



PHOTO: AFP
A masked Hamas militant stands on an armed vehicle belonging to Fatah-affiliated Force 17 presidential guard as he secures the seafont presidential compound, home to the Gaza offices of Palestinian Authority president and Fatah chairman Mahmud Abbas in Gaza City yesterday. Hamas seized full control of the Gaza Strip early Friday after days of ferocious gunbattles, hours after Abbas sacked the government and declared a state of emergency.

9 Afghans, Nato soldier killed in suicide blasts

AFP, Kandahar

Two suicide attackers blew themselves up near Nato convoys in southern Afghanistan yesterday, killing five Afghan children, four young men and a foreign soldier, officials said.

The dead all lost their lives in the first blast, which was a car bomb that ripped through a residential area of the town of Tirin Kot, the deputy governor of Uruzgan province governor Mohammad Nabi told AFP.

The US-led coalition said meanwhile it had killed more than two dozen Taliban in a series of battles across Afghanistan in the past 24 hours. A teenage boy was killed in the crossfire.

"Nine Afghan nationals including adults and children have been martyred," provincial police chief General Mohammad Qasim said. Five were children, aged around 12, and the rest were young men, he said. "Seven other Afghans have been

wounded including one woman," he said.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force said one of its soldiers was killed and three wounded.

The 37-country Isaf gave no details of the attack and does not release the nationalities of its casualties, leaving this to the home nations of its soldiers.

Most of the Isaf soldiers in Uruzgan are Australian and Dutch nationals.

Another suicide bomber struck hours later in the city of Kandahar, about 100km away, police said.

"Five civilians were wounded in a suicide attack on a Nato convoy," Kandahar province police chief Ismatullah Alizay told AFP. Isaf said it suffered no casualties.

Southern Afghanistan has been hard hit by a fierce Taliban-led insurgency. Attacks are mainly targeted at Afghan and foreign forces but kill and maim more civilians.

Nepali Maoists lobby Carter over terror tag

AFP, Kathmandu

The leader of Nepal's Maoists said Friday he has appealed to former US president Jimmy Carter to help remove the former rebels from a US list of terrorist groups.

The Maoists remain on Washington's blacklist of "specially designated global terrorists" even though they signed a peace deal with central government last November and declared an end to a decade-long insurgency.

The United States, however, argues that the ultra-leftists are still engaged in violence and have failed to properly disarm under the terms of the peace accord.

"As the US keeps us on a terrorist list, I asked him (Carter) to take our wish to be off the list to the US government, and he responded positively," said Prachanda, whose nom-de-guerre means "the fierce one."

Amnesty urges Lanka on UN monitors

AFP, Geneva

Amnesty International urged Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to invite UN monitors to verify claims of human rights violations by both sides in the country's bitter ethnic civil war.

After meeting the president here Thursday, the watchdog group's Secretary General Irene Khan said an escalation of rights abuses over the past 18 months had shown domestic institutions were not up to the task.

"A climate of fear dominates Sri Lanka, with human rights activists and journalists threatened, attacked, intimidated, harassed and killed. Even humanitarian workers have not been immune," she said in a statement.

"In this deteriorating situation, an independent presence to monitor and investigate human rights abuses by all sides is critical," Khan said.

She urged Rajapakse to open talks with the UN High

plants and even the kitchen sink, complete with plumbing fixtures such as taps.

And inside the Muntada, Abbas's seafont presidential compound that was seized by masked militants on Thursday -- the final bastion to fall, witnesses reported seeing Hamas fighters remove computers, documents and guns.

They also helped themselves to Fatah vehicles. Those they could not get started were towed away, draped in the green standard of Hamas.

The Islamists were firmly in control of Gaza on Friday, effectively creating an Islamic enclave on Israel's border and effectively splitting the Palestinians into two separate entities, jeopardising any prospect for a future state of their own and peace with Israel.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, now Fatah's sole powerbase, five shops affiliated with Hamas sympathisers, including a falafel

stand, were torched in Bethlehem, security sources and Hamas said.

Sporadic shooting rattled around Gaza, which has been completely sealed off from the outside world by Israel, which closed all border crossings until further notice.

"This is the worst thing I've seen since 1967" when Israel routed Arab armies in the Six Day War, Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat of Fatah told AFP.

"I see the separation of Gaza from the West Bank, and I see the Palestinian aspirations for a state set back. Gaza is officially outside the (Palestinian) Authority's control. It's a mutiny now."

