

Four Palestinians dead in Gaza border clashes

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli troops killed four armed Palestinians in a gunbattle on the Gaza border yesterday that rattled a nearly five-month lull, the Israeli army and Palestinian medics said.

"Four militants were killed and were transferred to Nasser Hospital" in the south of the Gaza Strip, a medic said.

Witnesses said the militants were from the Islamist Hamas movement which controls the Gaza Strip.

An Israeli army spokeswoman said: "Troops identified hitting the four Palestinians and later found firearms and grenades on their bodies."

The gunbattle broke out after Israeli armoured vehicles crossed

into the Hamas-controlled territory near the city of Khan Yunis, Palestinian witnesses and security officials said.

The army said mortar rounds were fired into Israel and that it responded with two air strikes just inside Gaza.

Meanwhile, two aircraft carried out strikes in open areas several hundred metres (yards) inside the Gaza Strip, an Israeli military spokeswoman said, adding there were no immediate reports of casualties.

Militants fired several mortar rounds into southern Israel, causing no damage or casualties, she said.

"A force identified and opened fire at armed men approaching the border security barrier in an area

near Khan Yunis," the army spokeswoman told AFP, adding that exchanges of fire were still under way.

Outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Tuesday warned of a looming confrontation with the Islamist Hamas movement which controls the Gaza Strip despite the Egyptian-mediated June 19 ceasefire.

"I have no doubt that the situation between us and Hamas is an unavoidable pre-confrontation situation," Olmert said while touring the military headquarters responsible for the Gaza region.

"It's only a question of time and not a question of if," his office quoted him as saying on the tour.

CIA, NI directors expect to lose jobs under Obama

AFP, Washington

The current chiefs of National Intelligence and the CIA expect to be replaced when Barack Obama takes over as US president on January 20, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

Several senior Democrats oppose keeping National Intelligence director Mike McConnell and Central Intelligence Agency director Michael Hayden in their jobs, the newspaper said, citing unnamed senior US intelligence officials.

Their public support for controversial George W. Bush administration policies such as the tough interrogation of terror suspects and the tapping of telephone calls, had alienated the politicians.

A Democrat on the Senate intelligence committee told the Post there

was a "consensus" view on their fate.

Names being floated in the media as possible replacements include retiring Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, and John Brennan, a former top CIA official who heads Obama's intelligence transition team.

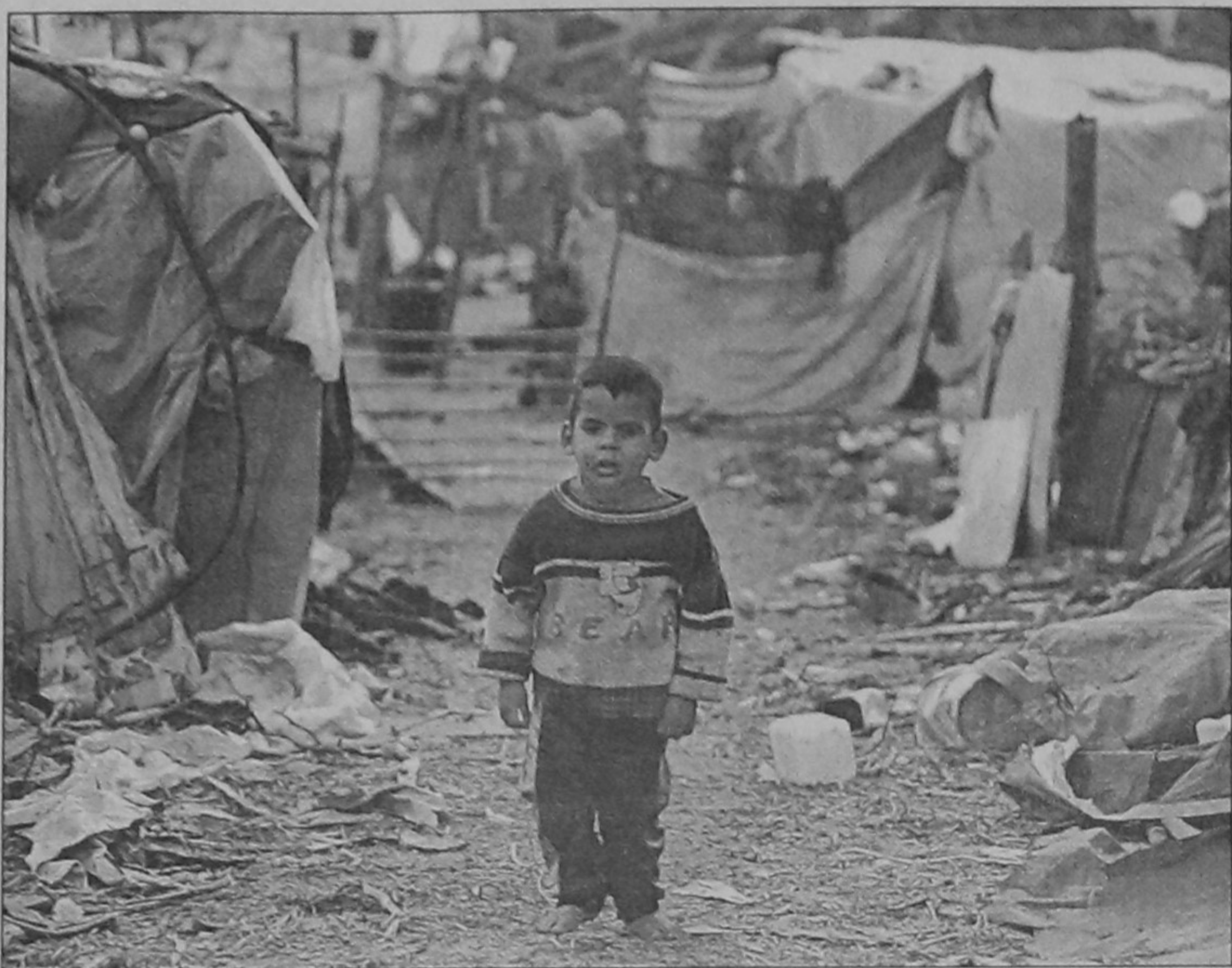
Both McConnell and Hayden want to remain on the job, the Post reported.

