

US blocks UN statement on Gaza

AFP, United Nations

The United States on Tuesday blocked a UN Security Council statement on the Gaza conflict, arguing that it would have been "counter-productive" amid efforts to reach a ceasefire.

Russia had threatened to press for a full council resolution on the conflict if the Arab-proposed statement was blocked. That could have led to a veto clash with the United States.

But, with Egyptian-led truce efforts gathering pace, diplomats said Moscow's initiative would be dropped, though the Russian mission made no immediate announcement.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Jerusalem that Washington's commitment to the Jewish state's security remains "rock solid."

But Hillary also stressed that Washington expected a quick de-escalation to a seven-day conflict that has shaken the already volatile region, and now threatens to spill over into an all-out ground war.

The United States sent a letter to the 14 other council missions just before a Tuesday deadline for the statement to take effect, diplomats told AFP.

Diplomats quoted the US letter as saying the proposed resolution "failed to address the root cause" of the showdown between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers, which it said was rocket attacks into Israel.

The US letter called the statement "counter-productive" and added that it was "failing to contribute to diplomacy."



Smoke billows after Israeli fighters strike Gaza Strip yesterday. Inset, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi meets with US Secretary Hilary Clinton at the presidential palace in Cairo to broker peace in the region. Israel yesterday agreed to a Egypt-brokered truce ending a 7-day attack on Gaza Strip killing 154 Palestinians.

PHOTO: AFP

Occupation main issue, not truce: Arab League

Turkey accuses Israel of 'ethnic cleansing' in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

The Arab League head said the world should focus on ending Israeli occupation instead of seeking a truce in Gaza, on a solidarity mission to the war-torn strip on Tuesday.

"The real problem is not a truce," Nabil al-Arabi told reporters as he led a top-level delegation of 10 Arab ministers on a visit to the territory where Israel has been pressing an intensive aerial campaign which did not let up for the duration of their visit.

"The real problem that the Arab and Islamic countries and all friendly countries in the world must focus on is ending the occupation," the Arab League secretary general said.

The visit came as intense diplomatic efforts edged the two sides closer toward a truce that some militant sources said could be

announced in Cairo later on Tuesday.

But Arabi said that nations were losing focus as they focused on ways to avoid escalating violence that has claimed the lives of more than 136 Palestinians and seen hundreds of rockets rain down on southern Israel.

The delegation also visited Gaza City's Shifa hospital and met the survivors of a family which lost eight members during a single deadly missile strike on Sunday.

Meanwhile, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday accused Israel of "ethnic cleansing" in Gaza, saying the Jewish state's air raids could not be considered self-defence.

"Israel is committing ethnic cleansing by ignoring peace in this region and violating international law," Erdogan said. "It is occupying

the Palestinian territory step by step."

"Sooner or later, Israel will answer for the innocent blood it has shed so far," he said.

Erdogan's words came after Israel halted a threatened Gaza ground operation to give Egyptian-led truce talks a chance.

Sources from the armed Hamas movement and Islamic Jihad both told AFP that a truce would be announced later on Tuesday at a joint press conference with Palestinian factions and Egyptian mediators in Cairo.

But an Egyptian source close to the negotiations was more cautious. "Up to this point there is no final decision," he told AFP by phone from Cairo.

An Israeli diplomatic source also refused to confirm an agreement was in the bag.

India slams excessive use of force

PTI, New Delhi

In an oblique criticism of Israel's offensive in Gaza, India yesterday said "disproportionate use of force" was completely unacceptable and demanded immediate deescalation of the conflict in the region.

External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid told reporters that "we did say categorically that the disproportionate use of force is unacceptable."

Khurshid said India considers the violence

"completely unacceptable and would urge that peace must be restored immediately." He also reaffirmed India's commitment to an independent state of

Palestine.

Pope publishes Jesus biography

BBC ONLINE

The third and final instalment of Pope Benedict's biography of Jesus is published yesterday.

One million copies of the book, Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives, have been printed in eight languages.

It analyses the gospel narratives from the birth of Jesus to his presentation in the temple at the age of 12.

The book is signed "Joseph Ratzinger Benedict XVI", meaning that it is an academic work, rather than papal dogma that cannot be contradicted.

Pope Benedict reaffirms the importance of the Christian belief in the virgin birth, that Jesus was not conceived through sexual intercourse but through the Holy Spirit.

He argues that it, together with the resurrection, are "cornerstones of faith" because they demonstrate God's power over matter.

But he debunks several Christmas traditions, including the year of Jesus' birth, which the Pope argues was miscalculated by a monk.

