

Gaza truce under fire as US envoy meets Abbas

AFP, Gaza City

Spiralling violence near Gaza threatened yesterday to shatter ceasefires that ended a war in the Hamas-run enclave as US envoy George Mitchell headed for talks with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas.

Israeli warplanes bombed smuggling tunnels on Gaza's border with Egypt and militants in the coastal strip fired two rockets into the Jewish state.

The attacks, which did not injure anyone, further stoked tensions that have been rising since Tuesday when an Israeli soldier was killed in a militant bombing after 10 days of calm that followed a 22-day war.

Israeli officials, in the midst of an election campaign ahead of February 10 legislative polls, vowed that they would hit back hard at any militant strike and warned Gaza's borders would remain

closed if attacks continued.

"It is clear that we will react, but we need patience and we have no intentions of showing our plans to the enemy," Deputy Defence Minister Matan Vilnai told army radio.

Speaking of Hamas leaders, he warned, "There is no need to worry, the turn of each of them will come."

Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said Israel would not open Gaza's border crossings and allow construction materials to enter the enclave to begin reconstruction efforts if rocketing continued.

"To start such works, you need cement, pipes, all sorts of construction materials. If Hamas leaders want to leave this area in the state that it's in right now, they will have to answer to the residents."

Israel launched an offensive on Hamas on December 27 in response to rocket fire. More than 1,300 people died and large

swaths of the impoverished territory were left in ruins.

On the Israeli side three civilians and 10 soldiers were killed.

The Gaza ceasefires began to unravel as Mitchell began his maiden tour of the region. He was appointed Middle East envoy by US President Barack Obama, tasked with "vigorously" resuscitating moribund peace talks.

The 75-year-old, who helped broker peace in Northern Ireland in 1998 with the Good Friday agreements, said it was vital to consolidate the Gaza ceasefire as he held talks with Israeli leaders on Wednesday.

"The prime minister and I discussed the critical importance to consolidate the ceasefire, including a cessation of hostilities, an end to smuggling and re-opening of the crossings based on 2005 agreements," Mitchell told reporters after meeting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Afghan voters to decide Karzai's fate on Aug 20

AP, Kabul

Afghanistan's election commission said Thursday that the country's presidential election will be held Aug. 20, when voters around the country will decide whether to keep President Hamid Karzai on the job.

The election falls due this year in the spring, according to the Afghan constitution, but Azizullah Loden, the head of the country's Independent Election Commission, said the security situation is not strong enough to hold elections then.

Loden said that additional international forces would arrive in the coming months, and that their presence would improve security and allow the vote to be held. US military leaders have said that up to 30,000 new American forces could be sent to Afghanistan in 2009. Thousands of those troops are being sent to the country's south, Afghanistan's most violent region.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (R) speaks with US envoy George Mitchell during their meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. The meeting took place as spiralling Gaza violence threatened to shatter ceasefire that ended a war in the Hamas-run enclave.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Islamists shout slogans as they march during an anti-Israel protest rally in Islamabad yesterday. The United Nations launched an appeal for \$1.3 billion to help those affected by Israel's 22-day offensive in Gaza, UN chief Ban Ki-moon said Thursday.

The myth of Hamas rockets, tunnels

HAMID MIR
From Gaza

Father Manuel Musallam is the Catholic Priest of more than 3500 Christians in Gaza. He voted for Al Fatah in 2006 election but today he is a big supporter of Hamas, which was declared terrorist by USA many years ago.

I came to know from a Palestinian journalist in Gaza that Father Manuel is trying to bridge gaps between Al Fatah and Hamas. It was a surprising news for me and I decided to meet him.

Imethim in his church from where he is looking after the Holy Family School of Gaza, which has more than 1200 students. Over 1,000 students of Holy Family School are Muslims and the rest are Christians. His school is a glittering example of Muslim-Christian harmony in Gaza.

Father Manuel very proudly informed me that "many Hamas leaders are also sending their children to my school because I am not preaching Christianity in Gaza, I am rather spreading the light of knowledge in my nation". He declared him first an Arab, then a Palestinian and then a Christian.

Father Manuel said that Hamas is not terrorist. Hamas represents a very big number of Palestinians. He was disappointed from the peace process initiated by US many years ago in Oslo. He said that "its not only me who is disappointed from Oslo talks, majority of Palestinians are disappointed and Hamas is the reaction of this disap-

pointment and Israel cannot wipe out Hamas through the bombing of F-16 planes, this bombing will provide more strength to Hamas".

When I asked him that new US President Barack Obama condemned the rockets fired by Hamas and not condemned the Israeli bombing on mosques, schools and hospitals, Father Manuel was irritated. He aggressively said that Hamas was not firing any rockets before 2002 then why Israelis bombed Palestinians before 2002? He asked that if Israel will not allow us to live peacefully and honorably then how can we stop our angry boys to fire toy rockets on Israelis?

