

## Israel sieges aid ship again

REUTERS, Jerusalem

The Israeli navy boarded another Gaza-bound aid ship yesterday after Washington condemned as "unsustainable" a blockade, which Israel enforced earlier this week by killing nine people on a Turkish vessel. The Israeli navy, whose action on Monday triggered an international outcry, took control of the Rachel Corrie without incident, the Israeli military said.

The boat had ignored Israeli orders to divert to Israel's Ashdod port where Israel had offered to unload the cargo and deliver it to Gaza after inspecting it.

"According to initial reports, there was no violence or injuries amongst the soldiers or the crew, as the use of force was unnecessary and no shots were fired," the Israeli military said in a statement.

Carrying Irish and other activists, the ship was the latest to attempt to break the four-year-old blockade imposed by Israel on Gaza with the stated aim of stopping its Hamas rulers from strengthening their arsenal to fight the Jewish state.

"This has been another brazen act of Israeli piracy on the High Seas," said Kevin Squires, national coordinator of the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign in Dublin, one of whose members was aboard the boat named after a pro-Palestinian activist killed in Gaza in 2003.

Autopsy results found 30 bullets in the bodies of the activists killed this week, a British

newspaper reported.

They were all Turks, including one with U.S. citizenship. Ankara's already strained ties with Israel, once an ally, are at an all-time low.

In the clearest sign yet that this week's bloodshed might lead to a modification of the blockade, the United States said the embargo was "unsustainable and must be changed."

Israel stops cement and other materials it says could be used by Hamas for military purposes from entering the territory controlled by the group since 2007. It also stops other goods with no obvious military application.

Hamas, an Islamist group backed by Syria and Iran, is hostile to Israel and does not recognize interim peace agreements signed by the Western-backed Palestinian Authority led by President Mahmoud Abbas.

**BLOCKADE "ILLEGAL," RIGHTS COMMISSIONER SAYS**

Friends and foes alike have heaped criticism on Israel this week over the blockade. Israel's main ally, the United States, has expressed more sympathy than most for its security concerns but has also spoken of the need for Palestinians in Gaza to receive adequate supplies.

"We are working urgently with Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and other international partners to develop new procedures for delivering more goods and assistance to Gaza," a spokesman for the White House National Security Council said.



US Defence Secretary Robert Gates (C), Japan's Minister of Defence Toshimi Kitazawa (R) and South Korean Defence Minister Kim Tae Young pose during the Shangri-La Dialogue's Asia Security Summit in Singapore yesterday. Gates chided China for suspending military ties over US arms sales to Taiwan and renewed his call for stronger relations between the Chinese and US militaries.

## US appeals to China to restore military ties

REUTERS, Singapore

The United States appealed to China yesterday to restore military ties despite discord over US arms sales to Taiwan and said it was considering options beyond the United Nations to punish North Korea over the sinking of a South Korean ship.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said China's decision to break off military-to-military contacts between the Pacific powers earlier this year could undercut regional stability.

He urged Beijing to accept the "reality" that Washington is committed to arming Taiwan, like it or not.

"It has been clear to everyone during the more than 30 years since normalization that interruptions in our military relationship with China will not change United States policy toward Taiwan," Gates told a security conference in Singapore.

China broke off military-to-military contacts after the Obama administration notified Congress in January of a plan to sell Taiwan up to \$6.4 billion worth of arms.

## Obama defends his actions on oil spill disaster

REUTERS, Venice

President Barack Obama yesterday defended his handling of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, while BP Plc said it aims to siphon off most of the oil gushing from the ruptured deep-sea wellhead within days.

Using robot submarines, British energy giant BP has clamped a containment cap over the ruptured wellhead a mile below the ocean surface.

But initial estimates of how much crude was being collected and siphoned safely to the surface amounted to a fraction of the oil that continued to belch from the ruined well.

The unfolding ecological and economic disaster along the US Gulf Coast, which began on April 20, has presented a stern test of Obama's leadership. He has faced criticism that the US government has not done enough to tackle the crisis.

In his weekly radio and Internet address to Americans on Saturday, Obama said his administration has put in place the largest response to an environmental disaster in US history.

## S KOREA'S SHIP SINKING US mulls options against N Korea

AFP, Singapore/United Nations

The United States yesterday weighed fresh steps to hold North Korea to account over the sinking of a South Korean warship, after Seoul appealed for UN intervention.

Washington "is assessing additional options to hold North Korea accountable", apart from the UN Security Council route and planned military exercises with South Korea, Defence Secretary Robert Gates said in Singapore.

He did not specify what the new measures might be but, in an apparent message to China, warned of the risks of inaction after North Korea's alleged torpedo attack on the ship in March, which killed 46 South Korean sailors.

