

Division for Palestinian Rights  
***Chronological Review of Events Relating to the  
 Question of Palestine***  
 Monthly media monitoring review  
**March 2008**

***Monthly highlights***

- PA President Abbas suspends peace talks with Israel following heavy Palestinian casualties in Gaza. ([2 March](#))
- Security Council convenes emergency meeting on the Gaza Strip. ([2 March](#))
- A Palestinian gunman kills eight and wounds nine inside a Jerusalem Yeshiva. ([6 March](#))
- UN Human Rights Council calls for a stop to Israeli military attacks in the OPT and the firing of rockets. ([6 March](#))
- Prime Minister Olmert approves construction of 1,100 new homes in settlements. ([9 March](#))
- Israeli and Palestinian officials meet with US Envoy William Fraser to review Road Map obligations. ([14 March](#))
- OIC Summit adopts declaration, communiqué and resolutions on Palestine, Al-Quds Al-Sharif and the Middle East peace process. ([14 March](#))
- Israeli and Palestinian negotiators meet to resume talks. ([17 March](#))
- Fatah and Hamas representatives sign Yemeni-sponsored agreement. ([23 March](#))
- UN Human Rights Council adopts resolution demanding a halt to Israeli settlements. ([27 March](#))
- During a visit by US Secretary of State Rice, Israel pledges to remove 50 West Bank roadblocks. ([30 March](#))

**1**

Sixty-three Palestinians, among them many civilians, were killed in IDF operations in northern Gaza City. According to Palestinian sources, five children and three women were among the dead. Gaza health officials said that about 200 Palestinians were wounded, 14 critically. Two Israeli soldiers also were killed and five were wounded during the fighting. (*AP, Haaretz*)

Around 50 rockets were fired at Israeli targets from the Gaza Strip. Six people were wounded in the Israeli town of Ashkelon after a rocket landed next to City Hall and another in the marina area. (*AP*)

The head of the Palestinian negotiating team, Ahmed Qureia, said, "What is happening in Gaza is a massacre of civilians, women and children, a collective killing, genocide." He said he expected the peace talks to be suspended. (*AP*)

The Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Karen AbuZayd said in a statement that she was "horrified at the violence engulfing Gaza, where the death toll of innocent civilians, including children, rises each hour." She also condemned the rocket firing. She appealed to the international community to intervene and to the leaders in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory to "exercise maximum restraint and to respect international humanitarian law so that civilians are not endangered."

(*UNRWA press release*)

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) issued [statement](#) saying that it was "deeply troubled that the current escalation of the conflict in Gaza is hurting a large number of children," adding that "children constitute more than half the population of Gaza and are bearing the brunt of the crisis." (*UNICEF press release*)

**2**

Eleven Palestinians, including a 21-month-old girl, were killed in Israeli raids, and 10 others died of earlier wounds or were found dead, Palestinian medical officials said. Meanwhile, Egypt opened its border crossing with the Gaza Strip to receive scores of wounded Palestinians. Thirty-nine ambulances transferred the wounded to Egyptian hospitals. (*AP*)

A 14-year-old Palestinian boy was fatally shot in the chest during a protest against Israel in the West Bank town of Hebron, Palestinian medical officials said. (*AP*)

At least 25 rockets were fired at southern Israel, the Israeli military said, scoring direct hits on houses in Ashkelon and the town of Sderot. Nine Israelis were slightly wounded, according to Israeli rescue services. (*AP*)

In a pre-dawn raid, Israeli rockets hit the empty offices of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. At least five people were wounded in the strike, according to Palestinian witnesses. Israeli aircraft also struck targets around the refugee camps Shati and Jabalya, where three people were wounded, Palestinian security officials said. (*AP, Haaretz*)

PA President Mahmoud Abbas suspended the peace talks with Israel. Nabil Abu Rudeineh, a spokesman for Mr. Abbas, said that Israel's "unjust war and open-ended massacre [in the Gaza Strip] is obstructing the peace process," making it untenable for Palestinian negotiators to meet with their Israeli counterparts "until the aggression ends." (*AP*)

The European Union issued a [statement](#) criticizing Israel's "disproportionate use of force." Slovenia, which holds the current EU Presidency, urged Israel to "exercise maximum restraint and refrain from all activities that endanger civilians," while also calling for an "immediate end" to Palestinian rocket attacks and any other actions that undermine the peace process. In the statement, the EU Presidency also reject collective punishment of the people of Gaza. (*EU Presidency press release*)

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband issued a statement on the situation in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel. ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk))

The Security Council held an emergency session and issued an agreed summary of discussion condemning the escalation of fighting in southern Israel and Gaza and urging Israelis and Palestinians to immediately cease all acts of violence. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in his statement to the Security Council that he condemned Palestinian rocket attacks and called for the "immediate cessation of such acts of terrorism." While recognizing Israel's right to defend itself, he also condemned the "disproportionate and excessive use of force that has killed and injured so many civilians, including children." The Secretary General was "deeply concerned at the possibility of the violence escalating." He said that he was also "extremely concerned at the impact of these developments on the negotiation process." (*UN press release SG/SM/11443-SC/9267*)

3

Israeli ground troops pulled out of the northern Gaza Strip before daybreak, leaving behind a scene of widespread destruction. As Israel was withdrawing, it carried out a series of air strikes, targeting weapons manufacturing and storage facilities, the Hamas headquarters and a police station.

Five militants were killed, the group said. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that Israel would take further military action against Palestinian militants. Meanwhile, Hamas militants declared "victory" and vowed to continue firing rockets. Only hours after the withdrawal, a rocket hit a residential building in the city of Ashkelon, causing no injuries. Palestinian militants in Gaza also fired at least six Qassam rockets at various locations in the western Negev. (*AP, Xinhua*)

The Palestinian Health Ministry said that 116 Palestinians had been killed in the Israeli Gaza offensive. Militant groups said that about half of them were civilians. Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said that the situation was "unprecedented since the 1967 war of Israeli occupation".

(*AP, Ma'an News Agency*)

Egypt unsealed a border crossing with Gaza for a second day to allow wounded civilians into Egypt for medical care, Egyptian security sources said.

About 50 had crossed so far, and more were expected. (*AP*)

A Palestinian teenager, Mohammed Saleh Shreiteh, was shot dead by an Israeli settler who opened fire on a group of youths throwing stones at cars outside Ramallah, Israeli and Palestinian sources said. (*AFP, Ma'an News Agency*)

Dozens of Palestinians have been injured in towns across the southern West Bank after Israeli troops cracked down on demonstrations against the Israeli military actions in the Gaza Strip. Nine Palestinians were arrested by the IDF in Jenin and Nablus. (*Ma'an News Agency, Wafa News Agency*)

PA President Abbas said that he was ready to "work for the conclusion of a total truce with the Israeli side to spare our people more victims and suffering." He called on Israel to accept this initiative. (*Haaretz, Wafa News Agency*)

The International Committee of the Red Cross sent an aid convoy – the first of several expected this week – from Amman to the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The Red Cross urged Israel to stop "indiscriminate attacks" on Palestinian civilians, saying that hundreds of Palestinians had been left homeless by the air strikes, while hospitals had been struggling to treat the wounded because of shortages in medical supplies and staff.

(*AP*)

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour [expressed alarm](#) about the violence in the Gaza Strip and Israel. While recognizing Israel's right to defend itself, Ms. Arbour condemned the IDF's disproportionate use of force. She called for an impartial investigation into the reported killing of dozens of civilians, including children. Ms. Arbour also strongly condemned the rocket attacks by Palestinian militants against Israeli civilian targets. ([www.unhchr.ch](http://www.unhchr.ch))

UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, John Dugard [said](#) that Palestinian rockets fired into Israel violated the rules of international humanitarian law and terrorized Israelis. Israel's excessive and disproportionate response was likewise unlawful in terms of international humanitarian law, as were collective punishment and the terrorization of an occupied people. He called on the Secretary-General to initiate meaningful talks to end the violence between all parties, including Hamas. ([www.unhchr.ch](http://www.unhchr.ch))

Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, expressed her profound concern about the upsurge in violence in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel. She denounced the use of disproportionate force by the IDF which had resulted in the killing and injuring of many civilians, especially children, and also condemned the Palestinian rocket attacks against Israeli civilians. ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org))

The White House blamed the Palestinian militant group Hamas for causing the fighting between Israelis and Palestinians. Gordon Johndroe, a spokesman for the National Security Council, told reporters, "The Palestinians have a choice to make... It's a choice between terrorism or ... a political solution that leads to a Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security with Israel". A US State Department official said, "We're encouraging Israel to exercise caution to avoid the loss of innocent life." (*AP, BBC*)

EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana urged the Palestinians to resume peace talks with Israel despite the bloodshed in Gaza, as he held talks with Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. "We have a process that cannot be stopped, that must be recuperated," Solana told *CNN*. He said that PA President Abbas "has to be the one that returns to the table of negotiations." (*AFP*)

The human rights organization B'Tselem said in a statement that more than half of the Palestinians killed in the Gaza Strip in IDF operations in recent days had not taken active part in the fighting. This statement came after the IDF Chief of Staff issued a statement saying that 90 per cent of those killed were in fact armed militants. According to data gathered by B'Tselem, 106 Palestinians were killed between 27 February and 3 March, 54 of them civilians and 25 under 18. ([www.btselem.org](http://www.btselem.org))

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan appealed to Israeli and Palestinian leaders to end the violence in the Gaza Strip. Mr. Erdogan told Israeli Prime Minister Olmert that Israeli attacks on Gaza were "unacceptable" and renewed an offer to mediate between the sides, his office said.

