

Olmert doubts full ME peace deal this year

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said yesterday that Israel and the Palestinians will not be able to agree this year on a peace deal that includes the crucial issue of Jerusalem.

"I don't believe that we can reach an understanding that will include Jerusalem by the end of the year," Olmert told parliament's powerful foreign affairs and defence committee, according to a senior official.

He expressed optimism that the two sides could bridge their differences on other core issues in the decades-old conflict.

But he seemed to rule out a comprehensive deal by year-end, despite a commitment made by the two sides at a conference hosted by US President George W. Bush in Annapolis, Maryland last November that revived peace talks.

"There is no practical possibility to reach an overall understanding on the issue of Jerusalem at this time," Olmert said.

"But there is an intention to create a mechanism that will continue to deal with the issue for a much longer period until we reach understandings that we can live with."

Israel captured mostly Arab east Jerusalem -- including the Old City with its holy sites sacred to Christians, Muslims, and Jews -- in the 1967 war and annexed it shortly afterwards.

It declared the whole city its eternal and undivided capital, a claim never recognised by the international community or the Palestinians, who have demanded east Jerusalem as the capital of a future state.

The Palestinians slammed Olmert's remarks, insisting they would never agree to a deal that did

not include Jerusalem.

"Jerusalem is a red line with respect to the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people and we cannot retreat one inch from it," Nabil Abu Rudeina, a spokesman for president Mahmud Abbas, told AFP by phone from Cairo.

"East Jerusalem is the capital of the Palestinian state and Olmert's statements are an attempt to run away from the commitments of the Annapolis conference and the vision of President Bush," he said.

"The American administration must work to push Israel to enter into serious negotiations and stop wasting time."

Already on the agenda is a meeting in Washington later this week between Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and former Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei, who are heading their respective negotiating teams.

The two sides launched their latest round of peace talks after a seven-year hiatus, vowing to try to reach a comprehensive agreement by the time Bush leaves office in January.

The talks have made little tangible progress since then, but Olmert said the gaps on other core issues, including the fate of 4.5 million UN-registered Palestinian refugees and final borders, could be bridged by the end of 2008.

"On the other core issues the gaps are not dramatic. On the issue of refugees we can reach an understanding that will not make us assume responsibility or have to solve the issue within Israel's borders," he said.

"On the question of the borders there is a gap that is not unbridgeable."

Olmert has vowed to put any agreement to a referendum.

