

Western diplomats seek elusive Gaza truce

AFP, Sharm el-Sheikh

An EU mission seeking to broker an end to Israel's Gaza onslaught held talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Monday ahead of a similar visit by French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Talks with Mubarak were about the situation in Gaza, the means of reaching an immediate ceasefire, a reopening of crossing points and a return to the truce, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit told journalists.

Hamas, the target of Israel's invasion, on Monday said it would also send a delegation to Egypt, the first such contact with key regional mediator Cairo since fighting began 10 days ago.

Egypt brokered a previous six-month truce, which ended on December 19, heralding the latest violence in which more than 500 Palestinians and five Israelis have been killed.

The EU mission headed by Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, whose country holds the European bloc's rotating presidency, as well as his French and Swedish counterparts met with Mubarak in the resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

Egypt, whose role as mediator has been shaken by accusations of complicity in Israel's bloody campaign, controls Rafah, the only border crossing with Gaza, which bypasses the Jewish state.

Abul Gheit said the talks also touched on getting the UN Security Council to pass a resolution for achieving a ceasefire. Discussions at the world body on Saturday failed to reach agreement on a text calling for an end to hostilities.

"Our mission is essentially aimed at lessening the Palestinian suffering and supplying humanitarian aid to the Gaza population which requires visits on the ground," Schwarzenberg said.

After Egypt, the European foreign ministers are to head to Jerusalem, Ramallah in the occupied West Bank and Amman, along with EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

Solana told journalists that the EU was "working for a rapid ceasefire... the faster the better."

The Sharm talks came as Hamas said it was sending a delegation to Egypt for talks on the war in Gaza, the first such

contact since fighting began.

"We have received an invitation from Egypt and we're going to Cairo to listen to Egyptian officials and discuss with them suspended issues, notably the (permanent) reopening of the Rafah crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip," Beirut-based Hamas official Osama Hamdan told AFP.

"We want an immediate end to Israeli aggression and the lifting of the blockade and we will listen to Egyptian proposals" on the subject, he added.

Hamas, which has controlled the strip since June 2007, has said it would be open to a ceasefire with Israel if the Jewish state would lift its blockade on Gaza and open the crossings into the densely populated, impoverished coastal strip.

Mubarak last week said he would not reopen Rafah because he did not want to officialise the rift between the Palestinian Authority (PA) of president Mahmud Abbas and Hamas.

Under a 2005 deal, the Rafah crossing can only be opened to normal traffic if European Union observers and PA forces are at the border, which is also monitored by Israel.



Palestinian father Magdi al-Samuli waits over the bodies of his children, killed by an Israeli tank shell early yesterday, upon their arrival at the mortuary of Gaza City's Al-Shifa hospital. Six children were killed in two separate Israeli airstrikes in Gaza early Monday.

Gaza's worsening nightmare

AFP, Gaza City

The shelling is incessant, hospitals are overwhelmed, children are shell-shocked, the Gaza nights are miserably cold in the windowless homes. And residents fear their nightmare could worsen.

After days of intense bombardment from the air, artillery shells are now pounding the Gaza Strip, as militants return fire with rocket-propelled grenades at Israeli tanks.

Children are traumatised, living in fear of the next explosion that will shake their home.

"Many kids have stopped eating. They are inactive, they barely talk, they cling to their parents all the time," said Sajj Elmaghinni, who works for the UN Children's Fund (Unicef) in Gaza.

"Children are now scared of the dark, which is a major problem because there's no electricity," says Elmaghinni, whose own home has been without power for five days.

He has no way of heating his home where all the windows were blown out by a blast, but like others in the besieged Palestinian enclave he has become used

to dealing with the cold. "We just wear a lot of clothes."

What does worry him is how he'll get his nine-month pregnant wife to the hospital when she is due to deliver.

"This is a major concern. At the beginning of the bombing she experienced some trauma when a neighbouring building was hit."

"Everybody evacuated our building. We had to stay. I didn't know what to do. I prayed to God my wife would not deliver in these conditions."

"It's very difficult to get an ambulance, they're all busy with the wounded. We can't walk to the clinic at night because drones pick up anything that moves."

Some of the missiles fired on Gaza are launched from unmanned aircraft that can be heard flying overhead.

Virtually everyone has a tragic story to tell in this shell-shocked coastal strip already crippled by an 18-month-old Israeli blockade.

At least 523 people have died in the onslaught unleashed by Israel on December 27 in a bid to silence the rocket fire from Gaza, an overcrowded territory of 1.5 million ruled by the Islamist Hamas

movement.

