

Israel orders army to draw plan to counter Gaza rockets

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert ordered the army on Wednesday to draw up plans to curb rocket fire from Gaza, but held back from endorsing water and power cuts on its beleaguered population.

"The prime minister instructed the army and the security establishment to prepare plans in order to counter the rocket fire from Gaza," an official told AFP following a lengthy meeting of the powerful security cabinet.

Pressure on Olmert to respond to the incessant rocket fire against southern Israel has mounted in recent days after a projectile struck outside a day-care centre in the hard-hit town of Sderot a day after

the start of the school year, causing no casualties but sparking wide-spread panic.

"The cabinet decided to continue the intensive military operations against those involved in terror and rocket launching, and no one responsible and involved in terror is immune," Olmert's office said.

For the time being, however, the cabinet decided not to adopt punitive measures against the impoverished population of Gaza, such as cutting water, electricity or fuel supplies to the territory where the Islamist Hamas movement seized power nearly three months ago, the official said.

The security establishment was instructed to draw a plan "to hamper the supply of services provided by

Israel to the Gaza Strip in reaction to ongoing vile and indiscriminate attacks against Israeli civilian population," the statement said.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak was quoted as telling ministers that until Israel has completed development of a sophisticated rocket interception system, "the only solution is deep ground operations in Gaza."

He reiterated the strategy in a speech to directors of Israel's main arms manufacturing firms.

"The time may be approaching where it will necessary to launch a major ground operation to stop the rocket fire," a statement quoted him as saying.



A Palestinian youth runs for cover after throwing a stone towards Israeli military vehicles during a military incursion into the Israeli occupied northern West Bank city of Jenin as they looked for Palestinians on their wanted list yesterday.

Syria fires on Israeli jets for violating airspace

AFP, Damascus

Syria said it opened fire on Israeli warplanes, which had violated Syrian airspace at dawn yesterday, heightening tensions between the two foes.

"Enemy Israeli planes penetrated Syrian air space from the Mediterranean Sea heading towards the northeast, breaking the sound barrier," an army spokesman told the official SANA news agency.

"Our air defences repulsed them and forced them to leave...after the Israeli planes dropped ammunition, without causing human or material loss," he said.

"The Syrian Arab Republic warns the government of the Israeli enemy against this aggressive action and reserves the right to respond in any way it deems appropriate."

There was no immediate response from Israel, which in June 2006 angered Damascus when its warplanes flew over President Bashar al-Assad's palace in northern Syria while he was inside.

Over the past few months, Israeli and Syrian leaders have both said their countries do not want a war, but were preparing for any possibility while each side has accused the other of arming for a conflict.



Iraqis stand by a house and car destroyed in an overnight US air strike in the Al-Washash neighbourhood of Mansour district in west Baghdad yesterday. US strikes on a Baghdad neighbourhood before dawn killed 14 civilians while they were sleeping and destroyed several houses, angry residents and Iraqi officials said.

Apec nations wrestle with climate change

AP, Sydney

Pacific Rim nations agreed yesterday that climate change was of "vital interest," but officials squabbled over whether their leaders should include energy efficiency targets in a statement at their annual summit.

As officials worked for a third day to craft a statement about climate change that would be acceptable to all 21 leaders at their weekend summit, familiar battle lines resurfaced over the issue of greenhouse gas emission targets.

The US and Australia want leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation group to embrace a new approach to climate change that would require China one of the world's biggest polluters and other developing countries to agree to reduction targets on greenhouse gases.

But developing Asian countries were opposing a US-backed Australian plan for the Apec leaders to include targets in their statement.

Those countries maintain that Apec, a consensus-based, trade-oriented group, is no place to discuss the details of a new approach to tackling global warming.

The specifics of Australia's plan were sketchy, but officials said they involved loosely defined aims to reduce "energy intensity" the amount of energy needed to produce one unit of gross domestic product rather than greenhouse gas emissions.



Opera great Pavarotti dead

AFP, Rome

Operatic legend Luciano Pavarotti, whose glorious tenor voice, showmanship and crossover celebrity turned him into a global superstar, died yesterday at his home in northern Italy at the age of 71.

Hailed by many as the greatest tenor of his generation, Pavarotti passed away during the night at his villa near the city of Modena after a long battle with pancreatic cancer.

"His condition progressively worsened up to this morning," said Antonio Frassoldati, one of the star's team of doctors. "He was always totally conscious of the situation, he always sought to fight the disease ... and he was very calm."

'US more eager than Europe for military strikes on Iran'

AFP, Washington

Far more Americans than Europeans believe that military force could prove necessary against Iran if diplomacy fails to halt the Islamic state's nuclear drive, a major opinion poll said Thursday.

The annual survey by the German Marshall Fund of the United States also suggested that regardless of who takes over the White House next year, no dramatic breakthrough is likely after recent years of transatlantic mistrust.

Sort out future or see US leaving Iraq

Says American senator

AFP, Ramadi

US Senator Joseph Biden told a gathering of Iraqi tribal leaders and officials on Thursday to reconcile their differences and sort out their future as US troops would not stick around forever to shed their blood in war-ravaged Iraq.

Biden, chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a Democratic contender for 2008 White House, told the meeting in Anbar province: "Unity of Iraq is an Iraqi problem. America wants you to succeed and we will do whatever we can to enable you to succeed."

Speaking at a one-day forum in Ramadi, capital of the province, just days after US President George W. Bush had stopped in the region to endorse peace initiatives, Biden said Iraq's future was in their hands.

"Only you can determine the future. It's encouraging to see central government assisting you in Anbar. In America we are waiting to see how extensive that cooperation will be," Biden said.

"If it is (extensive) you can count on America to stay, if it is not, we can say goodbye now."

"There are difficulties but if you continue (to make progress) we will also send you our sons and daughters to shed their blood with you, for you. But if you decide that you cannot live together let us know. My son, who is a captain in the army, can stay home."