

Egypt reopens Rafah border with Gaza

AFP, Rafah

Egypt yesterday reopened its Rafah border crossing with Gaza, allowing people to cross freely for the first time in four years, in a move hailed by Hamas but criticised by Israel.

Among the first to cross the reopened border post were two ambulances ferrying patients from the hitherto-blockaded Gaza Strip for treatment in Egypt as well as a minibus carrying a dozen visitors.

A total of around 200 Gazans crossed by early afternoon.

The crossing is to open to people for eight hours a day from 9:00am, apart from holidays and Fridays, giving Gazans a gateway to the world as Rafah is the only crossing which does not pass through Israel.

Under the long-awaited change, which excludes the flow of goods, people under the age of 18 or older than 40 require only a visa to pass, but men between 18 and 40 still need security clearance, officials said.

Jamal Nijem, 53, whose wife and daughter live in his spouse's native Egypt, was among hundreds who flocked to the Rafah border post, but he was unsure whether he would be still being held.

"I came here three years ago to rejoin my family but my Egyptian residency permit had run out because of frequent closures of the crossing, and the security services barred me from going back," he said.

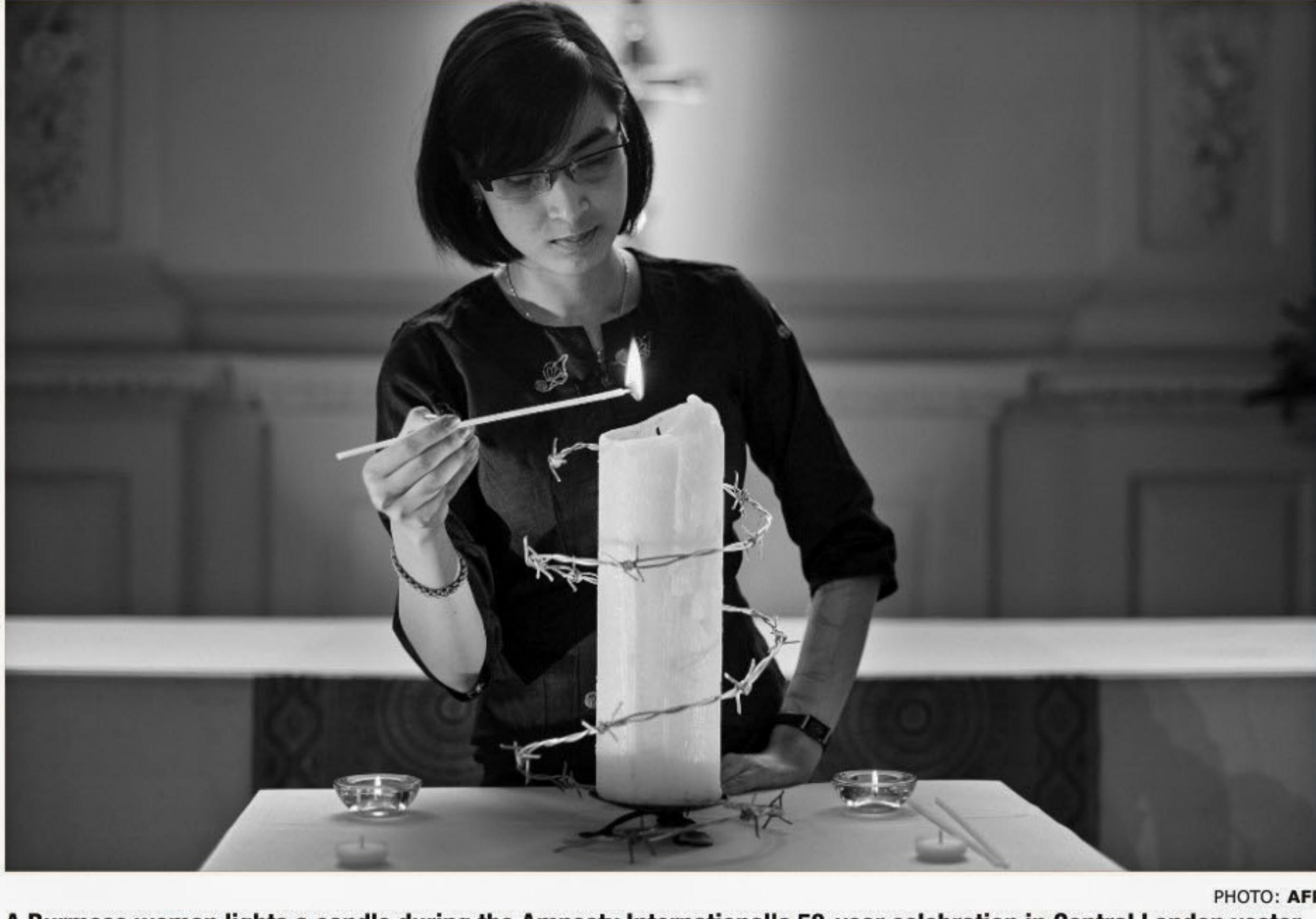
Commercial traffic will continue to have to pass through border points with Israel to enter the impoverished Palestinian enclave.

