

# 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."



Palestinian civil defence workers use hoses and bulldozers to control a fire consuming a building following a fresh Israeli airstrike in Rafah town in the southern Gaza Strip early yesterday. Israel warned Sunday that it could send ground troops into Gaza as its warplanes continued to pound Hamas targets in the overcrowded enclave where over 280 Palestinians were killed.

## 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.

## Zimbabwe to prosecute 140 white farmers

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe will prosecute 140 white landowners on charges of failing to vacate their farms under the country's controversial 2000 land reform programme, state media reported yesterday.

"A total of 140 farmers are to be prosecuted for failing to vacate farms after being issued with eviction notices," The Sunday Mail said, citing a report presented at the ruling ZANU-PF party's national conference.

The government ordered the group off their properties by September 30 to make way for resettlement by landless blacks, under often-violent land reforms that critics blame for causing chronic food shortages in this onetime regional breadbasket.

## Pakistan calls for dialogue to fight out terror

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's leader has pleaded for dialogue, not war, to fight terrorism in South Asia but told India not to push Islamabad too hard for action against extremists one month after the Mumbai attacks.

In an emotional speech delivered Saturday on the first anniversary of the assassination of former premier Benazir Bhutto, President Asif Ali Zardari -- her widower -- said Pakistan would fight the "cancer" of extremism.

Zardari's comments came as the United States, Russia and other nations tried to defuse tensions between Pakistan and India, which quickly escalated on Friday after officials here announced that troops had been moved to the border.

India has blamed the Mumbai attacks, which left 172 dead, on the banned Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and accused Islamabad of

not doing enough to clamp down on it -- something Zardari firmly rejected.

"Dialogue is our biggest arsenal," he told dignitaries gathered at the Bhutto family home to honour the slain opposition leader, who was killed on December 27 last year in a gun and suicide attack.

"We have non-state actors. Yes, they are forcing an agenda on us," the Pakistani leader said.

But on the subject of future action against such movements, he said in a direct remark to India: "We shall do it because we need it, not because you want it."

"This mettle has been tested many times. Please do not test it again... Allow us the freedom of democracy, allow us the freedom of choice," he said.

He welcomed US president-elect Barack Obama's plans for fighting terror in South Asia -- what he dubbed a "regional cure for this cancer" -- and said Islamabad was ready to play its part.

"We will cure it, we will solve it, we will correct it," Zardari said.

But he rejected the notion that conflict between the nuclear-armed neighbours could solve anything, saying: "We have lost our people -- we do not talk about war, we do not talk about vengeance."

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947, two of them over the disputed Kashmir region.

They came to the brink of a fourth war in late 2001 after an attack on India's parliament, which New Delhi also blamed on the LeT. Both sides deployed hundreds of thousands of troops but retreated after international mediation.

Senior Pakistani security and defence officials described last week's troop movements toward India -- and away from Afghanistan, where Islamabad is battling Taliban and al-Qaeda militants in the tribal areas -- as "limited".

## Call for change in the air

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constituency, the election there will be rerun.

Even after EC endeavours, people with dubious past are in the race thanks to court orders and some loopholes in the laws. However, the good news is that a significant number of fresh face and women are seeking election to parliament.

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda in an address to the nation last night called on everyone to come out and cast vote.

He said, "Let's turn to our conscience and reasoning to choose representatives for a parliament that can realise our long-cherished dreams."

Earlier in the day, Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) M Sakawat Hossain told reporters that the EC would take stern actions against troublemakers.

This is the first time the national election is being held in the month of victory.

As many as 35,263 polling stations are all set for 8.10 crore people to exercise voting rights in around seven years.

Polling opens at 8:00am to continue till 4:00pm without break. The caretaker government has declared the day a public holiday.

Of the voters, 4.12 crore are female and 3.98 crore male. The

number of fresh entrants on the electoral roll is over 1 crore.

Thirty-eight registered political parties are running for 299 out of 300 seats. Election to the other constituency, Noakhali-1, was rescheduled for January 12 after grand alliance candidate and Gondoantri Party leader Nuful Islam died on December 4.

The number of candidates is 1,555. Of them, 148 are independent and 60 women.

Contestants on the grand alliance ticket stand at 270 and the four-party at 266. Twenty-nine candidates including AL President Sheikh Hasina, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad are contesting more than one seat.

