



Palestinians inspect a damaged car following an Israeli airstrike in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Israel carried out a deadly air raid in Gaza after warning of a harsh response to renewed fire from the enclave, where the Hamas rulers spoke out in favour of a conditional one-year truce.

Bomber in police uniform kills 21 Afghan cops

AP, Kandahar

A suicide bomber in a police uniform detonated his explosives inside a police training centre in southern Afghanistan yesterday, killing 21 officers and wounding at least 20, officials said. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

The bomber entered the training facility in Tora Bora, the capital of Uruzgan province, as the police reservists were exercising, said Juma Gul Himat, Uruzgan's provincial police chief. The Interior Ministry said the attacker was disguised in a police uniform, a tactic Taliban militants have used in several high-profile attacks.

The Taliban has made a comeback the last three years after their initial defeat following the US invasion in 2001. Southern Afghanistan is the centre of their fight against the govern-

ment and international military forces, and militants control wide swaths of territory.

The blast, which also damaged the compound, killed 21 policemen and wounded at least 20 others, Himat said. Nine of the wounded were sent to hospitals, while the rest were released after treatment, Himat said.

A Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousaf Ahmadi, claimed responsibility for the blast in a phone call from an undisclosed location. Ahmadi said the militants will continue to launch bomb attacks on Afghan government officials and foreign troops in the country.

Over the last several years, police have borne the brunt of militant attacks. In 2008, some 868 policemen were killed in insurgent attacks, according to a tally of figures collected by The Associated Press. More than 900 police were killed in 2007.

Iraqi voters spell doom for religious parties

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqis voted heavily for secular parties in last weekend's provincial polls, in a show of disaffection with the religious parties that lead the central government, early indications showed yesterday.

In a further sign of voter disillusionment, turnout in the country's first elections since 2005 was little more than 50 percent, and even lower among the Shia majority community.

The Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), the Shia religious party that won control of seven out of the 11 mainly Shia provinces four years ago, looked set to lose at least five of them, according to early results from the electoral commission.

The outcome was a serious blow for the party's aspirations to establish a Shia autonomous region in the centre and south like the Kurdish one in the far north.

The big winners were secular parties, including not only the list of former prime minister Iyad Allawi but also several new formations, some with links to the ousted regime of Saddam Hussein.

"According to the preliminary estimates, new parties will advance, which will make significant changes in the political map and the nature of alliances in the future," the state-run Al-Sabah newspaper said in an editorial.

The rout of the religious parties looked set to extend even to the Shia clerical centre of Najaf, where SIIC was poised to lose control of the provincial council.

People are fed up with the way religious parties have acted because they are disconnected from modern life, especially the Supreme Islamic Council which has strong ties to Iran," said Mohammed Kazim, 38, who works as an odd jobs man in the central shrine city.

FARC rebels voluntarily free 4 Colombian hostages

AP, Bogota

Colombia's battered FARC rebels freed three police officers and a soldier held hostage for more than a year, handing them over to the International Red Cross on Sunday in the country's southern jungles.

A Brazilian military helicopter, emblazoned with the Red Cross insignia, retrieved the four hostages and flew them to a provincial airport in Colombia's eastern plains where they were met by relatives and peace activists with hugs and white daisies.

But their handover was marred by accusations that Colombia's military interfered. A reporter who was accompanied by the mission, Jorge Enrique Botero, said the military hounded and delayed the mission by more than two hours with numerous flyovers.

Analysts consider the unconditional releases, the guerrillas' first in nearly a year, a goodwill gesture. However, chances for a peace dialogue with Colombia's government remain far off, and Sunday's alleged military interference was only apt to complicate matters.

Colombia President Alvaro Uribe acknowledged the overflights, but said in a late-night news conference that no "offensive military operations" were mounted.

Uribe accused the rebels of using the hostage releases to cynically gain political advantage and he called the presence of Botero and other guarantors during Sunday's mission an inappropriate spectacle.



PHOTO: AFP
Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi (C) attends the opening of the African heads of State summit yesterday in Addis Ababa. Gaddafi was elected chairman of the African Union on Monday at a summit of the 53-nation bloc in the Ethiopian capital.

Gaddafi elected African Union chairman

AFP, Addis Ababa

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was yesterday elected chairman of the African Union at a summit of the 53-nation bloc in the Ethiopian capital.

Gaddafi was elected "by the heads of state in a closed-door session, for a one-year period," AU spokeswoman Habiba Mejjri-Sheikh told AFP.

"He is currently addressing the assembly as president, to outline his programme and his intentions," she said.

Gaddafi has been a keen supporter of the notion of forming a continent wide government to create a "United States of Africa", but the idea failed to get backing in a closed door debate at the summit on Monday.

