

Palestinian factions hold truce talks

No Hamas leader is immune to attacks, says Olmert

AFP, AP, Cairo/Jerusalem

Egyptian officials met members of the secular Fatah faction of the Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas yesterday, the first in a series of talks with rival factions aimed at cementing a fragile truce in Gaza, the official MENA agency reported.

"The talks with the Palestinian faction leaders began formally today on Sunday in Cairo with representatives of the Fatah party," MENA quoted an "informed source" as saying.

"The talks will then continue with the other factions, each separately, in order to assess the views of each faction as to ending the infighting, and the possibility of reaching a comprehensive truce

with Israel," the source said.

General Borhan Hamad, heading the Egyptian team, was also to meet representatives of the Islamist movement Hamas which shares power with Fatah in a Palestinian unity government.

The Fatah delegation includes deputy premier Azzam al-Ahmed, former parliament speaker Rawhi Fattuh, and Abbas's national security adviser Mohammed Dahlan, MENA reported.

The delegation was also due to meet Arab League chief Amr Mussa, the state-owned Al-Messa reported.

On Saturday, MENA said the talks were part of Cairo's "intensive efforts to stabilise the truce and end Palestinian infighting".

There was no intention "to hold

a meeting bringing all the factions around one table."

Clashes between supporters of Hamas and Fatah in the Gaza Strip killed more than 40 people in less than a week, before a ceasefire was agreed by the two factions on May 16.

Egyptian security officials are also due to hold talks with representatives of the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert yesterday promised to step up attacks on the Hamas militant group after a Palestinian rocket attack killed an Israeli man in southern Israel. "No one is immune," Olmert declared.

Sunday's bloodshed signaled

there was no end in sight for the latest round of fighting between Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip. A 10-day campaign of Israeli airstrikes aimed at halting rocket attacks has killed nearly 50 Palestinians, most of them militants. But the rocket fire has continued.

Another rocket slammed into the southern Israeli town of Sderot early Sunday, critically wounding a 36-year-old man with shrapnel, medical officials said. The man later died of his wounds at a hospital, Israeli media said. It was the second fatal rocket attack in less than a week.

Olmert told the weekly meeting of his Cabinet Sunday that he had instructed the army to do whatever it takes to halt the rocket fire.

Ukraine rivals agree on early elections to end crisis

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's President Viktor Yushchenko on Sunday announced a deal with Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych to hold early parliamentary elections, declaring a political crisis in Ukraine "finished."

"Early elections will be held on September 30," Yushchenko told reporters at a joint press briefing with his rival Yanukovych after seven hours of talks between the two leaders in Kiev.

"The political crisis in Ukraine is finished. We have come to a decision that represents a compromise," Yushchenko said.

The crisis started on April 2, when Yanukovych defied orders from Yushchenko to dissolve parliament and hold early elections, calling the move "unconstitutional."



PHOTO: AFP

Volunteers set up the Arlington West display of war memorial crosses for US military personnel killed in Iraq organised by Veterans for Peace (VFP) on Santa Monica Beach Saturday in Santa Monica, California. Each white cross represents one US military person killed.

Lebanon sets deadline to end camp standoff

AFP, Beirut/ Nahr al-Bared

Lebanon has given Palestinian groups until the middle of the week to negotiate an end to a deadly standoff between troops and an Islamist militia holed up in a squalid refugee camp.

Sporadic gunbattles flared overnight between soldiers and fighters from the shadowy extremist group Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Bared camp in northern

Lebanon, where fears are mounting for the safety of refugees trapped inside.

Soldiers remain on full alert around Nahr al-Bared, which has been battered by the worst internal strife since Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war, leaving residents facing dire shortages of water, electricity and food.

"There were rounds of gunbattles during the night, but this morning the situation is calm. There is an uneasy calm," a

Lebanese army spokesman said.

Lebanese troops encircled the camp last Sunday, the first day of fierce gunbattles between the tiny Fatah al-Islam militia that has now killed 78 people, forced thousands to flee and trapped thousands more.

"The authorities have given Palestinian organisations until the middle of the week" to try to negotiate a settlement, a Lebanese government source said on condition of anonymity.

Thousands flee Lebanon refugee camp, says UN

AP, Tripoli

A majority of families from a besieged Palestinian refugee camp caught in the crossfire between Islamic militants and the Lebanese army have fled but thousands remain trapped inside, a UN official said Sunday.

The Nahr al-Bared camp, located near the outskirts of this northern Lebanon port city, was calm Sunday after sporadic gunfire overnight between the army and Fatah Islam militants inside punctured a four-day-old truce.

Hoda al-Turk, a spokeswoman for UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, known as UNRWA, said more 5,000 refugee families or about 25,000 refugees have left the camp since the fighting began one week ago. The camp is home to about 31,000 people.

A majority of the families have fled to the nearby Beddawi refugee camp, while others are staying in Tripoli and other villages, she said.