Meanwhile, a deeply alarmed Israel on Friday mulled its future strategy towards Hamas after the radical Islamist movement, which it blacklists as a terrorist organisation, snatched control of the Gaza Strip.

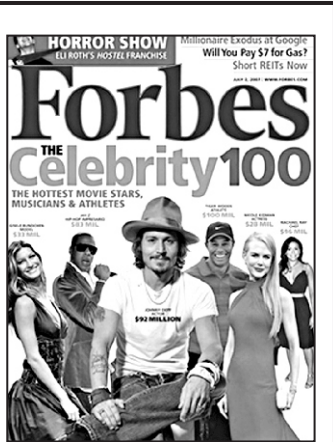
Israel woke up to find itself sandwiched between two de facto Palestinian entities, one controlled

by Western-backed president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party in the West Bank and the other under unfettered Hamas-control in Gaza.

The Israeli press was awash with alarmist cries of chaos, hell and catastrophe that would put the Jewish state on the frontline of global jihad.

"The catastrophic scenario has become reality: Hamas controls Gaza and Fatah the West Bank" and "Welcome to Hell" screeched the tabloid-style Maariv daily; "Hamastan is Here" cried the top-selling YediotAharonot.

"At the moment, Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and Gaza are de facto separated," government spokesman Miri Eisin said, standing by Israel's long-term strategy of supporting moderates at the expense of Hamas radicals.



Oprah tops Forbes' list of power players

AP, New York

Oprah Winfrey continues to take over the world. The media mogul is back on top of Forbes' annual "Celebrity 100 Power List," which ranks the rich and famous based on earnings and buzz.

Winfrey, who came in third last year, was the top money-maker with an estimated income of \$260 million over the past 12 months. She last topped the list in 2005.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) takes oath as member of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament) as Chairperson of the UPA Government, Sonia Gandhi (2R) and Vice-President of India and Chairman of the Upper House of Parliament, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (L), look on in New Delhi yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP
An Iraqi Shia carries a picture of firebrand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr as he takes part in a protest yesterday in Baghdad's impoverished district of Sadr City against an attack on a revered Shia shrine in the town of Samarra. A revered Sunni shrine was destroyed in a bomb attack near the southern Shia city of Basra Friday by a group pretending they wanted to film the shrine.

Palestinian state now a distant dream

AFP, Ramallah

Hamas has emerged as a force to be reckoned with, but its seizure of the impoverished Gaza Strip has effectively split the Palestinians into two entities and driven the creation of an independent state further from reach.

"Unfortunately this pushed us back, it pushed us back many years," stunned chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP a day after the Islamists overran forces loyal to his Fatah party in the Gaza Strip.

"This is the worst thing I've seen since 1967," he said referring to the six day war when Israel seized control of east Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, along with the Sinai and the Golan Heights.

The takeover after days of fierce fighting has split the Palestinians into two entities, with Western-shunned Islamist Hamas lording over Gaza and Western-backed president Mahmud Abbas of secular Fatah in

the West Bank.

Efforts to make peace between Israelis and Palestinians had already been set back when Hamas -- considered a terror group by the European Union, Israel and the United States -- routed long-dominant Fatah in parliamentary polls in January 2006, ushering in a Western diplomatic and economic boycott.

The overthrow of Palestinian Authority security services by the Islamists' armed wing and paramilitary force has made Palestinian aspirations of their own state with east Jerusalem an even more distant dream.

The reason is two-fold -- the steamrolling has weakened the PA and installed in power in Gaza a movement whose charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state.

"Gaza is officially outside the (Palestinian) Authority's control. It's a mutiny now," Erakat said.

The international community,

including Israel's main ally the United States, had warned during the raging clashes that the internal bloodletting was endangering the prospects of a Palestinian state and peace with Israel.

The Hamas takeover of Gaza will "toll the knell of the solution of an Israeli state and a Palestinian state side by side," Denmark had warned.

With the routing completed, the peace process is more moribund that ever, wrote Israeli media.

"The Palestinian Authority is dead, there is no one to talk to," said an editorial in the mass-selling YediotAharonot.

The office of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is "convinced that in light of the PA's collapse, the American administration leaders will not put pressure on Olmert at this stage to come up with ideas for renewing the negotiations with Abu Mazen and promoting a diplomatic horizon," it said.

AFP, Berlin

The European Union yesterday condemned the "violent" seizure of power by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which Britain labelled a "coup d'etat" against beleaguered Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

The United States, Russia, the EU and the United Nations were to have a ministerial level telephone conference on the crisis, while Arab foreign ministers gathered in Cairo for talks.

