

Israel again seals off Gaza

Power plant shuts down

AFP, Jerusalem/Gaza City

Israel reacted on Tuesday to militant rocket fire by again sealing off the Gaza Strip, where officials said the territory's sole power plant was forced to shut down because of the crippling blockade.

The renewed closure of the impoverished Palestinian enclave came one day after humanitarian supplies were allowed in for the second time since Israel tightened its blockade following a November 4 surge in violence.

"After rockets were fired at the Israeli territory, Defence Minister Ehud Barak decided, following consultations with security services officials, that the crossing points will be closed on Tuesday," the defence ministry said in a statement.

Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip fired a rocket at southern Israel on Monday, causing no casualties or damage, a military spokesman said.

On Monday, 30 truckloads of humanitarian and other basic goods were delivered to Gaza. The Israeli authorities had previously opened the

Kerem Shalom border crossing for only one day since violence flared up at the beginning of the month.

Israel also opened the Karni crossing conveyor belt on Monday to deliver wheat and grain as well as the Nahal Oz terminal for the delivery of fuel to the power plant.

But Israeli authorities have made it clear the crossings will open again only if Gaza militants respect a truce that went into effect on June 19 but has been rattled by the upsurge in violence.

The closure of the crossings has led to international concern over the plight of residents in the overcrowded sliver of land whose economy has been crippled by a blockade Israel imposed after the Islamist Hamas movement seized power in June 2007.

On Tuesday, Gaza's sole power plant, which provides 25 to 30 per cent of the energy used in the overpopulated territory, ground to a halt, according to Kanaan Obeid, assistant director of Gaza's energy authority.

"Despite deliveries of fuel on Monday, the power plant stopped func-

tioning because of breakdowns in the production units," he said.

He said the frequent shutdowns of the plant caused by fuel shortages damaged parts of the production units that cannot be replaced because of the blockade.

Israel "refuses to allow in the necessary parts and the plant cannot restart without them," he said.

The power plant has been particularly hard hit by Israel's blockade, and Gazans regularly experience blackouts. Hamas says Israel has not been keeping its side of the truce deal by refusing to ease the blockade, while Israeli authorities insist Gaza militants must first hold their fire.

The Israeli defence minister has nevertheless come out in favour of an extension of the six-month truce.

"In the months preceding the entry into force of the truce, we were recording as many as 500 mortar or rocket attacks a month in southern Israel against just a dozen in the months since the truce," Barak told parliament on Monday.



PHOTO: AFP

A Thai boy holds a guitar during a protest by anti-government demonstrators outside the Royal Armed Forces Headquarters in Bangkok yesterday. Thousands of supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) left the old Don Mueang airport where they were besieging the prime minister's temporary offices and moved to the nearby military headquarters after speculation that the cabinet would meet there on the second day of marches aimed at toppling the government.



PHOTO: AFP

US President-elect Barack Obama announces New York Federal Reserve Bank president Timothy Geithner (L) as his choice for treasury secretary and Christina Romer (C) as Council of Economic Advisers Chair during a press conference in Chicago on Monday.

Obama pushes for swift action

He unveils economic team

AFP, Chicago

President-elect Barack Obama was set to expand his call for swift action to revive the stricken US economy yesterday in his second press conference in as many days focused on unveiling his economic team.

Obama urged Congress Monday to get to work on a new stimulus package "right away" so he could sign it as soon as he takes office on January 20, warning there is not a "minute to waste" in dealing with an economy that is "trapped in a vicious cycle."

He declined to reveal the cost of a plan that some reports said could top 700 billion dollars (545 billion euros) but said: "It is going to be of a size and scope that is necessary to get this economy back on track."

After touting a plan to create 2.5 million jobs through a spending spree on national infrastructure, Obama was expected to detail plans to slash

the federal budget at a press conference here at 1700 GMT. Obama nominated New York Federal Reserve president Timothy Geithner to take charge of the Treasury and Washington's existing 700-billion-dollar bailout for troubled financial institutions as the US administration announced its latest rescue deal, this time for Citigroup.

Vowing to uphold President George W. Bush's far-reaching market commitments, the Democrat said: "We'll need to bring together the best minds in America to guide us and that is what I've sought to do in assembling my economic team."

They will be getting to work immediately to develop recommendations for the stimulus plan and to "consult with Congress, the current administration, and the Federal Reserve on immediate economic developments over the next two months," he said.

No coup looming despite protests

Says Thai army chief

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's powerful army chief on Tuesday vowed there would be no coup in the kingdom, despite pleas by anti-government protesters for the military to step in to end the current political crisis.

Up to 10,000 protesters who are trying to topple the government besieged the temporary offices of the prime minister at Bangkok's old airport on Tuesday, while hundreds more descended on the military headquarters.

Local media said the protesters planned to submit a letter to General Songkitti Jaggabata, the ceremonial head of the armed forces, asking the military to take sides in the conflict.

"The armed forces have agreed that a coup cannot solve our country's problems and we will try to weather the current situation and pass this critical time," army chief General Anupong Paojinda told reporters.

US taps online youth groups to fight crime, terrorism

AFP, Washington

The US State Department announced plans on Monday to promote online youth groups as a new and powerful way to fight crime, political oppression and terrorism.

Drawing inspiration from a movement against FARC rebels in Colombia, the State Department is joining forces with Facebook, Google, MTV, Howcast and others in New York City next week to get the "ball rolling."

