



Israeli soldiers prepare their tanks as they keep position on the Israeli-Gaza Strip border yesterday. Israel rejected world appeals for a truce Tuesday and warned its deadly assault on Gaza could last for weeks as warplanes pummelled Hamas positions for a fourth day and tanks massed on the border.

EU makes new call for end to Gaza 'hostilities'

OIC ministers to meet on ME crisis Saturday

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission made a new call yesterday for Palestinian group Hamas and Israel to halt their conflict so urgent supplies can be delivered to the population of the Gaza Strip.

"The European Commission is extremely concerned about the plight of civilians in the Gaza Strip," the EU executive arm said in a statement.

"It calls for an immediate halt to military hostilities that are having a heavy impact on the civilian population in Gaza. It also firmly calls for a halt to the rocket attacks targeting Israeli civilians."

Israel pounded targets in Gaza for the fourth day Tuesday and Hamas has fired scores of rockets into Israel since the collapse of a truce.

At least 363 Palestinians, including 39 children, have been killed and 1,720 wounded since Saturday, according to Gaza medics. Hamas rockets have killed

four people in Israel and wounded two dozen.

The Commission said it was "deeply concerned" over events in Gaza.

"The European Commission insists on the need for sufficient access for supplies of essential humanitarian goods to Gaza in particular in view of the dramatic situation of hospitals there."

"Urgent measures have to be taken in order to ensure safe and secure conditions for the distribution of these goods and to facilitate access of international agencies," said the commission statement.

In Jeddah ministers of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference will hold special talks on Saturday on Israel's deadly onslaught on the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, an OIC official said on Tuesday.

"The meeting will focus on the grave developments in the Gaza Strip as a consequence of the Israeli attack on the Palestinian people," the official told AFP

on condition of anonymity.

In four days of deadly raids at least 363 Palestinians have been killed inside the battered enclave. Israel on Tuesday rejected international appeals for a ceasefire and warned its offensive on Gaza could last for weeks.

The OIC meeting in Saudi Arabia's Red Sea port city of Jeddah will follow a gathering of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo on Wednesday.

On Saturday, the day Israel launched a wave of air raids on Hamas positions inside the besieged Palestinian territory, OIC chief Ekmelddin Ihsanoglu slammed the action as a war crime.

"The latest Israeli massacre is a war crime and shows what little regard Israel has for international law and the fourth Geneva convention on the protection of civilians in time of war," he said in a statement.

The OIC groups 1.3 billion Muslims from 57 countries worldwide.

62 journalists killed in 2008: Watchdog

AFP, Paris

The number of journalists, bloggers and media workers killed because of their work fell to 62 this year from 106 in 2007, the media rights watchdog Reporters Without Borders said Tuesday.

Nevertheless, the group said the fall in fatalities was not grounds for optimism over media freedom since in many areas the decrease showed only that violent repression had forced reporters to abandon their jobs.

The body also warned that state censorship was spreading to the Internet.

"The figures may be lower than last year's but this should not mask the fact that intimidation and censorship have become more widespread, including in the west," the group said in a statement.

"The quantitative improvement in certain indicators is often due to journalists becoming disheartened and turning to a less dangerous trade or going into exile," it added.

"We cannot say that 60 deaths, hundreds of arrests and systematic censorship offer grounds for optimism."

Reporters Without Borders is one of several pressure groups that maintains annual casualty figures for journalists. Others use different criteria, but all have noted high casualty rates in recent years.

6 dead as highway bandits pounce on Cameroon convoy

AFP, Yaounde

Highway bandits pounced on a convoy under military escort in northern Cameroon killing six people and leaving several wounded, national radio said Tuesday.

The armed bandits exchanged gunfire with two soldiers from Cameroon's rapid intervention battalion in Vina, in the Adamaoua region of the west African nation, Cameroon Radio-Television reported.

The convoy included a bus full of merchants headed to a cattle market, the radio said, adding that one of the bandits - sporting a bullet-proof vest - was able to keep firing "for a long time," wounding one of the soldiers.

Muslim nations condemn Israeli offensive

AFP, Paris

Muslim nations on Monday condemned Israel over the deadly air attacks on the Gaza Strip, as European diplomats called for an urgent meeting on the crisis, which sparked anti-Israeli protests around Europe.

EU foreign ministers will meet in Paris Tuesday to "look into how the European Union can help ease the current crisis, along with the efforts of the international community, especially the secretary general of the United Nations," a French foreign ministry statement said.

As the death toll in Gaza from Israel's offensive against the Islamist Hamas-controlled territory exceeded 300, efforts to hold talks between Syria and Israel were suspended.

Rebuffing Arab appeals, the United States demanded that Hamas agree to a "sustainable and durable ceasefire" and gave its support to Israel's attacks.

"In order for the violence to stop, Hamas must stop firing rockets into Israel and agree to respect a sustainable and durable ceasefire," said White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called key world leaders and diplomats, including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana as well as counterparts from Britain to Saudi Arabia to help restore a ceasefire, officials said.

