

UNGA demands immediate Gaza truce

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly late Friday to demand an immediate and durable ceasefire in the strife-torn Gaza Strip leading to the full withdrawal of Israeli forces.

In a non-binding amended resolution, the 192-member body demanded "full respect" of a Security Council resolution adopted last week calling for "an immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire leading to the full withdrawal of Israeli forces" from Gaza.

Council resolution 1860 also called for the "unimpeded provision and distribution throughout the Gaza Strip of humanitarian assistance, including of food, fuel and medical treatment."

The assembly vote, which came after hours of procedural wrangling, was 142 in favour with three against and nine abstentions, according to a revised vote count. Assembly president Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann earlier said the vote was 142 in favour, six against with eight abstentions.

Israel, the United States and Nauru cast no votes.

Ryad Mansour, the Palestinian observer to the United Nations, immedi-

ately welcomed the assembly's "almost unanimous vote" to pressure Israel to comply with Council resolution 1860.

"We shall prevail because of your support," he added.

The compromise assembly text, which slightly amended an earlier draft circulated Thursday by D'Escoto, was negotiated by Egypt on behalf of the Palestinian Authority with European Union ambassadors.

It dropped an earlier reference to Israel as "the occupying power" in Gaza and inserted a sentence "emphasising that the Palestinian and Israeli civilian populations must be protected and their suffering must end."

The resolution also expressed support for the current mediation undertaken by UN chief Ban Ki-moon and for other international and regional efforts underway.

It called on all member states to urgently extend the necessary support to international and regional efforts aimed at alleviating the critical humanitarian and economic situation in the Gaza Strip.

A group of assembly hardliners, including Ecuador, Venezuela, Iran, Syria, Indonesia, Malaysia and Nicaragua, sought a vote on a tougher draft but was overruled.

The hardliners' text demanded "full respect for Security Council resolution 1860, calls for an immediate ceasefire and the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza."

Friday's assembly decision capped two days of contentious debate in which Israel was roundly condemned by many UN delegations for its deadly assault on Gaza that included strikes Thursday on hospital, media and UN buildings.

Israel sought but failed to block the session on procedural grounds, arguing that under the UN Charter, the 192-member assembly cannot inject itself on a matter already being tackled by the powerful Security Council.

Israel's delegate, Meirav Shahar, dismissed the resolution as "irrelevant," "one-sided" and "procedurally and substantially flawed," noting that it did not mention rocket attacks on southern Israel.

US deputy ambassador Alejandro Wolff, who earlier in the day urged the assembly not to undermine ongoing diplomatic efforts to arrange a Gaza truce, slammed the resolution.

"A separate General Assembly is neither necessary nor helpful, certainly not an unbalanced one that is silent on the issue of Hamas rocket attacks," he noted.



Israeli artillery fires a long-range shell towards the Gaza Strip yesterday as seen from the Israel-Gaza border.

