

Gaza civilians hide where they can as battles rage

AFP, Gaza City

Gripping their wailing children, terrified Gaza civilians scuttled for any shelter they could find yesterday as Israeli tanks barrelled into the heart of a residential neighbourhood in Gaza City.

Loaded down with babies, toddlers and children, dozens of families arrived at the doors of the Al-Quds hospital shortly after dawn, after dozens of tanks roared into the area, sparking furious battles with Palestinian fighters.

Inside, the residents found space where they could. Mothers tried to console their crying children and to make them laugh.

"I brought the children to the hospital because they were scared at home, but here they are even more terrified," said Hossein, 40, who huddled in the paediatric ward with his wife and five children.

"The house next door was completely destroyed in the fighting so we had to get out of there. We can't take this any longer. Look at my children, they're trembling."

But as the frightened civilians took refuge in the facility, part of the hospital caught fire after an Israeli strike nearby. The blaze was brought under control in the medical area but not in the administrative building.

Around about the same time, two cameramen for Abu Dhabi television were wounded when an Israeli strike hit a building in Gaza City housing several international, and Arab media outlets, witnesses said.

And the UN partially suspended its operations in Gaza after Israeli shells smashed into its compound, setting fire to warehouses holding badly-needed aid.

Outside the hospital, the sounds of war ripped through the air like thunderclaps

and thick black smoke rose into the air. Tank shells, air missiles, artillery, helicopter gunships and automatic rifles combined into a deafening cacophony as battles unfolded less than 300 metres (yards) from the facility.

Palestinian fighters met the advancing troops with mortar and anti-tank rockets. Tanks fired shells on the ground and planes hit the area with missiles from above.

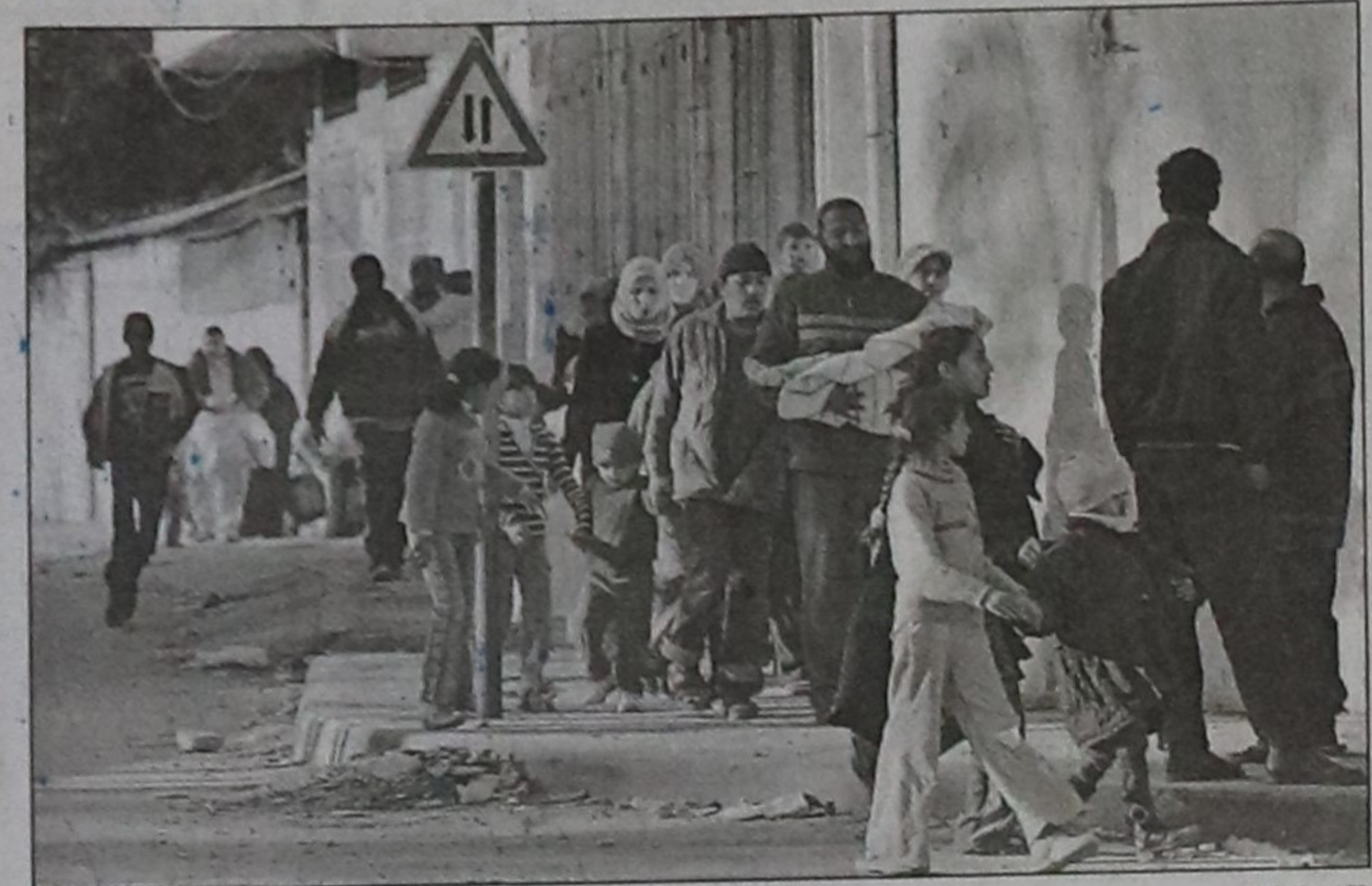
Armed Hamas fighters dressed in blue and black uniforms, one of them carrying the green flag of his Islamist movement, ran down a street 100 metres from the hospital, firing Kalashnikov rifles.

