

Rockets, gunfire on Gaza border as truce ends

AP, AFP, Jerusalem/ Gaza City

Sporadic violence is flaring along the Gaza-Israel border as a shaky truce expires.

The Israeli military says Gaza militants fired two rockets into Israel on Friday morning, following heavy rocket fire in recent days. The military also says troops guarding Israeli farmers in fields along the border came under sniper fire from inside Gaza.

There were no injuries reported. A six-month truce between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers is set to expire Friday. The ceasefire has been marred by ongoing violence since early November.

Hamas officials said Thursday that they would not renew the arrangement. Israel says the truce has no expiration date and that it will not take military action if Gaza's armed groups hold their fire.

Tension surged in and around Gaza on Friday as the Islamist rulers of the besieged Palestinian enclave declared an end to the troubled truce with Israel and

warned they would respond to any attack.

Shortly after the armed wing of Hamas formally announced the shaky six-month truce was over, the smaller Islamic Jihad group said it fired three rockets at Israel, which reported no damage or casualties.

Security sources also reported that an Israeli driving a tractor in a field just outside Gaza was targeted by Palestinian gunmen but was not hit.

At dawn, Hamas's Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades said: "The ceasefire is over and there won't be a renewal because the Zionist enemy has not respected its conditions."

Both Hamas and Israel have said they would respond if attacked, but neither has said it would go on the offensive at this stage.

"We issue a warning to the Zionist enemy: all attacks against the Gaza Strip or any new crime will trigger a large-scale confrontation and we will retaliate very fiercely," said a statement on the website of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades.

Israeli media highlighted the

increased state of alert among security forces and communities around the Gaza Strip, but also uncertainty about the risk of an escalation of violence.

"Hamas continues to maintain ambiguity," the mass-selling Yedioth Aharonot daily said. "If causing the situation to deteriorate will serve its immediate interests it will open fire even without declarations."

Several newspapers said the Israeli defence establishment was not eager for battle at this stage.

"There are myriad arguments against a war in Gaza, but the strongest is the one defence officials can't utter aloud... It would be hard to go into Gaza at the height of an election campaign," the liberal Haaretz daily said.

Israel scheduled legislative elections on February 10 after scandal-plagued Prime Minister Ehud Olmert presented his resignation in September.

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak has stressed that he sees no urgency in launching a large-scale military intervention in Gaza.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian militants of the Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades, the military wing of the Popular Resistance Committees, stand guard with their weapons during a press conference about the end of truce with Israel in Gaza City yesterday. Tension surged in and around Gaza Friday as the Islamist Hamas rulers of the besieged Palestinian enclave declared an end to the troubled truce with Israel and warned they would respond to any attack.



PHOTO: AFP
A riot police officer throws a tear gas canister to protesters during a demonstration in Athens on Thursday. The Greek capital was suffocating under a barrage of tear gas as 5,000 protesters swamped riot police outside parliament, 12 days after the police killing of a teenager sparked riots.

Protests pile pressure on Greek govt

AFP, Athens

Athens police braced for more protests Friday after nearly two weeks of clashes, as the government faced growing pressure over its handling of the crisis sparked by the police killing of a teenager.

The offices of a French cultural institute in the city were targeted by masked youths even before the day's scheduled demonstrations involving trade unions as well as student groups.

Students planned a protest in a city suburb where another teenager, the son of a union leader, was wounded in a mysterious shooting incident on Wednesday night, and were to stage a concert at Athens University.

Nato resumes diplomatic contacts with Russia

AP, Brussels

Nato and Russia will resume diplomatic contacts for the first time since the war in Georgia, the alliance's spokesman said Thursday.

Spokesman James Appathurai said Nato's secretary-general and Russia's ambassador to the Western alliance will meet informally Friday - the first such meeting since Nato froze diplomatic contacts in the wake of Moscow's invasion of Georgia in August.

Russian Ambassador Dmitry Rogozin has said previously he would welcome the resumption of ties, but his mission played down expectations for the meeting with Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

"We don't expect anything specific... but it is a step in unfreezing our relations," said Igor Semenenko, a senior Russian diplomat in Brussels.

Despite the diplomatic freeze, Nato and Russia have continued to cooperate on issues of common interest, such as combating piracy

off the Somali coast.

