

# War looms again in Gaza strip

AGENCIES

A Hamas rocket killed three Israelis north of the Gaza Strip yesterday, drawing the first blood from Israel as the Palestinian death toll rose to 15 in a military showdown lurking closer to all-out war and an invasion of the enclave.

Meanwhile, Arab nations demanded the UN Security Council condemn Israel's deadly attacks on Gaza at an emergency meeting late Wednesday, but the United States strongly defended Israel's military strikes.

The meet called for a halt to the violence, but took no action.

On the second day of an assault Israel said might last many days and culminate in a ground attack, its warplanes bombed targets in and around Gaza city, where tall buildings trembled.

Plumes of smoke and dust furled into a sky laced with the vapour trails of outgoing rockets.

Israel has attacked more than 200 targets in the Gaza since Wednesday night while Hamas militants fired 250 rockets over the border, officials said.



Smoke billowing from a spot targeted by an Israeli air strike inside the Gaza strip yesterday.

Aside from the deaths, around 150 Gazans have been injured in 22 hours of Israeli air strikes, medics said.

The sudden conflict, launched by Israel with the killing of Hamas's military chief, pours oil on the fire of a Middle East already ablaze with two years of revolution and an out-of-control civil war in

Syria. Palestinian allies, led by Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, denounced the Israeli offensive.

Cairo recalled its ambassador from Israel on Wednesday and asked US to take measures to stop Israeli attacks on Gazans.

The offensive began on Wednesday when a precision Israeli airstrike assassi-

nated Hamas military mastermind Ahmed Al-Jaabari, and Israel shelled the enclave from land, air and sea.

The 15 killed in Gaza included Jaabari and six Hamas fighters plus eight civilians, among them a pregnant woman with twins, an 11-month old boy and three infants, according to the enclave's health ministry. Medics reported at least 130 wounded.

Israel's sworn enemy Iran, which supports and arms Hamas, condemned the Israeli offensive as "organised terrorism".

A second Gaza war has loomed on the horizon for months as waves of Palestinian rocket attacks and Israeli strikes grew increasingly intense and frequent.

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday said his country will take "whatever action is necessary" to defend its citizens from Palestinian rocket attacks.

His cabinet has granted authorisation for the mobilisation of military reserves if required.

Hamas has said the killing of its top commander in a precision, death-from-above airstrike, would "open the gates of hell" for Israel.

## SYRIA CIVIL WAR Russia opposes arming rebels

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday warned nations backing the Syrian opposition against President Bashar al-Assad that they would be violating international law if they started supplying the rebels with weapons.

"Promises are being made from a number of capitals of massive supplies of modern weapons," foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich told reporters.

"Outside help to the opposition waging an armed battle against a legitimate government is a gross violation of fundamental norms of international law."

France, the first Western country to recognise Syria's newly formed National Coalition as the Syrian people's sole representative, has raised the prospect of providing defensive weapons to the rebels, but US President Barack Obama remains cautious.

Lukashevich said that the latest developments in the 20-month conflict, including what he said was the rebels' refusal to hold talks with Assad, were "in direct contravention" of the so-called Geneva peace plan for Syria championed by former UN negotiator Kofi Annan.

Syrian opposition groups on Sunday agreed on a plan to unite against Assad, which Lukashevich said was not only "an undermining of the Geneva compromise, it is a 180-degree turnaround".

## 452 prisoners freed in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar pardoned hundreds of prisoners yesterday under a mass amnesty criticised by pro-democracy activists as a cynical ploy to curry favour ahead of a landmark visit by US President Barack Obama.

Officials said 452 prisoners would walk free, but by the late afternoon rights groups said they were not aware of the release of any of the scores dissidents still languishing in jail.

Obama will on Monday become the first sitting US president to visit Myanmar, where he will meet former general President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's most famous former political prisoner.

## US plays down rivalry with China again

AFP, Adelaide



Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton yesterday said the Pacific "is big enough for all of us" as the United States pushes for a more visible military role across the region to counter China.

