

Israel PM talks Gaza truce with political leaders

Tel Aviv seeks release of captured soldier, Hamas leader hints he may have been killed during war

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert yesterday consulted domestic political leaders on Egyptian-brokered Gaza truce talks, a day after ruling out a ceasefire without the release of a captured soldier.

A senior Hamas official meanwhile hinted that the soldier may have been killed during Israel's war on the Islamist movement's besieged Gaza enclave last month, along with some 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.

"Mr. Olmert will today hold consultation with the main political leaders over a truce" with Hamas, government spokesman Mark Regev told AFP.

Asked whether the outgoing premier would meet with the right-wing Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu -- who is widely expected to form the next government after last week's elections -- Regev said Olmert would "take into account the new circumstances created by the elections."

Egypt has been struggling to mediate a lasting truce between the two sides since a devastating three-week war in Gaza was halted by separate ceasefires on January 18 that have since been strained by tit-for-tat exchanges of fire.

Olmert said on Saturday that the Jewish state would not agree to any ceasefire without the release of Gilad Shalit, a soldier seized in a joint raid by Hamas and two other militant groups in June 2006.

One of the conditions demanded by Hamas is that all the crossings into the enclave be opened, bringing an end to the Israeli blockade imposed when the Islamist group pledged to Israel's destruction seized Gaza in 2007.

Hamas has demanded that the release of Shalit be negotiated as part of a separate prisoner exchange involving hundreds of people held in Israeli jails.

"There is no relationship between the two files," Hamas government spokesman Taher al-Nunu told AFP, referring to

the truce and Shalit. The senior exiled Hamas official Mussa Abu Marzuq meanwhile hinted Sunday that Shalit may have died during the Gaza war.

"I don't have enough information, but Shalit may have been among the children who died. But really, I don't know," he told the London-based Arabic newspaper Al-Hayat.

Egyptian security chief Omar Suleiman has been leading separate negotiations with Israel and Hamas and has said efforts were underway to draw up a list of Palestinian prisoners who might be released in exchange for Shalit.

While Hamas has demanded an end to the blockade, Israel has insisted that will happen only when Hamas releases Shalit.

On Saturday Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum accused Israel of "backtracking" on the talks by demanding an open-ended agreement instead of an 18-month truce and of stepping up attacks on the group's Gaza enclave.



Venezuelans wait in line in front of a polling station to vote in the referendum on a constitutional amendment in Caracas yesterday. The closely-fought referendum, to be decided by a simple majority, is on changing the constitution to scrap term limits for mayors and governors as well as for Chavez, whose current term expires in 2012.



This undated file photo released by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on January 18 shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il (2nd L) posing with Jang Song-Thaek (R), department director of the Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee, and other unidentified men as he inspects the Mt. Ryongak Recreation Ground in Pyongyang.

N Korea offers olive branch to US

AP, Seoul

North Korea is ready to improve relations with countries that "treat us friendly," the communist country's No. 2 leader said Sunday ahead of a visit by US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to Asia.

The remark by Kim Yong Nam, North Korea's ceremonial head of state, could be an olive branch to Washington before Hillary Clinton's trip even though it came amid reports the North is gearing up to test-fire a long-range missile in an apparent attempt to grab President Barack Obama's attention.

Hillary Clinton was scheduled to depart Sunday on a trip to Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China.

"We will develop relations with countries that treat us friendly," Kim told a national meeting held as part of celebrations on the eve of the 67th birthday of leader Kim Jong Il, according to the North's official Korean Central News Agency.

North Korea has reportedly moved a long-range Taepodong-2 missile to a launch site on the country's northeastern coast. The missile is the country's most advanced, and is believed capable of reaching US territory. South Korean media have said a launch could come this month.

Analysts say North Korea's sabre rattling appears to be an attempt to grab Obama's attention so as to start negotiations where it can extract concessions, since the new US administration seemed more interested in other issues such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Seoul and Washington have issued repeated warnings to North Korea over a possible missile launch.

On Friday, Hillary Clinton urged North Korea not to take any provocative actions, saying Washington is willing to normalise ties with it in return for nuclear disarmament.