Moscow also has agreed to allow the alliance to use its territory to resupply Western forces in Afghanistan. Attacks on transport convoys in Pakistan by pro-Taliban forces have raised concerns about the security of Nato's main overland logistics route.

Nato foreign ministers agreed two weeks ago to gradually resume contacts with Moscow, starting with informal meetings at a relatively low level, such as Friday's meeting in which Russia is represented only by its ambassador.

They held off on resuming higher level talks, such as the meetings of Russian foreign and defence ministers with Nato counterparts that were held regularly every few months before the split over Georgia.

The decision was a compromise between nations led by Germany who had sought a rapid return to normal relations and the United States, backed by some eastern European Nato members, who were concerned a softer line might encourage Russia to bully its neighbours.

Obama takes a break after cabinet plaudits

AFP, Washington

President-elect Barack Obama was set to round out his cabinet picks yesterday after moving with his promised "deliberate haste" to get the faces in place to confront a dizzying array of menaces.

At a Chicago press conference Obama is expected to name Democratic lawmaker Hilda Solis as labor secretary and former Dallas mayor Ron Kirk as US trade representative, the Washington Post reported.

But after leaving Saturday for a Christmas break in Hawaii, the Democrat will have a chance to reflect on what has been unusually busy period for an incoming president since his November 4

election triumph.

And while these are still early days, Obama can bask in stellar poll readings -- 83 percent of respondents in a Marist survey Wednesday approved of his performance so far.

"This was one of the more well-organized and well-prepared transitions that we have seen," Princeton University historian Julian Zelizer said.

"Not only has he appointed some very high quality picks in terms of intellectual capacity and experience, but on key areas -- including economics and defence -- he has been able to move to the centre without alienating his core supporters," he said.

"It is a difficult balancing act. The most distinct aspect of this transition is how fast it is taking place."

At his first post-election news conference on November 7, Obama vowed to confront the US economic crisis head-on but stressed he would not rush into making cabinet appointments.

"I want to move with all deliberate haste, but I want to emphasise deliberate as well as haste," he said.

By common consent, Obama has filled his cabinet quickly but also with much thought to ability as he emulates the "team of rivals" assembled by his political hero, Civil War president Abraham Lincoln.

New Thai leader surveys damage at PM's office

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's new prime minister picked up a broom and posed for cameras yesterday on the steps of Government House, vowing to clean up the mess from a three-month sit-in and show the country is "back to normal."

About 100 painters and maintenance workers accompanied Abhisit Vejjajiva on his first trip to the prime minister's office compound, which was left in shambles after a three-month siege by protesters demanding the departure of allies of deposed ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

Parliament voted Abhisit in on Monday as the country's third prime minister in four months. He and his Democrat Party are the first opponents of Thaksin to lead a civilian government in the past seven years. Abhisit, 44, faces an enormous

challenge trying to unite the country largely split between the middle class that is his base and the rural poor who backed Thaksin and manage an economy buffeted by Thailand's political turmoil and a global slowdown. But first, he needs to get into his office.

"I intend to have the renovation finished as soon as possible because this is the country's face," Abhisit told reporters outside after orange-robed Buddhist monks blessed the building with holy water.

The once lush lawns and manicured gardens at Government House were ripped up by the protesters who set up a tent community with free food and outdoor showers. The crowd swelled to tens of thousands of people and caused damage estimated at \$3.6 million.



PHOTO: AFP
Bangkok Metropolitan Administration workers clean the ground at the Government House (background) in Bangkok yesterday. Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva planning to work at Government House next week as a massive 'cleaning' campaign launched in the compound which was illegally occupied by anti-government protesters for more than three months.

Malicious campaign in Ctg

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candidate. The booklets were being sold for Tk 5 and Tk 10.

The booklets criticised Awami League's politics. One of them apparently had a doctored photo of AL chief Sheikh Hasina wearing Sindur (vermillion).

As The Daily Star correspondent bought two booklets from a Shibir activist he was told that the Shibir men stored the booklets in a nearby library of their organisation for selling during the rally.

Four-party candidate in the constituency Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury said he was not aware of such activities.

"I do not believe in such dirty politics of tarnishing someone's character," he said, adding, "Everybody knows that I am a clean politician. It would be a matter of Jamaat if any such incident takes place," he added.

Prof Aslam Chowdhury, personal secretary to Khasru, told The Daily Star that they would be careful in future so that none could repeat such incident.

