce with anti-war Democrats in a fierce struggle for control of the unpopular war.

But the president's foes warned they were girding for a new assault on his authority in coming months, and claimed a breakthrough in reining him in over the unpopular and bloody conflict.

"I think that the president's policy is going to begin to unravel now," said Nancy Pelosi, Democratic speaker of the House of Representatives. She admitted however that the budget bill, which she voted against, fell short of Democratic aspirations. After Congress returns from a week-long break, Pelosi said, Democrats would seek to renew the battle to force Bush to change course in Iraq, targeting several defence spending bills due for debate.

She also pledged to schedule a vote on withdrawing Bush's congressional authorization to wage war in Iraq, granted in 2002. Senator Hillary Clinton has introduced a similar bill in the US Senate.

"September is the moment of truth for this war," Pelosi said, referring to a date when the top US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, is expected to report on progress of Bush's surge of nearly 30,000 extra troops into Iraq.

US needs to change on Iraq for talks to bear fruit: Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran said yesterday that upcoming talks with the United States on Iraq could succeed only if Washington changed its policies in Iraq.

"If the United States acknowledges its past wrong policies in Iraq and decides to change those policies ... one could be optimistic about these talks and their future," Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki told reporters.

"The Islamic republic is interested in successful dialogue to help the Iraqi people and government within this framework," he said.

Iran's envoy in Baghdad, Hassan Kazemi, will meet US Ambassador Ryan Crocker on Monday in the highest-level official bilateral talks between the two sides since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The United States and Iran

broke off diplomatic relations in 1980 after radical students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and held its diplomats hostage for 444 days.

Both sides have said their discussions will focus strictly on Iraq, and will not touch on other issues such as Iran's controversial nuclear programme.

"The issue of talks will be the security of Iraq and the fact that they (United States) should fulfil their responsibilities and legal obligations," President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told state television on Saturday.

"It has not been the case that any other issues be discussed," he added.

Iran's hardline president said it was a "great step" forward for the Iranian people that "the ones who were threatening us a few months ago are now requesting talks."

Myanmar criticised for extension of Suu Kyi detention

AFP, Yangon

The United States, Britain, United Nations and the European Union have led international condemnation of Myanmar's decision to extend the detention of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, calling for her immediate release.

British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett voiced deep sadness Saturday at Myanmar's extension of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's detention and called for all political prisoners to be released.

"It saddens me deeply to learn that the Burmese regime has extended her detention by yet another year," Foreign Secretary Beckett said in a statement.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon Friday expressed regret over Myanmar's

decision to extend the house arrest of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi for another year despite worldwide appeals for her release.

"The secretary general deeply regrets the decision," Ban's spokeswoman Michel Montas said in a statement.

On Friday, the military rulers of the Southeast Asian country ordered that the Nobel peace laureate -- who has spent much of the past 17 years in detention -- be kept under house arrest for another year, police sources said.

The decision came despite mounting calls for the junta to free the 61-year-old, whose National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in 1990 elections but was never allowed to govern.

Turks rally against pro-Islamic leaders

AP, Ankara

Thousands of flag-waving protesters filled streets in yet another city in Turkey on Saturday, accusing the government of trying to impose Islamic values on the country's Western way of life.

The rally in western Denizli was the latest of several large demonstrations since early April against the Islamic-rooted party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turks also have rallied in the country's four biggest cities -- Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Samsun.

"Turkey is secular and will remain secular!" the demonstrators chanted in Denizli, where security was extremely tight amid a

surge of attacks by separatist Kurdish guerrillas across the country.

The leaders of two main secular parties have formed an alliance to challenge Erdogan in elections scheduled for July 22.

Erdogan's government alarmed many secular Turks last month by nominating his ally, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, as a presidential candidate. Many Turks saw the move as an effort to allow his Islamic-leaning party to expand its powers and govern unchecked.

Secular opposition parties then boycotted the presidential voting process in parliament, creating a political deadlock and forcing Gul to abandon his bid.

Warming threatens Arctic glaciers

AFP, Montreal

Warming in Canada's far north is melting glaciers that threaten to split into massive chunks and float away, a Canadian researcher told AFP Friday, after tagging an iceberg as big as Manhattan.

Geologist Luke Copland of the University of Ottawa, and his colleague Derek Mueller of the University of Alaska Fairbanks,

visited Ayles Ice Island this week to install beacons to follow its movements through the Arctic Ocean.

"On Monday, we landed on the ice island and (installed) a satellite tracking beacon, so we can track where the ice island (goes), and a temperature sensor, which every hour will record the temperature," Copland told AFP.

