

Egypt, Hamas talk 'lasting' truce with Israel

Tel Aviv warns Hamas leader over missing soldier

AFP, AP, Cairo/Jerusalem

A Hamas team met Egypt's intelligence chief Omar Suleiman yesterday in a bid to clinch a lasting truce in war-battered Gaza, after an Israeli negotiator held similar talks in Cairo.

Senior Israeli minister Shaul Mofaz yesterday warned Hamas's leader in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, that he would not be able to move around freely if an Israeli soldier remained captive in the territory.

"As long as Gilad Shalit does not see daylight, Haniya will not see daylight either," said Mofaz, who is transport

minister and a member of Israel's powerful security cabinet.

"As long as Gilad Shalit is not free, Haniya will not be able to move freely in the streets of Gaza," Mofaz said on public radio, referring to a conscript seized by Gaza militants in a deadly cross-border raid in June 2006.

"I tell Hamas leaders -- do not again make a mistake when it comes to us, do not try and harden your position before negotiations on a (prisoner) exchange involving Shalit," he said.

Egypt's state MENA news agency said Suleiman and the Hamas officials dis-

cussed "Egyptian efforts to consolidate the ceasefire, reach a (permanent) truce, reopen Gaza crossings and resume Palestinian national dialogue."

Hamas and Egyptian officials were not immediately available to comment on the behind closed doors talks, attended by members of the group's powerful Syria-based politburo and a delegation from the Gaza Strip.

But a Hamas spokesman in Damascus reiterated to AFP that the Islamist group was willing to observe a "one-year truce" with Israel "on condition" that the blockade of Gaza is lifted.

Gaza's closed borders block reconstruction

AFP, Gaza City

Mohammed Samuni and his fellow Gazans can do little more than pick apart the rubble a week after the end of Israel's war on Gaza, with major reconstruction efforts blocked because of closed borders.

"At night we split up and each of us goes to sleep in a different house of relatives in Gaza," Samuni says as he uses rags to build a make-shift tent on the ruins of his house in the war-ravaged Zeitoun neighbourhood of Gaza City.

"Then in the morning we

come and sit here," says the 33-year-old. "It's the only thing we can do is sit here and wait."

Israel's 22-day war on Gaza's Hamas rulers has left widespread destruction in the impoverished territory that has reeled from a blockade ever since the Islamists, pledged to the destruction of the Jewish state, seized power in June 2007.

Samuni's neighbourhood in Gaza City was among the areas that bore the brunt of the assault. Seven days after Israel and Hamas declared mutual ceasefires, huge heaps of

rubble line the dirt road. The metal shops, garages and chicken farm at the beginning of the street have all been destroyed by Israeli strikes. Children pick up Koran pages through the stones of the destroyed Tawheed mosque.

Members of the extended Samuni clan, one of the area's largest, mourn relatives and friends killed in the bombings and wait for aid promised by Hamas, the rival Palestinian leadership in the West Bank, and by international organisations.

"We had 22 martyrs here,"

says Fares Samuni, 68, who lost his wife.

"Since then I sleep in the street," he says. "People come here to take our names, but I don't know who they are. They all say they want to give us things, but we haven't received anything."

In order to rebuild from the war that Palestinian officials estimate caused 1.9 billion dollars (1.4 billion euros) worth of damage to Gaza's already beleaguered economy and infrastructure, construction materials must be allowed through the territory's crossings.

Issue of terrorists' rights to test Obama's pledge

AP, Washington

President Barack Obama's pledge of bipartisan cooperation with Congress will be tested as he tries to fulfil a campaign promise to close Guantanamo Bay and establish a new system for prosecuting suspected terrorists.

The undertaking is an ambitious one. Fraught with legal complexities, it gives Republicans ample opportunity to score political points if he doesn't get it right. There's also the likelihood of a run-in with his former rival, Sen. John McCain, a former prisoner of war who before running for

president staked his career on overhauling the nation's detainees policies.

"We look forward to working with the president and his administration on these issues, keeping in mind that the first priority of the US government is to guarantee the security of the American people," McCain, R-Arizona, said in a joint statement with Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina.

In his first week in office, Obama ordered Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba to be closed within a year. CIA secret prisons shuttered and abusive interrogations ended. So far, Obama's team has

given every indication it will engage lawmakers, including Republicans, on the issue.

But once the two sides begin delving into details, there will be ample room for dispute.

