

Hamas resilient despite Israeli onslaught

AP, Gaza City

Israel is methodically targeting the Hamas domain, bombing government offices, security compounds, commanders, and even Hamas-linked clinics, mosques and money changers. Yet Gaza's Islamic rulers show no sign of buckling under the aerial onslaught.

Israel says Hamas still has thousands of rockets. Hamas TV and radio remain on the air, broadcasting morale-boosting battle reports. Hamas' political and military leaders communicate from hiding places by walkie-talkie. Police patrol streets to prevent price gouging and looting.

"Israel has destroyed the buildings, but Hamas is still here," Ahmed Yousef, a Hamas spokesman, said Thursday, the sixth day of the bombing campaign. "There is no anxiety over the existence of Hamas even if they destroy all of Gaza because we are among the people."

Hamas' survival will depend on how far Israel is willing to go to obtain its

declared objective: crippling the group's ability to fire rockets at Israeli towns and cities. Thousands of Israeli soldiers are amassed on Gaza's border, waiting for the signal to invade.

Yet Israel, which withdrew its troops from Gaza in 2005 after a 38-year occupation, also says it does not want to reoccupy the area. That suggests Hamas will be able to cling to power in Gaza, which it seized by force from moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in June 2007.

Hamas' future also hinges on the conditions of the cease-fire that will eventually be brokered.

The group's leaders are demanding that Gaza's borders be opened in exchange for calm; the territory has been largely sealed off by Israel and Egypt since the Hamas takeover. A plan promoted by Egypt and the US would link any opening of the borders to giving Abbas a new foothold in Gaza.

With Hamas losing much of its infrastructure to the Israeli assault, it might be

more willing to cut a deal with Abbas, said Gaza analyst Emad Falluji, a former Hamas activist.

For now, Hamas has proven surprisingly resilient.

Since the offensive began, the group's fighters have fired nearly 400 mortar shells, homemade rockets and Iranian-supplied Grad rockets, according to the Israeli military. It has struck two new targets closer to Israel's centre, the southern cities of Ashdod and Beersheba. Four Israelis have been killed.

Hamas has thousands more rockets in its arsenal, said Maj. Avital Leibovich, an Israeli army spokeswoman. Most of the weaponry has been smuggled in through some 300 tunnels under the Gaza-Egypt border, including about 300 tons of explosives imported in the last three years, she said.

Israel has destroyed about a third of the tunnels, along with explosives and missiles stored in basements and mosques, Leibovich said. That has hurt Hamas' ability to fire rockets, but hasn't crippled it, she said.



Israeli soldiers stand on their tanks in a deployment area near the Israeli border with the Gaza Strip yesterday. Israeli warplanes pounded militant targets including a mosque in Gaza on Friday as Hamas ordered a "day of wrath" against Israel over the killing of a senior commander.

PHOTO: AFP



Protesters from Partai Keadilan Sejahtera march during a protest in Jakarta yesterday to show their support for Palestinians. About a thousand people held a peaceful demonstration near the US embassy condemning Israel's airstrikes in Gaza.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel aims to cripple Hamas, warn other foes: Experts

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has thousands of troops massed for a ground offensive on Gaza that would aim to deal a hammer blow to Hamas and re-establish Israel's military credentials with its other foes, experts said.

After Israel's 2006 war in Lebanon, widely condemned as a fiasco, this campaign has been scrupulously prepared and few experts believe Hamas can halt the waiting army.

The number of troops and tanks along the 60 kilometre (37 mile) border is a military secret but Israeli leaders say the force is ready and local media say the assault is imminent.

Israel launched air strikes and a naval bombardment one week ago in response to weeks of militant rocket fire from Hamas-run Gaza.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has called it "iron fist" treatment.

Israeli missiles have killed more than 420 Palestinians -- including top Hamas leader Nizar Rayan -- while about 300 militant rockets have killed four people and wounded dozens in Israel.

Some analysts say Israel expects dozens of its soldiers to be killed in any ground offensive, but the government insists it wants to stop the rockets.

"Hamas must understand that if it launches rockets in

the future it will have to pay a prohibitive price," said Shabtai Shavit, a former head of the Mossad foreign intelligence service and now an advisor to the Israeli National Security Council.

"Israel does not intend to reconquer the Gaza Strip," Shavit told AFP. Any ground campaign "would mean going in and inflicting additional damage and cost to Hamas."

