

Division for Palestinian Rights
***Chronological Review of Events Relating to the
 Question of Palestine***
 Monthly media monitoring review
 December 2006

Monthly highlights

- PA President Abbas announces plans to call early election. ([9 December](#))
- PA President Abbas meets Israeli Prime Minister Olmert for the first time in 22 months. ([23 December](#))
- Israeli Cabinet approves transfer of up to \$100 million of customs duties owed to Palestinians. ([24 December](#))
- The Israeli Defence Ministry approves new settlement in the northern Jordan Valley. ([25 December](#))

1

The Israeli army said that its troops had shot dead a Palestinian who had attacked an Israeli patrol outside the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, throwing a Molotov cocktail and wounding one soldier. Palestinian medical sources said Bashar Hmedan Al-Ja'bgari, 22, had been shot by Israeli forces in the chest and head. (*AP, Ma'an News Agency*)

The army arrested 29 Palestinians in raids across the West Bank overnight. (*AP*)

A Palestinian man died from injuries sustained from Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip, a medical source said. Morad Abu Awad, in his twenties, was wounded 10 days ago during an Israeli arrest operation in a neighbourhood of Gaza City. Medics said he was probably a civilian. (*AFP*)

Palestinians launched a makeshift rocket from the Gaza Strip towards southern Israel, causing no casualties or damage, a military source said. The rocket landed in an uninhabited area in the western Negev desert, *Israeli Public Radio* reported. (*AFP*)

Unknown gunmen detonated a bomb in front of the Arab Bank in Gaza City, destroying its frontage. The Palestinian Authority (PA) had condemned the attack. During earlier protests against lack of salaries, demonstrators had thrown stones at banks. (*Xinhua*)

PA President Mahmoud Abbas convened the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee and leaders of all parliamentary groups, excluding Hamas, to discuss future steps after declaring that talks to form a national unity Government with Hamas was at a dead end, and called on PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas to resign to make way for the appointment of a new Prime Minister who could then resume negotiations with Mr. Abbas. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said, "We cannot accept such a step which is against Palestinian democracy and goes against the election results. The PLO does not represent the Palestinian people." Palestinian Chief Negotiator Saeb Erakat, who also took part in the talks, said that Mr. Abbas would "very soon" deliver a speech to explain the situation to the Palestinian people. He also said that a committee of legal experts, put together by the President, should present its recommendations during a follow-up meeting on 4 December. (*AFP, AP*)

The General Assembly took action on four draft resolutions considered under agenda item 14, "Question of Palestine." The draft resolution entitled "Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People" (A/61/L.31) was adopted as resolution 61/22 by 101 votes to 7, with 62 abstentions; the draft resolution entitled "Division for Palestinian Rights of the Secretariat" (A/61/L.32) was adopted as resolution 61/23 by 101 votes to 7, with 62 abstentions; the draft resolution entitled "Special information programme on the question of Palestine of the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat" (A/61/L.33) was adopted as resolution 61/24 by 157 votes to 7, with 9 abstentions; and the draft resolution entitled "Peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine" (A/61/L.34, revised) was adopted as resolution 61/25 by 157 votes to 7, with 10 abstentions. The Assembly also took action on the draft resolutions considered under agenda item 13, "The situation in the Middle East." The draft resolution entitled "Jerusalem" (A/61/L.35) was adopted as resolution 61/26 by 157 votes to 6, with 10 abstentions. (*UN press release GA/10543*)

2

Ayman Abu Imhady, 11, died after being wounded by an Israeli tank in the Gaza Strip two weeks earlier. He was wounded when a shell exploded near him. (*AFP*)

An Israeli naval boat fired at Palestinian fishing vessels in the southern Gaza Strip, the first Israeli violation of the ceasefire, according to Palestinian security forces. There were no injuries, and the Israeli military denied the report. (*AFP*)

The Israeli army arrested six "wanted" Palestinians across the West Bank. A female Palestinian activist was arrested near Ramallah. Two other Palestinians were arrested east of Bethlehem, and, in Hebron, the IDF arrested two Hamas members and one other "wanted" Palestinian. (*Ha'aretz*)

Palestinian factions agreed with PA President Abbas to enforce the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. Saleh Zidan of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) said the factions agreed on forming a special committee to outline conditions that secured the continuation of calm. A Palestinian report said Israel had breached the ceasefire 70 times, mostly in the West Bank, which the Palestinians had demanded should be covered under the ceasefire deal. (*Xinhua*)

3

IDF troops shot and killed Jamil al-Zabazhi, 15, who was reportedly throwing rocks at soldiers near Nablus. Medical personnel said soldiers had opened fire on protesters who had been throwing stones at military vehicles. The youth was shot in the head and died on the way to the hospital. (*AFP, AP, Ha'aretz*)

Salih ar-Rajabi, 16, was seriously injured and incurred several fractures after being hit by several Israeli soldiers in Hebron. The soldiers also

attacked his mother, Rida, 47, when she tried to grab her son from the soldiers. (*Ma'an News Agency*)
Palestinian militants fired a Qassam rocket at the western Negev. The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack. The rocket, the seventh that had been fired since the ceasefire came into effect a week earlier, caused neither damage nor injuries. (*AFP, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA), Ha'aretz*)
Banks in the Occupied Palestinian Territory went on a one-day strike to protest an attack against a bank in the Gaza Strip. The strike was a warning against attacks on Palestinian institutions, according to a bank spokesman. (*Xinhua*)
A group of settlers from the "Haggaï" settlement, south of Hebron, uprooted more than 100 olive trees belonging to the Palestinian Toubasi family. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Israelis and Palestinians threatened to scrap the truce, which Palestinians insisted should also apply to the West Bank, while Israeli leaders complained that rocket squads were still active. Islamic Jihad spokesman Abu Hamza said that Israel had violated the ceasefire by continuing operations in the West Bank. "We will respond to any violation", he said. A Hamas statement said that rocket attacks would resume unless Israel extended the ceasefire to the West Bank within two weeks. Five Palestinians had been killed since the start of the ceasefire. Prime Minister Olmert warned that "Israel would not be able to show restraint for very much longer in the face of ongoing rocket fire", according to a statement from Mr. Olmert's office. Defence Minister Amir Peretz said security forces would continue to operate in the West Bank. At its meeting, Israel's security cabinet decided to continue the policy of restraint in the Gaza Strip in order to maintain the ceasefire, but no decision was made on whether to extend it to the West Bank. (*AFP, AP, Ha'aretz*)

The Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee decided that the IDF would no longer arrest Palestinians in the West Bank without explicit approval from either the GOC Central Command or the commander of the IDF in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The IDF remained opposed to expanding the ceasefire to the West Bank, saying that terrorist organizations had no intention of stopping attempts to launch attacks from there. (*Ha'aretz*)

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said that Hamas was pulling out of talks with PA President Abbas on establishing a broader ceasefire. A Hamas statement said, "The comprehensive *tahdīyeh* (short-term ceasefire) must come as part of a comprehensive national plan ... Talks on the ceasefire are being held at the expense of talks on internal Palestinian issues." President Abbas said he was hopeful that a Palestinian unity government could be formed, despite the collapse in talks. He said any delay would harm chances of ending international economic sanctions on the PA, and would thus hurt the Palestinian people. (*AP, DPA, Ha'aretz*)

The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, promised to pay the salaries of the PA education and health ministries, covering almost 40,000 employees and amounting to \$22.5 million a month. As much was announced during a visit of PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh to Doha. Mr. Haniyeh had also held talks with King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain during a brief visit to Manama. The Bahraini monarch said that he would seek to ensure that leaders of the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council adopted "decisions in support of the Palestinians" during their annual summit in Riyadh on 9 and 10 December. (*AFP, BBC, DPA, Qatar News Agency*)

The French socialist presidential candidate, Segolène Royal, called for the resumption of international aid to the Palestinians during a visit to the Gaza Strip. (*AFP*)

4

Muhammad Firas Faris al-Atrash, 5, was admitted to the intensive care unit at the Al-Ahali Hospital in Hebron after he sustained wounds in the shoulder and neck when a settler shot him while he was standing in the courtyard of his house, near the settlement of "Haggaï". (*Ma'an News Agency*)

The IDF arrested 15 Palestinians across the West Bank. (*Ha'aretz*)

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said his Government would react with restraint to continuing Qassam attacks, saying Israel was hoping to give the ceasefire a chance to develop into further steps towards a peace process. The Knesset had earlier decided that the IDF would no longer arrest Palestinians in the West Bank without explicit approval of senior officers of which Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh had said, "Instructions have been issued to avoid unnecessary frictions and to abstain from actions that could serve as a pretext". (*BBC, Ha'aretz, Ynetnews*)

Israel informed Egyptian Intelligence Chief, Omar Suleiman, of its willingness to release prisoners, during meetings held in Israel last week, a senior source in Jerusalem said. "We agreed to release several hundred women and children, mostly the young among them", the Israeli source said. "We have also agreed to release several hundred [adult male] Palestinian prisoners, among them prisoners sentenced to many years in prison", he added. The senior Israeli source said that the total number of prisoners that Israel would be willing to release "revolves around one thousand. We have made the figure clear to Egypt and they know our stance. The prisoners will be released in a number of stages, women and children during the first stage". (*Ha'aretz*)

In an official statement, Fatah's Central Committee said, "The impasse which negotiations over the national unity government ran up against resulted from the intransigence of Hamas and its refusal to recognize past Israeli-Palestinian agreements". The Committee also said that "Fatah is entirely ready to support a government of national unity able to lift the blockade and end the international boycott". At the same time, PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, speaking to some 2,000 Palestinians in the Yarmuk refugee camp south of Damascus, said "Those who insist on suspending the dialogue must assume responsibility for the consequences", adding "talks over a unity government have reached a dead end, but we support the continuation of dialogue". However, Mr. Haniyeh said he ruled out any compromise. (*AFP*)

Syrian President Bashar Assad held talks in Damascus with PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh on the developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and efforts to form a national unity government, *SANA* news agency reported. Mr. Assad asserted Syria's full support of the Palestinian people, their efforts to establish an independent State, the right of return for Palestine refugees, and the need to break the siege imposed on the Palestinian people. (*Ha'aretz*)

Israeli Environment Minister Gideon Ezra said Israel should consider freeing jailed Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) member Marwan Barghout as part of a deal that would return captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and curb violence in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. A spokeswoman for Prime Minister Olmert said, "The Prime Minister has made it very clear that this subject has not come up in Government". (*Reuters*)

The PA Planning Minister and Acting Finance Minister Samir Abu Aisha announced that an agreement had been reached between the Government and the union of health workers, guaranteeing that the salaries of the employees would be paid and they would return to work. The workers agreed to end their four-month strike once the November salaries were paid, which were due the following day. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

5

Egyptian police found 500 kg of explosives hidden in central Sinai and reportedly bound for the Gaza Strip, police sources said. The police destroyed the explosives, along with a tunnel thought to be used for smuggling. (*AP*)

PA Prime Minister Haniyeh told reporters in Damascus: "The door for dialogue must be kept open and talks between the Palestinians must continue. However, if there are sides among the Palestinians who want to close the door on dialogue, then they alone would bear responsibility for the results of their position." He also reaffirmed the right of the Palestinians to resist Israeli occupation of their land. "The Hamas Government wants to preserve the right of Palestinian refugees to return and the right of resistance against occupation until an independent (Palestinian) State is established", Mr. Haniyeh told a press conference in Damascus, adding, "We want to preserve national unity and deploy all efforts to break the blockade". (*AFP, AP*)

PA President Abbas was to receive proposals on how to end political deadlock after power-sharing talks with the Hamas-led Cabinet reached a deadlock. The recommendations would be submitted to Mr. Abbas by a five-member commission. "The commission has studied several options, and we will present them to President Abbas on his return to Gaza later today", commission member Yasser Abed Rabbo said. (AFP)

Arab Member of Knesset Azmi Bishara (Balad Party) was to submit a Knesset bill the following day to force the Israeli Government to return expropriated land to its original owners in specified cases. According to the proposed law, the property would revert to its owners if after seven years it had not been used for the original purposes intended by the Government, or if the original purpose had been changed. Countless acres of land have been expropriated from Arab and Jewish citizens over the years, and given the status of State land, to be used at the discretion of the Government. (Ha'aretz)