Among the unknowns is how many of the 245 detainees now at Guantanamo Bay will be prosecuted.

Administration officials said that, pending an internal review, federal and military courts may be used. But, the officials added, a version of the secretive military tribunals, as established under President George W. Bush with the help of McCain, remains an option, too.

At 31 he walks with a limp and needs a stick to cross the drawing room of his brother's palatial villa in Pakistan's historical centre Lahore.

"It's too painful, it's too deep, it's too dark and fills me with sadness... They did every-

thing they could to destroy me when I was completely innocent."

Since returning home in 2008 -- six years after he was arrested and years after US investigators said they had no case against him -- Saad has undergone one operation to stem infection in his left ear and is waiting another.

Unmarried and an orphan, with little hope of a normal life, he is unmoved by US President Barack Obama's widely feted decision to close Guantanamo Bay, 'secret' CIA detention facilities and outlaw torture.

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Obama 'whitewash' can't repay prison horror: Ex-inmate

AFP, Lahore

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Elections are test for Maliki, Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Iraqis vote Saturday in the first nationwide election in three years, choosing provincial leaders in what amounts to a test of Iraq's stability as the US plans to remove its troops.

In contrast to Iraq's three previous ballots since the US-led invasion, which were held in the shadow of fierce fighting, this one is strikingly open.

In Baghdad and elsewhere, streets are festooned with colourful election banners, and candidates many of them first-timers have taken advan-

tage of better security to hold public meetings where voters pose questions on such nuts-and-bolts issues as housing shortages and rising prices.

Although the races are local, the stakes are enormous both for Iraq and the United States.

A credible election without significant violence would show that the security improvements of the past 18 months are taking hold. The outcome will also show which parties stand the best chance of success in parliamentary elections expected by the end of the year.

However, a deeply flawed election, marred by violence and allegations of widespread fraud, would cast doubt over Iraq's future and could influence President Barack Obama's decision on how fast to remove the 142,000 American troops.

Obama pledged during the presidential campaign to end America's role in the unpopular war and has ordered his national security team to prepare plans for a responsible withdrawal. US officials warn that a hasty pullout could threaten Iraq's fragile security.



PHOTO: AFP

A woman leaves her house as it is burning in La Nucia near Alicante, southeastern Spain, on Saturday. High winds lashed Spain and France, killing at least 15 since January 23, in Spain and knocking out power to over a million homes in southwest France, as well as disrupting air and rail traffic.

NEWS ANALYSIS

US takes turn in terror war but harsh realities persist

AFP, Washington

With an eye on world opinion, President Barack Obama ushered in a kinder, gentler version of the "war on terror" this week with orders banning torture and shutting down Guantanamo within a year.

But the harsh realities of the struggle against al-Qaeda have quickly reassured themselves, with raids and missile strikes in Pakistan showing that the war is by no means over.

"The terminology 'war on terrorism' may go away but the war on al-Qaeda is not going to go away," said Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer and an Obama adviser during the transition and his presidential campaign.

"It is a mistake to conclude that

Obama administration is not going to go after al-Qaeda with a seriousness of purpose that may be even more serious than George Bush," he said.

On Friday, unmanned Predator aircraft launched missiles in two separate attacks on suspected extremist hideouts along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan.

Pakistani security officials said 15 people, including three children, were killed.

Jihadist websites, meanwhile, showed video introducing a former Guantanamo detainee, Said Ali al-Shahri, as the new commander of al-Qaeda in Yemen.

Al-Shahri is among 61 former prisoners at Guantanamo who the Pentagon believes has returned to terrorist activities since their release.

"More of them will be rolling around," said a US military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Still, the new administration and others say the harm done to US standing by Guantanamo and controversies over interrogation methods like waterboarding required a change in direction.

"I think you have to weigh the costs of the more severe interrogation measures with, as the president talked about in his inaugural address, our values and the impact on our values," US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said Thursday.

Retired admiral Dennis Blair, Obama's nominee to run the US intelligence community, told Congress this week that the "immediate tactical benefit" of those methods was "not the only answer."



BBC faces more pressure to air Gaza charity appeal

AFP, London

The BBC yesterday faced more pressure to broadcast a charity appeal for funds for people in Gaza, as the Archbishop of Canterbury joined the row and more than 50 lawmakers signed a motion condemning the move.

The publicly-funded British broadcaster is refusing to air an appeal by the Disasters Emergency Committee, made up of charities including the British Red Cross and Oxfam, because it says it could compromise the BBC's impartiality.