Asked whether this means killing more Hamas leaders or just destroying infrastructure, he said: "Everything".

He predicted a war could last weeks with the ground offensive quickly followed by a phased withdrawal if a "political agreement" with Hamas can be concluded.

AFP, Washington

Nine Muslims, including three children, were ordered off a domestic US flight after two other passengers heard them making what they thought were suspicious remarks about security, media said yesterday.

The group, eight of whom are US citizens, was in Washington Thursday afternoon on an AirTran flight bound for Orlando, Florida where they were to attend a religious retreat, and were eventually cleared for travel by the FBI, according to the Washington Post.

The airline and FBI characterized the incident as a misunderstanding, but AirTran reportedly refused to rebook the passengers, who paid for seats on another carrier.

Kashif Irfan, 34, said his younger brother Atif and his brother's wife "were remarking about safety" when they were overheard.

"My brother and his wife were discussing some aspect of airport security," he told the Post. "The only thing my brother said was, 'Wow, the jets are right next to my window.'"

Irfan, who was also travelling with his wife, a sister-in-law, a friend and Irfan's three sons ages seven, four, and two, said action was taken against his party because of the way they looked.

US readying Afghan surge against Taliban

AP, Kandahar

The US is preparing to pour at least 20,000 extra troops into southern Afghanistan to cope with a Taliban insurgency that is fiercer than Nato leaders expected.

The new troops will augment the 12,500 Nato soldiers mainly British, Canadian and Dutch in what amounts to an Afghan version of the surge in Iraq.

New construction at Kandahar Air Field foreshadows the upcoming infusion of American power. Runways and housing are being built, along with two new US outposts in

Taliban-held regions of Kandahar province.

And in the past month the south has been the focus of visiting US and other dignitaries. Sen. John McCain, Defence Secretary Robert Gates, US congressional delegations and leaders from Nato headquarters in Europe.

For the first time since Nato took over the country in 2006, an experienced US general, Brig Gen John Nicholson, is assigned to the south.

He says US Gen David McKiernan, Nato's commander in Afghanistan, has made the objectives clear in calling the situation in the south a stalemate and asking for more troops, on top of the 32,000 Americans already in Afghanistan.

Chinese police detain tainted milk activist

AP, Beijing

The father of a child sickened by tainted milk was detained by police to prevent a news conference by parents to complain that proposed compensation for their ill children is too low, a lawyer said yesterday.

Dairies announced details of a 1.1 billion yuan (\$160 million) compensation plan this week as at least 17 people went on trial for the contami-

nation that killed at least six children and sickened nearly 300,000 others. The milk contained melamine, an industrial chemical that caused kidney stones in children.

The news conference, scheduled for Friday, was called off after organizer Zhao Lianhai was picked up Thursday, said Li Fangping, a lawyer for some of the parents. He said Zhao was still being held at a Beijing hotel.

Israeli Labour rebounds in poll with Gaza blitz

AFP, Jerusalem

The popularity of Defence Minister Ehud Barak's Labour party has shot up on the back of Israel's deadly blitz on Hamas in Gaza, according to an opinion poll published on Friday.

The centre-left party would get 16 seats in the Knesset if an election were held today -- compared with as low as seven seats that some surveys gave it in November, said the poll published in the Maariv daily.

The party currently has 19 MPs in the 120-seat parliament.

Forty-four percent of people questioned said they had a "more positive opinion" of Barak, against 48 percent who have not changed their opinion and 2.5 percent who had a more negative opinion of the former premier.

The centrist Kadima party that is currently heading the Israeli government has also inched up in popularity -- it is currently tied with the right-wing opposition Likud at 28 seats each, according to the poll.

In polls that preceded the bombardment, Kadima was generally a handful of seats behind the Likud.

Britain urged to accept Guantanamo detainees

AFP, London

Britain should accept inmates from the Guantanamo Bay detention camp to help the new US administration close down the notorious centre, former premier Tony Blair's chief legal advisor said yesterday.

Peter Goldsmith said the camp, set up by US President George W. Bush's administration to hold allegedly dangerous militants after the September 11, 2001 attacks, has become a "recruiting agent for terrorism."

Goldsmith, who as attorney general advised Blair that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was legal, said Britain has a duty to

accept Guantanamo inmates, to help US authorities grappling with where to send remaining detainees.

