

ISIS HOSTAGE CRISIS

THE 3 PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE

KENJI GOTO Kenji Goto, 47, is a respected freelance journalist who reported from various conflict zones for Japanese media. His last report from the Turkish-Syrian border town of Kobani aired in October. In his final video on YouTube before he was captured he explained why he was heading to Raqqa, an ISIS stronghold in Syria. "Syrian people suffering for three-years-and-a-half - it's enough" he said. Goto, a married father, was taken hostage by Isis shortly after his last broadcast. The latest video from ISIS features a voice believed to be his warning that a Jordanian pilot will be killed by the group if a female militant is not released by Jordan.

PILOT MUATH AL-KASAESBEH

Muath al-Kasaesbeh, 26, is a Jordanian pilot who was captured when his plane crashed as he conducted US-led coalition air strikes against the group. In statements printed in ISIS' Dabiq magazine, al-Kasaesbeh says he ejected from the aircraft and landed in the Euphrates River, where he was taken captive by ISIS fighters. ISIS claims it shot down the plane with a heat-seeking missile as it was flying near its stronghold of Raqqa. The United States has strenuously denied these claims. Militants are threatening to kill the pilot unless Sajida al-Rishawi is handed over by Jordan at sunset.

SAJIDA AL-RISHAWI

Sajida al-Rishawi, 46, has been detained in Jordan for nine years over a 2005 bomb attack at a wedding reception in Amman that killed more than 57 people. Al-Rishawi's husband succeeded in detonating his explosive vest but her belt failed to detonate and she fled the scene. She was later discovered in a safe house and arrested. She allegedly admitted her part in the attack in a televised confession. Al-Rishawi was sentenced to death by hanging following her confession, which she later retracted.



A Ukrainian woman begs Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to stop the bombing in Donetsk after shell hit the residential area where she lives, killing two civilians in Donetsk's Kyibishevsky district, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Gorbachev warns of 'hot' war

AFP, Moscow Europe yesterday prepared to draft even tougher sanctions against Russia over Ukraine as ex-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev warned against the danger of an increasingly isolated Kremlin fighting back.

The last Soviet leader's words of caution came with the daily death toll in Ukraine's separatist east spiking again with the nine-month war threatening to turn into a lasting conflict that keeps Europe on constant edge.

Gorbachev said the West's decision to respond to the violence by blaming Russia and cutting it off from access to US and European capital markets threatened to spiral into open warfare with dire consequences across the world.

"Where will that lead all of us? A Cold War is already being waged openly. What's next?" the 83-year-old Nobel peace prize winner asked.

"Unfortunately I cannot say for sure that a Cold War will not lead to a 'hot' one."

Pro-Russian insurgents last week pulled out of peace talks and announced a new offensive that was followed by a rocket assault on the strategic port of Mariupol in which 31 civilians died.

Rebel commanders later distanced themselves from the bloodshed despite being blamed for it by international monitors on site.

But they have followed through on their threat to push into lucrative eastern industrial lands that still answer to Kiev's pro-Western government under a September deal approved by the warring sides in Belarus.

"We pronounce the Minsk agreements dead," Donetsk separatist commander Eduard Basurin told reporters.

"The version that was signed no longer applies."

But the Belarussian foreign ministry yesterday announced a new peace push. It said the contact group of representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE will meet in Minsk today to hold peace talks aimed at ending the fighting in east Ukraine.

The United States and its European allies view the latest rebel surge as part of a proxy war launched by Russian President Vladimir Putin in reprisal for last year's ousting a Kiev's former Kremlin-backed government.

EU leaders unanimously backed more Russian sanctions in a rare statement adopted outside a regular Brussels session on Tuesday.

Greece and Cyprus later distanced themselves from the statement but are not expected to fight new penalties the bloc's 28 foreign ministers draft yesterday.

Greece has historic links with Russia, but the speed that the new government has made clear its ties to the Kremlin has worried some leaders in Brussels. EU ministers are gathering today to attempt to agree on stricter sanctions, but the vote must be unanimous - meaning that the Greeks hold the power of veto.

Previous Western measures and a coinciding slide in oil prices have plunged Russia into recession and seen Standard and Poor's slap a "junk" rating on Moscow's foreign currency debt.

The downgrade threatens to further alienate Western investors and burdens Russia's economy with the same failing grade it struggled with at the start of Putin's 15-year rule.



UKRAINE CRISIS

- EU set to impose tougher sanctions on Russia
Kiev, Moscow, OSCE to hold new truce talks today
Greece threatens EU veto over sanctions

MH370 crash an 'accident'

Malaysia says everyone on board is 'dead'; relatives vent anger

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia yesterday formally declared missing flight MH370 an "accident" and its passengers and crew presumed dead, a step that opens the door for compensation payments but which was met with angry skepticism by distraught relatives.