Her trip comes as North Korea has heightened tensions with South Korea, declaring all peace accords with Seoul dead and suggesting an armed naval clash with the southern neighbour in anger over the hard-line stance South Korean President Lee Myung-bak has taken toward it.

Crime steals limelight in Venezuela vote

AFP, Caracas

Rising kidnappings and murders have made violent crime a deciding factor in the minds of many Venezuelans as they vote 'Yes' or 'No' in a referendum on the future of President Hugo Chavez yesterday.

Fear is palpable in Caracas, one of Latin America's most dangerous cities, where crime ranges from shootouts in slums to violent armed robberies in smart streets, or shootings to finish off victims in hospitals.

Julio Alba, who stood in the street at night in his underpants after hearing footsteps in his house and calling the police for fear of being kidnapped, said his gated community in eastern Caracas was no longer safe.

"I've lived here for years, but there have been more robberies and kidnappings in recent months," said the resident of the Miranda development, surrounded by more than a dozen heavily-armed police, as silhouettes appeared behind the barred windows of neighbouring houses.

More than 80 percent of Venezuela's population has a negative view of the government's crime management, according to a recent poll by Datanalysis.

"Violent crime is the main concern of Venezuelans, it's one of the arguments of those who defend the 'No' vote for Sunday's referendum," said Luis Pedro Espana, from the Andres Bello Catholic University.

Boy got stepmother

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But four days later, when Shuvo was able to speak, he said that his stepmother had called him out of the house on that evening, poured kerosene over his head and set him on fire. She then threw away the can of kerosene. That's all he could recall.

Police arrested Ferdousi Begum the same day. Shuvo's father Monir Hossain, a metal workshop worker, told The Daily Star that Ferdousi wanted to have a child but he wanted to wait for a while as they already had a child and he was not sure she would take good care of Shuvo if she had a child of her own just now.

Monir said he was aware that Ferdousi had been ill-treating the child -- including beating him for no reason -- so much so that he had sent the

child to his own sister's house for 17 days very recently just to spare him the beatings.

"She was jealous of Shuvo, for that she has killed my son," wailed Monir yesterday.

Shuvo's mother Tara Begum died three year's ago. Monir got married to Ferdousi five months later.

He was inconsolable yesterday as he cried saying repeatedly, 'I got married only to give my child a mother's love, but I brought home a killer.'

Monir has filed a murder case with Kafur police station accusing Ferdousi of killing his son.

The Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Kafur police station Salahuddin Arshed told The Daily Star that Ferdousi had denied the charges brought against her and had been sent to jail.

Israel's Kadima calls for power-sharing deal with Likud

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's centrist Kadima party yesterday called for a power-sharing deal with the leader of right-wing Likud Benjamin Netanyahu amid furious haggling in the wake of tight parliamentary elections.

"A rotation is the minimum that Kadima can demand so that a stable government sees the light of day," said Avi Dichter, a Kadima member and public security minister in the outgoing government.

He was referring to a power-sharing arrangement Israel had in 1984 after another close ballot, when the

two top parties each held the post of prime minister for two years.

Kadima chief and current Foreign Minister "Tzipi Livni has received the preference of public opinion and Netanyahu has to admit so. We have to have a fair equilibrium" between the two parties, Dichter said.

Netanyahu has so far rejected the rotating premiership option.

Although Kadima gained 28 seats in the next parliament in last week's general election, one more than Likud, Netanyahu is widely tipped to become the next prime minister.



A donated fridge is delivered to a caravan housing of a couple made homeless from the bushfires as tonnes of donated goods are delivered to the Whittlesea relief centre, some 80km north of Melbourne on February 13. Australians are donating clothing, food and money in large numbers for the survivors of the bushfires.

Australia mourns dead as fires still rage

AFP, Whittlesea

Firefighters in ash-covered overalls joined sombre memorial services held across Australia Sunday, a week after walls of flame incinerated rural towns, killing at least 181 people.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd led national tributes to the victims of the country's worst wildfire disaster, which destroyed 1,800 homes, as firefighters warned the firestorms would burn out of control for weeks to come.

