



Palestinian boys stand on the rubble of a mosque in Jabalia yesterday. Tension eased in Gaza yesterday as a fragile ceasefire entered its third day, with residents struggling to absorb the devastation caused by Israel's deadly 22-day assault on the territory.

Gazans see little hope for change under Obama

AFP, Gaza City

As they clean up the rubble of Israel's deadliest war on their coastal strip, Gazans hold out little hope that new US president Barack Obama can bring change to the cycle of violence.

The tide of global hope that has surged with Obama's arrival has not washed over Gaza, where 1,300 Palestinians died, more than 400 of them children, and 5,000 were wounded in Israel's 22-day offensive that only ended on Sunday.

"Obama won't bring my husband back to life," said Leila Khalil.

"He was martyred and left me with six children to feed on my own. And Obama won't repair our house that was damaged in the (air) raids."

"Palestinians across the battered city voice the same

anguish as 42-year-old Khalil, who lost her husband on January 6 when Israeli bombs fell on a school in the north of the Gaza Strip.

For Khalil, Obama, who was to be inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States later on Tuesday, will not alter the historically pro-Israel US policy on the Middle East.

"No one cares about us," she said. "If we can't even count on Arab presidents, what can we hope for from an American president when they've always supported Israel?"

Samih Zouhdi, who works in a bank, agrees.

"No American president will compensate us for our losses from the war nor resuscitate the martyrs nor heal the amputated nor rebuild the homes that have been restored," said the 53-year-old.

Kalyan Singh quits BJP

PTI, Lucknow

BJP Vice President and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Kalyan Singh today quit the BJP, resigning from all party posts, saying he was feeling "neglected" in the party.

In a letter to party president Rajnath Singh, the 76-year-old leader, who has been sulking over various issues, said he was feeling "unhappy" but could not compromise by continuing in the party.

He also told Rajnath Singh that he was returning the Etah Parliamentary seat for which he was nominated by the party for the coming Lok Sabha elections.

Kalyan Singh, who had met Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav on Sunday, had attacked the party last week on various issues. Yesterday, Mulayam Singh offered a Lok Sabha seat for his son Rajveer Singh on BJP ticket.

Hundreds of millions needed for Gaza: UN

AP, United Nations

Hundreds of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid will be needed immediately to help Gaza's 1.4 million people and billions of dollars will be required to rebuild its shattered buildings and infrastructure, the UN humanitarian chief said Monday.

John Holmes said some neighbourhoods have been almost totally destroyed, there are huge medical and food needs, sewage is flowing in some streets, and unexploded ordnance is posing a big problem.

While 100,000 people had their running water restored on Sunday, 400,000 still have no water, electricity is available for less than half the day, and 100,000 people are displaced from their homes, Holmes said.

'Arabs unable to agree on Gaza statement'

AP, Kuwait City

Arab countries have been unable to agree on a unified statement about the Gaza Strip following Israel's devastating three-week offensive. Iraq's foreign minister said Tuesday at the end of an economic summit dominated by Gaza.

The crisis in Gaza has divided Arab countries into two camps - one supporting Hamas' hard-liners, the other hoping to lure the Palestinian militant group toward more moderation. The political division could affect the stability of the fragile cease-fire in Gaza, which was in its third day Tuesday.

"Unfortunately, we didn't reach a final result because of time limits and because some are entrenched in their positions," Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari told state-owned Kuwait Television at the end of a two-day Arab Economic summit in Kuwait.

He did not name any countries, but stressed that "everybody has to make concessions" and efforts were still ongoing to reach agreement.

Zebari's comments come a day after Saudi King Abdullah urged the deeply

divided Arab countries to end their rift and warned Israel that an Arab peace initiative proposed by Saudi Arabia would not remain on the table forever.

The king, who along with Egypt have been pressuring Hamas to be more moderate, even invited his Arab rivals - the Kuwaiti and Qatar - to lunch at his Kuwait residence.

Following the meal, Qatar's prime minister expressed optimism that both camps could work together, and local media praised the gathering as a historic "Arab reconciliation."

"But Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak took a veiled swipe at Syria by criticizing Iran's ties with some Arab leaders - indicating that the two sides were still divided. The Persian country and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah are the two of Hamas' main backers and both have strong relations with Syria."

Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both staunch US allies, initially blamed Hamas for the Gaza crisis. Later, as the Gaza death toll increased and public pressure in the Arab world to support Hamas mounted, the two Arab powerhouses shifted their

accusations toward Israel.

More than 1,250 Palestinians and 13 Israelis have been killed during three weeks of combat in Gaza, which Israel said it launched to halt Hamas rocket fire.