"It is therefore, with the heaviest heart and deepest sorrow that, on behalf of the government of Malaysia, we officially declare Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 an accident," civil aviation chief Azharuddin Abdul Rahman said in a televised announcement.

"All 239 of the passengers and crew on board MH370 are presumed to have lost their lives," he headed.

Many desperate MH370 relatives have continued to insist that the plane may have landed safely somewhere, and Malaysian authorities and the airline had until now refrained from drawing firm conclusions about its fate.

But the announcement essentially declared that the plane had crashed somewhere after its disappearance last March 8.

Azharuddin acknowledged the news was "very difficult" for next of kin to digest, but added "it is nonetheless important that families try to resume normal lives".

He also said the airline was "ready to proceed immediately with the compensation process," once families are ready.

Malaysia Airlines officials were not immediately available for comment.

But Sarah Bajc, whose partner Philip Wood was on board the plane, was one of several relatives who poured scorn on the announcement.

"I think they are lying," she said.

"It could very well be that the plane crashed. But there is no evidence, and until there is evidence we just can't believe them," she said, referring to the Malaysian government and flag carrier.



A relative (C) of a passenger of the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 holds a picture of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak with the writing "Please bring back my husband" in Putrajaya, yesterday.

Many relatives accuse the Malaysian government and its flag carrier of a chaotic and bungled response to the plane's initial diversion, which allowed the jet to disappear, and a subsequent cover-up. Those charges are strenuously denied.

The plane vanished en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing in what remains one of history's great aviation mysteries.

Malaysian authorities say satellite data indicates the plane inexplicably detoured to the remote southern Indian Ocean, which they suspect was due to "deliberate" action onboard.

But no evidence has turned up despite an ongoing Australian-led search of the supposed crash region -- the most expensive search and rescue operation in history.

AIRASIA TRAGEDY Co-pilot was flying jet when it crashed

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The French first officer and co-pilot of AirAsia flight QZ8501 was controlling the plane in the last moments before it crashed into the sea off Indonesia, killing all 162 on board.

Captain Remi Plesel, 46, is believed to have been in charge from take-off until the cockpit voice recording, recovered from the Java Sea earlier this month, ends.

Plesel had 2,247 hours experience, according to a Bloomberg report last month, in comparison to his co-pilot captain Iriyanto, 53, who had clocked up more than 20,000.

Only 70 bodies have been recovered from the wreckage as divers have struggled to bring the fuselage to the surface, hampered by adverse weather conditions. Divers entered the wreckage last week but believe there are no more bodies to be found in the carcass of the plane.

WHO: Ebola endgame begins

REUTERS, Geneva

The number of new confirmed Ebola cases totalled 99 in the week to Jan 25, the lowest tally since June 2014, the World Health Organization said on Thursday, signalling the tide might have turned against the epidemic.

"The response to the EVD (Ebola virus disease) epidemic has now moved to a second phase, as the focus shifts from slowing transmission to ending the epidemic," the WHO said.

"To achieve this goal as quickly as possible, efforts have moved from rapidly building infrastructure to ensuring that capacity for case finding, case management, safe burials, and community engagement is used as effectively as possible."

The outbreak has killed 8,810 people out of 22,092 cases, almost all of them in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.

Cases and deaths have fallen rapidly in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the past few weeks, with 20 deaths recorded in Liberia in the 21 days to Jan 25 -- less than one a day.

But Guinea reported 30 confirmed cases in the latest week, up from 20 in the previous week. The epidemic is also still spreading geographically there, with a first confirmed case in Guinea's Mali prefecture bordering Senegal.

Don't meddle in Cuba's affairs

Raul Castro warns US

REUTERS, Havana

Cuba will not accept any interference from the United States in its internal affairs, President Raul Castro said yesterday, warning that meddling would make rapprochement between the two countries "meaningless".

His comments came after US Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson, the highest-ranking US government official to visit the island in 35 years, held talks with Cuban officials on restoring diplomatic relations. Jacobson also met Cuban dissidents, annoying Cuban officials.

"Everything appears to indicate that the aim is to foment an artificial political opposition via economic, political and communicational means," Castro told a summit in Costa Rica.

"If these problems are not resolved, this diplomatic rapprochement between Cuba and the United States would be meaningless," he said.

Castro made it clear, however, that he was committed to the talks despite his concern that Washington might try to stir up internal opposition within Cuba through greater telecommunications access and the Internet.

