

(Clockwise from top to right) A large demonstration took place outside the Israeli Embassy, London yesterday to protest against Israel's deadly raid on the Gaza-bound aid flotilla. Police drag a protestor during a pro-Palestine demonstration outside the Israeli embassy in Athens. A member of Palestinian Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine jumps over burning tires during a demonstration in Ain al-Helweh refugee camp near a Lebanese coastal city.



PHOTO: AFP



Gaza's real humanitarian crisis

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The Israeli government has, for weeks, insisted that the 10,000 tonnes of supplies on board the Gaza aid flotilla are not necessary. Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's foreign minister, reiterated that claim on Friday, telling reporters "there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza".

"Israel is conducting itself in the most humanitarian manner, and allowing the entrance of thousands of tonnes of food and equipment to Gaza," he told reporters on Friday.

It's true that Israel allows basic necessities - which Israeli officials often term "humanitarian aid" - to enter the blockaded Gaza Strip. But it tightly controls both the type and quantity of goods allowed into the territory.

Navi Pillay, the United Nations' human rights chief, called the blockade devastating in an August 2009 report. Pillay said it constituted collective punishment, illegal under international law.

Israel usually allows 81 items into Gaza, a list that is subject to revision on a near-daily basis. It is riddled with contradictions: Zaatar, a mix of dried spices, is allowed into the territory; coriander and cumin are not. Chick peas are allowed, while Tahini was barred until March 2010.

"Luxury goods," things like chocolate, are prohibited altogether. So are most construction materials, though Israel has relaxed this prohibition slightly over the last few weeks. The United Nations refugee agency has resorted to constructing houses out of mud because other building material are unavailable.

And those products allowed to enter Gaza are permitted only in modest quantities. In January 2007, Gaza received more than 10,000 truckloads of goods each month; by January 2009, that number was down to roughly 3,000.

A 2008 report from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) found that 70 per cent of Gaza's population suffered from "food insecurity".

2 Palestinians killed after infiltration bid

AFP, JERUSALEM

Israeli troops yesterday shot dead two gunmen who infiltrated southern Israel from the Gaza Strip, an army spokeswoman said.

"Two infiltrators were identified in southern Israel, near Nirim," a spokeswoman said, referring to an Israeli area on the southern sector of the border not far from the Gazan city of Khan Yunis.

"There was an exchange of fire in which they were killed," she said, adding there were no Israeli injuries.

Witnesses on the Gaza side of the border confirmed an exchange of fire followed by Israeli shelling, and an AFP photographer saw an Israeli helicopter firing missiles.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the Palestinian side as ambulances were not able to enter the area.

Israel processes Gaza activists, UN urges probe

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem/Rome

Israel detained or deported yesterday hundreds of activists who were on Turkish-backed aid ships seized en route to Gaza, and the UN called for impartial investigation into the deaths of nine people in the takeover.

While Israel's diplomats worked to calm international outrage, its navy said it was ready to intercept another aid vessel that organizers of the flotilla planned to dispatch to the Gaza Strip, an enclave run by Hamas Islamists, next week.

Big questions were unanswered: how far Israel could continue to blockade 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip after condemnation from allies, and how it misjudged the situation and dropped marines on Monday onto a Turkish ship where they felt they had to open fire to save their lives.

Activists were held incommunicado by Israel but their accounts began to emerge after some were deported.

"We did not resist at all, we couldn't even if we had wanted to. What could we have done

against the commandos who climbed aboard?" said Mihalis Grigoropoulos, who was aboard a vessel behind the Mavi Marmara, the cruise ship on which most of the violence occurred.

"The only thing some people tried was to delay them from getting to the bridge, forming a human shield. They were fired upon with plastic bullets and were stunned with electric devices," Grigoropoulos told NET TV at Athens airport.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who returned from Canada after cancelling White House talks that had been planned for Tuesday, was to convene his cabinet to discuss the fallout from what Israeli newspapers termed a blundered operation.