PHOTO: AFP

Iran slams Arab 'traitors' in Gaza crisis

AFP, Tehran

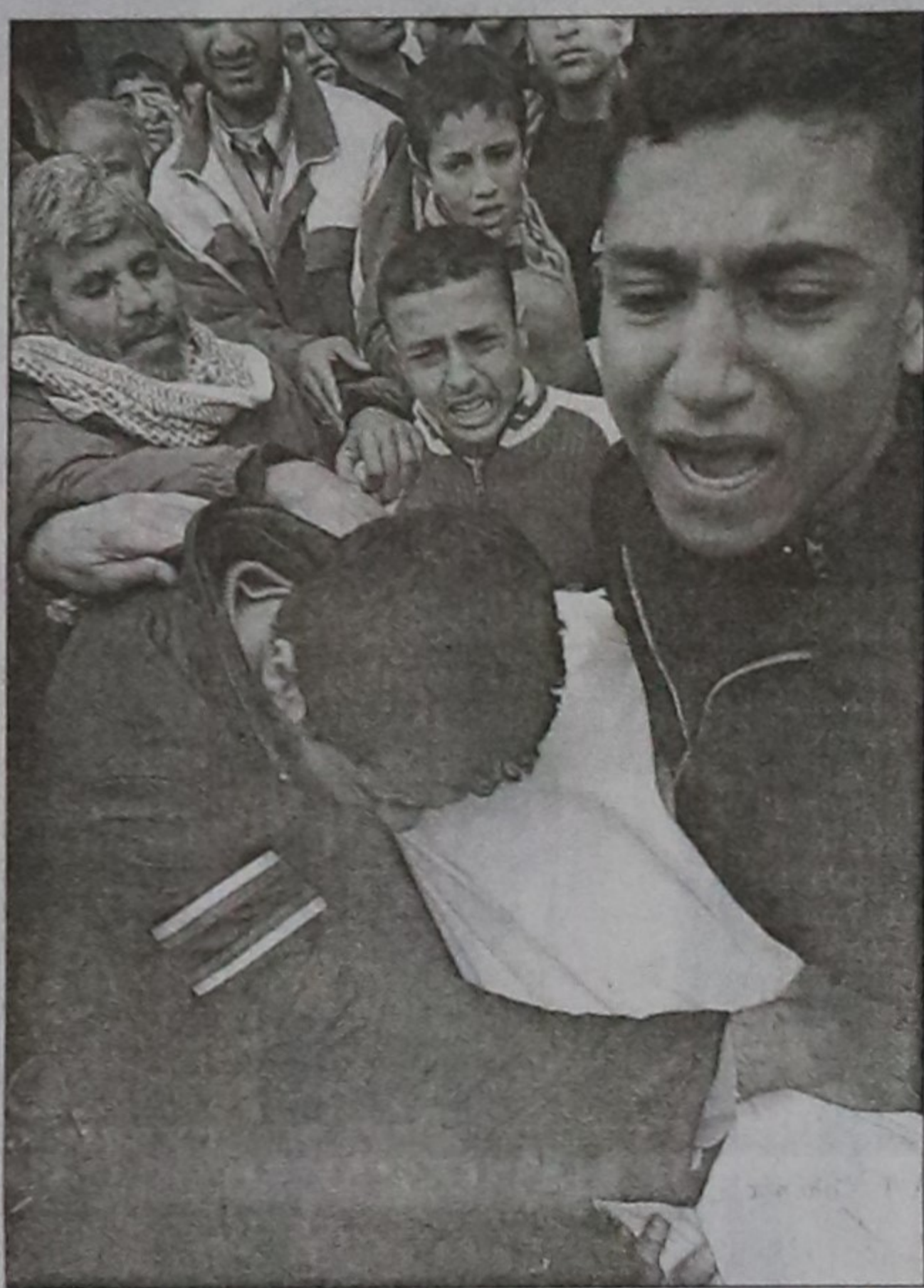
Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei denounced Arab "traitors" and "hypocrites" in the Gaza crisis, in a message Friday to Hamas leader Ismail Haniya, the state news agency IRNA reported.

"Be proud of your patience, courage and sacrifice... Your Jihad up to this day has exposed America, the Zionist regime and its supporters, the United Nations and the hypocrites among the Islamic nation," Khamenei said.

"The Arab traitors should know that their fate will not be better than that of the Jews in the Battle of Ahzab," he said, alluding to one of Prophet Mohamed's wars.

"Nations are with the people and combatants of Gaza. Any government that acts contrary to this deepens the gap between itself and its nation."

"You are victorious this very day and by continuing this noble resistance you will bring the hopeless and anti-human enemy further defeat," the all-powerful leader said.



Men cry during the funeral of several Palestinians killed during Israeli strikes at the Bureij Refugee Camp in central Gaza Strip yesterday.

Arab leaders accuse Israel of 'crimes of war and genocide'

AFP, Doha

Arab and other Muslim leaders meeting on Friday in Qatar accused Israel of "crimes of war and genocide" in Gaza, where the Jewish state has conducted a three-week onslaught against rulers Hamas.

Proposals adopted in Doha call for "an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Israeli forces and suspension of the Arab peace initiative," while accusing Israel of "committing crimes of war and genocide," the final statement said.

The proposals will be presented to Arab leaders in Kuwait on Monday at an official Arab League summit.

Other demands mentioned in the statement were "the opening of all border crossings, lifting of the blockade, and holding Israel responsible for paying compensation."

"We request that this crime stops," Qatari Prime Minister

Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani said at the press conference that followed the meeting.