Obama ushers in more informal White House style

AFP, Washington

Less than a month in office, President Barack Obama has ushered in a more informal White House culture that contrasts sharply with that of his predecessor, George W. Bush.

From his dress to his schedule, Obama has introduced a more informal decorum. He receives his daily intelligence and economic briefings after

9:00 am, hours later than Bush. He is also known to sometimes burn the midnight oil, a sharp difference with his notoriously early-to-bed predecessor.

Obama's "laid-back style is a sharp contrast to President Bush. He is more laid back in appearance, more 24-7 in his work code," said Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University.

Muslim women face 'crisis' over violence, inequality: UN

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Muslim women around the world are facing a "growing crisis" as Islamic governments fail to honour commitments to end inequality and violence against them, a senior UN official has warned.

Yakin Erturk, the UN's rapporteur on violence against women, said at a weekend conference that women must demand that governments carry out pledges to grant equal rights and ensure their safety.

"There is no time left to lose any more as this is a growing crisis," she told AFP after a speech which dealt with the issue at an international conference on "Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family."

"Women must demand that their governments implement agreements on women's equality, rights and an end to violence against women, which have been signed but have yet to be carried out," she said.

"In these countries, those who speak on behalf of Islam still justify things like stoning or killing a woman for this or that reason as being part of their religion. I have heard this

at the most official of levels." Erturk said without specifying which countries were to blame.

"Of course violence against women is not limited to Islamic countries but Islamic countries have become stigmatised as being misogynist societies which are inherently anti-women."

Erturk said that very often, laws protecting women are not enforced or are weakened due to pressure from religious groups.

Her view was endorsed by more than 200 international delegates attending the four-day conference organised by Musawah, a new Malaysia-based global movement demanding equality and justice in Muslim families.

"Women are not being bad Muslims when they demand equality, demand justice, demand their husbands stop beating them," said Musawah project director Zainah Anwar.

"We want to say you can be a Muslim, you can be a feminist, you can demand human rights and women's rights, equality and justice and still be a good Muslim. We don't see any contradictions in those demands."

Climate warming gases rising faster than expected

AP, Chicago

Despite widespread concern over global warming, humans are adding carbon to the atmosphere even faster than in the 1990s, researchers warned Saturday.

Carbon dioxide and other gases added to the air by industrial and other activities have been blamed for rising temperatures, increasing worries about possible major changes in weather and climate.

Carbon emissions have been growing at 3.5 percent per year since 2000, up sharply from the 0.9 percent per year in the 1990s, Christopher Field of the Carnegie Institution for Science told the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of

Science.

"It is now outside the entire envelope of possibilities" considered in the 2007 report of the International Panel on Climate Change, he said. The IPCC and former vice president Al Gore received the Nobel Prize for drawing attention to the dangers of climate change.

The largest factor in this increase is the widespread adoption of coal as an energy source, Field said, "and without aggressive attention societies will continue to focus on the energy sources that are cheapest, and that means coal."

Past projections for declines in the emissions of greenhouse gases were too optimistic, he added. No part of the world had a decline in emissions from 2000 to 2008.

Anny Cazenave of France's National Centre for Space Studies told the meeting that improved satellite measurements show that sea levels are rising faster than had been expected.

Rising oceans can pose a threat to low level areas such as South Florida, New York and other coastal areas as the ocean warms and expands and as water is added from melting ice sheets.

And the rise is uneven, with the fastest rising areas at about 1 centimetre 0.39 inch per year in parts of the North Atlantic, western Pacific and the Southern Ocean surrounding Antarctica, she said.

Also, highly promoted efforts to curb carbon emissions through the use of biofuels may

even backfire, other researchers said.

Demand for biologically based fuels has led to the growing of more corn in the United States, but that means fields were switched from soybeans to corn, explained Michael Coe of the Woods Hole Research Centre.

But there was no decline in the demand for soy, he said, meaning other countries, such as Brazil, increased their soy crops to make up for the deficit.

In turn, Brazil created more soy fields by destroying tropical forests, which tend to soak up carbon dioxide. Instead the forests were burned, releasing the gasses into the air.

The increased emissions from Brazil swamp any declines recorded by the United States, he said.