According to an official in charge of administrative procedures on the Palestinian side of the terminal, "the process is going without a hitch, and we are providing the facilities for travellers to pass quickly and comfortably."

On the Egyptian side, an official said: "We are going to do everything possible to ease the passage of our Palestinian brothers, and we hope procedures will be simplified further in due course."

Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil al-Arabi announced in April that the crossing would reopen permanently, stressing this would help ease the blockade imposed by Israel.

The border has remained largely shut since June 2006 when Israel imposed a tight blockade on Gaza after Palestinian militants snatched Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who is still being held.



A Burmese woman lights a candle during the Amnesty International's 50-year celebration in Central London yesterday. Supporters of the London-based rights group were holding events in more than 60 countries, half a century after the organisation was born out of a simple letter-writing campaign.

PHOTO: AFP

SYRIA UNREST Friday's death toll rises to 12

REUTERS, Amman

Syrian security forces shot dead 12 demonstrators on Friday during protests against Baath Party rule that erupted in 91 locations across Syria, the Syrian National Organisation for Human Rights said.

"The authorities are still pursuing the calculated course of using excessive violence and live ammunition to confront mass demonstrations," the organisation said in a statement yesterday.

Scores of people of all walks of life were also arrested including a doctor, musician, and an amateur boxer, it said.

State television said nine people, including police and civilians, were killed by armed groups on Friday.

Nato raids Gaddafi's Tripoli compound

AFP, Tripoli

Nato carried out fresh bombing raids at the heart of Tripoli's regime yesterday, the military alliance said after G8 world powers intensified the pressure on Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi to go.

The alliance launched a first salvo at 1:00am followed by another strike nine hours later in Gaddafi's Bab Al-Aziziya compound, which Nato aircraft have targeted for four successive days.

The strikes came after US President Barack Obama had said the United States and France were committed to finishing the job in Libya, and as Russia finally joined explicit calls for Gaddafi to go.

But Obama warned the "UN mandate of civilian protection cannot be accomplished when Gaddafi remains in Libya directing his forces in acts of aggression against the Libyan people."

His comments were followed only hours later by fresh air strikes on a command and control centre in Bab Al-Aziziya, a Nato

mission spokesman told AFP. "Three bombs were dropped on the Tripoli target," he said on condition of anonymity.

An AFP correspondent said the second strike, which caused a powerful explosion, hit an army barracks at around 10:00am.

The series of blasts have caused the collapse of sections of imposing walls around the barracks, which is full of warehouses, although the Libyan authorities say they have been emptied.

Earlier, the official news agency Jana said civilian sites in the Al-Qariet region, south of the capital, had been targeted in air raids.

Elsewhere, rebels fought Gaddafi loyalists near an oil facility in the eastern crossroads town of Ajdabiya, leaving two of the insurgents dead, rebel commander Jamal Mansur told AFP.

There were also sporadic clashes around the rebel-held southern oasis town of Jalo, as Gaddafi's forces were desperate for oil and gas reserves.

Missouri tornado toll rises to 132

AFP, Joplin

The death toll from one of the worst tornadoes ever to hit the United States has risen to 132 as crews continued to search the rubble for survivors and victims.

Five days after the massive tornado cut a miles-long path of destruction through this town of 50,000, officials have managed to pare down the list of the missing to 156 from 232.

The twister ranks as the single deadliest tornado to hit the United States since modern record-keeping began in 1950.

More than 8,000 structures in the Midwestern town were damaged or destroyed when the twister packing winds over 200 miles an hour came roaring through with just a 24-minute warning.

Bin Laden considered seeking deal with Pakistan

CNN ONLINE

Osama bin Laden considered seeking a deal with Pakistan under which al-Qaeda leaders in the country would be protected and, in return, al-Qaeda would refrain from attacking Pakistan, a US official told CNN Friday.

The revelation surfaced as American agents analysed the documents that were seized in the May 2 raid of bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, according to the official, who was not authorised to speak on the record.

The documents show the al-Qaeda leader communicated with his operations chief, Atiya Abdul Rahman, about a possible deal with Pakistan, the official said.

The New York Times first reported on the possible deal.

The official said there is no evidence an approach was ever made to any Pakistani



raise it with anyone? The US government clearly says that he did not. It was something that he and his associates were considering amongst themselves, Haqqani said.

In the aftermath of the raid, US officials have said that they suspect elements of the Pakistani government knew of bin Laden's hideaway in Abbottabad. But Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said recently that was just a "supposition."

But the official stressed agents are still going through the material that was seized and whether there are any "links to people inside Pakistan is still an open question."

officials to try to cut such a deal.

"This appeared to be a discussion inside al-Qaeda," the official said.

Husain Haqqani, Pakistani ambassador to the United States, told CNN's Suzanne Malveaux that Pakistan is "not aware" of any such idea.

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Yemen tensions ease with tenuous ceasefire

REUTERS, Sanaa

An informal ceasefire between President Ali Abdullah Saleh's security forces and a tribal group brought a pause in fighting yesterday after nearly a week of deadly clashes left Yemen near civil war.