Castro said during the visit with American diplomats that Cuba had proposed that it be removed from a blacklist of state sponsors of terrorism, and the return of the US Guantanamo naval base.

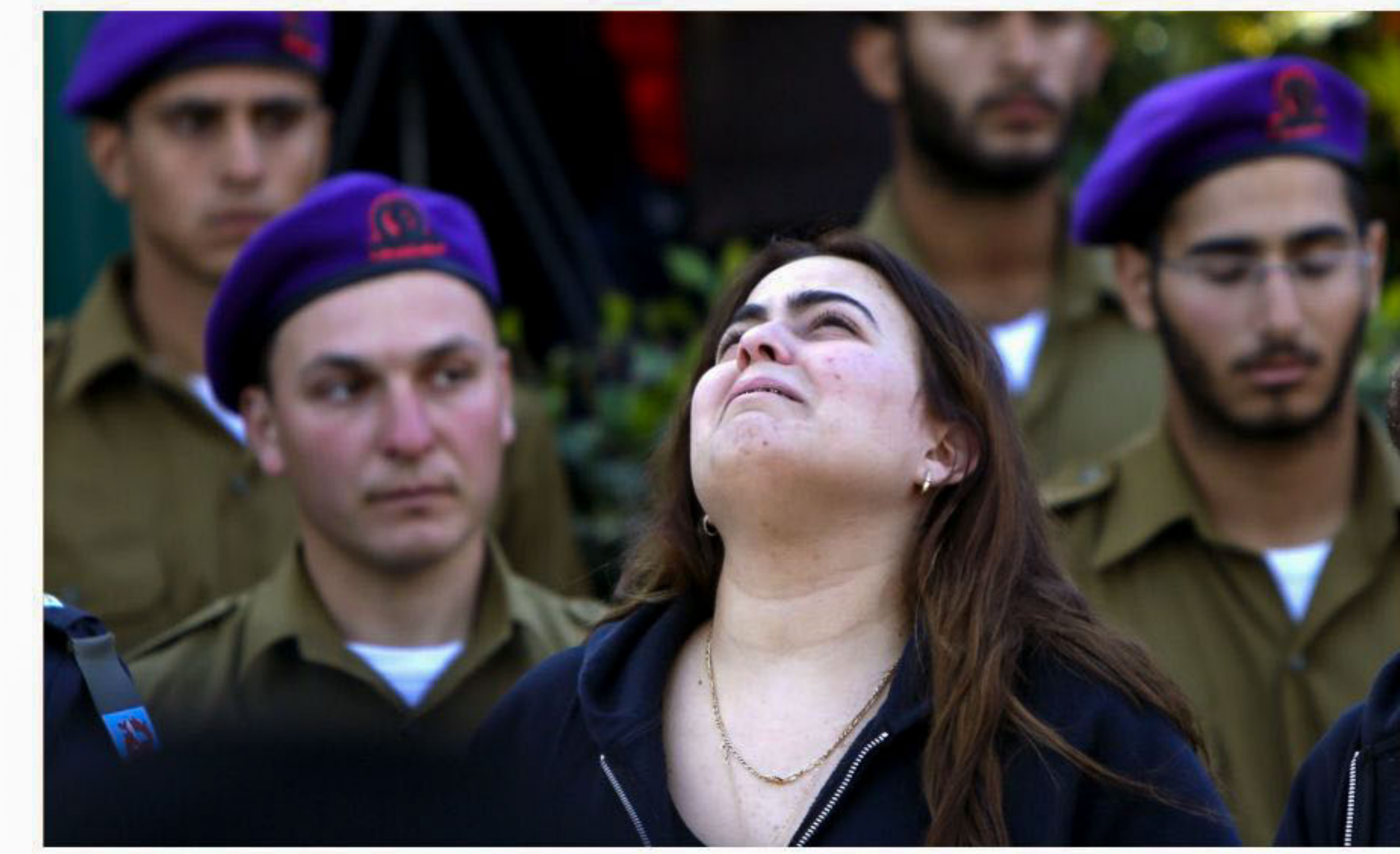
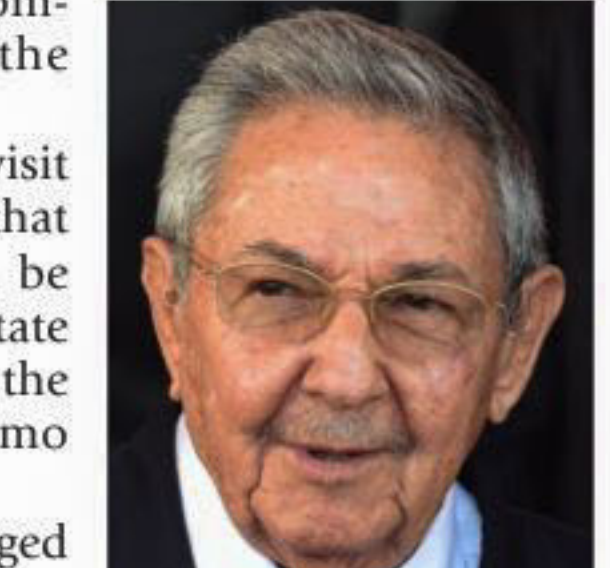
The Cuban leader also urged US President Barack Obama to use executive powers to ease a decades-long embargo against Cuba, saying Washington could extend measures like those announced for telecoms to other areas of the economy.

