

Gazans survey damage after 3 weeks of war

AFP, Gaza City

As Hamas congratulated Palestinians on their "victory" from mosque loudspeakers yesterday, shell-shocked residents surveyed the debris of the deadliest offensive ever launched by Israel on Gaza.

"We congratulate all the Palestinian people after the victory in the fight with the enemy," bellowed a voice from a Hamas mosque in central Gaza City.

Yahia Karin, a 54-year-old resident of city's southern neighbourhood of Zeitun, found little to cheer about -- his home was reduced to rubble during the 22-day Israeli offensive which killed at least 1,300 Palestinians.

"I came to see my home, but as you can see, there is no home here anymore," Karin said, pointing to the charred ruins of his residence.

Some of the heaviest clashes between Israeli troops and Hamas fighters occurred in his neighbourhood -- and the scars of war are everywhere to be seen. Surrounding buildings are marked by

charred traces of tank shells while black automobile carcasses line a street pockmarked by huge gaping holes.

"Everything has been completely destroyed," said Karin amid piles of dusty rubble and twisted metal.

"I ask (Israeli Prime Minister Ehud) Olmert -- why did you destroy my home? I'm not Hamas, I'm not in any faction. I'm a civilian. I want peace," he said, choked by emotion.

"It's a massacre not only against our people, but also against our homes. I pray to Allah to destroy the Jews."

Karin was one of thousands of Gazans who took advantage of a unilateral ceasefire announced by Israel late on Saturday -- already punctured by rockets, air strikes, and gunfire -- to survey the war damage.

"We congratulate the (Ezzedine Al-Qassam) Brigades that threw itself into battle and won," an imam wailed from another mosque. "We salute the heroes who were martyred."

In Tal Al-Hawa another resident glanced around the depressing land-

scape. "Everywhere I look there is rubble. There is still smoke rising from some places. The roads and buildings have huge gaping holes," he said.

Jumna Nasser, 62, came to his neighbourhood for the first time since the start of the war to survey the damage to his supermarket.

"Look at this, all the goods have been destroyed by tank shells," he said staring at the burned shelves.

Another resident, who gave his name only as Amer and his age as 34, left his wife and children behind at their temporary lodgings.

"I came alone because if the shelling resumes, I'll be able to run away," he said. "If my family is with me, we'll either be killed or injured. Without a complete ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, I won't be back in my home."

Such scenes were playing out all across Gaza.

In the southern city of Khan Yunis, Mohammed Al-Najar sought desperately to find him home -- in vain -- in the rubble.



A Palestinian man walks past a destroyed building in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Israeli troops and Palestinian fighters exchanged their first shots on Sunday in Gaza, where dozens of bodies were pulled from the rubble after Israel ended a deadly war on Hamas.

Gaza counts the cost of Israel's onslaught

AFP, Gaza City

Gaza, one of the world's most impoverished strips of land, has been plunged deeper into the abyss by Israel's three-week war, which has reduced vast swathes of the territory to rubble.

According to the Palestinian central bureau of statistics, the damage to infrastructure alone is 476 million dollars -- the bill for which is expected to be largely picked up by Western donors.

Israeli bombs and tanks shells have pummeled everything from UN warehouses, schools and hospitals since Operation Cast Lead was launched on December 27.

Water supplies have been reduced to a trickle after damage to the main treatment plant while hits on power lines and numerous sub-stations have left most households without electricity at the height of winter.

While Israel insists it made every effort to only target Hamas militants, the "collateral damage" from a war largely fought in the teeming neighbourhoods of Gaza City and refugee camps has been immense.

Gaza is one of the world's most densely populated places on the planet, with around 1.5 million people packed into a surface area of 362 square kilometres (140 square miles).

More than half of the population is under 18 years of age.

More than 1,200 people, some half of them estimated to be civilians, are known to have died since the start of the war.

Emergency services expect that figure will rise when they finally get the chance to sift through the rubble of areas that have been too dangerous to access.

Egypt hosts Gaza summit

AFP, Sharm el-Sheikh

European and Middle Eastern leaders held a summit in Egypt yesterday aimed at shoring up a fragile truce in the three-week war between Israel and Hamas militants in Gaza.