He declared that "Israel in not serious in resolving the Palestinian problem, Israel want us to become their slave, they have turned Gaza into the biggest jail in the world, today Palestinians have to choose between death and slavery and we are ready to die for our liberation if this is terrorism, let Barack Obama declare me a terrorist".

Its not only the Father Manuel Musallam who rejected the Israeli-US justification of bombing Palestinians but majority of the Western journalists and aid workers in Gaza also believe that Hamas rockets were not creating any big problem for Israel. They are sure that main aim of Israeli attack was to win votes for coming elections in Israel. Immediately after starting attacks Israel claimed that main objective of bombing was to wipe out Hamas and destroy tunnels along Palestine-Egypt border.

But the fact is that Hamas has gained more power and popularity after Israeli attacks and Palestinians are now digging more tunnels from their side of Rafah Crossing to Egypt. Many journalists including myself visited the area famous for tunnels. It was interesting to watch that Palestinians were busy in digging more and more tunnels with drilling machines and bulldozers. They were not Hamas fighters. They were local Palestinians belong to the families of Abu Samhadana and Abu Rish. This is their family business from many years. They dig approximately 15 meters deep and 800 to 3000 meters long tunnels from inside their houses. They smuggle food items mainly vegetables, meat, cigarettes, cooking oil, petrol, gas canisters and sometimes weapons for Hamas.

I counted myself 187 destroyed tunnels and I also counted more than 300 new under construction tunnels. One tunnel owner told me "I make 2000 US dollars a week by transporting food items from Egypt to Palestine. We don't work for Hamas because it is very difficult to buy weapons for Hamas in Egypt, nobody can smuggle weapons from Egypt, it's a lie". When I tried to confront with some Palestinians that digging tunnels is violation of international law and smuggling from these tunnels is a crime. They started laughing. They said what international law? Israel is violating international law from 1947, Israel is killing Palestinians ruthlessly for more than 62 years, and Israel

has blocked the delivery of food, oil, gas and even medicines to Gaza. Israel bombed our schools, hospitals and even the parliament. What action was taken by international community against Israel? If Israel is not accountable for the holocaust of Palestinians then we are not accountable for any smuggling of food items.

UN spokesman in Gaza Adnan Abu Hasna told me that the tunnels are now the only source of daily food supplies to Palestinians. He accepted that tunnels are illegal but he was forced to ask that "do you think that Israelis had any legal cover killing more than 1350 people in three weeks?" Adnan Abu Hasna said that the whole infrastructure of Gaza was destroyed and now Israel has blocked the transportation of building material inside Gaza. He estimated that Gaza will take at least 10 years to rebuild but the peace process will take at least 20 years to rebuild now.

Hamas leader Ehab Alghusian said that now he has no hope from the so-called peace process. He accepted that "Palestinians need unity today and Hamas meeting with Al Fatah leaders in Cairo was very good but we will not support any peace talks with Israel because majority of Palestinians are now ready to die for their liberation". Ehab was talking the language of Catholic priest Father Manuel Mussalam or may be Catholic priest was talking the language of Hamas or may be both of them were talking the language of majority of Palestinians.

Iraq govt won't allow Blackwater to operate

AP, Baghdad

Iraq will not allow Blackwater Worldwide to continue providing security protection for US diplomats in the country, Iraqi and US officials said yesterday.

Blackwater's image in Iraq was irrevocably tarnished by the September 2007 killing of 17 Iraqi civilians in Nisoor Square. Five former Blackwater guards pleaded not guilty Jan. 6 in federal court in Washington to manslaughter and gun charges in that shooting.

The decision not to issue Blackwater an operating license was due to "improper conduct and excessive use of force," said Interior Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Abdul-Karim Khalaf.

Neither Khalaf nor a US Embassy official gave a date for Blackwater personnel to leave the country and neither said whether they would be allowed to continue guarding US diplomats during the interim.

Obama sees 'difficult decisions' on Iraq, Afghanistan ahead

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama said Wednesday he had "difficult decisions" to make on Iraq and Afghanistan after his first meeting as commander-in-chief at the Pentagon with military brass.

No decisions were made at the more than 90-minute session with the military chiefs, officials said, and Obama gave no clue whether he intends to stick with a 16-month timetable for the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq.

"We're going to have some difficult decisions we're going to have to make surrounding Iraq and Afghanistan, most immediately," he said after speaking with the heads of joint chiefs of staff and the military services.

"Obviously our efforts to go after extremist organisations that do harm to our homeland is uppermost on our minds," he added.

Obama must balance the risk of a rapid drawdown in Iraq against commanders' requirements for up to 30,000 more US troops in Afghanistan, which would nearly double the US military presence there, in response to

worsening security conditions.

The president emerged from the meeting in a secure conference room known as "the Tank" with Vice President Joe Biden.

They shook hands and chatted and joked with senior enlisted leaders and officers who lined the wood panelled corridor to meet the new commander-in-chief.

Obama told reporters he had a "wonderful" discussion with the chiefs, which went longer than the hour allotted for the session, his first at the Pentagon with the joint chiefs since he became president.