(*AP*)

4

The Israeli Air Force killed a Palestinian rocket crewman and wounded one of his comrades after they fired a salvo across the Gaza Strip's frontier, both sides said. Islamic Jihad said that the casualties were its members. Two rockets hit Sderot, damaging a house but causing no casualties,

Israel's *Army Radio* reported. Hamas said that its armed wing was temporarily holding fire. (*Reuters*)

In the West Bank, the IDF arrested 16 Palestinians during overnight raids, Palestinian security sources said. *Israel Radio* confirmed the reports, saying that the 16, who were "wanted" militants, were arrested in Jenin, Nablus, Hebron, Ramallah and Bethlehem. (*Xinhua*)

Yousif Smairi, a senior Islamic Jihad member in central Gaza Strip, was killed in clashes with IDF troops. A month-old baby, Amira Abu-Akar, was also killed during the operation. The army said that it was looking into the report. Palestinian sources said that at least eight Palestinians had been wounded in the clashes. Some 25 IDF armoured vehicles advanced into the Gaza Strip after nightfall and troops clashed with militants. Helicopters circled overhead near Khan Yunis as IDF soldiers surrounded the home of Mr. Smairi. Israeli defense officials said that it was a pinpoint operation targeting Gaza militants. (*Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency, Ynetnews*)

Israeli police said that they had released the settler who was suspected of killing a Palestinian teenager on 3 March near Ramallah. (*AFP*)

Thousands of Israeli police officers had been deployed in the Old City of Jerusalem in order to suppress expected demonstrations against the Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip, *Israel Radio* reported. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israel opened the crossings along the southern border with the Gaza Strip, allowing 80 trucks with aid and medical supplies to enter the territory. (*The Jerusalem Post*)

Egypt allowed convoys carrying humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, five Palestinians wounded earlier succumbed to their wounds in Egyptian hospitals, local sources said. (*Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA)*)

In a meeting in Damascus, Khaled Mashaal, Hamas Political Bureau Chief, rejected a proposal by Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa to unilaterally stop firing home-made projectiles at Israeli towns bordering the Gaza Strip, Arab diplomatic circles said. Mr. Mashaal also insisted that Israel should not have any role, physical or electronic, in operating the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

In a [press conference](#) at the White House with King Abdullah II of Jordan, President Bush assured him that a major focus of his administration was that the "process that we have started in Annapolis, [be] finished prior to my departure from the presidency." He added that he was still as optimistic as he was after Annapolis. King Abdullah said that he looked forward to continuing to work with President Bush to finally set the Middle East in the right direction. ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

"Negotiations are going to have to be able to withstand the efforts of rejectionists to upset them, to create chaos and violence, so that people react by deciding not to negotiate," US Secretary of State Rice said in a joint press conference with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit in Cairo, adding, "The people who are firing rockets do not want peace. They sow instability. That is what Hamas is doing... The rocket attacks against innocent Israelis in their cities need to stop. No Israeli Government can tolerate that," she said. But the Israelis "need to be aware of the effects of [their] operations on innocent people." "Hamas gets armed by the Iranians and if nobody helps to improve the security capabilities of the legitimate Palestinian Authority security forces, that's not a very good situation," she added. "I do think that negotiations ought to resume as soon as possible," Ms. Rice had told reporters on her way to the Middle East. Mr. Aboul Gheit said that Hamas was "part of the Palestinian equation" and would have to be dealt with in future negotiations. "If they would mend their ways, if resorting to violence and to military actions... comes to an end then that would be opening the way for Hamas to join," he added. "Israel is using excessive force against the Palestinians in Gaza; this must stop," he said. (*AP, Haaretz, Xinhua, Ynetnews*)

"I insist on the necessity of installing a comprehensive truce in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank so that we can reach our goal of making 2008 a year of peace," PA President Abbas, said speaking at a news conference after talks with visiting US Secretary of State Rice in Ramallah. "The choking siege around Gaza has also sabotaged the negotiations. Therefore I call on the Israeli Government to cease its aggression in order to provide the environment necessary for the negotiations," he said. He stressed that "the negotiations are necessary and we are committed to them." He stopped short of announcing a resumption of the negotiations, however. For her part, Ms. Rice said: "We need very much for everybody to be focused on peace." Referring to the opponents of peace, she said, "We won't let them win." Ms. Rice, expressing her optimism that a peace accord could still be reached in 2008, also said that Israel should make "a very strong effort to spare innocent life" in the Gaza Strip. (*AP, AFP, Haaretz, Ynetnews*)

PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad would ask visiting US Secretary of State Rice to give guarantees that an Israeli offensive into Gaza would not happen again, said Riyad Malki, PA Information Minister. (*Xinhua*)

"[Secretary of State] Rice is unwelcome, since the US administration was a direct partner with the occupation," Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoom said, calling on PA President Abbas "not to deal with the US pressure and take more firm stances by cutting all forms of negotiations with the occupation." (*Xinhua*)

Israel had informed foreign diplomats that it would reoccupy the Gaza Strip if necessary, though it preferred not to do so, the Foreign Ministry said. (*AP*)

Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak had requested legal advice from Attorney-General Menachem Mazuz on the possibility of evicting Palestinian civilians from rocket-launching areas in the Gaza Strip. (*Haaretz*)

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed Maxwell Gaylard as Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, at the level of Assistant Secretary-General. In this capacity, Mr. Gaylard, an Australian national, would also serve as UN coordinator for humanitarian and development activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. (*UN press release SG/A/1122*)

The European Commission announced that it had included the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on a list of 17 locations that would be given priority in the largest food aid package ever launched by the EU. The Commission, which had earmarked €160 million for food aid, estimated that around 18.7 million people worldwide would benefit directly from this decision by its humanitarian aid department. (<http://ec.europa.eu>, *Ma'an News Agency*)

5

Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip fired two Grad-type rockets at Ashkelon. Also, three Qassam rockets hit two open areas in the western Negev. There were no reports of injuries or damage in any of the attacks. (*Haaretz*)

The corpse of a Palestinian man found buried in the Gaza Strip raised to 129 the death toll of Israel's five-day incursion that ended on 3 March. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

The Israeli Security Cabinet decided on its "policy for action against the firing of projectiles at communities in Israel, including the area adjacent to the Gaza Strip, and against the strengthening of terrorist forces in the Gaza Strip." Its main goals included bringing about the cessation of rocket fire and other terrorist actions from Gaza and reducing the strengthening of Hamas, including in coordination with and by Egypt. Action against Hamas institutions in the Gaza Strip would be approved by the Prime, Defense and Foreign Ministers. ([www.pmo.gov.il](http://www.pmo.gov.il), *Ynetnews*)

Israeli Vice Premier Haim Ramon said the Cabinet decision was insufficient and proposed that Israel declare a unilateral ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

He said, "We should gather all the foreign ambassadors and the press and announce that we are halting our fire. We should also announce that we are resuming fuel and electricity supplies to Gaza, but warn that if even one Qassam is fired we will shoot at the source of the fire, and again begin reducing the supplies. This will give Israel a public relations victory and fully legitimize any (military) action." (*Haaretz*)

Israeli military sources disclosed that Israel's Security Cabinet had approved a series of additional targets for attack, including the chiefs and senior officers of the armed wings of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, their senior political officials in the Gaza Strip, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad institutions, including police stations. Sources revealed that the Cabinet had considered demolishing urban districts in the Gaza Strip which served as launching pads for missiles, after evacuating their inhabitants. No final decision had been reached on this. (*DEBKAFfile*)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said that Israeli forces would not attack the Gaza Strip if Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups stopped their cross-border salvos. He said, "One thing should be clear: If there is no Qassam fire on Israel, there will be no Israeli attack on Gaza. We do not rise in the morning and think about how to attack Gaza." (*Reuters*)

PA President Abbas said that peace talks with Israel would resume. He said, "The peace process is a strategic choice and we have the intention of resuming the peace process." Earlier, he had conditioned talks on a ceasefire between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also said that a US general would hold his first meeting next week with the two sides on the implementation of the Road Map.

Ms. Rice wrapped up a two-day visit to Israel and the West Bank. (*Haaretz, The Guardian, The Jerusalem Post*)

In a meeting of the League of Arab States in Cairo, Arab Foreign Ministers condemned in a statement Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip as "crimes against humanity". They also called on Palestinians to end internal divisions. "For the Arab side to continue to offer the Arab Peace Initiative, it will be linked with Israel's implementation of its basic international commitments," the statement said. Secretary-General Amr Moussa said that "Israeli policy against the Palestinian people is based on genocide and ethnic cleansing." (*Reuters, Ynetnews*)

By a vote of 404 in favour, 1 against and 1 abstention, the US House of Representatives endorsed a resolution condemning the Palestinian rocket attacks on Israel. In the resolution, the House of Representatives expressed support for Israel's sovereign right to defend its territory against rocket attacks and called on President Bush to instruct the US Permanent Representative to the UN to introduce in the Security Council a resolution condemning Palestinian rocket and other attacks. ([www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov), *Ynetnews.com*)

Two French lawyers representing IDF soldier Gilad Shalit arrived in Israel to travel to the Gaza Strip to negotiate his release. Stephane Zerbib and Emmanuel Altit said that they had been lobbying European public figures and politicians to raise the profile of the abducted soldier, who is both a French and an Israeli citizen. The lawyers said that they were waiting for permission from the Israeli authorities to enter the Gaza Strip. They added that they had been in contact with the Egyptian authorities as well as with Israel and Hamas. (*Haaretz*)

The PLO Mission to the United States announced the launching of a new and updated web site [www.plomission.us](http://www.plomission.us). The site features updated news features, recent statements and remarks by Palestinian leaders, in-depth information about the Palestinian Government and a wide variety of links and resources. ([www.plomission.us](http://www.plomission.us))

6

An IDF soldier was killed and another seriously wounded when Palestinian militants blew up an IDF jeep patrolling the Gaza Strip border on the Israeli side. The explosives were apparently activated from the Gaza Strip. Senior IDF officers held an emergency meeting to plan their response to the attack. A spokesman for the Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility and Hamas said that it had also participated in the attack. (*Haaretz*)

Israeli forces seized an Islamic Jihad leader in Jenin. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

A Qassam rocket fired from the Gaza Strip struck a home in the southern Israeli town of Sderot, wounding four people. (*Haaretz*)

A Palestinian from East Jerusalem opened fire inside a Jewish religious school in West Jerusalem, the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, killing eight students and wounding nine others. Three of the wounded were in serious condition. (*AFP, Haaretz*)

One Palestinian militant was killed and another was injured when Israeli warplanes fired a missile northeast of Jabalya in the northern Gaza Strip. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

A Palestinian rocket fired from the Gaza Strip struck a house in Sderot, Israeli police said. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack. Six more Qassams struck open fields near Sderot and a mortar shell hit an agricultural field in Kibbutz Ein Hashlosha. There were no injuries or damage reported in any of the incidents. (*Haaretz*)

Six members of Islamic Jihad were killed in three separate Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip. One was killed in an Israeli strike targeting a rocket launching squad in the northern Gaza Strip. Another militant was killed in an Israeli strike near Khan Yunis in southern Gaza. Also, Israeli tanks opened fire on four militants and killed them near the Kissufim border crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip, after identifying an attempt to plant explosives at the same spot where an explosive device had killed an Israeli soldier earlier in the day. (*Haaretz*)

Palestinian medics said that two more patients had died as a result of the Israeli closure of the Gaza Strip. Ra'fat al-Ghalban, 42, died of renal failure and Mohammed Mteir, 55, died of leukemia. Both had been unable to leave the Gaza Strip for treatment. (*Wafa*)

Egypt had begun building a three-metre high concrete wall along its border with the Gaza Strip, a security official said. "It is a preventive measure.