Also in Doha, Qatar and Mauritania announced the suspension of the relations with Israel.

The move followed appeals by both the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad for Arab states to sever any ties they had with Israel.

Mauritania has diplomatic ties to Israel, while Qatar is the only Gulf Arab country with commercial relations with the Jewish state.

Egypt and Jordan are the only Arab countries which have signed peace treaties with Israel and which have Israeli embassies.

Ahmadinejad called for the prosecution of Israeli leaders by the International Court of Justice for "crimes" against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

US, Israel seek Palestinian Authority's return to Gaza

AFP, Washington

With a ceasefire shaping up, the United States and Israel seem to be trying to oust Hamas from the Gaza Strip in order to allow the return of the US-backed Palestinian Authority of Mahmud Abbas.

Although they did not clearly say so, all the remarks Friday from US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her Israeli counterpart Tzipi Livni pointed in the same direction: the return of Abbas with international support.

"I think that there is much that can be done to begin to bring Gaza out of the dark of Hamas's reign there and into the light of reconnecting to the very good governance that the Palestinian Authority can provide," Rice said.

Rice was speaking before she and Livni signed an agreement aimed at preventing the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip as part of efforts to clinch a ceasefire in Israel's three-week military offensive against Hamas.

"What we're doing in the Gaza Strip is not against the peace process, but it serves the peace process, because the idea is that Israel starts the peace talks with the pragmatic leadership in the Palestinian Authority," she said.

Livni has overseen the peace talks with the Palestinian Authority led by Abbas -- who is also known as Abu Mazen -- and his Fatah movement since they were relaunched in November 2007 under Rice.

Israel's chief diplomat did not reply directly when asked if Israel intended to restore Abbas to power in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas has ruled since June 2007 after ousting forces loyal to Abbas.

"It's a zero-sum game between (Hamas's Gaza leader Ismail) Haniya and Abu Mazen, between Hamas and Fatah," Livni said. "In order to strengthen the moderates and the legitimate government, we need to weaken the others."

Neither Rice nor Livni explained how Abbas could retake control of the Gaza Strip without appearing to be a traitor in the court of Arab public opinion.

But Rice recalled having negotiated in 2005 an agreement over access to the Gaza Strip, which calls for the deployment of international observers and Palestinian Authority security control over the territory.

Rice's spokesman Sean McCormack meanwhile suggested that Hamas had been "damaged" after the three-week pounding by Israeli forces.

"One thing we know for certain that we have learned from our experience in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan and elsewhere is there is not just a military solution to problems such as this, fighting terror," McCormack told reporters.

"You also have to bring to bear building up infrastructure, building up capabilities, bringing resources to bear to help the population so that they can make a different kind of political decision," McCormack said.

Israel, US sign anti-Gaza arms smuggling deal

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni signed a deal here Friday aimed at halting arms smuggling into Gaza as part of efforts to clinch a ceasefire.

Rice, who blamed Hamas for sparking a 21-day military offensive by Israel, said at a signing ceremony in Washington that the deal aims to ensure that "Gaza can never again be used as a launchpad" for rocket and other attacks.

Flanked by Livni at the hastily-arranged gathering, Rice said the memorandum of understanding "provides a series of steps that the US and Israel will take to stem the flow of weapons and explosives into Gaza."

Livni thanked her US counterpart for completing this "historic MOU in record time" after she was sent to Washington by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert late Thursday.

"There must be an end of smuggling of weapons to Gaza," the Israeli chief diplomat

said, adding that the MOU is "a vital component for the cessation of hostilities."

It was not immediately clear how soon a ceasefire could take place.

Rice told reporters that she hoped for a "ceasefire very, very soon" but could not promise one would be sealed in time for January 20, when President George W. Bush hands the White House over to his successor, Barack Obama.

"We're working ... on as quick a timeline as we possibly can in support of the Egyptian mediation," she said.

In Jerusalem, a senior Israeli government official said Olmert's security cabinet is expected to vote in favor of a proposal at a meeting on Saturday night under which Israel would silence its guns even without a reciprocal agreement from the Islamist movement Hamas, which has controlled Gaza since ousting forces loyal to the US-backed Palestinian Authority in June 2007.

