

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

**Monthly highlights**

- A suicide bombing hits the southern Israeli town of Dimona. ([4 February](#))
- Group of retired Israeli generals proposes alternatives to the policy of roadblocks in the West Bank. ([13 February](#))
- Israel names contractors to build 307 new homes in the East Jerusalem settlement of "Har Homa". ([15 February](#))
- PA Prime Minister Fayyad rules out a peace accord with Israel this year. ([19 February](#))
- Two-day United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People opens in Amman. ([19 February](#))
- Israeli and Palestinian negotiating teams begin to discuss non-core issues. ([24 February](#))
- UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs brief Security Council. ([26 February](#))
- UN Secretary-General, Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and European Union Presidency issue statements on latest escalation of violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and southern Israel. ([27](#), [28](#), and [29 February](#))

**1**

Egypt arrested 12 Hamas militants with weapons and explosives in the Sinai Peninsula near its border with the Gaza Strip, security officials said. (*Deutsche Press-Agentur (DPA)*)

Israeli forces arrested three Palestinians in Bethlehem and Nablus, Palestinian Authority (PA) security sources said. (*Wafa*)

Armed Palestinians detonated two explosives near the Israeli settlement of "Efrata", south of Bethlehem. No injuries were reported. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

The IDF bombarded an agricultural area in the east of the Gaza Strip and caused light damage to nearby houses. (*Wafa*)

Omar Al-Choul, an adviser to PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad who had been arrested by Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip, was freed after being held for more than a month, Hamas and Mr. Fayyad's office said. (*Haaretz, Reuters*)

Hundreds of Hamas supporters protested on the Gaza Strip-Egypt border to demand that it remain open. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak pledged the entry of food supplies into the Gaza Strip from Egypt, saying that Egypt would not allow the Palestinian people to go hungry, but at the same time, Egyptian sovereignty must be preserved. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said that Hamas would not allow a border closure, adding that "Palestinians have many options". *Israel Radio* announced that the Israeli authorities would open the Al-Muntar (Kam) crossing for two days to allow supplies of food, animal fodder and medicines sent by international relief organizations into the Gaza Strip. (*AP, DPA, Ma'an News Agency*)

Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Zahhar said, after talks between a Hamas delegation and Egyptian Government officials in Cairo, that the group would not object to the PA Presidential Guard controlling the Rafah crossing on condition that Israel had no say over procedures there. He also said that Hamas was prepared to consider the deployment of EU monitors if they were not subordinate to Israeli instructions. (*The Jerusalem Post*)

"If Israel withdraws from the territories, acknowledges Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital, and recognizes our people's right of return, we will agree to a ceasefire of at least 10 years," Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashaal said in an interview with the Italian magazine *Panorama*. Mr. Mashaal also said that IDF soldier Gilad Shalit was "alive and well". (*Haaretz, Ynetnews*)

Some 200,000 children in the Gaza Strip would start the second half of their school year without textbooks because Israeli authorities had delayed authorizing imports of printing paper, Christopher Gunness, spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), told *AFP*.

"It will take 45 days and four printing presses working full-time to get those books ready," Mr. Gunness said. (*AFP*)

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was attempting to mediate among Israel, Jordan and the Waqf over the Israeli construction at the Mughrabi Gate in East Jerusalem, Director-General of UNESCO Koïchiro Matsuura told *Haaretz*. Mr. Matsuura would travel to the area next week. (*Haaretz*)

**2**

Egypt arrested two Palestinian militants with weapons and explosives in the Sinai near its breached border with the Gaza Strip, security officials said. The men were arrested in al-Sheikh Zowaid area, some 10 km away from the crossing point of Rafah, security sources said. (*DPA*)

Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Zahhar said that Hamas would work with Egypt to gradually seal the border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. "We will work towards sealing the border between us and Egypt... this has to be done gradually," Mr. Al-Zahhar told reporters as he crossed back into the Gaza Strip after two days of talks with officials in Cairo. (*AFP*)

Former PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh said that the Gaza Strip must forge stronger economic ties with Egypt as a way of disconnecting from Israel. (*AP*)

Quartet Representative Tony Blair said in an interview with *The Times* he believed that a peace agreement in the Middle East was possible by the end of the year.

The most important thing, according to Mr. Blair, was to answer the question of whether the Middle East was to become a moderate and modern region or one dominated by "a particular and exclusive and wrong-headed view of Islam and a major threat." (*DPA*)

**3**

Egypt's President Mubarak said that Cairo had proposed that Hamas and Fatah jointly operate the border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, according to presidential spokesman Suleiman Awad, on the same day that the border was closed by mutual agreement between Egypt and Hamas. Speaking after a meeting between President Mubarak and EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, Mr. Awad said that Egypt would not allow the border to reopen.

"Egypt is a respectable country; you can't break open its borders and throw stones at its soldiers," Mr. Awad said. What Egypt would prefer, he said, was for the Rafah crossing to reopen under the same arrangements that had been in place before, namely, under Palestinian control alongside EU monitors. Mr. Solana said that the EU monitors would return if all parties concerned agreed, and added that the EU was working to achieve such an agreement. Mr. Awad also stressed that Hamas needed to reach an agreement on this issue with the Palestinian Authority. (*Haaretz*)

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had decided to relax the criteria for releasing Palestinian prisoners as part of a swap for abducted soldier Gilad Shalit, but insisted that Hamas would also have to be more flexible for a deal to be finalized. Mr. Olmert told a meeting of senior ministers and defense officials held to resolve a dispute within the defense establishment over the deal that he was "determined" to conclude the deal, but added, "I do not intend to agree to whatever price Hamas asks."

(*Haaretz*)

At the weekly Israeli Cabinet meeting, the heads of the Shin Bet security services warned that because of the anarchy on the Gaza-Egypt frontier, Palestinian militants might enter Israel through the Sinai desert to attack a civilian Israeli target, a Government official said. (*Haaretz*)

Israel's Prime Minister Olmert appointed Brig.-Gen. Udi Dekel to head the negotiations division with the Palestinians, Mr. Olmert's office said. The appointment was announced after a meeting with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who headed the Israeli negotiating team, and Defense Minister Ehud Barak. The office said that Mr. Dekel would coordinate the work related to the peace process with the Palestinians for the negotiating team, formulate Israel's positions and take part in the talks on a permanent settlement. (*AFP*)

The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) said that it would step up action at the United Nations to stop Israel's blockade of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. "The Islamic bloc at the United Nations will be charged with taking the appropriate measures to ensure the United Nations plays its role," according to a statement made after OIC officials met in Jeddah. (*Reuters*)

Israelis and Palestinians involved in interfaith contacts recently drafted an initiative for a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas. The document, whose implementation included the release of abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, was submitted to the Israeli cabinet and to the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip. Rabbi Menachem Froman of the West Bank settlement of "Tekoa" had for several months been working closely with Khaled Amayreh, a Hebron-area journalist who was close to Hamas. "Our proposal was presented to the highest political echelon in the Hamas Government in Gaza and gained 100 per cent approval," Mr. Amayreh told *Haaretz*, while refusing to name the Hamas officials. Rabbi Froman said that the document had been presented to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who had yet to respond to it. (*Haaretz*)

4

IDF commandos killed two Islamic Jihad gunmen, Anar Zakama, 20, and Ahmed Abu-Zaid, 32, and seriously wounded a third during a raid on the West Bank town of Qabatiya in an exchange of fire which developed during an arrest operation for "wanted" militants in the town. The IDF arrested a total of 10 wanted Palestinians across the West Bank overnight. (*Haaretz*)

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators held talks in a continuation of efforts to achieve a final status deal. (*Reuters*)

At least 44 Palestinians and Egyptians were reported injured as a result of clashes between Palestinians and the Egyptian border police. One Palestinian was killed in the incident. (*DPA*)

The military wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the National Resistance Brigades, claimed responsibility for firing a home-made projectile at the Sufa crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel. Separately, Islamic Jihad's Saraya Al-Quds Brigades said that their fighters had launched two home-made projectiles at the Israeli town of Sderot. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

A suicide bomber blew himself up in the southern Israeli town of Dimona, killing an Israeli woman and wounding 11 others, Israeli officials said. Israeli police said that they had killed another attacker before he had the chance to detonate his explosives belt. Abu Fouad, a spokesman for the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which claimed responsibility for the attack, said that the operation had been planned for a month, but was made possible after militants violently opened Gaza's border with Egypt on 23 January. (*AP, Haaretz*)

An Israel Air Force aircraft attacked a car travelling in the northern Gaza Strip, Palestinian medical officials said. The Popular Resistance Committees said the strike killed its top leader in the Gaza Strip, Amir Qarmout Abu As-Sa'id. Dr. Moaiya Hassanain, a health official in Gaza, said that two other people were wounded in the air strike. (*Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency*)

A Palestinian was killed and three others were wounded as Egyptian policemen opened fire to disperse a protest after the Gaza-Egypt border was resealed, medics and witnesses said. (*AFP*)

Egyptian security forces arrested five Palestinians attempting to illegally enter Cairo, and a militant with weapons and explosives in the northern Sinai, security officials said. A vehicle with explosives was also found. (*DPA*)

Hours after the suicide bombing in the town of Dimona, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak promised Mayor Meir Cohen that a security fence would be constructed along the Egyptian border by 2010. At the same time, Labor, Trade and Industry Minister and Shas Chairman Eli Yishai called on the Government to cease negotiations with the Palestinian Authority immediately and to allocate funds for the construction of a security fence at the Egyptian border. President Shimon Peres issued a statement saying, "The attack in Dimona was carried out by despicable terrorists who want to murder innocent women and children, at the same time [that they are] murdering the chances for peace." (*Haaretz*)

PA President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the Dimona bombing, but was also critical of an earlier military raid by IDF troops in the occupied West Bank, which killed two Palestinians. PA Minister of Agriculture Mahmoud Habbash also condemned the attack, but blamed Israel for creating an atmosphere of violence with its ongoing attacks against militants in Gaza. In Gaza, Hamas spokesman Ayman Taha said that he did not know whether his group was involved, but said that the attack was justified. Meanwhile, Islamic Jihad praised the attack as a blow against "Israeli occupation." (*Haaretz*)

The Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People issued a [statement](#) on the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The Bureau expressed its alarm that the deteriorating situation on the ground could jeopardize recent international efforts to resume the peace process. It criticized Israeli actions as contrary to the Road Map obligations and undermining the implementation of the Joint Understanding achieved by the parties at Annapolis. The Bureau also expressed its concern about the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. It condemned the killing of innocent civilians by both sides, including the firing of rockets from Gaza, and supported the Palestinian Authority proposal to assume responsibility for the Palestinian side of all of the Gaza Strip's border crossings. The Bureau also expressed its regret that the Security Council had failed to act in response to the grave situation. (*UN press release GA/PAL/1071*)

Jordan's King Abdullah II said that the Middle East is "at a crossroads" this year, and that a decision must be made, whether for peace and stability or the opposite.