South Korea on Friday formally asked the UN Security Council to respond to the sinking, after President Lee Myung-Bak called the attack on the Cheonan corvette a "military provocation".

Addressing the same Singapore conference as Gates, Lee dismissed Pyongyang's denials of involvement as "laughable" but he stopped short of calling for specific sanctions on the North.

Gates said the sinking, which an international investigation blamed on Pyongyang, was not an isolated incident but "part of a larger pattern of provocative and reckless behaviour" by the North.

The Pentagon chief, speaking at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue on Asian security, called on countries in the region to respond to North Korea's "dangerous provocations".

"Inaction would amount to an abdication of our collective responsibility to protect the peace and reinforce stability in Asia," he said.

His remarks appeared aimed at China, an ally of North Korea that was slow to react to the incident and has yet to accuse Pyongyang of sinking the Cheonan.

Gates pledged "full support" to South Korea at a "difficult hour" but avoided talk of any US or allied military response.

The South Korean and US navies were scheduled to hold a joint anti-submarine drill next week, as a show of force against North Korea.

But the exercise has been postponed, South Korean officials said Friday, and Gates suggested a delay would allow time for UN diplomacy to play out.

He also said that Seoul might seek a Security Council letter denouncing Pyongyang instead of a full-fledged UN resolution.

Such a diplomatic strategy is "not a manifestation of a lack of recognition of the nature of the provocation we have seen from North Korea, but may be more addressed to the worry about provoking further instability and further provocations from the North", he said.

## Obama to name spy chief

BBC ONLINE

President Barack Obama is to nominate retired Gen James Clapper, a top Pentagon official, as his next intelligence chief, an administration official has told the BBC.

Gen Clapper would replace Adm Dennis Blair, who resigned in May after a run of security failures, as director of national intelligence (DNI).

He would oversee 16 agencies in the intelligence community as the new DNI.

Gen Clapper is expected to be nominated at a White House ceremony on Saturday.

Gen Clapper is likely to have a tough time winning over Capitol Hill.

Some in Congress have expressed objections to his nomination because of his combative style during hearings and his focus on defence department issues.

The senior Democrat and the senior Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, which will confirm Gen Clapper in his new role, had each previously publicly opposed his nomination.

## Gaza blockade unsustainable

Says White House

REUTERS, AFP, Washington/Ankara/London

The White House said on Friday Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip was unsustainable and urged a Gaza aid vessel sent by pro-Palestinian activists to divert to an Israeli port to reduce the risk of violence.

"We are working urgently with Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and other international partners to develop new procedures for delivering more goods and assistance to Gaza," said Mike Hammer, spokesman for the White House National Security Council.

"The current arrangements are unsustainable and must be changed. For now, we call on all parties to join us in encouraging responsible decisions by all sides to avoid any unnecessary confrontations," Hammer said in a statement.

Israel was preparing to intercept the Irish-owned ship the Rachel Corrie, bound for Gaza with aid and activists, after its naval operation on Monday in which nine Turkish activists were killed on another ship when it was boarded by Israeli forces.

"It remains a US priority to provide assistance to the people of Gaza," Hammer said.

"In the interest of the safety of all involved, and the safe transmission of assistance to the people of Gaza, we strongly encourage those on

board the Rachel Corrie and other vessels to sail to Ashdod to deliver their materials to Gaza," he said, referring to the Israeli port.

**TURKISH PROBE ISRAELI LEADERS**  
Turkish prosecutors have launched an investigation against top Israeli leaders over the raid on aid ships bound for Gaza which left nine people dead, Turkish press reports said yesterday.

If the prosecutor's office in Bakirkoy, Istanbul, compiles enough evidence, it will press charges against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, the English-language Today's Zaman said.

The charges would include murder, injury, attacking Turkish citizens on the open seas and piracy, it added.

**GAZA ACTIVISTS WERE HIT 30 TIMES**

Nine Turkish activists killed in an Israeli raid on a Gaza-bound aid ship were shot a total of 30 times and five died of gunshot wounds to the head, Britain's Guardian newspaper reported on Friday.

Autopsy results showed the men were hit mostly with 9mm bullets, many fired at close range, the Guardian said, quoting Yalcin Buyuk, vice-chairman of the Turkish council of forensic medicine which carried out the autopsies on Friday.

## 100 children in Nigeria died of lead poisoning

BBC ONLINE

More than 100 children have died of lead poisoning in Nigeria in recent weeks, health officials say.

The number has been rising since March, when residents started digging illegally for gold in areas with high concentrations of lead.

The victims were from several remote villages in the northern state of Zamfara.

A total of 163 out of 355 cases of poisoning have proved fatal, a Nigerian health ministry official told Reuters.

Dr Henry Akpan, the health ministry's chief epidemiologist, said: "[The victims] were digging for gold, but the areas also have large concentrations of lead."