Over 2 lakh local observers and 700 foreign observers are monitoring the polls.

The EC has made all-out preparation to ensure free and fair conduct of the polls. It has employed 5,67,094 polling staff to get the job done.

Around 6 lakh members of law enforcement agencies and the armed forces have been deployed to effect foolproof security.

In the wake of repeated calls from the political parties and rights organisations, the caretaker government lately lifted the state of emergency, reinstating civil liberties and allowing free rein in election-

eering.

The days following the proclamation of emergency on January 11, 2007 were full of actions unthinkable up until then. Happenings in the political sphere were splashed across the front pages of the newspapers.

During the time, two former prime ministers along with their many party colleagues were detained for about a year on graft charges.

AL and BNP faced immense pressure to be reformed while a 'minus-two' formula to disperse with Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia being at their helm failed to gain ground.

Eventually, the two were let out to lead their parties to the polls.

Khaleda-led BNP teamed up with Jamaat-e-Islami and two other parties won the 2001 election by a landslide. Hasina's AL fought that election on its own.

Though the gap between the number of seats won by BNP-led alliance and AL in 2001 election was huge, that in the number of votes they obtained was slim. BNP polled 40.97 percent of the ballot, AL 40.13 and Jatiya Party 7.25 percent.

As alliance partners of BNP, Jamaat got 4.28 percent, Bangladesh Jatiya Party 1.12 and Islami Oikya Jote 0.68 percent.

## Egypt trying to broker Hamas-Israel truce

AFP, Cairo

Egypt is trying to broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas to be followed by a truce, Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said following talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

Abbas was in Cairo to discuss Egyptian and Arab League efforts to end the violence in Gaza that has seen the Israeli military kill more than 280 Palestinians in two days of air strikes against Hamas targets.

One Israeli was also killed by a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip on Saturday.

Abul Gheit said that a meeting of Arab League foreign ministers set to be held in Cairo on Wednesday should agree on a plan to deal with the crisis that would include seeking a ceasefire and trying to renew a Hamas-Israel truce.

The ministers "must decide how to reach a ceasefire between the two parties as a prelude to an agreement on the truce which will lead to an opening of crossing points between Israel and Gaza."

Israel, Hamas and the United Nations Security Council will be informed of the outcome of Wednesday's meeting, he said.

Egypt brokered a six-month truce between Hamas and Israel, which expired last week, heralding a resurgence of tit-for-tat violence that led to Israel's onslaught on the territory.

## Cast your vote wisely

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representatives and mode of development in their areas as well as overall development depend on their decision.

"You are now sitting in the chair of judge... Keep it in mind that we are going to take a decision for five years through our single day's verdict. We'll not make mistake in taking the decision, Inshallah," he said.

Fakhruddin, who took over power at a critical juncture of the nation on January 12, 2007 under the state of emergency following the 1/11 changeover amid a political crisis, urged the parties to shun malice, violence and hostile mindset in the post-election period and be copartners in the future journey.

"We want to find unity, solidarity and unity in diversity. Today, it is critically important to have mutual respect, harmony and tolerance," he said.

The chief adviser said people's verdict should turn to be the responsibility of the elected representatives and the people's support and trust should be the commitment to build a happy Bangladesh by fulfilling the basic needs.

He said he had not performed his responsibility in the last two years with emotion or affection rather followed the constitution and government rules. "We've tried to accomplish the assigned responsibility with only a few advisers and assistants," he said, adding: "We'll not claim cent-percent success for all our sincerity and efforts."

The chief adviser said his caretaker government embarked upon a journey for political reasons and that journey ends with restoration of politics. He hoped that a free, fair, neutral and transparent election will be held today and it will remain a shining example for the next generation.

"We hope all will accept the election results in good grace," he said, adding that the next parliament will fulfill the aspirations of the people and steer the

nation towards development and progress.

"Let violence and clash be gone, let discrimination and differences be removed and let conflict be resolved," he said in his speech and urged the people to face the future challenges holding the dreams of independence in heart. "Make it sure that new generation does not need to look up the meaning of independence so we can present the nation with a nice dream of Bangladesh."

In an emotion-charged voice, the head of the outgoing interim government said, "We had mistakes too. Maybe, sometimes I had been unintentionally the cause of someone's sorrow. For that I sincerely express my regret. I hope you will forgive our flaws and failures."