Thai-Cambodian border talks resume

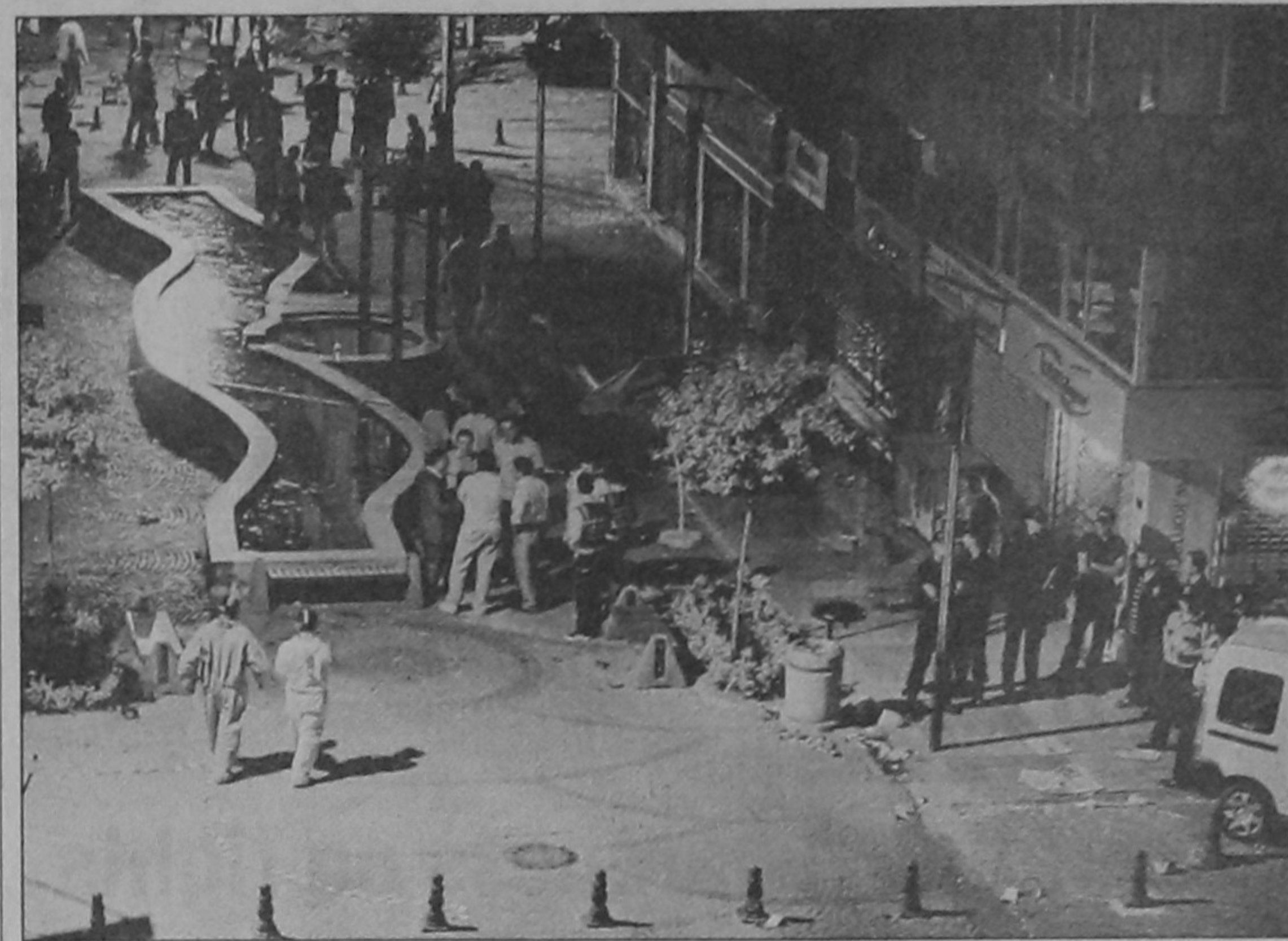
AP, Siem Reap

Cambodia and Thailand attempted to settle Monday an armed stand-off over disputed border territory near a historic Hindu temple that prompted both countries to deploy thousands of troops to the area.

Foreign ministers from both Southeast Asian nations expressed optimism that a second round of talks would produce a breakthrough over the dispute, after several thousand soldiers were sent two weeks ago to the 11th century Preah Vihear temple.

"I hope that the result of the talks will be positive," said Thai Foreign Minister Tej Bunnag before flying off to the Cambodian city of Siem Reap. "On the issue of withdrawing troops, they should be pulled back in equal numbers."

The first meeting on July 21 between the two sides foundered over what maps should be used to demarcate the border. It prompted Cambodia to request an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council before agreeing to the second meeting with Thailand.



Forensic officers investigate the scene of two bomb explosions in a busy shopping district in Istanbul Sunday night, leaving at least 17 people dead, and 140 others wounded.

Iran would respond if US adopts new approach

Says Ahmadinejad

AFP, Washington

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said in an interview aired on US television Monday that if the United States adopted a genuinely new approach to his country Tehran would respond in a positive way.

"Today, we see new behavior shown by the United States and the officials of the United States. My question is, is such behaviour rooted in a new approach?" the president told NBC in a rare interview with a US broadcaster.

"In other words, mutual respect, cooperation and justice? Or is this approach a continuation in the confrontation with the Iranian people, but in a new guise?" he said

from Tehran, speaking through an interpreter.

If US behaviour represented a genuine change, "we will be facing a new situation and the response by the Iranian people will be a positive one."

