

Muslim MPs meet over Gaza conflict

AFP, Istanbul

Parliamentarians from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) member states met here yesterday to seek joint action in support of the Palestinians facing a deadly Israeli offensive in Gaza.

Erol Kilic, the Turkish secretary-general of the OIC's parliamentary assembly, urged a joint appeal encouraging Muslim nations to back the Palestinians, pursue Israel before international tribunals and seek compensation for "the immense destruction and loss of human life."

He also suggested that a delegation of OIC parliamentarians travel to Gaza to demonstrate support for the Palestinians and coordinate the distribution of humanitarian aid.

Iranian Assembly Speaker Ali Larijani condemned the "crime against humanity" committed by Israel and said it must "pay the price" for its actions and called on Muslim countries to sever ties with the Jewish state.

Aid boat sails for Gaza from Cyprus

AFP, Nicosia

A boat carrying much-needed medical aid for casualties of Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza set sail again from Cyprus yesterday after suffering mechanical trouble during an earlier attempt this week.

Last year a bid by the Free Gaza Movement to break Israel's blockade on Gaza ended on December 30 when an Israeli navy vessel was in collision with the vessel. Passengers said it was a deliberate ramming.

A generator problem forced the boat, "Spirit of Humanity", to return to port on Monday three hours into the journey.

"Now the boat problem is fixed we will try and get into Gaza, we can't wait until Israel decides to stop the killing," Huwaida Arraf, a coordinator for the US-based Free Gaza Movement, told AFP before making her fifth trip to the Strip.

"We know it won't be easy but if Israel stops us it will be a deliberate attack on civilians carrying humanitarian aid."

The Greek-registered 22-metre island-hopping vessel left the Cypriot port of Larnaca with a reduced passenger list cut to 21 from 34 due to the delay. They include pro-Palestinian activists, European politicians and doctors.

Israel's transport ministry, in a statement, called the attempt to reach Gaza "provocative and risky."



A Palestinian woman stands in front of a destroyed building following an Israeli strike in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood in Gaza City yesterday. Israeli forces battled Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip's main city early Wednesday and bombed the enclave's southern border with Egypt as the death toll from the war on Hamas neared 1,000.

Israel faces UN court on legality of attack

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Israel faces the prospect of intervention by international courts amid growing calls that its actions in Gaza are a violation of world humanitarian and criminal law.

The UN general assembly, which is meeting this week to discuss the issue, will consider requesting an advisory opinion from the international court of justice, the Guardian has learned.

"There is a well-grounded view that both the initial attacks on Gaza and the tactics being used by Israel are

serious violations of the UN charter, the Geneva conventions, international law and international humanitarian law," said Richard Falk, the UN's special rapporteur on the Palestinian territories and professor emeritus of international law at Princeton University.

"There is a consensus among independent legal experts that Israel is an occupying power and is therefore bound by the duties set out in the fourth Geneva convention," Falk added. "The arguments that Israel's blockade is a form of prohibited collective

punishment, and that it is in breach of its duty to ensure the population has sufficient food and healthcare as the occupying power, are very strong."

A Foreign Office source confirmed the UK would consider backing calls for a reference to the ICJ. "It's definitely on the table," the source said. "We have already called for an investigation and are looking at all evidence and allegations."

An open letter to the prime minister signed by prominent international lawyers and published in yesterday's Guardian states: "The United Kingdom government... has a duty under international law to exert its influence to stop violations of international humanitarian law in the current conflict between Israel and Hamas."

The letter argues that Israel has violated principles of humanitarian law, including launching attacks directly aimed at civilians and failing to discriminate between civilians and combatants.

Questions are also being raised as to whether the international criminal court, which deals with war crimes and crimes against humanity, would have any jurisdiction to hear cases against perpetrators of the alleged crimes on both sides of the conflict. Neither Israel nor the Palestinian territories are signatories to the Rome statute, which brings states within the jurisdiction of the ICC.

More likely, experts say, is the establishment of ad-hoc tribunals of the kind created to deal with the war in the former Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda.

Gunmen kill 4 policemen in Pakistan

AP, Islamabad

Gunmen riding on a motorcycle fired on a vehicle carrying police officers near the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta in Pakistan's southwest Baluchistan province yesterday, killing four, said Mohammed Ishtiaq, an area police chief. Police were still investigating the motive for the shooting.

Baluchistan has long been the scene of a low-level insurgency, with militant groups seeking greater regional autonomy and a larger share of revenue from its natural resources.

In a separate incident, a roadside bomb critically wounded seven paramilitary troops in Dera Bugti district, some 500 kilometres east of Quetta, said Muhammad Ashfaq, a senior police official.

Sarbaz Baluch, a purported spokesman for the Baluch Republican Army, one of the main militant groups in the province, said the group staged the attack out of revenge after a large portrait of a slain nationalist Baluchi leader was removed from the area.

Pakistan reopens Nato supply route

AP, Chaman

Pakistan reopened a supply route for Nato and US forces in Afghanistan yesterday after tribesmen ended a three-day blockade.

