

3 Palestinians killed in Gaza crossing raid

AFP, Gaza City

Three Palestinians were killed and 12 Israeli soldiers wounded on Saturday when Hamas militants, including suicide bombers, stormed a Gaza border crossing with explosives-laden vehicles.

Militants in four vehicles attacked the Kerem Shalom crossing in southern Gaza under the cover of mortar fire and heavy morning fog just hours before Jews begin the week-long Passover holiday at sundown on Saturday.

Two vehicles exploded at the entrance to and inside the Israeli-controlled crossing, while two other vehicles entered the site, where they engaged in heavy exchanges of fire with troops, the army and Hamas said.

Three Palestinians were killed in the blasts and exchanges of fire, and at least 12 Israeli soldiers were wounded in the attack, the fifth on the Gaza border this week, an army spokeswoman told AFP.

One bomb-laden vehicle managed to escape the scene but was hit by Israeli tank fire north of the crossing shortly afterwards. The other vehicle which failed to explode was blown up by sappers,

the army said.

The armed wing of the Islamist Hamas movement that controls Gaza said it carried out the attack, which took place just a day after militants attempted to raid the same crossing.

The dead militants were later identified as Ghassan Rehem, 22, Mahmud Abu Samra, 23, and Ahmed Soliman, 25.

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said that the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades carried out operation "Explosion Warning" to break the Israeli blockade.

"If the parties (the international community) do not intervene immediately to save Gaza, which is dying of the siege, Hamas will work to end the siege in all possible ways," Abu Zuhri said in a statement.

Israel slapped a punishing blockade on Gaza after Hamas seized control of the territory last June, routing forces loyal to moderate Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

Al-Qassam Brigades spokesman Abu Obeida said in a press conference that the attack was a "gift" for Palestinians in Gaza and warned that his movement was planning

"more surprises" for Israel in order to break the blockade.

Israeli army southern command spokesman Major Tal Lev Ram said the simultaneous attacks appeared to be aimed at killing or capturing Israeli soldiers.

"The timing on the eve of Passover shows that they intended to carry out an extremely severe attack," he told reporters.

It was the fifth time in a week that militants had attacked crossing points through which humanitarian aid is supplied to Gaza.

Earlier this month, two Israeli civilians were killed when Palestinian militants raided the Nahal Oz crossing through which fuel is supplied to the impoverished territory.

Israeli government spokesman Mark Regav said that the attack on the crossing demonstrated Hamas's "nihilistic agenda" and vowed that Israel would defend itself.

"Once again Hamas is not interested whatsoever in the welfare of the people of Gaza.... Hamas continues to attack Israel. Hamas continues its military build-up. Israel will act to protect its citizens," he said.

Carter holds meeting with Hamas chief

AFP, Damascus

Former US president Jimmy Carter and Khaled Meshaal, exiled chief of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, held more talks in Syria yesterday focused on a possible truce between Israel and Gaza militants and the release of an Israeli soldier, Hamas said.

The two men held a lengthy meeting on Friday, strongly opposed by Washington and Israel who view Hamas as a terrorist organisation despite its victory in Palestinian elections in 2006.

Carter, on a Middle East trip to promote peace efforts amid continuing bloodshed, suggested to the Damascus-based Meshaal that the Palestinian movement should make some goodwill gestures towards Israel.

The 2002 Nobel Peace prizewinner proposed a truce between Israel and Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, "an exchange of prisoners, which would include Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, the lifting of the Israeli blockade of the strip, and a solution to the Rafah terminal," Hamas official Mohammad Nazzal told AFP.

Nazzal said Hamas would respond to Carter "soon".

It would reply positively but "not at any price. The interests of the Palestinian people must be taken into account," he said.



US President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush walk with South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak and his wife Kim Yoon-ok on Friday upon arrival at Camp David in Maryland. Lee is the first South Korean leader to be invited to the rustic presidential retreat.

N Korea, trade top Bush talks with South Korean leader

AP, Camp David

President Bush and South Korea's new President Lee Myung-bak were having fried chicken and potato salad for lunch Saturday, but beef was on the dinner menu when they began two days of talks at the Camp David presidential retreat.

Anything else might not have seemed quite right.

The White House said the dinner menu Friday night always included Texas black Angus beef tenderloin, but the choice became even more apropos when South Korea announced on Friday that it would lift its ban on US beef imports. That removed an obstacle to getting lawmakers to ratify a free trade deal that Bush wants with South Korea, although the pact still faces opposition in Congress.

Bush is hoping to strengthen sometimes-shaky US-South Korea ties under Lee, a pro-American conservative who has taken a strong stance against North Korea's nuclear program, another key topic of talks. Lee's position on North Korea may turn out to be even tougher than Bush's right now because the United States is pressing hard for an agreement.

Nuclear talks are stalled over

whether the North will hand over a promised full declaration of its nuclear programmes in return for concessions. The Bush administration apparently has decided that the declaration's exact contents are less important than an assurance that the nuclear negotiators can check up on Kim Jong Il's government to make sure it has told the truth.

Bush and Lee's get-acquainted sessions at the secluded presidential retreat were buoyed by the beef announcement.

South Korea was the third-largest foreign market for US beef before it banned imports in December 2003 over the possibility of mad cow disease. Even with the beef spat resolved, however, the trade deal still faces concerns by Democrats and automakers and a narrowing legislative calendar that could push the issue into the next administration.

The South Korean Agriculture Ministry said it will allow US beef imports from cattle younger than 30 months. Younger cows are believed to be less at risk for mad cow disease. South Korea said it would allow beef from older cattle after the US strengthens controls on feed to reduce chances of infection.



Iraqi army soldiers look at ammunitions found in the northern Hayaniyah district of Basra yesterday. Iraqi security forces took control of the district Saturday. Hayaniyah, a stronghold of fighters loyal to anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, has seen intense clashes since March 25 when Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ordered a crackdown on militiamen in the southern port city.

Calls for Abdullah to quit grow louder

THE STRAITS TIMES/ ANN, Kuala Lumpur

After touring the four states which fell to the opposition last month, Umno top guns are hearing a recurrent theme from the grassroots: It is time for a leadership change.

From banners explicitly asking Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi to step down to subtle hints from local leaders made during closed-door discussions, the message was not lost.

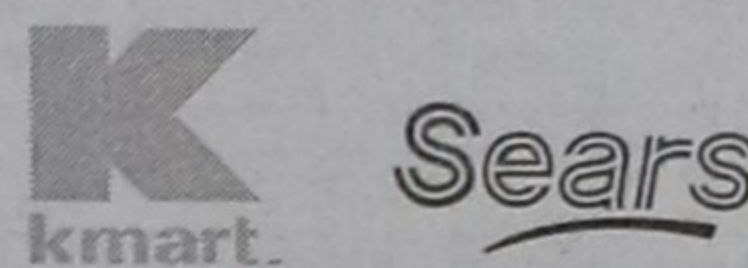
In Selangor, for example, a banner put up outside the venue of the dialogue on Wednesday asked Pak Lah, as the PM is affectionately known, to hand over the leadership to a successor now.

Another one read "Najib - president, Muhyiddin - deputy president", indicating a preference for Deputy PM Najib Razak and Umno vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin to move up the party hierarchy.

A Selangor Umno official denied putting up the banners, which were prominently displayed in front of a hotel where the two-hour dialogue took place.

But no one removed the banners, which would have been deemed offensive before last month's watershed general election.

The dissent against Abdullah also took the form of fliers criticising his businessman son Kamaluddin, who is said to have benefited from state contracts.



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