But the divisions between Arab countries grew deeper last week when Qatar hosted a summit on Gaza. Egypt and Saudi Arabia led a boycott of the gathering, which Qatar had called to take a united stance on Gaza but ended up being dominated by supporters of Hamas.

The two sides also are divided about what should be done with the Arab peace initiative - first proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002 and relaunched in March 2007.

At the summit in Qatar, Syria called for putting the peace initiative on hold - a more radical position than the one outlined by Abdullah on Monday.

The Arab peace initiative offers Israel collective Arab recognition in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from territory it occupied during the 1967 Mideast war, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and a just solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees.

16 killed as troops, Tigers lock horns

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's navy yesterday destroyed four Tamil Tiger boats and killed 16 guerrillas trying to escape as government soldiers close in on the rebels' last base in the northeast, the military said.

Officials said the pre-dawn naval battle erupted in waters off Mullaitivu, a jungle and lagoon area and the last town in Sri Lanka still in the hands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

A naval blockade has been stepped up to prevent any rebel leaders from leaving the country. On the ground, government forces claim they have the Mullaitivu area surrounded.

Reeling under the military's biggest ground, air and sea offensive in more than three decades of fighting, the Tigers have seen their territory rapidly shrink, with their political capital Kilinochchi falling earlier this month.



Thai demonstrators burn a US flag and chant slogans during an anti-Israeli and anti-US protest in support of Gaza in the southern Pattani province yesterday.



Pakistan Premier Yousuf Raza Gilani (R) talks to David Petraeus, the US commander for southwest Asia during a meeting at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad yesterday.

Pakistan warns Petraeus over missile strikes

Pak troops kill 22 militants near Afghan border

AFP, AP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday expressed concern to key ally the United States over missile attacks against Islamist militants on its soil, ahead of an anticipated surge of US troops into neighbouring Afghanistan.

President Asif Ali Zardari and army chief General Ashfaq Kayani outlined Pakistan's position in talks with the visiting David Petraeus, the US commander for southwest Asia, said a Pakistani official.

Incoming US president Barack Obama, who was to be inaugurated in Washington just

hours later, has identified battling al-Qaeda and Taliban militants in neighbouring Afghanistan one of his administration's priorities.

Yet a more aggressive US strategy is likely to further antagonise Pakistan, a conservative Muslim country that has reacted angrily to dozens of suspected US missile strikes on its northwest since August.

Pakistan sought to relay its concerns to the US about a domestic backlash against the weak civilian government caused by the missile strikes, believed to be the work of unmanned drones from the

Central Intelligence Agency.

Meanwhile, Pakistani troops backed by war planes and helicopter gunships on Tuesday killed 22 militants in a major offensive against insurgents near the Afghan border, security officials said.

"We have launched a major operation in Mohmand district early this morning," a paramilitary force official told AFP.

Earlier suspected Taliban militants killed six alleged US spies in a lawless region of northwest Pakistan where US missile attacks have targeted al-Qaeda hideouts, police said Tuesday.

Five cops, 22 militants killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Suspected insurgents killed five Afghan policemen, said officials on Tuesday, as the US-led coalition announced its forces had killed 22 militants in operations against extremist networks.

Explosives mounted on a bicycle blew up Tuesday in the centre of the southern city of Kandahar as a police vehicle passed by, witnesses said.

"Two policemen were killed, one policeman and a civilian have been wounded," said the provincial government spokesman, Zalmai Ayobi.