King Abdullah made the remarks at a meeting with a group of European parliamentarians. (*Xinhua*)

Egyptian forces gathered Palestinians who had been allowed to reside temporarily in Al-Arish at the airport ahead of their departure from the country, security sources said. At least 3,000 Palestinians had been staying at al-Arish airport in the city of al-Arish, the nearest large city to Gaza, and were waiting for flights to take them out of the country, security sources said. (*DPA*)

5

Nine Hamas members were killed when an Israel Air Force missile struck a Hamas police headquarters east of the town of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip.

The IDF confirmed the air strike in response to Qassam rockets fired from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel. Several people were wounded in the strike and some were in critical condition, said Dr. Moaiya Hassanain, a health official. A spokesman for the police said that the strike had hit the police station in the village of Abassan during afternoon prayers. Hamas leader Sami Abu Zuhri said that Israel would pay a high price for those crimes. (*Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency, The Jerusalem Post*)

Israeli soldiers shot dead two Hamas militants during a military incursion in the southern Gaza Strip. An Israeli military spokeswoman said that an army force had been operating near the border fence on the outskirts of the town of Rafah and opened fire when two Palestinians approached them in a "suspicious manner." (*DPA, Haaretz, Reuters*)

Palestinian militants fired two rockets from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel and hit two factories in the town of Sderot. Both the Popular Resistance Committees and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack. Israeli sources said that the rockets had caused damage to the factories and several nearby cars. (*Xinhua*)

Hamas claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing in the southern Israeli town of Dimona. "The Izz ad-Din Al-Qassam Brigades claimed full responsibility for the martyrdom operation in the town of Dimona," Hamas' armed wing said in a statement. In text messages to journalists and on Hamas TV, Hamas identified the two attackers as Mohammed Herbawi and Shadi Zghayer. (*AFP, AP*)

A total of 12 rockets and 13 mortars landed in Israel, according to Israeli sources. Hamas said they had launched some 26 home-made rockets towards Israeli targets. Seven people were taken to a hospital in Ashkelon for treatment. One rocket hit a house and caused heavy damage. A 14-year-old girl was moderately wounded. Another rocket hit a high-voltage wire, causing a power outage that lasted for hours. Another rocket landed near two kindergartens while the schools were holding a joint activity for parents and children. Three rockets hit local factories, two in the Sderot industrial park, causing property damage but no injuries. (*Haaretz, Xinhua*)

Palestinian gunmen opened fire at farmers working in the fields of Kibbutz Nir Oz, near the Gaza Strip. No one was hurt, but some farm equipment was damaged.

(*Haaretz*)

Hundreds of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip set fire to a government building. They were furious at being rounded up by Egyptian authorities following deadly

clashes at the border with Gaza, a security source said. Meanwhile, Egypt reinforced security alongside the border, with some 1,500 members of Egypt's Central Security Force now deployed, the daily newspaper *Al-Hayat* reported earlier. (AFP, Xinhua)

Knesset Member Tzachi Hanegbi (Kadima Party), Chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, urged the Israeli Government to order the assassination of Hamas political leaders in response to the Dimona attack. (AP, Haaretz, Reuters)

A number of Hamas leaders in the city of Nablus called on their members to surrender their weapons to the Palestinian Authority and urged comrades in the Gaza Strip to give up control of the territory. At a press conference, local Hamas leader Mussa Al-Kharraz welcomed the improved security situation in Nablus. He condemned Hamas' military takeover of the Gaza Strip, as well as other measures which followed it. (AFP, Ma'an News Agency)

Israel shut down a religious and educational centre in East Jerusalem, saying that it was funded and operated by Hamas. Hussein Abu Hamed, director of the centre, said that the centre was not connected to any Palestinian faction. (AP)

White House spokesperson Dana Perino said that the United States strongly condemned the suicide bombing in Dimona and urged the Palestinian Authority to do more to counter terrorism. (AP)

An Israeli court sentenced Bassel Al-Asmar, a Palestinian militant from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, to life in jail plus 20 years for the assassination of an Israeli cabinet minister in 2001, judicial sources said. (AFP)

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said that Egypt would not allow its border with Gaza to be breached again by militants seeking to escape the Gaza Strip. Mr. Mubarak also rejected any responsibility for the violence between Egyptian police and the Palestinians at the border. "We did not give any order to shoot anyone," he said in an interview with the Spanish newspaper *ABC*. (AFP)

PEGASE (Mecanisme Palestino-Europeen de Gestion et d'Aide Socio-Economique), the new instrument to channel European Union (EU) and international development assistance to Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, issued its first payment to Palestinian civil servants in the amount of €22 million. This was the first step to replace EU's Temporary International Mechanism. "We will be moving away from budget support and towards development, presuming the economy can grow," according to Roy Dickenson, EU Head of Operations in the OPT. He noted the long-term nature of PEGASE, designed for development and not only for emergency aid. PEGASE would function in coordination with the Government of PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and would continue to boycott Hamas authorities in the Gaza Strip. However, Europe and the PA continued to pay the salaries of many civil servants in the Gaza Strip. "We won't give up on Gaza," said EU Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner. ([www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org))

6

Israeli aircraft struck against Gaza Strip militants. Four Palestinians were reportedly injured. Lawmakers in the Gaza Strip cancelled a session of the legislature, fearing an Israeli attack. (AP, Haaretz)

Two Israeli children were slightly hurt when Qassam rockets landed in the Negev kibbutz playground. Hamas claimed responsibility for the rocket attack, saying it had fired 31 rockets starting the previous day. PA President Abbas condemned the rocket attacks but said that Israel should not use the Qassam rockets as a pretext for collective punishment of Palestinians. (Haaretz)

IDF forces arrested 10 Palestinians in Ramallah, Jenin, Nablus, Qalqilya and Hebron. They were transferred to security forces for further investigation. Meanwhile, Israeli forces said that they had been targeted by an explosive device in the al-Fawwar refugee camp near Hebron. There were no casualties. (The Jerusalem Post, Xinhua)

In Hebron, Israeli troops arrested Salim Hirbawi, father of Mohammed Hirbawi, one of the two suicide bombers in Dimona. (DPA)

Israeli bulldozers demolished a Palestinian house in the Old City of Jerusalem. The two-storey home on Al-Buraq Street, belonged to the Isma'il Al-Masri family, and housed 30 people. In the northern West Bank village of Haris, west of Salfit, bulldozers demolished a Palestinian shop. Israeli authorities said neither building had a building permit. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli Vice Premier Haim Ramon said that Israel would continue "to use the economic weapon against the Gaza Strip, and reduce supplies of fuel, electricity and some food to the territory in an attempt to persuade Hamas to stop the rockets." (Haaretz)

Israel approved the construction of a border fence with Egypt. Because of the mountainous terrain, the fence would not extend along the entire 230-km (150-mile) border, but would be augmented by sensors, Israeli officials said. The proposed fence would initially be constructed in two small sections, one near Eilat and another near Nitzana. (AP, Haaretz)

Hamas' representative in Teheran, Abu Osama Abdel Mu'ti, said: "The armed wing of Hamas has decided to resume martyrdom [suicide] operations against Israel after a one-year lull... The enemy should expect more attacks." (The Jerusalem Post)

An Israeli inter-ministerial task force, established a few weeks earlier, was examining the possibility of stationing an international force in the Gaza Strip. The panel was analyzing the similarities and differences between Lebanon and the Gaza Strip and assessing the effectiveness of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Most of the preparatory work on this issue was being conducted by the IDF Planning Directorate. Hamas had said that any international force would be considered an occupation force. (Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency)

Hamas spokesperson Sami Abu Zuhri said that talks were ongoing between Hamas and Egypt on the subject of the Egypt-Gaza Strip border. (Ma'an News Agency)

A poll indicated that Palestinians believed Hamas was strengthened by the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip. (Haaretz)

Egyptian President Mubarak told Spanish journalists that Egypt was negotiating only with the PA and not with Hamas over the issue of the borders with the Gaza Strip. With regard to the Hamas delegation which had visited Cairo, Mr. Mubarak said that the Egyptians had hosted them to try and convince them to cooperate with the PA, which was the only recognized legitimate authority in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. (Ma'an News Agency)

"Anyone who violates Egypt's borders will get his leg broken," Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit was quoted as saying in a TV interview. He added that Egypt allowed the Palestinians to cross the border only after Hamas blew up the wall, because of fears over the humanitarian situation resulting from Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip. He blamed Israel for the humanitarian crisis and hardship that the Gaza Strip was experiencing, and for responding to the Palestinian missiles with collective punishment. (AP)

Palestinian sources said that around 2,000 men from various Arab countries, who had entered the Gaza Strip through the breached Egypt-Gaza Strip border, wanted to join the Palestinian resistance against Israel. Hamas, however, said that the Palestinian resistance factions were not interested in foreign fighters. (Ma'an News Agency)

Jordanian Ambassador to the PA Yahya Al-Qarraia said that a convoy of 22 truckloads of food and medicine had arrived from Jordan to the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Twenty of the trucks would go to the Gaza Strip, and two to the West Bank. (Ma'an News Agency)

Quartet representative Tony Blair met with Israeli President Shimon Peres to discuss what further steps could be taken towards improving the Palestinian economy. Mr. Blair said that many industrial projects were making progress. "None of it is a substitute for political negotiations and the political process, but economic progress can supplement the political process," he said. (The Jerusalem Post)

7

Israeli ground forces, backed by warplanes, exchanged fire with Palestinian gunmen in the northern Gaza Strip, killing five Hamas and one Islamic Jihad militant, spokesmen for the groups said. A 38-year-old Palestinian teacher was killed when an Israeli missile struck an agricultural school in Beit Hanoun, Hamas security forces said. Fifteen Palestinians were injured. (AP)