While Obama can gut much of the embargo, only Congress can lift it completely. Obama has asked Congress to do so, and has started by easing restrictions on telecommunications companies in Cuba, among other measures.

Castro reiterated that he has no plans to budge from Cuba's single party political system, although observers have said that does not rule out the possibility that independent politicians might be given space to run for local elections in the future.

Castro said Obama's decision to hold a debate in Congress about eliminating the embargo was "significant", adding that he was aware that ending it "will be a long and hard road".

The historic high-level talks between United States and Cuba in Havana are expected to lead to re-establishment of diplomatic ties that were severed by Washington in 1961.



An Israeli woman grieves during the funeral of 25-year-old Israeli army Captain Yochai Kalangel at the Mount Herzl military cemetery in Jerusalem, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Hezbollah, Israel play down war fears

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday buried two soldiers killed in a Hezbollah missile strike that triggered Israeli fire on southern Lebanon, raising tensions between the bitter enemies to their highest in years.

But the Israeli-Lebanese border was calm, and Israeli officials played down the threat of a new war with the powerful Iran-backed Shia group's militia.

In an unusual declaration, Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon said Hezbollah had passed on a message through the UN peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon saying it did not want a further escalation.

"We have received a message... that, from their point of view, the incident is over," he told public radio.

Analysts say neither side seems keen for a repeat of the devastating Israel-Hezbollah conflict in 2006 and that any response is likely to be limited.

The two soldiers were killed when Hezbollah fired anti-tank missiles at a convoy in an Israeli-occupied area on the border with Lebanon.

Israeli forces responded to the attack -- which came in retaliation for an Israeli strike on the Golan Heights that killed senior Hezbollah members -- with artillery, tank and air fire on several villages in southern Lebanon.

There were no reports of Lebanese casualties, but a 36-year-old Spanish peacekeeper with UNIFIL was killed in the exchange of fire.

In Israel, farmers were tending apple orchards close to the border fence, an AFP photographer said. Schools had reopened, as had the Mount Hermon ski resort in the Israeli-occupied portion of the Golan Heights.

Israel said it considered Wednesday's attack the "most severe" it had faced since 2006, when the war with Hezbollah killed more than

1,200 people in Lebanon, mostly civilians, and some 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blamed the attack on Iran. "It is Iran that is responsible for yesterday's attack," he said at a memorial ceremony in southern Israel for late prime minister Ariel Sharon.

"This is the same Iran that is now trying to achieve an agreement, via the major powers, that would leave it with the ability to develop nuclear weapons, and we strongly oppose this agreement," he said.

Israel has threatened military action to stop arch-foe Iran obtaining atomic weapons. Tehran insists its programme is only for civilian purposes.

Netanyahu held talks with top security brass late Wednesday, warning afterwards: "Those behind today's attack will pay the full price."

Gas blast at Mexico child hospital kills 7

AFP, Mexico City

A gas explosion ripped through a children's hospital in Mexico City yesterday, killing at least seven people, including four children, and injuring dozens, officials said.

Rescuers toiled through the rubble of the Maternity and Children's Hospital in the Cuajimalpa borough to look for people who were trapped following the blast, said civil protection chief Fausto Lugo.

Adrian Rubalcava, the president of the Cuajimalpa borough, reported that four babies and three adults had died.

Mancera told MVS Radio that the area was evacuated "for safety because a lot of the people are babies in the crib area."

Television images showed people with bloodied faces being carried to ambulances. Around 40 percent of the hospital was destroyed.

The disaster happened when a gas tanker truck blew up outside the building in the morning, officials said. Mancera said the explosion took place after workers were unable to control a hosepipe leak.

The mayor said at least 32 adults and 22 children were injured, though none were in serious condition. Most were hit by shattered glass.

Lugo said 37 people were transferred to other hospitals.

Mexico has been hit by other gas explosion tragedies in recent years.