There is no threat of another border breach at the moment," the official said. (*AFP*)

Israel's Industry, Trade and Labour Minister Eliyahu Yishai said: "In every instance of [Qassam] fire from the Gaza Strip, we must instruct the Palestinian residents in the launching area to evacuate their homes, and bomb the area". (*The Jerusalem Post*)

In Johannesburg, South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) called for an end to Israel's blockade of Gaza, calling it a "flagrant breach of international law." In a statement, the ANC also deplored Israel's "senseless killing" of Palestinian civilians and called for a resumption of Israel-Palestinian peace talks. (*DPA*)

Deputies of Egypt's Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman met with officials from Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Egyptian city of El-Arish, security officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity. An Israeli-Palestinian truce was high on the agenda of the talks, said one security official. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declined to comment on the meetings in El-Arish but, at a news conference in Brussels, expressed "trust" that Egyptian efforts could further the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. "It is extremely important that there be an effort to bring calm there," Ms. Rice said. (*AP*)

Mahmoud al-Zahhar and Jamal Abu Hashim, representatives of Hamas, met with an Egyptian delegation on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing.

They discussed the conditions of a potential ceasefire with Israel and the issue of control over the Rafah crossing. Hamas spokesman Ayman Abu Taha said that the group would not object to having PA presidential guards stationed at the crossing, but wanted to have some influence as to whom the PA chose to deploy. He added that Hamas was not opposed to having European monitors at the crossing, on the condition that they stay either in the Gaza Strip or Egypt. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Head of the Palestinian Negotiating Team Ahmed Qureia said that a mechanism had been agreed upon with US Secretary of State Rice according to which a truce would be put in place through Egyptian mediation. Mr. Qureia said that Egypt's Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman was expected to visit the Occupied Palestinian Territory to discuss a comprehensive truce in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. President Abbas' political adviser Nimr Hammad said that the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations would resume after reaching a truce that would reopen the Gaza Strip crossings. (*Wafa*)



A senior US official in the region, speaking on condition of anonymity after a visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, said that Washington's main objective was to "calm the situation" in the Gaza Strip, adding: "We would like to see a situation where Gaza is not entirely a humanitarian problem and there can be some commercial activity as well, so that the people can support themselves. And that will require a conversation about how to reopen some of these crossing points". (Reuters)

The spokesperson for United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued the following statement:

The Secretary-General condemns in the strongest terms today's savage attack on a Jewish seminary in west Jerusalem, and the deliberate killing and injuring of civilians. He extends his condolences to the families of those killed.

The Secretary-General is deeply concerned at the potential for continued acts of violence and terrorism to undermine the political process, which he believes must be pursued to achieve a secure and lasting peace for Israelis and Palestinians, based on a two-State solution.

(UN press release SG/SM/11455)

The Human Rights Council held a [special debate](#) on the situation in the Gaza Strip at the behest of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and African, Arab and Non-Aligned members. Pakistan submitted a resolution on behalf of the OIC that called for "the immediate cessation of all Israeli military attacks throughout the occupied Palestinian territory and [of] the firing of crude rockets", which was adopted with 33 votes in favour, 1 against and 13 abstentions. Addressing the Council, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour said that the international community should put pressure on both sides and condemn the rocket attacks by Palestinian militants against civilian targets, as well as IDF's disproportionate use of force. She urged all parties to conduct law-based, independent, transparent and accessible investigations into the killings of civilians, to make the findings public and to hold any perpetrators accountable. (AFP, [www.unhchr.ch](http://www.unhchr.ch))

A coalition of eight aid and human rights organizations released a [report](#) saying that the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip was at its worst point since Israel occupied the territory in 1967. The report said that more than 80 per cent of the Gaza Strip residents were dependent on food aid and hospitals suffered power cuts of up to 12 hours a day, while the water and sewage systems were close to collapse. The report, sponsored by Amnesty International, along with CARE International UK, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Médecins du Monde UK, Oxfam, Save the Children UK and Trócaire, called on the British Government to exert greater pressure on Israel and to reverse its policy of refusal to negotiate with Hamas.

Amnesty International UK Director Kate Allen said, "Israel has the right and obligation to protect its citizens, but as the occupying Power in Gaza, it also has a legal duty to ensure that Gazans have access to food, clean water, electricity and medical care," adding that "Punishing the entire Gazan population by denying them these basic human rights is utterly indefensible. The current situation is man-made and must be reversed." Israel's Foreign Ministry denied Israeli culpability in the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, saying human rights groups "should point their criticism towards Hamas... that controls the Gaza Strip, and not against the State of Israel." (Haaretz)

Nita Lowey, Chair of the Committee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programmes of the US House of Representatives, placed a hold on \$150 million in economic assistance to the PA until the US State Department provided further clarifications on how the money would be dispensed and until it certified that a single treasury account for the funds had been created, among other requirements. (The Jerusalem Post)

Allegra Pacheco, Head of Information and Advocacy for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Jerusalem office, told *The Washington Post*: "There has been no significant improvement in movement or access. And in fact, there's been an increase in the number of physical obstacles since Annapolis". OCHA's latest count of barriers in the West Bank is 580, up from 563 recorded in November 2007 and about 50 per cent higher than it was two and a half years ago. (The Washington Post)

7

Two members of the armed wing of Hamas were injured, one seriously, in an Israeli strike east of Gaza City, medical sources and witnesses said.

(AFP)

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades said one of its members had been killed in a clash with Israeli forces in the northern Gaza Strip near the border with Israel. (Reuters)

Israeli forces arrested three Palestinians in Tulkarm. (Wafa)

Hamas claimed responsibility for the shooting attack at a yeshiva in Jerusalem the previous evening. (AFP, AP, Reuters)

The Presidency of the European Union held by Slovenia issued the following statement:

The Presidency of the European Union condemns in the strongest terms the terrorist attack on 6 March on the Jewish seminary in Jerusalem, which claimed so many innocent lives and wounded many. The Presidency offers its deepest sympathies to the bereaved families of victims.

The Presidency decisively denounces terrorism. These vicious acts of horror are totally unacceptable and there can be no justification for them.

This terrorist act must not derail the peace process recently revived in Annapolis and endanger the efforts for achieving lasting peace and security in the region.

([www.eu2008.si](http://www.eu2008.si))

Haaretz reported that Israeli defense officials were promoting the idea of a multinational force in the Gaza Strip but were undecided on whether they preferred such a unit to be deployed relatively soon or only after a major ground operation by Israeli forces. A major offensive could include reoccupying part of northern Gaza and occupying or imposing a closure on the area around Rafah in southern Gaza. The reoccupation would be expected to last about a month, after which the army would round up fugitives and seize weapons and materiel over six or seven months. The deployment of a multinational force in Gaza was part of the defense establishment's "exit plan" after a big operation, and the idea had been raised in unofficial talks with leaders of Arab and Muslim countries, the newspaper said. (Haaretz)

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak ordered the complete closure of the West Bank, sealing all entrances to Jerusalem and Israel. The Israeli police announced a state of alert in all Israeli cities, especially Jerusalem, where Muslims were prevented from praying at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. (Ma'an News Agency)

The Elders, an organization launched by former South African President Nelson Mandela, said it was sending a three-person team composed of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, former US President Jimmy Carter and former Irish President Mary Robinson to Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia next month to "help people understand the urgency of peace." (AP)

8

Egyptian authorities discovered six underground tunnels near the town of Rafah, close to the border with the Gaza Strip, a security official told AFP.

The tunnels were all empty, the official said. (AFP)

PA President Abbas called for continued talks with Israel and said that a just peace was his people's goal. Mr. Abbas renewed calls to resolve the conflict in the Middle East by creating a Palestinian State and resolving all final-status issues. (AFP, Reuters, Xinhua)

Hamas and Islamic Jihad representatives would visit Egypt next week to continue talks on a ceasefire deal with Israel under Egyptian mediation, an Islamic Jihad leader said. (Xinhua)

An Israeli soldier died of injuries he sustained on 6 March in an attack at an army post near the "Kissufim" border crossing. (AFP)

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the National Resistance Brigades claimed responsibility for firing two mortar shells at the Israeli military base of Megen, east of Al-Maghazi refugee camp, in the central Gaza Strip. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli Housing Minister Ze'ev Boim said that Prime Minister Olmert had approved the construction of new homes in East Jerusalem. Mr. Boim said that the new building would include 350 apartments in "Givat Ze'ev," a West Bank settlement just outside of Jerusalem, and 750 homes in "Pisgat Ze'ev," a settlement in East Jerusalem. (AP, Haaretz)

Some 50 Palestinians who were wounded in recent Israeli strikes against the Gaza Strip crossed into Egypt for medical treatment. The group of wounded Palestinians entered Egypt through the Rafah crossing, the Egyptian official MENA news agency reported. (Xinhua)

Senior Israeli Defense Ministry official Amos Gilad was in Cairo for talks with Egyptian officials, presidential spokesman Suleiman Awad said. Mr. Gilad met with Egypt's Chief of Intelligence, Lt. Gen. Omar Suleiman to discuss the ongoing crisis in the Gaza Strip and the meetings between Egyptian officials and members of Hamas. (AFP)

Jerusalem authorities said that they planned to build 400 new homes in East Jerusalem, in the settlement of "Neve Yaakov," on the northern end of the city. The construction plan had been completed and was awaiting the final approval of a regional planning committee before construction could begin, said Ariela Smilinski Deri, a spokeswoman for the Jerusalem municipality. (AP)

## 10

Israeli forces seized 29 Palestinians during raids on several West Bank districts, Israeli sources said. The sources reported that Israeli troops apprehended 13 Palestinian activists in Nablus, in the northern West Bank, and 16 others in different West Bank districts. Eight people were detained in Bethlehem, including 55-year-old journalist Hasan Fararja, local sources told the Ma'an News Agency. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert has instructed the army to halt air strikes and raids into the Gaza Strip in response to a serious drop in rocket fire from the territory. Israeli defense officials and Hamas said there was no formal truce in place. But officials in Mr. Olmert's office said that the prime minister had ordered the army to scale back its operations to allow Egypt to proceed with mediation talks. (AP)

The spokesperson of the UN Secretary-General issued the following statement on the Middle East:

The Secretary-General expresses his concern over the Government of Israel's approval of a resumption of construction of 750 units in the West Bank settlement of "Givat Ze'ev." Any settlement expansion is contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map and to international law. The Secretary-General calls on the Government of Israel to halt settlement expansion and reiterates that the fulfilment of the Road Map obligations by both parties is an important measure underpinning the political process between them.