Jordan's King Abdullah II urged US President George W. Bush to help end Israel's air blitz, the palace said.

"Effective international efforts must be launched to stop the Israeli aggression on Gaza and end the suffering of the Palestinians," the king told Bush over the telephone, according to a palace statement.

Other Muslim countries including Indonesia, Afghanistan, Malaysia and Pakistan joined in condemning Israel.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said it was ironic that the raids occurred as people entered the Islamic new year and days before the new year of 2009.

"We should pray that the earth will be more peaceful, but we've been torn by the situation in Palestine and Gaza," Yudhoyono told reporters.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown urged Israel and Palestinian leaders to let urgent medical aid into Gaza, to provide a "humanitarian breathing space" amid the fighting, his spokesman said.

"We are appalled by the continuing violence in Gaza and reiterate our call to Israel and Hamas for an immediate ceasefire to prevent further loss of innocent life," said a spokesman for Brown.

The special UN envoy to the Middle East, Robert Serry, and the head of the UN Relief and Works Agency, Karen Abu Zayd, meanwhile protested strongly to Israel after air strikes hit two UN buildings and killed eight of its people.

Ban urged world leaders, especially those from Arab nations, to work urgently to end the violence.

Israeli patrol boat collides with aid ship off Gaza

AFP, Tyre

An Israeli naval vessel collided yesterday with a boat carrying activists and medical supplies that was trying to break the blockade of Gaza, forcing it to head to port in Lebanon.

Passengers on board the 20-metre (66-foot) Dignity said the Israeli patrol boat rammed their vessel, but Israel insisted the two boats collided as the Israeli navy was trying to contact its captain.

"Dignity has entered Lebanese territorial waters and will arrive in Tyre soon," an official in the southern port town told AFP.

No one was injured in the collision between the patrol boat and Dignity -- operated by the Free Gaza Movement -- which was trying to take three tonnes of medical supplies into Gaza over four of Israeli air strikes on the Palestinian territory.

Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Yigal

Palmer told AFP that the naval vessel tried to contact the aid boat by radio for identification and to inform it that it could not enter Gaza.

"After the boat did not answer the radio, it sharply veered and the two vessels collided, causing only light damage," Palmer said.

The Israeli spokesman accused the international activists of "seeking provocation more than ever."

The Free Gaza Movement, which has run the blockade six times since August to take humanitarian supplies into Gaza, said the vessel could still sail after the ramming.

Paul Larudee, one of the group's founders, told AFP the Dignity had been "surrounded" in international waters about 70 kilometres (45 miles) off the Israeli coast and 135 kilometres from Gaza.

"It was surrounded by 11 Israeli naval vessels," he said.

Thai PM says his goal is to heal political divide

AP, Bangkok

Anti-government protesters abandoned their siege of Thailand's Foreign Ministry building on Tuesday, easing a standoff that threatened to reignite a long-running political crisis.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Cabinet then left the building, where he had earlier given a key policy address in which he vowed to jump-start Thailand's economy, heal its political divisions and repair its battered image.

"The government has come into office at a time of conflict. This conflict has become the weakness of the country," he told lawmakers that included only his coalition members. Opposition members boycotted the session.

"Meanwhile, the global economic crisis has turned the situation from bad to worse," he continued. "Our government's priorities are reviving the ailing economy and solving the

conflicts between groups in Thai society."

The protesters calling themselves the Democratic Alliance against Dictatorship have vowed to ring the Parliament building until their demands for new general elections are met, forced the government to abandon plans Monday to deliver its policy speech. The government said it would try to peacefully end the blockade.

The standoff comes less than a month after the last government was forced from office following six months of demonstrations that culminated in the eight-day seizure of Bangkok's two main airports. The earlier protesters had been part of an alliance opposed to ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The latest demonstration was peaceful except for some brief scuffles between protesters and police Tuesday. But analysts say the continuing upheavals will further batter Thailand's virtually moribund tourist industry and other economic sectors.

Guinea coup leader names civilian PM

AP, CONAKRY, Guinea

The leaders of Guinea's coup named a civilian as prime minister Tuesday, making good on a key promise to the population exactly a week after seizing power upon the death of the country's late dictator.

The man designated prime minister, Kabine Komara, is a Guinean based in Cairo where he is a director of the African Export-Import Bank, a 14-year-old institution that promotes trade between African states.

Guineans had already heard his name two years ago after the country's powerful unions led weeks of demonstrations demanding the resignation of the ailing President Lansana Conte. They reached a compromise when he agreed to name a prime minister of their choice. Komara was one of three names they proposed. While Conte did not choose Komara, his name on the list indicates his standing with the country's powerful unions, who represent the country's main opposition voice.

The naming of a civilian suggests the military junta is serious about following through on its commitments, which include holding elections and cracking down on corruption.