Seven rockets were fired at southern Israel, the IDF said. One landed in the yard of a home in Sderot, slightly wounding one person. (AP)

The IDF arrested 17 Palestinians in an overnight raid in Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron, PA security sources said. In addition, the Israeli army also arrested four Palestinians from villages near Jerusalem in two raids, *Israel Radio* reported. A 17-year-old Palestinian girl was also arrested by the Israeli police in East Jerusalem. (Xinhua)

Israeli forces seized six Islamic Jihad and Hamas activists during an incursion into Qabatiya, south of Jenin. Israeli forces also seized a Fatah activist in Tulkarm. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israel started to reduce the electricity supply to the Gaza Strip. The Defense Ministry sent a letter to the National Infrastructures Ministry instructing it to go ahead with a series of gradual cutbacks, Israeli officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the letter had not been publicized. It was not immediately clear when the reductions would start going into effect. (AP, Haaretz, Xinhua)

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said during a tour of a military base in the western Negev: "If the Qassam rocket fire from Gaza continues, then we will strengthen our operations more and the casualties on the other side will increase." Israeli Government officials also said that the Government would have to decide

whether to further ratchet up its reactions by targeting top Hamas political leaders. (*The Jerusalem Post*)

The threats Israel faced from the Gaza Strip must be resolved before a Palestinian State was established, Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni told US Special Envoy for Middle East Security Gen. James Jones during a meeting between the two. (*The Jerusalem Post*)

"[PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad] is to have a series of meetings in the US Congress with a view to accelerating the transfer of American aid announced during a donors' conference in Paris to the Palestinian Authority," his office said in a statement. (*AFP*)

PA Prime Minister Fayyad said that a lasting peace accord with Israel was unlikely in 2008 despite renewed diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. In an interview in Austin, Texas, where he was on a private visit, he highlighted the lack of progress on the issue of Israeli settlements and military incursions into the West Bank as among the chief obstacles in the Road Map and Palestinian statehood. "I do not believe, though, that the final resolution ... will be complete in the course of this year," Mr. Fayyad said. "The short-term track is not moving as well as it needs to for the political process, for negotiations, in particular, the lack of an adequately firm commitment with regard to settlements," he added. (*Reuters*)

EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process Marc Otte told *Haaretz* in an interview: "The implications of Israeli activity may be that Gaza becomes Somalia." He added that "the blockade and the sanctions against the population [have] failed, and [have] only strengthened Hamas and weakened [PA Prime Minister] Fayyad and [PA President Abbas] Abu Mazen." Before his visit to Israel, Mr. Otte had met with senior Egyptian officials in Cairo to discuss the breached border fence. Mr. Otte disclosed that Egyptian President Mubarak and Egypt's Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman had expressed an interest in a "package deal" according to which the Rafah crossing should be reopened in line with the previous agreement but more intensive efforts would be imposed to curb smuggling.

The plan also called for Israeli support to Prime Minister Fayyad's plan, under which the control over the Kami and Sufa crossings would be transferred to the PA. Mr. Otte said: "I believe that Israel needs to agree to the Fayyad plan, because this will put pressure on Hamas, forcing them to decide whether to continue preventing the opening of the crossings." (*Haaretz*)

Hamas did not object to the return of EU monitors to the Rafah border crossing, Hamas spokesman Taher Nunu said, adding that the group welcomed the return of "civilian employees" of the PA to the crossing point. However, he said that the EU monitors' role "should not be obstructive." Hamas denied the EU monitors the right to decide when the crossing should be opened or closed, arguing that it "may affect the people's freedom of movement." "There is a national consensus, even from our brothers in Fatah, that the Israelis can not return to oversee the operations at the crossing point," Mr. Nunu added. (*Xinhua*)

Speaking at a press conference in Nablus, Quartet Representative Blair said: "Occupation must come to an end, as well as all military checkpoints removed in order to establish real peace." He said that two years ago he could not visit Nablus for security reasons, but now the security situation had greatly improved, thanks to the enormous efforts of the Nablus Governor and his colleagues. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Some 37 trucks carrying supplies made it into Gaza from Israel, but the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) noted that, while that was an improvement, it was far from what was required to meet current needs. The trucks were carrying paper for UNRWA schoolbooks, as well as sugar and wheat flour from the World Food Programme. Commercial imports of dairy products and frozen meat also made it through. Earlier during the week, 31 truckloads of aid and commercial goods had entered Gaza through the Sufa and Kami crossings. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said that because of continued fuel reductions from Israel, the majority of households in Gaza were still dealing with power cuts lasting eight hours a day. (*UN News Centre*)

The Israeli measures aimed at reducing the electricity supplies to the Gaza Strip "amount to collective punishment of the civilian population and violate Israel's obligations under the laws of war," said Human Rights Watch. "Israel views restricting fuel and electricity to Gaza as a way to pressure Palestinian armed groups to stop their rocket and suicide attacks," said Joe Stork, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "But the cuts are seriously affecting civilians who have nothing to do with these armed groups, and that violates a fundamental principle of the laws of war." ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org))

Gen. Roy Grøttheim replaced Karl-Henrik Sjørus as Head of Mission for the Temporary International Presence in Hebron. General Grøttheim had served as deputy Head of Mission for the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization prior to this appointment. ([www.tiph.org](http://www.tiph.org))

8

Israeli forces seized a "wanted" Palestinian west of Ramallah. Israeli forces also seized a 17-year-old Palestinian north of Salbit. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip fired at least 22 rockets at Israel's western Negev. Four residents in Sderot were treated for shock, and a warehouse was damaged. (*Haaretz*)

Spokesman for the Israeli Defense Minister Shlomo Dror said that Israel had cut back late the previous day around one per cent of the power it supplied to Gaza, and Israel would continue gradually scaling back electricity until Hamas ended the rocket fire. "It's their choice. They need to choose if they want to keep investing in rockets and in attacking Israel or if they want electricity from Israel," Mr. Dror said. *Haaretz* reported that during the first week, the supply would drop by one megawatt of the total 124 megawatts Israel supplied to the Gaza Strip, and Israel aimed to lower the amount to a mere five per cent of the original total. (*AP*, *Haaretz*)

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and Development Secretary Douglas Alexander issued a joint statement on the situation in the Gaza Strip, saying, "We are extremely concerned by reports that Israel has reduced electricity supplies to Gaza. We believe that such action risks a further deterioration in the humanitarian situation in Gaza, without improving the security situation... We call on the Government of Israel to reverse its decision immediately, to avoid any further planned cuts, and to fulfil its obligations under international law." (*AFP*, *Haaretz*, [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk))

Jordan's King Abdullah II said in an interview with *ITAR-TASS* which coincided with his departure to Russia: "The process that started in Annapolis is, from our perspective, a positive development. But it also may be our last chance for peace for many, many years to come. So it is especially important for the international community to stay engaged. We know from experience that, although the parties themselves have to take the tough decisions and do the negotiating, they have been unable to move forward without the support and involvement of the international community." (*AP*, [www.itar-tass.com](http://www.itar-tass.com))

9

An Israeli air strike in Beit Hanoun seriously wounded a member of a rocket squad belonging to the Popular Resistance Committees. The Israeli military confirmed the strike. (*AP*)

Israeli forces arrested five Palestinians in Hebron and another in Jenin. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

An 8-year-old Israeli boy and his 19-year-old brother were seriously wounded when a rocket from Gaza struck Sderot. The younger boy's legs were at least partially severed by the explosion. Israeli police said that the rocket had been one of 11 fired towards southern Israel during the day. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for firing two rockets towards Sderot around the time of the attack. (*AP*)

An Israeli air raid in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip killed a local leader of Hamas' armed wing, Mohammed Mutar. No one was injured in a second air raid against the armed wing's position in Khan Yunis, Hamas said. An Israeli military spokesman confirmed the two raids and said that Mr. Mutar had been suspected of involvement in the "transfer of illicit arms" across the border between Gaza and Egypt. (*AFP*)

*Reuters* reported that a Palestinian security plan backed by Washington called for consolidating PA President Abbas' forces into a nearly 50,000-member gendarmie that could both police civilians and rein in militants. Internal cost estimates of \$4.2 billion to \$7 billion over five years were compiled by US security officials and their Palestinian counterparts, and recently shared with Israel and foreign diplomats, who expressed doubts that donors would produce such large sums any time soon. (*Reuters*)

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reported that the Palestinian population in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem had risen by about 30 per cent in the past decade to 3.76 million. (*AP*)

10

In an exchange of gunfire at the border with the Gaza Strip, Israeli troops killed a Palestinian militant after he opened fire on them. Also, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) fired a missile aiming at two armed Palestinians in Jabaliya in the northern Gaza Strip. An IDF spokesperson confirmed that IAF had scored a direct hit on the target.