The European Union (EU) announced that the European Commission, through the Temporary International Mechanism, had begun to pay a social allowance of €185 to over 73,000 Palestinian households living below the poverty line. In 2006, the EU and its Member States disbursed and committed €651 million to Palestinians, an increase of 27 per cent, compared to 2005. (www.eu.int)

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack questioned Qatar's pledge to pay the salaries of 40,000 Palestinian teachers. "If the intended use of this money is to pay salaries of Hamas Government workers and it gets funnelled through a Hamas Government, paid directly to a Hamas Government, then that would cross a line of the existing international understanding", he said. (www.state.gov)

6

The IDF wounded two Palestinians as they approached the Gaza Strip-Israel fence, the army said. In a separate incident, a Palestinian approached the Beit Hanoun (Erez) crossing and ignored soldiers' warnings, so the troops shot him in the lower body, the IDF said. (AFP)

The IDF seriously wounded a nine-year-old Palestinian child in Hebron. (Wafa)

IDF troops arrested 30 Palestinians, mostly in Jenin, Palestinian security sources said. (Xinhua)

A Qassam rocket landed in Israel's western Negev region, causing no injuries or damage. (Ynetnews)

Abu Awad, a spokesman for the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in the Gaza Strip, told reporters that his group had decided to resume firing rockets into Israel because of "daily Israeli violations of the ceasefire." (Xinhua)

In a statement to the press, the President of the Security Council, Ambassador Nassir Abdulaziz al-Nasser of Qatar, welcomed steps taken by the Israeli and Palestinian sides to maintain the mutual ceasefire in Gaza, agreed upon by Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and PA President Abbas. Council members expressed "their hope that it would lead to a sustained period of calm", Mr. Al-Nasser said, calling on both sides to avoid any actions that could jeopardize further progress. The members also "repeated their call for an end to all aspects of terrorism and violence as set out in previous statements and resolutions", he added. (UN News Centre)

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in an interview with *The Irish Times*, said "key" international players were belatedly realizing that ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was central to broader Middle East peace. "This recognition, though late, represents a window of opportunity we must seize", Mr. Mubarak said. (AFP)

"Hamas does not want peace, even if we give them '67 borders", Israeli Vice Prime Minister Shimon Peres said. "Hamas wants to use Fatah as a façade to get money." (AP)

The following are excerpts from a report issued by the Iraq Study Group, a US bipartisan commission: "There must be a renewed and sustained commitment by the United States to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts: Lebanon and Syria, and President Bush's June 2002 commitment to a two-State solution for Israel and Palestine. This effort should include - as soon as possible - the unconditional calling and holding of meetings, under the auspices of the United States or the Quartet ..., between Israel and Lebanon and Syria on the one hand, and Israel and Palestinians (who acknowledge Israel's right to exist) on the other. The purpose of these meetings would be to negotiate peace, as was done at the Madrid Conference in 1991, and on two separate tracks - one Syrian/Lebanese, and the other Palestinian. ... Concerning the Palestinian issue, elements of that negotiated peace should include: adherence to UN Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) and to the principle of land for peace, which are the only bases for achieving peace; strong support for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority to take the lead in preparing the way for negotiations with Israel; a major effort to move from the current hostilities by consolidating the ceasefire reached between the Palestinians and the Israelis in November 2006; support for a Palestinian national unity government; sustainable negotiations leading to a final peace settlement along the lines of President Bush's two-state solution, which would address the key final status issues of borders, settlements, Jerusalem, the right of return, and the end of conflict." (The New York Times)

Speaking to newspaper editors about Cpl. Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier captured by Palestinian militants in June, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said, "Negotiations on releasing him are in their final stage and waiting for Hamas' approval". (AP)

The United Nations would ask donor countries to contribute \$450 million when it launched its consolidated appeal for the Occupied Palestinian Territory on 7 December, to support job creation, cash assistance and food aid to the Palestinians, stated David Shearer, head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Jerusalem. The money would also be earmarked to support the Palestinians' health and education systems. (AP)

The Japanese Foreign Ministry stated that the Government had decided to extend assistance of about \$3,720,000 in total to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to "support its three projects for Palestine refugees in Lebanon and to assist its general budgets in educational and other general fields." (AP, www.mofa.go.jp)

Reuters reported that an Israeli businessman, Avi Shaked, had offered PA Prime Minister Haniyeh \$1 billion if he and his Israeli counterpart would sit down and reach a peace agreement. "The moment that both sides reach an agreement, this private equity that I am offering will immediately invest \$1 billion. The first 10 per cent will be invested immediately when the negotiations start", Mr. Shaked said. (Reuters)

7

Israeli troops shot and wounded two Palestinians on the Israel-Gaza border, medical officials said. An Israeli army spokesperson said a number of Palestinians had approached the border fence near the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Lahiya and begun to sabotage it. "The force fired at one Palestinian and hit him in the leg", the spokesperson said, adding that the army was unaware of a second man being hit. (Ma'an News Agency, Reuters)

Israeli forces arrested 29 "wanted" Palestinians in the West Bank overnight. (www.idf.il)

A panel appointed by the PLO recommended that PA President Abbas dissolve the Hamas-led Government and call new elections as early as March, an official close to Mr. Abbas said. Palestinian Chief Negotiator Saeb Erakat said it was premature to jump to any conclusions about the options, but added that the President would deliver a speech the following week outlining his course of action. Mr. Abbas would first meet on 9 December

with the PLO's main decision-making body to discuss strategy, Mr. Erakat said. (AP)

Ma'ariv reported that the United States was putting pressure on Israel to accept the Saudi initiative adopted at the 2002 Arab League Summit, and called for Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders. It added that the United States was attempting to make some amendments to the initiative in order to better suit Israel and allay Israel's reservations and fears. (Ma'an News Agency)

Twelve UN agencies, together with 14 non-governmental organizations operating in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, launched an emergency appeal for \$453.6 million to help meet increasing Palestinian humanitarian needs in 2007. It was the largest appeal for emergency humanitarian assistance ever launched in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the third biggest in the world. (AFP, OCHA press release)

The Spanish Government authorized contributions of €41 million (\$54.5 million) to several UN agencies, including €4 million (\$5.3 million) to UNRWA. (EFE)

The International Committee of the Red Cross said that it was increasing aid to growing numbers of "destitute families" in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory suffering from the "further degradation of the economic situation", for a total of 71 million Swiss francs. (Reuters)

The League of Arab States criticized United States attempts to halt financial aid from Qatar to the PA Government. PA Prime Minister Haniyeh said on 3 December that he had received pledges from Qatar for \$40 million a month to cover the salaries of teachers and some health workers.

The League's Under-Secretary-General, Mohammed Sobeih, said that the PA Government needed the money to pay the salaries of about 165,000 employees, who "do not have other means to sustain themselves". "The logic of siege and isolation against the Palestinians is tantamount to aggression. Siege leads to frustration, and this leads to extremism", he added. (AP)

The US House of Representatives gave final passage, by voice vote, to a bill that would cut off aid to the PA unless it acknowledged Israel's right to exist and accepted all the PA agreements with Israel. The bill would also give the President broad authority to waive penalties if he deemed it in the country's best interests. In passing the Senate bill, which the Senate had already passed, the House had dropped a much harsher bill of its own. (AP)

The Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association, the main grouping of Islamic religious teachers in Singapore, sent letters to Israeli Ambassador to Singapore Ilan Ben-Dov and Palestinian Ambassador to Malaysia Ahmad al-Farra in Kuala Lumpur, praising the ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian militants, while noting that the current situation was "very delicate". It had been heartening to hear calls for restraint and the upholding of the recently declared ceasefire led by Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and PA Prime Minister Haniyeh, the letters stated. "This is a commendable act on the part of the two leaders." The association further urged the two "to quickly pursue a more effective peace process so that true peace shall prevail". The association also called for the lifting of financial sanctions that had "crippled Palestine". (DPA)

"Muslims and independence-seeking nations support the Palestinians because they have adopted the correct position towards the occupiers", Iranian First Vice President Parviz Davoudi told PA Prime Minister Haniyeh at the start of his four-day visit to Iran. (Reuters)

8

Miras al-Azza, 12, was shot in the abdomen when Israeli soldiers opened fire on a group of children playing with a plastic rifle in the Ayda refugee camp near Bethlehem. The soldiers fired from a military position at the camp's entrance. An IDF spokesman stated that soldiers operating in the camp had fired in the direction of a group of armed men. "They were grown and armed", the spokesman insisted. "(Soldiers) fired one bullet at them, but did not identify hitting anyone." (AFP)

A rocket was launched from the Gaza Strip, but struck an uninhabited area along Israel's border with Gaza, causing neither injury nor damage, an IDF spokesman said. No Palestinian group had claimed responsibility for the rocket fire. (AFP, AP)

Two Palestinians were moderately wounded near the Gaza-Israel border. The circumstances of the shooting were unclear, but Palestinian rescue workers and residents said that the two men were unarmed. The IDF stated that soldiers had fired warning shots at people who approached the border at various times throughout the day, but that no one had been hit. (AP, Reuters)

PA Prime Minister Haniyeh told worshippers at Tehran University: "The US and Zionists ... want us to recognize the usurpation of the Palestinian lands and stop jihad and resistance and accept the agreements reached with the Zionist enemies in the past. I'm insisting from this podium that these issues won't materialize. We will never recognize the usurper Zionist Government and will continue our jihad-like movement until the liberation of Jerusalem." (AP)

The President of the UN Human Rights Council, Luis Alfonso de Alba, appointed Christine Chinkin of the United Kingdom a member of the fact-finding mission established by the Council in connection with the Israeli military operations in Beit Hanoun on 8 November resulting in the deaths of at least 18 civilians. A press release by the Council said that Ms. Chinkin would join Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with both expected to depart for the region this weekend. Ms. Chinkin is a professor of international law at the London School of Economics and a faculty member of the University of Michigan Law School. (WFAA, UNOG press release)

A fact-finding mission to the Gaza Strip that was to be led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu was in doubt because Israel had yet to give him permission to enter the territory, officials said. (AP)

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that the Bush Administration "could begin to deliver" on its promise of a Palestinian State living in peace alongside Israel. "No American president has ever dared to say it as a matter of policy", Ms. Rice said of President Bush's declaration in 2002 that he supported the creation of a Palestinian State. At a joint news conference with visiting German Foreign Minister Franz-Walter Steinmeier, Ms. Rice also said that a "freedom deficit" was the core problem in the Middle East. (AP)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said that he was ready to discuss Italy's proposal to send international troops to the Gaza Strip when he arrived in Rome on 13 December for meetings with Prime Minister Romano Prodi and Pope Benedict XVI. Mr. Olmert said in an interview with Italy's *RAI Tg1* TV news that he was on friendly terms with Mr. Prodi and would listen to what he had to say. "If Italy is prepared to allow its army to be engaged on a daily basis against terrorist actions of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the other terrorist organizations operating in Gaza, this is very interesting news. I want to hear about it," he said. (AP)

9

Two Palestinian parliamentary guards were wounded when demonstrators and parliamentary security guards exchanged fire at the PLC building in Gaza City. Some 1,400 uniformed police and other security officers, demonstrating over the non-payment of their salaries, had stormed into the Parliament compound, while some fired into the air as slogans were chanted from loudspeakers. Marchers alleged that Hamas was paying its own militia, the Executive Force, while neglecting the members of the regular security forces. Hospital staff said that the condition of the guards, who were protecting PLC member Ahmed Bahar of Hamas, was not serious. (AP, Reuters)

Some 4,000 members of the Palestinian security forces staged a march in Jenin to press for their salaries. In Hebron, dozens of parents carrying infants broke into a mother-and-child clinic, which had been closed because of the health workers' strike. The parents demanded vaccinations for their babies. Several of the protesters burned tires outside the clinic and set large garbage bags on fire. Doctors and nurses at Government hospitals had been on strike since September, attending only to emergencies and providing minimal services. Union leaders said the strikers would return to their jobs the next day, following Government assurances of more payments. (AP)

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades said in a statement that two rockets they had fired into Israel had been aimed at Kfar Azza, just east of the Gaza Strip, and came in response to the daily breaches of the ceasefire by the IDF in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The statement also condemned

the detention campaign launched by the Israeli army against West Bank activists. (*Xinhua*)

