

## Egypt to take Palestinian truce offer to Israel

### Militant groups agree to proposal

AFP, Cairo  
Palestinian militant factions agreed yesterday to a proposal for a truce with Israel that Egyptian mediators will now try to sell to the Jewish state, a senior Egyptian official said.

The 12 groups meeting in Cairo agreed to the plan, already backed by Hamas and Fatah, for a "comprehensive, simultaneous and reciprocal period of calm to be applied progressively, first in Gaza and then in the West Bank," Egypt's MENA news agency said, without naming the official.

"This is a stage in a plan aimed at creating a situation that will allow for the lifting of the (Israeli) blockade of the Gaza Strip and the end of internal Palestinian divisions," the official was quoted as saying.

A deal for a six-month period of calm had already been accepted by the Islamist movement Hamas, while Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas, from rival Fatah, on Sunday gave the negotiations unconditional support.

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri, speaking to AFP in Gaza, called the agreement a "good step which confirms that the ball is in Israel's court."

"It's up to the occupation to choose between the success of the Egyptian effort, and agree to a mutual period of calm, or the failure of this effort, of which it will bear the consequences."

Abu Zuhri added: "This Palestinian agreement confirms that the problem with the issue of a period of calm is not with the Palestinian side but with the Israeli side which continues its threats

and attacks.

"In the light of this announcement we are waiting for an official Israeli response to Cairo to determine our final position on the issue."

The Palestinian ambassador to Cairo, Nabil Amr, who was appointed by Abbas to follow the talks, said Egyptian officials would now travel to Israel to submit the plan, but he could not say exactly when.

Egypt's intelligence chief Omar Suleiman has been serving as a go-between in truce negotiations, as Israel refuses any direct contacts with organisations it considers terror groups.

An official at the Israeli defence ministry told AFP that Suleiman was "not expected before Sunday."

MENA said that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had

called Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak to inform him of the talks' outcome and "look at means of easing Israel's blockade of Gaza."

Egyptis keen to avoid a repeat of a January breach of its Rafah border crossing with Gaza by Hamas militants that saw hundreds of thousands of needy Palestinians flood into Egypt to stock up on supplies.

The agreement of Islamic Jihad, which fires most rockets from Gaza into Israel, is seen as crucial for the deal. However, a spokesman for the group said they would respect a truce but not sign it if it applied only in Gaza.

"We will respect what Israel respects but we will not sign a truce to be applied only in the Gaza Strip," Jihad spokesman Daud Shahab told AFP from Gaza.

## Bali bomber plans death-row wedding

AFP, Jakarta

One of the three Indonesian Muslim militants on death row for their roles in the 2002 Bali bombings is planning to remarry his ex-wife before his execution, his lawyer said Wednesday.

Lawyer Achmad Michdan said his client Amrozi, dubbed the smiling assassin for his cheerful courtroom antics, was planning to remarry his first wife, Rahma, in prison on May 12.

"He wants to get back with his ex-wife," Michdan said after visiting Amrozi in the high-security Nusakambangan island jail where he is on death row.

"We have permission from the prison to hold a party there. He has a right to get married -- it's a human right."

Amrozi and two other Islamists, Imam Samudra and Ali Ghufron, are awaiting execution by firing squad after exhausting their legal appeals against their conviction over the attacks which killed 202 people on the resort island.



Local resident Jay Thompson cleans up debris in front of the Harmony House Antiques store, which was damaged by a tornado on Tuesday in the Driver area of Suffolk, Virginia. Three Tornadoes touched down in central and southeast-ern Virginia damaging buildings and injuring at least 200 people.



Iraqi Shia tribesmen shout anti-US and Iraqi government slogans while holding their national flag during a protest in Baghdad yesterday. The demonstration was held to protest the US-backed government battle against Shia militiamen, mostly from the Mahdi Army of anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

## 925 people killed in Iraq's Sadr City clashes

AFP, Baghdad

More than 900 people have been killed in clashes between militia and security forces in Baghdad's Sadr City that broke out last month, a senior Iraqi official told reporters yesterday.

"There were 925 martyrs in Sadr City and 2,605 others have been wounded," in the firefights that began on March 25 and are still continuing, said Teheeen Sheikhy, a spokesman for the government's Baghdad security plan.