At nightfall, about 20 IDF vehicles rolled into northern Gaza. The IDF called the operation routine and said that Palestinians had fired one rocket and five mortar

shells at Israel by nightfall. (*Haaretz*)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said in his remarks at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting: "We will continue to reach all the responsible terrorists, including those who dispatch and operate them. We will not give anyone special consideration." (*AFP, AP, www.pmo.gov.il*)

11

Israeli troops shot dead a militant from the armed wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in the eastern Gaza Strip overnight, medics said. An Israeli army spokesperson said that she was not aware of the incident. (*AFP*)

Israeli forces arrested six Palestinians in Hebron, Tulkarm and Qalqilya, PA security sources said. Also, Israeli forces seized a member of the Palestinian security services in Bethlehem. (*Ma'an News Agency, Xinhua*)

The Israeli Air Force carried out an air strike in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, wounding two civilians, Palestinian sources said. The IDF confirmed the air strike, saying it had targeted a car carrying members of Hamas' military wing. Palestinian militants fired two rockets at Israel, causing no damage or injuries. (*Haaretz*)

Salih Nabhan, a 22-year-old Palestinian, died of wounds he had sustained during an Israeli air raid in the northern Gaza Strip on 7 February, medical sources said. Health official Muawiya Hassanain said that the death toll of the attack rose to nine with Mr. Nabhan's death. Mr. Hassanain also said that medics were still searching for the bodies of two other victims. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said that he had instructed IDF to prepare for a possible wide-scale operation in the Gaza Strip in response to the ongoing Qassam rocket attacks. Mr. Barak told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Israel would not rule out any possible course of action to bring quiet back to the western Negev. The head of the Committee, Tzahi Hanegbi, said, "We have to overturn the Hamas regime, pulverise its military force and liquidate all of its leaders, without making an artificial distinction between those who wear suicide belts and those who wear diplomat suits." Israeli Vice Premier Haim Ramon told reporters, "The combination of the steps against Hamas in Gaza will bring the end of the Hamas regime in Gaza. It may take months or a year, but it won't last." (*AFP, Haaretz*)

Israeli Vice Premier Haim Ramon said that the aim of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians was to reach agreement on statehood principles this year, rather than an accord spelling out all the details. He said that the "declaration of principles" sought by Israel would address final-status issues such as "what will be in Jerusalem" as well as statehood borders and the future of Palestinian refugees, but would not settle questions such as how Jerusalem's Old City would be administered. "It has to be detailed enough in order to implement it in the years that will come after 2008, two to three years after, in a process of implementation," Mr. Ramon told reporters. (*Reuters*)

In a speech to Arab-Americans, diplomats and journalists in Washington, PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said that Israel was failing to keep its commitments to freeze the settlement activity and to ease checkpoints that limit Palestinian mobility on the West Bank. He said that there was a lack of progress on these issues. (*Reuters*)

*Haaretz* reported that the US Administration was urging Israel to engage Egypt in immediate dialogue in order to find a joint solution to the problem of the breached Gaza-Egypt border, adding that the US wanted Israel to show some flexibility on Egypt's demand to add 750 soldiers to its border force and to agree to PA Prime Minister Fayyad's proposal to take over responsibility for the border. (*Haaretz*)

12

Nine Palestinians and an Israeli soldier were wounded in Israeli raids on the Gaza Strip. Seven of the Palestinians, both militants and civilians, were hit during a firefight in Gaza City with an Israeli infantry unit accompanied by around 20 armoured vehicles and with helicopter gunship support, Palestinian witnesses said. The Israeli soldier was lightly wounded in the same operation, an IDF spokesman said. Two more Palestinians were wounded when Israeli soldiers opened fire while searching houses during an incursion in the central Gaza town of Deir al-Balah, witnesses said. (*AFP*)

An IDF soldier was moderately wounded when a Palestinian stabbed him at a checkpoint near Jenin. During an initial questioning at the scene, the assailant said that he had been sent by Islamic Jihad. (*Haaretz, The Jerusalem Post*)

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said that his government would be willing to consider any initiative which would establish peace through ending the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. He also called for a halt to Israeli aggression as well as the recognition of the Palestinians' inalienable rights. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Head of the Negotiations Affairs Department of the PLO Saeb Erakat called on the international community to exert every possible effort to impose a comprehensive ceasefire between Palestinians and Israel, during a meeting with two members of the British House of Commons. Mr. Erakat stressed that Israel's imposition of "facts on the ground" in the form of settlements, especially in East Jerusalem, had become a threat to efforts to make 2008 a year of peace. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israel was planning to build 1,100 new apartments for Israeli settlers in East Jerusalem, Israel's Housing Minister Ze'ev Boim said. Mr. Boim told *Israel Radio* that plans were under way to build 370 apartments in "Har Homa" (Jabal Abu Ghneim) and an additional 750 in "Pisgat Ze'ev". (*AP*)

Israeli troops raided 14 money-changing offices in several West Bank towns, including Nablus, Hebron and Jenin, confiscating a total of \$843,000 and arresting five Palestinians on suspicion that funds were transferred from abroad to militant groups, the army said. Palestinian witnesses said that the soldiers had detained 10 (15 according to *Wafa*) money changers. (*AP, Wafa*)

Egyptian security forces found a cache of explosives containing 250 kg of TNT near the border with the Gaza Strip in the Sinai Peninsula, security sources said. (*DPA*)

During a visit to the United Arab Emirates, PA President Abbas said that the pace of negotiations with Israel was slow. "We cannot speak about progress in the peace process," Mr. Abbas added. (*AFP, DPA*)

During a joint press conference in Berlin, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said that Israel would respond to attacks from the Gaza Strip "in every possible manner which will be effective." At the same time, he said that Israel would continue the negotiations with the PA. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "I think that the fact that there is terrorism emanating from Gaza raises the question of how to respond and how to prevent Hamas from doing this. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is difficult and we are trying help as much as possible, but first they must stop firing on Israeli cities. We don't want to worsen the situation in Gaza, but the terrorism is taking place there at the expense of civilians." Meanwhile Defense Minister Ehud Barak added that Israel would not refrain from taking any course of action in order to bring a stop to the fire against Sderot. "There are reasons why we are not using all our force right now, but it will happen at the right moment," Mr. Barak told journalists travelling with him to Turkey. (*AFP, AP, Haaretz*)

Israeli authorities released PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's advisor on Jerusalem affairs, Hatem Abdel Qader, after a few hours of interrogation at an Israeli facility in an East Jerusalem settlement. (*Xinhua*)

The Government of India condemned the "Israeli aggressive actions against the Palestinians." India's official Government spokesperson said, "India followed recent events in Gaza and the West Bank with deep concern and anguish. The misery and hardship faced by the people of Palestine, especially in the Gaza Strip, is deplorable. India condemns the use of force on the civilian population of Palestine and calls upon all sides, including Israel, to exercise restraint." The statement also praised "recent moves by the Egyptian Government to address humanitarian needs through dialogue, including among the Palestinian groups." (*Ma'an News Agency*)

13

An Israel soldier was moderately wounded after he was stabbed by a Palestinian at a checkpoint between the village of Ija, north of Jenin, and the settlement of "Dutan", in the northern West Bank. Overnight, the IDF carried out an air strike in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, wounding two civilians, Palestinian sources said. (*Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency*)

The Israeli Army announced the arrest of 70 "wanted" Palestinians in the West Bank, including 42 from Beit Ommar. (*AFP, Ma'an News Agency*)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said that it was possible to advance significantly the resolution of the issue of borders in negotiations between Israel and the PA. "If we do not want to run straight into an impasse, it is best to begin negotiating over other issues like borders ... On this issue there is a set of previous understandings and international backing, such as the letter of President Bush which mentioned concentrations of population. All this offers a direction to the resolution of the issue of borders," the Prime Minister told reporters in Berlin after completing a three-day official visit to Germany. The Prime Minister also said, "The matter of Jerusalem is not the first but the last in terms of order in which the core issues will be discussed and there is an agreement by all parties involved in the negotiations." (*Haaretz*)

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni took 70 foreign diplomats on a tour to its border with the Gaza Strip in an effort to build diplomatic support for a military operation against the territory. The diplomats were also given a security briefing by officials and met residents of the various communities hit by Qassam rockets. Deputy-Director of Communications at the Foreign Affairs Ministry Aviv Shiron said, "What we want to do is to increase world awareness of the terrorist entity running the



Gaza Strip. Today's efforts focused on diplomats, but the Foreign Ministry is also working on reaching policymakers and public opinion worldwide." Shortly after the diplomats left Sderot, a rocket hit a house there. Ramiro Cibrian-Uzal, head of the European Commission delegation to Israel, condemned the rocket fire and called for it to stop immediately and unconditionally. But he told *Reuters*: "The European Union does not consider a large military operation in Gaza to be a good idea and we do not believe it will bring a permanent solution to the problems Israel is confronted with." (*Reuters, Ynetnews*)

The Israeli military jailed IDF Lt. Yaakov Gigi for 15 months and stripped him of his rank for leading an unauthorized operation in the village of Dahariya in the West Bank in 2007, in which a Palestinian civilian was shot and wounded. In a statement, the court said that the officer and five of his men commandeered a local taxi, tied up its driver and drove to the village, where they shot an unarmed Palestinian who aroused their suspicion. Military police said the squad left the seriously wounded man on the ground without helping him. (*AP*)

Head of the Palestinian negotiating team, Ahmed Qureia, commenting on Israel's plan to build more than 1,000 units in East Jerusalem, said, "In a time when everybody is hoping for serious work and credible negotiations to reach a comprehensive and lasting peace agreement, the Israeli leaders came to this dangerous declaration, which we consider a declaration of war on our people and their national rights and also a declaration of war on the peace process ... The plan aims at sabotaging and paralyzing any efforts for real work toward peace in the area." (*AP*)

A group of 12 retired top Israeli generals, which included former chiefs of branches that oversaw the civil affairs of Palestinians, and division, brigade and battalion commanders in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, presented alternatives to the policy of roadblocks in the West Bank, suggesting instead surprise roadblocks, PA-coordinated patrols, and more fences around the settlements. Their paper, which was also sent to Defense Minister Ehud Barak, was presented at a conference organized by Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. In their letter to Mr. Barak, the signatories said, "You have to understand that there is damage in having the Palestinian people with its back to the wall, not seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, unable to improve their economy, unable to move from place to place ... This creates a reality that creates terror, and we have to remember that ... The feeling of humiliation and the hate that roadblocks create increase the tendency of Palestinians to join militant groups and Hamas." (*AP, Haaretz*)

*Ma'an News Agency* obtained a copy of an initiative for a ceasefire between the Palestinians and Israel, with an agreement to lift the siege of the Gaza Strip in exchange for a halt to the firing of rockets into Israel. Journalist Khaled Amayreh, who had prepared the initiative, told *Ma'an*, "The initiative is still being studied by the concerned parties and the ball is now in Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's court, after the leaders of Hamas, both in Gaza and in exile, agreed to the terms of the initiative." (*Ma'an News Agency*)

In a [report](#), the World Bank urged the opening up of the Palestinian communications sector, saying this would yield far-reaching benefits to the overall economy. It also lamented the fact that Israel had failed to free up frequencies for the second Palestinian mobile operator, Wataniya, preventing it from the beginning to compete with Jawwal unit of PalTel. "Improved efficiency brought about through competition will reduce the cost of doing business in all sectors, lower the cost of telecommunications services to consumers and help increase government revenue," the Bank said in a statement. (*AFP*)

Hamas spokesman Taher Nunu said that reaching a state of calmness "was in Israel's court and subject to its behaviour. The Palestinian people will not offer any free ceasefire in the shadow of Israeli aggressions and they will not bow before extortion or threats," he said. (*Xinhua*)