Fighting this week has killed some 115 people, prompted thousands of residents to flee Sanaa and raised the specter of chaos that could benefit the Yemen-based branch of al-Qaeda and threaten adjacent Saudi Arabia, the world's No. 1 oil exporter.

Tribal sources and residents said there had been no renewal of fighting in Sanaa's northern district of Hasaba, site of heavy clashes this week for control of government buildings, and outside the capital.

"Mediation is going to resume later this afternoon," a government official told Reuters.

The latest fighting, pitting Saleh's security forces against members of the powerful Hashed tribe led by Sadeq al-Ahmar, was the bloodiest since pro-democracy unrest erupted in January and was sparked by a Saleh refusal to sign a power transfer deal.

A prestigious think tank, the International Crisis Group, said a broad ceasefire was needed immediately and should be part of a plan that leads to a transition of power.

Foreign states should be involved, it said, "but, given the deeply personal and tribal nature of the feud between the Salehs and al-Ahmars, it cannot be addressed effectively by international mediation or initiatives alone."

Global powers have little sway in Yemen, where tribal allegiances are the most powerful element in a volatile social fabric and the fighting already appears to be playing out along tribal lines.

On Friday, Yemeni tribesmen said they had captured a military compound from elite troops loyal to the president 100 km outside Sanaa, widening a conflict hitherto concentrated mainly in the capital near the home of Ahmar.

The fighting has overshadowed a largely peaceful protest movement that started months ago aimed at ending Saleh's 33-year-long autocratic rule and inspired by the movements that brought down the long-standing leaders of Tunisia and Egypt.

Egypt court fines Mubarak \$90.64m

REUTERS, Cairo

An Egyptian court yesterday fined ousted President Hosni Mubarak and two former officials \$90.64 million for cutting off mobile and internet services during January protests, a court source said.

It was the first court ruling to be made against Mubarak since he was ousted on February 11. Mubarak faces more serious charges, including ordering the killing of protesters, a charge which could carry the death penalty.

A judicial source said the administrative court fined Mubarak 200 million Egyptian pounds, former Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif 40 million pounds, and former interior minister Habib el-Adly 300 million pounds.

Sudan rivals to meet on Abyei crisis

AFP, Khartoum

South Sudan's vice president flew to Khartoum yesterday on a mission to "ease tensions" over Abyei, one week after northern troops overran the contested border region, a southern official said.

"A high level delegation led by the vice president, Riek Machar, has gone to Khartoum," said Mangar Amerid, a spokesman in the office of the southern president.

"It is aimed as an effort to normalise and ease tensions, and to improve the situation in Abyei," he added, but could not confirm who the southern team would meet in the north.

"This is an important mission on a very important matter, and we are hoping for a good reception," he said.

The surprise visit came as the northern National Congress Party and the south Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) were to meet in Addis Ababa yesterday for talks also to be attended by the African Union panel on Sudan and South Africa's former president Thabo Mbeki.

Khartoum's chief Abyei negotiator Al-Dirdiri Mohammed Ahmed said on Friday that the northern government was "open" to negotiations with the south.

South Sudan leader Salva Kiir had called for a complete withdrawal of Sudanese government forces from Abyei, insisting the south did not want a return to war.

A southern Sudanese minister said more than 150,000 people have fled violence ravaging the border region and surrounding areas since May 21 when northern troops and tanks took control.



Spaniards hold flowers at the Puerta del Sol square in Madrid on Friday during a protest against Spain's economic crisis and its sky-high jobless rate.

Serbia to probe Mladić networks

AFP, Belgrade

Serbia vowed yesterday to track down those who helped Bosnian Serb war crimes suspect Ratko Mladić evade justice for so long, as fresh details emerged of his arrest after 16 years on the run.

"We will continue to pursue all those who have helped Mladić and other fugitives evade justice," Serbian war crimes prosecutor Vladimir Vučević told AFP.

"By hiding Mladić they have caused serious damage to this country. Hiding fugitives from the Hague tribunal is a serious crime," he added.

Mladić, accused of masterminding the 1995 Srebrenica massacre and other atrocities during the 1992-95 Bosnian war, was arrested Thursday and is set to be transferred next week to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague.

Judges are expected to rule Monday on an appeal against his transfer to the court, where he faces charges of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

His capture came after a 16-year manhunt and amid many questions as to how Europe's most-wanted man was able to evade capture for so long.

President Boris Tadić told the BBC on Friday that authorities would leave no stone unturned in their search for those who sheltered Mladić.

Tadić promised a "full and complete picture" of the network.

First Arab woman scales Everest

AFP, Dubai

Suzanne al-Houby, a Palestinian who lives in the United Arab Emirates, has become the first Arab woman to scale Mount Everest, the world's tallest mountain.

"Becoming the first Arab woman to reach the top of the world was an enormous thrill and a great privilege," Houby said in the statement.

"I would like to share this triumph with the Palestinian people and all Arabs -- especially all the Arab women, young and old, who continue to contribute to the peace and stability of the region we all call home."

Houby, 40, spent 51 days making the climb on May 21, the statement said, adding that she spent two years preparing for her Everest attempt.