Fierce clashes between US and Iraqi forces and Shia fighters, mostly from the Mahdi Army militia of anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, erupted after Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ordered a crackdown on militiamen in the southern city of Basra.

The crackdown triggered a wave

of clashes in other Shia regions of Iraq, but particularly in Sadr City, the bastion of the Mahdi Army in east Baghdad.

The clashes have also inflicted heavy toll on US forces. At least 20 soldiers have been killed in Baghdad in April, a significant number of them in and around Sadr City.

So far in April, the US military has lost 46 soldiers across Iraq, making it the deadliest month since it lost 65 troops in September 2007, according to an AFP tally based on independent website www.icasualties.org.

The military says it will continue to fight the "criminals" in Sadr City so long as they continue to fire rocket or mortar rounds from the district at the heavily-fortified Green Zone, seat of the Iraqi government and US embassy.

## 2nd aircraft carrier in Gulf is 'reminder' to Iran: Gates

AP, Mexico City

Defence Secretary Robert Gates said Tuesday that sending a second US aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf could serve as a "reminder" to Iran, but he said it's not an escalation of force.

Speaking to reporters after meeting with Mexican leaders, Gates said heightening US criticism of Iran and its support for terror groups is not a signal that the administration is laying the groundwork for a strike against Tehran.

Still, he said Iran continues to back the Taliban in Afghanistan.

"I do not have a sense at this point of a significant increase in Iranian support for the Taliban and others opposing the government in Afghanistan," Gates said. "There is, as best I can tell, a continuing flow, but I would still characterize it as relatively modest."

His comments contrasted with those from Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who said last week that he had not seen any new signs of Iranian support for the Taliban.

Gates played down the addition of a second carrier to the Gulf, saying that the number of ships there rises and falls continuously.

He said he doesn't expect there to be two carriers there for a long time.

Asked if the carrier move went hand in hand with the rising US rhetoric against Iran, Gates said, "I don't see it as an escalation. I think it could be seen, though, as a reminder."

In the past, military officials have said that beefing up the Navy's presence in the Gulf was a way to show that the US remains committed to the region. And they have acknowledged it also serves as a show of force for other countries there, such as Iran.

In recent weeks, US officials have ratcheted up their complaints that Iran is increasing its efforts to supply weapons and training to militants in Iraq.

Military commanders in Baghdad are expected to roll out evidence of that support soon including date stamps on newly found weapons caches showing that recently made Iranian weapons are flowing into Iraq at a steadily increasing rate.

Another senior military official said the evidence will include mortars, rockets, small arms, roadside bombs and armour-piercing explosives known as explosively formed penetrators or EFPs that troops have discovered in caches in

recent months. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the evidence has not yet been made public, said that dates on some of the weapons were well after Tehran signalled late last year that it was scaling back aid to insurgents.

Speaking of Afghanistan on Tuesday, Gates said that the Taliban is changing its tactics there from large-scale firefights to a "significant increase in terrorist acts," including roadside bombs and suicide attacks, similar to the one that unsuccessfully targeted Afghan President Hamid Karzai on Sunday.

At least one police officer has been arrested in connection with the assassination attempt, deepening concerns about the Taliban's infiltration of Afghan security forces.

Gates said, however, he does not have a sense that the infiltration is any worse than it has been before. He said that it is important to screen the security forces well and that military trainers working with those forces need to make that a focus of their efforts.

On other matters, Gates said it was critically important for Congress to approve funding for an anti-drug trafficking programme to aid Mexico.

## Hamas serving as Iran's 'proxy warriors': Rice

AFP Washington

Palestinian Hamas militants are serving as the "proxy warriors" for an Iran bent on destroying Israel and destabilising the Middle East, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said here Tuesday.

In a speech to the American Jewish Committee in Washington that underscored growing US concerns about Tehran, Rice mentioned Iran as not just a threat in the Palestinian territories, but also in Lebanon, Iraq

and even in Afghanistan.

Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz said after talks with Rice on Monday that an Iran-led radical front in the Middle East is becoming more powerful and weaknesses in it need to be found.

Rice vowed to pursue US efforts to isolate Hamas, which she said refused to renounce violence, recognise Israel's right to exist and respect all previous Palestinian agreements with Israel.

"But perhaps of deepest concern, the leaders of Hamas are increasingly serving as the proxy warriors of an Iranian regime that is destabilising the region, seeking a nuclear capability and proclaiming its desire to destroy Israel," Rice told the group's annual meeting.