Fatah was undergoing unprecedented internal reforms to democratize the movement in the face of the electoral threat from political rivals. "Over the past few months, Fatah has undergone a change the likes of which has not taken place in the past 19 years," said Fatah leader Azzam al-Ahmed. (*Haaretz*)

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that she planned to visit Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory early next month to help both sides narrow their differences. Ms. Rice told the Committee on Senate Foreign Relations that Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and PA President Abbas were trying to continue their discussions "without much public glare" and that the United States was doing everything it could to help. (*Reuters, www.state.gov*)

14

The IDF bombed a number of abandoned buildings in the Gaza Strip near the Beit Hanoun (Erez) crossing that the army said were being used to launch rockets and mortar shells at Israel. (*Haaretz*)

Militants in the Gaza Strip fired four rockets at Israel. No damage or injuries were reported. (*Haaretz*)

IDF troops arrested 13 Palestinians in the West Bank, the army said. (*Haaretz*)

A mentally ill resident of Qabatiya in the northern West Bank succumbed to wounds sustained in an Israeli incursion on 7 February. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Gaza Strip flower farmers, unable to export to Israel because of the closure, protested on Valentine's Day by destroying their produce near the Sufa crossing. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Three settler families moved to a new settlement outpost being built in the southern Hebron Hills despite the fact that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had issued a directive to halt construction in the West Bank, *Israel Radio* reported. According to the report, 10 new housing units had been almost completed and dozens more were planned in the new settlement, located outside the boundaries of "Karmel". (*The Jerusalem Post*)

A Hamas delegation, headed by senior leader Mahmoud Al-Zahhar, entered Egypt from the Gaza Strip to discuss the border issue with Egyptian officials, including Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman, security sources said. A Hamas source confirmed the trip saying it was for "talks on the border situation and supply of basic needs to Gaza." (*AFP, Reuters*)

Fatah spokesman Ahmed Abdel Rahman urged Hamas to pave the way for a national dialogue. "If Hamas was serious about Gaza's fate, it would have given up the coup," he added. (*Xinhua*)

John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, began his first official visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel. He will make field trips to the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the Israeli town of Sderot during the five-day visit. Mr. Holmes is also scheduled to meet senior officials, UN staff, representatives of aid agencies and members of the donor and diplomatic community. (*UN News Centre*)

Israel's Shas Party Chairman Eli Yishai received reassurances from Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni that Jerusalem's future was not on the table. Ms. Livni denied previous media report of a secret channel of meetings with the Palestinians. Mr. Olmert also promised Mr. Yishai that construction would continue in the settlements in East Jerusalem. (*The Jerusalem Post*)

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni met with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Washington, D.C. She said that Israel would continue to wage a war against Palestinian militant groups in the Gaza Strip and that negotiations with PA President Abbas could not be successful without an end to the firing of Qassam rockets. (*Haaretz*)

Russian President Vladimir Putin told a news conference that Russia supported the US initiative to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even though there were elements of US policy in the Middle East that Russia did not fully approve of. He added that Moscow was willing to host another international conference on the issue to help find a compromise. Mr. Putin also said that in seeking a resolution of the conflict it was necessary to understand the politics of Hamas. (*RIA Novosti*)

Egyptian officials ended talks with a visiting Hamas delegation, headed by senior leader Mahmoud Al-Zahhar, on the latest developments of the Egypt-Gaza Strip border. Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri said that Hamas had told Egyptian officials it would consider a ceasefire with Israel if it lifted its blockade of the Gaza Strip and ceased military operations in all the Palestinian territories. Hamas had also discussed a prisoner deal that could lead to the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for Israel freeing several hundred Palestinians. (*Ma'an News Agency, Reuters, Xinhua*)

The 2008 session of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People was opened during which the Committee elected the members of its Bureau: Ambassador Paul Badji of Senegal as Chairman, Ambassador Zahir Tanin of Afghanistan and Ambassador Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz of Cuba as Vice-Chairmen, and Ambassador Saviour F. Borg of Malta as Rapporteur. The Committee also adopted its [programme of work](#) for the year. (*UN press release GA/PAL/1072*)

15

Israeli troops wounded Palestinian photographer Imad Bemat in the head when they used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse a demonstration against the separation wall, medics and witnesses said. (*AFP*)

Masked militants blew up the library of the YMCA in Gaza City, destroying the building but causing no injuries. (*Haaretz, Reuters*)

Israeli special forces arrested 30 Palestinians in Rafah, an IDF spokesman said. Palestinian residents confirmed the reports. (*Xinhua*)

Eight Palestinians were killed and 40 others wounded after an explosion in the Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip, medics and witnesses said. Palestinian witnesses said that an Israeli F-16 warplane fired a missile and struck the building, where a senior Islamic Jihad militant was living. The IDF denied involvement. Palestinian human rights groups said that there was no evidence to confirm that the explosion had been caused by a rocket or aerial bombardment by Israeli forces. The Popular Resistance Committees said that its militants fired 10 rockets at Israeli targets in Western Negev and at southern Israel's port city of Ashkelon in response to the attack. (Haaretz, DPA, Xinhua)

A Palestinian woman suffering from heart disease and trying to reach the hospital in Tulkarm died after Israeli soldiers manning a checkpoint turned back the taxi she was travelling in, relatives said. The Israeli military said that it had issued permission for an ambulance to evacuate the woman but none arrived. (AP)

Israeli authorities authorized five construction companies to build 307 new homes in the East Jerusalem settlement of "Har Homa". (Haaretz)

PA Foreign Minister Riyad Malki said during a visit to Turkey that Israel had failed to meet commitments made at the Annapolis Conference. He also called for international pressure on Israel and urged Turkey to use its influence over Hamas to help achieve a peaceful resolution to the rift among Palestinians. Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan criticized Israel's expansion of settlements as well as the blockade of the Gaza Strip, saying that they were steps that "hamper peace efforts". (AP, Reuters)

Nine Israeli families moved to the settlement of "Maskiyot" in the Jordan valley, setting down six trailer homes and promising to bring more settlers to the area. The action was funded in part by the US "One Israel Fund". A settler leader said that he understood that the Israeli Government had frozen the construction of permanent homes at "Maskiyot", but a Defense Ministry official did not indicate that it would block any attempt to expand the settlement. Prime Minister Olmert's spokesman, Mark Regev, said that Israel would abide by its Road Map commitments. "There will be no new settlements," Mr. Regev said. "Most of the time our experience shows that they [settlers] move in and then the Government keeps them there," Saeb Erakat, Head of the Negotiations Affairs Department of the PLO, said. A spokesman for the US Embassy in Israel, Stewart Tuttle, said Israel must evacuate all settlement outposts under its Road Map obligations. "We expect that the Government of Israel will meet them," he said. (AP, Haaretz)

According to a poll conducted for Israel's *Ma'ariv* newspaper, 67 per cent of Israelis supported a broad ground operation against the Palestinian rocket squads in the Gaza Strip. Only 25 per cent said that they were opposed. The poll included 500 respondents and had a margin of error of 4.4 per cent. (AP)

During a visit to the Gaza Strip, John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, told journalists that life in the Gaza Strip was "grim and miserable" as a result of prolonged closure of the Strip's borders. He called for the lifting of the blockade by Israel. (Haaretz)

17

Israeli troops killed three gunmen and a civilian in the southern Gaza Strip near the former international airport. Hamas health officials said that more than 20 people were wounded, including several gunmen and a 45-year-old civilian. According to Hamas, Israeli tanks and bulldozers had moved in to back the troops, and Israeli aircraft had struck twice. The Israeli military said a soldier was seriously wounded, adding that the operation was aimed at "infrastructures of terrorist organizations." According to a statement by Hamas, at least 25 men were arrested during the raid. (AP)

Israeli troops killed two Palestinians and wounded nine other people in the town of Rafah, in the south of the Gaza Strip. One man, a member of Hamas, was killed when Israeli troops, supported by helicopter fire, moved into the sector. The second man, who had been wounded during the incursion, died the following day from his injuries, Palestinian medics said. Meanwhile, another Hamas militant died of wounds sustained during an Israeli operation in Khan Yunis three days earlier.

(AFP)

Israeli army arrested at least 16 Palestinians in the West Bank, Palestinian security sources said. A number of armoured vehicles stormed the city of Nablus after midnight and troops detained four people, the sources said, adding that in the East Jerusalem suburb of Abu Dis, the Israeli army arrested three men. Other arrests took place in Ramallah, Jenin and Tulkarm. (Ma'an News Agency, Xinhua)

A shell or rocket hit the Egyptian side of the crossing point with Gaza, knocking down the wall of an Egyptian Government administrative building, security sources said. No injuries were reported. (Reuters)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said that he was not optimistic about an early agreement to free Cpl. Gilad Shalit. A day later, a Hamas official added that there were no real indications of a deal to free the captive Israeli soldier in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. (AFP)

More than a third of the settlements in the occupied West Bank had been built on private Palestinian land seized for "security purposes," Haaretz reported. Citing an unreleased report compiled by the IDF in October 2006, the newspaper reported that 44 of the 120 West Bank settlements were based to some extent on private land seized by the military. (AFP, Haaretz)

Prime Minister Olmert said that the Israeli army had a "free hand" to target anyone in the Gaza Strip, particularly the ruling party, Hamas, to bring an end to cross-border rocket fire at Israel. (DPA)

Following a meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said that the lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was "dangerous" and economic improvement on the Palestinian side was needed to give them hope. He urged Israel to lift its blockade of the Gaza Strip, saying that the situation in the impoverished territory was "intolerable". He also suggested that a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas could improve the situation.

On 16 February, Mr. Kouchner had also met with PA President Abbas. (AFP, DPA)

18

Egyptian security forces uncovered an explosives cache containing 100 kg of TNT hidden in sacks near the border with the Gaza Strip in a deserted area of the northern Sinai Peninsula, a police officer said. (AP)

Israel will continue negotiations with the PA despite continued rocket fire on the southern part of the country, since halting the talks would play into the hands of Hamas, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said. Halting peace talks with the Palestinian Authority would not bring an end to terror attacks against Israelis, she said.

(DPA, Haaretz)

Hamas is ready to study any ceasefire proposal "that can secure the restoration of the Palestinian people's rights," a Hamas spokesperson said. (Xinhua)

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice agreed to defer talks on Jerusalem to the final stage of negotiations with the PA.