Water -- a precious commodity in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Every day when Israel pauses its bombardment of the Gaza Strip, Palestinians launch a ground assault on the territory's public fountains to try to lay their hands on precious supplies of water.

As soon as the radio announces the start of the daily three-to-four-hour lull, thousands of people race from their homes, laden with water containers of all shapes and sizes, and head for fountains, mosques, schools or any other public water source.

At home, for many families, the taps have run dry. "As soon as I heard that there was another of the three-hour truces, I came down to the fountain," says Kamel al-Hamami, an empty water container in each hand as he nears the front of a queue of around 20 people.

Hamami lives in Zeitun, a neighbourhood which has seen some of the heaviest exchanges between Hamas fighters and Israeli troops, and where running water is now a distant memory.

"I've come here with my children, and they've also got containers so that we can fill up our 500-litre water tank on the roof of our home."

Some of Gaza's more resourceful residents have sought to make a swift buck out of the shortages, with hawkers selling jerrycans for up to ten shekels (about 2.5 dollars/two euros) a go.



Palestinian youths and Israeli forces clash at Qalandia checkpoint, between Jerusalem and the West Bank city of Ramallah on Friday during a protest against Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip.

PHOTO: AFP



Palestinian UN workers inspect a classroom following an Israeli strike over a UN school in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza Strip early yesterday. A woman and a child were killed early Saturday in the Israeli strike on the UN-run school where civilians took shelter from the fighting.

PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi guards throw party for shoe-thrower

AP, Baghdad

The Iraqi journalist jailed since throwing his shoes at President George W. Bush got a visit from his brother Friday and a birthday party for his guards as he turned 30.

Muntadhar al-Zeidi, who has gained cult status for his bizarre protest, is in good shape but has been denied access to his lawyer, relatives said after his brother Maitham visited him for two hours in his detention cell in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone.

Al-Zeidi has been in custody since the Dec. 14 outbreak at Bush's joint news conference with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Thousands demonstrated for al-Zeidi's release and hailed his gesture.

But concern was raised about his welfare after allegations that he had been severely beaten and tortured in detention.

The case's investigating judge has said the journalist was struck about the face and eyes, apparently by security agents who wrestled him to the floor after he hurled his shoes, forcing Bush to duck for cover.

Obama ready to end harsh interrogations

AP, Washington

President-elect Barack Obama is preparing to prohibit the use of waterboarding and harsh interrogation techniques by ordering the CIA to follow military rules for questioning prisoners, according to two US officials familiar with drafts of the plans. Still under debate is whether to include a loophole that would allow exceptions in extraordinary cases.

The proposal Obama is considering would require all CIA interrogators to follow conduct outlined in the US Army Field Manual, the officials said. The plans would also have the effect of shutting down secret "black site" prisons around the world where the CIA has questioned terror suspects with all future interrogations taking place inside American military facilities.

However, Obama's changes may not be absolute. His advisers are considering adding a classified loophole to the rules that could allow the CIA to use some interrogation methods not specifically

authorized by the Pentagon, the officials said, although the intent is not to use that as an opening for possible use of waterboarding.

The new rules would abandon a part of President George W. Bush's counterterrorism policy that has been condemned internationally. Bush has defended his policies by pointing to the fact that the nation has gone more than seven years without another terrorist attack on its soil.

Obama spokeswoman Brooke Anderson did not have an immediate comment Friday about the drafted plans, which the two officials discussed only on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

No final decisions have been made about how to adjust the government's interrogation standards. Obama is still weighing whether to alter interrogation policy by executive order during his first days in office or working with Congress through legislation.

NYC investigators hunt for jet's lost engines

AP, New York

Divers and sonar operators hunted for two missing engines from a US Airways jetliner in challenging, nearly impossible conditions as investigators made plans to carefully hoist the damaged plane from the water to retrieve the flight and data recorders.

The engines, lost when Flight 1549 splashed down after colliding with birds, were presumed to have been carried somewhere cold, dark and murky by the river's strong tides.

Exactly where, though, was a mystery. US Army Corps of Engineers vessels and city police department boats were to resume the search Saturday, probing the sediment-obscured riverbottom along a 4 1/2 mile stretch from the point of impact to the southern tip of Manhattan.

Investigators also planned to conduct their first interview Saturday with the pilot, Chesley B. "Sully" Sullenberger.