In the coming months, the book will be translated into 20 languages and sold in 72 countries around the world.

EU fails to pass Greek bail-out deal

AFP, Brussels

Eurozone finance ministers yesterday failed at an emergency meeting to strike a deal to unblock bailout funds needed to keep Greece from bankruptcy and said they would try again next week.

A day earlier, they had expressed confidence that a deal would be reached to unblock 31.2 billion euros (\$40 billion) in aid to Greece and resolve a rift with the IMF over how to get the debt-stricken state's economy back on track.

But the talks ended nearly 12 hours later without the desired result.



Residents of Goma react as they listen to M23 rebel group spokesman in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo yesterday. The M23 yesterday threatened to take Kinshasa, the capital, after seizing the strategic city of Goma, where the UN accused them of carrying out summary executions as they sweep across the east, stoking fears of a humanitarian disaster.

PHOTO: AFP

Farc rebels declare truce as talks begin

AFP, Havana

Colombia's leftist Farc rebels declared a unilateral two-month ceasefire Monday as they began talks in Cuba with the Bogota government on ending Latin America's longest-running insurgency.

But the government of President Juan Manuel Santos immediately made clear it would not be bound by the ceasefire and military operations against the FARC would continue.

The Colombian military is determined to "chase these individuals who have violated all types of laws... and have attacked the lives and honor of Colombians," Defense Secretary Juan Carlos Pinzon said in Bogota.

Negotiators for the Santos administration and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc) were in Havana to resume negotiations formally launched last month in Norway, the first attempt at a negotiated peace in 10 years.

Ivan Marquez, the head of the FARC delegation, said the rebel ceasefire would take effect at 0500 GMT Tuesday and last through January 20.

Colombian negotiators made no statement as they arrived at the convention center in the Cuban capital. Reporters were not allowed inside as the talks began.

Pakistan to host Muslim leaders in rare summit

AFP, Islamabad

Muslim leaders gather today for a rare summit in Pakistan designed to increase trade and investment but likely to be overshadowed by the Gaza conflict as diplomats scramble to arrange a ceasefire.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Egyptian leader Mohamed Morsi and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, key players in the Middle East, are scheduled to be among those attending the Developing Eight (D8) summit.

The D8 groups Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey, with an estimated total population of one billion people. Bangladesh and Malaysia will be

represented at adviser- and ministerial-level respectively.

The summit will mark the first visit by an Egyptian president to Pakistan in four decades and by the first by a Nigerian leader in 28 years.

Its ambitious goal is to increase trade between member countries from \$130 billion to \$507 billion by 2018.

D8 leaders are set "to discuss ways to cushion the effects of the global economic recession and climate change and tackle ways to boost trade among themselves", the Pakistani government said in a statement.

Islamabad rarely hosts major international gatherings given the Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked violence that has plagued the country since the 9/11 attacks.

Taliban suicide attack kills 2 in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A suicide bomber blew himself up near a Nato base in Kabul's heavily-fortified diplomatic district yesterday, killing two Afghan security guards and wounding two government officials, police said.

The Taliban, leading an insurgency against US-led troops and the Afghan government, claimed responsibility and said the target was a CIA office.

An official said the bomber was wearing a security guard's uniform and was armed with grenades.

War heroes to retire at 60

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Once the fresh extension of service age comes into force, it will cover around 11,000 serving officials and employees listed as freedom fighters by the liberation war ministry.

"A proposal for extending retirement age of the freedom fighter civil servants is likely to be placed at the next cabinet meeting for approval," a senior official of the liberation war ministry said yesterday.

This will be the third extension of service age by the present government.

Earlier in April 2010, retirement age of the freedom fighter civil servants was raised by two years to 59 from 57.

A year later, service age of other civil servants were also

extended by two years, which made the age limit same for all (nearly 12 lakh) officials and employees. The freedom fighter public servants then started demanding increase of their service age by another two years.

In June this year, the liberation war ministry sent a proposal to the public administration ministry for extending retirement age of the freedom fighters. But it did not place the proposal before the cabinet and sent it back.

Within a week, the liberation war ministry took up the matter with the prime minister. The PM decided to extend the age limit by one year, sources in the liberation war ministry said.

In 2010, the extension of

service age for freedom fighters by two years created a huge commotion among the rank and file of the civil administration. Many of them termed the step discriminatory.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, some bureaucrats who are not freedom fighters said the step would trigger adverse reaction in the entire administration. It would make only a small section, including some senior officials, happy, they added.

"The government should not irk the entire civil administration by rewarding a small section of civil servants," said a deputy secretary of the communications ministry. The step will also delay promotion of many, he added.