The road through the frontier town of Chaman is one of two main routes into Afghanistan for trucks carrying fuel and other supplies to the thousands of foreign troops there.

The road has seen few of the attacks by Taliban militants that have increasingly plagued the more important northerly route via the city of Peshawar and the famed Khyber Pass.

However, tribesmen used vehicles to block the Chaman road on Sunday to protest a raid by Pakistani counter-narcotics forces that left one villager dead.

The protesters withdrew on Wednesday after police promised to take their complaints to provincial authorities, tribal leader Abdul Kahar Khan Wadan said.

Heavy rains continue to pound Fiji

AFP, Suva

More flooding hit Fiji yesterday after five days of tropical downpours left at least 11 people dead and inundated homes, businesses and farms.

After flooding eased in many areas of the South Pacific nation on Tuesday, more rain lashed parts of the Pacific island nation overnight and yesterday.

Police said the death toll stood at 11, with the latest fatality reported when a three-year-old boy drowned in flood waters in the town of Labasa on the northern island of Vanua Levu on Wednesday.

Fiji's National Disaster Management Office said more than 6,500 people had been forced out of their homes and into evacuation centres.

UN renews call for immediate Gaza ceasefire

AFP, Cairo

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday renewed his call for an "immediate and durable ceasefire" in the Gaza Strip, where Israel's offensive has killed almost 1,000 Palestinians.

"I repeat my call for an immediate and durable ceasefire," Ban told journalists after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo.

"I again urge both parties to stop now, to stop the fighting now, there is no time to lose," Ban said at the start of a regional tour aimed at brokering a truce between Hamas and Israel.

Ban also called for "urgent humanitarian assistance to be provided," to deal with a humanitarian crisis breaking out in one of the world's most densely populated places where half of the population is under 18 years of age.

Aid agencies have warned of a growing humanitarian crisis because the vast majority of the 1.5 million population depends on foreign aid.

"You have my full commitment that I'll do my best as secretary general of the United Nations first and foremost to bring a ceasefire immediately and to do whatever I can do in my power to bring humanitarian assistance."

Ban arrived in Cairo early on Wednesday at the start of a regional tour aimed at stopping the conflict that he has slammed as "unacceptable."

Both Israel and Hamas ignored last week's Security Council resolution demanding an immediate halt to the fighting.

Ban is also due to travel to Jordan, Israel, the West Bank city of Ramallah, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Kuwait, where he is due to attend an Arab League summit on Monday.

Rockets from Lebanon slam in Israel again

AFP, Kiryat Shmona

Three rockets fired from Lebanon slammed into northern Israel yesterday in an attack that frayed nerves on both sides of the tense border for the second time in less than a week.

"Rockets fell in northern Israel without causing injuries or damage," an Israeli army spokesman said. "The Israeli army responded immediately by firing in the direction from where the rockets were launched."

In Lebanon, a security official said that several rockets were launched in the area of Habariyah and that the Israeli military retaliated with artillery shells.

Israeli planes also could be seen overflying the area at low altitude.

The Lebanese government meanwhile denounced the

firing of three rockets from Lebanon into Israel, saying the incident undermined national unity and gave Israel an excuse to attack the country.

"Whoever is behind this attack is targeting the national consensus and all parties represented within the government," Lebanese Information Minister Tarek Mitri told reporters after discussing the situation with Prime Minister Fuad Siniora.

The attack comes on the 19th day of a massive Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip -- which has sparked widespread outrage across the Muslim world.

With memories still fresh of 2006 -- when war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah in the midst of a Jewish state's offensive in Gaza -- Wednesday's incident again sowed panic on both sides of the border.



Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit (L) receives UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in Cairo yesterday. Ban said there was "no time to lose" in Gaza, renewing his call for an immediate ceasefire to end Israel's deadly offensive on Hamas.

No quorum yet for Arab summit

AFP, Cairo

Arab League chief Amr Mussa said yesterday that the 22-member organisation has failed to come up with the two-thirds quorum needed to convene an emergency summit on Israel's Gaza offensive.

"So far, the quorum has not been reached. There are only 14 member-countries," who have accepted a call by Qatar to hold a summit on Friday in Doha, Mussa told reporters.

He insisted that 15 member countries must give their approval for a summit in order to reach the two-thirds quorum needed to convene an emergency meeting of Arab leaders.

"A decision will be taken in the hours to come," Mussa told reporters after talks with UN chief Ban Ki-moon who was in Cairo on the first leg of a

regional tour to try to secure a ceasefire between Israel and the Hamas rulers of Gaza.

Arab governments are divided in their stance towards the Islamist Palestinian movement Hamas, which took control of Gaza in a coup against president Mahmud Abbas's Palestinian Authority in June 2007.

Heavyweights such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia said on Tuesday they supported discussing the Gaza situation during an Arab economic summit scheduled to be held in Kuwait on January 19 and 20.

