

UN chief urges unilateral Israeli ceasefire

AP, Gaza City

The UN chief urged Israel Friday to declare a unilateral ceasefire in Gaza, but Israel rebuffed the idea as its diplomats headed for Egypt and the United States in what appeared to be a final push toward a truce.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon floated the idea during a visit to the West Bank on his Mideast mission to try to stop Israel's three-week-old offensive against Hamas militants who have been firing rockets from Gaza for years.

"I strongly urge Israeli leader-

ship and government to declare a cease-fire unilaterally," Ban said from Ramallah, the seat of the West Bank government of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, a fierce rival of Hamas. "It's time to think about a unilateral cease-fire from the Israeli government."

Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev dismissed the idea.

"I don't believe that there's a logical expectation in the international community that Israel unilaterally cease fire while Hamas would continue to target cities, trying to kill our people," he said.

Ban is on a weeklong trip

to the region meant to promote a truce after both sides ignored a U.N. resolution demanding an immediate and durable cease-fire. He will not meet with Gaza's Hamas rulers, who have been shunned by much of the international community since they violently overran Gaza in June 2007.

His comments came a day after Israeli forces shelled a UN compound in Gaza that had been sheltering hundreds of refugees from the fighting, sending thousands of tons of food aid up in flames. Israeli forces also killed a senior Hamas official on Thursday.

Some 1,100 Palestinians have been killed since the war began on Dec. 27, including 346 children, according to the UN and Gaza health officials. Thirteen Israelis have been killed, four by rocket fire, according to the military.

The Israeli military kept up pressure on Hamas Friday.

Before dawn Friday, Israeli aircraft struck about 40 targets all over Gaza, the military said. An official statement said targets included smuggling tunnels along the Egyptian border, a rocket launcher ready for firing and a mosque that housed a tunnel entrance and was also used to store arms.

Palestinian voices start to criticise Hamas

AFP, Ramallah

After nearly two weeks of showing a united front in the face of Israel's war in Gaza, some Palestinians are starting to slam Hamas for dragging its feet on a truce as the death toll mounts.

With Hamas maintaining a tight grip on the Gaza Strip, most of the critical voices are coming from the rival Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, whose forces the Islamists routed from the coastal enclave in June 2007.

Those close to the Fatah party of moderate president

Mahmud Abbas accuse Hamas of trying to extract political gains from the Gaza offensive all the while turning a blind eye on the rising numbers of civilian dead.

"When we hear the conditions posed by certain Hamas leaders in exile, you get an impression that our tanks were carrying out incursions in the streets of Tel Aviv, when in fact it's their tanks that are in the heart of our homeland," wrote last week Hafez Barghuthi, the editor in chief of Al-Hayat al-Jadida, the newspaper of the PA.

For Barghuthi and others,

Hamas is delaying accepting an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire deal in order to get their people stationed at the Rafah border terminal -- Gaza's sole crossing that bypasses Israel.

Such a move would accord indirect recognition to Hamas, a group boycotted by most of the West as a terror outfit.

"Hamas's demands in this war boil down to the Rafah terminal," Barghuthi wrote in a separate article.

"But the deal to open the terminal could have been agreed over a cup of coffee in Cairo instead of a war that has caused an unprecedented

catastrophe in the Gaza Strip," he wrote.

Ashraf al-Jarami, minister for prisoner affairs, is even more emphatic.

"Hamas and Israel have a common interest -- keeping a catastrophic situation in Gaza and preventing the creation of an independent Palestinian state."

Azzam Al-Ahmad, the head of Fatah's parliamentary faction, said he put aside differences with Hamas when he called on one of its exiled leaders, Mussa Abu Marzuk, to accept the Egyptian truce plan.



Doctors and paramedics evacuate patients from al-Aqsa hospital in Gaza City yesterday. Hundreds of people, including sick and wounded patients on stretchers and wheelchairs, tried to flee the hospital when it was engulfed in flames sparked by an Israeli tank shell.

Rice raises 'difficulties' with Israelis over UN HQ shelling

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Thursday she spoke to the Israeli leadership about the "difficulties" caused by the shelling of the main UN compound in the Gaza Strip.

Rice telephoned Israel's Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni after shells triggered a fire at the warehouse for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees in Gaza.

"We had a discussion of the difficulties that this had caused and the need to try to avoid such incidents," Rice told reporters when asked whether she had protested to the Israelis over the incident.