Smoke billowed above several other neighbourhoods in Gaza City and in the north. Fires were raging in some parts of the buildings.

The fighting sent clouds into the air so thick that buildings 100 metres away were obscured.



Smoke billows from the UN building (unseen back L) following Israeli strikes yesterday as seen from the centre of Gaza City. PHOTO: AFP



Palestinian families flee the Tal al-Hawa neighbourhood in Gaza City following Israeli strikes yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Global outrage over Israeli attack on UN Gaza office

AFP, Paris

UN chief Ban Ki-moon led international protests yesterday describing the Palestinian death toll as "unbearable" as Israeli air strikes set hospitals, media and UN buildings ablaze.

"I have conveyed my strong protest and outrage and demanded a full explanation from the defence minister and foreign minister," Ban told reporters in Tel Aviv after the strike on a UN compound in Gaza.

The UN suspended its operations in Gaza after Israeli shells smashed into its compound, setting fire to warehouses holding badly-needed aid.

Other strikes set a hospital wing on fire and wounded two cameramen in a building housing international and Arab media outlets.

"The number of casualties has reached an unbearable point," said Ban, who is due to meet Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert later Thursday.

Since Israel launched its offensive on December 27, at least 1,070 people have been killed, including at least 355 children, 100 women, 117 elderly men and 12 medics, say Gaza medics. Another 5,000 people have been wounded.

France also denounced the latest attacks.

"We condemn in the strongest terms the bombings this morning by the Israeli army of several hospitals and a building housing international media in Gaza city," said French foreign ministry spokesman Eric Chevallier.

Chevallier also condemned the attack on the UN building, adding:

Israeli official in Cairo to hear Hamas's truce 'vision'

AFP, Cairo

Senior Israeli defence official Amos Gilad arrived in Cairo yesterday to hear Hamas's response to an Egyptian-mediated plan for an end to the fighting in the Islamist-controlled Gaza Strip.

Gilad was to be briefed by Egypt's pointman for Israeli-Palestinian affairs, intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, the day after Hamas presented its "vision" for a ceasefire, limiting its acceptance to the plan's "broad outlines."

"This crucial meeting should last two or three hours, and Gilad should leave this afternoon to inform the Israeli government for them to take a decision," a diplomatic source close to the negotiations told AFP.

"Israel doesn't seem to want to hurry, another shuttle visit could happen to reach an agreement in the context of the Egyptian initiative," the source said.

Hamas spokesman Salah al-Bardawil said late Wednesday that "President (Hosni) Mubarak's vision is the only one that was proposed, we don't ask for any amendment to its broad outlines."

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said that "we will tell the Israelis what we have obtained from our brothers Hamas... We hope that things will move forwards but we will not enter into details."

Abul Gheit said that Mubarak's plan, launched on January 6, calls for an "immediate ceasefire and acceptance of withdrawal" of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip.

Tin-pot rockets won't open a second front

ROBERT FISK, Independent Online

The "Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command" the quotation marks are necessary since this outfit controls at most 500 cadres is responsible for all the tin-pot rockets fired into Israel from Lebanon this past week.

It is not the next "front". It is not the beginning of the "northern front". No one was injured when three rockets fired from southern Lebanon fell in open areas near the Israeli town of Kiryat Shemona Wednesday.