(UN press release SG/SM/11458)

European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner suggested that the members of the Quartet meet soon to assess chances for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Ms. Ferrero-Waldner said that a Quartet meeting should assess "how the negotiations are going and what we can do to enhance conditions" for a peace agreement by year's end. (AP)

Issues on the Middle East and the western Balkans were at the centre of EU General Affairs and External Relations discussions. The EU expressed concern about growing tensions, Hamas rocket attacks, Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip and the Israeli decision to restart construction in settlements. (www.eu2008.si)

White House spokesperson Dana Perino said, "Settlement issues and violence issues are part of the Road Map obligations that neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis are moving fast enough on," referring to US Vice-President Dick Cheney's planned trip to Israel, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the West Bank. Mr. Cheney's agenda includes talks with PA President Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. Mr. Cheney was expected to take the Israeli Government to task for settlement construction. President Bush said the goals of the visit were "to reassure people that the United States is committed to a vision of peace in the Middle East, that we expect relevant parties to obligate themselves – to uphold their obligations on the Road Map." In addition to Mr. Cheney, presumptive Republican presidential nominee John McCain was also scheduled to arrive in Israel. (AFP, Haaretz, The Jerusalem Post)

## 11

A rocket fired from the Gaza Strip struck southern Ashkelon, ending a four-day lull in violence. No injuries or damage from the rocket strike was reported. (Haaretz)

Israeli Government spokesperson Mark Regev said, "The Hamas movement clearly controls the Gaza Strip and is therefore directly responsible for any launching of rockets from Gaza into Israel. We will hold them accountable." (AFP)

Al-Hayat and Al-Quds Al-Arabi reported that senior Defense Ministry official Amos Gilad had relayed to Egypt Israel's request for a month-long unofficial ceasefire [trial period] with Hamas in the Gaza Strip before reaching a final decision on the matter. He conveyed the request during his meeting with Egypt's head of intelligence, Lt.-Gen. Omar Suleiman. PA President Abbas had remained in close contact with Egypt to make certain that an official truce would include the West Bank. The unofficial ceasefire would require ending rocket attacks by the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and refraining from digging arms-smuggling tunnels. (Ynetnews)

Head Palestinian Negotiator Ahmed Qureia said Israeli Prime Minister Olmert's decision to allow the resumption of housing construction in the settlement of "Givat Ze'ev" endangered the struggling peace process, and he promised to raise the issue with a key US mediator the following week.

"The pursuit of settlement is a slap to the peace process and to efforts to make it credible," he told reporters after a meeting with Quartet Representative Tony Blair in Ramallah. (AFP, Haaretz, Xinhua)

Arab League Secretary-General Amre Moussa said, "We are a hair's breadth or less from announcing the failure of the peace process, given its evolution." He said settlement activity sent a "strong message" that "Israel does not want peace because it is building settlements to try and change the demographic and geographic situation on the ground." (AFP)

Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement: "It is obvious that the impulse the international conference in Annapolis gave to the peace process needs support. In this context, many of our partners reaffirm their interest in holding an international meeting on the Middle East in Moscow." Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's trip to Syria, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory from 19 to 21 March would be devoted to a discussion of these and other questions, including the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the ending of violence and a resumption of the negotiation process on all tracks, including Syrian. (www.mid.ru)

## 12

Israeli troops on an arrest raid killed an Islamic Jihad militant in a gun battle in the village of Saida in the Tulkarm area, according to Palestinians and the Israeli military. The Israelis then demolished half of his house and arrested his father for harbouring a wanted militant, a relative said. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said that Israel's raids in the West Bank showed "it was not interested in calm". The Islamic Jihad threatened to retaliate "deep inside the Zionist entity." (AP, Haaretz)

Twelve Palestinians were arrested in West Bank operations by the IDF. (The Jerusalem Post)

In Bethlehem, Israeli special forces shot and killed four Palestinians, including a leader of Islamic Jihad, witnesses said. Islamic Jihad leader Mohammad Shahada, as well as Issa Marzouq, Imad Al-Kamel, and Ahmad Bilboul were killed in the attack. The undercover Israeli forces, who entered the city in vehicles with Palestinian license plates, shot the four Palestinians, who had been wanted by Israel for eight years. (*Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency*)

An underground tunnel collapsed near Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip, killing one smuggler and injuring another, a security official said. (*Xinhua*)

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said that a truce with Israel should include both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. "The Palestinians seek a comprehensive, mutual and parallel ceasefire that could lead to an end of the imposed siege and opening the closed crossings," he said, adding that "the decision to agree on a ceasefire is in the hands of Israel." (*Xinhua*)

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak told *Israel Public Radio*: "We are continuing our fight against the rocket fire from the Gaza Strip and we will bring it to an end, but that will not be done in a day... There is no truce." He also said during a visit to troops stationed near the Gaza Strip border: "We are expecting other operations in the near future and the pursuit of our fight against Gaza risks provoking an escalation on other fronts." "Continued combat in Gaza will bring an escalation beyond what we have seen so far, before we reach a period of calm," he said. (*AFP, The Jerusalem Post*)

"I think that we will have to engage with Hamas at some point," said French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner during an open forum organized by the International Diplomatic Academy and the *International Herald Tribune*. "It is not the responsibility of France to talk to Hamas, even if indeed we can maintain contacts. It is matter that first and foremost concerns the Palestinians, and secondly the Israelis," said Mr. Kouchner. (*Xinhua*)

"Washington is the only side which can oblige Israel [to stop building settlements]," Saeb Erakat, Head of the Negotiations Affairs Department of the PLO, said. Mr. Erakat added that he hoped the US stance towards Israeli plans of building settlements would be clarified at a three-way meeting with US Envoy Gen. William Fraser on 13 March. Other members of the Quartet – the EU, Russia and the UN, "should immediately intervene to force Israel to withdraw the recent decisions in order to make peace in 2008," Mr. Erakat said. (*Xinhua*)

Mahmoud Al-Khizindar, Deputy Director of the Federation of Petrol Stations in the Gaza Strip told *Ma'an News Agency* that Israel was allowing in only 70,000 litres of petrol per week, or about 5 per cent of the amount needed. Hospitals and ambulance services got first priority, so the general public has access to even less. He added that the Gaza Strip received 800,000 litres of diesel fuel per week. The Gaza Strip's power plant was receiving 2.2 million litres of industrial fuel per week, short of the 3.5 million it needed to operate at full capacity. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Talking to students at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said, "It's not the Israeli Government policy to expand settlements these days." She characterized the expansion of West Bank settlements as "unhelpful" and said that Israel had decided to stop settlement activities. Ms. Livni characterized the planned construction as private building in an existing settlement and as "not dramatic." She added that Israel would "need to dismantle more settlements" under a peace deal for a two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that US President George W. Bush had said he hoped to see before he left office in early 2009. She also seemed to rule out any plan by Israel to recapture Gaza, despite the latest border tensions, saying: "Israel left the Gaza Strip not in order to come back." (*Haaretz*)

13

Israeli forces wounded a Palestinian in the head with a rubber-coated bullet and destroyed a number of houses in Qalqilya. (*Wafa*)

Israeli forces arrested 13 Palestinians in Nablus. (*MEMC, Wafa*)

Israeli warplanes hit the Gaza Strip after Palestinian militants fired rockets at Israel. (*AFP*)

Islamic Jihad launched at least 15 rockets at Israel, ending a week-long Egyptian-brokered moratorium. The group called the rocket strikes an "initial" response to the deadly IDF raid in Bethlehem. The group's spokesman in Gaza told *Iranian Television* Israel had "wiped out any chance to talk about calm at this time" by killing four of its militants the day before. Nearly 20 rockets and two mortars had been fired since the raid the previous day, Israeli security forces said. Five more rockets hit the western Negev in the afternoon. Two Qassams struck a warehouse and soccer stadium in Sderot. No injuries were reported in either incident (*Haaretz*)

The PA published a statement denouncing the Israeli operations in Bethlehem, and said that it held Israel responsible for a possible deterioration in the situation. (*Haaretz*)

Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak said that Israel would continue to pursue militants involved in terror attacks on Israeli citizens. Speaking at a memorial service for dead IDF soldiers, Mr. Barak said that Israel had proven its commitment to this goal the day before, when troops had killed four wanted militants from the Islamic Jihad organization in the West Bank city of Bethlehem. (*Haaretz*)

The Israeli Prime Minister's Office said that Israel held Hamas accountable for every rocket fired by the various militant groups in the Gaza Strip. "When another group publicly takes responsibility, as happened earlier today, such a group could not be shooting rockets without the acquiescence and collaboration of Hamas. We will not allow Hamas to sub-contract out terrorism," said Mark Regev, a spokesman for Prime Minister Olmert. (*Haaretz*)

Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade, the new Chairman of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), said at the two-day OIC Summit in Daka that he would make solving the Israeli-Palestinian crisis a priority for the Organization. "The just and legitimate cause of Palestine remains at the heart of our concerns," Mr. Wade said. He called Israel "an occupying Power" and urged its Government to "immediately stop its disproportionate use of force." He added: "I should like to tell our brothers and sisters of Palestine that your unity is the first priority of success .... Please unite."

(*AFP*)

At the OIC Summit, PA President Abbas said: "Our people in the city [Jerusalem] are facing an ethnic cleansing campaign through a set of Israeli decisions such as imposing heavy taxes, banning construction and closing Palestinian institutions, in addition to separating the city from the West Bank by the racist separation wall," Mr. Abbas said, adding that what was taking place on the ground today was in total violation of the peace process.

Mark Regev, a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, condemned Mr. Abbas' comments as inflammatory. (*Haaretz*)

At the OIC Summit, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned Israel's attacks on Palestinian civilians. Mr. Ban said that Israel had employed an "inappropriate and disproportionate use of force" in its renewed attacks on the Palestinian territories and called for an immediate ceasefire by both sides. Highlighting the deaths of women and children in the Israeli attacks he said, "I condemn these acts and call on Israel to cease them". (*AFP*)

14

Three Qassam rockets were fired from the northern Gaza Strip towards Israel, two of which landed in open areas near the southern town of Sderot.