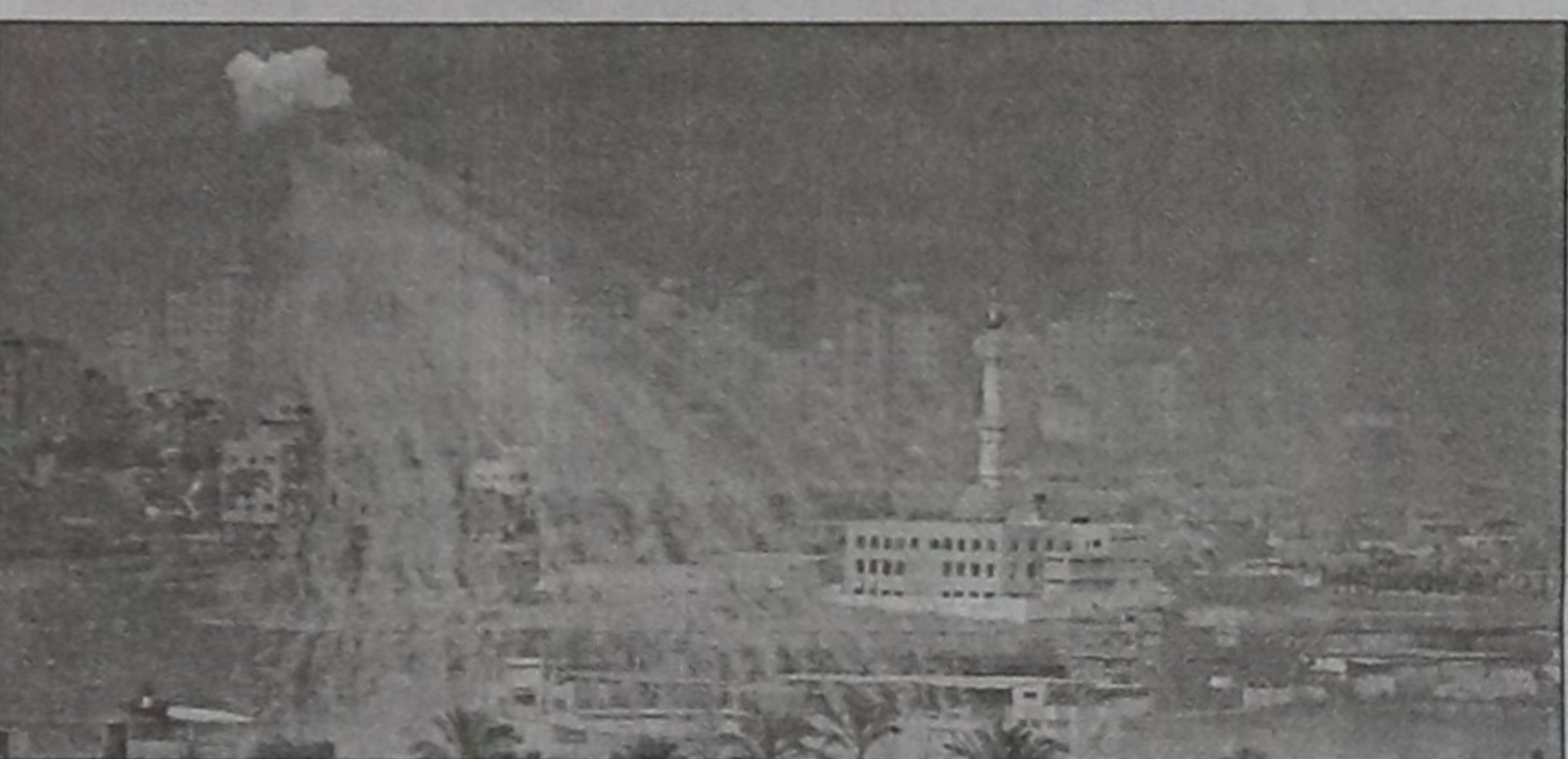
The Israelis told her it had been an "error," Rice added.

"I am quite sure that they are trying to avoid them but it is a difficult environment and our focus has been on what can we do to help get supplies, medical and food and water to the citizens of Gaza," she said.

She described the incident as "unfortunate."

The shelling set fire to a warehouse filled with tonnes of aid and forced the UNRWA to partially suspend operations.

Earlier, Rice's spokesman Sean McCormack said the United States is "deeply, deeply concerned" about the humanitarian situation in Gaza but had no reason to doubt that Israel is doing everything it can to protect civilians.



An Israeli artillery shell explodes over the Gaza Strip yesterday from the Israeli-Gaza border.

Arab League admits 'chaos' in its ranks over Gaza carnage

AFP, Kuwait City

Arab League chief Amr Mussa acknowledged "chaos" in Arab ranks over the Gaza crisis yesterday as foreign ministers gathered in Kuwait for a meeting overshadowed by an unofficial summit in Qatar.

