



Palestinian boys play in the rubble of the Gaza International Airport in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday following an Israeli military incursion into the area, which ended Sunday morning. The residents of Gaza mark one month yesterday since factional Palestinian fighting in the impoverished territory ended with Hamas seizing control there on June 15.

## Fatah militants renounce attacks against Israel

AP, Ramallah

Scores of Fatah militants in the West Bank have signed a pledge renouncing attacks against Israel in return for an Israeli promise to stop pursuing them, a Palestinian security official said yesterday.

The deal would grant amnesty to 178 Fatah gunmen who will join the official Palestinian security forces, and Israel will remove them from its lists of wanted militants, the official said. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to divulge details of the agreement.

An official in Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's office confirmed the deal would extend to wanted militants who openly renounce terrorism, and was part of a series of measures to bolster Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

The moderate president set up a Fatah-led government in the West Bank after his rivals from the

Islamic group Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in mid-June. Israel and the international community back Abbas in his struggle against Hamas.

Olmert will meet Abbas on Monday, Olmert's office said, in the first meeting between the two leaders since a June 25 summit that followed the Hamas victory in Gaza. At the meeting, Olmert is expected to present a list of 250 Fatah prisoners Israel will release.

And in another gesture of support, Israel agreed to Abbas' request to allow Nayef Hawatmeh, an exiled Palestinian militant leader, to enter the West Bank this week for a meeting of a top Palestine Liberation Organisation policy-making body, a step that Abbas hopes will provide him added legitimacy among Palestinians.

Hawatmeh heads the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a small and nearly forgotten PLO faction best known

for commandeering a school in the northern Israeli town of Maalot in 1974. The attack left 24 Israelis dead, most of them children, and helped shape the attitudes of a generation of Israelis about the Palestinian leadership.

The amnesty document began circulating Saturday among members of Fatah-allied militia groups dedicated to fighting Israel.

The Palestinian official said an "overwhelming majority" of the militants have already signed. The Palestinians asked that another 200 militants be included in the amnesty, he said.

An Arabic text of the document obtained by The Associated Press reads in part: "The Israeli security and judicial authorities will refrain from arresting or pursuing me after I sign this document. I must be committed to the decisions of the Palestinian Authority and its security apparatus ... and refrain from carrying out any military or security activities against the Israelis."

Kamel Ghanam, a Fatah militia leader in Ramallah, said all 40 of the militia's men in the city have signed the pledge.

"We feel that we have a new political atmosphere. We are optimistic," Ghanam said.

In Bethlehem, Amjad Khalawi, a 35-year-old Fatah gunman, signed the document and came out of hiding after six years. Khalawi said he planned to get his hair cut for the first time since going underground to evade the Israelis, and would become a member of the Palestinian Preventive Security organization.

"I am happy for this end," he said.

In other moves aimed at helping Abbas, Israel has begun transferring Palestinian tax revenues that were frozen after Hamas won a Palestinian election in 2006, drawing an international boycott. The money has allowed Abbas' government to resume paying salaries to civil servants.

Iran hopes to avoid more UN sanctions

AP, Tehran

Tehran will remain steady in pursuing its disputed nuclear program and hopes the UN Security Council won't approve further sanctions, Iran's foreign ministry said yesterday.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini dismissed earlier reports that Iran had slowed down the pace of its uranium enrichment programme.

"Nuclear activities of Iran continue in a defined and clear framework," Hosseini said at his weekly news conference.

Iran contends its nuclear programme is purely peaceful, but the United States and its allies suspect enriched uranium could be used to make atomic bombs.

The UN Security Council already has imposed two sets of sanctions on Iran since December over the Islamic republic's refusal to halt enrichment. A third resolution is being pushed by the United States and its allies on the council, and Hosseini acknowledged Sunday that Iran was bracing for this.

## Iraq capable of handling security without US: PM

AP, Baghdad

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki shrugged off US doubts of his government's military and political progress on Saturday, saying Iraqi forces are capable and American troops can leave "any time they want."