The African Union froze Guinea's membership in the continent-wide bloc on Monday, threatening further sanctions if the junta does not restore constitutional order. "We will not accept that the coup d'etat sticks in Guinea," said AU chairman Patrick Sinyanza.

Ugandan rebels kill 400 in Congo: NGO

AFP, Kinshasa

Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army rebels killed more than 400 people in Christmas massacres in northern Democratic Republic of Congo, the Caritas aid charity said yesterday.

The targets included a town where a Christmas Day concert was being held and a Roman Catholic church and attacks were going on along the Sudanese border, the group said in a statement.

Caritas workers say that "over 400 people have been killed in the attacks in an area of northern Congo including Faradje, Duru, Gurba, Doruma, and Province Orientale."

"The director of Caritas Duru-Doruma says that the Ugandan rebels attacked a

Christmas Day concert in Faradje City organised by the Catholic church there," the statement said.

"He says the rebels returned the next morning to continue their killing spree. He says approximately 150 people were killed over the two days."

"At the same time, another attack was perpetrated in Duru, north of Duru. Caritas reports 75 people killed and the church burned down."

Caritas reported that killing continued along the Sudan border, including in Bangadi, Doruma and Gurba.

In Bangadi 48 people died and in Gurba 213 people were killed. Approximately 6,500 people have found refuge in the area with the Catholic church, the charity said.

Shoe-thrower trial in Iraq postponed

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's Central Criminal Court decided on Tuesday to postpone the trial of an Iraqi journalist who won global fame for throwing his shoes at US President George W. Bush, a court spokesman said.

"The postponement came after Zaidi's lawyers presented an appeal to a higher court," Abdel Sattar Beyraqdar told AFP.

"The Supreme Criminal Court decided to postpone the trial of journalist Muntazer al-Zaidi until the higher court issues its decision," he said, adding that a new trial date would be set later.



Thai policemen clash with supporters of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra as the police try to clear a path outside the foreign ministry in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's new Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was forced to relocate his maiden policy speech after riot police failed to clear protesters besieging Bangkok's parliament building.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Israel keeps Gaza objectives vague

AP, Jerusalem

Israel has dropped tons of bombs on the Gaza Strip in an unprecedented show of force to make Hamas stop rocket attacks, but it has not said it will try to topple the Islamic militants who have ruled the territory for 18 months.

Such a limited definition of goals gives Israel considerable flexibility in deciding when to end the assault, especially if international pressure mounts, while still calling it a success. But this guarded approach also offers Hamas good survival odds, even if the

onslaught leaves it badly weakened.

Israel's unwillingness to reoccupy Gaza or openly try to install a new ruler there gives Hamas considerable leverage in future cease-fire negotiations.

In exchange for calm on Israel's border, Hamas demands an end to the crippling blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt after the Hamas takeover of Gaza 18 months ago. Hamas, which won 2006 parliamentary elections, seized control after a power-sharing agreement with the rival Fatah movement collapsed in violence.

Ending the blockade could help Hamas recover quickly and prolong its rule indefinitely. But, in turn, would all but destroy prospects of an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Israel has been negotiating for the past year with Hamas' rival, moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who controls the West Bank. However, Israel says it cannot implement an agreement as long as the Iranian-backed Hamas, sworn to Israel's destruction, controls half of what would be a Palestinian state.

With peace talks producing no tangible results, a weak-

ened Abbas may not be able to cling to power much longer if Hamas remains in control of Gaza. Abbas' opponents claim his term ends on Jan. 9 and have said they will not recognise his authority after that.

Abbas seemed increasingly irrelevant this week, voicing little more than tepid condemnations after the Israeli offensive began. On Monday, Hamas quickly rebuffed his offer to serve as a broker between Israel and the Islamists.

The previous cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, brokered by Egypt, took effect in June.

Its terms were never made public, but Hamas says the understanding was that Israel would gradually ease the blockade.

Instead, Israel allowed in only limited supplies, and it repeatedly closed border crossings for sporadic rocket fire on Israeli border communities. With Israel controlling all of Gaza's cargo passages, the closures have led to widespread shortages of basic goods.

Hamas, meanwhile, kept bringing in weapons through smuggling tunnels in preparation for the next round of fighting.



This file photo shows Bristol Palin (R), daughter of Republican vice presidential candidate Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, is holding hands of her boyfriend Levi Johnston.

Palin's daughter gives birth to boy

AP, Anchorage

The daughter of former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin has given birth to a son, a magazine reported Monday.

Bristol Palin, 18, gave birth to Tripp Easton Mitchell Johnston on Saturday, People magazine reported online. He weighed 7 pounds, 4 ounces. Colleen Jones, the sister of Bristol's grandmother, told the magazine that "the baby is fine and Bristol is doing well."

The governor's office said it would not release information because it considers the baby's birth a private, family matter. Palin family members, hospital employees and spokespeople for the governor's former running mate, John McCain, either would not confirm the birth or did not return messages from The Associated Press.