PA President Abbas, speaking at a PLO Executive Committee meeting, said that he might call early elections. "The President announced that he will make a speech to the public within days", said Mustafa Barghouti, an independent PLC member involved in the unity talks, who attended the meeting. "He will declare that if there is no national unity government, he will call for early presidential and legislative council elections without specifying the date yet." "The decision goes back to the people", Palestinian Chief Negotiator Saeb Erakat said. "The goal of this decision is to kick Hamas out of the Palestinian political scene", Khalil al-Hiyya, the leader of the Hamas faction in the PLC, told *AFP*. "This decision is not in the national interest and will only make the situation more tense." (*AFP, AP, DPA*)

Two emissaries of Israeli Prime Minister Olmert paid a secret visit to PA President Abbas in Ramallah. The two men were Mr. Olmert's Bureau Chief, Yoram Turbowicz, and his political adviser, Shalom Turjeman. During the meeting, Mr. Abbas, who also spoke with Mr. Olmert by telephone, indicated that he wanted Israel to release Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti from prison, independent of any deal for the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Mr. Olmert replied that he was not willing to discuss the issue until Cpl. Shalit was released. At the meeting, Mr. Abbas and the Israeli officials also discussed US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's planned visit to the region next month and the possibility of an Olmert-Abbas meeting. A Palestinian source said, "We received several very positive messages from Israel". (*Ha'aretz*)

King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia opened the annual summit of Gulf leaders with a warning that the Arab world was on the brink of exploding because of conflicts in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Iraq and Lebanon. "Our Arab region is surrounded by dangers," he said. "It is like a keg of gunpowder waiting for a spark to explode." The Palestinians were suffering from "a hostile and ugly occupation" by Israel while the international community watched their "bloody tragedy like a spectator," King Abdullah said. But "most dangerous for the [Palestinian] cause is the conflict among brethren," he stressed. (*AFP, AP*)

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said in her weekly Internet address that she wanted to "revitalize" the work of the Quartet when Germany takes over the EU Presidency in January 2007. The focus must be on the political process, which "must now get under way again," said Ms. Merkel, who was to meet the next day with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Berlin, and then with Israeli Prime Minister Olmert on 12 December. (*AFP*)

10

Unknown gunmen opened fire at the convoy of PA Interior Minister Said Siyam in Gaza City but caused no injuries, Interior Ministry spokesman Khaled Abu Hilal said, dismissing the shooting as a random attack and denying that the target had been Mr. Siyam. The men, driving in a nearby car, apparently had shot at a car in the motorcade, but not at the vehicle carrying Mr. Siyam, he said. (*AFP, AP*)

PLC member and PA President Abbas' media adviser Nabil Amr told reporters that in his speech planned for 16 December, Mr. Abbas would announce "an exit from the crisis". "Every country which suffers such a crisis resorts to the ballot box," Mr. Amr added. Mohammed al-Ghoul, a Hamas PLC member, said, "According to the law, the President has no authority to call any referendum or any election. This requires changing provisions in the constitution. It's another desperate attempt to overthrow the existing parliament and government." Speaking during a trip to Iran, PA Prime Minister Haniyeh warned that early elections would lead to chaos, according to *IRNA*. (*AFP, AP*)

A coordination meeting of Arab countries hosting Palestinian refugees opened in Amman, with a view to adopting a unified position ahead of a conference with donors the next day, a press release from the Foreign Ministry said. (*Petra*)

Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority launched a study to examine the feasibility of building a canal to channel water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea (RSDSC). France, the Netherlands, Japan and the US would finance the two-year study estimated to cost around \$15 million. It will be managed by the World Bank. The agreement was reached between Jordanian Water Minister Zafer al-Aalem, Israeli Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben Eliezer and Mohammed Mustafa, the economic adviser to PA President Abbas. Also present at the meeting on the Jordanian shores of the Dead Sea were representatives of the World Bank, Europe, Japan and North America. "The meeting, hosted by the Jordanian Government, launched a feasibility study and environment and social assessment for the Red Sea-Dead Sea water conveyance study," a joint statement said.

"From a principled attitude, we view the project as a political move that has the key aim of normalizing ties with the Zionist entity," the Secretary-General of the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, Zaki Bani Ershaid, had told *DPA* the previous day. "A technical study already conducted has shown that the project involves political, economic, environmental and geological perils to Jordan," he said. (*AFP, DPA, Reuters*)

Amnesty International Secretary General Irene Khan, in an open letter to EU leaders to coincide with International Human Rights Day and ahead of the meeting of the European Council, called for urgently addressing "the downward spiral of human rights abuses in Israel and the occupied territories". Speaking the day before after a week-long tour of the region, Ms. Khan said international monitors should be deployed in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel to document and investigate human rights violations. Ms. Khan also criticized Israel's "deliberate and reckless shooting and artillery shelling or air strikes carried out in densely populated areas in the Gaza Strip." (*AFP, AP*)

11

Unknown gunmen opened fire on a car in Gaza City, killing four people, including three children. Medical officials named the dead as Osama, Ahmed, and Salam, with ages variously given from 3 to 9, whose father, Baha Ba'lousha, is a colonel in a security intelligence service. The fourth fatality was reported as the children's driver, Mahmud al-Habil, 25. Some reports named the fourth fatality as 18-year-old student Ahmed al-Habil.

Four schoolgirls, two of them sisters, were reportedly wounded in the attack. Witnesses said the car with the Ba'lousha children had been driving down a street crowded with students on their way to school, and Gazans on their way to work, when two vehicles blocked its route. A gunman had stepped out of one vehicle and sprayed the Ba'lousha car with automatic gunfire, before speeding off again. Officials assumed the intended target of the attack was Mr. Ba'lousha himself, who had not been in the car, but whose absence could not be determined because of the vehicle's blacked-out windows. (*AP, DPA*)

Mourners firing automatic weapons stormed the PLC compound in the Gaza Strip during a funeral procession for three boys who were earlier shot dead by unidentified gunmen. (*Reuters*)

An IDF soldier was moderately wounded when Palestinians opened fire on an IDF convoy in Qabatiyeh, south of Jenin. The convoy was en route to the scene of a vehicular accident. The Palestinians opened fire from a distance, wounding the soldier in the head. (*Ha'aretz*)

"The Shin Bet and Israeli police uncovered last month a network of weapon-traders who smuggled large quantities of ammunition and weapons from Israel into the West Bank," Israel's internal security service stated. The smuggling ring was believed to have been headed by Mohammed Mahmud Falah Ajbariya, 29, from the northern Israeli town of Umm el-Fahm. "According to suspicions, Mr. Ajbariya was involved during the past two years in smuggling M-16 assault rifles, handguns and thousands of bullet rounds to traders in the West Bank," the statement said, adding that so far, three Palestinians and 10 Israeli Arabs had been detained on suspicion of involvement in the weapons trading with Mr. Ajbariya. (*AFP*)

Yasser Abed Rabbo was appointed Secretary-General of the PLO Executive Committee. (*Ma'an News Agency*)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said he was distressed that Israel had blocked his planned mission to Gaza to investigate last month's killing of 19 Palestinian civilians by Israeli shells. Archbishop Tutu and his fellow team member, Christine Chinkin, said they no longer had time to complete the visit by the end of the week as planned. "We find the lack of cooperation by the Israeli Government very distressing," they said in a joint statement.

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev said that Israel was concerned about the mission's platform, saying it "advances a biased anti-Israeli agenda", but said Israel was "still considering the request" for the mission's authorization to travel. (*AFP, Reuters*)

PA Prime Minister Haniyeh said that Iran had pledged some \$250 million in direct financial aid to Palestinians in 2007, including \$120 million in direct

funds to the PA Government. (Reuters)

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called on international donors to make up "the current, worrying shortfall" in the UNRWA budget, with an operational deficit of over \$100 million already looming. "Such efforts merit strong support from the international community," he said in a message delivered by UN Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Kevin Kennedy to the second annual meeting of UNRWA host authorities and donor Governments in Amman. "While awaiting the fulfilment of their political rights, Palestinian refugees have a right to live in safety and dignity, and are entitled to services and opportunities," he added. (UN News Centre, UN press release SG/SM/10790-PAL/2005)

Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdul Ilah al-Khatib, at the opening of the second annual meeting of UNRWA host authorities and donor Governments, urged the international community to exert sustained efforts to support UNRWA. During the two-day conference, UNRWA Deputy Commissioner-General Filippo Grandi was due to launch the Agency's 2007 emergency appeal. About 30 host and donor countries were taking part in the meeting. (DPA, Xinhua)

At the meeting of UNRWA host authorities and donor Governments in Amman, former UN special adviser Lakhdar Brahimi urged the world community to re-engage in efforts to secure Israeli-Palestinian peace. The policies adopted by the Quartet after the victory of Hamas "have been utterly misguided", and amounted to "harsh collective punishment inflicted on all Palestinians because 'they did not vote right'", he said. "The position of the United States and the European Union and even of the United Nations on Palestinian issues renders their pronouncements on human rights and democracy hollow, if not downright hypocritical," Mr. Brahimi said. (AFP)

EU Foreign Ministers were set to extend the EU aid programme for Palestinians, as officials warned of a worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza and the West Bank. EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said that she was suggesting a three-month extension of the Temporary International Mechanism. "The situation in the Palestinian territories is deteriorating," Ms. Ferrero-Waldner said, also urging Israel to unblock the transfer of taxes and customs duties to the Palestinians to alleviate the territories' cash crisis. (DPA)

The higher committee of Palestinian factions will propose a new plan to settle differences between Hamas and PA President Abbas over forming a unity government, said Khaled al-Batsh, a senior official of Islamic Jihad. (Xinhua)

A Palestinian female novelist was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature for this year by the American University in Cairo, MENA reported. Sahar Khalifa was granted the prize for her novel "Image, Icon & Old Era", which highlights the spiritual atmosphere of Jerusalem and the suffering and frustration of the Palestinian people. (Xinhua)

The PA Government allocated some \$50,000 to Bethlehem for holiday decorations, more than twice the amount spent in previous years. (AP)

12

Hamas security forces opened fire on stone-throwing demonstrators in the southern Gaza Strip town of Khan Yunis, wounding four Fatah activists, one day after the killing of three children of a Fatah official. A Fatah senior official, Hussein al-Sheikh, said, "Of course people very close to Hamas, to say the least, are behind the killings. We hold the Government and the Interior Minister directly responsible". Senior Hamas lawmaker Mushir al-Masri denied Hamas had anything to do with the attack. (AP Ha'aretz)

Heavily-armed members of PA security forces took up positions around key installations and road junctions in Gaza City. "Palestinian security forces had been deployed in all streets of Gaza City to prevent crime. This was upon orders from President Abbas," a security source said. A force loyal to the Hamas Government had also strengthened its positions. There was no immediate sign of friction between the Abbas and Hamas forces. (Ha'aretz)

Three Qassam rockets fired from the Gaza Strip hit the western Negev. No injuries or damage were reported. (Ha'aretz)

The Shin Bet announced that, in recent months, security forces had arrested roughly 50 Islamic Jihad members in the South Hebron Hills. Among those arrested were seven operatives suspected of expressing a willingness to carry out suicide bombings. (Ha'aretz)

Riad al-Luah, an Israeli Arab, was released after 46 days in captivity in the Gaza Strip. Mr. Al-Luah was a resident of Tira, in Israel. Born in Gaza and married to an Israeli woman, he was abducted in Gaza on 27 October, while visiting family members there. (Ha'aretz)

An Israeli special unit dressed in civilian attire abducted three Palestinians driving in a car in Tulkarm, witnesses said. The three Palestinians were Salah Iraqi, 24, the driver, and two other travellers. (Wafa)

The IDF arrested 11 Palestinians in the West Bank, security sources and witnesses said. Four brothers were arrested in Nablus; four Palestinians were arrested in Qalqilya; three Palestinians, two in Hebron and one in Bethlehem, were also arrested. (Wafa)

Latifa Miskawi, 57, died of a heart attack when IDF soldiers hurled a stun grenade inside her home in Qalqilya. (Wafa)

IDF soldiers, stationed on the border east of Gaza City, shot at a Palestinian, wounding him moderately. In another incident, a settler ran over a five-year-old child as he was heading near al-Ibrahimiya School, Jihad Jeber, the child's father, said. Hospital sources said that the child had severe bruises on the head and left hand. (Wafa)