In a videotape obtained Saturday by AP Television News in Tripoli, the head of the Fatah Islam, Shaker Youssef al-Abisi, said his fighters would not surrender but would kill those who storm the

camp.

"We wish to die for the sake of God... Sunni people are the spearhead against the Zionist Americans," said the bearded leader, who is suspected of having ties to al-Qaeda. He was shown seated before a black banner, as another militant holding a machine gun stood next to him. The tape also showed militants training in an unidentified camp.

The Lebanese government has vowed to crush the militants. The military has rolled more troops around the camp, which is already ringed by hundreds of soldiers, backed by artillery and tanks. Fatah Islam has claimed to have more than 500 fighters with automatic weapons, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades, inside the camp.

Three US transport planes carrying military aid arrived from Kuwait on Saturday in an effort to help shore up the army. So far, eight military transport planes have landed at Beirut airport since Thursday four from the US Air Force, two from the United Arab Emirates and two from Jordan. Media reports said the planes carried ammunition, body armour, helmets and night-vision equipment.

Western spy networks discovered: Iran

AP, Tehran

Iran said Saturday it has uncovered spy rings organized by the United States and its Western allies, claiming on state-run television that the espionage networks were made up of "infiltrating elements from the Iraqi occupiers."

The Intelligence Ministry has "succeeded in identifying and striking blows at several spy networks comprised of infiltrating elements from the Iraqi occupiers in western, southwestern and central Iran," said the statement, using shorthand for United States and its allies.

The broadcast did not elaborate, saying further details would be published within days.

Meanwhile, the state IRNA news agency said the uncovered networks "enjoyed guidance from intelligence services of the occupying powers in Iraq" and also that "Iraqi groups" were "involved in the case."

The White House said Saturday that it does not confirm or deny allegations about intelligence matters.

"We urge Iran to play a positive role in Iraq ... and stop blaming everyone else for problems they are only bringing on themselves," White House deputy press secretary Dana Perino said.

Washington, Tehran to hold first substantial talks in 27 years

AFP, Washington

Washington and Tehran open their first substantial talks in 27 years in Baghdad today, with both countries setting modest goals and limiting discussions to ways to quell the chaos in Iraq.

US ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker is set to meet Iranian ambassador Hassan Kazemi 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.

State Department spokesman Tom Casey said the talks would be held "in Baghdad, at an Iraqi government facility," giving no further details for security reasons.

An Iraqi representative will join them at the start of the talks, which will then continue behind closed doors. There will be no official statement, but Crocker said there could be a press conference at the US embassy after the event.

The meeting follows a brief encounter between US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her Iranian counterpart, Manouchehr Mottaki, on May 4 at a conference

on Iraq held at the Egyptian resort of Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt.

"Bad relations between the two countries does not serve Iraq, and Iraq has paid the price for the tension between the two countries," said Ali al-Dabbagh, spokesman for Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

"We don't want Iraq to be an arena for fighting between the two sides," Dabbagh told reporters Wednesday.

Washington accuses Tehran of fomenting violence by arming and training radical Shia militias. Tehran in turn says that peace will not be restored in Iraq until US forces leave.

Washington also accuses Iran of seeking nuclear weapons, wants Tehran to freeze its uranium enrichment operations, and has not ruled out military strikes to thwart Iran's nuclear drive. Iran says its atomic drive is peaceful and that it has every right to the full fuel cycle.

Iran's nuclear programme however is not on the agenda for Monday's talks.

"We have decided to do this meeting as part of the neighbours process," said Casey. "This is the appropriate channel for that kind of issue. It's not a forum for discussion about other events."



PHOTO: AFP

A demonstrator with a headband reading "RCTV is Venezuela" participates in a demo against the closure of private broadcast Radio Caracas Television Saturday, in Caracas. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez presented Friday the new Teves television channel that will replace RCTV from May 28.

Syrians vote for Assad in no-contest referendum

AFP, Damascus

Syrians were voting yesterday in a no-contest referendum to give President Bashar al-Assad another seven years at the helm, in the face of an opposition boycott and a crackdown on dissidents.

With parliament unanimously approving the candidature of the 41-year-old Assad for a second term, and with vocal opponents of the regime locked up, the referendum will inevitably anoint him as president until 2014.

While the authorities focused the campaign on stability in a region awash with bloodshed, the opposition, partly tolerated but with no legal status and unable to field candidates, said it was boycotting the referendum.

"I voted yes, of course. I am voting for the stability of Syria, for security and for the achievements of the regime," said Ali Ahmad, a 23-year-old hotel employee.

Another "yes" voter, Mohammed Ali Sharif, a 62-year-old pensioner, said "Syria has shown to the world it can resist in the face of foreign forces."



PHOTO: AFP

Members of the All Assam Students' Union with their faces tied with black cloths stage a protest against the killing of at least eight people in a blast the police suspects was triggered by United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) militants in Guwahati, the capital of Assam.