

Hamas pledges bloody revenge for Israel's assassination of leader

By Lara Sukhtian
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Hamas threatened "100 unique reprisals" against Israel for killing its leader, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, as hundreds of thousands of mourners flooded the streets Sunday in a show of strength and fury.

It wasn't clear if the Islamic militant group was strong enough to carry out large-scale attacks after a sustained two-year Israeli campaign against it. Despite promises of revenge, Hamas still has not struck in the three weeks since Israel assassinated Rantisi's predecessor, Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin.

Hamas chose a replacement for Rantisi on Sunday, but did not disclose his name — a clear sign at least that the group is on the defensive in the face of Israeli attacks ahead of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's planned withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

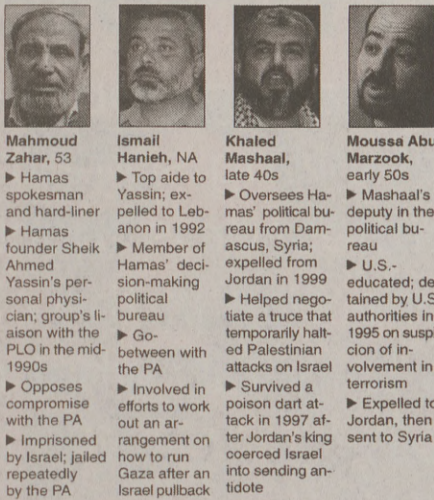
Sharon on Sunday picked up the support of key Cabinet ministers for his unilateral disengagement plan, including the Gaza withdrawal, assuring him of a Cabinet majority ahead of a hard-fought referendum among the 200,000 members of his Likud Party.

Sharon told the Cabinet on Sunday that he would forge ahead with his plan and continue to "hit the terror organizations and their leaders."

Cabinet minister Gideon Ezra said the overall Hamas leader, Damascus-based Khaled Mashaal, was also a target. Rantisi was in charge of the Palestinian areas and

Militant group's top leaders

Hamas secretly appointed a new Gaza Strip chief but refused to reveal his identity following the assassination of Abdel Aziz Rantisi.



Mahmoud Zahar, 53
▶ Hamas spokesman and hard-liner
▶ Hamas founder Sheik Yassin's personal physician; group's liaison with the PLO in the mid-1990s
▶ Opposes compromise with the PA
▶ Imprisoned by Israel; jailed repeatedly by the PA

Ismail Hanieh, 40
▶ Top aide to Yassin; expelled to Lebanon in 1992
▶ Member of Hamas' decision-making political bureau
▶ Go-between with the PA
▶ Involved in efforts to work out an arrangement on how to run Gaza after an Israel pullback

Khaled Mashaal, late 40s
▶ Oversees Hamas' political bureau from Damascus, Syria; expelled from Jordan in 1999
▶ Helped negotiate a truce that temporarily halted Palestinian attacks on Israel
▶ Survived a poison dart attack in 1997 after Jordan's king coerced Israel into sending antidote

Mousa Abu Marzook, early 50s
▶ Mashaal's deputy in the political bureau
▶ U.S.-educated; detained by U.S. authorities in 1995 on suspicion of involvement in terrorism
▶ Expelled to Jordan, then sent to Syria

reported to Mashaal. The killing of Rantisi set off demonstrations — some of them violent — across Gaza and the West Bank, as well as in Arab countries.

In the West Bank, Israeli troops shot and critically wounded a 14-year-old Palestinian boy in a clash between stone throwers and soldiers.

Israel rebuffed international criticism, including by several European countries. It said Rantisi — like Yassin — was targeted because he directed bloody Hamas attacks

against Israelis and was planning more.

However, many Palestinians held the United States responsible for Rantisi's death, saying it is giving Israel free rein.

"The Palestinian government considers this Israeli terrorist campaign to be a direct result of American encouragement and the total American bias in favor of the Israeli government," said Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia, echoing a widely held sentiment in the West Bank and Gaza.

Palestinian officials are furious with President Bush for sidelining them, endorsing Sharon's unilateral plan and backing Israel's demand to hang on to parts of the West Bank.

Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, denied that Bush gave Sharon the go-ahead for the Rantisi killing during their White House meeting last week. She told ABC TV that Israel has the right to defend itself, but that it is "extremely important that Israel take into consideration the consequences of anything that it does."

Mashaal said Sunday that the killing of Rantisi only strengthened his group and boosted support for it. However, a local leader in Gaza, Ismail Hanieh, acknowledged Hamas suffered a momentary setback.

Palestinian officials said they are worried the next target for assassination will be Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, whom Israel accuses of fomenting terror. The Israeli Cabinet voted last year to "remove" Arafat.

In Sunday's funeral, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians thronged the streets of Gaza City. In addition to Rantisi, two bodyguards were killed.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Police kill two men in Dallas shootout

DALLAS (AP) — Two men, believed to be suspects in a Dallas slaying, were killed by police during a shootout overnight. Shortly before 2 a.m. Sunday officers were investigating the shooting death of a woman in Dallas. A witness described suspects in the shooting, and a patrol officer spotted the suspects' car, a few blocks away, police said. Officers approached the vehicle and a brief chase ensued, said Dallas Police Lt. Anthony Williams. The two men in the car got out of the vehicle and exchanged gunfire with officers, he said. One man died at the scene, and the other man was taken to an area hospital where he died. No officers were injured, Williams said. Police have placed three officers on procedural administrative leave, while the incident is being investigated.

Police are investigating whether the suspects fired at the officers first, Williams said.

Houston's crash rate exceeds national average, Houston-Galveston study says

HOUSTON (AP) — The Houston area far exceeds the national average in the number of serious traffic collisions, contributing to skyrocketing medical costs and giving Harris County the most expensive auto insurance rates in Texas. County officials said one reason drivers in Harris County are at greater risk of collisions is because the area is growing faster than roads can be improved or patrolled. Now area drivers are even crashing into the new MetroRail trains.

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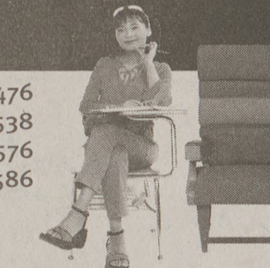
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Dutch Oven Cooking Clinic	April 20	NOW-April 19
Climb Cracks-Enchanted Rock	April 23-25	NOW-April 20
Backpacking Trip	April 24-25	NOW-April 20
Family Camping Trip	April 24-25	NOW-April 20
Rafting Day Trip	April 25	NOW-April 20
Bike Clinic-Brakes/Shifts	April 28	NOW-April 26

- **CLIMB CRACKS**—The technique needed to climb up cracks in rock faces is not something that comes naturally. However, it is something that can be taught. This trip will accommodate the beginner climber as well as the long-time gym climber who has never had a taste of the crack.
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