"If it is necessary in order to close this camp, which has become a symbol of injustice and it is part of an international scheme in which other countries play their part, then I think we ought to do so," he told BBC radio.

US president-elect Barack Obama has promised to close the Guantanamo prison after taking office this month, raising the question of what to do with the remaining 250 inmates held without charge or trial.

Some of the alleged "en-

emy combatants" captured since 2001 by US and allied forces around the world during the so-called "war on terror" are no longer considered a threat by US authorities.

But if sent to their home countries some could be arrested and face torture or lengthy incarceration and therefore need to be resettled elsewhere.

The Times newspaper reported this week that Britain is preparing to take in Guantanamo detainees to help the new Obama administration. London has previously said it would consider any US requests on a case-by-case basis.

Cuba revolution will last another 50-yr Says Raul Castro

AP, Santiago

President Raul Castro predicted Cuba's revolution will survive another half-century as the communist government marked the 50th anniversary of its triumph amid fears of economic hardship following three devastating hurricanes.

Thursday's subdued festivities were held under the enduring public absence of the ailing Fidel Castro, who led a band of bearded rebels down from Cuba's eastern mountains to topple dictator Fulgencio Batista's govern-

ment on Jan. 1, 1959.

"We know that a man alone doesn't make history. But some men are indispensable, as they can have a decisive influence in the course of events. Fidel is one," Raul Castro said of his older brother, who is convalescing in private after undergoing major intestinal surgery almost 2 1/2 years ago.

Raul Castro, speaking beneath the balcony where his older brother declared victory, vowed to "continue to struggle incessantly" and said the revolution would last another "50 years."



PHOTO: AFP

Cuban President Raul Castro delivers a speech on Thursday during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution in Santiago de Cuba.

Two soldiers, 6 militants killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Two soldiers and six Muslim militants have been killed in two shootouts in Indian Kashmir, the first violence since state elections in the Muslim-majority region, the army said yesterday.

The first gunbattle erupted late Thursday in the southern district of Poonch after Indian troops, acting on a tip-off, carried out a search operation of a densely forested area.

"As we closed in, the militants opened fire, killing two of our soldiers," an army officer told AFP, asking not to be named.

He said one militant was killed in the return of fire.



PHOTO: AFP

(L to R) Former President Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Diana Taylor celebrate the beginning of the year 2009 during the ceremony to lower the Times Square New Year's Eve ball in Times Square on January 1 in New York City.

N Korea resumes anti-US rhetoric

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday resumed its criticism of the United States, a day after dropping its customary harsh words from a policy-setting New Year message.

The ruling party newspaper Rodong Sinmun accused Washington in a commentary of planning a preemptive nuclear strike against North Korea.


"The US war-thirsty forces' moves to mount a preemptive nuclear attack are assuming an increasing danger," it said.

In a separate commentary, the government Minju Joson newspaper accused Washington of adopting a "contradictory" nuclear policy.

"The US is handling the nuclear issue in a way to meet its own strategic interests only," it said, adding the US had made the issue "more complicated" by allowing Israel to possess atomic weapons.

The two countries remain locked in a tense standoff over North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

However, on Thursday the headline communist state dropped its customary criticism, in a New Year message analysts said indirectly expressed hopes of friendly relations with the incoming US administration.



SOUTHERN CROSS CRUISES

Cruise the Sundarbans in ultimate comfort & style

- Gorgeous 100ft Bojra (Traditional Bengal Wooden Yacht)
- Cosy private cabins with attached western bathrooms
- Sumptuous food (dietary requirements accommodated)
- Round the clock personalized service
- NIGHT SAFARI CRUISE (1st time in Sundarbans)
- Limited to only 16 valued guests/twin-share (8 cabins)
- Dhaka-Khulna-Dhaka pick up/drop off by luxury AC vehicles
- Round the clock power supply
- Armed GOVT. security guards & Experienced guides
- Family atmosphere

Indulge Yourself for tk.20,000 per person for a 3D/2N cruise
+ tk. 2,500 forest tax for foreigners

Tour dates: 7th, 15th, 22nd, 29th Jan; 5th, 12th, 19th, 26th Feb; 5th, 12th, 19th, 26th Mar 2009

Contact :
01713190517, 01713190518, 01713190519,
01713389959, 01715791329
email : southerncrossbd@gmail.com

Ticketing office :
Galaxy Holidays
Taj Cassilina (2nd floor), 25 Gulshan Avenue, Dhaka.