

UN assembly votes for probes of Gaza war charges



A Palestinian stands on the rubble of the bombed headquarters of the National Guard in Gaza City. The UN General Assembly on Thursday overwhelmingly approved an Arab-sponsored resolution calling on Israel and the Palestinians to probe war crimes allegedly committed in Gaza nearly a year ago. (AFP/File/Patrick Baz)

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) — In a move that angered Israel, the UN General Assembly voted on Thursday to urge the Tel Aviv regime and Palestinians to investigate war crimes charges leveled in a UN report on the Gaza war.

The Arab-drafted resolution is nonbinding and unlikely to lead to inquiries by either Israel or the Palestinian Hamas movement that rules Gaza into their conduct during the December-January conflict.

But the outcome was seen by Arab states as a public relations coup and a public discomfiture for Israel, which has reacted with outrage to the findings of the UN report, as have American Jewish groups.

Following a two-day debate, 114 countries voted for the resolution with 18 opposed -- including Israel and its ally the United States -- and 44 abstaining. No country has veto power in the assembly.

The resolution responded to a 575-page report on the Gaza war commissioned by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council, written by a panel led by South African jurist Richard Goldstone and published in September.

The report blasted both sides in the conflict, which killed over 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis, but was harsher toward Israel, which refused to cooperate with Goldstone.

The resolution follows Goldstone in calling on Israel and "the Palestinian side" to undertake within three months credible investigations into the report's charges.

At a forum at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, on Thursday, Goldstone criticized Israel for refusing to cooperate, adding that Israel responded to Palestinian attacks with disproportionate force.

As an example, he said that Israeli forces bombed a mosque during a worship ceremony, resulting in a large number of casualties. "If a

government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for the law," Goldstone said.

At the same forum, former Israeli UN Ambassador Dore Gold defended his country's decision to boycott the investigation and sparred verbally with Goldstone.

"This was a fixed fact-finding mission. It

wasn't looking for the truth," Gold said.

The resolution asks UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to transmit the report to the Security Council and to report back to the assembly in three months on implementation of the resolution "with a view to considering further action" by UN bodies.

Security Council action unlikely

Diplomats said all five veto-wielding permanent Security Council members opposed council involvement, so it was unlikely the 15-nation body -- the only UN entity with powers of enforcement -- would take action.

Despite European Union aspirations to a common foreign policy, the 27-nation bloc was badly split over the assembly resolution. Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia voted against it.

Ireland, Portugal, Malta, Slovenia and Cyprus voted in favor while others, including Britain and France, abstained.

Most developing countries voted in favor, reflecting sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Muslim states backed the Goldstone report during the assembly debate and called for an end to what Israel's impunity in the Middle East.

Israeli Deputy Ambassador Daniel Carmon told the assembly the resolution "endorses and legitimizes a deeply flawed, one-sided and prejudiced report of the discredited Human Rights Council and its politicized work that bends both fact and law."

In a clear warning to the Obama administration Tuesday, the House of Representatives by an overwhelming majority urged President Barack Obama to oppose UN endorsement of the Goldstone findings.

Egypt calls for UN resolution if Israel rejects freeze

CAIRO (AFP) — Egypt said on Thursday that if Israel continues to reject a freeze on Jewish settlement, then any new peace talks should be on the basis of a UN Security Council requiring it to leave the whole West Bank.

"Negotiations can start only if settlements are frozen -- and this continues to be our demand -- or if we receive unequivocal guarantees that a Palestinian state will be erected on 1967 borders, including (Arab east) Beit-ul-Moqaddas," Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said.

"If the United States gives these guarantees in writing, and (they are) backed by the international community, that is a UN Security Council resolution, then we would have accomplished what has been so hard to achieve so far," he said.

This solution would "set the borders of the (future Palestinian) state through an international resolution, and would place east Jerusalem within the borders," he said.

Abul Gheit was speaking a day after U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held hastily arranged talks in Cairo with Egyptian



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President Hosni Mubarak to clarify remarks about US policy on demanding a Jewish settlement freeze.

Clinton said at joint news conference with Abul Gheit on Wednesday that Beit-ul-Moqaddas must be on the agenda of any Middle East peace talks. "We want to assure you that our goal is a real state, with a real sovereignty," she said.