The other hit a regional council compound. There were no reports of injuries or damage. The National Resistance Brigades, the armed wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, claimed responsibility for launching the rockets. (*Ynetnews*)

Israel and the Palestinians resumed high-level talks after a two-week hiatus, meeting with US Lt.-Gen. William Fraser, who was appointed in January to oversee compliance with the Road Map. The meeting was the first at the senior level since PA President Abbas suspended talks on 2 March to protest Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip. "We examined areas where the parties are not meeting their commitments and the reasons why, and explored ways to accelerate the process and make the parties' implementation of their Road Map obligations more effective... Our goal remains the fulfilment of the parties' Road Map obligations," the US Embassy said in a statement issued after the closed-door meeting at a Jerusalem hotel.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak did not attend but sent an aide to the talks with PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and Mr. Fraser. (AFP)

The eleventh Session of the Islamic Summit Conference, held in Dakar, 13-14 March, on adopted a declaration which proclaimed "our common position on the overall settlement of the Palestinian question in accordance with OIC and UN resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Road Map of the Quartet within the spirit of the OIC's constant commitment to the Middle East peace process." It also adopted a [final communiqué](#), as well as [resolutions](#) on the cause of Palestine, Al-Quds Al-Sharif, and the current situation in the peace process. ([www.oic-oci.org](http://www.oic-oci.org))

The Presidency of the European Union issued a [declaration](#) concerning the Middle East peace process. ([www.consilium.europa.eu](http://www.consilium.europa.eu))

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters while en route to Latin America: "There is a lot of room for improvement on both sides concerning Road Map obligations. Frankly, not nearly enough has happened to demonstrate that the Israelis and the Palestinians fully understand... that without following Road Map obligations and without improvement on the ground, it's very hard to sustain this process. And so I'll see what [US Envoy] General Fraser says." PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad made it clear during a three-way meeting with Gen. Fraser and Israeli Defense Ministry Official Amos Gilad that "a freeze on settlement activity is crucial to preserving the possibility of a Palestinian State," a statement quoted him as saying. "By freeze, I mean not one more brick." Mr. Fayyad said that Gen. Fraser showed "seriousness and commitment". An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that Defense Minister Ehud Barak's absence from the meeting with Gen. Fraser reflected his scepticism about the peace negotiations. "He didn't feel like going to a meeting and getting scolded," he said. (Haaretz, [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov), Wafa)

15

Islamic Jihad said that its three members killed in an IDF air strike in Gaza on 12 March had been on their way to fire Qassam rockets into Israel in retaliation for last week's IDF operation in Bethlehem, in which four of its members had been killed. In an earlier air strike, three Gazans, whom the IDF said were also planning to fire Qassams, were wounded. Palestinian medical officials confirmed that the wounded were members of Islamic Jihad. (The Jerusalem Post)

Islamic Jihad said that it had a new rocket with a range of 22 km, *Israel Radio* reported. (AP)

Hamas said that its fighters would keep targeting Israeli aircraft with heavy machine guns, after hitting an Israeli helicopter over the Gaza Strip for the first time. The Israeli military did not comment on the incident, but security officials said that the helicopter was slightly damaged and returned to Israel safely. (AP)

Ayman Taha, a spokesman for Hamas, said that the group would agree to the deployment of PA personnel at the Rafah crossing, on condition that their names were handed over to Hamas in advance. Mr. Taha also said that Hamas was no longer opposed to the presence of international monitors at the terminal. However, he noted, Hamas would insist that the monitors reside in Egypt. "We don't want them to sleep in Israel, as was the case in the past, so that the Israelis won't control their movements," Mr. Taha said. A senior PA official in Ramallah said in response that the PA was opposed to the presence of Hamas members at the border crossing. "The border crossing must be opened only under the terms of the 2005 agreement," he said. Senior Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Zahhar said that although Hamas had agreed to the return of the European monitors, "we won't allow them to control the border crossing at Rafah... The border crossing must be under the control of Egyptians and Palestinians," he said. "We reject any intervention by a third party." (The Jerusalem Post)

Israel should decide within a week or two to dismantle the settlement outposts and must do more to enable the Palestinians to build two industrial parks in the West Bank, Israel's Vice Premier Haim Ramon told *Israel Radio*. Mr. Ramon said that an Israeli go-ahead for the two industrial zones, near Hebron and Jenin, "is vital for a change of atmosphere in the West Bank." Earlier in the week, Quartet Representative Tony Blair said that progress on the industrial parks would have to be made soon. "Otherwise, it is difficult for people to see that the political process has real credibility," he said. (AP)

China had reached an agreement with the PA to supply crime-fighting equipment to the West Bank security forces, a Chinese official said. "What we signed today will give the Palestinians some emergency assistance for the security branches," Yang Wei Guo, China's Envoy to the PA, told AFP. The agreement will see China supply vehicles, communications equipment and crime laboratories via the Jordanian border. China also signed an agreement with the PA granting \$500,000 in emergency humanitarian aid for the Gaza Strip. (AFP, Xinhua)

16

Izz ad-Din Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, said that any military escalation by Israel will cause the situation to deteriorate. "If the occupation did not understand our previous messages, this doesn't mean that our options are over," said Mr. Abu Obaida, a spokesman for the Brigades. He was commenting on the killing of Palestinian militants in Israeli air strikes in the Gaza Strip. "Al-Qassam Brigades doesn't beg for quietness and it will be impossible if it comes under the swords of the aggression," he added. (Xinhua)

*Israel Radio* reported that three rockets hit southern Israel, adding that the rockets exploded, causing no damages or casualties. (Xinhua)

Hundreds of Israeli protesters tried to break through police barricades outside the East Jerusalem village of Jabel Mukaber and destroy the house of the Palestinian gunman who had killed eight students at a Jerusalem yeshiva. Some of the demonstrators managed to evade the barricades and threw rocks at houses. Police made 13 arrests. One protester was carrying a long knife, said a police spokesman. (AP)

Three Palestinians were wounded in the Gaza Strip when Israeli navy boats opened fire on a car, Palestinian medics said. (AFP)

A delegation sent by PA President Abbas to Yemen would not hold talks with Hamas, which would also send representatives to Sana'a, a delegation member said. Saleh Ra'fat, a member of the Executive Committee of the PLO, told *Voice of Palestine* radio that "the delegation will only meet with the Yemeni leadership and is not allowed to hold any talks with Hamas." The visit aims at welcoming a Yemeni initiative to settle the internal Palestinian differences, Mr. Ra'fat said, adding "Any dialogue with Hamas is subject to its acceptance of the Yemeni initiative and retreating back from its coup." Hamas spokesman in Gaza Ayman Taha told reporters that Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashaal would travel to Yemen to discuss the Yemeni initiative. Mr. Taha said that "it is a positive step and serves the efforts to hold a national dialogue if the two delegations meet separately with Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh." (AP)

Palestinians and internationals, Muslims and Christians, gathered at the Lazarus Gate checkpoint in Jerusalem to commemorate Palm Sunday and highlight the movement restrictions by the Israeli Government. They proceeded along the path that Jesus travelled from Bethany to Jerusalem, carrying olive branches, palm leaves and signs reading, "Stop the Wall" and "Where could Jesus go?" (Independent Catholic News)

17

Israeli forces arrested a Palestinian in East Jerusalem and another in Tulkarm. (Ma'an News Agency)

Prime Minister Olmert said that Israel would keep expanding the "Har Homa" settlement. "Everyone knows that there is no chance that the State of Israel will give up a neighbourhood like ... Har Homa. It is an inseparable part of Jerusalem," Mr. Olmert said in a joint news conference with visiting German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Ms. Merkel said she had raised the issue of settlement construction with Mr. Olmert and noted that halting settlement activity was part of the Road Map. "We agree that all sides should try as much as possible to keep their obligations, and I've



pointed out that both sides have things left to do," she said. (AP)

Prime Minister Olmert said: "There will be a meeting today in order to continue the negotiations with the Palestinian side led by Abu Ala [Ahmed Qureia]". "I am going to meet with the Chief Palestinian Negotiator," Ms. Livni confirmed. (AP, Haaretz)

US Ambassador to Israel Richard H. Jones told *The Jerusalem Post* that the US was "concerned about where things are built in Jerusalem".

Commenting on the Israeli settlements, Mr. Jones said that "Israel has commitments and it is important that they begin honouring those commitments and that is part of a dialogue, part of the Annapolis process, and part of the implementation of the Road Map." (The Jerusalem Post)

The IDF Civil Administration hosted, at its Headquarters in Beit El, a one-day symposium with its Palestinian counterparts, bringing together officials that coordinate civilian and security issues between Israel and the PA. The meeting was chaired by Administration Chief Brig.-Gen. Yoav Mordechai as well as Hassin a-Sheikh, the PA official responsible for coordination with Israel. Israeli and Palestinian officials have been meeting regularly since July 2006, but the gathering was the first time since 1998 that all of the officials who were involved in the talks, both Israeli and Palestinian, have sat down together. The sides discussed the current political situation in the West Bank as well as ways to increase foreign investments in the Palestinian territories and improve coordination on health-related issues. They also discussed plans to establish two new industrial zones in the West Bank slated to create 20,000 new jobs for Palestinians. (The Jerusalem Post)

18

Two Qassam rockets struck western Negev; no injuries or damage were reported. (Haaretz)

In Jerusalem, Ahrar Al-Jalil, a militant group, claimed responsibility for stabbing an Orthodox rabbi, Yehizkel Greenwood, near the Damascus Gate of the City. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli forces raided Nablus and ransacked several homes before arresting five Palestinians. Eyewitnesses said Israeli forces raided the town of Kafr Qallil south of Nablus as well as the Balata and Beit Ilma refugee camps and several neighbourhoods in the old city of Nablus. (Ma'an News Agency)

The IDF demolished part of a house and blew up a car belonging to a Palestinian in the West Bank town of Az-Zababda, near the city of Jenin. Palestinian security sources said that more than 15 Israeli military vehicles raided the city, surrounding the town's mosque and Catholic church before demolishing sections of a house owned by Nabil Az-Zuzu, a Palestinian civilian. The IDF also ransacked the home of Sheikh Fathi Qutait, the imam of the mosque. Clashes erupted between Israeli troops and young Palestinians, who pelted the soldiers with stones, while the soldiers fired back using live ammunition, rubber-coated bullets and tear gas canisters. No injuries or arrests were reported. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak ordered the West Bank and the Gaza Strip sealed off during the impending Jewish Purim holiday, his office said.

The closure would be in effect until 23 March, the office said. (AFP)

Egypt's Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman postponed for the third time his visit to Israel, [which had been] scheduled for later this week. A senior Egyptian official told London-based newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* that the decision was prompted by Israel's "lack of commitment to the lull in Gaza."