Secretary-General Kofi Annan briefed the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, his last briefing before leaving office on 31 January 2007. He said, "Mistrust between Israelis and Palestinians has reached new heights", adding "The international community must develop a new understanding of the uncertainty engulfing the Middle East, and then shoulder its full responsibility in resolving it and stabilizing the region." He said, "One of the most frustrating aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the apparent inability of many people on both sides to understand the position of the other, and the unwillingness of some to even try". As a true friend and supporter of both sides, Mr. Annan sent frank messages to each, including: "Thousands of Israelis still live in territories occupied in 1967 – and more than 1,000 more are added every month. As Palestinians watch this activity, they also see a barrier being built through their land in contravention of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, as well as more than 500 checkpoints to control their movement, and the heavy presence of the Israeli Defence Forces. Their despair at the occupation only grows, as does their determination to resist it. As a result, some tend to invest much of their trust in those who pursue the armed struggle, rather than a peace process that does not seem to yield the coveted goal of an independent State". (UN News Centre)

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said there was "nothing more important" in world politics than the Middle East peace process. Mr. Blair, who was preparing to make a trip to the region, told a news conference in London that the situation for the Palestinians had become "desperate". Asked whether he saw any cause for optimism about achieving a breakthrough, Blair said, "It is precisely because of the desperate situation that I think it's important we make every effort to break the deadlock." Mr. Blair said that he would have discussions with PA President Abbas on the prospects for a government of national unity. (DPA)

In Berlin, visiting Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said his country was making an "exceptional effort" to launch a dialogue with the Palestinians on the basis of the Road Map. Mr. Olmert's meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel discussed the revival of the Quartet. (AP)

Qin Gang, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, said China would be hosting a symposium during the week for Israeli and Palestinian politicians to discuss peace in the Middle East. The four-day event would begin on 14 December. He said the meeting would be attended by Yossi Beilin, leader of the Meretz Party, and Abdel-Kader Hamid, a former legislator. "China firmly supports any efforts conducive to peace in the Middle East," Mr. Qin said at a briefing, "No matter the past, the present or the future, we will devote ourselves to the Mideast peace process." (AP)

The Israeli Supreme Court ruled unanimously that Palestinian civilians, harmed in military operations in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, have the right to sue Israel for compensation, Israel Radio reported. The ruling by the nine-judge panel rendered invalid an amendment to Israel's compensation law, which stated that residents of "conflict areas" could not sue Israel for damages. The amendment, known as the "intifada law," was passed by

the Knesset in July 2005, and applied retroactively to the beginning of the current Palestinian uprising in September 2000. But another amendment, which stipulated that citizens of enemy States or members of terrorist organizations were not entitled to sue Israel for damages, was not overturned.

In its ruling, the court accepted three petitions filed by nine Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations, including B'Tselem, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, Doctors for Human Rights and Rabbis for Human Rights. The petitioners had argued that Israel, as an occupying power, was responsible for the safety and well-being of civilians under its occupation. (DPA)

A press release issued by UNRWA said that the living conditions among Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank had slumped to levels unseen since 1967. The statement said that UNRWA, the biggest humanitarian actor in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, carried a major burden of the impact of the crisis. Consequently, UNRWA was appealing for \$246 million in emergency funding for 2007. Interventions would provide social safety net support to increasing numbers of needy refugees in the form of food aid, job creation and emergency cash assistance, and respond to considerably increased demand on health services. (www.un.org/unrwa)

Karen Koning AbuZayd, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, thanked the Government of the United Kingdom for its contribution of £76.6 million to help support UNRWA over the next four years. The British Secretary of State for International Development, the Right Honorable Hilary Benn, MP, signed a memorandum of understanding with Mrs. AbuZayd at Kalandia refugee camp in the West Bank. (www.un.org/unrwa)

A Security Council presidential statement said that efforts to bring peace to the Middle East must be intensified, emergency assistance should be provided to Palestinians living in the occupied territories and the goal of Israel and Palestine "living side-by-side in peace and security," should be upheld. The statement was issued after Secretary-General Kofi Annan's last Security Council briefing on the situation in the Middle East, including the question of Palestine, in which he called for a "new and urgent push for peace" and warned that "tensions in the region are near the breaking point." (UN News Centre, S/PRST/2006/51)

In an article published in *The Guardian*, former President Jimmy Carter said, "My new book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, is devoted to circumstances and events in Palestine and not in Israel, where democracy prevails and citizens live together and are legally guaranteed equal status".

He also said, "The book describes the abominable oppression and persecution in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, with a rigid system of required passes and strict segregation between Palestine's citizens and Jewish settlers in the West Bank. An enormous imprisonment wall is now under construction, snaking through what is left of Palestine, to encompass more and more land for Israeli settlers. In many ways, this is more oppressive than what black people lived under in South Africa during apartheid. I have made it clear that the motivation is not racism, but the desire of a minority of Israelis to confiscate and colonize choice sites in Palestine, and then to forcefully suppress any objections from the displaced citizens. Obviously, I condemn acts of terrorism or violence against innocent civilians, and I present information about the casualties on both sides. The ultimate purpose of my book is to present facts about the Middle East that are largely unknown in America, to precipitate discussion and help restart peace talks that can lead to permanent peace for Israel and its neighbours". (The Guardian)

13

Three Palestinian fishermen were injured when Israeli ships fired at their boat off the shore of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli troops shot a 21-year-old Palestinian, Ala Makawi, in the head and killed him along the border fence between the Gaza Strip and Israel, medical sources said. Two others were wounded. A military spokesman said soldiers had shot a man armed with a gun and a grenade north of the Karni crossing. (AFP)

Two Palestinians stabbed and gravely wounded an Israeli security guard at the Qalandiya checkpoint between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, Israeli officials said. One of the Palestinian assailants was apprehended and the other escaped, a police spokesman said. (AP)

Israeli forces arrested four Palestinians in Bethlehem, four in the Jenin refugee camp, and two teenagers in Abu Dis. (IMEMC, Wafa)

IDF soldiers stormed into al-Sammoa' High School in al-Khan area, north of Hebron, security sources said. The Secretary of the school, Ghalib al-Za'reer, said the soldiers caused damage to equipment and property. Israeli soldiers also seized the house of Salah al-Badareen, next to the school, and turned it into a military post. (Wafa)

Palestinian gunmen shot to death Bassam Al-Fara, 30, a judge at the Islamic court, outside the courthouse where he worked in Gaza City, forcing PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh to cut short a trip abroad. The death came two days after the killing of the three young sons of a Fatah Palestinian intelligence officer in a drive-by shooting, sparking renewed conflict between the Hamas and Fatah factions. Mr. Al-Fara was a Hamas commander who belonged to the largest clan in Khan Yunis. In a statement faxed to reporters, Hamas blamed a Fatah "death squad" for Mr. Al-Fara's death. Fatah spokesman Tawfik Abu Khousa rejected the accusations saying, "We condemn all acts of anarchy, whatever may be behind them. We call on the brothers in Hamas to stop firing accusations before the investigation". In Khartoum, Prime Minister Haniyeh dismissed fears of the violence in Gaza escalating into a civil war saying, "We will protect the national unity of the Palestinian people and we will thwart any attempt to instigate an inter-Palestinian struggle." Hamas forces had set up their own roadblocks throughout Gaza City, searching for the shooters, while about 1,000 Fatah members, about half of them uniformed security personnel, marched through the city to the residence of President Abbas. "We tell Abu Mazen [President Abbas] the time has come to exercise your powers and stop this farce," said Othman Shalouf, an officer in the National Security Service. (AP)

Speaking at a press conference in Khartoum, PA Prime Minister Haniyeh said that Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir had pledged \$10 million to the Palestinian Government and people. (The Jerusalem Post)

Following a meeting in Damascus, a statement issued by Damascus-based Palestinian factions unanimously rejected early presidential and legislative elections and urged the formation of a national unity government. The statement said that elections "would create excessive tensions and divisions in the Palestinian arena." Moussa Abu Marzouk, deputy head of Hamas Political Bureau, said that the political differences between Palestinian factions were to blame for the deteriorating security situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. He said the "call for early elections is a coup against democracy and legitimacy". Mr. Abu Marzouk also urged the resumption of dialogue "without foreign interference," and urged Fatah not to succumb to pressures. (DPA)

The water treatment plant for Aqbat Jaber refugee camp in the West Bank city of Jericho will be re-opened after being upgraded with Dutch technology and financial assistance. The UNESCO Institute for Water Education, which had been closely involved in the upgrading of the plant, said that this treatment plant supplied drinking water to more than 5,000 inhabitants in the refugee camp. Both the camp and the treatment plant were run by UNRWA. The first stage of the renovation had been completed and the governor and mayor of Jericho, as well as officials from UNRWA, were expected to attend the official opening of the upgraded water plant today. (Ma'an News Agency)

Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi suggested prisoner exchange between Israel and the Palestinians as a confidence-building measure, and called for direct talks between Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and PA President Abbas. "It is necessary to attempt a conversation on the exchange of prisoners," Mr. Prodi said, adding that he would bring up the issue to the EU Council. (AP)

In a statement issued by its Foreign Ministry, the South African Government expressed disappointment at the Israeli Government's decision not to grant permission to the Human Rights Council fact-finding mission to be led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to investigate the deaths of 19 Palestinians in Beit Hanoun in November and called on Israel to reconsider its decision. (www.dfa.gov.za)

14

A 27-year-old Palestinian, Wahib al-Dik, was killed when Israeli soldiers opened fire at stone-throwers in the village of Kafr al-Dik in the northern West Bank. (AFP, Ha'aretz, Ma'an News Agency, Wafa)

Israeli special police unit troops dressed as civilians killed a 26-year-old Palestinian member of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in Nablus, Palestinian witnesses and medical officials said. A 10-year-old boy was one of at least two bystanders wounded. (Ha'aretz)

Israeli forces arrested five Palestinians in the Balata refugee camp in Nablus, three in Jenin, three in Bethlehem, and one in the Tulkarm refugee camp. (Wafa)

Israeli troops discovered 8 kg of explosives during a search of a car at a checkpoint east of Nablus. Four Palestinians riding in the vehicle were taken in for questioning. (Ha'aretz)

Four Qassam rockets launched from the Gaza Strip hit southern Israel. One of the rockets hit a residential area in Sderot, damaging buildings and parked cars. A second landed near a road between a kibbutz and Sderot. A third hit a kibbutz, damaging the electricity infrastructure and shattering windows. The fourth was not located. (Ha'aretz)

Two Hamas members and two bystanders were injured when unknown gunmen fired at a rally of Hamas supporters in the Balata refugee camp in Nablus. Also, a Hamas activist in the Rafidia neighbourhood of Nablus was shot and injured by unknown gunmen. (Ma'an News Agency)

After waiting at the Rafah crossing for hours, which Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz had ordered closed to prevent PA Prime Minister Haniyeh from returning from a trip abroad, Mr. Haniyeh crossed into Gaza late in the day. He had to leave behind an estimated \$35 million (€26.6 million) that he had hoped to carry into Gaza. Mr. Haniyeh emerged from the border terminal and prepared to climb on the back of a pickup truck, presumably to deliver a speech, when gunshots rang out. Bodyguards jumped on Mr. Haniyeh to protect him and one bodyguard was killed. Mr. Haniyeh's son, Abdel Salam, was shot and injured in the jaw and his political adviser, Ahmed Yousef, in the finger. In total, 27 were wounded in the gun battles. Mr. Haniyeh later said, "We know the party that shot directly at our cars ... and we also know how to deal with this." Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said, "The Presidential Guard controls the Palestinian side [of the border terminal]. There are no other gunmen there.

They are responsible for security of the border. ... We say there was a clear assassination attempt." Wael Dahab, a spokesman for the Presidential Guard, said many gunmen had been in the area and that it had been difficult to control the situation. "Our men did not start the shooting.

