

Israel vows to keep up deadly Gaza assault

UNSC, EU condemn violence

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel vowed yesterday to keep up its assault on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, which has killed nearly 70 Palestinians and has threatened to entomb the recently-revived Middle East peace process. "It must be clear that Israel has no intention to stop for one moment the fight against terror organisations," Olmert said at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting, adding it would continue to hit gunmen.

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas suspended peace talks with Israel to protest the assault, after senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said the negotiations had been "buried" by the Israeli blitz.

"The president decided to suspend the negotiations as a protest to the Israeli aggression," a member of Abbas's office said on condition of anonymity.

The two sides revived their peace talks to great fanfare at a US conference in late November, but the negotiations have made little headway since.

Five more Palestinians, includ-

ing one civilian, were killed early on Sunday amid a continuing Israeli air and ground blitz aimed at halting militants from firing rockets from Gaza, medics said.

Olmert rejected criticism that in its blitz, which has killed 66 people including children and other civilians since early Saturday, Israel was using excessive force in the densely-packed territory.

"We must remember that Israel is protecting its citizens in the south of the country and that with all due respect, nothing will prevent us from this duty," he said. "No-one has the moral right to preach to Israel for exercising its right to self-defence."

In the northern town of Jabalya, where Israeli ground troops operated for a second day in a row, residents covered indoors for fear of being caught in the crossfire between the soldiers and militants.

In Gaza City, schools, banks and many shops were shuttered as residents observed a general strike called in protest of the Israeli blitz -- the bloodiest days in Gaza in years.

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud

Barak said Israel would continue to strike militant positions throughout Gaza despite warnings that the violence, which has also left two Israeli soldiers dead, was endangering peace negotiations revived just three months ago after a seven-year freeze.

"The land and air operations will go on, we will continue to attack installations, stocks of weapons, and Hamas's infrastructure," Barak told public radio.

The UN Security Council, meeting at Abbas's request, condemned the violence and urged both sides to respect their obligations under international law.

Members "underscore the need for all parties to immediately cease all acts of violence," read a statement following five hours of hard-nosed talks, which also said the violence should not derail the peace talks.

Earlier UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon slammed "the disproportionate and excessive use of force that has killed and injured so many civilians, including children."

He also condemned Palestinian rocket attacks, criticism that

earned the rebuke of several Arab diplomats who objected to his characterisation of these as "acts of terrorism."

European Union president Slovenia criticised Sunday Israel's "disproportionate use of force" against the Palestinian population in Gaza, urging restraint by all parties in the escalating violence.

In a statement, the presidency condemned "the recent disproportionate use of force by the Israeli Defense Forces against (the) Palestinian population in Gaza and urges Israel to exercise maximum restraint and refrain from all activities that endanger civilians."

At least 299 people have been killed in Israeli-Palestinian violence, most of them Gaza militants, since the relaunch of the talks, according to an AFP tally.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was due to arrive in the region this week on her latest trip to try and nudge along the talks that Washington had hoped would lead the two sides to ink a peace deal before US President George W. Bush leaves office in January 2009.



An Israeli border policeman fires rubber-bullets at Palestinian stone throwers during a protest against Israel's military assault on the Gaza Strip yesterday in the West Bank town of Hebron. Israel vowed Sunday to keep up its assault on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip which has killed nearly 70 Palestinians and has threatened to entomb the recently-revived Middle East peace process.

Ahmadinejad makes landmark Iraq visit

AP, Baghdad

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrived Sunday in Baghdad for the first-ever visit by an Iranian president to Iraq, walking a red carpet past Iraqi troops to meet the president of a once-bitter enemy nation that's now under growing Iranian influence.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani greeted Ahmadinejad at his car and the two kissed four times on the cheeks in the traditional fashion. A military honor guard saluted the two and a band played the two countries' national anthems as they walked slowly down the red carpet at Talabani's headquarters.

The visit gives Ahmadinejad a chance to highlight the relationship his nation has with post-Saddam Hussein Iraq while also serving as an act of defiance toward the US, which accuses Iran of training and giving weapons to

Shia extremists in Iraq.

The US has said it will have no involvement in Ahmadinejad's visit. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari told The Associated Press that Ahmadinejad plans to leave Monday morning.

Ahmadinejad is scheduled to meet not only with Talabani but also Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, both of whom have made official visits to Iran since taking office.

Talabani's headquarters are located right across the Tigris River from the mammoth new US Embassy in the fortified Green Zone, an area that has been repeatedly hit by mortar attacks, with the US blaming Shia militants.

Ahmadinejad arrived in Iraq a day after Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, came to Baghdad on an unannounced visit with commanders and Iraqi officials.

Iran military strike 'unlikely to succeed: British MPs

UNSC set to adopt Iran sanctions today

AFP, London/United Nations

A military strike against Iran would be unlikely to succeed and would only inflame tensions in the Middle East, an influential group of British MPs warned yesterday.