US President Barack Obama, who has succeeded in reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations through US-mediated indirect talks, said he wanted the full facts soon and regretted the loss of life.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini urged Israel to make "a gesture of detente" after its military raid on an aid flotilla bound for the Gaza Strip.

"Israel has a great opportunity after this very

serious act... to say 'let's multiply the peace efforts; let's accelerate negotiations; let's give the Palestinians a state,' he said on public television.

"The consequences unfortunately are hard to predict, but they will not be small. Frankly, I hope the Arab League summit does not decide to freeze the peace process," Frattini said in the interview with RAI television, adding that it would be a "catastrophe".

The Arab League was set to hold an extraordinary summit on Tuesday to decide a response to the Israeli operation.

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan urged Israel to lift what he called its "inhumane embargo" of Gaza as soon as possible. Once-close Muslim ally Turkey has described Israel's storming of the ships as "state terrorism".

INVESTIGATION

After more than 10 hours of closed-door talks that gave rise to conflicting interpretations, the UN Security Council called for "a prompt, impartial, credible and transparent investigation conforming to international standards".

FACTS ON AID FLOTILLA

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- Flotilla's nearly 700 passengers mainly Turkish, but also include nationals of US, UK, Australia, Greece, Canada, Belgium, Ireland, Swedish author, Australian journalists, German MPs and a Jewish Holocaust survivor.
- 629 had refused repatriation and 428 held for investigation.
- Israel to probe and to prosecute activists who hit the marines with fists, batons, knives and gunfire.
- UNSC called for "an impartial and transparent investigation".
- Britain, Turkey, Italy urged strongly to lift Gazablockade.

Source: AFP, Reuters

Guatemala toll tops 150

BBC ONLINE

Emergency workers in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are struggling to get aid to communities cut off by Tropical Storm Agatha.

The storm has left at least 150 people dead since Saturday, most of them in Guatemala.

Rescuers are digging through mud and rubble in search of dozens of people still missing after landslides destroyed entire communities.

The storm has passed but officials warn that swollen rivers still pose a risk.

The Guatemalan authorities said 123 people were known to have died, while in Honduras 14 people were killed, and nine in El Salvador.

All three countries have declared emergencies in an attempt to increase immediate aid and resources.

The storm dumped more than 3ft (1m) of rain on parts of Guatemala, the government said, causing rivers to burst their banks and hillsides to collapse.

In the capital, Guatemala City, a giant sinkhole opened up, reportedly swallowing a couple of buildings.

Officials initially said the storm was to blame, but now say they will carry out further studies to determine the exact cause, as a sinkhole appeared in the same area in 2007.

Tens of thousands of people are living in temporary shelters, either because their homes were destroyed or because they were evacuated from areas at risk of flooding.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A giant sinkhole caused by the rains of Tropical Storm Agatha is seen in Guatemala City yesterday. More than 94,000 people have been evacuated as the storm buried homes under mud, swept away a highway bridge near Guatemala City and opened up sinkholes in the capital.

Japanese PM meets party kingpin

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's embattled prime minister insisted yesterday he would stay in his job despite press speculation he may step down ahead of upper house elections next month.

Centre-left leader Yukio Hatoyama, who took power in a landslide election last August, has seen his approval ratings slide below 20 per cent amid a row over a US military airbase on the southern island of Okinawa.

His U-turn decision to keep the unpopular base on Okinawa despite strong local opposition has caused a split in his three-party coalition, with the small, pacifist Social Democrats bolting the government on Sunday.

Newspaper front-pages Tuesday said Hatoyama faced growing calls from within his Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to quit.

China calls on Iran to cooperate with IAEA

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday called on Iran to improve its cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog, after the agency said in a report that Tehran was pressing ahead with its controversial atomic programme.

"We hope Iran will further step up cooperation with the IAEA and resolve the pending issues at an early date," foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu told reporters, adding China "appreciated" the efforts of the nuclear watchdog.