It convened as Palestinian armed groups offered a one-week truce in response to the unilateral ceasefire declared by Israel.

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, who held meetings early Sunday with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo, was in attendance at the summit in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, as was UN chief Ban

Ki-moon.

Germany, Britain, France, Italy and Turkey -- which have offered to satisfy Israel's main demand of securing Gaza's border with Egypt in order to stop Hamas rearming -- were also represented at the meeting.

Egypt held talks with a Hamas delegation in Cairo earlier in the day aimed at consolidating the ceasefire.

"We are working with Hamas, and discussions were held today with them. As soon as Hamas's position is clarified we will let Israel know and wait for them to come," foreign ministry spokesman Hossain Zaki told AFP.

The Islamists' exiled number two Musa Abu Marzuq, later offered a one-week truce to allow Israel to withdraw its troops and open its border crossings with Gaza to basic goods.

"The Israeli enemy has failed in its bid to impose conditions. We in the Palestinian resistance movements announce a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and demand that enemy forces withdraw in a week and open all the border crossings to permit the entry of humanitarian aid and basic goods," Abu Marzuq told Syrian state television.

"We are ready to accept all efforts, particularly those of

the Egyptians, Turks, Syrians and Qataris, to reach an agreement that meets our known demands, namely the lifting of the blockade and the opening of all the crossing points, including the Rafah crossing," between Gaza and Egypt, he said.

Egypt announced a truce plan for Gaza on January 6 and has since made intensive efforts to secure a reciprocal ceasefire.

Israel's announcement late on Saturday that it was halting its offensive with or without an understanding with Hamas drew a testy response from Egyptian officials.



Palestinian families return to their homes near the Rafah border in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Thousands of Gazans took advantage of a unilateral ceasefire announced by Israel Saturday night to return home and take a look at what remained.

Ceasefire 'insufficient', says Abbas

AFP, Cairo

Israel's unilateral ceasefire in Gaza is insufficient, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas said yesterday, calling for a complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from the territory.

"The ceasefire is important and necessary but insufficient," Abbas said after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who has been spearheading truce efforts.

"There must be a complete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and a reopening of crossing points to allow the arrival of aid to the Palestinian people of Gaza," he was quoted as saying by Egypt's official MENA news agency.

Israel declared a unilateral ceasefire at 2.00 am (0000 GMT) on Sunday to end its 22-day-long campaign in Gaza, which killed at least 1,245 people, including more than 400 children, wounded another 5,300, and left much of the territory in ruins.

Since the ceasefire, militants have fired

rockets and exchanged fire with Israeli troops, who in turn shot dead a Palestinian as their air force carried out an air strike on Gaza.

The Islamist Hamas, bitter rivals of Abbas's Fatah faction, has also called for an end to Israel's 18-month siege of the territory and a withdrawal of all Israeli forces in order to end its fighting.

Nabil Abu Rudeina, spokesman for Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, said the move should only be a "first step" while senior negotiator Saeb Erakat predicted the ceasefire will not last if soldiers remain in Gaza.

"This Israeli decision to stop the fire is a first step and should be followed by a truce, the end to the closure surrounding Gaza and the withdrawal of troops," Abbas's spokesman told AFP.

Announcing the end to the offensive late Saturday, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that soldiers would remain in the territory for an unspecified period with orders to respond to any fire from Hamas militants, who have been the target of Operation Cast Lead.

Rights groups to ask world court to probe Israeli 'war crimes'

AFP, Geneva

An international group of lawyers and jurists said Saturday they would ask the International Criminal Court to probe alleged "war crimes" committed by Israel during its offensive in the Gaza Strip.

"The request for an investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity would be placed by Wednesday at The Hague," Haytham Manna, Arab Commission for Human Rights spokesman, told AFP.

The commission is among 300 human rights groups planning to submit a 37-page dossier to the ICC based in the Netherlands.

International lawyers and jurists met Saturday in Geneva to finalise details of the dossier, which documents several violations against international human rights committed by the Israeli army during the Gaza offensive, said Manna.

The ICC is competent to adjudicate war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed after 2002.

It can try individuals if a crime is alleged to have been committed on the territory of, or by a national of, a state party to the court's founding statute.