According to the paper, Mr. Suleiman said that Israel was violating verbal commitments given during a visit by senior Defense Ministry representative Amos Gilad to Cairo last week. He referred to the killing of an Islamic Jihad cell by the IDF in Bethlehem last week despite the relative calm between Israel and the Palestinians and Egypt's intensive efforts to persuade Hamas to cease rocket attacks. The official estimated that Mr. Suleiman's visit would be postponed for three weeks, and urged Israel to exercise restraint in order to facilitate Egyptian efforts to mediate a comprehensive truce between the two sides. (Ynetnew)

Hamas voiced willingness to talk to Fatah as part of the reconciliation initiative, but said that Fatah must drop its demand to give up control of the Gaza Strip. "We will not accept it as condition to restore dialogue," Hamas spokesman Ayman Taha said. (Haaretz, Xinhua)

German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited the Knesset, where she vowed Germany would do its best to bring back abducted IDF soldiers. Mrs. Merkel also addressed the Knesset plenary, taking a firm stance against the firing of Qassam rocket at Israeli communities bordering the Gaza Strip.

(Haaretz)

US Republican presidential candidate John McCain, on a congressional tour to Israel, said that he supported Israel's claim to Jerusalem as its capital, and Israel's military response in Gaza to rocket attacks. He also said that he would largely follow the path of President George W. Bush. In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, he said that Hamas and Hezbollah threatened the interests of the US and the West in general. He spent the day in a series of closed meetings with Israeli leaders and spoke on the telephone with PA President Abbas. (AFP, AP)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert told visiting Sen. John McCain that Israel could halt rocket fire in Gaza without a major ground offensive. "It is possible to stop the Qassams without conquering Gaza ... We will stop the Qassam fire by the creation of deterrence in the south, which will make Gaza militants think twice before they shoot again," the Prime Minister said. (Haaretz)

In Gaza, Palestinians inaugurated a symbolic graveyard for factories forced to close by the Israeli blockade that they said was killing jobs.

(Reuters)

19

Israeli bulldozers demolished several buildings in the Hebron area and in villages south of Hebron. Members of the organization Christian Peacemaker Teams said that Israeli forces had invaded the villages of Umm Navel, Khirbat Bdairat, and Umm Al Kher Al-Faqir and destroyed two structures. One demolished house was allegedly too close to the settlement of "Mazadot Yehuda", and the other was demolished to make way for an Israeli road between two settlements south of Hebron. Hebron Governorate cartographer Abdul-Hadi Hantash told *Ma'an News Agency* that if construction on the road was implemented, dozens of Palestinian homes would be demolished. (Ma'an News Agency, IMEMC, Wafa News Agency)

Palestinians fired two Qassam rockets and several mortar shells from Gaza at southern Israel. The Al-Nasser Salah ad-Din Brigades, the military wing of the Popular Resistance Committees, claimed responsibility. (Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli border police operating along the wall surrounding Jerusalem had been given a new directive enabling them to open fire directly on Palestinians who try to demonstrate near the barrier. The new rule forbids shooting at Israeli or foreign citizens among demonstrators. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israel declared a heightened security alert and barred Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip from entering the country. The IDF said that the closure would remain in effect through Sunday night, preventing thousands of Palestinians from entering Israel. (AP)

Leaders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Islamic Jihad, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, in three separate statements, called on Hamas and Fatah to resume dialogue immediately, and welcomed the reconciliation initiative of Yemen. "The Popular Front calls for a comprehensive dialogue not only between Fatah and Hamas, but among all other factions. The dialogue should be based on the national accord and the previous understandings," said the Popular Front. Khaled al-Batsh, a senior Islamic Jihad leader said, "We won't be able to confront the Zionist enemy while we are not united, therefore it is time for launching a comprehensive national dialogue that [will] get us out of the current crisis." (Xinhua)

Hamas official Moussa Abu Marzouq said that Hamas would share control of the Gaza Strip if Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was reappointed prime minister by PA President Abbas. (AFP)

PA Chief Negotiator Saeb Erekat warned that the PA might collapse if a peace agreement with Israel was not reached in 2008. (Ma'an News Agency, Reuters)

PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said that the US was transferring \$150 million in aid to the PA. The payment is part of a total of \$550 million the US had pledged to pay to the PA over three years, and part of a total of \$7.7 billion in pledges from international donors made at the donors' conference in December in Paris. (*AFP, AP, The Jerusalem Post, Ynetnews*)

20

A Palestinian civilian on a donkey cart was shot dead by Israeli troops near the border fence between the Gaza Strip and Israel, medics and witnesses said. An army spokesman said that the report was being investigated. (*AP*)

Two Palestinian militants were killed and a third seriously wounded in an explosion at a Hamas training base in the central Gaza Strip. Hamas initially blamed Israel for the blast, but later said that it had been caused by mishandled explosives. (*AFP, AP*)

Israeli forces apprehended four Islamic Jihad activists in Qabata near Jenin after ransacking several homes. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

A 14-year-old Israeli boy sustained light to moderate wounds when the vehicle he was travelling in came under attack in the Hebron area. The IDF said that it had found traces of an explosive device that had apparently been detonated near the car. A cell of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack. (*Ynetnews*)

A tunnel under the Egypt-Gaza border collapsed, killing one man, doctors said. (*Haaretz*)

A Qassam rocket fired by militants in the Gaza Strip struck a western Negev kibbutz. No injuries were reported, but the rocket damaged a building. (*Haaretz*)

Israeli forces arrested at least 12 Palestinians after raiding several cities in the West Bank. Raids were reported from the towns of Surif, Halhul, Al-Khadiir, Qabatiya, Nablus, Hebron, Beit Sahur and Ramallah. (*IDF, Ma'an News Agency, Wafa News Agency*)

Aides to PA President Abbas said that the talks on reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah had failed and Fatah negotiators were returning to the West Bank without a deal. "The matter has ended in failure because Hamas refused to accept the Yemeni initiative as is," said PLO Executive Committee Secretary-General, Yasser Abed Rabbo. "Our delegation will come back home tomorrow, but it is ready to head back to Yemen once Hamas accepts the initiative as is." Delegations from the two factions were to meet separately with Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Sana'a. (*Reuters, Haaretz*)

In Damascus, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia was preparing to host a Middle East peace conference this year that would be a follow-up to the Annapolis meeting that resumed peace talks between Israel and the PA, led by President Abbas. Mr. Lavrov met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who underlined support to all efforts aimed at unifying Palestinian ranks, helping them restore their rights and lifting the Israeli siege against them. Mr. Lavrov also said that he was making contacts with Hamas to restore Arab unity and move it toward a common Arab platform, noting that he had met with the Hamas leadership a day earlier. (*Reuters, Xinhua, www.itar-tass.com*)

After a meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in Tel Aviv, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told reporters, "We are negotiating with the different parties to organize a meeting in Moscow. ... The main objective is to help the ongoing talks to create a positive atmosphere that will allow the peace process to reach a conclusion." In Washington, D.C., a spokesman for US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice confirmed that she had discussed Russia's plans for the meeting during her visit to Moscow earlier in the week. (*AFP*)

21

Israeli forces arrested eight Palestinians in several cities in the West Bank. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Palestinian groups launched three Qassam rockets from the northern Gaza Strip towards Israel. One of the rockets reportedly landed on the Palestinian side of the border between Gaza and Israel. No injuries were reported and no damage was caused. (*Ynetnews*)

At a news conference with PA President Abbas in Ramallah, visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, "We are worried by the Israeli settlement activity and urge Israel to end it." "The blockade imposed against Gaza is unacceptable and it must be ended so the Palestinian people can live normally," Mr. Lavrov said. Concerning a proposed follow-up to the Annapolis Conference in Moscow, he said a date would be "fixed in the near future." (*AFP*)

Israeli officials said that Russia had agreed to Israeli conditions regarding the delivery of armoured vehicles to PA President Abbas' security forces.

Israel had agreed last November to allow the Palestinians to receive up to 50 lightly armoured vehicles, but a dispute had emerged over a Palestinian demand that guns be mounted on them. (*Reuters*)

The Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* said, "Egypt has decided to implement a project aiming to increase its provision of electricity to the Gaza Strip from 17 to 150 megawatts, in order to give relief to the Palestinians." It did not say when the project would start. (*AFP*)

22

Israeli soldiers shot and injured a Palestinian teenager during an incursion into the West Bank town of Azzun, east of Qalqilya. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Two Qassam rockets hit Israel's western Negev region. There were no injuries or damage, *Israel Radio* reported. (*Haaretz*)

US Vice President Dick Cheney said in his [remarks](#) during a press availability with Israeli Prime Minister Olmert at his residence in Jerusalem: "America's commitment to Israel's security is enduring and unshakeable, as is our commitment to Israel's right to defend itself always against terrorism, rocket attacks and other threats from forces dedicated to Israel's destruction. The United States will never pressure Israel to take steps that threaten its security." Mr. Cheney also said, "Reaching the necessary agreement will require tough decisions and painful concessions by both sides, but America is committed to moving the process forward -- and to that end, I will meet with President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad. They, too, can be certain of America's goodwill in this process." (*AFP, www.whitehouse.gov*)

23

A 23-year-old Islamic Jihad member, Nidal Shaqura, died of wounds he had sustained in an Israeli air strike in the northern Gaza Strip in the previous week. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israeli settlers attacked a group of Palestinian shepherds in Nablus and abducted two of them, a 17 and a 16-year-old. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

During a raid in Beita, south of Nablus, five teenagers were seized by Israeli troops. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

After talks in Sana'a, Fatah and Hamas signed a Yemeni-sponsored deal promising to revive direct talks after months of hostilities, but differences remained over the future of the Gaza Strip and West Bank. The office of PA President Abbas said that Hamas must accept to end its control of the Gaza Strip before any dialogue could take place. "We, the representatives of Fatah and Hamas, agree to the Yemeni initiative as a framework to resume dialogue between the two movements to return the Palestinian situation to what it was before the Gaza incidents," the Sana'a Declaration, signed by Hamas negotiator Moussa Abu Marzouk and Fatah official Azzam al-Ahmed, said. The declaration also affirmed the "unity of the Palestinian people, territory and authority." An apparent dispute broke out hours after the signing, with Mr. Abbas' office saying in a statement: "Resumption of dialogue ... must take place to implement the Yemeni proposal and not to deal with it as a framework for dialogue, because this will not lead to any result. We want the implementation of the proposal. We do not want talks over its articles." Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said, "Fatah's comment reflects the Presidency's lack of regard towards dialogue and it gives an impression that its signature is no more than an act of gratitude to the Yemenis." (*Reuters*)