Health authorities have set up two camps in the area to treat people who are suffering symptoms of lead poisoning.

The deaths were discovered during the country's annual immunisation programme, when officials realised there were virtually no children in several remote villages in the northern state, says the BBC's Abdullahi Kaura Abubakar in Kaduna.



Candles and images of a day care fire victims are displayed on the floor at the Independence Angel Monument during a protest in Mexico City on Friday. Relatives of 49 children killed in a day care fire a year ago in Hermosillo, Mexico, demanded the officials, who failed to ensure the centre's safety, be brought to justice.

## Japan's new PM scrambles to form cabinet

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's new leader Naoto Kan yesterday huddled with aides to choose a cabinet line up that will help him tackle pressing challenges, from reviving Asia's top economy to mending ties with Washington.

Kan replaced Yukio Hatoyama on Friday becomes Japan's fifth prime minister in four years after Hatoyama stumbled over a dispute about a US airbase and became mired in political funding scandals.

Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada, Defence Minister Toshimi Kitazawa and health and welfare minister Akira Nagatsuma will be reappointed when Kan launches his cabinet on Tuesday, Kyodo News reported, quoting unnamed sources.

Kan, a one-time leftist activist, received a generally warm welcome from the press, with one major daily highlighting that he was the first prime minister in over a decade not to hail from one of Japan's political dynasties.

"Japan's politics has turned a new page," the Asahi Shimbun said in an editorial.

"Mr Kan was raised in the family of an ordinary salary man. He has a unique background, as many of the post-war prime ministers came from political families or the bureaucracy."

Kan, 63, served as finance minister and deputy premier in Hatoyama's centre-left government, which took power last year in a groundbreaking election that ended decades of conservative rule.

Support for his Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) jumped to 36.1 percent from 20.5 percent in late May, with nearly 58 percent expressing high hopes for Kan, Kyodo News said in its opinion poll released Saturday.

## Thai PM to shuffle cabinet

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's prime minister Friday pushed a possible Cabinet shake up to shore up a coalition government shaken by a no-confidence vote this week and a forcible army crackdown on anti-government protesters.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva also planned his first foreign trip since the crackdown last month, a trip Sunday to an economic forum in Vietnam where he will try to restore investor and tourist confidence in Thailand's stability.

Nearly 90 people were killed and some 1,800 injured in violence related to two months of protests by Red Shirt demonstrators demanding that Abhisit call an early election.

As troops cracked down on May 19, angry protesters put more than 30 buildings around the capital to the torch, including the country's largest shopping mall and the stock exchange.

The Cabinet ministers who were targeted in the no-confidence motions easily won the votes after the opposition accused the government of excessive use of force in suppressing the protest and of corruption.

## Putin chided by schoolboy

AFP, Moscow

Russia's strongman Prime Minister Vladimir Putin yesterday found himself targeted by unusual criticism on environmental protection -- by a young schoolboy.

The encounter took place as Putin toured the Losiny Ostrov national park outside Moscow on a trip that also saw the animal-loving Russian number one feed wild elk with baby-bottles.

Russia is repeatedly criticised by environmentalists for lax ecological protection measures, which endanger the fantastic natural riches across the vast country.

"I think that the government should look more strictly at all violations of the law on ecology," piped the boy, who was not named, staring straight into the dark sunglasses of the prime minister.

Taking off his shades and looking the boy in the eye, Putin said: "I agree completely. Russia's nature is a gift from God, without any exaggeration a wonder which we enjoy every day and deserves our protection."

## Tiananmen leader's 'diary' revealed

BBC ONLINE

A diary which publishers claim is that of the man many blame for the Tiananmen massacre is to be published in Hong Kong.

It gives details on events immediately before and after the killing of workers and students in Beijing in June 1989.

Publishers say the author is Li Peng, the man who announced martial law in Beijing shortly before troops moved in.

In the diary Li declared that he was willing to die to stop the pro-democracy protests.

The news of the diary comes on the 21st anniversary of the massacre.

The book, entitled Li Peng's June 4 Diary,

will be published by New Century Press at the end of this month.

The man behind the project is Bao Pu, the son of Bao Tong, a senior advisor to the head of the Chinese Communist Party at the time of the Tiananmen protests.

"It provides amazing details of how decisions were made and how the order was carried out, and how the leaders reached internal consensus," said Bao Pu, talking about the diary.

It reveals such things as how many troops were involved in the suppression, and where they were deployed.

Who said what in the higher echelons of the party is also detailed in the publication, which will initially appear only in Chinese.

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International School Dhaka, Plot-80, Block-E, Bashundhara R/A Dhaka-1229, Bangladesh  
Tel: 8401101-7, Tel/Fax: (880 2) 8401622, Email: info@isd.org, Website: www.isd.org