

## Rice ends Mideast trip as Israel vows to keep up Gaza strikes

### Mideast peace talks to resume only after truce: Abbas

AFP, Ramallah, West Bank, Jerusalem

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrapped her latest Middle East peace bid on Wednesday, urging Israelis and Palestinians to resume talks despite new deadly raids in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile Israel has vowed to keep up Gaza strikes, as the Palestinian president has agreed to resume suspended Middle East peace talks, but only after a truce is reached.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed on Wednesday to keep up military strikes on the Gaza Strip as long as rocket fire from the Hamas-ruled territory continues.

"The Israeli army operations against the Gaza Strip will continue as long as the rocket fire continues," a senior official quoted the premier as telling a meeting of the powerful security cabinet on the situation in Gaza.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and the US secretary have agreed to work on a truce to end Israeli-Palestinian violence, officials said on Wednesday.

During a phone call on Wednesday morning, "president Abbas and secretary of state Condoleezza Rice agreed to work together to install a truce to put an end to the (Israeli) aggression," Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

Rice met Abbas in Ramallah on Tuesday on her latest visit to the region aimed at mending peace talks that were dealt a major blow by Israeli strikes on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip that have killed more than 125 people in a week.

She dined with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Tuesday and on Wednesday was holding

talks with senior Palestinian and Israeli leaders at the tail-end of her visit.

Secretary of State Rice said she still believed it was possible to achieve President George W. Bush's goal of resolving the decades-old conflict and inking a historic peace deal by the end of his term in less than a year.

Bush, too, said he was still "optimistic" about the prospects for the

peace talks, relaunched to great fanfare at a US conference in November after a seven-year freeze but mostly static since.

The US president urged the two sides to "step up" efforts to end the violence and reach a deal.

"This is a process that, you know, always has two steps forward and one step back. We've just got to make sure that it's only one step back," Bush declared in

Washington.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said on Wednesday that he will resume suspended Middle East peace talks only after a truce puts an end to Israeli-Palestinian violence.

"The negotiations must resume, but only after a truce takes effect," Abbas told reporters after talks with visiting Hungarian President Laszlo Solyom.

Abbas on Tuesday called for a truce between Israel and the Palestinians, both in his West Bank powerbase and in the Gaza Strip, which has been ruled since June by the rival Hamas movement after the Islamists routed his forces.

But Hamas rejected his call for a reciprocal ceasefire, insisting the blame lay with Israel.

"We consider the statements of the Palestinian president about the truce an unbalanced call because the problem lies in the occupation, not in the Palestinian people," its spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said.

Rice reiterated that the rocket fire had to stop and called on Israel -- which earned international condemnation for excessive use of force during the Gaza attacks -- to spare innocent lives during its raids.

A statement released by Olmert's office said that "the Israeli government will act continuously, systematically, and over a long period... to put an end to the rocket fire and other terror activities in Gaza."

The Israeli statement said that while Israel would work to contain Hamas it would also advance the peace process with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

Government spokesman Mark Regev insisted that the Hamas government in Gaza bore full responsibility for the latest escalation.

The body of a Palestinian killed in the clashes was found in the northern town of Jabalya on Wednesday, medics said, bringing to 126 the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli fire in Gaza over the past week.

Two Israeli soldiers and one civilian have also died over the same period.



The body of one-month-old Palestinian baby girl Amira Abu Akar, lies in her house during her funeral in Gaza City on Wednesday. The baby and a senior Islamic Jihad militant were killed during an Israeli brief military incursion into Gaza as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pushed peace talks in the region.



Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak shakes hands with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at King David Hotel in Jerusalem Wednesday. Rice wrapped her latest Middle East peace bid today with calls on Israelis and Palestinians to resume talks despite new deadly raids in the Gaza Strip.

## Cut military ties with Israel: Indian govt allies

AFP, New Delhi

Allies of India's coalition government demanded Wednesday an end to military ties with major arms supplier Israel over its blockade of the Gaza Strip and military strikes against the territory.

Several smaller regional parties joined India's Communists, who prop up Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's minority government, in calling for a return to New Delhi's "principled stand of support" for the Palestinians.

"Unfortunately the government has been evasive in its response" to the military strikes as well as the economic blockade of Gaza, said Prakash Karat, India's main Marxist leader.

In keeping ties with Israel, "India is betraying one of its most principled positions," he said.

## Israel attacks Gaza: 2 killed

BBC ONLINE

Israeli forces have briefly re-entered the Gaza Strip and clashed with Palestinian militants, with two people killed by gunfire, medics said.

The dead were reported to be a senior militant and a baby girl.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is winding up a trip to the region that hoped to revive peace talks.

Israel stepped up military raids last week to counter rocket fire from Gaza. More than 100 Gazans were killed and Palestinians leaders suspended talks.

Speaking in the West Bank on Tuesday, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas resisted US pressure to resume peace talks

given events in Gaza, which is under control of the militant Hamas movement.

"I call on the Israeli government to halt its aggression so the necessary environment can be created to make negotiations succeed, for us and for them, to reach the shores of peace in 2008," Mr Abbas said.

During Wednesday's raid in Khan Younis, the baby was killed by a ricocheting bullet, and a local Islamic Jihad leader was also killed, Palestinian health ministry officials said.