They did not shoot, and there were many people carrying guns," he said. (AP)

Palestinian intelligence officers entered a Hamas-dominated neighbourhood of Gaza City to arrest Hisham Mukhmir of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC), a suspect in the killings of the three young sons of a Fatah-linked security official on 11 December. The officers came under fire and three of them were wounded, including one who was in serious condition. Several hours later, PRC militants, furious at the arrest, kidnapped an intelligence officer, Maj. Mohamed Abu Siyam, as he waited for a taxi in Gaza City. Abu Abir, a PRC spokesman, said Mr. Abu Siyam would not be released until Mr. Mukhmir was freed and warned that more intelligence officers would be kidnapped. (AP)

The High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, Javier Solana, deplored the violence at the EU monitored Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, while criticizing PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh for attempting to carry a huge sum in cash across the border. "We are not for transferring money in the pockets - that should be clear," he said at a meeting of the Council of the European Union in Brussels. (DPA)

Asked about PA Prime Minister Haniyeh's attempt to carry \$35 million in cash into the Gaza Strip, US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said during a daily press briefing: "This flies in the face of the will of the international community in terms of the rules that it has laid down, and I think that it bumps up against Palestinian regulations as well." (Ha'aretz, www.state.gov)

Israel's High Court of Justice ruled that the IDF policy of targeted killing of militants did not categorically violate international law, and the legality of each targeted killing must be evaluated on an individual basis. (Ha'aretz, www.court.gov.il)

The General Assembly adopted resolutions under agenda items 31 entitled "United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East", and 32 entitled "Report of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territory". A resolution on assistance to the Palestinian people was also adopted under agenda item 69. (UN News Centre, UN press release GA/10559)

After his meeting with a delegation of the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People at his office in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian Foreign Minister, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, said that the United Nations, and not any other parties, should be the central player in efforts to resolve the Palestinian issue. "We consider that the UN should play a central role, the Security Council should not abdicate its responsibility. The matter should be on the table of the Security Council," he told reporters after the meeting. The Minister also stressed that, while efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should continue, Palestinians themselves must demonstrate their sense of unity and cohesiveness. "External parties will take advantage if among themselves they are in a state of open conflict to the extent that it ends up in a civil war," he said. (AP, Bernama)

15

Hamas and Fatah-allied gunmen exchanged fire in Gaza City and Ramallah. The fighting in Ramallah began when Hamas supporters marched towards the centre of town, where Fatah-allied police were deployed in advance of celebrations to mark the nineteenth anniversary of Hamas' founding. A total of 32 people were wounded by stones and gunfire, including a man hit in the head by crossfire, hospital officials said. In Gaza City, masked Hamas gunmen waged battle with Fatah-allied police near a security post in the middle of the city. There were no reports of injuries.

The gun battle, a block from the home of Mohammed Dahlan, a Fatah legislator, came hours after Hamas accused him of orchestrating the attack on PA Prime Minister Haniyeh at the Rafah border terminal. (AP)

Israeli forces arrested five Palestinians in Hizma, south of Ramallah, one in Nil'in, west of Ramallah, and one in Nahhalin, south-west of Bethlehem. (Ma'an News Agency)

A Qassam rocket fired from the Gaza Strip landed north of Sderot, in Israel's western Negev, causing no damage or injuries. (Ha'aretz)

Following are excerpts from the message of Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the opening session of the United Nations Asian Meeting in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People in Kuala Lumpur, delivered by Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Angela Kane:

It is first and foremost the parties themselves who bear the primary responsibility for peace. ... At the same time, the international community cannot escape its own responsibility to use its influence to end the occupation and promote a negotiated, two-State solution. The Quartet, for its part, needs to work harder to restore faith not only in its own seriousness and effectiveness, but also in the Road Map.

In that same spirit, and as I told the Security Council earlier this week, I believe the Committee itself should seek to ensure that its efforts

make a positive difference. Too often, the work of parts of the United Nations system is too easily dismissed as being reflexively biased against Israel, which, in turn, limits its ability to help the tragically suffering Palestinian people on the ground. It hurts both Palestinians and Israelis if the United Nations is perceived as too one-sided to be allowed a significant role in the Middle East peace process.

(AFP, UN News Centre, UN press release SG/SM/10801-GA/PAL/1026)

The following statement was released by the Spokesman for Secretary-General Kofi Annan:

The Secretary-General is deeply concerned over the recent deterioration in the security situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the increase of intra-Palestinian violence. The Secretary-General calls for respect by all parties for the rule of law, and for Palestinians to resume dialogue in order to resolve differences peacefully and seek national unity.

(AFP, DPA, UN News Centre, UN press release SG/SM/10803-PAL/2066)

The General Assembly, at its tenth emergency special session, adopted a resolution, introduced by Iraq, to establish a Register of Damage arising from the construction of a separation wall by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The resolution was adopted, as orally amended, by a recorded vote of 162 in favour to 7 against (Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Israel, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, United States), with 7 abstentions (Cameroon, Canada, Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Uganda). The resolution (ES-10/17) called for the establishment of the Register and an office to serve as a comprehensive record of the damage caused to all natural and legal persons as a result of the building of the wall.

The office would be composed of a three-member board, an executive director and a secretariat. As a subsidiary organ of the Assembly, the office would operate under the administrative authority of the Secretary-General. (UN News Centre, UN press release GA/10560)

Following are excerpts from the Presidency Conclusions of the two-day meeting of the Council of the European Union held in Brussels:

In view of the protracted deterioration of the socio-economic situation of the Palestinians, the European Council endorsed a further three-month extension of the [Temporary International Mechanism] until March 2007. The European Council calls for the release of Palestinian customs and tax revenues withheld by Israel.

...

The European Council invited the Quartet to stand ready to lead an effort by the international community to build on the outcome of successful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians in order to reach a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict, including peace agreements with Syria and Lebanon and full normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab countries. This will require an inclusive approach involving all relevant actors; all need to engage constructively in the region to support these efforts. In accordance with the Road Map, the Quartet, in consultation with the parties, should in due course convene an international conference to realize these goals.

(www.consilium.europa.eu)

Speaking with journalists at the end of a meeting with Mustafa Barghouti, an independent PLC member, Italy's Foreign Minister, Massimo D'Alema, reiterated the need for holding an international peace conference on the Middle East. "We have discussed the opportunity to organize an international conference for peace in a relatively short time believing that what we need is not a generic resumption of the peace process but the rapid conclusion of a peace deal between Palestinians and Israelis," Mr. D'Alema said. (Agenzia Giornalistica Italia (AGI))

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in an interview that she would ask Congress for tens of millions of dollars to strengthen the security forces of PA President Abbas. (Reuters)

16

PA President Abbas called for early presidential and legislative elections. In a speech broadcast live on *Palestine TV*, President Abbas said, "Let us ask the people if they approve the national document of the pure and respected prisoners", adding, "I ... decided to call for early presidential and parliament elections. Let us return to the people, to hear their word, and let them be the judge." Across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, streets were largely deserted, as everyone watched Mr. Abbas' 90-minute address. Mr. Abbas said a unity government was still the best option, but he had despaired of persuading Hamas to enter into a coalition with Fatah. Mr. Abbas said that Hamas was ignoring reality and warned it not to try to "terrorize" him by claiming its rule was God's will. PA Chief Negotiator Saeb Erakat said, "We have a crisis. We have an Authority with two heads. So what do we do? Bullets or ballots? Abu Mazen [President Abbas] said ballots." President Abbas' aides said that they expected the vote to be held by the summer. Mr. Abbas also announced that he had revived the Palestine Liberation Organization Negotiations Affairs Department and the appointment of new Fatah leaders. Fatah officials said that the party's younger leaders would now be given a chance.

(AP, WAFA)

Hamas leaders said that the "confrontational" tone of President Abbas' speech made it clear he was no longer a partner. Ahmed Yousef, senior adviser to Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh said, "Abu Mazen is not part of the solution anymore. He is part of the problem now," adding, "We will challenge him everywhere." Several Palestinian faction leaders also rejected Mr. Abbas' decision. "Any step outside the context of the laws is rejected by us all, and this is not just the position of Hamas," said Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashaal. "The position that we have expressed today is the position of the 10 Palestinian factions whose history, performance and weight on the ground is well known." Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Shallah urged Hamas and Fatah to reach an agreement, calling Mr. Abbas' decision "lawless". Israeli Government spokeswoman Miri Eisin said Prime Minister Ehud Olmert "respects Abu Mazen and hopes that he will have the capability to assert his leadership over the Palestinian people, and to bring about a government that will comply with the international community's principles." (AP)

As a reaction to PA President Abbas' speech, British Prime Minister Tony Blair urged the international community to support the PA President, while State Department spokesman Edgar Vasquez said it was "an issue for the Palestinian people to decide through a peaceful political process." The Russian Federation asked the Palestinians to try to maintain unity. Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos said that Spain "fully backs" the move "as an alternative means of securing the unity of the Palestinian people." (AFP, AP)

Fatah and Hamas supporters exchanged fire and threw stones at each other in towns across the Gaza Strip after PA President Abbas' announcement.

Eighteen people were wounded, including seven who were shot, according to reports from hospital officials and Hamas. The confrontations involved just a small number of the tens of thousands who rallied across Gaza in support for each side. (AP)

17

Despite talk of an impending truce between Palestinian factions, gunmen shot at PA Foreign Minister Mahmoud Al-Zahhar's convoy, while armed Palestinians launched mortar shells at President Abbas' office in Gaza City in a day-long wave of attacks that killed three and wounded 13 others. PA Prime Minister Haniyeh accused Mr. Abbas of inflaming the violent political crisis by calling for early elections and said that Hamas would boycott the poll. The attack on Mr. Al-Zahhar's motorcade unleashed a gun battle that lasted for more than an hour in downtown Gaza. Medical officials said Hiba Masbah, a 19-year-old woman, was killed in the crossfire. Mr. Al-Zahhar blamed top Fatah leaders for the attack. In northern Gaza, Hamas gunmen opened fire at a demonstration of tens of thousands of Fatah supporters, wounding at least one person, and unknown militants fired at least two mortars at President Abbas' office in Gaza City. Hours later, they launched another mortar shell. Five pro-Fatah security men and a 45-year-old woman were wounded, officials said. Mr. Abbas was in the West Bank at the time. In an earlier attack blamed on Hamas,

dozens of gunmen raided a training camp of the Presidential Guard near the President's residence, killing a member of the force. After nightfall, the body of a security officer affiliated with Fatah, Col. Adnan Rahmi, was discovered in northern Gaza several hours after he disappeared, Palestinian medical officials and his family said. No group had taken responsibility, but the Rahmi family blamed Hamas for the killing. A French reporter, Didier Francois, 46, of the newspaper *Liberation*, was wounded in the leg by a bullet during the clashes, according to his newspaper. Just before midnight, a gun battle broke out outside the home of Mr. Mohammed Dahlan. (AP, Ha'aretz)

Fatah issued a statement late during the day calling on its members not to fire unless there was a serious threat on their lives. The statement also accused Hamas of trying to overthrow President Abbas. (AP)

PA President Abbas briefed US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on the situation and his efforts to resolve it, said Nabil Abu Rudeineh, the official spokesman of the PA Presidency. (AP)

President Abbas met with members of the Central Election Commission at his headquarters to discuss a possible elections date. The head of the panel said it would take at least three months to prepare for new presidential and parliamentary elections. "The message of the meeting was that he is serious, that he is saying 'don't doubt my words'", PA Chief Negotiator Saeb Erakat said, adding he believed elections would be held around June 2007. (AP)

Late during the day, a truce, brokered by Islamic Jihad, the DFLP and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was signed between Fatah and Hamas. Hamas official Ismail Rudwan said that the groups had agreed to resume talks on forming a unity government. Fatah spokesman Tawfiq Abu Khousa said, "Fatah is trying to control its forces. We hope there will be a ceasefire. We have serious intentions of stopping the fighting, and it is now up to the other side to also stop firing." Salah Zidan, a senior official of the DFLP, said that the agreement included an end to the fighting, the removal of armed gunmen from the streets, an end to all demonstrations and incitement in the media, and the release of captives by both sides. (Reuters)

A poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research placed President Abbas and Prime Minister Haniyeh in a statistical tie in a presidential race. Mr. Abbas would win 46 per cent, compared with 45 per cent for Mr. Haniyeh. In parliamentary elections, Fatah would defeat Hamas by a 42-36 margin. The survey was conducted among 1,270 Palestinians and had an error margin of 3 percentage points. (AP)

The United Nations Forum of Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People was held in Kuala Lumpur, under the auspices of the Committee or the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. It looked into initiatives by civil society in Asia and the Pacific region in solidarity with the Palestinian people, with a particular focus on the Malaysian experience. Participants discussed legislative and political advocacy; efforts by non-governmental organizations, religious groups and the media aimed at mobilizing public opinion in support of the Palestinian people; and the impact and educational responsibility of academic institutions and think tanks. The Forum was held following the two-day United Nations Asian Meeting in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. (UN News Centre, UN press release GA/PAL/1031)