Obama transition officials have not announced any appointments of senior government officials beyond the president-elect's chief of staff, and have said that none are expected this week.

McConnell is a retired Navy admiral who took over as national intelligence director in February 2007. He is the second person to hold the job, which was created following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States.



People cry at a funeral ceremony for some of the twenty who died on board the Akula-class submarine, in Komsomolsk-on-Amur yesterday. Twenty people, including three naval officers and 17 civilians, were killed on November 9 by inhaling poison freon gas after the vessel's fire-extinguishing system accidentally activated during sea trials in the Sea of Japan.



An impoverished Palestinian boy walks amidst shacks and rubbish at a poverty-stricken southern Gaza City neighborhood yesterday. The UN says more than half of residents in the Gaza Strip are living under the poverty line. Living conditions in Gaza have deteriorated because of the two-year long Israeli blockade imposed against the territory's Hamas rulers.

UN sees significant improvement in Iraqi access to food

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's poor has had better access to food supplies over the past three years as security improved but the overall situation remains "highly volatile," a UN report said yesterday.

A hefty new report released by the UN World Food Programme and unveiled at a press conference in Baghdad cites "significant improvement" since 2005 in access to food among the poorest Iraqis.

Three years ago, an estimated four million people (15.4 percent of the population) were "food insecure" and another 8.3 million (31.8 percent) would have been considered as such if they did not receive government food handouts.

Today, 930,000 Iraqis (3.1 percent of all households) are considered "food insecure" while

another 2.8 million people (9.4 percent) are "extremely dependent" on government-supplied rations, the report said.

The report warns however that another descent into violence could reverse the positive trends, particularly by hindering the government's ability to distribute food to needy families.

Iraq has seen significant improvements in security over the past year as US and Iraqi forces have flooded former insurgent and militia strongholds and recruited local tribes and families to help patrol their own regions.

The resulting decline in violence has led to an improvement in the overall economy and allowed the Iraqi government and international aid workers to increase the scope of their efforts, the report said.

The UN defines food security as having "physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

Malaysia will allow Thaksin to transit

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia would not object to former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra travelling through its territory, but any request for asylum would have to be evaluated, Foreign Minister Rais Yatim has said.

"It would be all right for Thaksin if he wants to pass through Malaysia. However, if he wants to stay here, then the matter would have to be looked into," he said in comments reported Wednesday that were confirmed by his aides.

However, Rais did not say whether any request for transit or asylum had been received.

Thaksin, toppled in a military coup in September 2006, was last month sentenced in absentia to two years in jail by a Thai court for conflict of interest after helping his wife buy state-owned land when he was premier.

He has spent most of his time since the coup in self-imposed exile in Britain, where he bought and then sold Manchester City football club to his brother-in-law.

Thaksin returned to Thailand in February this year but swiftly fled again in August after his wife was sentenced to three years in jail for tax evasion.

However, Britain recently revoked his visa, without explaining why.



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