The "Arab situation is in a very big chaos," Mussa told

reporters as he entered the meeting, which was delayed for two hours.

"It is regrettable and harmful."

The ministers' meeting was supposed to prepare for an Arab summit on Gaza due to convene alongside a long-scheduled economic summit in Kuwait City on Monday.

Ministers discussed "steps

that should be taken after Israel rejected UN Security Council Resolution 1860," that called for an immediate ceasefire, delegates said.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal called on the meeting to "look into the possibility of going back to the Security Council to try and issue another resolution to enforce ceasefire."

Israel's attack on UN compound could be war crime: Amnesty

AFP, London

Amnesty International joined Thursday for an immediate and independent investigation into Israel's attack on a United Nations compound in Gaza and warned it could be seen as a war crime.

"International law unequivocally forbids attacks against personnel, installations, material, units or vehicles involved in a humanitarian assistance mission," said Malcolm Smart, director of the London-based human rights organisation's Middle East and Africa programme.

"Deliberate attacks on humanitarian assistance facilities or personnel may

constitute a war crime."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that Israeli troops had shelled the UN compound in Gaza in response to fire coming from the building, but Chris Guinness, spokesman for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, insisted there was no "militant activity" there.

"The attack on UNRWA, apparently targeting a clearly identified humanitarian compound, underscores the need for an impartial and thorough investigation into a range of attacks in which civilians were killed or injured and civilian buildings and infrastructure were destroyed," Smart said.

Russia urges Iran, Syria to pressure Hamas

AFP, Moscow

Russia has called on Iran and Syria to persuade Palestinian Islamist group Hamas to accept a plan pushed by Egypt to end the fighting in Gaza, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Friday.

"We are sending the appropriate signals to Hamas representatives and to those states that have influence on Hamas, meaning above all Iran and Syria," of the need to accept the Egyptian plan, Lavrov said at a news conference.

The Russian minister said the Egyptian initiative, launched by President Hosni Mubarak on January 6, was

the "optimal" way to put an end to the war in Gaza that has killed more than 1,100 people in the past three weeks.

"We believe all forces need to throw their support behind it," Lavrov said.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit has said the Mubarak plan calls for an "immediate ceasefire and acceptance of withdrawal" of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip.

A Hamas official said Wednesday that the Islamist movement had accepted "broad outlines" of the Egyptian plan without approving it outright.

Russia is a member of

the Mideast quartet but is the only one formally to be on speaking terms with Hamas, which is classified as a terrorist organisation by the United States and the EU.

Lavrov said Russia was in close contact with all the parties but placed particular emphasis on Moscow's channels of communication with Tehran, Damascus and the Hamas leadership.

Referring to the Egyptian initiative, Lavrov said: "I hope everyone will focus in this direction. This is the most important thing at the moment. Everything else can be dealt with later."

NEWS ANALYSIS

Divisions complicate truce efforts

AP, Cairo

Sealing a lasting peace between Israel and Hamas over Gaza will mean overcoming a dizzying array of splits the Palestinians are deeply divided politically, Arab countries are feuding and Iran is firing off heated rhetoric at Israel.

Adding to the complexity, multiple mediators are trying to untangle the strands, while the United States has largely stood on the sidelines, with the administration of President George W Bush in its final days

and President-elect Barack Obama not yet sworn in.

The difficulty is that so many different parties will have to agree to make any deal work and that is complicating the task of clearing the obstacles from the path to a cease-fire.

At the same time, Israel is hiking up the pressure on Hamas to sign onto a cease-fire deal, pushing deeper into Gaza City and targeting the movement's leadership. A strike Thursday evening killed Hamas' Interior Minister Said Siam, who oversaw thousands

of security agents.

Negotiations have been snarled in part over who will control border crossings into the Gaza Strip. Hamas wants the crossings opened to commerce and travel to end a crippling Israeli-Egypt blockade since 2007. But Israel wants internationally backed guarantees that the crossings and underground tunnels won't be used to smuggle weapons to Hamas, which controls the government in the tiny Mediterranean coastal strip with a population

of nearly 1.4 million Palestinians.

Both Hamas and its rival, the Palestinian Authority headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, want a hand in running the borders. Egypt is trying to cobble together an arrangement that would involve both factions in crossing security.

But that would require the two Palestinian factions to resolve the virulent rift between them over control of Gaza, which Hamas seized after driving out Abbas loyal-

ists in bloody fighting in 2007. Meanwhile, Israel and the United States, which along with the European Union consider the group a terror organization, would be reluctant to accept a Hamas role at the crossings.

The other key to controlling the border is international monitors to prevent smuggling. Turkey has volunteered to put together a monitoring mission, but the question is what powers they would have?



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