

Israel orders army to step up Gaza strikes

AFP, Jerusalem

Defence Minister Ehud Barak said yesterday he has authorised the army to target militant structures across the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip as Israel mulls a broad military incursion into the territory.

"The defence minister has recently authorised the army to expand its operations in response to the Hamas fire to include targeting Hamas military positions," Barak's office quoted him as telling the weekly cabinet meeting.

Israel has in recent months carried out strikes against rocket-launching cells and infrastructure, but has refrained from targeting Hamas military headquarters since the Islamist movement seized control over Gaza last June, a senior security source told AFP.

The army has now been given the green light to bomb militant structures and positions all over

the impoverished Palestinian territory in response to nearly daily rocket fire into southern Israel, he added.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government has been debating whether to launch a broad military operation in Gaza, with Barak repeatedly warning that "every day brings us closer to an operation."

Eighteen Palestinians have been killed in a series of Israeli air and ground operations across Gaza over the past week, marking a sharp escalation in the violence there.

Meanwhile, Israel on Sunday allowed more than 250 Palestinians from the Hamas-run Gaza Strip to cross into Egypt via Israeli territory for the first time in months, witnesses and officials said.

Some 254 Palestinians crossed the Erez checkpoint between northern Gaza and Israel and were then taken by bus to the El-Oja (Nizana) crossing between Egypt

and Israel, Palestinian officials responsible for coordination with Israel said.

Most of the Palestinians either study or work abroad, they said, adding that it was the first time in several months that Israel had allowed people to cross into Egypt.

No immediate comment was available from the Israelis.

Since Hamas, which is pledged to the Jewish state's destruction, violently seized control of Gaza in mid-June Israel has imposed ever-tighter restrictions on the movement of goods and people out of the impoverished territory.

The Rafah terminal with Egypt - Gaza's only border crossing that bypasses Israel - has been closed since the Hamas takeover, and the only way for people to move between Gaza and Egypt has been when Israel has allowed people to be taken by bus between Erez and El-Oja.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (2R) and his wife Ludmila (R) speak with voters while entering a Moscow polling station yesterday to cast their votes in Russia's parliamentary elections. Several people at the polling station applauded Putin.

Russian vote seen as referendum on Putin

AP, Moscow

Russians voted Sunday in a parliamentary election where the only question was whether President Vladimir Putin's party would win a strong majority of seats or a crushing share.

The election follows months of increasingly acidic rhetoric aimed against the West and efforts, by law and by truncheon, to stifle opponents.

A huge win for Putin's United Russia party could pave the way for him to stay at the country's helm once his presidential term expires in the spring. The party casts the election as essentially a referendum on Putin's nearly eight years in office. Many of its campaign banners that festoon the capital read "Moscow is voting for Putin."

"He's a good man. Any woman would love to see him in her house," said Polina Amanyeva, 58, at a Moscow polling station where she said she voted for United Russia.

Putin is constitutionally prohib-

ited from running for a third consecutive term as president in March. But he clearly wants to keep his hand on Russia's levers of power, and has raised the prospect of becoming prime minister, many supporters have suggested his becoming a "national leader," though what duties and powers that would entail are unclear.

He has said that a strong showing for the party Sunday would give him the moral right to ensure that politicians in power continue his policies. Recent opinion polls suggest the party could win up to 80 percent of seats.

"I'm sure that voters have determined their preferences and now only have to come and vote for the party whose platform seems convincing, vote for those people in whom you trust," Putin told reporters after casting his ballot at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The dominance of United Russia provoked a fatalistic attitude in some voters.

"I think the result was pretty much planned in advance. I don't

know who I'll vote for; I'll decide when I get to the booth," said Ivan Kudrashov as he entered Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral for Sunday Mass.

'Major powers to seek sanctions against Iran'

AFP, Paris

The six powers dealing with Iran's contested nuclear programme will start work on a resolution calling for new sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council, a French diplomatic source said Saturday after a meeting here.

"The six have agreed to examine the elements of a new resolution on sanctions" against Iran, said the diplomat, who asked to remain anonymous.

"A compromise text will be worked out and should circulate between the capital cities concerned next week."