The interview came after the United States took the unprecedented step of sending a top diplomat to meet Iran's chief negotiator at talks in Geneva over Tehran's disputed nuclear program.

It also follows Ahmadinejad's announcement on Saturday that Iran had boosted the number of uranium-enriching centrifuges to up to 6,000, in an expansion of its nuclear drive that defies international calls for a freeze.

Iran is already under three sets

of UN Security Council sanctions over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment, which makes nuclear fuel as well as the fissile core of an atomic bomb.

World powers, seeking to resolve the standoff and concerned Tehran is pursuing a clandestine nuclear weapons project, have offered to start pre-negotiations during which Tehran would add no more uranium-enriching centrifuges and in return face no further sanctions.

Iran was given a two-week deadline to give a final answer to world powers seeking a breakthrough in the crisis after talks a week ago in Geneva with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana ended in stalemate.



Iraqi police watch over a street from a high point close to the Imam Musa al-Kadhim Shrine in northern Baghdad yesterday, while hundreds of thousands of pilgrims gather to mourn the revered Shia Imam who died 12 centuries ago.

Serbia braces for Karadzic transfer

AFP, Belgrade

Serbia's war crimes court was on Monday awaiting Radovan Karadzic's appeal against his transfer to a UN tribunal ahead of a protest rally by ultra-nationalists furious about his arrest.

"The appeal hasn't arrived yet," Ivana Ramic, the spokeswoman of the Serbian war crimes court, told AFP.

Svetozar Vujacic, the lawyer representing Karadzic, said earlier he was confident their ploy to delay the wartime Bosnian Serb leader's transfer to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) had worked.

Karadzic's brother, Luka, on Sunday confirmed the appeal had been sent from a remote post office at the very last minute required under Serbian law, just before a midnight Friday deadline.

Officials say Karadzic, 63, was arrested a week ago in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, after more than a decade on the run from the ICTY disguised as an alternative medicine guru who specialised in "human quantum energy".

Karadzic, who stands indicted for genocide and crimes against humanity, has ordered his legal team to try to delay his transfer to

the tribunal based in The Hague for as long as possible.

Ultra-nationalists have staged daily protests in support of Karadzic since his capture, some of them marred by attacks on journalists and threatening chants against Serbia's pro-Western leaders.

Speaking at a Belgrade rally closely watched by riot police on Sunday evening, Vujacic said he believed local authorities hoped to transfer Karadzic to the UN court before a large rally organised for Tuesday.

"They are doing everything they can in order to carry out the transfer before the protest on Tuesday," the lawyer said, adding: "Mine and Radovan's only goal is that this doesn't happen."

Karadzic vanished from public life in 1996, shortly after the ICTY issued an arrest warrant for him.

While in hiding, he completely changed his appearance and identity, styling himself as Doctor Dragan Dabic and donning large wire-rimmed glasses and a white Panama hat atop his long white hair and bushy beard.

On Monday, several Serbian newspapers published pictures of a local healer who is the spitting image of the alter ego that Karadzic assumed to avoid capture.

Graft case against Thaksin cabinet approved

AP, Bangkok

The Thai Supreme Court on Monday accepted a lawsuit alleging abuse of power by ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, his former Cabinet and other officials in the holding of a government lottery.

It is the third case to go to court involving allegations of corruption and abuse of power against Thaksin, who was deposed in a September 2006 military coup.

The first hearing for the 47 people named in the lawsuit is set for Sept. 26, said Judge Pairoj Reungngerngong. The suit names three members of the current Cabinet: Finance Minister Surapong Suvongdee, Labor Minister Uraivan Thienthong and Deputy Transport Minister Anurak Juremas.

The targets of the lawsuit are accused of malfeasance in a 2003 lottery scheme initiated by Thaksin's government. The administration claimed the plan would attract people away from a popular illegal lottery and generate revenue for education.

