

In Focus

Israel Accepts Conditional Gaza Truce

The head of the Israeli Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee on Monday linked the possibility of a truce between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip to the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

"There are primary interests which guide Israel, and first among them is that Gilad Shalit must be freed," Tsahi Hanegbi said on a radio interview when asked about a proposed Gaza truce, AFP said.

The Israeli lawmaker also named other conditions that should be met in any truce accord and said talks with the Egyptian mediator would be 'difficult'.

"Secondly, any agreement must stipulate that Hamas cannot continue to re-supply its armaments from Egypt's Sinai peninsula," he said.

"Finally, any accord must state that the activities of all (armed) Palestinian groups must cease ... We have difficult talks with Egypt," he said.

Shalit, 21, was captured in June 2006 on Israeli territory near the border with Gaza by three armed groups, including a branch of Hamas, which controls the territory since ousting the forces of moderate Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas nearly a year ago.

Until now, Israeli leaders have been skeptical about Hamas's intentions, suspecting the Islamists of wanting a time-out in the conflict in order to rearm.

Twelve armed Palestinian groups have signed off on the Egyptian truce proposal, which also has the approval of the two main Palestinian political factions, Hamas and Abbas's Fatah.

Attack Damaged Houses

Israel confirmed on Monday two Palestinian-fired rockets landed in Ashkelon inflicting damage.

An Israeli spokesperson said on a local radio the attack caused damage to several houses in the coastal city. Resi-



Israeli policemen inspect damage to a house following a rocket attack in Ashkelon.

dents were shocked with the impact of the exploding missiles, Kuna reported. Al-Quds Brigades, the armed wing of the Islamic Jihad Movement, claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that it was launched after Israel's continued aggression on the Palestinian people.

Subsequent to the incident, Israeli F-16 fighter jets were seen flying over Gaza, prompting Palestinian radios to call upon residents to take caution.

'Extremely Difficult'

Israeli President Shimon Peres said, in an interview published Monday, that reaching a formal comprehensive peace deal between Israelis and the Palestinians would be "extremely difficult" right now because of the "emotional" nature of unresolved disputes.

"In the political negotiations, the gaps are not very great, but they are highly emotional," Peres told the Washington Post.

"It will be extremely difficult to put them on paper because each party looks to its own audience and will be very careful not to appear as losers."

The Israeli leader argued the unresolved issues were of varying complexity and suggested resolving them one by one rather than as part of an overall, all-encompassing deal.

"If we can agree on borders, let's agree. If we can agree on refugees, let's agree. It will take time," Peres said.

The comments came as Bush heads to the Middle East this week, where his efforts to forge Israeli-Palestinian peace face growing skepticism with less than nine months left in his term.

Suleiman in Israel

Meanwhile, Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman arrived in Israel on Monday to discuss an Egyptian truce proposed for the Gaza Strip.

Suleiman was due first to hold talks with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and then meet Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.

Suleiman will try to rally support among Israeli leaders for the proposed truce, which has already been approved by 12 Palestinian groups, including Hamas, which runs Gaza.

Sudanese Capital Calm

A curfew was partly lifted in Sudan's capital Sunday but residents hunkered inside and security remained tight, a day after the government repulsed an unprecedented Darfur rebel assault on Khartoum.

Sudan accused Chad of backing the assault and severed ties with its neighbor, raising the possibility of more border clashes and a worsening of Darfur's humanitarian crisis, AP reported.

In the capital's twin city of Omdurman, frightened residents emerged slowly to find buildings pockmarked with bullet holes and streets littered with charred cars. Women draped in flowered gowns stepped around huge armored personnel

carriers, inspecting the damage. The city's main market was closed and residents milled around on side streets, staying off main roads lined with checkpoints.

"We were worried at first, that Khartoum may again be unsafe," said Hatem, a 45-year-old Omdurman resident who would not give his last name, fearing government reprisal.

"We are extremely cautious." "Police are searching for rebels on the run and are pestering us for IDs," he said.

A curfew was lifted in Khartoum but not in Omdurman, where police told state media that more than 300 rebels were arrested and many

more had tossed away their camouflage uniforms to blend in with urban civilians.

State television paraded images of captured and bloodied fighters, including the dead body of a man it said was an aide to a top rebel leader. Army generals received congratulations in the streets and women praised them with traditional ululating screams.



No Deal on Pak Judges
Sharif Party Quits



File photo shows Pakistani former Premier Nawaz Sharif (r) and Asif Ali Zardari listening to a question at a joint press conference.

Pakistani leaders failed to reach a deal on restoring judges sacked by President Pervez Musharraf, increasing the likelihood the ruling coalition could shatter after just six weeks in power and plunge the country back into political turmoil.

Negotiators from the two main ruling parties held talks in London throughout the weekend, ahead of a self-imposed Monday deadline to resolve the issue. But officials said Sunday night they were heading back to Pakistan without a deal, AP reported.

Sharif's brother Shahbaz said both sides had made sincere efforts to come to an agreement. He played down the possibility of an all-out opposition stand.

"We will support the government issue to issue—we will not let the government destabilize," he said.

Sharif meanwhile has announced that his party is withdrawing from Pakistan's federal Cabinet but will not join the parliamentary opposition.

Sharif said ministers from his party will meet with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani on Tuesday and hand in their resignations, AP reported.

Sharif announced the move Monday after the failure of weekend talks with the party of Asif Ali Zardari over the reinstatement of judges axed by President Pervez Musharraf.

Satisfactory Conclusion

Husain Haqqani, one of the negotiators for the larger party, that of Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of slain ex-premier Benazir Bhutto, said the two sides are trying to take this matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

Musharraf removed the judges and declared emergency rule in November to halt legal challenges to his presidency.

Anti-Musharraf parties came to power after winning February elections, and promised to restore the judges.

But they have quibbled on the mechanics.

Sharif, who was tossed out by Musharraf in a 1999 coup, has pushed for the president's ouster and demanded outright restoration of the deposed judges.

A return of the judges could increase pressure on Musharraf to step down if the courts decide to revisit his eligibility for office.

But Zardari, who has been less harsh toward Musharraf, has linked the judges' reinstatement to broader judicial reforms. Complex legal and political issues, including the status of the judges Musharraf installed after the purge, have proved stumbling blocks to a deal.

The two parties already missed an April 30 deadline to resolve the matter. Sharif later said the parties would introduce a parliamentary resolution to restore the jurists on May 12.

Commitment to People

Information Minister Sherry Rehman, a key Zardari aide, said Sunday her party would try to work with Sharif's even if the formal relationship breaks down.

"Our commitment is really to the people of Pakistan, not just to each other," Rehman said.

Sharif and Zardari also met separately on Sunday with US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher, who was visiting London. Elizabeth Colton, spokeswoman for the US Embassy in Islamabad, confirmed the meetings.

Of particular concern to negotiators is whether Musharraf and his allies could seek to block the return of Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry as chief justice.

Musharraf has accused Chaudhry of corruption and conspiring against his plan to guide Pakistan back to democracy after eight years of his military rule.

Zardari insists judges sworn into the Supreme Court after the purge be retained so they do not oppose the new government in a legal tussle that would cast the country into more turmoil.

It remained unclear if the rift could block the government or force fresh elections. That would be a serious setback to Pakistan's transition to democracy after eight years of military rule under Musharraf.

The new government came to power just six weeks ago.