Leaders decided instead to consider ways of expanding the mandate of the existing AU Commission, which will be renamed the AU Authority.

Madagascar tensions simmer as UN voices alarm

AFP, Antananarivo

Offices and schools in the Madagascan capital re-opened Monday but die-hard protesters vowed to keep up efforts to bring down President Marc Ravalomanana.

Hundreds gathered at a main square to await Andry Rajoelina, the mayor of Antananarivo who has led a campaign to oust Ravalomanana that descended into violence last week at the cost of at least 68 lives.

Ravalomanana, 59, was forced to miss a regional summit in South Africa and rushed back home on January 25 to confront his worst crisis since winning re-election in 2006.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, attending an African Union summit in Ethiopia, said Monday he was very worried about the events on the Indian Ocean island.

"I am particularly concerned about recent developments in Madagascar and urge that all parties address their differences peacefully and through existing constitutional mechanisms," Ban said.

Rajoelina on Saturday claimed he should be in charge of the island's affairs as he escalated his war of words with the president.

There were signs however that his protest movement might be losing momentum as ministries, schools and courts resumed work on Monday. Widespread rioting and looting in the capital last week forced their closure.



PHOTO: AFP
Police watch a square in Antananarivo yesterday as offices and schools in the Madagascan capital re-opened. But die-hard protesters vowed to keep up efforts to bring down President Marc Ravalomanana.



PHOTO: AFP
Released hostages policeman Alexis Torres Zapata (L) and Walter Jose Lozano Guarino (R) celebrate next to opposition Senator Piedad Cordoba (C). Cordoba headed the humanitarian delegation that oversaw the hand-over at the Vanguardia airport after getting out of the Brazilian helicopter that, under the flag of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), was used to pick up released hostages in Villavicencio, southern Colombia on Sunday.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Hamas holds the key to halting rocket attacks

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas may be the only force capable of ending rocket fire from the Gaza Strip but it is unlikely to do so in the absence of a formal agreement that lifts the Israeli blockade, analysts say.

Israel was unable to stop the rockets during a three-week-long offensive launched in December that killed more than 1,330 Palestinians and 13 Israelis and left vast swathes of the besieged coastal strip in ruins.

And the tense calm that came into effect when both sides declared unilateral ceasefires last month has been rattled by several rockets and mortar rounds fired on southern Israel.

The attacks were apparently conducted by smaller Palestinian factions but they cast doubt on Hamas's commitment to the calm.

The Islamist group remains in control of the impoverished territory, and experts say if it secures a mutual truce that opens Gaza's border crossings

it could halt the rocket fire that Israel's massive offensive failed to stem.

Hamas proved during the six-month ceasefire that started in June that it can stop the rockets when it chooses to, according to Nicolas Pelham, a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group.

When the ceasefire was decided upon it was rigorously enforced. There were three or four rockets a day before the ceasefire came into effect in June and afterwards it dropped to three or four per month, he says.

But both sides accused the other of violating the unwritten agreement, and the truce broke down on November 4 following an Israeli incursion that killed six Palestinians and the war broke out less than two months later.

This time around Hamas has again demanded the opening of the crossings, particularly the Rafah crossing with Egypt, the only one that bypasses Israel.

"Opening the Rafah cross-

ing in particular is seen as key to Hamas's ability to govern, and Hamas has shown since it won elections in 2006 that if they are not allowed to govern they will fight," Pelham says.

Since Hamas seized power in June 2007 the territory has been under strict Israeli sanctions sealing it off from all but basic goods and Palestinian militants have launched thousands of rockets at Israel.

The Israeli military says at least 15 rockets and mortar rounds have been fired from Gaza since Operation Cast Lead ended, including 10 on Sunday alone, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has vowed a "disproportionate" Israeli response.

None of the rockets have been claimed by Hamas, however, and experts say they were probably the work of smaller, fringe factions.

Hamas is not interested in firing rockets against Israel right now. It is other groups who are trying to place themselves on the resistance map, says Mukhaime Abu Saada,

professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar University.

He suspects the bitter divide between Hamas and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party may be partly to blame, with militants loosely linked to Fatah trying to derail truce talks in Egypt.

"Maybe Fatah is trying to annoy Hamas in the same way Hamas used to annoy Fatah in the past when it declared ceasefires," he says, referring to past years when Hamas suicide attacks threatened Fatah-led peace talks with Israel.

During the six-month truce Hamas arrested and punished militants responsible for the rockets, Mukhaime said, but it is unlikely to do so as long as the crossings remain closed.

"If the borders are not going to be opened and the blockade is not lifted then Hamas will always turn a blind eye to such actions," he says.

Israeli officials have admitted smaller groups are behind the recent rockets but hold Hamas responsible for all attacks that emanate from Gaza.