

# Israel rules out Hamas truce talks amid 'war'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and Hamas yesterday both ruled out any truce talks amid what Prime Minister Ehud Olmert described as a "real war" between the army and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

"There is no other way to describe what's happening there other than real war between the army and the terror groups," Olmert said at the weekly Israeli cabinet meeting.

"This war will continue, all the while taking precautions to avoid a humanitarian crisis that could hurt civilians who are not involved at all in the territory."

Olmert said Israel would not

hold truce talks with Hamas, a group that violently seized control of Gaza in June and does not recognise Israel's right to exist.

"The state of Israel has no interest in holding negotiations with groups that do not recognise the Quartet's basic conditions," Olmert said, referring to the international Quartet for Middle East peace.

The Quartet has demanded that Hamas renounce violence, recognise Israel and agree to past peace deals, steps which the Islamist movement has refused to take.

Hamas also said it would not hold any ceasefire talks unless Israel stopped its military operations, which have killed at least 20 militants over the past week in

Gaza as armed groups continued to fire rockets and mortars into Israel.

"It's too early to talk about the truce as long as the aggression continues against the Palestinian people... the Palestinian people have a right to continue resistance," said Hamas spokesman Ismail Radwan.

Since it seized power in Gaza, routing forces loyal to moderate Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, Hamas has repeatedly said that it could consider a truce if Israel first stops its operations against militants in Gaza.

On Saturday Ahmed Youssef, a political adviser to the premier in the dismissed Hamas-led cabinet

of Ismail Haniya, again said as much in an interview with the Palestinian Maan news agency.

"We are ready to reach a truce with Israel... on the condition that the siege around Gaza is lifted and border crossings are open," he said, adding that Israel must also stop "assassinations" and arresting militants.

His statements came several days after Israel killed the head of the armed wing of the radical Islamic Jihad group, the most senior Palestinian militant killed in months.

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak said on Sunday that any talk of a truce from the Palestinian side was because of the effectiveness of Israeli strikes in the territory.

## Five dead in US snow storm

AFP, Washington

A snow storm packing strong winds caused flight delays and closed highways across the central United States, leaving at least five dead in road accidents, US media reported on Sunday.

The National Weather Service warned travel conditions had deteriorated at the weekend in Midwestern states stretching from northern Missouri to Michigan due to snow and high wind.

"A combination of heavy snow, strong winds and bitter windchills will make any form of travel dangerous if not impossible in some areas," the service said early Sunday in a warning for parts of Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota.

The harsh weather posed a potential hazard for travellers ahead of the Christmas holiday Tuesday and for presidential candidates campaigning in the state of Iowa, which on January 3 holds the first contest for each party's nomination race.



PHOTO AFP

Supporters of Thailand's democrat party celebrate election result on one of their party seat at the party's headquarters in Bangkok yesterday. Counting of the votes has started throughout Thailand at the end of the voting while unofficial results are coming up from different constituencies.

## 3 Western leaders visit Kabul

AP, Kabul

Leaders of France, Australia and Italy travelled to Afghanistan over the weekend to meet with President Hamid Karzai and visit troops stationed in the conflict-ridden country.

Nicolas Sarkozy, the first French president to visit Afghanistan, signalled that French troops would not pull out of the country anytime soon. He told Karzai that France has a long-term political and military interest in Afghanistan, Karzai's office said in a statement.

"We did not want to give the signal of a withdrawal, which

## Russian rocket delivers Christmas presents to space station

AFP, Moscow

It would have been a detestable signal at a time when we see the ravages that terrorism can do to the world," Sarkozy said on France-Info radio.

France announced its decision a year ago to withdraw 200 elite Special Forces, raising questions about whether the pullout would precede a larger withdrawal.

French television quoted the president as suggesting that more combat instructors could be sent to Afghanistan, creating a "qualitative" but not a "quantitative" increase. There are currently some 1,300 French troops in Afghanistan.

The Progress M-62 carried by a Soyuz rocket took off at 0712 GMT, a spokesman for ground control outside Moscow told AFP.

## Saudis net 28 Qaeda men over attack plot

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia announced yesterday the arrest of 28 al-Qaeda linked suspects for planning attacks in the oil-rich kingdom, following an alleged plot to commit a "terrorist act" during the annual Muslim pilgrimage, or Hajj.

"Since December 14, 28 members of the deviant group (the term used by the Saudi authorities for al-Qaeda) have been arrested, including one foreign resident and the rest Saudi nationals," an interior ministry official said in a statement carried by the official SPA news agency.

The statement said the suspects were "linked to elements abroad and were planning criminal acts in the kingdom." Saudi authorities, who have been battling a wave of deadly violence waged by Islamists since 2003, use the term criminal acts to refer to al-Qaeda attacks.

It said the arrests had not been announced earlier to avoid creating panic among the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to Islam's holiest sites in and around Makkah in western Saudi Arabia.

## Blair converts to Catholicism

AFP, London

Former British prime minister Tony Blair has become a Roman Catholic, church officials said Saturday, ending widespread speculation that he would switch to the faith of his wife and four children.

But as Catholic leaders welcomed Blair into the fold, immediate questions were raised about whether the 54-year-old had now renounced his liberal views on contentious issues like abortion, gay rights and stem-cell research.

A spokesman for the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, said Blair had been "received into full communion with the Catholic Church" at a private mass on Friday night.

## Tough Thai politician Thaksin's proxy

AFP, Bangkok

Fiercely right-wing Samak Sundaravej openly campaigned as a proxy for deposed Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra, and appears to have vindicated him at the ballot box more than a year after his ouster.

After the military toppled Thaksin's government in a bloodless coup, Samak rallied Thaksin's allies under the banner of the People Power Party, which exit polls showed had won the most seats in the 480-member parliament.

He has served in previous military governments, but railed against the current junta, which he accused of unjustly persecuting Thaksin.

"They staged a coup without reason -- because of hatred and envy," he told AFP in an interview before the election.



PHOTO AFP

Afghan President Hamid Karzai (L) welcomes his French counterpart Nicolas Sarkozy (C) upon his arrival in Kabul on Saturday to visit French troops. The international community cannot afford to lose the "war against terrorism" in Afghanistan, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said on a quick visit to the insurgency-hit country.

## Turkey bombs Kurd rebel bases in Iraq

AP, Istanbul

The bombing lasted nearly a half-hour on Saturday afternoon, and was followed by shelling from inside Turkish borders, the military said in a statement posted on its Web site. It did not say how deep into Iraqi territory the warplanes penetrated, or which areas were shelled.

Security forces in northern Iraq said the bombs fell about 75 miles northwest of Dahuk. There were no casualties reported, said Jaber Yawar, a spokesman for Kurdish Peshmerga security forces in northern Iraq.

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The situation on the ground, I think, makes it likely that General (David) Petraeus will be able to decide to bring out the first five teams by July," Gates told an end of year press conference.

"The first of those is coming out this month. My hope has been that the circumstances on the ground will continue to improve," he added.

The challenge for next year, Gates said, would be "to sustain the gains we have achieved."

"Improved security is beginning to achieve momentum that, if maintained, may lead to sustained stability," it said.

There are currently about 160,000 US troops in Iraq fighting a fierce insurgency launched in the wake of the March 2003 US-led invasion.

About 30,000 extra troops were sent in during the year in a bid to quell the violence as part of a controversial "surge" strategy laid out by President George W. Bush and the US commander in Iraq, General Petraeus.

According to a Pentagon report released on Tuesday, the surge has been working, with US forces achieving "significant security progress" in Iraq over the past three months with the number of attacks down 62 percent.

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