The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee also recommended that British ministers urge their American counterparts to begin direct negotiations with Iran and consider offering it a security guarantee if it provides "credible" and "verifiable" assurances it will not manufacture nuclear weapons.

"A military strike would be unlikely to succeed and could provoke an extremely violent backlash across the region," the committee said in its "Global Security: Iran" report.

"We recommend that the government urges Washington to consider offering a credible security guarantee to Iran if the Iranian government in turn will offer an equally credible and verifiable guarantee that it will not enter into a nuclear weapons programme and improves its cooperation with the international community in other areas."

The committee also called for ministers to push for Washington to "engage directly with Iran on its nuclear programme, as the absence of such engagement has deprived the international community of a significant diplomatic tool."

Iran is at loggerheads with the West over its nuclear programme -- the United States and the European Union in particular believe the Islamic Republic is trying to manufacture nuclear weapons, a charge Tehran vehemently denies, insisting the programme is for peaceful purposes.

The Security Council is set to vote Monday to marginally tighten UN sanctions against Iran over its refusal to freeze sensitive nuclear fuel work.

The 15-member council was scheduled to hold consultations from 10:30 am (1530 GMT) Monday ahead of the vote to adopt a third sanctions resolution which was slightly amended by its Western sponsors late Friday.

The United Nations Security Council has already imposed two sets of sanctions on Iran over the nuclear programme, and is likely to approve a third set Monday.

The sanctions already imposed, according to the Commons commit-

tee, were "not sufficiently robust" to convince Tehran to suspend enrichment, and future sanctions may "inadvertently help President (Mahmoud) Ahmadinejad by providing him with a scapegoat for his economic failings."

Of the nuclear programme itself, the committee's report concluded that "there is nevertheless a strong possibility that it (Iran) could establish a 'breakout' nuclear weapons capability by 2015."

"The consequences of that would be dire, the MPs warned, leading to "other states in the Middle East developing their own nuclear programmes."

"This domino effect would heighten regional tensions and seriously weaken the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It would also seriously undermine any prospect of moves to a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East."

IAEA chief Mohammed ElBaradei found in his report last month that while Tehran had cleared up most of the outstanding questions on its past nuclear activities, it was still refusing to address allegations about its purported work on nuclear weapons.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (L) gestures towards his Iraqi counterpart Jalal Talabani (R) during a joint press conference at his Baghdad residence yesterday. Ahmadinejad began a historic visit to Iraq Sunday -- the first ever by an Iranian president -- hoping to boost ties with Baghdad with which Tehran fought a bitter eight-year war.

Emergency imposed in Armenian capital

AFP, Yerevan

Tanks and troops patrolled the Armenian capital Yerevan yesterday after eight people were killed during violent protests against alleged rigging of a presidential election.

Authorities imposed a state of emergency late Saturday following clashes between riot police and protesters that also left 33 police injured.

A spokeswoman for the foreign ministry said seven civilians and one police officer had been killed. One police officer was in critical condition and 17 had been hospitalised for gunshot wounds, she said.

"The police are calling on all citizens to be careful, to hold back and to obey all the rules of the state of emergency," a police statement read.

Major al-Qaeda figure in Iraq killed, says US

AP, Baghdad

A US military helicopter fired a guided missile to kill a wanted Saudi Arabian al-Qaeda in Iraq leader who was believed responsible for the bombing deaths of five American soldiers, a spokesman said Monday.

US Navy Rear Adm. Gregory Smith said Jar Allah, also known as Abu Yasir al-Saudi, and another Saudi known only as Hamdan, were both killed Wednesday in Mosul. Al-Saudi headed up the al-Qaeda network in southeast Mosul, an insurgent hotbed where US forces wage daily battles against the group.

According to the military, al-Saudi conducted numerous attacks against Iraqi and US forces, including a Jan. 28 bombing that killed the five US soldiers.

In that attack, insurgents blasted a US patrol with a roadside bomb and showered survivors with gunfire from a mosque. The soldiers died in the explosion, the deadliest on American forces since six soldiers perished Jan. 9 in a booby-trapped house north of Baghdad.

21 Tigers, 3 soldiers killed in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

At least 21 Tamil rebels and three Sri Lankan soldiers were killed in weekend clashes in the north and east of the island nation, the army said yesterday.

One soldier was killed Sunday morning by a roadside bomb blast in Vavuniya district bordering a de facto mini state run by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the army said in a statement.

The blast happened in the morning in Vavuniya district bordering a de facto mini state run by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the army said in a statement. "One soldier was killed in the explosion," the statement said. "A search operation in the area commenced immediately after the incident."