The International Atomic Energy Agency said in a restricted report obtained by AFP that it remained concerned about the true nature of the Islamic republic's nuclear activities, which Tehran insists are peaceful.

The report said Iran was producing higher-enriched uranium and noted indications of "past or current undisclosed nuclear-related activities" including some linked to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile.

China, a close ally of Iran with significant energy interests in the Islamic republic, on Tuesday also reiterated its usual call for further talks to resolve the standoff.

"We hope relevant parties can seize the opportunities, step up diplomatic efforts and seek an early resumption of dialogue and negotiations," Ma said.

'Noise pollution' threatens fish

EARTH NEWS ONLINE

Fish are being threatened by rising levels of man-made noise pollution.

So say scientists who have reviewed the impact on fish species around the world of noises made by oil and gas rigs, ships, boats and sonar.

Rather than live in a silent world, most fish hear well and sound plays an active part in their lives, they say.

Increasing noise levels may therefore severely affect the distribution of fish, and their ability to reproduce, communicate and avoid predators.

"People always just assumed that the fish world was a silent one," says biologist Dr Hans Slabbekoorn of Leiden University, The Netherlands.

But in the journal Trends in Ecology and Evolution, Dr Slabbekoorn and colleagues in The Netherlands, Germany and US report how the underwater environment is anything but quiet.

Thai PM vows to honour probe into crackdown

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said yesterday he would accept the findings of an independent investigation into a deadly army crackdown on anti-government "Red Shirt" protesters.

Abhisit has been accused by his political opponents of violating human rights in the tense standoff between the demonstrators and armed troops, who fired live rounds during several confrontations in the capital.

"Whatever the outcome of the fact-finding investigation, (deputy premier Suthep Thaugsuban) and I are ready to accept it," Abhisit said on the second day of a debate in parliament on a censure motion against his government.

He said the government "will not interfere" with the probe, which has not yet been set up.

The Red Shirts' street rally, broken up on May 19 in an army assault on their vast encampment in the retail heart of Bangkok, sparked outbreaks of violence that left 88 people dead, mostly civilians, and nearly 1,900 injured.

Abhisit -- who has surprised many by remaining in power during the crippling street protests -- is expected to survive the no-confidence motion thanks to his ruling coalition's majority in the lower house.

Jatuporn Prompan, a Red Shirt leader and opposition member of parliament, urged Abhisit and his deputy Suthep to "enter the justice process".

Iraq's SC upholds March polls result

BBC ONLINE

Iraq's supreme court has ratified the results of the March election, officially ruling that Iyad Allawi's Iraqiyya party won by a narrow margin.

The ruling clears the way for further negotiations between parties trying to form a coalition government.

The election in March was inconclusive, with no party winning a clear majority in the 325-seat parliament.

Incumbent Prime Minister Nouri Maliki, head of the State of Law alliance, had demanded a partial recount of votes.

His party won 89 seats, two fewer than the Iraqiyya party, which had attracted the support of Iraq's minority Sunni population.

Duchess admits she had been drinking during paper sting

BBC ONLINE

The Duchess of York had been drinking before allegedly offering access to her ex-husband for cash and was "in the gutter", she told Oprah Winfrey.

Her comments come after secretly-filmed News of the World footage appeared to show Sarah Ferguson, 50, offering a reporter access to the Duke of York in return for £500,000.

The interview with the US chat show host is to air on Tuesday.

The duchess flew back to the UK from the US on Saturday.

In footage released to People magazine, the Queen's former daughter-in-law told Winfrey: "I haven't faced the devil in the face because I was in the gutter at that moment."

"So I'm aware of the fact that I've been drinking, you know, that I was not in my right place."

The duchess has also claimed that she is yet to see the full video of her meeting with the reporter.

The former royal has thrived in the US where she has been able to establish a range of business interests before her recent money worries.



The duchess has remained good friends with Prince Andrew despite their divorce.