Even though Israel is not a state member, the group of jurists said the ICC could still prosecute individuals in the country.

Manna added that some state members such as Venezuela and Bolivia are also interested in going to the ICC.

As state members of the ICC, these countries can go one step further than simply requesting for an investigation by putting forward the charge against the Israeli authorities, said Manna.

Bolivia is preparing a request seeking to have Israel prosecuted by the ICC, two ministers said Friday in Geneva.

The South American state says it wants to muster support among regional peers for a bid to have "the Israeli political and military leaders responsible for the offensive on the Gaza Strip" brought before justice, said Sacha Llorenti, whose portfolio covers civil society.

Venezuela and Bolivia on Wednesday broke diplomatic ties with Israel over its deadly military offensive in the Gaza Strip and refusal to comply with international calls for a ceasefire, their leftist governments said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced late Saturday a halt in the three-week-old Gaza offensive, which left more than 1,200 Palestinians dead.

Ctg Arms Haul Case

FROM PAGE 16

Ahsanul Hoque Hena appealed for the order.

In his appeal, Hena said interrogation of Jamaat-e-Islami leader and former industries minister Matjur Rahman Nizami and former state minister for home Lutfuzzaman Babar is necessary to unearth the mystery of the arms and smuggling case.

The mystery over the identity of the smugglers and the destination and place of origin of the firearms and ammunition remains unsolved even after 56 months.

In the country's largest-ever arms haul, joint forces seized 10 truckloads of 10,000 arms, including submachine-guns, AK 47 rifles, rocket propelled grenades and their launchers, 2,000 grenades and three lakh bullets in the early hours on April 2, 2004.

The arms and ammunition were stuffed in 1,500 wooden boxes and seized during unloading from two trawlers, MV Khazar Dan and FB Amanat, at the jetty.

There were 690 7.62mm SMG T-56-1, 600 7.62mm SMG T-56-2, 400 9mm automatic carbine (model 320),

100 tommy automatic rifles, 150 40mm rocket launcher T-69, 2000 Launching Tubes (Ugo Rifles), 150 sight for 40mm rocket launchers, 2,792 magazines of SMG T-56-1, 2,400 magazines of SMG T-56-2, 800 magazines of 9mm automatic carbines, 400 magazines for tommy rifles, 400,000 7.25x25 ball pistol bullets, 739,680 bullets of T-56 pistol, 840 40mm rocket heads of T-69 launchers and 25,020 NV hand grenades among the captured arms and ammunition.

Earlier, the then CID ASP AKM Kabir Uddin had submitted the charge sheet twice after investigation into the case and ASP Ismail Hossain Khan was conducting further investigation into the case as of yesterday.

"After today's court order, an SP of CID or higher ranked officer will have to probe the case. Additional six-month time was given in two phases to the last IO Ismail who was scheduled to submit his report today (Sunday). As he [Ismail] failed to do so, I appealed to change him and appoint a new IO," Hena told reporters.

In his appeal, Hena said, "The then deputy commissioner (port) of Chittagong Metropolitan Police (CMP) high officials of special branch, and the then home and industries ministers are concerned parties in the case and they all are required to be queried."

On quizzing former ministers Nizami and Babar, Hena told reporters that the state minister for home could not skip his responsibility considering the circumstances as his ministry was somehow aware of the incident beforehand while the then industries minister Nizami must respond to the question how the arms-laden trawlers were anchored at the jetty, which is under his ministry.

Two cases were filed with the Karnaphuli Police Station after the arms and ammunition were seized during off-loading from the boats.

One of the cases was lodged under section-25/B of the Special Power Act for arms smuggling and the other under section-19 (ka) of the Arms Act.

However, out of the 44 accused in these two cases, all except two are now on bail.

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BCL antics irk AL top brass

FROM PAGE 1

Sources said Hasina last week warned BCL President Mahmud Hasan Ripon and General Secretary Mahfuzul Haider Chowdhury Roton of stern action against them if their activities tarnish the government's image.

Hasina earned praise when she brought radical changes in the BCL leadership on April 4, 2006 giving the charge to regular students aged under 29. But during its two-year tenure, that committee failed to implement similar changes in its metropolitan, district and upazila committees and those in different universities and colleges. This gave rise to different factions within the BCL and increased internal feuds.