18

Fatah sources said that gunmen had killed a Fatah activist in the Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip and wounded three others. The sources blamed the attack on Hamas. Late in the day, masked gunmen kidnapped the brother of Alaa Yaghi, a Fatah parliamentarian in northern Gaza, from the Fatah-affiliated charity association where he worked, family members said. Mr. Yaghi blamed Hamas for the kidnapping. Rival Fatah and Hamas forces exchanged fire near the Hamas-controlled PA Foreign Ministry building in Gaza, in the latest breach of a ceasefire between the sides. A spokesman for Hamas' Executive Force said that the fighting was between the Presidential Guard and Ministry of the Interior police guarding the building. Earlier, gunmen from Hamas and Fatah confronted each other in a gun battle in the middle of Gaza City, wounding one teenager in the neck, hours after officials from Hamas and Fatah announced that a ceasefire agreement had been reached. (Ha'aretz)

Fatah and Hamas members abducted by gunmen were freed late during the day as part of a deal between the two sides. Sources in the two groups said that eight Fatah activists and four Hamas members, including senior official Emad Deeb, had been released and handed over to third-party mediators. (AFP, Reuters)

Sufian Abu Zaydeh, 48, former PA Minister of Prisoners' Affairs and a top Fatah official, was seized late during the day as he was driving home. He was released unharmed a few hours later. Abu Ubaida, a spokesman for the armed wing of Hamas, said that Mr. Abu Zaydeh had been freed as "a gesture of goodwill despite the fact that a leading Hamas figure remained a captive of Fatah". Mr. Abu Zaydeh told *Israel Radio* the next day that he was taken to a home in the Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, where he was offered coffee and tea. He said he knew his captors and did not fear for his life during his few hours in captivity, only the consequences of the act. (AP, Reuters)

British Prime Minister Tony Blair met with PA President Abbas in Ramallah to push for the resuscitation of the Middle East peace talks. At a news conference with Mr. Abbas, he praised the latter's call for new elections, saying the next few weeks would be a critical time for the region. Mr. Blair also called on the international community to support Mr. Abbas, calling him "a leader of moderation and tolerance." He told Mr. Abbas, "Your people are suffering. We don't want anything to stand in the way of helping the Palestinian people." Following his meeting in Ramallah, Mr. Blair headed to Jerusalem for talks with Israeli Prime Minister Olmert. Mr. Blair met with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defence Minister Amir Peretz. (Ha'aretz)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert met with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Jerusalem. After the meeting, Mr. Olmert told a press conference, "everything should be done" to support PA President Abbas. There is no doubt that we have to support the moderates favourable to negotiations among the Palestinians, to the Quartet principles and to the Road Map, and that everything should be done to reinforce Mahmoud Abbas." (AFP) King Abdullah II of Jordan urged Israel to state its position on Palestinian statehood. "Jordan will have contacts with Israel ... in addition to those it is having with the Palestinians, to encourage both sides to take measures to build trust between them and contribute to activate the peace process," the King told local newspaper editors, a royal court statement said. (AFP)

US President George W. Bush delayed for another six months the transfer of the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, citing national security interests, the White House said. (Reuters)

19

Israeli troops shot dead two members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in the West Bank. Rami Anab, 22, was killed in Nablus in exchanges of fire with Israeli special undercover forces. The IDF said troops had approached a car and opened fire when the three men inside attempted to flee. Two of them, Tallal Mustafa and Imad Abu Maslem, were injured and evacuated to an Israeli hospital, then questioned. The IDF said, "The three were being directed by Hezbollah to carry out suicide bombings". Mohammed Hamad, 24, was killed by Israeli troops in a village near Tulkarm. Two other Palestinians were arrested. The IDF said troops had opened fire on a Palestinian seen holding a gun during an arrest raid. It said that nine Palestinians had been detained by troops overnight throughout the West Bank. Separately, another member of the Brigades, Amar Zaquq, 30, had died from wounds sustained during an Israeli raid in Nablus on 14 December. (AFP, AP, DPA, www.idf.il) At least five Palestinians were killed and some 18 wounded, including five children caught in the crossfire, in clashes between Hamas and Fatah. Two members of Fatah-related PA security forces were killed in clashes with Hamas gunmen early in the day, with one fatally shot as he sat in a security vehicle in Gaza City. The dead also included two pro-Fatah security men abducted earlier in the day. Their bodies had been left on a

street. Fatah sources said the two deceased men had been “executed” by a Hamas-led police unit. A Hamas police spokesman denied that the force had abducted or killed anyone. A Hamas policeman was reportedly killed in a clash at the entrance and inside the compound of the Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. In Gaza City, civilians fled for safety and some shops closed, as gunmen fought running battles with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades. At some point, dozens of armed Hamas members surrounded a Fatah headquarters in the northern Gaza Strip, reportedly trying to free a Hamas member detained in Jabalya earlier in the day. (AFP, AP, Reuters)

Four masked gunmen kidnapped Mohammed al-Kharuf, 40, a known Hamas loyalist, in Hebron’s Ahli Hospital, where he worked. (AFP)

Israeli troops shot and killed a 13-year-old Palestinian girl, who residents said was playing with a friend near the separation barrier. An IDF spokesman said that the shooting was under investigation and that troops treated her at the scene and brought her to an Israeli hospital. Officials at Beilinson Hospital confirmed that the girl arrived in critical condition and died from her wounds. The spokesman added that the senior general in the region had ordered that a soldier and the commander at the scene be suspended from duty pending the outcome of an inquiry. (AP, Reuters)

A Hamas member died from wounds received during clashes with Fatah faction in Gaza, bringing to six the day’s death toll from internal Palestinian violence. The other casualties were four Fatah security men and one civilian bystander. (AFP, DPA)

PA President Abbas issued a statement calling on all factions “without exception” to observe a ceasefire agreed late the previous day. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that the violence had to stop. “We hope that there will in fact be a ceasefire between the parties. That is very important,” Ms. Rice said in an interview with *Al Arabiya* television to be broadcast later in the day. Saudi Arabia urged Palestinians to overcome their differences. (AFP, Reuters)

The PA Interior Ministry said that Egyptian security officials had brokered a deal for members of rival security services to leave the streets and return to their quarters. The deal required various factions to also free hostages they were holding, Ministry spokesman Khaled Abu Hilal said. (Reuters)

Late during the day in Ramallah, PA President Abbas announced a new ceasefire between Hamas and Fatah, the second in two days, saying it would take effect at 11 p.m. (2100 GMT). The deal came after PA Interior Minister Said Siyam held an urgent meeting with the chiefs of Fatah-affiliated security and police forces. Shortly before the announcement, Prime Minister Haniyeh appealed for calm in a televised speech. (AP, DPA)

King Abdullah II of Jordan offered to host talks between PA President Abbas and the leader of Hamas to resolve their bloody confrontation. “Jordan is willing to do all it can to help the Palestinians overcome their differences and to bolster Palestinian unity,” according to a statement issued by the Royal Palace in Amman. (AP)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert paid a surprise visit to Jordan for talks with Jordanian King Abdullah II. Mr. Olmert’s Office said in a statement, “The two leaders discussed various bilateral issues, developments in the Palestinian Authority and the broader regional situation.” During their meeting, Prime Minister Olmert committed “in principle” to a viable Palestinian State in response to a series of questions posed by King Abdullah, political sources in Amman said. King Abdullah had sent the questions to the Government of Israel in a bid to gauge its sincerity towards peace. (Reuters, DPA)

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with his Syrian counterpart, President Bashar al-Assad, in Moscow. Noting that he had recently hosted Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, Mr. Putin said: “We continue in the most active way possible to participate in the Middle East peace process and continue to have contacts with all the political forces in Palestine”. “Russia could become a sponsor of the Middle East settlement,” Mr. al-Assad was quoted by *Interfax* as saying. (AFP, Xinhua)

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier presented his Government’s European Union Presidency priorities, telling Brussels-based international press corps, among other things, “We are very worried about the dangers of escalation in the Middle East.” He said that the EU would push for contacts between Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and PA President Abbas. However, Mr. Steinmeier downplayed the expectations of any major breakthrough in European or international developments, saying, “We cannot perform miracles.” (DPA)

The Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Amre Moussa, speaking before his departure to Lebanon, said mediating efforts by several Arab countries could defuse the Palestinian internal conflict. (Xinhua)

Romania had called on Hamas and Fatah to stop fighting. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Corina Vintan said that it was necessary to create a “climate of calm and responsibility” that would allow the Palestinian people to express their political options in a “free, democratic and transparent manner.” Romania voiced its hope that the Palestinian Government would cooperate with President Abbas on the implementation of the peace programme, in line with the parameters set by the Quartet, the Road Map and relevant UN Security Council resolutions, Ms. Vintan said. (Xinhua)

The Israeli Supreme Court rejected the Government’s policy of not granting visas to Palestinian students hoping to study at Israeli universities. In its ruling, the Court ordered the State to prepare a list of criteria for granting visas to Palestinian students within 60 days. The decision came in response to a petition filed by Gisha, an Israeli non-profit group that works to guarantee freedom of movement for Palestinians. The petition was supported by the heads of nearly all Israeli universities and by Israel’s Minister of Education. The Court also made specific reference to the case of Sawsan Salameh, a Palestinian doctoral student granted a full scholarship to Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but barred by authorities from remaining in Israel for more than six months. The Court told the State to find an arrangement that would allow Ms. Salameh to continue her studies. (AP)

20

The IDF killed two Palestinians – Salah Sawafta, 24, and Hussam al-Eissa, 26 – during an arrest raid in Sila, near Jenin, when an Israeli force surrounded a house in the village and waged a three-hour fire fight with Palestinians barricaded inside. Islamic Jihad, using mosque loudspeakers around the northern West Bank, announced that the two men were members of the group. Israeli sources also said that the IDF had arrested 22 Palestinians in West Bank cities overnight. (AP, Xinhua)

Two Palestinian policemen were killed in the Gaza Strip. Fatah spokesman Tawfiq Abu Khousa said that the two, cousins in their early 20s, had been killed when their vehicle was attacked during an overnight patrol. Six other people in their car were wounded, he said. “They came under fire from an ambush of masked gunmen affiliated with Hamas,” Mr. Abu Khousa said, adding that although Fatah considered the shooting a violation of the ceasefire, it would still honour it. According to other reports, the incident started when unknown gunmen opened fire on several Hamas members in the Sabra neighbourhood of Gaza City. An hour-long gun battle broke out after members of the PA Ministry of the Interior auxiliary force arrived at the scene. At least seven people were injured in the gun fight, two of them critically. About 300 people attended the officers’ funeral. Many of the men were armed, shooting in the air and calling for revenge. (AP, DPA)

Three Qassam rockets were launched at noon from the northern Gaza Strip. One rocket landed inside Sderot and the other outside. No injuries had been reported. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the rockets, saying it was avenging the deaths of its members in the West Bank. Israeli Prime Minister Olmert said the restraint Israel was exerting by not responding to the Qassam firings could not go on much longer, adding, “In the period since the ceasefire, there have been some 40 Qassams, and the shooting continues.” (AFP, AP, Xinhua)

PA Minister of Environment Yussef Abu Safieh told reporters in Algiers, on the sidelines of a conference of Arab environment ministers, “Analyses carried out in laboratories outside Palestine have shown that Israel has had recourse to banned chemical weapons and depleted uranium” in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. He further accused Israel of having “transported major quantities of dangerous chemical products into the interior of the Palestinian territories, thereby seriously polluting the water table.” Mr. Abu Safieh quoted figures from the PA Agriculture and Environment Ministry to the effect that “two million trees have been uprooted [by the Israelis] in the past six years, half a million of them olive trees.” He said that Israel had refused access by the United Nations Environment Programme and the International Atomic Energy Agency to the Occupied

Palestinian Territory to look into the situation. "The situation in the territories has deteriorated after the building of the 'separation wall', after the destruction of a considerable number of wells and because of the serious effects on fauna and flora and assaults on biological diversity, which includes 3,500 animals and vegetable species in the Palestinian territories," he said further. (AFP)

The Amman-based Arab Bank, one of the Arab world's largest, denied reports that Hamas had deposited US\$35 million at one of its branches in Egypt, saying in a statement, "Hamas has no accounts at any of the Arab Bank branches, be they inside or outside the Palestinian territories." (DPA)

21

A 22-year-old Hamas member, wounded by Israeli naval fire in Rafah on 13 December a week earlier, died from his wounds. The deceased was wounded when a naval craft fired on a Palestinian vessel in the Mediterranean Sea. The IDF said that an Israeli patrol boat identified a vessel suspected of smuggling, opening fire when the vessel ignored warning shots. (AP)