"We had discussions about Iraq, as well as Afghanistan. We talked about some of the broader global risks that may arise, and the coordination that may arise between our military and civilian forces," he said.

"We also talked about making sure the health of the force is always in our sights," he said.

Acknowledging the strains on soldiers, he said the military has been under "enormous pressure" to carry out a whole set of missions, sometimes without the backing of all other aspects of American power.

Russia drops missile plans

AFP, Moscow

Russia has shelved plans to install missiles on central Europe's doorstep after detecting a cooling by the Obama administration towards a controversial US shield project, a military official said Wednesday.

Russia had warned it would deploy Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave wedged between Nato and EU members Poland and Lithuania, if Washington did not withdraw its controversial European missile shield plan.

"The realisation of these plans has been suspended in connection with the fact that the new American administration is not speeding up its plans" for missile defence facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Efforts to involve Iran in Afghanistan gather pace

AFP, Washington

Efforts to involve Iran in stabilising Afghanistan are gaining pace and raising hopes that President Barack Obama can find a key to defuse tensions with Tehran on the nuclear and other fronts.

Calls for Iranian involvement in Afghanistan have come from US military chief Admiral Michael Mullen and US Middle East and Central Asia Commander General David Petraeus, as well as Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

The European Union said meanwhile Wednesday that Iran will be invited to talks preparing for a spring meeting between the EU and Asian nations that will focus on Afghanistan.

Tehran was absent from a similar meeting in December.

Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Tuesday that Iran is among countries in central Asia that could help bring stability to

Afghanistan.

"Iran is unhelpful in many, many ways, so I wouldn't be overly optimistic at this point but there are mutual interests that I think might offer some possibilities," Mullen said.

Despite their antagonism, US officers and analysts say, Shia Muslim Iran shares the US fear of the Taliban's puritan Sunni strain of Islam and the drug trafficking that both crosses into Iran and fuels the Taliban insurgency.

Analyst Karim Sadjadpour said involving Iran could be the key to begin to thaw three decades of frozen US-Iranian diplomatic ties because they could find "common cause" in Afghanistan.

"It is a very intelligent idea because ... it kills two birds with one stone," Sadjadpour told AFP.

"You're helping to improve the situation in Afghanistan and you're helping to build confidence with Iran," according to the specialist with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Obama must treat Iran as key regional player

AFP, Tehran

New US President Barack Obama must view Iran as a strategic player if he wishes to achieve regional peace rather than limiting his policy to Tehran's controversial nuclear drive, analysts said on Wednesday.

Both Washington and Tehran have an interest in the wider Middle East and an easing of tensions between the two archfoes is key to ushering in peace in the volatile region, they said.

Mohammad Saleh Sedghian, head of Tehran-based think tank the Arab-Iranian Studies Centre, said both administrations were watching each other closely to determine their next steps.

"The Iranians are watching the Americans' practical moves and the Americans, especially Obama, are expecting Iran to help them take the

correct position on Tehran's nuclear plan and Iran's role concerning Hezbollah and Hamas," he said, referring to militant groups in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

Officials in Washington accuse Tehran of arming and funding the two Islamist movements as well as Shia fighters in Iraq where US forces are battling sectarian strife and a raging insurgency.

Tehran denies the charges but acknowledges offering moral support to Hezbollah and financial aid to the Hamas government in Gaza.

But on Monday Obama, in contrast to his predecessor George W. Bush who refused talks with Iran until it halted sensitive nuclear work, extended a diplomatic hand towards Tehran.

"As I said in my inauguration speech, if countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand

from us," Obama said in an interview with pan-Arabic television Al-Arabiya.

"It is very important for us to make sure that we are using all the tools of US power, including diplomacy, in our relationship with Iran."

On Wednesday Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said he would welcome Obama's plan if it contained "real change" but he also demanded an apology for past US "crimes" against Iran.

Obama's policies towards Iran are expected to be guided by Tehran's own approach to its nuclear programme, which many Western nations suspect is a cover for ambitions to build the atomic bomb.

Washington's ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, on Monday pledged "direct" diplomacy with Tehran if it halts uranium enrichment, the process, which makes fuel for nuclear plants but can be

extended to make the core of an atomic bomb.

The five permanent members of the UN Security Council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany (known as the P5-plus-1) have offered Tehran economic and energy incentives in exchange for freezing enrichment.

But Tehran is pressing on with the sensitive work, insisting its nuclear programme is peaceful and solely geared toward electricity generation.

Frederic Tellier, Iran analyst with the International Crisis Group, insisted that Obama has to treat Iran as a regional player.

"The Iranian leadership expects a comprehensive and equal-to-equal dialogue with the US," Tellier told AFP.

"This will require a strategic vision that accepts Iran as a key player in the Middle East and a necessary interlocutor



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama, with US Vice President Joe Biden (L) and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen (C), speaks alongside the Joint Chiefs of Staff and US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates (R) after meetings at the Pentagon in Washington, DC, on Wednesday.