Talking to The Daily Star, many BCL leaders said the student body has gone out of control as the central committee lost its control on any unit committee.

Over 20 incidents of violent activities, including gun battle among BCL factions in Jahangirnagar University, took place in Dhaka University, Jagannath University, Chittagong University, Rajshahi University, different medical colleges and other public colleges.

The authorities have, however, taken no significant action so far against persons responsible for those activities.

At least 20 BCL leaders were injured, most of them chopped repeatedly, on Dhaka University campus in the last 20 days.

Meanwhile, BCL central committee suspended its JU unit for a month following two days' internal clashes. But it has failed to take any action against the BCL leaders who have kept Chittagong University inactive for several days

demanding resignation of the vice-chancellor.

Talking to The Daily Star, BCL President Ripon said, "We have already suspended the Jahangirnagar University unit for a month and issued a warning to the Jagannath University unit." He urged law enforcement agencies to take immediate action if BCL men violate the law.

State Minister for Home Affairs Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj said, "We are monitoring the situation at different universities and colleges so that we can take instant measures to prevent any untoward incident and ensure safety and security of students and teachers."

He told The Daily Star that law enforcement agencies have been directed not to tolerate any unruly incidents anywhere in the country including the educational institutions.

BNP aspirant given right result sheet

FROM PAGE 1

which was rightly printed in the correct result sheet sent by the presiding officer.

In a media briefing on Friday senior BNP leaders presented the erroneous figures in the consolidated result sheet as their evidence of poll rigging.

The consolidated result sheet shows that 3,845 votes were cast in that centre while the total number of voters were 3,768, sparking the BNP allegation that 77 votes were rigged, shoddily hiking up the rate of vote casting in that centre to 102.04 percent.

Worried by BNP's claim, EC Secretariat officials on Saturday asked the election officer of Naogaon district to send a copy of the polling result of Gahelapur High School polling station, sources said.

On receiving the result sheet, which should have been the foundation of the figures shown in the consolidated sheet, the officials found that the presiding officer had mentioned that the total number of voters of that centre

had been 4,091, of whom 3,845 had cast their votes.

"The presiding officer who conducted the poll in that polling station, correctly mentioned the figures," Jesmin Tuli, deputy secretary to the EC Secretariat told The Daily Star yesterday.

The result sheet also shows that Mohammad Abdul Mannan, and Brindaban Nath Pal, two polling agents of AL and BNP candidates, deployed at the polling station, put their signatures on the correct result sheet and received copies of it. None of them raised any allegation either.

Asked whether he inquired about any perceived anomaly in the result sheet received by his polling agent, BNP candidate Anwar Hossain said, "It was not my job to look into the facts mentioned in the result sheet of the polling station. I don't even know whether my polling agent was provided with a copy," Anwar told The Daily Star over the phone.

He said he collected a consolidated

result sheet from the district election office on January 13 and found an anomaly in it. "Then I collected another copy on January 15 to be sure, and found the same anomaly again. So I handed it over to my senior leaders," Anwar claimed.

Asked whether he sought clarification from the offices of the returning officer or the district election officer, Anwar said he did not.

So how the erroneous figure was included in the consolidated result sheet finally became a question.

The EC investigation revealed that the office of the returning officer (RO), which prepared the consolidated result sheet, copied the total number of voters of that station from the gazette of polling stations instead of the result sheet provided by the presiding officer of that station.

And the gazette had the wrong figure for the total number of voters of that particular polling station.

The gazette erroneously mentions

that the total number of voters of that polling station was 3,768.

"Had the officials who consolidated the constituency's poll results, looked at the result sheet sent by the presiding officer, the misunderstanding could have been avoided," Mihir Sarwar Morshed, deputy secretary to the EC Secretariat, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Referring to the error in the gazette of polling stations, Election Commissioner Muhammed Sohul Hussain yesterday expressed regret and said, "It was a clerical error."

"We will post the election results of all polling stations on our website to dispell all confusions," he added.

Meanwhile, BNP Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan told The Daily Star last night, "If the Election Commission admits to its printing mistake and apologises for it, then we have nothing else to say. But we based our allegation on the figures published in the gazette."