Our staff correspondent in Khulna reports: Police seized 101 VCDs and audiocassettes at an office of a courier service in Khulna yesterday.

The VCDs had pictures and footage of a Shibir man being

killed with oars and sticks in front of Baitul Mukarram Mosque in Dhaka on October 28, 2006. The audiocassettes contained apparently Awami League leaders' speeches against Jamaat-e-Islami.

Iqbal Hossain of Moghbar, Dhaka, sent those to City Jamaat Ameer Nizam Gohar Parwar and Maulana Gohar Kader, proprietor of Mamun Pharmacy at Paikgachha Bazar in Khulna.

A general diary (GD) was filed with Khulna Police Station in the evening.

Mian Gohar Parwar is contesting the upcoming parliamentary elections from Khulna-5 constituency.

Nizami shares assets

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lakh. He also owns electronics goods and furniture worth about Tk 3 lakh.

Apart from getting Tk 3 lakh as salary from the party, the Jamaat secretary general says that his two other sources of income are share dividends of Tk 3,512 and Tk 1,60 lakh he received as advance house rent from his tenants.

Mojahid, who identifies himself as a businessman, did not describe anything about his business. He claimed he spends Tk 3.75 lakh annually.

He says he may get donation of Tk 50,000 from Monowara Begum and Tk 4 lakh from Anwarul Haq Raju, neither of whom are his relatives. He will also get Tk 1.50 lakh from other sources.

Mojahid, who is running for the December 29 parliamentary elections in Faridpur-3 constituency, will spend Tk 50,000 from his own pocket while his sons, brothers and wife will provide him Tk 6.50 lakh for election expenditure.

In contrast, Nizami says that he has movable properties worth over Tk 47 lakh and his wife has more than Tk 7 lakh. They would have shared movable properties worth almost equally had Nizami kept the three vehicles in his wife's name. The Jamaat chief's three vehicles are said to be worth Tk 40 lakh.

The couple have immovable properties in either of their names. Nizami's wife owns Tk 65,828

in cash against her husband's Tk 28,716. She also has more money deposited in banks than her husband. Nizami has Tk 28,837 deposited in banks against his wife's Tk 2,51 lakh.

Nizami says he would spend 1.5 lakh from his own pocket while the rest of his total election expenditure of Tk 14 lakh would come from the party, his family members and well-wishers. Nizami, who identifies himself as a writer, is contesting the polls from Pabna-1 constituency.

Both the Jamaat leaders are now facing three criminal cases each. Proceedings of the cases against Nizami were suspended while Mojahid is on bail in two cases and the proceeding of the other one was suspended.

Shoe-thrower asks for leniency

CNN, Baghdad

The journalist who hurled his shoes at US President George W. Bush has described his attack as "ugly" and asked the Iraqi government for leniency.

A government spokesman confirmed Thursday that Muntadhar al-Zaidi penned a contrite handwritten letter to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki requesting compassionate treatment.

Yaseen al-Majeed, the prime minister's media adviser and spokesman, read CNN part of the letter, saying al-Zaidi describes what he did as "the great ugly act I perpetrated" and says an excuse would not be enough for that.

Al-Zaidi said he recalled

interviewing al-Maliki in 2005, and al-Maliki had said to him "come in, this is your home, too."

Al-Majeed told CNN al-Zaidi asked al-Maliki for that same "fatherly compassion." The letter was received on Thursday but it was written at another time, al-Majeed said.

Asked if al-Maliki would consider exonerating him, al-Majeed said it is too early to talk about that because the case remains with the judicial authorities.

Al-Zaidi is hailed as a hero by many Iraqis protesting his detention after he threw both of his shoes at Bush while the US president and al-Maliki were holding a news conference Sunday during Bush's unannounced visit to Baghdad.



Mark Felt

Watergate's 'Deep Throat,' dies

AP, San Francisco

W Mark Felt, the former FBI second-in-command who revealed himself as "Deep Throat" 30 years after he tipped off reporters to the Watergate scandal that toppled a president, has died. He was 95.

Felt died Thursday in Santa Rosa after suffering from congestive heart failure for several months, said family friend John D. O'Connor, who wrote the 2005 Vanity Fair article uncovering Felt's secret.

The shadowy central figure in the one of the most gripping political dramas of the 20th century, Felt insisted his alter ego be kept secret when he leaked damaging information about President Richard Nixon and his aides to Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward.

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