The 16-by-five-kilometer (10-



PHOTO: AFP
A relative of a blast victim weeps after a powerful bomb went off, in the Athgaon area of Guwahati, Assam yesterday. At least 8 people were killed and 15 injured in a powerful blast in the troubled Assam's main city.

Ban cluster bombs, say 68 nations

AFP, Lima

Activists touted as successful a 68-nation agreement Friday to ban cluster bombs, despite manufacturing countries' desire for exceptions in coming talks.

However, country representatives wanted to avoid overstating the depth of the commitment in Lima, calling them "informal talks and not negotiations," French delegation leader Pierre Charasse said.

The anti-personnel weapons are dropped by the world's armies but 98 percent of victims are civilians, one-fourth of them children.

Non-governmental groups that opened the conference here on Wednesday pushed for stand-alone negotiations for an independent

treaty to ban cluster bombs by 2008.

However, governments, mostly in Europe, sought to negotiate such a ban within the UN Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW), without abandoning an initiative launched at the conference's first meeting in Oslo in February.

"European countries want negotiations within the framework of Oslo not to go backwards, while still wanting to negotiate under the auspices of the CCW," said Jean Marc Boivin, for Handicap International.

France, Germany and Poland pushed for further talks in Geneva under the UN treaty, which covers anti-personnel weapons, with non-detectable fragments or shrapnel, booby-traps, incendiary bombs and clearing unexploded ordnance.

Japan under pressure over Lanka aid

AFP, Tokyo

An international human rights group is lobbying Sri Lanka's top donor Japan to exert greater pressure on the island nation to address spiralling violence.

But Tokyo said it has no plans for now to slash aid and follow the lead of Sri Lanka's former colonial ruler Britain and Germany, which have frozen debt relief due to rights concerns.

"It has dramatically worsened over the last year," Sophie Richardson of Human Rights Watch said of Sri Lanka's rights record, during a week-long mission to Tokyo for meeting with Japanese officials.

Asylum-seekers will be allowed to stay in Netherlands

AP, Amsterdam

Some 25,000 asylum-seekers whose applications for refuge were rejected will be allowed to stay, the newly installed Dutch government said yesterday, reversing the previous administration's hardline immigration policy.

The Cabinet approved the plan crafted by Deputy Justice Minister Nebahat Albayrak, the country's

Violence plagues Philippine polls

AP, Manila

Unidentified gunmen opened fire on soldiers guarding polling precincts during special elections yesterday in 13 Philippine towns where voting was postponed last week over fears of violence.

The government sent about 2,000 soldiers and 500 regional police commandos to secure the elections in southern Lanao del Sur

province, elections commissioner Rene Sarmiento said.

He said the gunmen fired at troops in the Masiu and Pualas townships early Saturday, slightly wounding one soldier. The regional police chief later said the shooting in Masiu was not hostile in nature.

Police said soldiers also briefly exchanged fire with armed thugs in Kapai township. No casualties



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian refugees approach a Lebanese army checkpoint as they flee their besieged camp of Nahr al-Bared in north Lebanon yesterday. The Lebanese government offered a final chance for a peaceful end to the army's siege of Fatah al-Islam militant group in the refugee camp as sniper fire stopped all but a few dozen of the thousands of civilians trapped inside from fleeing.

Lebanon gives last chance for talks

Sniper fire stops refugee exodus

AFP, Nahr al-Bared

The Lebanese government offered a final chance for a peaceful end to the army's siege of Islamists in a refugee camp as sniper fire stopped all but a few dozen of the thousands of civilians trapped inside from fleeing yesterday.

Washington confirmed it was rushing military supplies to the Lebanese army but the Lebanese opposition warned the government against getting involved in a US-backed war against the al-Qaeda-inspired fighters of fringe Palestinian militant group Fatah al-Islam.

Relief agencies expressed grow-

ing concern for the 10,000 or so civilians still inside the Nahr al-Bared camp outside Lebanon's second city of Tripoli whom the army has said are being used as "human shields" by the militants.

As a fragile truce unilaterally declared by the militants on Tuesday largely held, Defence Minister Elias Murr said talks were under way to try to reach a negotiated end to the siege.

"We are now giving a chance for political negotiations," he told reporters late on Friday.

But he added: "If the political negotiations fail, I will leave it up to the army command to carry out the

required actions."

Murr did not specify who was brokering the talks but reports said mainstream Palestinian factions were trying to break the deadlock for fear of the impact that an all-out offensive against the camp would have on Palestinian civilians.

By longstanding convention, the army does not enter Lebanon's 12 refugee camps, leaving security inside to the Palestinian factions.

Previously, Murr had ruled out any negotiations to end the clashes, which have killed 78 people, 33 of them Lebanese soldiers, in the worst internal strife since the 1975-90 civil war.