

Israel faces pressure to ease Gaza blockade

AFP, Gaza City

Violence across the Gaza-Israel border subsided yesterday after three days of bloody exchanges, as pressure rose on Israel to unblock humanitarian supplies for the aid-dependent territory.

One Palestinian militant was killed and another seriously wounded in an explosion as they prepared to launch a rocket into Israel from the northern Gaza Strip, witnesses and medics said.

Israel said the blast was probably an own goal as it had carried out no attacks in the area. It added the militants had not succeeded in firing off any rockets.

"We haven't carried out a strike in northern Gaza in recent hours," an army spokesman said. "The explosion might be due to mishandling of weapons."

A small armed group unconnected to the Islamist Hamas move-

ment that rules Gaza said the dead man was one of its fighters.

The Popular Resistance Committees, a loose grouping of hardline defectors from other factions, insisted that an unmanned Israeli aircraft had carried out the attack.

"Abdullah Hassan Manayia, 35, one of the commanders of a surveillance unit and a member of our faction, was martyred during a raid by an Israeli drone east of Jabaliya," the group said in a statement.

Earlier one rocket was fired at Israel from Gaza but the army was unable to say on which side of the border it hit as it was far from inhabited areas.

It was the first time in four days that no rockets or mortar rounds had been fired into populated areas of Israel.

A series of salvos over the previous three days had left one Israeli woman wounded and

prompted a series of tit-for-tat attacks that threatened to unravel a nearly five-month-old truce between Israel and Hamas.

Israel has blocked passage of humanitarian supplies on most days since violence first flared on the border on November 5.

The closure of the border crossings, Gaza's sole gateway for vital goods, forced the United Nations to suspend food distribution to 750,000 residents and the territory's sole power plant to shut down.

On Saturday, the crossings remained closed as they have been every week on the Jewish day of rest for several years.

An aide to Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak told AFP that no decision would be taken before Sunday on reopening them in the coming days.

The Israeli cabinet holds its weekly meeting on Sunday mornings but the Gaza closure was not

on the formal agenda and the decision is normally taken by the defence minister in consultation with field commanders.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas plans to raise the issue with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert when they meet on Monday for their first talks since September 16, Palestinian senior negotiator Saeb Erekat told AFP.

A range of international organisations and rights movements have urged Israel to ease the punishing blockade on Gaza which it first imposed when Hamas seized control of the territory in June last year and then tightened earlier this month.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon "is deeply concerned at the deterioration of the humanitarian and security situation in Gaza and southern Israel. He calls on all parties to uphold international humanitarian and human rights law," a UN statement said.



Palestinians gather around a mural painted on the street with a slogan in English that reads: "No for siege, the siege kills", during a demonstration in Gaza City on Friday against the Israeli blockade on the territory. Violence flared again around Gaza Friday, wounding two militants and an Israeli woman and putting a five-month-old truce in jeopardy as UN food handouts to the Hamas-ruled strip grind to a halt.

South Korean opposition delegation visits north

AP, Seoul

An opposition party delegation was taking a message from the South Korean government to the North on Saturday to try to improve relations that soured after Pyongyang threatened to halt border crossings.

The Democratic Labour Party group was travelling to North Korea via China, Jun Kwon-hee, a party leadership aide, told The Associated Press.

Vice Unification Minister Hong Yang-ho met opposition leader Kang Ki-kap on Thursday and asked him to tell Pyongyang that Seoul has not turned away from deals reached at two bilateral summits and that it is ready to discuss how to implement them, Jun said.



General Ann Dunwoody

US Army promotes first woman to four star rank

AFP, Washington

The female descendant of a long line of US military officers was promoted to four star general Thursday, the first woman ever to reach the top rung of the US military.

Ann Dunwoody accepted the promotion and command of the army's materiel command with humour and humility at a Pentagon ceremony so packed with well wishers that three star generals were standing in the aisles.

"When people ask me, Ann, did you ever think you were going to be a general officer, say nothing about a four-star, I say not in my wildest dreams," she said.

Firefighters battle blazes in California

AFP, Montecito

Firefighters were battling to get a grip on a wildfire in an exclusive California enclave early Saturday as a fresh blaze erupted on the outskirts of Los Angeles.

At least 100 homes in the ritzy hillside community of Montecito, 100 miles (160 kilometres) northwest of Los Angeles, had been destroyed by a wind-driven wildfire that erupted on Thursday in the picturesque celebrity haven.

A lull in winds on Friday offered respite to around 800 firefighters tackling the flames but the fire, which has burned around 1,800 acres (728 hectares) remained out of control.

Montecito is a popular home-from-home for the super-rich, and celebrities such as talk-show queen Oprah Winfrey and Hollywood actors Michael Douglas, Jeff Bridges and Rob Lowe all own property in the area.

Iraq, US agree on final security pact draft

Key Shia clerics warn Baghdad about deal

AP, Baghdad

A senior aide to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki says Iraq and the US are now in agreement over a final draft of a security pact.

The pact would allow American troops to stay in Iraq for three more years after their United Nations mandate expires Dec. 31.