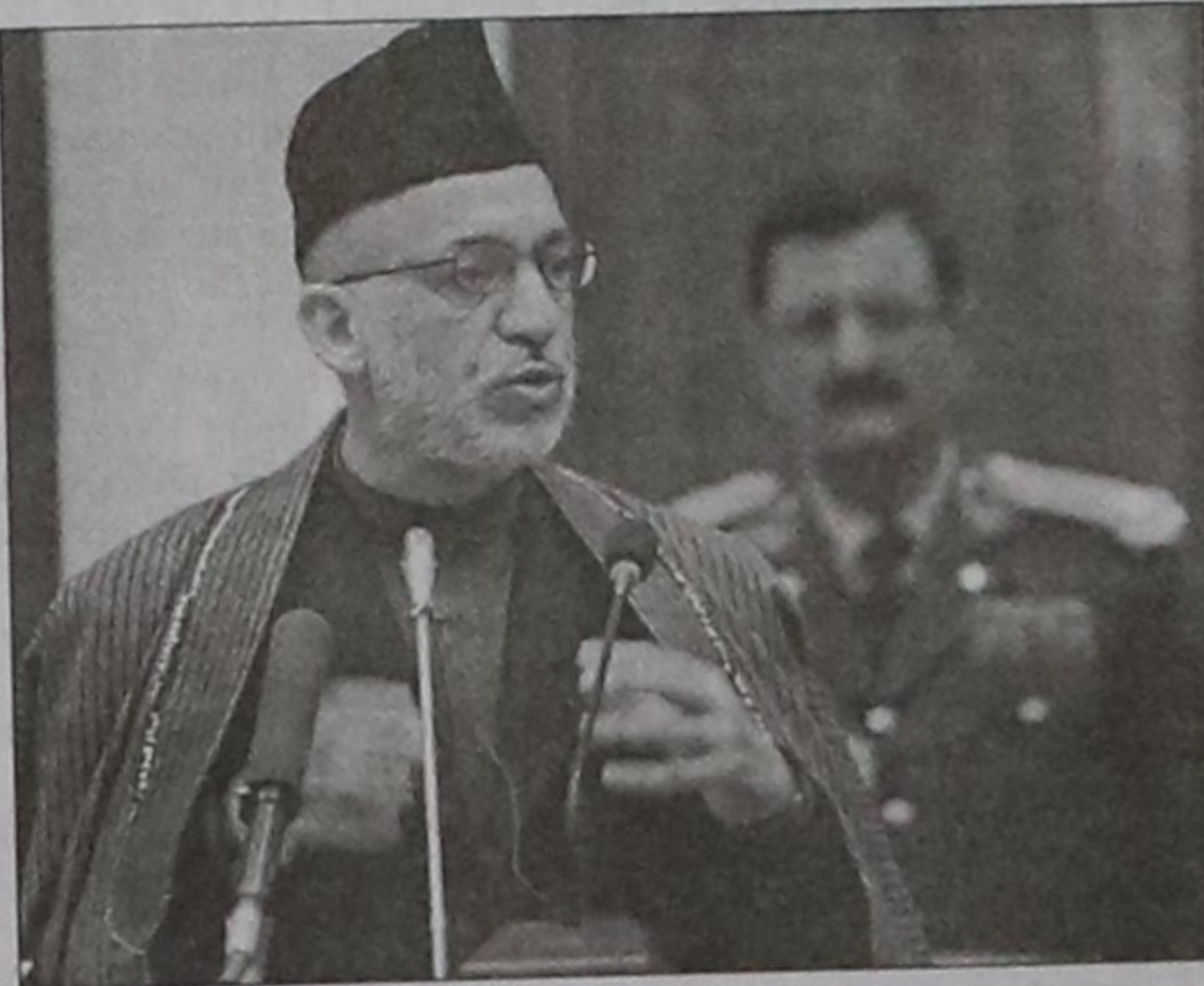
There was no claim of responsibility. The city has previously come under attack by Taliban insurgents, who

swept into government in 1996 before being ousted five years later by the 2001 US-led invasion.

Three more policemen were killed in remote north-western Afghanistan when the Taliban stormed a police post late Monday, officials said.

Another eight policemen were kidnapped in the attack, Badghis province deputy governor Abdul Ghani Sabir told AFP. He had no information about casualties among the attackers.

The US-led coalition, which is helping the Afghan government fight insurgents, said its soldiers had killed 22 militants, including two Taliban commanders, in various operations on Monday.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai speaks during the opening session of parliament in Kabul yesterday. Karzai on Tuesday accused his Western allies of not doing enough to stop civilian deaths in the "war on terror" or of cutting opium production in areas patrolled by foreign troops.

NEWS ANALYSIS

No real winners in Gaza war

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel dealt a heavy blow to Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip, but now faces political uncertainty on the back of a Palestinian humanitarian disaster, analysts said on Monday.

"The conflict has fed the cult of hatred and vengeance," warned Palestinian academic Mahdi Abdul-Hadi.

"In the end there are no victors," he said referring to proclamations of victory from both Hamas and Israeli leaders as the guns fell silent.

"The Palestinians are the losers," and not just with

more than 1,300 dead and 5,000 wounded.

A political solution to the Palestinian question is much further off today, said the founder of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs.

Israel's Operation Cast Lead followed Hamas's June 2007 power-grab in Gaza and has, said Abdul-Hadi, "set the Palestinians back by decades, to when the Palestinian question was considered a refugee drama and not a national problem," as it had become recently.

"We are heading into a situation where the real power in Gaza lies with the United Nations office for

refugees (UNRWA)," he lamented.

Today, neither the Islamised Hamas nor its bitter rivals in the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmud Abbas is in a position to administer Gaza, said Abdul-Hadi.

The political and geographic divide between Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, to which Abbas's writ is now effectively confined, is now "catastrophic" for the Palestinian unity, he said.

But Israel too faces a future without hope for peace on the ruins of Gaza, he added.

Israeli military analysts are more optimistic if still uncertain about the future.

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