The chief adviser regretted the sufferings of people due to the price hike of essentials, pushing up the inflation at home as high as 10 percent, with sharp rise in prices across the world for high-priced fuel oils and food items on the international market.

"This caused tremendous pains for us," he said, adding that the inflation already started declining and recorded 6.2 percent in November this year. He hoped that the indicator would continue to decline in the coming months due to substantial increase in production of food in the country.

He said the government has given the highest priority to attaining food security and shared government's experience that agriculture production can be increased in the country through ensuring fertiliser and quality seeds as well as fuel oils and electricity as evident during the last Boro, Aus and Aman harvests.

Appreciating the farmers' success in the last Boro season, the chief adviser said the country had to face a food shortage of 1.8 million tons due to three consecutive disasters last year, "but it has been proved that we

can overcome it though it took sometime."

In the year 2008, country's cereal production marked its highest yearly record of 33 million tons while the food stock in government godowns stood at 1.3 million tons as of current month, he added.

"We'll have to utilise the experience. The farmers should be provided with all cooperation as agriculture will be our tool for development. There is no scope for thinking otherwise," he said in his 26-minute speech, touching upon all aspects of the military-backed caretaker government's eventful two-year rule.

Fakhruddin said electricity is an integral part of agriculture, production and development despite the fact that the country is lagging behind the demand for power and described the short- and medium-term power sector plans undertaken by the caretaker government during the last two years.

He mentioned that agreements were signed for adding 1,000MW power to the national grid during the two-year period. Of the target, 400MW have already been supplied into the grid and the rest 600 MW could be supplied before the next summer.

Dwelling on his government's achievements on the economic front, the chief adviser said that GDP grew at 6.2 percent during the last fiscal year despite natural disasters, increase in import prices and adverse external environment while exports grew 16 percent to \$14 billion and per-capita income rose to \$600 from \$520.

A significant achievement of this government was to double the manpower export, numbering around 800,000 in 2007 as compared to the year 2006. "If the process continues, country's growth will be faster as well as the munga-hit and poor sections of people will be benefited," he told the nation.

## Harijans upbeat

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(PDP) -- have pledged in their election manifestos to end all discriminations against the Dalits.

Awami League has pledged to help educate the community, while CPB said it voted to power, they would consider any form of discrimination based on caste as a punishable offence.

The inclusion of their demands in the manifestos brought enthusiasm among the Dalit community about exercising their franchise.

There are no recent surveys on these people. However, according to a survey conducted in late 1990s by the United Nations, as many as 5.5 million Dalits were living in Bangladesh.

The majority of the Dalits in the country are employed as sweepers who are originally the descendants of immigrants from Kanpur, Nagpur and

Andhra Pradesh of India, brought here by the British in 1830s to provide all sorts of manual services to the colonial rulers.

Most of these people are Hindus and Christians who mainly speak Telegu, Kanpuri, Jabbalpuri, Hindi and a distorted form of Bangla.

According to Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR), an organisation working for the low caste people, there are around 5.2 million Dalit voters across the country and among them around 35,000 live in Dhaka city.

The sweepers live in 18 sweeper and Dalit colonies in the city. Dhaka City Corporation has set up such colonies at Ganakuti, Dayaganj, Dhalpur, Sutrapur, Agargaon and on Gabtoli embankment. Around 5,000 more live in 13 smaller settlements in Dhaka, Naryanganj and Savar.

In all of these colonies Awami League has always been holding a strong position.

Srimoti Devi, working as a sweeper for Lalmeta Women's College in the city, said: "During the last election when I went to vote I found someone already had voted in my name, while most of my neighbours' names were not even on the voter list. Our rights were always ignored."

Lusmi, a Telegu cleaner working for Dhaka City Corporation in Taltola area, said, "During every poll the candidates pay a visit to our colony, and when the poll is over they never come back. But this time we might see some changes."

The term 'Harijan' is considered bad and weak word by many of the 'lower' caste people of India, as the name implies that the section is weak and should be taken care of. They prefer the word 'Dalit' (meaning

oppressed) instead of Harijan. The word Dalit generally indicates the poor and oppressed persons in the society.

The Dalits are usually deprived of many fundamental rights, financial and social supports only because they perform menial jobs including those of sweepers, scavengers, doms (persons engaged in managing dead bodies and cutting, sewing and preserving them during autopsy), cobblers, fishermen, tea workers and gypsies (bede).

