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NEWS IN BRIEF
Britain cancels
N. Ireland election

BELFAST, Northern Ireland (AP) — British Prime Minister Tony Blair canceled Northern Ireland's elections Thursday, saying deepening divisions among Catholic and Protestant voters threatened to bring "complete and total chaos."

Blair said he planned to move the May 29 election for Northern Ireland's dissolved legislature to the autumn. But he warned the vote could be delayed longer if the outlawed Irish Republican Army doesn't explicitly renounce violence, cease all hostile activities and disarm.

Gaining such an IRA commitment "goes to the very soul of the Good Friday agreement," he said, referring to the 1998 pact that proposed power-sharing between British Protestants and Irish Catholics in the province. He accused the IRA's Sinn Fein party of a "point-blank refusal" to go beyond "general assurances" on future IRA actions.

Northern Ireland legislators in 1999 overcame deep Protestant divisions to form a four-party administration that included Sinn Fein.

But Britain, fearing a walkout by the main Protestant party, shut down the crisis-prone coalition last October after police implicated Sinn Fein in an alleged IRA spy ring.

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Israeli raid kills 12

By Ibrahim Barzak
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Israeli troops stormed a Hamas stronghold on Thursday, setting off the most intense gunbattle in the Gaza Strip in 2 1/2 years of fighting, just a day after mediators presented a Mideast peace plan. Twelve Palestinians were killed, including two children and a top bombmaker.

Also Thursday, a Palestinian opened fire on a guard post outside a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, and soldiers killed the attacker, the military said.

Palestinian officials and Israeli opposition leaders accused Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of using the raid to undercut the new Palestinian prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, before he has a chance to fulfill a promise to disarm militias.

However, a Sharon adviser said Israel would not halt its anti-terror campaign and would not give Abbas, sworn in Wednesday, a grace period.

The Israeli incursion pitched more than 200 Palestinian gunmen with anti-tank missiles, grenades and homemade explosives against Israeli soldiers who fired machine guns and tank shells. Sixty-five Palestinians were wounded, including 15 critically.

The violence came just a day after international mediators presented a new peace plan, the so-called "road map" to Palestinian statehood within three years. The Palestinians have accepted the plan, while Israel has expressed major reservations.

The road map starts with a Palestinian crackdown on terror groups and an Israeli freeze on Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, combined with a gradual Israeli pullout from the autonomous Palestinian zones its troops have reoccupied during 31 months of fighting.

In Madrid, Secretary of State Colin Powell urged both sides to take steps toward implementing the plan. "We need to see the end to terror — and actions on the Israeli side as well," Powell said at the start of a trip through Europe and the Middle East. Powell was expected to meet with Sharon and Abbas next week.

The Gaza City incursion came a day after Hamas carried out a suicide bombing in a Tel Aviv pub that killed a waitress and two musicians. However, Israeli military officials did not link the raid to the bombing, saying they were after three top Hamas fugitives in Gaza — brothers Yousef, Mahmoud and Ayman Abu Hein.

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