One of his top aides, meanwhile, accused the United States of embarrassing the Iraqi government by violating human rights and treating his country like an "experiment in a US lab."

Al-Maliki sought to display confidence at a time when pressure is mounting in Congress for a speedy withdrawal of US forces. On Thursday, the House passed a measure calling for the US to withdraw its troops by spring, hours after the White House reported mixed progress by the Iraqi government toward meeting 18 benchmarks.

During a press conference, al-Maliki shrugged off the progress report, saying that difficulty in enacting the reforms was "natural" given Iraq's turmoil.

"We are not talking about a government in a stable political environment but one in the shadow of huge challenges," al-Maliki said.

"So when we talk about the presence of some negative points in the political process, that's fairly natural."

Al-Maliki said his government needs "time and effort" to enact the political reforms that Washington seeks "particularly since the political process is facing security, economic and services pressures, as well as regional and international interference."

He also criticised US overtures to Sunni groups in Anbar and Diyala provinces, encouraging former insurgents to join the fight against al-Qaeda in Iraq. "These are gangs of killers," he said.

In addition, he said that al-Maliki has problems with the top US commander, Gen David Petraeus, who he said works along a "purely American vision."

"There are disagreements that the strategy that Petraeus is following might succeed in confronting al-Qaeda in the early period but it will leave Iraq an armed nation, an armed society and militias," al-Suneid said.

Al-Suneid's comments were a rare show of frustration toward the Americans from within al-Maliki's inner circle as the prime minister struggles to overcome deep divisions between Shia, Sunni and Kurdish members of his coalition and enact the US-drawn list of benchmarks.

## Libyan families strike \$400m compensation deal in AIDS case

AP, Tripoli

Families of Libyan children infected with AIDS have accepted compensation totalling 400 million dollars, a Libyan foundation confirmed on Sunday, which could lead to a death sentence on six foreign medics being lifted.

Libya's top legal body is expected to examine the deal on Monday, and could rule that the five Bulgarian nurses and Palestinian doctor on death row for infecting the children may serve prison time rather than face execution.

"The families have accepted compensation in the order of a million dollars for each victim," said Salah Abdessalem, director of the charitable Kadhafi Foundation run by Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's son Seif-al-Islam.

The medics have been on death row since 2004 after being convicted of deliberately infecting 438 children with HIV-tainted blood. Fifty-six have since died.

The death sentence was confirmed by the supreme court on Wednesday, eight years after the six were first detained.

Libya's Supreme Judicial Council, due to meet on Monday,

can modify the supreme court verdict or even cancel it.

But Idriss Lagha, the spokesman for the families, insisted on Sunday: "An agreement will not be signed until the money has been paid to the families."

He said the number of victims had increased to almost 460 because a number of mothers had been infected by their children. Among them are eight Palestinians, two Egyptians, two Syrians, two Sudanese and a Moroccan, he said.

Libyan Foreign Minister Abdel Rahman Shalgham said on Wednesday the compensation would come from "certain European countries and charitable organisations, and from the Libyan state."

A special fund for the AIDS victims was set up by Libya and Bulgaria in 2005 under the aegis of the EU.



PHOTO: AFP  
Chinese villagers make their way to higher grounds as they wade through a flooded road in Funan, central China's Anhui province Saturday. China issued emergency flood warnings for central and eastern parts of the nation after torrential downpours led to the deaths of at least 127 people.

## Russia's treaty freeze puts pressure on Europe

AFP, Moscow

Russia's decision to withdraw from a key European arms treaty ratchets up pressure on the European Union as an assertive Moscow tests Brussels' resolve, analysts said.

Russia announced Saturday that it would suspend adherence to the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) arms control treaty, a key agreement that limits the deployment of forces in central and eastern Europe.

But while US moves to install anti-missile bases in the region were seen as a key cause of the Kremlin's decision, it is Europe that is likely to suffer most from the fallout, analysts said.