Because of their untouchable and isolated social status and a lack of social security, the Dalits cannot go out of their community and join the mainstream workforce.

BDHR General Secretary Babu Lal Sarder said, "No government has ever taken effective measures to remove the social stigma against them."

"This is the first time we have

an opportunity to challenge all our odds with a national ID card and with the support from political parties as pledged in their manifestos. We can only hope that they would keep their promises," he added.

As their primary demands, Dalit community leaders said political parties as per their promises should lift them out of the untouchable status, provide them with better access to education and employment with quota system, stop eviction of the Dalits from settlements and allocate khas land to them.

Shankar Das Pollati Apparao, president of Telegu Community Development Society, said: "Our community has been evicted many times from one place to another. We have been doing all the dirty works for generations. Eviction of Dalits from their settlements should stop."

## 'Hijras' still deprived of franchise

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were considered to cast their vote, either as male or female.

"I am neither man nor woman. But society knows I exist. So why should I have to hide my identity," said Jaya Sikdar, general secretary of Badhon Hijra Shongho.

"When the government does not allow me to vote with my original identity, it means I am not recognised by the state as who I am, with my biological uniqueness," Jaya added.

There are no surveys available regarding the Hijra population in the country. Surveys conducted by various NGOs

often vaguely mention that there are around 1.5 million Hermaphrodite people living in Bangladesh. They are seriously deprived of many rights.

Members of the Hijra community pointed out that because only two sexes are identified by the state, the Hijras are deprived of the rights to marry, own a passport, a driving licence, open a bank account or apply for employment. Being recognised by the state is vital, they said, as it is related to all other rights.

They also mentioned that none of the parties included their rights in the election man-

ifesto. Also, party nominees did not ask for their votes, ever.

Another member of the Hijra community, Kotha, organiser of Shocheton Shilpi Shongho (SSS), described some of the difficulties faced during the last elections, even disguised as women, on pen and paper. "When I went to vote in the last elections, I could not join any queue, as I did not belong to any specific gender."

"We are not a curse of nature. What we have is a physical deformation. Other people with physical disabilities can exercise their rights, so why can't we?" Kotha enquired.

Despite facing deprivation, Hijras have a role to play in the society. The traditional livelihood of the Hijra community is centred on blessing newborns for a fee. Hijras are also largely hired for entertaining weddings, birth rituals and other celebrations in rural Bangladesh. It is even believed that they can get rid of bad luck.

Hijras are however gradually losing their traditional occupation, making it hard for them to survive. Most live in an isolated life and even families abandon them.

As an alternative form of livelihood, Hijras are being

compelled to work in the sex industry, as they are not readily accepted elsewhere.

Sara Hossain, a Supreme Court lawyer, said, "We cannot ignore the fact that they are nature's creation and they have been a part of society for thousands of years. We have to accept their diversity with respect."

"Hijras should enjoy the right to vote with proper recognition, not as man or woman, but as human beings with a third gender. This would give them a proper legal status and create a safety net," she noted.

## 700 foreign observers to watch polls

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followed by 88 of ANFREL, 83 of IRI, 60 of NDI, 26 of USAID, 20 of the British High Commission and 16 of Commonwealth.

Most of the observation teams have opened temporary offices at different five-star hotels and many observers have already gone to different districts ahead of the election.

European Parliament

delegation, UN observer team, Commonwealth and Japanese delegations opened their observation booth at Pan Pacific Sonargaon hotel.

According to the hotel

management, 50 rooms of Sonargaon have already been booked for accommodation and offices of different delegations.

Press Information Department (PID) of the Ministry of Information opened its central monitoring office at the hotel offering opportunities of using Internet and International Subscriber Dialling (ISD) calls for the foreign journalists.

IRI has opened its office at Radisson Water Garden Hotel while EU Election Observation Mission at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel, said the hotel management.

Among the foreign observers, NDI will publish its election monitoring report on December 30 followed by European Union Mission and Commonwealth Observer Group on December 31 and the team from the United Nations (UN) secretary general's office on January 2.

According to the EC, 74 foreign journalists from different media include BBC World Service, Voice of America, Reuters, AFP, Al Jazeera, Newsweek, Xinhua News Agency, Radio France, France 24, Spanish News Agency, Deutsche Welle, NDTV and Kyodo News of Japan.