In a later statement, the defence ministry said 21 rebels were killed during clashes across the north on

Saturday, putting their own losses at two soldiers dead and six injured on the same day.

There was no immediate comment from the Tamil Tigers over the casualty figures.

The attack came as sporadic clashes continued along the front lines in the north and east of the island state where the military has claimed to have killed a large number of rebels in recent weeks.

According to the Sri Lankan defence ministry, 1,754 rebels have been killed so far this year, which has seen the end of a truce and escalating violence. The military estimates the Tigers' strength at 5,000 combatants.

The ministry says 97 soldiers and police have been killed in 2008.

Casualty figures provided by each sides differ vastly and cannot be independently verified since the government bars journalists and human rights workers from frontline and rebel-held areas.

Day of destiny looms in White House race

AFP, Dallas

The destiny of the searing Democratic White House battle is on the line in two key states tomorrow, with Barack Obama seeking a knockout, and Hillary Clinton desperately reaching for a lifeline.

Bold, brash Texas, and economically distressed Ohio have the chance to deal a decisive blow in the increasingly angry race, in which one hopeful will make history, as the first black, or woman presidential nominee.

Obama, 46, hopes to take his winning streak to 15 straight nominating contests, on a day, which also includes voting in Rhode Island and Vermont.

Hillary Clinton, 60, needs to come out of Tuesday with a reason to go on, as she currently trails Obama in nominating delegates, fundraising, the popular vote and momentum, in the race to battle likely Republican nominee John

McCain.

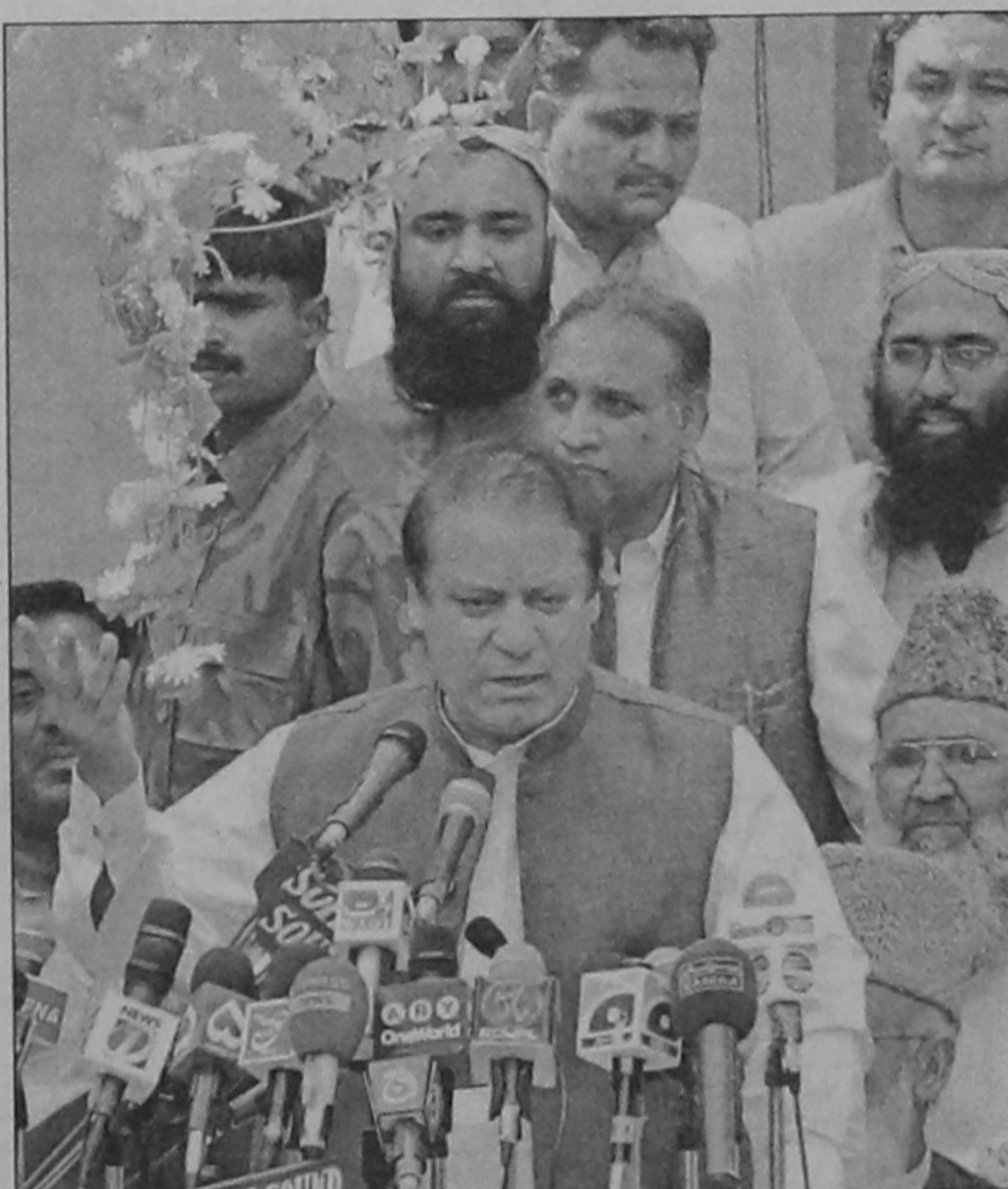
Senator McCain, the Vietnam war hero who has pulled off a stunning comeback after his campaign was left for dead last year, hopes to finally nail down the Republican nomination, by dispatching pesky challenger Mike Huckabee.