"The CFE treaty is much more important to the European countries than the United States," said Pavel Felgenhauer, an independent defence analyst.

Russia "has other problems with Europe and here we have another factor reducing confidence and deteriorating relations," he said.

While actual troop deployments are unlikely to change much, the biggest practical effect of Russia's decision will be an end to mutual inspections and confidence-

building measures governed by the treaty, Felgenhauer predicted.

"Confidence will worsen especially with the European countries," he said.

The hope in Moscow is that the uncertainty will weaken European resolve over a number of issues, analysts said.

"It will push Europe into a more active position on missile defence," Interfax news agency cited Ivan Safranchuk of the International Centre on Defence Information as saying.

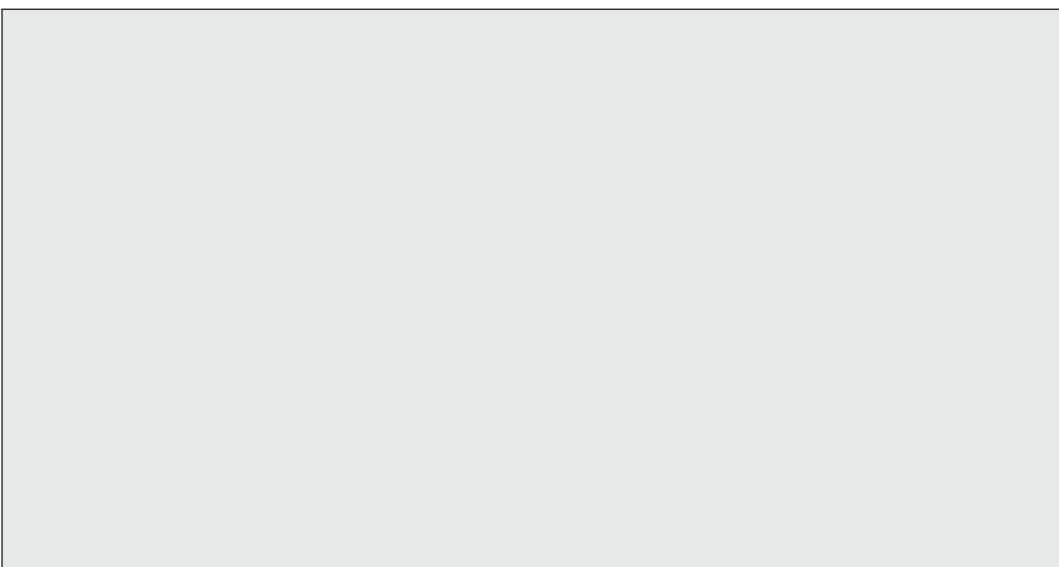
Europe has largely backed US plans for an anti-missile radar station in the Czech Republic and interceptor rockets in Poland, plans which Russia says threaten to upset the balance of power on the continent.

Others were doubtful attempts to pressure the EU would bear fruit.

"Europe will be extremely uneasy over this and Russia is hoping that this nervousness will lead to a softening of its position," said Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the Moscow-based journal Russia in Global Affairs.

"But I think these calculations are wrong and that a frightened Europe will throw in its lot with the United States."

Black smoke rises from the besieged Palestinian Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli in northern Lebanon Saturday. Lebanese troops close in on positions of die-hard Islamists holed up in a besieged Palestinian refugee camp after two days of heavy fighting that killed 11 soldiers.



## Frenchman stages chopper escape from jail

AFP, Marseille

A convicted killer who had already made one helicopter-assisted prison break and organised another, escaped by helicopter from a French prison Saturday for a second time.

Pascal Payet, 43, broke out of Grasse prison, southeast France, after a helicopter hijacked by four masked men landed on the roof of one of the prison buildings, said a source close to the investigation.

The helicopter, which had been hijacked earlier in the evening at the Cannes-Mandelieu airport, landed some time later at Brignoles, 38km northeast of Toulon, on the Mediterranean coast.