Four Qassam rockets were fired at Israel. Two of the rockets landed in Israel, the second of which landed near a school in Sderot, causing some damage to the building. Several people suffered from shock. The other two landed inside the Palestinian territory, one of which struck a home in the northern Gaza Strip. Two-year-old Samir al-Masri, who was sleeping in his bedroom, suffered broken legs, and his four-year-old sister and three-year-old brother were slightly wounded by shrapnel. (AFP, AP, Ynetnews)

At a news conference with the visiting Italian Foreign Minister, Massimo D'Alema, PA President Abbas said, "We always showed our willingness to hold this meeting with [Prime Minister] Olmert, and it's no secret that we hope it will take place before the end of this year. ... There is progress in preparations for this meeting." During the same press conference, Mr. D'Alema affirmed that his country was ready to propose the tripartite initiative by Italy, France and Spain as a European initiative, adding that domestic stability in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was a precondition for the European peace initiative, which includes international forces to be stationed in the Gaza Strip, along with the establishment of a Palestinian State by the end of 2007. (AP, Ma'an News Agency)

European monitors stationed at the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt had reached an agreement with Israel and other parties to stop cash being brought in by Hamas. A spokeswoman for the Border Assistance Mission (EU BAM-Rafah) said that the ban on Hamas ministers and officials bringing in cash had been reached following a meeting the previous day among EU, Palestinian, Egyptian and Israeli officials. "If they are carrying money, it will be deposited in an Egyptian bank," said the spokeswoman, Maria Telleria. (Reuters)

Shlomo Lecker, a lawyer representing Palestinian petitioners from Abu Dis and Suahra A-Sharqia, said that Defence Minister Amir Peretz had approved the original route of the separation barrier surrounding the "Ma'aleh Adumim" enclave, placing 64,000 dunams of West Bank land on the Israeli side of the barrier. (The Jerusalem Post)

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso told visiting Jordanian King Abdullah II that Japan would keep supporting initiatives such as the "peace and prosperity corridor," the Ministry said in a statement. Under the "corridor" proposed by then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on a visit to the Middle East in July 2006, Japan would help develop the West Bank and build an agro-industrial park there in cooperation with Israel, Jordan and the PA. "Foreign Minister Aso said Japan will stay proactively involved in building stability in the Middle Eastern region," the statement added. (AFP)

US President Bush signed into law a bill (S.2370) meant to block US aid to the Hamas-led Palestinian Government and ban contacts with Hamas until the faction renounced violence and recognized Israel's existence. It also created a US\$20 million fund to promote democracy, human rights, freedom of the press and peace between Israel and the Palestinians. (AP, thomas.loc.gov, www.whitehouse.gov)

Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in an interview with CTV, to be aired on 23 December: "We will not solve the Palestinian-Israeli problem, as difficult as that is, through organizations that advocate violence and advocate wiping Israel off the face of the Earth. ... It's unfortunate because with Hamas, and with Hezbollah in Lebanon, it has made it very difficult to have dialogue, and dialogue is ultimately necessary to have peace in the long term, but we are not going to sit down with people whose objectives are ultimately genocidal." (AFP)

22

Israeli sources said that Israeli forces had arrested 11 Palestinians in Nablus, nine in Hebron, and one in Qalqilya. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli soldiers severely assaulted five Palestinian boys in Aqaba, east of Tubas, after raiding the village. One of them was stabbed in the hand. (Ma'an News Agency)

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip fired five rockets towards southern Israel, causing no injuries, the army said. Only three were identified as having fallen within Israel. One rocket hit a bank in Sderot. Another projectile struck a house in a nearby kibbutz. (AFP)

A Palestinian civilian, Ayman al-Girgawi, was killed overnight in Gaza City in clashes between Hamas and a powerful local clan. Armed with light weapons and rocket launchers, fighters from Hamas and the clan clashed just after midnight near the home of PA Foreign Minister Mahmoud Al-Zahhar. Two clan members were killed in clashes with Hamas earlier in the week. Witnesses said that several Hamas supporters and at least five clan members had been seized during the night in tit-for-tat abductions. In Nablus, six Palestinians were wounded, two of them seriously, in clashes between Hamas and Fatah, medics and witnesses said. The fighting erupted when Fatah loyalists tried to prevent Hamas supporters from organizing a celebration to mark the movement's nineteenth anniversary. (AFP)

PA Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh announced that he had accepted calls by President Abbas to resume talks on forming a unity government, officials in his office said. Officials close to Mr. Abbas, however, said that resuming the talks would make sense only if Hamas accepted the three conditions of the international community for ending a financial boycott of the Palestinian Authority. (DPA)

A Palestinian source said that the expected summit between PA President Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert would be held on 26 December.

"What facilitated the meeting was the removal of the main obstacle before it, namely the prisoners' problem. The Israelis have, for the first time, agreed to reformulate the joint prisoners' committee, on the basis that the Palestinians be involved in the selection of their prisoners to be released in the expected exchange," the source said. (Ma'an News Agency)

The Quartet issued the following statement:

Recalling its previous statements of 17 June 2006 and 20 September 2006, taking into account the need for the Palestinian Authority Government to respond to the 30 January 2006 Quartet principles, and mindful of the continuing needs of the Palestinian people, the Quartet endorsed the continuation of the Temporary International Mechanism (TIM) for a three-month period, and agreed to again review the need for such a mechanism at the end of that time. The Quartet commended the efforts of the World Bank and European Union to facilitate needs-based assistance directly to the Palestinian people via the TIM. Donors are also encouraged to respond to humanitarian and other assistance requests by international organizations, especially UN agencies, active in the West Bank and Gaza.

(AP, Reuters, UN News Centre, UN press release SG/2121-PAL/2067)

After talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier announced that his country planned to launch a coordinated Middle East peace initiative the following month with the United States, Russia, the United Nations and other European countries. Mr. Steinmeier said that in spite of the political tensions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the "time was right for a revitalization of the Quartet." Germany assumes the presidency of the EU on 1 January 2007. (The Financial Times)

In an [opinion poll](#) conducted by Fafo, a Norwegian research foundation, 54 per cent of the Palestinian respondents said that they would prefer a new national unity coalition government over new elections. The suggestion of new elections received the support of 21 per cent of the respondents.

(Ma'an News Agency, www.fafo.no)

23

Assailants fired on the car of Hassan Jarboub, the deputy chief of the Rafah branch of the Preventive Security Service, critically wounding him. A bodyguard and a seven-year-old girl bystanders suffered moderate wounds. There was no immediate claim of responsibility. (AP, DPA, Reuters)

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and PA President Abbas met for the first time in 22 months at Mr. Olmert's official residence in Jerusalem. Mr. Olmert's office said in a statement, "The two men expressed their willingness to cooperate, as genuine partners, in an effort to advance the peace process between Israel and the PA and to reach a solution of two States, living side by side in peace and security, according to the Road Map." Palestinian Chief Negotiator Saeb Erakat, who participated in the talks, said that the two leaders had agreed to hold more meetings, but had not set a date. Mr. Erakat and Mr. Olmert's spokesperson, Miri Eisin, said that the Israeli leader had agreed to transfer \$100 million in frozen tax rebates and other Palestinian funds to Mr. Abbas' control. Ms. Eisin said that Israel planned to transfer the money soon, but that it wanted to make sure the funds did not reach Hamas. In addition, Israel would transfer about \$7.25 million to Palestinian-run hospitals in Jerusalem, Mr. Erakat said. Israel also agreed to remove several roadblocks in the West Bank to make travel easier, Mr. Erakat added. Mr. Olmert also promised to meet a quota of letting 400 trucks move through the main cargo crossing between Gaza and Israel. Mr. Olmert's office said the two sides had also discussed the possibility of expanding a month-old ceasefire in Gaza to the West Bank. The two failed to agree on a prisoner swap issue, but decided to set up a committee to study it further. (AP, www.pmo.gov.il)

24

The International Solidarity Movement said that Israeli settlers had attacked Umm Fagarah village in Hebron, breaking windows of houses and damaging some cars. (Wafa)

Palestinians fired four Qassam rockets at Israel's western Negev. One rocket hit an area near a Sderot nursery school, causing damage to the building and nearby homes. The rocket also damaged street lights and electricity lines. Eight people were treated for shock. No injuries or damage were reported in the other strikes. (Ha'aretz)

An Israeli was moderately wounded in the leg when he came under Palestinian fire while driving on a route connecting two settlements north-west of Ramallah. (Ha'aretz)

Gunmen opened fire at the home of PA Foreign Minister Mahmoud Al-Zahhar in the Gaza Strip. There were no reports of injuries. (Ma'an News Agency, Ynetnews)

The Israeli Cabinet unanimously [approved](#) the transfer of up to \$100 million of customs duties owed to the Palestinians. The funds were meant "to help in humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people who suffer, among other things, due to the failing conduct of their Government, which is not part of the international community," Prime Minister Olmert told reporters before going to the Cabinet meeting. "The aid will be transferred through a special mechanism that will ensure the money is used only for humanitarian aid," he said. (AFP, www.nfa.gov.il)

Prime Minister Olmert indicated that he might release some Palestinian prisoners in the coming days, associates said. "The time has come to show flexibility and generosity regarding prisoners. ... It could be that this opinion is different from what has been said in earlier Government meetings, but this is my opinion," Mr. Olmert told a Cabinet meeting, according to a participant. (AP)

The official Emirates News Agency (WAM) reported that President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan had ordered the transfer of \$30 million to the Palestinian Authority to reduce the suffering of the Palestinian people. (AFP, AP, Reuters, WAM)

25

Israeli forces raided Qabatiya and detained nine Palestinians, including Yasser Nazzal, head of the Popular Resistance Committees in the West Bank, security sources and witnesses said. They also seized two Islamic Jihad members. (Reuters)

Israeli forces arrested two Palestinians in Nablus, one in Ramallah and two in Bethlehem. (Ma'an News Agency)

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip fired two rockets towards southern Israel, causing no casualties, the army said. "One of the rockets landed in Palestinian territory and another fell next to the security fence" on the northern Gaza border, an army spokesperson said. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for firing the rockets. (AFP)

Israel expelled a Palestinian prisoner from the West Bank to Gaza, officials in Gaza said. The prisoner, Abdullah Saadi, 26, who lived in Jenin, belonged to the military wing of Fatah, the officials said. The Israeli military said Mr. Saadi had posed an "imminent danger" to security in the West Bank and had been held without trial in administrative detention. He asked to be sent to Gaza instead, and the military agreed. (AFP, AP)

Prime Minister Olmert announced the removal of 27 roadblocks and other restrictions in the West Bank to "strengthen moderate elements" among the Palestinians, especially PA President Abbas, whom he had met the previous day. Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh said inspections would be eased at 16 checkpoints, and 27 unmanned roadblocks would be removed. Also, crossings for people and cargo between Gaza and Israel would be upgraded "in order to accelerate the economy in Gaza to lessen the poverty and despair." However the move was derided by Hamas in Gaza and criticized by Mr. Abbas' supporters. PLC Member Hanan Ashrawi said that Israeli promises often did not translate into action. If the restrictions were relaxed, she said, they were so insignificant. "We are justifiably sceptical. Nothing has happened yet and we do not know if these roadblocks are important or peripheral ... If it is true then it will be too little too late. The only thing that will help Mahmoud Abbas are serious substantive measures accompanied by a serious and substantive peace process," she said. (AP, The Guardian, www.pmo.gov.il)

The Israeli Defence Ministry approved the building of a new settlement in the northern Jordan Valley, outside of the separation fence, which would have 30 houses to accommodate families evacuated from Gaza settlements. The settlement, to be named "Maskiot," was to include 20 families from the former Gaza settlement of "Shirat Hayam" and another 10 families from other settlements in the former "Gush Katif" block. (Ha'aretz)

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz said he supported the release of some Palestinian prisoners, even without a deal on the return of a captured Israeli soldier held by Palestinian militants. "Every year, there has been a humanitarian release of prisoners" around the Christmas and Eid al-Adha holidays, Mr. Peretz said after appearing at a parliamentary hearing. He said that the Government should carry out a similar goodwill gesture this year. (AP)