It said 17 groups from South Africa, Britain and the

Middle East which have an online presence like the "Million Voices Against the FARC" will attend a conference at Columbia University Law School from December 3-5.

Observers from seven organizations that do not have an online presence -- such as groups from Iraq and Afghanistan -- will attend. There will also be remote participants from Cuba.

They will forge an "Alliance of Youth Movement," said James Glassman, under secretary of state for public diplomacy.

Bush, Olmert bid farewell saying ME talks to go on

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Monday that the Middle East peace process which has so far failed to yield results will continue after the two lame-duck leaders leave office.

The close allies spoke at the start of a farewell meeting before Bush leaves the White House on January 20 and as Olmert prepares to step down amid a corruption scandal after February 10 elections.

Although president-elect Barack Obama has vowed to continue to support the talks to end the 60-year conflict, the prospects of the process launched almost exactly a year ago at an international conference in Annapolis, Maryland remain shrouded in uncertainty.

"I believe that vision is alive and needs to be worked on," Bush said. "We strongly believe that Israel will benefit by having a Palestinian state, a democracy on her border that works for peace."

Olmert, on his part, said that the Annapolis process will continue because "a two-state solution is the only possible way to resolve the conflict in the Middle East."

Bush and Olmert, who wish to end their time in office with proof of some success, will use the talks to take stock of their work over the past three years, officials said.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (R) meets with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Monday at the White House in Washington, DC.

Qaeda brands top Pak leaders agents of US



HAMID MIR From Pakistan

al-Qaeda is becoming a great unifying factor between the political and military leadership of Pakistan. In a new 30 minutes video statement American born al-Qaeda leader Adam Yahya Gadhah declared President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and Army Chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kyani as the agents of American imperialism.

May be al-Qaeda is not aware that this new video released by its propaganda cell "Al-Sahab" have created a lot of fans for the new ruling troika in Pakistan. The same video has also become a unifying factor between American CIA and Pakistani intelligence agency ISI. Nobody will believe in the West now that ISI still have connections with al-Qaeda because Adam Yahya Gadhah looks very angry with ISI in his new video.

Many Western diplomats in Islamabad are contacting their friends in media and requesting for the copy of 30 years old young American Gadhah's statement who is also known as Azzam Al-Americee. Gadhah was converted to Islam in 1997 in USA. He moved to Afghanistan in 1998 and joined al-Qaeda through Khalid Sheikh Muhammad.

Gadhah have analysed the situation in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kashmir according to the worldview of al-Qaeda in his American style English. He claimed that Zardari, Gilani and Kyani have been imposed on people of Pakistan by the USA. He said that "Kyani is the continuation of Musharraf". He suggested that

condemnation from Pakistani government and Army on US drone attacks is just a drama because new rulers of Pakistan have secretly allowed US to attack anywhere in Pakistan and these attacks are being planned after getting intelligence from Pakistani agencies.

Gadhah also criticised military operations in Bajour and Swat and said that "Kyani and ISI are doing all this to please USA". He also said that new rulers of Pakistan have decided to sell Kashmir to India and Pakistani Mujahideen have a big responsibility to save Kashmir. Gadhah have inserted some exclusive statements of Osama bin Ladin and Dr Ayman al Zawahiri in the same video just to establish that he is speaking on behalf of the top al-Qaeda leadership.

A highly placed government source in Islamabad revealed that President Asif Ali Zardari and coming Obama administration in USA are in contact with each other for making a "new Kashmir strategy". Obama have assured Zardari personally that in return of Pakistan's out of the way cooperation in war against terror he will try his best to put pressure on India for resolving Kashmir dispute. Zardari have also made it clear to Obama that his government is losing popularity due to increasing drone attacks in Pakistan and he need some breakthrough on Kashmir within the first half of 2009 for establishing his credibility. Zardari is also in contact with Democrat leader Hillary Clinton for starting a special diplomatic Kashmir mission in 2009.

In a recent video address to an Indian newspaper summit President Zardari tried to make some friends across the border by saying that "I don't feel threat-

ened by India and India should not feel threatened by Pakistan". Zardari proposed an agreement with India on a No First Use of Nuclear Weapons, a Nuclear Free South Asia and a visa free regime between India and Pakistan. There is no positive response from Indian government on the friendly statement of Zardari despite the fact that many Pakistanis never liked "one sided friendly gestures" from their President to India. Pakistani public opinion is very much disturbed after the blocking of river Chenab waters by India through Baglihar dam. Some close advisers of Zardari including Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi are of the opinion that Pakistan should not give any more good gestures to India till March 2009.

Zardari is rightly or wrongly convinced that he cannot have any breakthrough with India without the help of Washington. The reality is that Zardari administration recently tried its level best to convince the CIA officials that Indian intelligence agency RAW is trying to destabilise Baluchistan and also tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. Interior Adviser Rehman Malik and one serving Pakistan Army General reportedly produced some evidence in front of CIA officials about the involvement of Indian intelligence to destabilise peace in Pakistan. A top Pakistani official told this scribe that "we need a commitment on Kashmir from Obama administration before March 2009, if not then US drones will not be allowed to enter in Pakistani areas, US know that we can target their drones easily. After all Pakistan is a nuclear power and US forces in Afghanistan could not survive without the help of Islamabad".

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