

US stands by Israel as world recoils at Gaza bloodshed

UNSC urges end to all military activities

AFP, AP, Paris/United Nations

The United States said that massive Israeli air strikes Saturday on the Gaza Strip were the fault of Islamist Hamas "thugs," as rival world powers urged both sides to halt escalating violence.

Outgoing US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in a statement that the US "holds Hamas responsible," whereas the European Union, Russia and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon distanced themselves from blaming either side.

The UN Security Council has issued a statement expressing serious concern at the escalating violence in Gaza and is calling on Israel and the Palestinians to immediately halt all military activities.

After more than four hours of emergency consultations that began Saturday night, the United Nations' most powerful body issued a statement Sunday that also stressed the need for the restoration of a ceasefire between Israel and Gaza's Islamic Hamas rulers.

The Security Council also called for the

opening of border crossings into Gaza "to address the serious humanitarian and economic needs in Gaza" and ensure a continuous supply of food and fuel as well as medical treatment.

As global reaction began to polarise, Israel's strongest ally accused Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, of bringing destruction upon itself by breaking a six-month ceasefire, which expired on December 19.

"These people are nothing but thugs, and so Israel is going to defend its people against terrorists like Hamas," White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe said at George W. Bush's Texas ranch.

"If Hamas stops firing rockets into Israel, then Israel would not have a need for strikes in Gaza," Johndroe said. "What we've got to see is Hamas stop firing rockets into Israel."

The United States holds Hamas responsible for breaking the ceasefire; we want the ceasefire restored. We're concerned about the humanitarian situation and want all parties concerned to work to make sure the people of Gaza get the

humanitarian assistance they need," said Johndroe.

The State Department amended Rice's initial statement about holding Hamas responsible to say "we" rather than the United States, adding that "the United States calls on all concerned to protect innocent lives and to address the urgent humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza."

At least 225 Palestinians have been killed, according to the head of Gaza emergency services. Another three people were reported killed later, taking the toll to at least 228.

In the Middle East, the Arab League singled out Israel for blame, and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference accused it of a "war crime" for not protecting the lives of civilians.

Middle East envoy Tony Blair deplored the "tragic loss of life," and urged a "new strategy for Gaza, which brings that territory back under the legitimate rule of the Palestinian Authority in a manner which ends their suffering and fully protects the security of Israel."

14 children die in bombing near Afghan school

AP, Kabul

The US military says that a suicide bombing near an Afghan primary school killed 14 children. Authorities had earlier said five children were killed.

A bomber was trying to attack a meeting of tribal elders in eastern Afghanistan on Sunday. The military says a total of 16 people were killed in

the explosion and 58 were wounded.

Khost deputy police chief Yacoub Khan says the suicide blast went off near the entrance to a police and army post. US troops are also stationed inside the outpost, but no troops were wounded or killed in the attack.

Meanwhile, a roadside bomb killed two Canadian soldiers and two Afghans working alongside them in a dangerous region of southern Afghanistan, Canada's military said Sunday.

The suicide blast went off near the entrance to a police and army post, said Yacoub Khan, the deputy police chief of the eastern province of Khost. US troops are also stationed inside the outpost, but no troops were wounded or killed in the attack.

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