A blaze of outdated rockets on northern Israel "about 1944, I date them", as one Palestinian put it in Beirut is not going to ignite another conflict for Hamas in Gaza. In Lebanon, the guns are silent and when they are not, the world will know about it.

The Hizbollah are not behind them though it is strange that the Iranian-supplied militia failed a second time to prevent the PFLP-GC from firing over the border and the organisation's preposterous attempt to ignite another conflict did little more than advertise the divisions within the Palestinian

refugee community inside Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp east of Sidon. For the West, the PFLP-GC is an unspeakable problem. Most Arabs suspect they were behind the Lockerbie bombing. Thus did most Western "analysts" believe, until the PFLP-GC's Syrian supporters were needed after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Syrian troops were sent to Saudi Arabia to help defend the kingdom after which Libya and a certain Mr Megrahi became the culprits, and the PFLP-GC became the blameless boys of the Middle East.

The UN peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon should have spotted the latest attack but, relying on Hizbollah to defend them from their "al-Qaeda" enemies they did not keep their eye on the ball. The Israelis know all this. Nor did they want to smear the UN yesterday (that will come later).

The Israelis do not want a second war right now. It's not the moment to claim that the PFLP-GC, with its nests around Sidon, is the "centre of world terror". That will be a surprise for the West's "analysts" and for the Obama administration in due course.

Fertiliser subsidy

FROM PAGE 1

price has already gone down. Any further forced decrease in prices may not be beneficial to farmers or agriculture as a whole, which is why it is important to watch what kind of policy the government adopts for rice market intervention.

Here a crucial decision would be whether to transfer resources to the farmers through the input market or the output market.

Generally speaking, it can be assumed that cheaper fertiliser will increase its use and a back of the envelop of calculation shows farmers will save about Tk 2.5 on production of each kg of rice. A higher use of fertiliser, especially TSP, DAP and MoP which are used at a lower dose now for high price, logically means higher rice production. But as economists point out this does not necessarily mean a higher supply of rice in the market or an equivalent amount of rice price decrease.

"This is because the supply of rice is inelastic to an incentive of smaller margins," Dr Zohir says.

Therefore, some feel that if there is a reduction in costs of Tk 2.5 per kg, it may at best reduce market prices by Tk 0.25 a kg if other things remain constant.

The chances of price impact are also low because the rice market is already in a dampened situation because of a global reduction in commodity prices and restrained speculative behaviour of traders because of the government's political commitment to keep prices down. A strong government stock of about 13 lakh tonnes has also stabilised the market.

"In a market where the opportunity costs are rightly reflected, any deviation through administered prices will involve resource transfers to the benefit of one particular group," Dr Zohir points out.

But whether part of the benefit will get transferred to wage earners also is always a big question. In case of the new fertiliser subsidy scheme, it still is an open question. More input use is supposed to increase labour use. But if the rice area does not expand or if switching from one crop to another does not take place, there may not be a big impact on the hired labour market. The reduction in input price is expected to up input use but is unlikely to transfer much to

workers' wage through improved employment.

Again, when benefiting a group is in question, it is to be thought whether who would be the government's prime target for resource allocation -- the farmers or the net consumers. If the goal is to feed the vulnerable groups, cheap food, then what about the options of open market sales and rationing.

Whatever savings the farmers will make, how they will use it is also of crucial importance. They can generally improve their quality of life through higher expenditure on education or health. But they can also spend on consumer products leading higher imports and no productivity improvement. These farmers have little ability to create wealth on their own, but if they can create some effective demand in the economy, this can boost the local small and medium enterprises and non-farm trading activities. To make that happen, a crucial need is a right policy to advance small and medium enterprises.

The other question that now rings is whether this subsidy is actually supporting the inefficient local DAP plants that meet 40 percent of the demand. While the production cost of local DAP is high at Tk 90,000 (\$1,300) a tonne, the same can be procured at \$613 a tonne in November, as a World Bank factsheet shows. This global market trend also shows the government may not need to fork out all that Tk 2,700 crore in subsidy because of the falling international prices. This is all the more reflected in an advertisement by a private importer on Thursday to sell TSP at Tk 29 a kg against the government announced Tk 40 a kg.

This international pricing brings us back to the basic question of bad decision of the government agency when it procured its current stock at a high price. In business sense, the government is actually facing a loss for its imprudent decision because when the international price is low, it cannot afford to sell fertiliser at a higher price, Dr Zohir says. This all the more raises the need for improving efficiency of Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADCO) so that can monitor world market and make judicious decisions.



Palestinians inspect the rubble at the al-Abbar mosque after overnight Israeli airstrikes in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip yesterday. PHOTO: AFP



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