In his remarks after meeting with PA President Abbas in Ramallah, US Vice President Dick Cheney said, "George W. Bush is the first President of the United States to endorse the establishment of an independent Palestinian State. Our administration is strongly committed to that objective, and we look forward to the day that an independent, viable, democratic, and peaceful Palestinian State comes into being. Achieving that vision will require tremendous effort at the negotiating table, and painful concessions on both sides. It will also require a determination to defeat those who are committed to violence and who refuse to accept the basic right of the other side to exist. A difficult but immutable truth must continue to be told: terror and rockets do not merely kill innocent civilians, they also kill legitimate hopes and aspirations of the Palestinian people." (*Reuters, www.state.gov*)

24

A 55-year-old Palestinian, Yusef Abu Daher, was shot dead by Israeli soldiers near the Al-Qarara village in the Gaza Strip, medics and witnesses said. The soldiers opened fire from a military position near the Kissufim crossing between Gaza and Israel, according to witnesses. The Israeli army had no immediate comment on the report. (*AFP*)

Israeli forces seized five Palestinians in Tammun and Tubas, north of Nablus, witnesses said. In Ramallah, Israeli forces seized an aide to PA President Abbas, who was in charge of Jerusalem affairs. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israeli troops killed a 70-year-old Palestinian farmer in the southeast Gaza Strip, Palestinian security sources said. The sources said that the farmer was killed by Israeli fire while working in his field in the town of Khan Younis, near the security fence that separates the Gaza Strip from Israel.

Witnesses added that four Israeli tanks and two bulldozers were operating in the area and opened fire from time to time towards the Palestinian side.

(*Xinhua*)

Three Palestinians were seized during an IDF raid in the Balata refugee camp, near the city of Nablus. Israeli forces also seized three people from Bethlehem and the neighbouring town of Doha. An Islamic Jihad activist was arrested in the town of Qabatiya south of Jenin. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

The Fatah movement announced its rejection of the Yemeni plan on dialogue between Fatah and Hamas signed the previous day. Top Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Qureia said that there had been a "misunderstanding" involved in the signing. Nimr Hammad, political adviser to PA President Abbas, said that the conclusion of the agreement had been a personal initiative by Azzam Al-Ahmad, who had signed the joint declaration with a senior Hamas leader in Yemen. PA Chief Negotiator Saeb Erekat suggested that it was unlikely that another round of Fatah-Hamas talks would be held. Israeli officials said that any power-sharing arrangement between Fatah and Hamas would mean an end to peace talks between the Palestinians and Israel. (*AP, BBC*)

Israel would not remove its checkpoints and roadblocks in the West Bank, but it would look at ways to make travel easier for the Palestinians living there, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said. Visiting a crossing between the southern West Bank and Israel, Mr. Barak said that the checkpoints blocked militants and were vital to Israel's security. The Government would "look into" certain changes in a limited test area, he said, but offered no details. (*AP*)

European Parliament Vice President Luisa Morgantini visited An-Najah National University in Nablus. She called on Israel to lift its blockade of the Gaza Strip in order to fulfil its obligations under international law. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

The European Commission (ECO) was to grant €300 million (\$462 million) in fulfilment of its pledge at the Paris donors' conference. Most of the money, €229 million, would be used to support the Palestinian Authority's Reform and Development Plan in the areas of governance, social development, economic and private sector development, and public infrastructure. €71 million would be used to support UNRWA, including the EC's regular contribution to the general budget as well as support to UNRWA's Special Hardship Cases scheme for the most vulnerable refugees.

(*European Commission press release*)

25

The military wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, claimed responsibility for firing six homemade rockets at Sderot. Separately, Hamas' military wing, the Izz ad-Din Al-Qassam Brigades, said that its fighters had launched four mortar shells at the Al-Muntar (Karni) crossing in the southern Gaza Strip. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said at an army base in the West Bank that he would soon allow 600 Palestinian police trained in Jordan to be deployed in Jenin, in a gesture aimed at helping the Palestinian Government restore "law and order". Mr. Barak said that he would discuss the issue at a meeting with PA Prime Minister Fayyad. Meanwhile, Palestinian officials said that Jenin did not require additional forces. They added that Israel was still not doing enough to bolster PA President Abbas, such as removing roadblocks, dismantling unauthorized settlement outposts or releasing prisoners. (*AP, Reuters*)

PA President Abbas announced in a meeting with senior leaders of Fatah that he would adopt the Yemeni-brokered agreement to resume talks with Hamas. Present at the meeting was Fatah's speaker in the Palestinian Legislative Council, Assam Al-Ahmad, who represented Fatah at earlier talks in Sana'a. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon made a statement at the meeting of the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. He expressed deep concern over the prospect of renewed Israeli-Palestinian violence, and said that negotiations were the only way to Middle East peace. Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe briefed the Security Council. (*UN press releases SG/SM/11478-SC/9284 and SC/9283*)

Quartet Representative Tony Blair [said](#) that the international community must rethink its strategy toward the Gaza Strip to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in the area. In an appearance before a European Parliament panel, Mr. Blair said, "We need a strategy which isolates the extremists and helps the people. At the moment, if we are not careful, we will get the opposite .... That is not intelligent." He said that the Middle East was "approaching crunch time," adding that there must be visible results by May if there was to be an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal by year's end, as planned. (*AP, European Parliament press release*)

A new poll showed that 53 per cent of Israelis believed the peace talks now under way should be stopped. Only 39 per cent said that they supported the talks. Among Palestinians, opposition was even higher: 75 per cent, with support at 21 per cent. The poll also showed that 84 per cent of Palestinians supported the 6 March shooting attack by a Palestinian gunman in Jerusalem. On both sides, more than two-thirds believed the chances that a Palestinian State would be established in the next five years were slim. (*AP*)

26

An Israeli man was lightly wounded when Palestinian militants opened fire towards the fields of Kibbutz Ein Hashlosaha near the Gaza Strip border.

Meanwhile, eight rockets were fired into Israel. One of the rockets hit a backyard in a kibbutz in the western Negev, causing some damage to surrounding buildings. (*Haaretz, The Jerusalem Post*)

Israeli forces demolished three houses in the southern Gaza Strip, witnesses said. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israeli officials said Defense Minister Ehud Barak had agreed to transfer police cars, rubber-coated bullets and night-vision equipment to PA security forces, but remained opposed to removing army checkpoints that hampered Palestinian travel in the West Bank, according to Israeli officials. Mr.

Barak also planned to grant thousands of permits for Palestinian labourers to work in Israel. He planned to offer the gestures at a scheduled meeting with PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad later in the day. *(AP, Haaretz)*

Israeli and Palestinian officials said that Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak had promised PA Prime Minister Fayyad new measures aimed at improving conditions in the West Bank during their meeting in Tel Aviv. Israel's Defense Ministry said Mr. Barak had promised Mr. Fayyad to "move ahead with moves to make life easier for the Palestinian population" as long as they did not threaten Israel's security. *(AP)*

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni defended the IDF operations against Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip as necessary for the advancement of the peace negotiations. She said, "I expect the Palestinian partner to continue to negotiate even as we operate in Gaza. The fact that we are conducting negotiations with the Palestinian Authority will not change the situation in Gaza, which must be handled as terrorists are handled." She warned of the adverse impact a possible Hamas-Fatah rapprochement would have on future Israel-PA relations. *(Haaretz, The Jerusalem Post)*

PA President Abbas ruled out talks with Hamas unless the group first ceded control of the Gaza Strip. Nabil Amr, media adviser to Mr. Abbas, said, "We are ready to open a new chapter, but the Palestinian condition remains unchanged, and that is a complete and total reversal of the coup. This is the final position of the Palestinian National Authority, of the Palestine Liberation Organization and of Fatah." *(Reuters)*

Arab League Secretary-General Amre Moussa said that the Arab Summit in Damascus "will adopt the Yemeni initiative [on Hamas-Fatah reconciliation] and will include a clause about it in the final statement of the Summit." *(Xinhua)*

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert told foreign press: "I think that the understandings about the basic parameters that will define accurately the outline of a two-State solution... can be reached within the current presidency." He added: "There will be additional [settlement] building as part of reality of life, and this fact was well explained to everyone involved." *(AFP)*

The Human Rights Council of the United Nations [appointed](http://www.unhchr.ch) Richard Falk of the United States as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. *(www.unhchr.ch)*

27

Israeli forces raided the village of Jbara, south of Tulkarm, imposing a curfew and apprehending three Palestinians. *(Ma'an News Agency)*

President Bush invited PA President Abbas to the White House for talks in the beginning of May, according to US National Security Council's spokesman Gordon Johndroe. "Details are still being worked out," said Mr. Johndroe, who added that the talks would be part of a continuing effort "to work with the Palestinians and the Israelis as well as other countries in the region in realizing a Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel." *(AP)*

PA President Abbas conferred with Jordan's King Abdullah II on the upcoming Arab Summit conference in Damascus. "There is no room for changing or amending the Arab [Peace] Initiative," he told reporters after the meeting. "Our attitude has always been that this plan should remain as it is and that we should defend it and fight for it... and the other side should accept it," he said. *(DPA)*

A spokesman for Israel's Public Security Ministry said that Israel is set to inaugurate a new police headquarters for the West Bank in the "E1 corridor" between East Jerusalem and "Ma'aleh Adumim" settlement. "The building, which can house hundreds of police, will be inaugurated on Monday," he said. *(AFP)*

Hamas and Islamic Jihad rejected an Egyptian-brokered truce with Israel in the Gaza Strip after fresh talks in Egypt, saying it must include all Palestinian territories: the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The talks were held on the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing and attended by Hamas official Jamal Abu Hashem and Khaled al-Batsh of Islamic Jihad. Gen. Mohamed Ibrahim, a senior aide to Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman, represented Egypt. *(Reuters, AFP)*

The Human Rights Council passed a resolution demanding that Israel halt its settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and the Syrian Golan Heights. The Council expressed its grave concern at, inter alia, the Israeli plan to expand the Israeli settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim, thereby further disconnecting occupied East Jerusalem from the West Bank; the implications for the final status negotiations of the announcement by Israel that it will retain the major settlement blocks in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; and the expansion of Israeli settlements and the construction of new ones on occupied territory. The Council urged Israel to reverse the settlement policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and to stop immediately the expansion of the existing settlements. *(OHCHR)*