The text would be sent to the UN Security Council in New York if the countries manage to agree on the details, the source added.

Tehran is already under two sets of UN sanctions, as well as unilateral US sanctions, for refusing to suspend uranium enrichment.

Representatives of the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany met in Paris on Saturday to discuss Iran's contested nuclear programme after last-ditch talks failed to produce a breakthrough.

The European Union's foreign policy chief Javier Solana said he was "disappointed" after the talks in London on Friday with Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, hours before a deadline for him to report back to world powers on the issue.

"I have to admit that after five hours of meetings I expected more, and therefore I am disappointed,"

Solana told reporters.

The talks were seen as a last chance for Tehran before a possible new round of sanctions, though hopes of a breakthrough had been slim.

Jalili said Saturday that Iran was not to blame for the disappointment expressed by Solana.

"The fact is that we defended the Iranian nation's rights and stressed fulfilling our duties and that the Iranian nation will not accept anything that goes beyond the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," he said.

"If some people have become disappointed because they cannot deprive Iran of its natural rights then this is another matter," Jalili told reporters after arriving back in Tehran.

Western nations suspect Iran is using its nuclear programme to covertly develop a nuclear bomb. Despite Iranian denials, the United States and its allies are pressing for stronger UN sanctions against Tehran, a move resisted by China and Russia.

The French diplomat said the new resolution would be a compromise between Western nations and China and Russia. A resolution could be agreed upon in the short-term, perhaps in the coming weeks, the source said.

Tehran had promised to bring "new ideas" to the table for the London talks but Solana's spokeswoman Cristina Gallach said Friday: "There was not enough new in order not to be disappointed."



Pakistani Christians belonging to the World Minorities Alliance hold pictures of religious and political leaders during a march in Islamabad yesterday. Former federal minister J Salik has urged the Commonwealth to suspend President General Musharraf and not Pakistan because his discriminatory policy will be highly detrimental to minorities in the coming elections.

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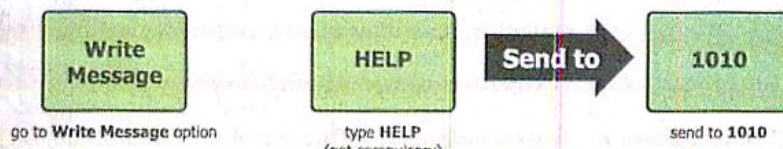
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Chavez renews attacks on US ahead of polls

AFP, Caracas

President Hugo Chavez again threatened Saturday to halt oil exports if he sees US meddling in, or after, a hotly contested weekend referendum that could let him lead Venezuela for the rest of his life.

"If it starts a process of destabilisation, incites a civil war, not only will the United States not get any of the 3.2 million barrels (produced per day in Venezuela according to official figures) but nothing will go onto the market, not a drop," Chavez warned, explaining he would stop all oil exports.

"There will be no oil for anyone, and the price per barrel will go up to 200 dollars," he said in an hours-long encounter with reporters.

His comments reaffirmed a threat he made late Friday, in a final rally before Sunday's plebiscite. They also appeared to break election rules barring any campaigning the day before polling.

In the capital, some residents cheered Chavez's strong line.

Gaza petrol stations shut for lack of fuel

AFP, Gaza City

Petrol stations shut across the Gaza Strip on Sunday as Israel continued to provide only restricted quantities of fuel to the Hamas-run territory, industry officials and witnesses said.

"Sorry, no fuel, no benzene, no petrol," read a typical sign posted at a Gaza City petrol station.

"All stations in Gaza have been shut down because there is no fuel of any kind," Mahmud al-Khuzdnar, a deputy chief of a Gaza association for petrol stations, told AFP.

Israel, which provides Gaza with all its fuel, has delivered only restricted supplies since October 28 and Khuzdnar said that the association was not releasing for sale the quantities received on Sunday in protest of the cuts.

Khuzdnar said that 60,000 litres of diesel came through via Israel on Sunday instead of the 350,000 litres that are needed on a daily basis.

"We are not putting the 60,000 litres on sale to protest at the cutbacks," Khuzdnar said, adding that the fuel would go into storage.

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