Meanwhile, PA President Abbas insisted that discussions on the status of the city must not be postponed. (Haaretz)

Concluding a five-day visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, [highlighted](#) the worsening humanitarian conditions in Gaza and the West Bank resulting from closures and restrictions on movement. Mr. Holmes said that he left the region "deeply concerned" about the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, as well as in the Israeli town of Sderot. Mr. Holmes called the overall deterioration of living conditions in Gaza "an affront to the dignity of the people there." During his visit to Sderot, Mr. Holmes referred to a circle of violence to describe the fighting between Israeli troops and Gaza militants who fire rockets. Israeli Foreign Ministry Director, Gen. Aaron Abramovich, later criticized Mr. Holmes for drawing a parallel between the rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip and Israeli military operations. Just after Mr. Holmes' visit to Sderot, a house was hit by a rocket. (UN News Centre)

19

A 10-year-old boy was killed and two other children were wounded in an exchange of fire between Hamas militants and Israeli troops in the central Gaza Strip town of Deir el-Balah, Palestinian medics said. An Israeli army spokeswoman said troops operating in the area had responded when a group of Palestinians opened fire on them, saying the "soldiers identified hitting only gunmen." (AFP, Haaretz)

Israeli troops killed an armed Palestinian militant along the border with the Gaza Strip. The gunman, affiliated with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, had opened fire on the troops, an Israeli army spokesman said. The Israeli soldiers returned fire and hit him. (AP, Haaretz)

A Hamas delegation met with Egyptian officials at the Rafah border terminal in an effort to try to open the border and tighten security, officials said. (AP)

The number of rockets that struck Israel decreased from 1,488 in 2006 to 1,150 in 2007, Home Front Command Chief, Brig-Gen. Yair Golan said. So far this year, the figure had reached 400, he told a Knesset committee. (AFP)

PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad ruled out a peace accord with Israel this year due to the slow progress of negotiations. "I personally think that reaching a peace treaty in 2008 is impossible because the talks were very slow over the past three months," Mr. Fayyad said during a meeting with a delegation of American Jewish leaders at his office in Ramallah. (AP, Xinhua)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and PA President Abbas were due to meet in the latest round of peace talks. Saeb Erakat, Head of the Negotiations Affairs Department of the PLO, told *Voice of Palestine* radio that President Abbas would propose a comprehensive ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. (Xinhua)

In a prelude to the two-day United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People in Amman, the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Karen AbuZayd, addressed the visiting delegations. She said that the impact and sustainability

of humanitarian work ultimately hinged on the resolution of questions of statehood, self-determination, and enforcement of international rule of law. Ms. AbuZayd said that political actors were responsible from addressing these questions. She added that the recurrent conflict, alongside political isolation and movement restrictions, had made it virtually impossible for Palestinians, including refugees, to build the socio-economic foundations for sustainable development necessary for a future Palestinian State. (UN press release PAL/A (Amman))

The two-day United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, held under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, opened in Amman. At the opening session, statements were delivered by Roberterry, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, on behalf of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon; Paul Badji, Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations and Chairman of the Committee; Nasser Judeh, Minister of State for Media Affairs and Communications and Acting Foreign Minister of Jordan; and Samir Abdullah, Minister of Planning of the Palestinian Authority and representative of Palestine, on behalf of PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Statements were also delivered by the representatives of the Non-Aligned Movement, the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. (GA/PAL/1075)

20

Israeli troops arrested Islamic Jihad leader Omar al-Badawi and 11 others during an incursion into the West Bank town of Tulkarm. (AFP)

Secretary-General of the Executive Committee of the PLO Yasser Abed Rabbo said that Palestinians should follow the example of Kosovo and unilaterally declare independence if Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations failed. He said, "Kosovo is not better than us. We deserve independence even before Kosovo, and we ask for the backing of the United States and the European Union for our independence." PA President Abbas responded by saying, "We will pursue negotiations in order to reach a peace agreement during 2008 that includes the settlement of final status issues including Jerusalem. But if we cannot achieve that, and we reach a deadlock, we will go back to our Arab nation to take the necessary decision at the highest level." (Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency)

Israel and Egypt had been conducting EU-backed negotiations in an effort to reopen the Rafah crossing in the Egypt-Gaza border. Israel had agreed to reopen the crossing under the same conditions as in the past: with EU monitors supervising PA control on the Palestinian side and Egyptian control on the Egyptian side — and Israeli monitoring of traffic through the crossing via screens placed in the Kerem Shalom crossing. The Egyptians had already agreed to most of these terms, but believed Hamas should assume control of the Palestinian side of the crossing. In the meantime, Egypt and Hamas were also engaged in dialogue over the border arrangements. (Ynetnews)

A new settlement outpost comprising 27 trailers was currently under construction at the settlement of "Eli," north of Ramallah. Some of the trailers were being set up on land privately owned by Palestinians. The Israeli authorities were taking no action. Captain Tzidki Maman, spokesperson for the Israeli Civil Administration said, "The illegal construction at Eli is known and is being examined. Another part of the construction is being considered by the High Court of Justice." (Haaretz)

PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad told reporters that Palestinians would present monthly reports to the United States listing measures taken by the PA to comply with the Road Map. In addition, the reports would detail "where Israel has complied and where it hasn't complied with its commitments," the Prime Minister said. (AFP)

The US was reviewing the feasibility of deploying a NATO force in the West Bank as a way to ease Israeli security concerns and facilitate an Israeli withdrawal from the area. Gen. James Jones, the US Special Envoy for Middle East Security, was spearheading the idea. (AFP, The Jerusalem Post)

The United States rejected comparisons between the Palestinian situation and Kosovo after Yasser Abed Rabbo, Secretary-General of the Executive Committee of the PLO, called for a Kosovo-like declaration of independence. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters, "Kosovo is a unique situation. It is not a precedent for any other situation around the world." (AFP)

21

Two Qassam rockets landed near Sderot and two more hit open areas in the western Negev. No one was wounded in the attacks and no damage was reported.

Following the rocket strikes, Israeli aircraft attacked a rocket-launching group in the northern Gaza Strip, the IDF said. It was not immediately known whether anybody had been wounded in the attack. (The Jerusalem Post)

Israeli troops arrested 20 Palestinians in the village of Beta in the West Bank. (AFP)

The closure of Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, including Orient House, was extended for another six months by Israel. "I think this is against the promise of Israeli Prime Minister Olmert to reopen the Palestinian institutions ... This is a promise he made to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. This is not a good sign for the peace process," said Hatem Abdel Khader, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). (The Jerusalem Post, Ynetnews)

European lawmakers urged Israel not to inflict "collective punishment" on the Gaza Strip's population. "The policy of isolation failed at both the political and humanitarian level ... The civilian population should be exempt from any military action and any collective punishment ... The EU calls on Israel to cease military actions killing and endangering civilians, and extrajudicial targeted killings," the European Parliament said in an adopted resolution. The lawmakers also called on the PA to re-launch a dialogue with Hamas. An Israeli official told AFP: "EU Ministers are expressing growing concern over the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and the lack of progress in the peace talks with the Palestinians ... Our embassies in Europe report increasing pressure to end the blockade." An EU official told AFP: "We are in favour of opening up crossings into Gaza, particularly Rafah and Kami." Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said at a meeting with her Romanian counterpart Adrian Cioroianu, "Any indirect support of Hamas, even if it is done through discussions on the crossings or the humanitarian situation, weakens those interested in reaching an agreement." (AFP, DPA, Haaretz)

Peace Now issued a report saying that in the last seven years, only 91 of 1,625 Palestinian requests for home building permits in "area C", comprising 60 per cent of the West Bank, had been granted by Israel, while some 94 per cent of the Palestinians applications had been rejected. By contrast, 18,472 new apartments had been built between 2000 and 2007 in Israeli settlements. Some 33 per cent of the demolition orders against Palestinians were carried out, while only 7 per cent of the unauthorized structures built by settlers were demolished in the same period. According to the report, the figures proved that Israel was clearly and blatantly discriminating against the Palestinian population. It also accused Israel of following a deliberate policy of hindering Palestinian construction in those areas, which would eventually lead to a "quiet transfer" of Palestinians to other parts of the West Bank. (DPA, [www.peacenow.org.il](http://www.peacenow.org.il), The Jerusalem Post)

Ahmed Yousef, an aide to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, warned of "unexpected explosions" of the Palestinian people if the international community did not move to lift the siege on the Gaza Strip. "Don't bet on Gaza's patience. Gaza is a barrel of burning gunpowder and it can't be subject to the logic of evaluations and assessment by others," he said. (Xinhua)

Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People Paul Badji told community leaders at the Irbid camp for Palestine refugees in northern Jordan that the Committee knew that their living situation was unacceptable and that, not only did Arab countries have to work to solve the problem, but the entire international community had to help the Palestinians live in dignity and peace, in an independent and sovereign State. Joining Paul Badji of Senegal in a first ever official tour of the Palestine refugee camps Irbid and Husn by a Committee delegation were the other members of the Bureau: Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz (Cuba) and Zahir Tanin (Afghanistan), Vice-Chairmen, and Saviour F. Borg (Malta), Rapporteur. The Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, Riyad Mansour, joined the ambassadors, along with the Chief of the Division for Palestinian Rights, Yuri Gourov, and the Committee Secretary, Wolfgang Gieger. (UN press release GA/PAL/1079)

Norway's State-owned Sovereign Wealth Fund is considering whether to sell its \$20 million in bonds in Israel Electric Corporation. "Information that the Israeli Government is using this company to cut electricity supplies to Gaza, and thereby worsening the situation for civilians there, has made Finance Minister Kristin Halvorsen ask the [fund's] ethics council to investigate the company," Finance Ministry spokeswoman Kaja Haldorsen said. Norway places most of its petroleum revenue in the fund. (The Jerusalem Post)

22

The IDF killed two Islamic Jihad militants and wounded two others in an air strike near the Maghazi refugee camp, Palestinian security officials said. They said that the Palestinian gunmen had confronted an Israeli force that entered the central Gaza Strip to carry out arrests. (DPA)