The Israeli Foreign Ministry said in a statement, "Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations has been instructed to submit an urgent [protest](#) to the duty president of the UN Security Council strongly condemning Palestinian violations of the November 25 ceasefire. The protest is to note that,

since the ceasefire went into effect, 53 Qassam rockets have been fired into Israel, causing widespread shock trauma to residents and damage to property.” (Ynetnews, www.mfa.gov.il)

Israel's National Infrastructures Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said that Prime Minister Olmert should have convened a Cabinet meeting to discuss the re-evaluation of the Gaza ceasefire and the policy of restraint against Qassam rocket attacks, instead of just calling a restricted meeting with security officials only, *Army Radio* reported. (The Jerusalem Post)

PA President Abbas arrived in Amman and was to meet with Prime Minister Marouf Al Bakhit. A spokesman for the Palestinian Government, Ghazi Hamad, said PA Prime Minister Haniyeh had received a call from Prime Minister Al Bakhit inviting him to visit Jordan and meet with PA President Abbas “to deal with the latest developments in the Palestinian arena.” “The Prime Minister responded positively and arrangements for the visit will follow,” Mr. Hamad added. (Ma'an News Agency, Petra)

Pope Benedict XVI said in his traditional “Urbi et Orbi” [Christmas address](#) at the Vatican: “With deep apprehension I think, on this festive day, of the Middle East, marked by so many grave crises and conflicts, and I express my hope that the way will be opened to a just and lasting peace, with respect for the inalienable rights of the peoples living there. I place in the hands of the divine Child of Bethlehem the indications of a resumption of dialogue between the Israelis and Palestinians, which we have witnessed in recent days, and the hope of further encouraging developments.” The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, said in his midnight mass in Bethlehem, “We call on Israeli and Palestinian officials to take new steps to put an end to the killing and lead our two peoples to a new period.” During his sermon at Canterbury Cathedral in Kent, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, voiced concern over an “almost total absence” of belief in the region that a political solution could be found. (AFP, AP, BBC, www.vatican.va)

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A 27-year-old Palestinian farmer, Ismail Ghabin, was shot in his knee while working on his farm north of Beit Lahia, medical sources said. The army said its troops had identified two Palestinians sabotaging part of the security fence, called on them to leave and then fired warning shots in the air. When the Palestinians continued to damage the fence, the Israeli troops fired at their lower extremities and identified hitting one of them in the legs, the army said. (AP, Wafa, www.idf.il)

Israeli forces arrested two Palestinians in Jenin, two in Bethlehem, one in Qalqilya, and one in East Jerusalem. (Wafa)

Israeli forces raided a medical centre in Hebron, destroying doors, computers and medical equipment. (Wafa)

Five Qassam rockets fired by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip landed in Israel. One of the rockets landed in Sderot, causing damage to a building and injuring two Israeli teenagers, and another landed near a strategic site in Ashkelon. The other three landed in open areas. No injuries were reported. The Al-Quds Brigades, the armed wing of Islamic Jihad, claimed responsibility for the attacks on Ashkelon and Sderot. (AFP, Ha'aretz, Ynetnews)

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz urged Prime Minister Olmert in a telephone conversation to rescind the policy of restraint against Qassam rockets. “We cannot continue to restrain ourselves,” he said. “We cannot let Jihad get stronger. We must fight against Qassam fire.” (Ha'aretz)

In response to a [Peace Now](#) report on the issue, Israeli Attorney General Menachem Mazuz ruled that a criminal investigation would not be opened against settlements and outposts that were built on privately owned Palestinian land. In the State response, Attorney Eyal Yinon, Mr. Mazuz's aide, wrote that the Attorney General and Justice Ministry associates had recently been dealing with how to approach the problem of illegal outposts. The Attorney General's working assumption was that all budget allocations from the [Construction and Housing] Ministry to the local authorities in the West Bank must be frozen until a fitting mechanism for preventing illegal money transfers could be put in practice. Mr. Mazuz also mentioned that following the findings published in the State Comptroller's report in regards to the transfer of state resources to the illegal outposts, a criminal investigation would be launched to look into certain aspects of the building issue presented by Peace Now. The Attorney General's response also stated that legislative steps had been taken in order to establish jurisdiction to put Israelis who had committed certain crimes related to building illegal outposts on trial. Among other things, a directive was issued stipulating that the local West Bank courts were permitted to try Israelis who had committed violations related to building, planning, or not evacuating illegal outposts. (Ynetnews)

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A Qassam rocket was fired from the northern Gaza Strip into Sderot. The rocket landed outside the town, causing no injuries or damage. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that the rocket was a medium-range “Quds” type. (Ynetnews)

Israeli forces arrested 24 Palestinians in Bethlehem, Hebron and Nablus, according to Israeli sources. (Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli bulldozers, backed by a group of Israeli border police, stormed the Shu'fat refugee camp in East Jerusalem and demolished the house of Tayseer al-Golani under the pretext that the house was constructed without a license. Palestinian boys stoned the Israeli soldiers, who responded with tear gas, sonic bombs and rubber bullets. No casualties were reported. (Wafa)

The Office of the Prime Minister of Israel issued a press release saying that over the past few days there had been an increase in the firing of Qassam rockets by Palestinian groups from the Gaza Strip into Israel. That, despite the fact that Israel had agreed to a ceasefire, and, over the past month, had refrained from responding to the ceasefire violations. Under those circumstances, an instruction had been given to the security forces to take pinpointed action against the launching cells. Simultaneously, Israel would continue to preserve the ceasefire and would act *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian Authority in order for them to take immediate action to stop the firing of Qassams. (www.pmo.gov.il)

Prime Minister Olmert and Defence Minister Amir Peretz ordered the IDF to act only against cells launching Qassam rockets into Israel from Gaza.

The decision to break from the current policy of restraint followed an emergency security meeting with military and security officials convened by Prime Minister Olmert early in the day. (Ynetnews)

In Cairo, PA President Abbas held talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. They discussed the latest developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the outcome of Mr. Abbas' meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, as well as efforts to form a national unity government. The meeting was attended by PLC Member Mohammed Dahlan, the official spokesman of the PA Presidency, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, and the Palestinian Ambassador to Egypt, Munzer Al-Dajani. It was also attended by Egyptian Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman. (Wafa)

Prime Minister Olmert met Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit at his Jerusalem office. They discussed the ceasefire violations and their implications. Mr. Aboul Gheit expressed Egypt's profound appreciation of Israel's restraint policy and its contribution to strengthening the moderate elements in the Palestinian Authority. They also discussed the upcoming meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and President Hosni Mubarak to be held the following weekend in Egypt. The two leaders were due to discuss the latest developments in the Middle East. (www.pmo.gov.il)

In Jerusalem, visiting Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit told a press conference that the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, held by Palestinian

militants, was still alive. "I emphasize that we are working hard for his release and we are sure that he is still alive," Mr. Aboul Gheit added. (Xinhua)

In a [press release](#) issued by the EU Presidency in Helsinki, the European Union criticized Israel's approval of a new settlement in the West Bank, describing it as illegal under international law. ([www.eu2006.fi](#))

The French Foreign Ministry, in a statement about the construction of 30 houses in the northern Jordan Valley authorized by Israeli Defence Ministry, stated: "For France, this decision runs counter to the commitments taken by Israel under the Road Map. Coming two days after the meeting between the Israeli Prime Minister and the President of the Palestinian Authority, it sends a particularly negative signal with respect to the will to dialogue and the re-establishment of trust between the two parties." ([www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](#))

Egypt transferred a large quantity of arms and ammunition to Palestinian Authority security organizations in the Gaza Strip. The move was carried out with Israel's approval and was made in an effort to bolster Fatah-affiliated groups. The shipment included 2,000 AK-47 rifles, 20,000 magazines and two million rounds of ammunition. They were transferred from Egypt to Israel through the Kerem Shalom crossing, through coordination with the Israel Defence Forces and with the Government's authorization. (Ha'aretz)

Canadian Foreign Minister Peter MacKay would travel to the Middle East in an attempt to revive the peace process in the region. Mr. MacKay would also discuss the issue of Palestine refugees stranded at the Iraqi-Jordanian borders since 2003. (Ma'an News Agency)

A US State Department spokesman, Gonzalo R. Gallegos, stated, "The US calls on Israel to meet its Road Map obligations and avoid taking steps that could be viewed as predetermining the outcome of future negotiations. ... The establishment of a new settlement or the expansion of any existing settlement would violate Israel's obligations under the Road Map." (AP)

During a meeting with Israeli Ambassadors to EU Member States, Prime Minister Olmert emphasized that there was currently broad international agreement that the Road Map and the Quartet principles were the basis for negotiations on the Palestinian track and that that was the only way for moving forward. "The countries that support the peace process all understand that disavowing terrorism and fighting it are basic conditions for moving forward, and we must stand on these principles," Mr. Olmert said. ([www.pmo.gov.il](#))

Commenting on the news of an arms transfer from Egypt to Palestinian security forces, Amos Gilad, head of political military policy at the Israeli Defence Ministry, said, "The assistance is aimed at reinforcing the forces of peace in the face of the forces of darkness that are threatening the future of the Middle East." Mr. Gilad added that the assistance to the Presidential Guard came from the Arab world and Israel was not dealing with the matter directly. PA President Abbas' spokesman, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, said, "The talk about the President's security services receiving arms is unfounded and not true at all." (Ha'aretz)

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An Israeli army spokesperson said that two rockets, fired by Palestinians in Gaza, had landed in an open area west of Sderot, causing no injuries or damage. (AFP)

Two Israelis guarding a building site along the barrier west of Ramallah were shot and slightly wounded in a Palestinian attack, according to an Israeli military source. (AFP)

An Israeli human rights group, B'Tselem, [said](#) that 660 Palestinians had been killed by the Israeli army in 2006 (until 27 December). Of those, 141 were minors, at least 322 did not take part in the hostilities at the time they were killed, and 22 were targets of assassinations, according to the statistics. In the Gaza Strip alone, after the capture of Cpl. Gilad Shalit, Israeli forces killed 405 Palestinians, including 88 minors, 205 of whom had not participated in the fighting when they were killed. Palestinians killed 17 Israeli civilians in 2006, both in the West Bank and inside Israel. In addition, Palestinians killed six members of Israeli forces. The group also said that Israel had demolished 292 houses during military operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, 279 of them in the Gaza Strip. They were home to 1,769 people. Israel also demolished 42 homes in East Jerusalem built "without a permit," which were home to 80 people. (AFP, [www.btselem.org](#))

In Ha'aretz weekend magazine interview, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said, "My vision says that the principle of two nation-states is not only an Israeli gift to the Palestinians, but also a promotion of Israel's interests." "The Road Map contains stages, not content. It lacks content to a certain extent. It affirms that in the second stage, a state with temporary borders and symbols of sovereignty will be established. But what does that mean? I think that in talks with the Palestinians, I can get into details on this issue," she said. When asked whether the separation wall was a reference point for her for dividing the land, she said, "Yes." "The vision is the State of Israel as a national home for the Jewish people ... and alongside it a Palestinian State that is the national home of the Palestinian nation, which provides a total solution for the problem of the Palestinian nation and the Palestinian refugees, and provides a national expression for each and every Palestinian. I feel that I have the obligation to make that happen," Ms. Livni said. (AFP, Ha'aretz)

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Israeli forces arrested five Palestinians in the West Bank, according to Israeli sources. (Ma'an News Agency)

Palestinians fired 10 Qassam rockets at Israel. The tenth rocket landed in a kibbutz in the western Negev, shattering windows but causing no injuries. All the others landed in open areas. There were no reports of damage or injuries. (Ynetnews)

Israeli political sources said that Prime Minister Olmert had dropped the idea of freeing Palestinian prisoners as a gesture to PA President Abbas ahead of a Muslim holiday. The sources said that Mr. Olmert did not have sufficient support in his Cabinet for the move ahead of the holiday, which was to start the following day. "It does not look as though there will be anything before Shalit is out," said one political source. (Reuters)

The [Damascus-based] Arab Water Studies and Water Security Centre said in its report that 65 per cent of two billion cubic feet of water Israel consumed was re-channelled from the Arab areas. It also said that despite limited water resources in the Palestinians territory, Israel controlled over more than 80 per cent of them, and that water had always been one of Israel's strategic motives for military operations. It added that the average individual in Israel consumed three to four times more water than the average Palestinian individual. (KUNA, Wafa)

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Israeli soldiers opened fire at a group of Palestinians in Beit Hanoun, moderately wounding two of them, medical sources said. (Wafa)