There were no reports of Palestinian rocket fire on southern Israel, after militants had fired dozens of the unguided missiles, including regular salvos at the city of Ashkelon for the first time.

### NEWS ANALYSIS

## India heading for early parliamentary polls?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Is India heading for parliamentary elections earlier than scheduled in early 2009? Political circles are abuzz with poll talk triggered by the federal budget presented by Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram which was as much of an economic statement as political.

The budget had goodies doled out for a cross-section of the society, the farmers, the salaried class and the manufacturing industry, with the centre piece, of course, being the over 16 billion dollar scheme waiving loans of small and marginal farmers reeling under drought and heavy indebtedness.

The Finance Minister sought to woo the salaried urban middle class by giving some income tax relief and slashing excise duty on small cars and two wheelers. The most talked about, however, is the farmer loan waiver.

Sonia Gandhi-led Congress, which is heading the country's ruling United Progressive Alliance, is out to reap electoral dividends of the economic populism of the budget. It is organizing a rally here on March 9 to project the party

chief and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as pro-farmer.

Besides, Congress has asked all its units in the states to stir up a nation-wide campaign and Sonia's son Rahul Gandhi, who is the party's General Secretary, himself is undertaking a country-wide tour soon in moves seen by political analysts as the ruling party's build-up for the coming big electoral battle.

A series of elections to state legislatures are already lined up this year, including in states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh ruled by main national opposition BJP where it will be pitted against Congress in a straight contest.

The assembly polls in the states and, of course, the parliamentary polls, assume significance for Congress as it had in recent months lost the democratic exercises in states like Punjab, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, analysts say.

Signalling Congress party's battle-readiness, senior party leaders, including Sonia Gandhi and Rahul, will address a series of rallies in several states amidst speculation that the general election could be advanced to some-

time later this year instead of early next year as scheduled.

There is, however, realization among a section of Congressmen that one budget may not be enough to help the party's revival in big and electorally key states like Uttar Pradesh like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu where the party is out of power.

The farmers' loan waiver package in the budget has already seen a race among ruling alliance constituents to take the credit for the populist measure and analysts see this as a move to derive political and electoral mileage out of it.

Congress sources said that through the waiver of loans of farmers the party has successfully countered the opposition's sustained campaign over the past few weeks seeking to link the agrarian crisis to the Congress-led government's alleged neglect of the farm sector.

Congress sources also feel that the budget would help blunt the Left parties' frequent criticism of the government's alleged failure to arrest the inflation and pressure to junk a controversial civil nuclear deal with the United States.

## Myanmar junta not likely to heed UN envoy

AFP, Bangkok

UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari returns to Myanmar today to press the junta to include opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in its election plans, but analysts say the military will likely turn him a deaf ear.

Gambari is making his third trip to the military-ruled country since police and soldiers used deadly force to break up anti-government protests led by Buddhist monks in September.

At least 31 people died according to the United Nations, although Human Rights Watch has put the toll at more than 100.

The junta agreed to allow Gambari to visit in hopes of soothing international outrage over the crackdown, which crushed the biggest challenge to military rule in nearly 20 years.

On his two earlier trips, Gambari tried to open a dialogue between the junta and Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel peace laureate and pro-democracy leader who has been under house arrest for 12 of the last 18 years.

But on this trip, Gambari faces a changed political landscape.

After months of sitting on the defensive over their bloody crack-

down, the junta has reclaimed the initiative by proposing a constitutional referendum in May and multi-party elections in 2010.

With their new constitution in hand, the military will be less likely to heed western calls for reform -- especially demands that Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) be brought into the process, he said.

Although the final version of the constitution has not been released, the regime has already announced that Aung San Suu Kyi will be barred from running in elections.

The military appears unwilling to reopen the charter for discussion, meaning Gambari will have to try to secure whatever small concessions he can get to ensure the voting is free and fair, Win Min said.

"He will try to ask them to negotiate to include Aung San Suu Kyi in the process, to allow the NLD to debate on the constitution at the referendum, and also to run in elections in 2010," he said.

"It is likely that the regime will say no," he added.

Under a law enacted last month, speaking publicly about the referendum or distributing leaflets is punishable by up to three years in prison.

## US pushes India on nuclear deal

AFP, New Delhi

The United States Wednesday urged India to quickly complete all steps required to conclude a civilian nuclear technology deal with Washington before the US presidential polls in November.

"Time is very tight" to get the deal through the US Congress before the United States goes into election mode, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Richard Boucher, told reporters in New Delhi.

"I am certainly aware that things fall apart... but on the other hand, my job is to make things work. What I am focused on right now is how to make things succeed. We both want this to happen," said Boucher, who is on a two day visit here.

"We are kind of playing in overtime right now," added the diplomat, the latest in a line of US officials who have recently told India to move ahead with the deal.

give New Delhi crucial access to civilian atomic technology even though it has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, requires final approval of the US Congress -- where it currently has bipartisan support.

But before that, India needs approval from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to place India's civilian nuclear reactors under UN safeguards. It also needs the approval of the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which regulates global civilian nuclear trade.

Stiff opposition from Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Communist allies, who prop up his minority Congress-led government, has held up the deal.

New Delhi has completed five rounds of talks with the UN atomic watchdog in Vienna with the Indian Express newspaper reporting Wednesday that India and the IAEA were close to finalising the text of their pact.

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