"There is no doubt that moving toward a state that reflects the aspirations and the rights of the Palestinian people must include all of the issues that have been discussed and mentioned by President (Barack) Obama, and that includes Beit-ul-Moqaddas."

Abul Gheit insisted that the issue must be solved in the interests of the Palestinian people "who then can resume negotiations (with Israel) on the basis of a Security Council resolution."

The Palestinians have demanded that talks can resume only after a complete halt to Jewish settlements on occupied land, including Arab east Beit-ul-Moqaddas, which Israel captured in 1967 and annexed.

Israeli envoy in Turkey pelted with eggs

Israeli ambassador to Turkey Gabi Levy was pelted with eggs on Wednesday by Turkish university students, according to various reports.

Turkish daily Hurriyet reported that during Levy's visit to the Black Sea Technical University, a group of students congregated around him, shouting slogans such as "Israel's child killers are not wanted in our universities," and hurled eggs into his van until university security personnel intervened.

Several students were arrested, and the ambassador was forced to cut short his visit to the institution.

The ambassador was slated to speak at the university during a tour of the historic

Turkish city of Trabzon.

"The people of Israel have a great interest in the (Black Sea) region," Levy was quoted as saying, referring in his speech to the influx of Israeli tourism in the area.

Also during Levy's Black Sea visit, the mayor of the coastal city of Rize, Halil Bakirci, criticized Israel's "policy of occupation" and said that Turkey's stance on Israel would "not change as long as it continues," according to a report in Turkish publication Turkiye.

Foreign Ministry Director-General Yossi Gal called the incident "an unfortunate public disturbance" in an interview with Channel 10 conducted Wednesday.

Relations between Israel and Turkey have been strained since October, when Ankara canceled a joint NATO drill in which Israel had been slated to participate, citing claims of war crimes committed during the IDF's Operation Cast Lead last winter.

The cancellation was soon followed by the airing of a Turkish television series on a popular state-run channel which depicted IDF soldiers as heartless murderers of women and children.

Although Muslim-majority Turkey emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire as the region's only secular republic, the country's current ruling party has clear Islamic leanings.

(Source: jpost.com)

Syria gains new confidence on world stage

DAMASCUS (AFP) — Emerging from international isolation with a flurry of high-level Western visitors and ties boosted with Turkey, Syria has gained in confidence to the point of holding out on an EU partnership.

The European Union hoped to sign a partnership accord on October 26, after a freeze of several years by the EU side, but the Syrian side now insists it must review the terms to protect its interests.

Damascus and the EU first drew up a draft partnership pact in 2004 but it was never signed by European countries, amid concerns by some nations of human rights abuses in Syria.

While stalling on the EU deal, Syria has been working full steam ahead to develop relations with the major powers in its back yard.

Already a strategic ally of Iran, Syria on October 8 hosted King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, resulting in a joint call for the speedy formation of a unity government in Lebanon where the two

countries have rival interests.

Ties with Turkey have also been strengthened with the launch of a high-level strategic cooperation council.

The two neighbors, whose relations were strained in the 1980s and 1990s over a Kurdish revolt in Turkey, for the first time held joint military exercises in April.

Last year, Turkey hosted and mediated indirect contacts between Syria and Israel on re-launching U.S.-brokered peace talks that broke off in 2000. They were frozen in December following the outbreak of the Gaza war.

Seen from Damascus, solid ties with a Turkey that is gaining strength as an economic power "make links with Europe less important," explained Riad Qahwaji, director of the Dubai-based Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis.

"Syria does not have to make political concessions," he said, referring to European human rights demands.

Iraq lawmakers can't agree on election law — again

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraqi lawmakers failed Thursday to agree on an election law for the country's January vote, raising concerns the balloting may be delayed and in turn push back a U.S. troop withdrawal.

Iraq's election law has been stalled for weeks as lawmakers argue over who should be allowed to vote in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, claimed by both Arabs and Kurds. Lawmakers said they would meet again Saturday. One said it would not be a big problem to delay the January election by a few days.

The ongoing political stalemate in Iraq comes as President Barack Obama decides whether to send tens of thousands more U.S. troops to Afghanistan. Under the president's drawdown plan for Iraq, all U.S. combat troops would leave Iraq by August 2010, and the remaining 50,000 trainers and support troops would go by the end of 2011.