She did not elaborate.

Iran is one of the most vocal backers of the Islamic Resistance Movement and pledged millions of dollars in 2006 to help a Hamas government through a funding drought caused by Western aid cuts.

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## Thai PPP wins backing for charter rewrite

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

After initial delays and ambiguous stances, Thailand's Chart Thai and Puea Pandin parties have agreed to go along with attempts by coalition leader People Power Party to rewrite the 2007 Constitution.

Chart Thai leader Banharn Silapacharua said Tuesday his party would join in the amendment of the Constitution despite fears of a political backlash.

Puea Pandin spokesman Chaiyos Chiramehakorn also said his party supported a wholesale rewrite of the Constitution.

Support from both coalition partners is crucial to the People Power-led government's plan to amend the 2007 Constitution.

Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Surapong Suebwonglee said Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej had ordered him to arrange a meeting with the leaders of the coalition partners next week.

Rewriting the Constitution threatens to push the country back into political turmoil because opponents believe the move is aimed at helping the People Power Party, the Chart Thai Party and the Matchima Thipataya Party to avoid being dissolved in high-drama court cases.



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Crew members of the Spanish trawler "Playa de Bakio" arrive at the military base of Torrejon, near Madrid yesterday after being held for a week by Somali pirates. The 26 were released on April 26, six days after the ship was seized by pirates with grenade launchers while fishing for tuna some 200 nautical miles off the coast Somalia.

## Hillary gaining on Obama as key primaries loom

AFP, Washington

Hillary Clinton appeared yesterday to be gaining on Barack Obama in two key primary states, after her Democratic foe tried to quell another damaging uproar sparked by his fiery former pastor.

The White House rivals fought another day of fierce turf battles in midwestern Indiana and North Carolina on the east coast, which hold Democratic primaries on Tuesday in a crucial phase of the end-game in their gripping race.

Though Obama leads in nominating contests, elected delegates

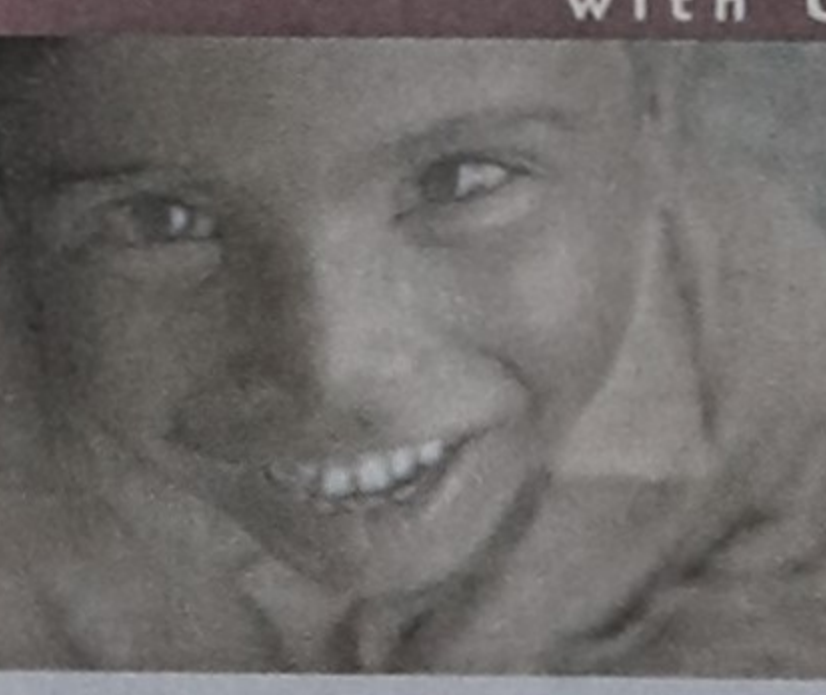
and the all-important fundraising stakes, Clinton's message seems to be hitting home after her campaign-saving victory in Pennsylvania last week.

But she needs to capitalize on Obama's recent struggles, as she tries to convince "superdelegates" -- the professional Democratic politicians who effectively hold the nomination in their hands -- that Obama is unelectable.

A Howey-Gauge poll in Indiana released Tuesday had Obama up by just 47 to 45 percentage points, well within the margin of error, with eight percent of likely primary voters undecided.

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