Japan's Special Envoy for the Middle East peace process, Tatsuo Arima, would visit Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the United States next week to exchange views with counterparts and seek progress in the peace negotiations, the Foreign Ministry said. *(Kyodo)*

Israel is to start supplying cattle to Gaza for fear that unvaccinated livestock might otherwise be smuggled in from neighbouring Egypt, further spreading disease to Israel, Agriculture and Rural development Minister Shalom Simhon told *Army Radio*. "As a test we will send in 400 head of cattle to ensure the supply of meat in the Gaza Strip. If this experiment works out well, we will repeat it every Friday," he added. *(AFP)*

The Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem had written to Israel's Attorney General and the IDF Military Advocate General requesting a criminal investigation into the deaths of four "wanted" Palestinian militants in Bethlehem on 12 March, saying that the deaths during the IDF raid appeared to have been extrajudicial executions. *(Haaretz)*

28

A militant of the Izz ad-Din Al-Qassam Brigades was killed and two others were injured during clashes with Israeli special forces near the Kissufim military base, east of the town of Al-Qarrara in the southern Gaza Strip. Several Israeli armoured vehicles and tanks had crossed into the Gaza Strip, where they engaged in a gun battle with militants, Palestinian medics said. *(AFP, Ma'an News Agency)*

A Qassam rocket fired by Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip exploded in a western Negev community near a children's house and a nursery school. Another rocket struck an open field. In addition, militants fired six mortar shells at southern Israel, which exploded near the border fence in the central Gaza Strip. There were no injuries in the incidents. Meanwhile, Islamic Jihad's military wing, the Saraya Al-Quds Brigades, claimed responsibility for launching three projectiles at the Israeli town of Sderot. *(Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency)*

IDF soldiers shot dead a Palestinian in the northern part of the Gaza Strip after he hurled a grenade close to the border fence with Israel. Palestinian medics were allowed to retrieve his body the next day. *(Haaretz)*

Thousands of Palestinians participated in rallies in the Gaza Strip, where militants urged Arab leaders gathered in Damascus to support a bid to bridge the rift between Hamas and Fatah. Hamas leader Khalil al-Haya at one rally called on the Arab leaders to drop their proposal for a comprehensive peace deal with Israel and support the battle against Israel instead. *(AFP)*

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice plans to hold two trilateral meetings during her visit to the region next week. One American-Israeli-Palestinian conclave will deal with the final-status negotiations, while the other will address the situation on the ground in the West Bank and what both sides are doing, or not doing, to fulfil their obligations under the Road Map.

Ms. Rice will hold meetings in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Amman. *(Haaretz)*

29

The Al-Nasser Salah ad-Din Brigades, the armed wing of the Popular Resistance Committees, claimed responsibility for launching three home-made projectiles at the Israeli town of Sderot. *(Ma'an News Agency)*

The Izz ad-Din Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, claimed responsibility for bombing a group of Israeli special forces in Beit Hanoun, at the northern end of the Gaza Strip. *(Ma'an News Agency)*



Palestinians fired a Qassam rocket, hitting the western Negev, causing no damage or injuries. (Haaretz)

The IDF killed two Palestinians who tried to plant a bomb on the Gaza Strip's northern border fence, Palestinian hospital officials and a militant faction said. They identified the men killed near the town of Beit Hanoun as members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Earlier in the day, four Palestinians were wounded in an Israeli Air Force strike in the northern Gaza Strip. (Haaretz)

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said during a flight en route to Israel to begin a Middle East mission that she was looking for "real, concrete progress" on several issues, including improving the movement and access of people and goods in the West Bank. "The improvement of life on the ground is the piece that I think really has to be pushed forward pretty hard," Ms. Rice said. (AP)

In Damascus, PA President Abbas called on Arab leaders at the opening of the League of Arab States Summit to send peacekeeping troops to the Palestinian territories, asking them to think seriously of Arab and international protection for the Palestinian people. He said, "The coming couple of months are decisive. If we don't reach a solution by the end of this year, it means the whole region will be on the verge of a new era of tension and loss of confidence in peace". He said that it had become clear that Israel was imposing on the ground the political solution that it wanted. Mr. Abbas said that negotiations could not continue with Israeli bulldozers swallowing Palestinian land and building settlements and with daily Israeli military operations. "The parameters and plans of the solution that Israel is drawing on the ground would not leave more than a group of isolated enclaves of land torn apart by settlements and the wall of racial separation," Mr. Abbas continued, adding "Jerusalem ... is facing the most vicious settlement campaign which is aimed at its Arab character through confiscation of lands, building settlements and destroying houses of [Arab] residents with the aim of isolating Jerusalem from the rest of the Palestinian lands," (Haaretz)

At the League of Arab States summit, Arab leaders discussed the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said in his opening speech that peace was the only way for Israel to gain security in the region. He also questioned how long Arab nations could keep offering Israel a land-for-peace proposal, saying they might have to seek alternatives if Israel continued to refuse to accept it. "The question is: do we leave the peace process and initiatives hostage to the whims of successive Israeli Governments, or do we search for choices and substitutes that can achieve a just and comprehensive peace?" Mr. Al-Assad said. Amre Moussa, the League's Secretary-General, called for a meeting later in the year to evaluate negotiations with Israel. Libya's President Muammar Gaddafi called for a one-State solution to the conflict, *Israel Radio* reported, saying Israelis and Palestinians should live together in a single, democratic State. (Haaretz)

In an interview with *Ma'an News Agency* in Damascus, Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashaal spoke about truce talks with Israel and negotiations for the release of captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. "We will not beg Israel for a truce. They have to accept [a truce] and be committed in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," he said. Mr. Mashaal said that Israel had refused to release Palestinian prisoners who had served lengthy sentences. Consequently, negotiations for Mr. Shalit's release had been nearly frozen. Mr. Mashaal said the US had recently been sending unofficial emissaries to meet with the leadership of Hamas, but that Hamas had refused to meet with them. He said that Hamas also rejected informal contacts from Israel. (Ma'an News Agency)

30

The Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, the military wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, claimed responsibility for firing two home-made projectiles at the Israeli towns of Sderot and Zekeim. (Ma'an News Agency)

Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashaal told *Sky News* that the captured IDF soldier, Gilad Shalit, was still alive. He also made an unconditional offer to PA President Abbas to travel to Gaza for talks on their divisions. (AFP, Haaretz)

In Jenin hundreds of young Palestinian men gathered in the *muqataa* to sign up for the Palestinian police. (Haaretz)

In Jerusalem, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice began a three-day visit to the region. She met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in Jerusalem. Speaking to reporters, she said that the US would be following up on Israel's activities in the West Bank to verify whether it was implementing its promises to ease access and movement for the Palestinian population. Ms. Rice said, "Gen. William Fraser will be following up on the specifics and will be making certain that in fact there are 50 [roadblocks] and that they are being removed, that in fact they have some impact on the access and movement." She then held a trilateral meeting with PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, after which she issued a press statement. During the trilateral meeting, Israel presented a list of measures that it intended to take to ease West Bank restrictions, including the removal of a permanent checkpoint east of Ramallah and some 50 dirt roadblocks that have prevented passage in the areas of Jenin, Tukarm, Qalqilya, and Ramallah. Later, Ms. Rice flew to Jordan where she met Jordan's King Abdullah II, who called for greater US efforts in the peace process and criticized Israeli "unilateralism, in particular its practices in Jerusalem and (West Bank) settlement expansion." (Haaretz, [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov))

In a press availability published by the US State Department, US Secretary of State Rice said after a meeting with Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, "I really do think that what we need to do is to have meaningful progress toward a better life for the Palestinian people, for economic viability for Palestinians, even as we move toward the establishment of a State. And that's why, as the Foreign Minister said, we've tried to do this in a simultaneous fashion. And there's a shared responsibility here for an atmosphere and a reality that can lead to the establishment of a Palestinian State based on security for Israelis and Palestinians alike, and economic viability for Palestinians...." ([www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov))

In a statement, Israeli Defense Minister Barak's office said that Israel would scrap 50 "dirt mounds," which restrict Palestinian travel between major West Bank cities. But citing security concerns, Israel had balked at Palestinian demands to dismantle major checkpoints. Mr. Samir Abdallah, PA Planning Minister, said that Israel's pledge to remove the dirt mounds did not go far enough, saying major checkpoints which had been choking the West Bank economy must be taken down as well. "These are small steps," Mr. Abdallah said. (Haaretz)

Majdi El-Khalidi, a diplomatic advisor to PA President Abbas, said that Arab leaders at the League of Arab States summit in Damascus had accepted and approved the Yemeni initiative for reconciliation between the Hamas and Fatah movements. He also said that the Arab leaders had approved three Palestinian-related decisions and agreed to extend the monthly \$55 million of Arab financial aid to the Palestinian Authority for another year, noting that they had only paid 40 per cent of what they had pledged in the previous summits. The League also voted to renew its peace offer to Israel and to continue to back the Arab Peace Initiative. (DPA, Xinhua)

31

In an interview with the German daily *Die Welt*, US President George W. Bush said: "I hope that President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert can sign an agreement before the end of my presidency [in January 2009] that defines a clearly-outlined Palestinian State," adding, "This could then immediately take shape when the conditions of the Road Map are fulfilled." He said, "The first step must be the clear definition of the Palestinian State. I hope it's possible. And I have an optimistic feeling that it will happen." (Haaretz)

Construction was continuing in 101 settlements in the West Bank, Peace Now said in a report released during a visit by US Secretary of State Rice. ([www.peacenow.org.il](http://www.peacenow.org.il))

At a news conference with PA President Abbas in Jordan, US Secretary of State Rice said that Israeli-Palestinian peace talks were on the right track



and that she believed a deal would still be possible by year's end. The comments were made as PA Foreign Minister Riad Malki said Israel had removed checkpoints in Jericho as part of commitments made to Ms. Rice. She said, "I have to say I find very impressive the work that is being done and the seriousness of the process and I think it's all moving in the right direction." Commenting on US hopes for an agreement before US President Bush leaves office in January, she said: "I fully believe that it is a goal that we can reach." She also called for a halt to Israeli settlement building. Mr. Abbas also expressed confidence despite differences with Israel over what the outcome of the negotiations should be. He added, "I am confident, God willing, [that] we will reach a comprehensive peace in 2008. We, the Israelis, the Americans and all the concerned parties in the region, are working to achieve this". Earlier, Ms. Rice met in Jerusalem with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and former PA Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia, both of whom were heading the recently revived final status peace talks. She also met with Israel's Prime Minister Olmert and was to travel to Amman to meet for a second time with PA President Abbas. *(Haaretz)*

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