Meanwhile, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta yesterday pledged a defence deal with Thailand in Bangkok amid a once in a decade leadership change in China.

In a speech at a marine defence hub in the South Australian capital Adelaide, America's top diplomat sought to allay fears about Washington's pivot into Asia, which has irked Beijing.

She called Australia an "indispensable" ally and said both Canberra and Washington wanted to strengthen ties with China and other nations in the region, in what she called "the Pacific century".

Hillary said Australia's relationship with the United States should be seen as com-

plementary to its ties in Asia, particularly China which is Canberra's biggest trading partner.

"We support Australia having strong, multi-faceted ties with every nation in the Asia-Pacific, indeed in the world, including China, just as we seek the

same," she said.

"And I have said repeatedly, the Pacific is big enough for all of us."

In Bangkok, US and Thailand pledged to renew their military alliance for a new security era.

The last time the two nations drafted such a joint declaration was in 1962, when the United States promised to defend Thailand from "communist aggression".

Although the new statement made no reference to China's rising military power, Washington's strategic tilt to the Asia-Pacific is meant to offset Beijing's clout and maintain American influence there.

## GULF OIL SPILL BP agrees to pay over \$4.5b in fine

AFP, London

British energy giant BP yesterday said it had agreed to pay more than \$4.5 billion in US fines related to the devastating 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill, including a record \$4.0 billion to settle criminal claims.

"The aggregate amount of the resolution is approximately \$4.5 billion, with payments scheduled over a period of six years," BP said in a statement.

The company's reputation was ravaged two and a half years ago after an explosion on the BP-leased Deepwater Horizon rig killed 11 workers and sent millions of barrels of oil spewing into the sea making it the biggest marine oil spill in the industry's history.

## China's new Politburo Standing Committee

The nation's top decision making body

Xi Jinping



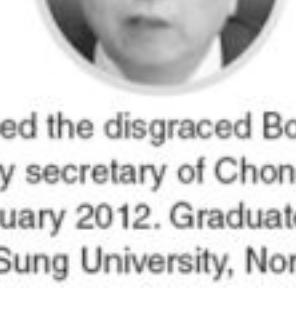
Li Keqiang



Anointed general-secretary of the Communist Party, to become president in March. Promoted to the Standing Committee in 2007, VP since 2008 with backing of Jiang Zemin

Set to be named premier in March 2013. In the Standing Committee since 2007, VP since 2008. English speaker with law degree from Peking University

Zhang Dejiang



Yu Zhengsheng



Liu Yunshan



Replaced the disgraced Bo Xilai as party secretary of Chongqing in February 2012. Graduate of Kim Il-Sung University, North Korea



Graduated from the department of missile engineering at Harbin Military Engineering Institute. Known as a "princeling"



Economist by profession. Ran Shenzhen in the 1990s. Protege of Jiang Zemin and close to Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing

AFP

## Obama defends Rice over Libya attacks Says scandal no security threat

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama Wednesday angrily hit out Republicans gunning for the US ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, who is under fire over the militant attack on the US mission in Libya that killed ambassador Chris Stevens and three other US staff.

Refusing to say if he planned to pick her to replace Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Obama defended Rice saying she had done "exemplary work" at the UN showing "skill and professionalism and toughness and grace."

Rice has been widely criticized after she said only days after the September 11 attack on the Benghazi consulate that according to the current intelligence it had started with a spontaneous protest against an anti-Islam film.

Rice is reported to be one of the top favorites to be the new secretary of state, as Clinton has made it clear she is stepping down.

Obama, appearing at his first press conference since his re-election last week, also assured Americans on Wednesday that the sex scandal that brought down CIA chief David Petraeus and ensnared another top general has not compromised national security.

## Dhaka tops list of global cities

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classifies seven cities as "extreme risk," out of a list of 50 that were chosen for their current and future importance in global business.

Manila was ranked second in the firm's fifth annual "Climate Change and Environmental Risk Atlas 2013", while Bangkok, Yangon, Jakarta, Ho Chi Minh City and Kolkata came third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh respectively.