Of the 90 killed since the ground offensive started on Saturday night, 27 were children and another 17 were women, according to Palestinian medics.

Hospitals are completely overwhelmed.

They used to have five surgeons to operate on a severely wounded patient. Now a surgeon might have to operate on as many as 10 patients in a day, doctors said.

Amputations are increasingly frequent as doctors do not have time to try to save limbs. Many wounded people have died because they could not be treated in time, according to health authorities.

In Gaza City the nightmare is compounded by uncertainty as Israel's troops move closer. "The scariest part is not knowing when they will move into the city. When they do, there could be many civilians killed," says Elmaghinni.

Residents live in fear, and the streets of the city are deserted. In any case there's nowhere to go. Supermarkets are virtually empty. There is no cooking gas and UN food aid distribution has been suspended.



Thai-Muslim protesters burn an Israeli flag during a demonstration at the Israel embassy in Bangkok yesterday. At least 538 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's 10-day offensive on Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip.

Two-state solution no longer workable

Says US ex-envoy

AFP, Washington

Former US ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton said Monday settling the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of a two-state solution was no longer workable and suggested giving the Palestinian territories to Egypt and Jordan.

"Let's start by recognising that trying to create a Palestinian Authority from the old PLO has failed and that any two-state solution based on the PA is stillborn," Bolton wrote in The Washington Post.

"Hamas has killed the idea, and even the Holy Land is good for only one resurrection."

World fears grow over Gaza humanitarian crisis

AFP, Beijing

World leaders expressed mounting concern about the humanitarian impact of Israel's massive offensive on the Gaza Strip Monday, as diplomatic efforts to bring an end to the conflict went into overdrive.

Chinese President Hu Jintao said he was worried about a "humanitarian crisis," in a telephone conversation with US President George W. Bush, Israel's most powerful ally, according to Beijing's foreign ministry.

Hu "expressed concern about the escalation in the

conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis and the worsening turbulence in the Middle East," the ministry's website said in a statement.

Aid groups have said Israel's offensive has aggravated a humanitarian crisis for Gaza's population, who have no electricity, no water and now face dire food shortages. Hospitals were only running on backup generators.

"Our life is filled with fear," said Abdelrahim Malaka, a resident of the surrounded Gaza City. "We call on the world to have mercy on us and save us from the Israeli war."

What did the children do wrong to have their houses bombed?"

Israel allowed some humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip on Monday, including medicine and food which was sent from Egypt, Jordan, Greece and UN aid agencies.

"A convoy of 80 trucks transporting humanitarian aid has started to pass through the Kerem Shalom crossing" in the south, a military spokesman said.

The Nahal Oz terminal in the north was also opened to allow the transfer of 200,000 litres of fuel for Gaza's electricity station as well as 120

tonnes of cooking gas, he said.

It was "critical for Israel to meet its humanitarian obligations," Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said Monday.

"Australia recognises Israel's right to self-defence, (but) we call on all parties to avoid any actions which result in unnecessary suffering or increased suffering on the part of innocent civilians," Rudd said.

The Philippine government has abandoned an attempt to evacuate six Filipinos -- four children, their mother and a nun -- from the area, officials said Monday.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Ground troops 'burnish' Israel's iron image

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's use of ground troops in its offensive against Hamas in Gaza is aimed at restoring the iron image of the Jewish state's military ability, undermined by its 2006 war with Hezbollah, say regional specialists.

"We are on the way to restoring our deterrence in a message which is also addressed to Hezbollah so it thinks twice if it is tempted to get involved in a second round (against Israel)," said a senior Israeli military officer, on condition of not being named.

Retired general Shlomo Brom, former head of strategic planning at Israel's staff headquarters, commented: "The best way to halt aggression by groups such as Hamas or Hezbollah is not to go hunting rockets one by one, because that is impossible.

"You need to create a new deterrent balance," said Brom, now a researcher at the Institute of National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

The land campaign has more impact on the adversary than the air raids, which began on December 27, killing more than 400 people ahead of last Saturday's invasion, say experts in strategic matters.

Ground troops hinder the movement of members of the Hamas armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, commented Jean-Francois Daguzan, research specialist at the Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris.

But he added: "The ground operations will be extremely cautious, drawing on the lessons from Hezbollah. The Israelis have no desire to go and get themselves into a mess in Gaza, even if Hamas is not Hezbollah."

Tanks and infantry have not been deployed throughout the whole of the Gaza Strip but have mainly occupied areas around Gaza City and in the north, which Israel says are used by Palestinian militants to fire rockets into the Jewish state.

The Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades have been hit but not

hugely for "the simple reasons that the members are hiding," said Shlomo Brom. "But they will have to show themselves if they want to confront Israeli troops."

Without the decision to send ground troops into battle "Hamas would have been able to announce that 'the Israelis are afraid of us,'" he added. "This factor had to be taken into account."

According to the former officer, "the war in Lebanon scarred the spirits" of the Israelis.

Israel's military and political leaders have drawn lessons and applied them, starting with the aims of the operation," he added.

Hostilities in Lebanon in 2006 killed more than 1,200 Lebanese, mainly civilians, and 160 Israelis, mainly troops.

But Israel failed to break Hezbollah's military infrastructure, to prevent the firing of its rockets into northern Israel, or to free two soldiers captured by the Shiite movement.

"The (military) aims in Lebanon were very ambitious, and that played a big part in the feeling of failure," said Brom. "This time, the objective is very modest; it is not to destroy Hamas but to halt the firing of rockets."

The conduct of the Israeli campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon unleashed a torrent of criticism in Israel, because of the fact that army units were unprepared, confusion was widespread with counter-orders from the commanders, and the military failed to attain its aims.

Anticipating similar reproaches, the Israeli forces in their communique about the launching of the ground offensive, emphasised that the troops involved had "been very well trained and prepared for this mission over a long period."

Some hours afterwards, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was able to say he could "look in the eyes" of parents of the soldiers engaged in Gaza. It was a gesture he could not have made during the conflict in Lebanon without drawing condemnation from the families of the troops, analysts say.

trying the same doomed tactic again. Ban the press. Keep the cameras out. By yesterday morning, only hours after the Israeli army went clanking into Gaza to kill more Hamas members and, of course, more civilians Hamas was reporting the capture of two Israeli soldiers. Reporters on the ground could have sorted out the truth or the lie about that. But without a single Western journalist in Gaza, the Israelis were left to tell the world that they didn't know if the story was true.

On the other hand, the Israelis are so ruthless that the reasons for the ban on journalism may be quite easily

Israel bans press, keeps cameras out

ROBERT FISK, The Independent Online

What is Israel afraid of? Using the old "enclosed military area" excuse to prevent coverage of its occupation of Palestinian land has been going on for years. But the last time Israel played this game in Jenin in 2000 it was a disaster. Prevented from seeing the truth with their own eyes, reporters quoted Palestinians who claimed there had been a massacre by Israeli soldiers and Israel spent years denying it. In fact, there was a massacre, but not on the scale that it was originally reported.

Now the Israeli army is

explaining: that so many Israeli soldiers are going to kill so many innocents more than three score by last night, and that's only the ones we know about that images of the slaughter would be too much to tolerate. Not that the Palestinians have done much to help. The kidnapping by a Palestinian mafia family of the BBC's man in Gaza finally released by Hamas, although that's not being recalled right now put paid to any permanent Western television presence in Gaza months ago. Yet the results are the same.

Back in 1980, the Soviet Union threw every Western journalist out of Afghanistan. Those of us who had been reporting the Russian invasion and its brutal aftermath could not re-enter the country except with the mujahedin guerrillas. I received a letter from Charles Douglas-Hume, who was editor of the Times for which I then worked making an important observation. "Now that we have no regular coverage from Afghanistan," he noted on 26 March that year, "I would be grateful if you could make sure that we do not miss any opportunity for reporting on reliable accounts of what is going on in that country. We must not let events in Afghanistan vanish from the paper simply because we have

no correspondent there."

That the Israelis should use an old Soviet tactic to blind the world's vision of war may not be surprising. But the result is that Palestinian voices as opposed to those of Western reporters are now dominating the airwaves. The men and women who are under air and artillery attack by the Israelis are now telling their own story on television and radio and in the papers as they have never been able to tell it before, without the artificial "balance", which so much television journalism imposes on live reporting. Perhaps this will become a new form of coverage letting the participants tell their own story. The flip side, of course, is that there is no Westerner in Gaza to cross-question Hamas's devious account of events: another victory for the Palestinian militia, handed to them on a plate by the Israelis.

But there is also a darker side. Israel's version of events has been given so much credence by the dying Bush administration that the ban on journalists entering Gaza may simply be of little importance to the Israeli army. By the time we investigate, whatever they are trying to hide will have been overtaken by another crisis in which they can claim to be in the "front line" in the "war on terror".



Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak (C) meets an European Union delegation with France's Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner (L), EU Foreign policy chief, Javier Solana (2ndL), Czech Republic's Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg (3rdL), Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit (3rdR), EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner (2ndR) and Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt (R) yesterday at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.