The BBC also questions whether aid can be delivered efficiently in the Gaza Strip, where Palestinians say over 1,300 died during Israel's 22-day offensive, despite ministers saying this is not an issue.

The decision drew fierce criticism from British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's government Saturday, while thousands of people protested in central London over the move.

The leader of Anglicans worldwide, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, said Sunday: "My feeling is that the BBC should broadcast an appeal."

The second most senior Anglican clergyman, Archbishop of York John Sentamu, has also said the row is not about impartiality, but humanity.

AL to probe minister's influence

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made against them and we will also launch an internal investigation," an AL Parliamentary Party (ALPP) member told The Daily Star quoting Prime Minister and AL chief Sheikh

Latif and Bodhi. As per the electoral rules, if they are found guilty they may be imprisoned for two to seven years and fined as well.

A case was filed with Teknaf Police Station Friday against Bodhi accusing him of violating the electoral code of conduct and beating up an assistant presiding officer inside a polling centre.

Ignoring the electoral rules, Fisheries and Livestock Minister Abdul Latif Biswas and

Majumder has been posted to the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) while OSD Uzzal Bikash Datta to the education ministry as additional secretary and OSD Md Golam Hossain to the home ministry as additional secretary.

OSD Nazibul Rahman has been transferred to the Department of Environment as director general (DG) replacing Khandaker Rashidul Haque, who has been made DG of the Planning and Development Academy.

OSD Monwara Begum has been posted to the Bangladesh Space Research & Remote Sensing Organisation as its chairman while DG of the National Museum of Science and joint secretary of shipping ministry Md Nurul Haque to the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) as its chief executive officer.

Chief executive officer of

Joint secretary Apurba Kumar Biswas, who was earlier attached to the Board of Investment (BoI), was sent to the Directorate of Government Transport as its transport commissioner replacing Md Abdul Kasem, who has been transferred to the Bangladesh Employees' Welfare Board as DG.

Director of the Bangladesh Steel and Engineering Corporation Shitangsu Sen has been transferred to the Department of Social Services while joint secretary of the youth and sports ministry Sadar Uddin Ahmed to the National Museum of Science and joint secretary of shipping ministry Md Nurul Haque to the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) as its chief executive officer.

Director of Biman Bangladesh Airlines Limited Mohammad Tahir Hossain has been made member of SPARRSO while OSD ALM Abdur Rahman has been transferred to the Department of Printing, Stationery, Forms and Publications as its controller, say the notifications of the establishment ministry.

Chief executive officer of

DCC Md Alauddin has been transferred to the shipping ministry as its joint secretary while establishment ministry joint secretary Main Uddin Khanakar to the education ministry as joint secretary, posts and telecommunications joint secretary Gazi Mizanur Rahman to the youth and sports ministry as joint secretary and OSD Mohammad Abdul Wazed has been made joint secretary of the food and disaster management ministry.

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Let Sangsad be centre of all activities

FROM PAGE 1

Sircar entered the House at 3:00pm to preside over the inaugural session in which main agenda was to elect the new speaker and deputy speaker.

In his speech, Sircar, whose partisan role in the last parliament triggered controversies, also hoped that participation of new and old would make the ninth parliament more dynamic.

Sircar, elected speaker by the BNP-Jamaat alliance in the immediate past parliament, said he as well as people hoped that the ninth parliament would

establish Bangladesh as a democratic, independent, sovereign and welfare state.

He went on to say, "The people will uphold the constitution, continue with the democratic practice and establish the rule of law in the country."

Sircar hoped the new speaker would follow the path he had treaded as he mentioned some of his activities as the speaker like sending parliamentary representatives from different political parties as per their ratio in parliament.

He also said he allocated

more time to the opposition than the treasury bench during president's speech in the budget session, on point of order and in other discussions.

He said there is no alternative to democracy and said all problems of the country can be solved through democratic process.

After the new speaker and deputy speaker were elected, Sircar congratulated them and hoped that their impartial attitude in discharging their duties will help flourish the parliamentary democracy.

Sircar, who contested on a

BNP ticket in the December 29 general elections but failed to win, requested the lawmakers to make their contribution to the forward march of democracy by extending full cooperation to the newly elected speaker and deputy speaker.

In his valedictory speech, he cited the famous speech of British Historian Lord Acton (1834-1902) "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.... There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it."