The CCVI looks at exposure to extreme weather events such as drought, cyclones, wildfires and storm surges, which translate into water stress, loss of crops and land lost to the sea.

With a strong economic

growth of above 5 percent forecast for countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and India in the next few years, the relevance of climate change to populations and business in the major commercial centres should not be underplayed, according to Maplecroft.

The firm said extreme risk cities may see an increase in frequency and severity of key hydrological and meteorological events.

A further 19 cities are classed as "high risk" in the CCVI, including the important commercial centres of Mumbai (8) and Delhi (20) in India; Lagos, Nigeria (10); Johannesburg, South Africa (13); Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (21); and Hong Kong

(14), Guangzhou (18), Shenzhen (19), Wuhan (23) and Shanghai in China (24).

New York, which took the full brunt of Superstorm Sandy, is ranked 41 of the 50 cities. Despite the city's exposure to natural hazards, it is only categorised as "medium risk" due to the USA's ability to adapt to a major climatic event.

Chicago, London, St Petersburg, Paris and Madrid, meanwhile, are the only five cities classified as "low risk".

Maplecroft said multinational companies operating in the Asian growth economies will be exposed to spiralling environmental risks.

"As global corporations expand into the emerging growth markets, their operations and supply chains will become exposed to a complex set of climate risks that have the potential to disrupt business continuity," said Helen Hodge, head of Maps and Indices at Maplecroft.

"It is essential for them to identify where suppliers, assets and personnel are most at risk and plan for the long term."

Maplecroft is a global risk and strategy consulting firm based in Bath, the UK. Its work includes analysing key political, economic, social and environmental risks impacting global business and investment.

"I am not ambivalent about my views on violence; violence is something that I abhor completely," she said.

"The security of the border surely is the responsibility of both countries."

The Rohingya, who make up the vast majority of those displaced in the recent fighting, are described by the UN as among the world's most persecuted minorities.

Suu Kyi, who is now a member of parliament after dramatic changes overseen by a quasi-civilian regime that took power last year, dismissed criticism that her response to the unrest in Rakhine had been inadequate.

Representatives of the Rohingya say their people have been in Myanmar for centuries but their ethnic history is the subject of fierce dispute.

US President Barack Obama's visit to Myanmar next week will underline the end of the country's pariah status since the recent reforms were initiated.

## Suu Kyi declines to back Rohingyas

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Myanmar is nothing new. It has already become a common feature of the bordering area at Teknaf since their first influx as refugees in 1978.

The country has sent back around 2,36,490 Rohingya refugees from 1992 to 2004.

It now accommodates around 29,000 registered Rohingya refugees, although different estimates suggest the number of the Myanmarese minorities unofficially living in and around Cox's Bazar ranges between 2.5 and 5 lakh.

"Don't forget that violence has been committed by both sides. This is why I prefer not to take sides and also I want to work towards reconciliation," she told NDTV news channel.

for her muted response to the ethnic violence in her homeland, reports AFP.

"This is a huge international tragedy and this is why I keep saying that the government must have a policy about their citizenship laws," she said.

Nicholas Farrelly, a Myanmar expert at Australian National University, told AFP that Suu Kyi's comments reflected domestic opinion.

"If she makes a mis-step, she could alienate her political base which is reluctant to have anything to do with the Rohingya," he said.

"She appears to be pivoting away from international human rights groups and is echoing sentiments inside Myanmar.

over as migrants later from Bangladesh," Suu Kyi said.

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## Libya government sworn in

AFP, Tripoli

Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan's new cabinet was sworn in on Wednesday at the national assembly and officially took up their posts, in the absence of eight contested nominees.

The chief task of the new government is to organise fresh elections within 12 months on the basis of a new constitution, which has yet to be drafted.

## Bal Thackeray critically ill

AFP, Mumbai

Mumbai police stepped up security yesterday to prevent any unrest as Indian firebrand politician Bal Thackeray was reported to be in critical condition at his home in the city.

Doctors on Wednesday night had said Thackeray was in a "very critical" condition and on a life support system, but Shiv Sena spokesman Sanjay Raut said on Thursday he was now stable.