Egypt recalled its diplomatic and security delegations to the Gaza Strip.

"The presidency of the European Union condemns in the strongest terms the violent seizure of power by Hamas militia in the Gaza Strip," Martin Jaeger, German foreign ministry spokesman, said on behalf of the EU leadership.

"We condemn the killing of innocent civilians and legitimate security forces," the spokesman said.

Hamas fighters were in full control of the Gaza Strip on Friday, creating an Islamic enclave on Israel's doorstep and further cloud-

ing prospects for peace after routing their secular Fatah rivals in days of vicious gunbattles.

The radical Islamist group -- branded a terror outfit by Israel and the West -- overran the territory hours after Abbas sacked the government and declared a state of emergency in a bid to avert all-out civil war.

Jaeger joined the United States in backing Abbas, insisting that his decision to dismiss the three-month-old Hamas-Fatah unity government was "in accordance with the Palestinian constitution." Germany holds the EU presidency until the end of the month.

British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett stressed it would be wrong for Hamas to benefit from its seizure of power in Gaza.

"The notion that somehow mounting a coup d'etat is something that should be rewarded by the international community seems to me to be completely bizarre," she said.

Indians find no clues to missing relatives in Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

A group of Indian families who returned from a trip to Pakistan to search for relatives who went missing in a war 36 years ago said yesterday they were disappointed with the visit.

The 14 Indians returned to India Thursday after a two-week visit to Pakistan, where they visited about a dozen jails to find clues to the men they believe may still be held in Pakistan.

"We are not satisfied at all because we were shown only 10 to 12 prisons, all of them housing civilians," said Reshma Advani, whose airforce officer husband went missing in the 1971 war between the South Asian arch-rivals.

Pakistan has repeatedly denied that it holds any Indian prisoners of war, but some families say they have heard of their relatives in jail from other Indian civilians who had been imprisoned there.

Islamabad said it allowed the families to visit jails following the repeated requests from the Indian government. Ties between India and Pakistan have also improved since a peace process was launched in 2004.

"They did not let us see any of the cells. We only visited the office of the head of the jail and were shown some records," Advani told AFP.

Advani said the only consolation came from a former Pakistani army official, who approached them after reading about their visit in the local media, and told them that an Indian they were searching for had died in the war.

"That story seemed to be true," Advani said.

The group is seeking information about 54 Indians they believed were captured alive in the war -- the third between the South Asian rivals.

No consensus on first Indian female president

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A contest and not a consensus for the post of president of India appears inevitable with main opposition BJP-led NDA having rejected ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA)'s appeal for backing its woman candidate Pratibha Patil.

Shortly after choosing Patil as its nominee for the top post, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi spoke to NDA Chairperson Atal Bihari Vajpayee seeking the opposition combine's support for her.

Sonia told Vajpayee that this was the first time she is seeking support from him but the senior BJP leader told her that NDA has its own candidate and it was therefore not possible for the opposition alliance to honour her request, a statement issued by BJP late on Thursday night said.

Besides, Vajpayee told Gandhi that the UPA did not consult NDA before finalising its presidential nominee and was seeking its support only after deciding on Patil, the statement said.



Pratibha Patil

BJP President Rajnath Singh also ruled out a consensus and reiterated that the NDA has its own nominee for the top constitutional post.

The opposition was clearly taken by surprise at the nomination of 71-year-old Patil, who has a Masters' degree in law and has served as a minister in Congress governments in western state of Maharashtra in the 1970s and 1980s, BJP sources said.

They said the nomination of a woman presidential nominee may have affected the chances of Vice

President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, a senior BJP leader, in the presidential contest.

Congress, political observers said, is clearly seeking to use the emotive plank of a woman being made the president for the first time. This was evident when senior party leader and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee last night appealed to all political parties to support Pratibha Patil to ensure a woman becomes the head of state for the first time.

It may be recalled that the Left parties had fielded a woman Lakshmi Sehgal, an associate of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, as its joint presidential candidate when incumbent APJ Abdul Kalam was put up by NDA and backed by Congress. Sehgal had lost that contest.

Patil had been in virtual political wilderness for about eight years since the end of her tenure as Lok Sabha member in 1996 before she was made by Congress-led UPA government Rajasthan Governor.



PHOTO: AFP
Supporters of Thailand's ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra hold placards while shouting slogans during a pro-democracy rally in Bangkok yesterday. The army-installed Thai government agreed to let Thaksin deliver a live video address Friday to thousands of his supporters who have been rallying on the streets.