The complaint, brought by the Attorney General's office, alleges that irregularities in the scheme, including misspending and tax exemptions, cost the state \$1.1 billion. It asked the Supreme Court to order the 47 people to pay the damages.

Ulfa rejects plea by sacked colleagues to talk peace

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Guwahati

The outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), one of north-eastern India's frontline separatist groups, has rejected pleas by rebel colleagues to side with them and start peace talks with the Indian government for an acceptable solution to the 29-year-old insurrection in Assam, a rebel statement said yesterday.

"We had entrusted the People's Consultative Group (PCG) that we had set up in 2005 to initiate the process for possible peace talks with the Indian government. We are not ready to endorse initiatives by any group which lacks credibility," Ulfa chairman Arabinda

Rajkhowa said in a statement released on the occasion of the group's martyrs' day Sunday.

Leaders of the Alpha and Charlie companies of the Ulfa's crack '28th battalion' announced a ceasefire June 24 and have since been calling upon Rajkhowa and other central committee leaders of the rebel group to join them and start peace negotiations with New Delhi to work out an acceptable solution to the insurgency.

The Ulfa has since expelled three top pro-talk leaders belonging to the '28th battalion' for "violating the (group's) constitution and flouting rules", but the trio, that includes Mrinal Hazarika and Jiten Dutta, maintain they belong to the Ulfa.

Hamas arrests in WB spark tit-for-tat action in Gaza

AFP, Nablus

Palestinian security forces arrested more than 50 Hamas members in the West Bank Monday in an apparent tit-for-tat action after the Islamist movement rounded up hundreds of its rivals in the Gaza Strip.

Security forces loyal to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas carried out the arrests in and around the northern West Bank town of Nablus against "those suspected of inciting civil strife," a Palestinian security official told AFP.

All but one of the detainees are Hamas members, and those arrested include several prominent local leaders and university professors.

The wave of arrests came amid a widening Hamas crackdown in the Gaza Strip in which more than 300 members of Abbas's Fatah party, which was largely driven from the territory when Hamas took over, have been detained in the past three days.

A senior security official in the West Bank political capital of

Ramallah said 150 people, most of them Hamas members, had been arrested in the past week but denied that the arrests had any connection to events in Gaza.

"The arrests are not political but are against outlaws," the official said. "They were given the opportunity to live their lives and conduct their political activities according to the law but they did not do that."

In Gaza, meanwhile, Hamas continued to raid homes, offices, sporting clubs and charities, most of them linked to Fatah, and arrested dozens more people, a senior Fatah official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Hamas also halted distribution in Gaza of the three main Palestinian newspapers -- Al-Ayyam, Al-Quds and Al-Hayat Al-Jedida, according to Sami al-Qishawi, a senior manager at Al-Ayyam.

"They did not give any reason," Qishawi told AFP, adding that Hamas-run security forces had blocked shipments of the papers at the Erez crossing between Israel and Gaza.



People wade through flooded Poberezhya village in the Ivano-Frankivsk region in Ukraine on Sunday. At least 16 people have died in severe storms and flooding in western Ukraine and northern Romania, which forced thousands of people to abandon their homes.

Floods, mudslides in Japan kill 4

AP, Tokyo

Four people died Monday in central Japan after being swept away in torrential rains that caused floods and mudslides and prompted an evacuation order for 50,000 people, officials said.

A woman, two girls and a boy were found dead after being washed away by a swollen river in the port city of Kobe, about 270 miles west of Tokyo, said an official in the city's fire department who asked that his name be withheld according to department policy. He said three others were rescued in serious condition.

In the city of Kanazawa, about 180 miles northwest of Tokyo, heavy rain flooded houses and led authorities to issue a mass evacuation order, said Hiroyuki Tatsuda, a city spokesman.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Bombings may threaten Indo-Pak ties

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, New Delhi

Indian cities are on high alert after a series of explosions ripped through the western city of Ahmedabad on Saturday, killing at least 45 people and wounding 160. The blasts, which occurred a day after bombings in the southern city of Bangalore, are the latest in a string of attacks in India believed to be the work of Islamic terrorists.