The bulk of the American withdrawal is supposed to come about 60 days after the planned Iraqi election in January, U.S. commanders have said. However, they have said the plan is flexible, depending on the situation on the ground.

The head of Iraq's independent High Electoral Commission, Faraj al-Haidari, had warned lawmakers earlier this week that if they did not approve an election law by Thursday's end, it would be logistically impossible to carry out the vote Jan. 16 as planned.

But after lawmakers said Thursday they had not reached a deal and would meet again today, al-Haidari seemed to backtrack, saying it would be difficult to carry out the vote as planned, but not necessarily impossible.

Iraqi lawmakers have a long history of negotiating down to the wire. Several lawmakers said Thursday they were close to reaching a deal that would allow the vote to go ahead. But it was unclear whether a compromise was in the offing or would fall apart as have other proposals.

"We had a lot of ideas exchanged today, and I think we are close," said Mahmoud Othman, a Kurdish lawmaker. Othman added it would not be a big problem to delay the January election for a few days.

But Michael Hanna, an analyst with the New York-based Century Foundation think tank, said the longer the debate goes on, the more perilous the situation becomes and the more logistically difficult to print ballots and take other steps to carry out the vote.

He said Iraqi lawmakers genuinely appear to want the elections to go forward, understanding that a delay could undermine the country's fledgling political credibility, but don't seem as worried as the United States.

"There's a greater sense of urgency on the U.S. side, because we've more or less pegged our withdrawal to these elections," Hanna said.

A U.S. Embassy spokesman, Philip Frayne, said the U.S. would like to see a deal "that works for all sides, so that the Council of Representatives can pass an elections law in time to keep to the January date for holding elections." That is parliament's official name.

Saudi launches offensive against Yemen rebels

SAN'A, Yemen (AP) — Saudi Arabia sent fighter jets and artillery bombardments across the border into northern Yemen Thursday in a military incursion apparently aimed at helping its troubled southern neighbor control an escalating Shiite rebellion, Arab diplomats and the rebels said.

The Saudis — owners of a sophisticated air force they rarely use — have been increasingly worried that extremism and instability in Yemen could spill over to their country, the world's largest oil exporter. The offensive came two days after the killing of a Saudi soldier, blamed on the rebels.

Yemen denied any military action by Saudi Arabia inside its borders. But Yemen's president is a key ally of the Saudis, making it highly unlikely the kingdom would have launched the offensive without tacit Yemeni agreement.

A U.S. government official said the Yemenis were not involved militarily in the fighting. The official spoke anonymously because he was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

A top Saudi government adviser confirmed "a large scale" military operation underway on the Saudi-Yemeni border with further reinforcements sent to the rugged, mountainous area.

"It is a sustained operation which aims to finish this problem on our border," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue. He said Saudi troops were coordinating with Yemen's army, but Yemen's defense ministry denied the Saudis were inside the country.

The northern rebels, known as Hawthis, have been battling Yemeni government forces the past few months in the latest flare-up of a sporadic five-year conflict. They claim their needs are ignored by a Yemeni government that is increasingly allied with hard-line Sunni fundamentalists, who consider Shiites heretics.

The rebels said the Saudi airstrikes hit five areas in their northern stronghold Thursday but it was not possible to independently verify the reports. They said there were dead and wounded, and that homes were destroyed. The rebels' spokesman said people were afraid to get near the areas being bombed, making it difficult to count the casualties.

"Saudi jets dropped bombs on a crowded areas including a local market in the northern province of Saada," Hawthi spokesman Mohammed Abdel-Salam told The Associated Press. "They claim they are targeting al-Hawthis, but regrettably they are killing civilians like the government does."

He said the attacks were followed by hundreds of artillery shells from the border.

"So far, three killed have been pulled out of the rubble, including a woman and a child who perished when their houses were bombed and burned down," said Abdel-Salam.

The fighting is more than 600 miles from Saudi Arabia's oil fields on the kingdom's eastern Persian Gulf coast. But northern Yemen overlooks the Red Sea, the world's busiest route for oil tankers.

Two Arab diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Saudi Tomado and F-15 warplanes had been bombarding targets inside Yemen since Wednesday afternoon, inflicting significant casualties on rebels. The diplomats spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not allowed to talk to the media.