He is tipped to pick up the remaining support he needs to cross the threshold of 1,191 delegates to the party convention in September.

Should Clinton lose both Ohio and Texas, she would face intense pressure to fold her White House campaign for the good of the party.

"We have to win on Tuesday, that's not a surprise to any of you and we are going to win on Tuesday," the former first lady said in Texas on Saturday.

But the campaign may be regretting the categorical marker laid down by former president Bill Clinton last month.



Former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif (C) addresses a seminar in Lahore yesterday. The Pakistani Election Commission has officially notified results of the February 18 polls, which may increase pressure on embattled President Pervez Musharraf to convene a new parliament, officials and parties said.

Ties with India will not be hostage to Kashmir: Zardari

THE DAILY TIMES, Islamabad

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari said Saturday that good relations with India would not be held hostage to the Kashmir issue and the two countries would wait for the future generations to resolve the issue in an atmosphere of trust.

"That is a situation we can agree to disagree (on)," he told Karan Thapar in CNN-IBN's programme Devil's Advocate. "We can be patient till everybody grows up further."

Zardari denied that the Kashmir issue could best be resolved while the army is in power in Pakistan.

Asif Zardari said the PPP was "rethinking" its position on Makhdoom Amin Fahim as the prime ministerial candidate and said it would have to choose a person who could take along its coalition partners.

Asked if choosing a candidate was causing a rift within the PPP, Zardari replied, "We haven't really

even come to the position where we have started to select. There are many front-runners." He said the choice of a final candidate was still a "few days away." The PPP was a "federal party" he added, so the candidate could belong to any province.

Sonia Gandhi: Zardari said Sonia Gandhi was "too great" for him to emulate, and his role in a new Pakistani government would be of someone who is with the administration, not above it.

Asked what would be his role in the new government, Zardari said, "Well, I'll take a leaf out of your politics and do something like an inter-political role. Talking to the allied parties, making democracy come alive."

Asked if the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) could become a larger party if defectors from the PML-Quaid joined it, he said, "I think the problems faced by Pakistan today are beyond the number games."

Notice of the Thirteenth Annual General Meeting

Notice is hereby given to all Members of Prime Bank Limited that the **13th Annual General Meeting** of the Company will be held on Sunday, March 30, 2008 at 10.00 a.m. in the Plenary Hall of Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre, Agargaon, Dhaka to transact the following business and adopt necessary resolutions:

AGENDA

1. To receive, consider and adopt the Directors' Report and Audited Financial Statements of the Bank for the year ended December 31, 2007 together with the Auditors' Report thereon.
2. To declare dividend for the year ended December 31, 2007.
3. To elect/re-elect Directors.
4. To appoint Auditors for the term until the next AGM and to fix their remuneration.
5. To transact any other related business with the permission of the Chair.

By order of the Board of Directors
sd/-
Manash Kumar Ghosh
Company Secretary

February 24, 2008

Notes:

- a. March 12, 2008 is scheduled as Record Date. Shareholders whose name will appear in the Register of Members on the Record Date will be eligible to attend the meeting and qualify for dividend.
- b. The Board of Directors has recommended 35% Dividend out of which 10% Cash Dividend and 25% Stock dividend i.e. 1 (One) Bonus Share for every 4 (Four) Ordinary Shares.
- c. A Member eligible to attend the Annual General Meeting is entitled to appoint a proxy to attend and vote on his/her behalf. Form of proxy, duly stamped, must be deposited at the Registered Office of the Company at least 72 hours before the time fixed for the Meeting. Proxy Form will be available at the Registered Office of the Bank.
- d. The existing Joint Auditors M/S Rahman Rahman Huq, Chartered Accountants and M/S S. F. Ahmed & Co., Chartered Accountants have completed 3(three) years in succession as Auditors of the Bank. As such, they are not eligible for re-appointment as per Bangladesh Bank's directives. Shareholders are hereby requested for nomination of Audit Firms enlisted with Bangladesh Bank on or before March 13, 2008 for appointment as External Auditors in the AGM.

Registered Office: Adamjee Court Annex Building-2
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a bank with a difference
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