



PHOTO: AFP  
Palestinian children take part in a candlelight rally in Gaza City on Saturday. Gaza plunged into darkness after its only power station stopped due to lack of diesel, causing about 50 percent shortfall in electricity.

## Israel to consider Egypt-backed Gaza truce proposal

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel said on Sunday it would consider an Egyptian-brokered Gaza Strip ceasefire proposal signed by 12 Palestinian factions but remained non-committal about its prospects for success.

"We have to examine the proposal from the Egyptians, who are an important strategic element in the region," Deputy Defence Minister Matan Vilnai told public radio.

Egypt's intelligence chief Omar Suleiman is due in Jerusalem on Monday to present the truce proposal -- signed by every major Palestinian faction including Hamas -- to Israeli leaders, army radio reported.

## Army deployed throughout Lebanon amid clashes

AFP, Beirut

The army deployed throughout Lebanon on Sunday as clashes broke out between rival factions in the north and southeast while the Arab League met to try resolve the country's ongoing political crisis.

The capital Beirut was calm with Shia Muslim militants who had been locked in fierce although one-sided clashes for four days with Sunni Muslim opponents having seemingly vanished from the streets.

Fierce battles, however, erupted overnight in Tripoli between Sunni supporters of the Western-backed government and members of the Hezbollah-led opposition, which is backed by both Syria and Iran.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (himself an Alawite).

One woman was killed and at least five were wounded in and around the northern city but by mid-morning before the fighting stopped and the army deployed in the affected areas.

Clashes between government supporters and opposition opponents also broke out in the mainly Druze mountainous area of Aaytat, southeast of Beirut, a security official told AFP.

Arab League foreign ministers were holding emergency talks in Cairo on the crisis amid regional Sunni fears about Shia Iran's influence in divided Lebanon.

The ongoing clashes in parts of Lebanon underscored the simmering tension between Sunnis and Shias despite a return to calm in west Beirut, a Muslim-majority area where four days of fierce sectarian fighting left nearly 40 dead.

Armed militants could no longer be seen on the streets and there was a heavy presence of military troops.

However, some barricades put up by the militants remained and the road to Beirut international airport was shut for the fifth straight day, paralysing air traffic.

The Shia opposition announced on Saturday it was ending its takeover of large swathes of west Beirut after the army revoked government measures aimed at curbing the group.

The army overturned a government decision to reassign the head of Beirut airport security and to probe a Hezbollah communications network -- measures that sparked the unrest.

But the opposition vowed to keep up its campaign of civil disobedience against the government.

Many Lebanese, including cabinet ministers, observed a minute of silence on Sunday across the country to remember the victims of the violence, heeding a call by embattled Prime Minister Fuad Siniora who described Hezbollah's takeover of west Beirut as an armed coup.

## Signs of normalcy in Sadr City amid ceasefire

AP, Baghdad

Militants were withdrawing from the streets and shops were reopening on the first day of a cease-fire between Shia extremists and US-backed Iraqi forces following two months of intense clashes.

Authorities in Baghdad's Sadr City reported no violence Sunday.

"Today, people are very happy and very optimistic," said Sadiq Jaafar, a 30-year-old father. "Last night for the first time in more than 40 days we were able to sleep without being woken up by explosions or gunfire."

The government said it retained the right to chase wanted militants and search houses in order to confiscate weapons. The US military has made no comment on the reported cease-fire.

Thousands of civilians have fled their homes in the teeming slum home to nearly 40 percent of Baghdad's population and aid groups said some areas are desperately short of food and medicine after seven weeks of street battles.

Followers of anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who was

apparently instrumental in brokering the cease-fire, distributed food in the neighbourhood Sunday, residents said.

The bulk of al-Sadr's 60,000-strong Mahdi Army is not believed to have participated in the clashes, instead adhering to a general cease-fire ordered by al-Sadr last August. The violence is blamed on splinter groups believed to be acting on their own. Al-Sadr has directed his supporters to only fight when attacked.

Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki has called on al-Sadr to disband the Mahdi Army and vowed to disarm its members.

"We have concerns about this agreement," a senior commander of the Mahdi Army, speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons, said Sunday. "When US-led forces enter the area, we fear that they will pursue us."

The commander spoke by telephone from the most troubled southern part of the district, where US and Iraqi forces are building a barrier reaching up to 12 feet high to isolate it and disrupt supply and escape routes for militants.



PHOTO: AFP  
Lebanese soldiers are deployed in the northern city of Tripoli yesterday following fierce battles between rival clans as the Hezbollah-led opposition handed over control of west Beirut to the army.

## Tornadoes kill 19 in Missouri, Oklahoma

AP, Picher, Oklahoma

Many have fled this depressed, pollution-scarred mining town. Those who have chosen to stay or have not yet relocated face a new heartache. A tornado ripped through a 20-block swath of Picher late Saturday afternoon, killing at least seven people. The same storm system then moved into southwest Missouri where tornadoes took the lives of at least 12 others, authorities said.

Oklahoma Highway Patrol Lt. George Brown said Picher's victims included an infant. He said at least three people were confirmed missing.

"We've seen homes that were completely levelled to the foundation," Brown said. "In a few of these homes you would have had to be subterranean to survive."

Ottawa County Emergency Manager Frank Geasland said dozens of people were injured, some seriously.

"Trees are toppled over, ripped apart," he said. "There are cars thrown everywhere. It looks like a bomb went off, pretty much."

Brown said 32 people were transported to Integris Baptist Hospital in the nearby town of Miami. Of those, 26 were treated and released.

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## Jenna Bush's wedding is low-key affair at ranch

AP, Crawford

Jenna Bush couldn't see herself getting married at the White House surrounded by antique furniture and oil portraits of presidents. She and Henry Hager said "I do" Saturday at President Bush's ranch in Crawford where the corn is high-high, roads are named Cattle Drive and the Texas flag is painted on the rooftops of barns.

The president and the bride picked "You Are So Beautiful" for their father-daughter dance, according to band leader Tyrone Smith of Nashville, Tenn. Smith and his 10-piece party band, The Tyrone Smith Revue, was asked to do "Lovin' in My Baby's Eyes" by Taj Mahal for the newlyweds' first dance. Smith, who promised the couple a "get down" party, talked to The Associated Press earlier in the week on condition that the information not be released before the wedding.

## Sudan cuts ties with Chad after rebel attack

AP, Khartoum

President Omar al-Bashir announced Sunday he severed relations with neighbouring Chad, accusing the government of supporting rebels who attacked the Sudanese capital, according to state media.

The president, wearing his military uniform, appeared on state television and said he held Chad responsible for the Saturday night assault by Darfur rebels in Khartoum, the independent English language daily Sudan Tribune reported.

"Al-Bashir announces the severing of relations with Chad," reads a headline on a brief news story from the official SUNA news agency. The news agency added that the president had just returned from Saudi Arabia where he was performing a pilgrimage.

Relations between the two countries, which share a long arid border region home to numerous armed groups, have long been strained.

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