"The image of Arab countries is very bad," said Mussa in reference to Arab divisions on whether to hold a summit.

"We must overcome them not aggravate them. There must be a consensus," he said.

Gaza battles rage as death toll nears 1,000

AFP, Gaza City

Israel bombed smuggling tunnels and battled fighters in Gaza on Wednesday as UN chief Ban Ki-moon arrived in the region seeking to end the war on Hamas that has killed nearly 1,000 Palestinians.

Rockets slammed into northern Israel from Lebanon early on Wednesday, the second such attack in less than a week that sent echoes of 2006, when war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah amid the last major offensive in Gaza.

At least three Palestinians were killed as Israel's deadliest ever offensive on Gaza entered its 19th day with more than 60 air and naval strikes slamming into the densely populated territory, medics and the army said.

Israeli warplanes blasted Gaza's southern border with Egypt with some three dozen bombing raids, sending panicked residents fleeing, witnesses said.

Gaza's Islamist Hamas rulers have repeatedly vowed to keep fighting and yesterday, two rockets were fired into Israel from Gaza, the army said. A senior Israeli defence official told AFP that the war, which has killed some 400 civilians and has sparked outrage across the Muslim world, could continue until the January 20 inauguration of



Palestinians rush a child into the Kamal Edwan hospital in Beit Lahia following an Israeli air strike on the northern Gaza Strip yesterday.

US president-elect Barack Obama.

"Israel is still waiting for guarantees on solving the issue of weapon smuggling and things are moving in Cairo," he said on condition of anonymity.

"Nevertheless, Israel is not feeling any pressure at this point to end the operation," he said.

"The only real exit point we can see at this time would be when Obama enters the White House."

Ban arrived in Cairo early yesterday at the start of a regional tour aimed at stopping the conflict that he has slammed as "unacceptable." Both Israel and Hamas

ignored last week's Security Council resolution demanding an immediate halt to the fighting.

"My message is simple, direct and to the point: the fighting must stop," he said in his first press conference of the year on Tuesday. "To both sides, I say: just stop now. Too many people have died. There has been too much civilian suffering."

Egypt, which brokered a six-month truce between Israel and Hamas last June, has been spearheading efforts to end the fighting.

A Hamas delegation is currently in Cairo for talks on a Western-backed proposal drawn up by President Hosni

Mubarak, which calls for an immediate halt to the violence, talks on opening crossings into the Gaza Strip and securing Gaza borders and a restart to Palestinian reconciliation talks.

A senior source in Cairo indicated Egypt was getting increasingly frustrated at Hamas's response so far to its initiative, saying "they need to say 'yes', now, to our plan."

A top Hamas leader, Mussa Abu Marzuk, acknowledged the movement had "substantial observations" about the initiative but said there was "still a chance" they would accept it.

Amos Gilad, Israel's pointman for the Gaza truce talks and a senior aide to Defence Minister Ehud Barak, was due to arrive in Cairo on Thursday for his second visit in a week.

Since Israel unleashed Operation Cast Lead on Hamas on December 27, at least 979 Palestinians have been killed, including 292 children, and more than 4,500 people wounded, according to Gaza medics.

Ten Israeli soldiers and three civilians have been killed in combat or by rocket attacks during the same time. Gaza militants have launched some 700 rockets and mortar into Israel since the start of the offensive, according to the army.

Lanka troops seize Jaffna peninsula

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military yesterday seized a final strip of Tamil Tiger rebel-held land and secured total control of the key Jaffna peninsula in the north, an official said.

Jaffna, the cultural capital of the country's ethnic minority Tamils, has long been seen as the symbolic heart of the 25-year-old separatist insurgency on the island. Taking full control of the territory after nine years is a strategic and symbolic victory for the government.

Military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said that all of Jaffna was secured when the soldiers captured Chundikkulam village.

Nanayakkara said the rebels retreated with their dead and the military did not suffer any casualties.

Rebel officials could not be reached for comment.

Authorities say that they now hope in the coming months to finally crush the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Gaza top priority for Obama

AFP, London

US president-elect Barack Obama's most pressing international task is the war in the Middle East, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said yesterday, as the death toll around Gaza neared 1,000.

Brown added that Britain was doing "everything we can" to secure an immediate ceasefire to Israel's operations in Gaza.

"I think the whole house will want to welcome the new president when he comes in," he said during his weekly question and answer session with lawmakers in the House of Commons.

Obama is due to be inaugurated on January 20, next Tuesday.

Brown also expressed sympathy for those who have lost relatives or been displaced by the 19-day operation, which has killed some 400 civilians.

Iraq bans use of chemical weapons

AFP, United Nations

Iraq, which used chemical weapons during Saddam Hussein's regime, became the 186th nation to ratify an international treaty banning them, UN officials announced here yesterday.

The 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, which Iraq joined on Tuesday, "is the first multilateral treaty to ban -- with international verification -- an entire category of weapons of mass destruction," the United Nations said in a statement.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon congratulated Iraq "on its decision."



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