He says copies of the agreement will be distributed to Cabinet members later Saturday after a final revision of the Arabic translation and could be put to a vote in an emergency meeting Sunday or Monday.

Speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject, the aide says the agreement stands "a good chance" of being passed by a two-thirds majority in the 37-member

Cabinet.

If adopted by the Cabinet, the agreement will be voted on in parliament.

Earlier Iraq's two most powerful Shia clerics on Friday challenged the government's planned security pact with the United States, undercutting efforts to reach a deal before the UN mandate for American troops in Iraq expires Dec. 31.

Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr renewed threats to unleash his militia fighters to attack US forces unless they leave Iraq immediately, and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani vowed to intervene if he concludes the proposed agreement governing the presence of US forces infringes on national sovereignty.

Iraqi officials have said they will seek a renewal of the UN Security

Council's mandate if the pact, which would allow American troops to stay in Iraq through 2011, is not passed by parliament by year's end.

The pressure from the clerics showcases the precarious position of Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Most of his Shia allies reject the deal, including the senior partner in his coalition, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, and his own spiritual guide, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah of Lebanon.

Al-Sadr's threat to attack American troops if they don't leave came in a statement by the Iran-based cleric that was read to thousands of supporters at Friday prayers in Baghdad's Shia Sadr City enclave and the city of Kufa, south of Baghdad.



A firefighter walks across a burnt landscape near a home that was saved from burning by a team of firefighters on Friday in Montecito, California. A wind-whipped wildfire has destroyed at least 100 homes and forced thousands to evacuate.

Obama also weighs Richardson as secy of state

AP, Washington

President-elect Barack Obama has interviewed primary election rivals Hillary Rodham Clinton and Bill Richardson for secretary of state, according to Democratic officials who revealed his secret meetings with both as he weighed the decision on folding former foes into his new administration.

Obama met with Richardson late Friday afternoon, a day after conferring one-on-one with Clinton at his Chicago office, said several Democratic officials.

He plans to meet there Monday with his Republican opponent, John McCain, but advisers to both of the general election rivals say they don't expect Obama to consider McCain for an administration job.

Obama faces more personal threats

AP, Washington

Threats against a new president historically spike right after an election, but from Maine to Idaho law enforcement officials are seeing more against Barack Obama than ever before.

The Secret Service would not comment or provide the number of cases they are investigating. But since the Nov. 4 election, law enforcement officials have seen more potentially threatening writings, Internet postings and other activity directed at Obama than has been seen with any past president-elect, said officials aware of the situation who spoke on condition of anonymity because the issue of a president's security is so sensitive.

Earlier this week, the Secret Service looked into the case of a sign posted on a tree in Vay, Idaho, with Obama's name and the offer of a "free public hanging." In North Carolina, civil rights officials complained of threatening racist graffiti targeting Obama found in a tunnel near the North Carolina State University campus.

And in a Maine convenience store, an Associated Press reporter saw a sign inviting customers to join a betting pool on when Obama might fall victim to an assassin. The sign solicited \$1 entries into "The Osama Obama Shotgun Pool," saying the money would go to the person picking the date closest to when Obama was attacked. "Let's hope we have a winner," said the sign, since taken down.



Space Shuttle Endeavour lifts off from launch pad 39-1 at Kennedy Space Centre on Friday in Cape Canaveral, Florida. Endeavour is scheduled for a 16-day mission to the International Space Station.

Space shuttle Endeavour races toward space station

AP, Cape Canaveral

Space shuttle Endeavour raced toward the international space station on Saturday for a home makeover job after a brilliant moonlit launch that had NASA managers in awe.

The shuttle and its seven astronauts blasted into orbit Friday night on a mission to redo the insides of the space station, adding some extra bedrooms and a spare bathroom and kitchenette.

"It's our turn to take home improvement to a new level after 10 years of international space station construction," commander Christopher Ferguson called out.

Ferguson and his crew will double as plumbers and installers once they arrive at the 220-mile-high space station Sunday, hooking up extra cooking and sleeping equipment as well as a new water recycling system so the station's crew can expand next year.

The work will keep the astronauts up over Thanksgiving. NASA expects to add a 16th day to the mission, thanks to the on-time launch.

"Very few things that we do beat a night launch like you saw tonight," said LeRoy Cain, chairman of the mission management team. "We're off to a great start on what's going to be an extremely exciting, very complex and challenging mission."

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Head and neck surgery involves the surgical removal of tumours from the skull base to the clavicle (collar bone). It comes broadly under:
- squamous (relating to skin) cancer of the aerodigestive tract (HNSCC)
- salivary gland and thyroid neoplasms (tumours)
Patients would require a combination of surgery, radiation and chemotherapy.
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The highly-trained team of surgeons at NCCS and the high volume of cases they handle helps to ensure quality of care and world standard results.

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NCCS treats more than 250 lymphoma patients each year and is the largest tertiary centre for lymphoma treatment in Singapore. Our lymphoma team consists of experienced medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, nuclear physicists and top-notch haematopathologists.
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