Four Palestinians were injured, including two six-year-old children, during a march against the separation wall in the village of Masara, south of Bethlehem. Israeli soldiers attacked demonstrators, beating them with batons, eyewitnesses said. Some 2,000 Palestinians and Israeli and foreign activists gathered in the West Bank village of Bil'in to commemorate three years of their struggle against the wall. According to the organizers, 10 people were wounded in clashes with Israeli security forces, including a US activist who was hit in the head by a rubber bullet. (Ma'an News Agency, The Jerusalem Post)



Israeli forces apprehended 10 "wanted" Palestinians in Tulkarm, Bethlehem and Abu Dis. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Fourteen Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades militants gave themselves up to the Palestinian Authority after escaping from a Nablus prison the previous day. (*The Jerusalem Post*)

The chief of police in Hebron said that Palestinian police were back on the streets of Hebron, after a 12-day ban by the Israeli authorities following the Dimona attack. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said: "We in Hamas appreciate the call by the European Union to end the Israeli siege imposed on the Gaza Strip and their invitation to the Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas for the resumption of dialogue with the Hamas movement." He added that Hamas was ready to study any initiative that would contribute to stopping the Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people. "The problem is not with Hamas. The problem is with the occupation, its aggression and the siege imposed on our people in the Gaza Strip," said Mr. Abu Zuhri. (*Ma'an News Agency, Xinhua*)

Prime Minister Olmert will meet with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice while both are in Japan next week. The meeting was requested by Ms. Rice. Israeli Government officials predicted that the meeting would focus on the situation in the Gaza Strip, and said that Ms. Rice would probably want to express her concern over the humanitarian situation there. (*Haaretz*)

23

An Israeli missile killed three Palestinians picnicking in a field in the northern Gaza Strip near Beit Hanoun, according to officials and relatives of the victims.

Conflicting reports identified the dead as militants. The Israeli military confirmed the cross-border attack and said that it had targeted Palestinian militants on their way to fire mortar shells at Israel. (*AFP, AP, Xinhua*)

Merchants across the Gaza Strip closed their shops in a half-day strike to protest against Israel's blockade of the territory. The strike, called by the Popular Committee Against the Siege, was part of a day of international events and demonstrations. The group said that it had organized protests and other activities in more than 90 cities across the world and had called on international participants to switch off their lights for 30 minutes after sundown in a show of solidarity with the Gaza Strip. Hundreds of protesters, including representatives from the main Palestinian political movements, gathered in Gaza City's Kuteiba Square to lay the cornerstone of a memorial to victims of the blockade. (*AFP*)

A six-member Hamas delegation, led by senior Hamas officials Mahmoud Al-Zahhar and Said Siyam, crossed into Egypt to meet Egyptian security officials, a security official familiar with the discussions said. Egyptian officials repeated warnings to Hamas to stay away from the border and not even think of reopening it by force, the official said on condition of anonymity. Hamas spokesman Ayman Taha said that Egypt had agreed to release 115 Palestinians who had been captured after breaching the border. Egyptian officials declined to comment on the claim. Mr. Taha also said that Hamas expected another meeting to take place with Egypt in the near future. (*AP*)

24

PA President Abbas welcomed the initiative announced by Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to promote Palestinian dialogue, settle the rift between Palestinians and end differences between the Hamas and Fatah movements. The initiative, presented by President Saleh to President Abbas during his recent visit to Yemen, included seven points aimed at restoring the situation in the Gaza Strip as it was prior to 13 June 2007; holding early elections; resuming dialogue on the basis of the Cairo Agreements of 2005 and the Mecca Accord of 2007; committing to Palestinian legislation; respecting Palestinian constitution and law; operating Palestinian institutions without discrimination; and re-building the security apparatus on a national basis. (*SABA - Yemen News Agency*)

Israeli and Palestinian expert-level negotiating teams met, with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Palestinian Chief Negotiator Ahmed Qureia heading the meeting. "The experts will meet in working groups to discuss non-core issues, such as civil, economic and judicial issues," said Aryeh Mekel, a spokesman for Israel's Foreign Ministry. He added that the 20 members were specialists in various fields, including the environment and water. (*DPA*)

A senior Israeli Air Force commander said in an interview that to date, the number of Palestinian bystanders killed in air strikes had dropped from 50 per cent in 2002 to less than 5 per cent. Palestinians and human rights groups said that the figure was much higher, but acknowledged that the Air Force had become more accurate. (*AP*)

25

Four members of Hamas' armed wing were killed in two Israeli air strikes in Gaza City and Khan Yunis. Another militant, belonging to the Popular Resistance Committees, was killed during an Israeli incursion near Rafah, medics said. IDF troops had uncovered five smuggling tunnels in the area and arrested some 40 Palestinian militants before withdrawing, the IDF said. (*AFP, Haaretz*)

An Israeli boy was wounded in Sderot by a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip, police said. A mother and her one-year-old baby were also slightly wounded. A total of five rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip. One of them landed in Gaza, another in an empty field and three more in Sderot, Israeli police said. (*AFP*)

Undercover Israeli forces afternoon raided Nablus and seized six Palestinians. Two Palestinians, including a 15-year-old, were arrested in Jenin. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Palestinians formed a human chain in the Gaza Strip to protest the Israeli blockade. Israeli forces were placed on alert for any rush on the border. A small group of youths set fire to a tire near the Israeli army position at the Erez crossing and began throwing stones. The incident drew fire from Israeli soldiers, and two of the youths were wounded, medical sources said. The IDF said that it had arrested "around 50" Palestinians who had approached the crossing. (*AFP*)

Egypt released 21 Palestinians, many of them detained carrying weapons and explosives during the two weeks when the border had been breached, and sent them back into Gaza, a local security official said. (*AP*)

IDF troops seized the facilities of a Hamas-affiliated charity in Hebron, saying that it funnelled money to militant activities and recruited members to its ranks. The charities also owned retail properties in Hebron rented by local merchants. Israeli soldiers handed the shopkeepers warrants ordering them to vacate the shops before 1 April. The Governor of Hebron, Hussain Al-A'raj, expressed his astonishment at the Israeli action and called on the Israeli authorities to revoke it. (*Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency*)

Following a closed-door meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah II in Amman, PA President Abbas warned that if the Bush administration did not make good on its pledge to make 2008 the year to broker peace, then there would never be any future chances to achieve that goal. The US "must understand it is to play an active role, not just as a supervisor, by intervening directly to help make peace," he told reporters. He also urged Israel "to stop escalating the situation in the Palestinian territories and stop all attacks in the Gaza Strip, including firing missiles there." (*AP*)

Hamas announced that it had received a copy of the Yemeni initiative aimed at reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. "The movement is following up the details of this initiative with the Yemeni leadership," Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri told reporters, stressing that Hamas "was ready to make any Arab mediation successful on the basis of pushing for dialogue without any preconditions." Meanwhile, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine welcomed the Yemeni initiative, saying its articles agreed with a similar plan launched earlier by the Popular Front, and called on Hamas to accept the initiative. (*Xinhua*)

"Hamas is ready to calm down and to stop firing rockets on Sderot if Israel stops its aggression against the Palestinian people," Hamas official Mohammed Nazzal told *AP* by telephone. "The message is clear and doesn't require an agreement," he said. (*AP, Haaretz*)

PA President Abbas met with President Mubarak in Cairo. They discussed the issue of the crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. Mr. Abbas called on the armed groups in the Gaza Strip to stop launching rockets into Israel in exchange for lifting the siege on Gaza. He also told reporters that Israel was using the rocket attacks as a pretext to keep border crossings closed. (*DPA, Xinhua*)

Prime Minister Olmert signalled in a Japanese television interview broadcast that the construction of settlements would not be stopped. "First of all, it is difficult because you are talking about living entities," Mr. Olmert told broadcaster *NHK* before his departure for Tokyo. (*AFP*)

Jordan's National Electricity Power Company had started supplying Jericho with electricity, a company official said. It was the first time the city had received power from Jordan since 1967. (*DPA*)

The head of the Palestinian Energy Authority, Omar Qattaneh, said that the PA planned to connect more areas of the Gaza Strip to the Egyptian electricity grid, a move that would reduce the area's reliance on Israel for power. Mr. Qattaneh said that the PA had secured financing from the Islamic Development Bank in Saudi Arabia for the \$32 million project, which would be able to distribute up to 250 megawatts, or a large part of the area's needs. He said that bids would be published in the coming days, and the project could be completed in 12 to 18 months. Hamas spokesperson Taher Nunu said, "We welcome any project that links us to our Arab brothers and ends our relations with the occupation." (*AP*)

During the visit of PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan said, "The Government and people of the United Arab Emirates are concerned by the plight of the Palestinian people, who are reeling under a cruel occupation and blockade". Sheikh Khalifa reiterated his country's commitment to supporting the Palestinian people. (*Xinhua*)

Israel postponed a meeting planned for 27 February between Costa Rican President Oscar Arias and an Israeli diplomat over Costa Rica's decision on 5 February to

recognize the State of Palestine. Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesperson Arye Meikel said, "We would like to express our disappointment over this regrettable decision ...." Costa Rican Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno said that Costa Rica had hoped to encourage peace talks when it recognized the Palestinian State, a key demand on the part of the Palestinians. "We thought it would be necessary to send a message to both sides about the need to sit down and negotiate the key issues in the conflict," he said. (*Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency, The Jerusalem Post*)

26

The National Resistance Brigades of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine said that it had fired a home-made rocket into an Israeli army base near the Sufa commercial crossing in the south-eastern Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, the Popular Resistance Committees, a group affiliated with Hamas, said that its militants had fired 10 mortar shells into an Israeli army post, also in the south-eastern Gaza Strip. (*Xinhua*)

In Tokyo, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said that he was not certain Israel and the PA would be able to reach a peace agreement by the end of 2008. He said, "I am not sure we will make it, but we are determined to make a giant step forward to end this dispute once and for all. In these days, we are making exceptional efforts to conclude all differences with our neighbours and to resolve outstanding disputes with our Palestinian neighbours." While in Tokyo, Mr. Olmert was scheduled to meet US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on 28 February. (*Haaretz*)

Secretary-General of the Executive Committee of the PLO Yasser Abed Rabbo called on the PA to think about alternative options, because adopting one political strategy would be a political suicide. He attributed the slow progress in the talks to the Israeli policies in the West Bank, such as the building of "settlements, barrier and checkpoints." (*Xinhua*)

UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General Robert Serry [briefed](#) the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, also briefed the Council on his visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel on 14 to 18 February. (*UN press release SC/9264*)

US Assistant Secretary of State in charge of refugees Sam Witten said that the US would provide additional aid to the Palestinian refugees, including those living in the Gaza Strip. He said that the US Government had contributed \$40 million to UNRWA. "We will be making additional substantial contributions in the near future," he added. (*AFP*)

The Palestinian Centre for Democracy and Conflict Resolution and the Popular Campaign for Nationalist Reconciliation announced a campaign to collect signatures to urge Hamas and Fatah to begin dialogue. The Centre's deputy director, Dyad Al-Husain, said, "We have proposed a plan for national reconciliation through pursuing the origins of the conflict. Many legal experts and specialists in Palestinian affairs from Arab countries have participated in the plan, and 250,000 copies have been prepared to be distributed in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip." (*Ma'an News Agency*)

27

Nine Palestinians were killed in the Gaza Strip, five of them militants, and three children. Seventeen Palestinians were injured, including six children. Israeli undercover commandos killed another Palestinian militant and arrested four in Nablus. (*AP, AFP, DPA, Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency*)

An Israeli strike aimed at a rocket squad in the northern Gaza Strip killed two youngsters leaving a mosque at nightfall, Palestinian sources said. The Israeli military said that it had carried out the air strike but had no knowledge of civilians being hit. Afterwards, Israeli planes attacked the office of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and the nearby Interior Ministry building in Gaza City, both of which were empty. Palestinian health officials said a six-month-old baby had been killed by shrapnel in the air strike and about 30 residents of nearby buildings suffered wounds. A few minutes later, Israeli aircraft hit two metal workshops. The Israeli military said the targets had been command posts at the Government building and sites where weapons were made and stored. (*AP*)

A Palestinian rocket killed an Israeli student near his college in Sderot. The rocket barrage came hours after an Israeli air strike. In all, at least 40 rockets were fired at Israel. (*AP, AFP, DPA, Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency*)

Israeli forces arrested 17 "wanted" Palestinians in the West Bank. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

The following statement attributable to the Spokesperson for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was issued:

The Secretary-General is deeply concerned at the loss of civilian life in Southern Israel and Gaza, and at the escalation of violence that has taken place today.

The Secretary-General condemns rocket fire against Israel by Hamas, which intensified today and killed an Israeli civilian in Sderot. He calls on Hamas and other militant groups to cease such acts of terrorism.

The Secretary-General also condemns the killing of four Palestinian children, including an infant, in Gaza in IDF strikes. He calls on Israel to exercise maximum restraint and ensure respect for international humanitarian law so as not to endanger civilians.

These events underscore the urgent need for a calming of violence, and must not be allowed to deter the continuation of the political process.

(*UN News Centre*)

Prime Minister Olmert said that a war was being waged in southern Israel and the Gaza Strip, and vowed that "no one in Hamas, not the low-level officials or the highest echelon, will be immune against this war." However, he said that, "I don't recall even once speaking about a large-scale ground operation in the Strip." (*Haaretz*)

Fourteen Palestinian patients from the Gaza Strip crossed into Egypt through an Israeli border crossing. Israel refused to let nine others to go through, without giving a reason, according to Hani Jabbour, a Palestinian official. (*AP*)

B'Tselem, in a report, criticized a military probe that decided not to press charges in an errant artillery attack that killed 21 Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip in 2006.

The army announced that it was closing the matter after its investigation determined that the deaths were the result of a "rare and severe" technical malfunction.

In the statement, B'Tselem questioned whether the inquiry met proper legal standards. (*AP*)

Secretary-General of the League of Arab States Amr Moussa was chosen to head the Yasser Arafat Foundation in Cairo. Some 50 Palestinians leaders, Arab politicians and intellectuals, including PA President Abbas, gathered to launch the Foundation. Dr. Nasser Al-Kidwa, former PA Foreign Minister, was appointed head of the board of trustees. "The purpose of the centre is to honour the memory of the *rais* among Palestinians and the whole world. It is important to initiate humanistic and academic activities in order to increase support among women and children, to encourage excellence and to strengthen the unity and national connection between all Palestinians," a statement said. (*Ma'an News Agency, Xinhua, Ynetnews*)

The Water Utility in the Gaza Strip said that it had run short of chlorine because of an Israeli blockade and the residents should start boiling their drinking water to purify it. Officials said there had been no deliveries of chlorine, needed to purify the water, since 21 January. More than one-third of Gaza's water supply was now untreated, said Maher Najjar, Deputy Director of the Utility. (*AP*)

US State Department Deputy Spokesman Tom Casey said that starting on 3 March, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would be travelling to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. "In Israel and in the Palestinian territories, she'll meet with officials from both sides. And obviously, this is part of the follow-up to the Annapolis process and I'm sure she'll get a good sense there from the parties as to the state of play of their discussions and negotiations and cover a variety of other bilateral issues as well," Mr. Casey said. (*AFP, AP, www.state.gov*)

28

Israel carried out a series of air strikes in northern and central Gaza, killing at least 14 people, five of them civilians, including four boys who were struck as they played soccer in Jabaliya in northern Gaza. Relatives said that the boys ranged in age from 8 to 14. The Israeli army said that it was targeting "militants and rocket-launcher squads." (*AP*)

An Israeli helicopter carried out a strike about 150 yards from the home of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in the Shati refugee camp in Gaza City. One person was killed and four people were wounded, officials said. (*AP*)

Two militants affiliated with the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades were killed in clashes with Israeli forces in the Balata refugee camp, east of Nablus. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israeli forces apprehended 12 Palestinians during raids in Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Palestinian militants fired at least 10 rockets into Israel, Israeli police said. Two people were slightly wounded. Police said that four foreign-made rockets had reached the southern Israeli city of Ashkelon. (*AP*)

Two Palestinians were killed in an Israeli air strike in the city of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, medics and witnesses said. The two were reportedly in a car

belonging to the Gaza Power Station Company. Hours before the strike, another two Palestinians were killed as they were in a truck that delivered Coca-Cola cans in Gaza City. The two were members of the Popular Resistance Committees. *(Xinhua)*  
*Haaretz* reported a total number of 20 Palestinian deaths for the entire day. At least 18 Palestinians, including five boys under the age of 16 and a 6-month-old baby, were killed in clashes with the IDF in the Gaza Strip and two militants were killed in the West Bank. *(Haaretz)*  
During his visit to Tokyo, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reiterated that Israel would not negotiate peace with Hamas. Mr. Olmert called Hamas a "terrorist organization." *(Xinhua)*  
Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said that Israel must prepare for a further escalation of the tensions and would not be afraid of launching a large-scale ground incursion into the Gaza Strip to put an end to the incessant rocket attacks. During a visit to Ashkelon, Mr. Barak blamed Hamas for the escalating violence in the south, and said that the movement would bear the consequences of it. *(AP, Haaretz, Xinhua)*

The European Union Presidency, held by Slovenia, issued a [statement](#) condemning rocket attacks from Gaza on Southern Israel and calling for their immediate end. While recognising Israel's right to self-defense and protection of its citizens, it urged Israel to show restraint and refrain from all activities contrary to international law. *(www.eu2008.si)*

29

Israel launched seven new air strikes in the northern Gaza Strip. According to Mu'awiya Hassanain, a Palestinian health official, 19 Palestinians, including a two-month old baby, were injured in one of the air raids which destroyed the headquarters of the Palestinian Syndicate of Labourers in the Saftawi neighbourhood in the north of Gaza City. In another attack on a rocket-production facility in the Shati refugee camp, five Palestinians, including two children, were wounded, Palestinian sources reported. The IAF also carried out two air strikes in the Jabalya area and one in Beit Lahia. IDF troops have also been operating on the outskirts of Beit Hanoun. Meanwhile tens of thousands of Gazans took to the streets to protest against the Israeli raids. *(Haaretz, Ma'an News Agency)*

An elderly Palestinian woman, 72-year-old Fatima Al-Qar'awi, died from a heart attack as Israeli warplanes targeted a house in the northern Gaza Strip, Palestinian medical sources said. Earlier, Palestinian medical sources announced the death of a 20-year-old man, who died of wounds sustained in the Israeli raid on a police station in Gaza City the day before. *(Ma'an News Agency)*

A Qassam rocket fired from the Gaza Strip hit a house in the town of Sderot. A woman was lightly wounded in the attack. A total of 16 rockets were fired at southern Israel. Most landed in open areas, causing no injuries or damage. *(The Jerusalem Post)*

A Palestinian died in an Israeli jail, with Palestinian officials laying the blame on "medical negligence" on the part of Israel's prison service. Israeli prison authorities rejected the accusation. *(AFP)*

The Israeli military had completed its preparations for a major ground offensive and notified the Government it was ready to move immediately when the order was given, Israeli Defense officials said. Over the past few days, the IDF had positioned an artillery battery near the border to the Gaza Strip and dozens of tanks had made their way to an assembling area north of the Gaza Strip, *Yedioth Ahronoth* reported. Israeli troops had already entered the Gaza Strip ahead of a possible large-scale ground incursion, according to the report. *(AP, Xinhua)*

Israel's Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai said that Palestinians firing rockets from the Gaza Strip would bring upon themselves what he termed a "shoah", the Hebrew word for disaster or holocaust. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said: "This is a proof of Israel's pre-planned aggressive intentions against our people." Mr. Vilnai's spokesman said: "Mr. Vilnai was meaning 'disaster'. He did not mean to make any allusion to the genocide." *(Reuters)*

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Gulf Cooperation Council condemned the deadly Israeli raids on the Gaza Strip and urged the United Nations to rein in Israel. Meanwhile, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora denounced what he described as Israeli "massacres" against Palestinians in Gaza and called on the world and Arab communities to intervene to stop the bloodshed. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit urged Israel and the Palestinians to show restraint over the situation in the Gaza Strip and denounced Israeli military operations for excessive use of force. *(AP, DPA, Thomson Financial)*

The Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People issued a [statement](#) saying that it was "seriously disturbed by the escalation of violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, especially in the Gaza Strip." *(UN press release GA/PAL/1080)*

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman, during her Middle East tour next week, Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit said. He added that Ms. Rice's meeting with top Egyptian officials would focus on Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. *(AP)*

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