A little known group calling itself the "Indian Mujahideen" claimed responsibility for the Ahmedabad bombings, just as it had for an attack in Jaipur in May that killed 60 people. But security analysts and intelligence officials are doubtful about these claims and instead suspect that militant Islamic groups from Pakistan and Bangladesh are behind the attacks.

"The way in which the attack in Ahmedabad took place the multiplicity of the bombs and the way in which they were coordinated suggests a level of expertise not yet associated with any Indian group," says Uday Bhaskar, a security analyst and former director of New Delhi's Institute for Defence

Studies and Analyses. "It is reasonable to say this group has benefited from external involvement," he adds.

Other observers say the "Indian Mujahideen" was coined to cover the involvement of Pakistani groups, although few here doubt that Indian Muslims are involved at some level.

Saturday's bombings occurred in two waves. The first series of explosions detonated in crowded markets; the second wave, less than half an hour later, targeted two hospitals where the injured had been taken. Television footage showed blood-covered victims writhing in agony on hospital floors. In all, there were 17 explosions, caused by crudely made devices that peppered victims with red-hot ball bearings and shrapnel. The day before, one person was killed and six wounded when eight bombs exploded in quick succession in Bangalore. No group has claimed responsibility for the Bangalore bombings.

Communal conflict? Both attacks like the one in Jaipur occurred in states run by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP), India's main opposition party.

Ahmedabad, the main city in Gujarat, is especially vulnerable to communal tensions. In 2002, a train fire that killed members of a Hindu nationalist group sparked Hindu-Muslim riots in which over 2,000 people, most of them Muslim, died.

"Await five minutes for the revenge of Gujarat," read an e-mail sent to television stations, purportedly from the Indian Mujahideen, moments before Saturday's explosions.

But analysts say that stoking communal tensions is not the sole objective of recent attacks. "These people want to hurt the country in any way possible," says Ajay Sahni, a terrorism expert at the Institute for Conflict Management in Delhi. "Causing communal tensions is a secondary objective to that. If I wanted to whip up communal riots I would ensure that only Hindus were killed whereas these attacks are occurring in areas with mixed populations." Indeed, Saturday's attacks occurred in Ahmedabad's old city, which houses many Muslims.

Cross-border terrorism

In recent years, there have been regular, fatal bomb blasts in cities across India. Many have targeted religious sites: a temple in the ancient pilgrimage city of Varanasi in 2006, a mosque near Mumbai (Bombay) later that year, and another mosque, during Friday prayers, in the southern city of Hyderabad in 2007.

Often, no one claims responsibility for the attacks. But officials in New Delhi routinely point fingers at Pakistan, or at militants backed by Islamabad.

Such accusations of cross-border terrorism are a legacy of the cold war between India and Pakistan, during which Pakistan has used militancy as a tool to destabilise India.

Many believe that Islamabad retains links to militant groups, although the degree to which it remains operationally in control is unclear, especially at a time when Pakistan itself is suffering from an upsurge of Islamic militancy. Pakistan, meanwhile, denies backing any Islamic militants, including those operating in the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir.

The recent bomb attacks came at a time when the Pakistan-India peace process is under strain. Amid one of the sharpest exchanges between the neighbours since they launched peace talks in 2004, Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon said that "elements" in Pakistan were behind a resurgence in militant activities, including the recent bomb attack at the Indian Embassy in Kabul that killed 58 people, including two Indian diplomats.

"There have been statements by leaders of Pakistan, inciting terror," Menon said. "There are such statements from some government officials and this incitement of violence has culminated in suicide blasts.... All investigations point to Pakistan being behind the blast."

The involvement of home-grown Indian terrorists in such attacks is also of increasing concern here. "In the wake of 9/11 there was a lot of satisfaction that no Indian national was involved in terrorism in India," says Bhaskar. "I would be cautious in saying that was changing, but it may be that we are reaching some sort of tipping point."

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