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REGIONAL BRIEFING

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

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THE DISTRICT

Dozens of demonstrators called yesterday for an end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip in a vigil at the Israeli Embassy.

The protest followed an interfaith service at St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Northwest Washington featuring Christian, Jewish and Muslim spiritual leaders.

The Rev. Susan Wilder, a Presbyterian who took part in the prayer service and demonstration, said participants called on Israel to lift its blockade of Gaza and urged an end to the barrage of rocket attacks from the Palestinian territory.

Israel has cited those attacks as its reason for sealing off the strip, which is controlled by the armed Hamas movement.

Darrin Blackford, a spokesman for the U.S. Secret Service, estimated that 50 people took part in the protest. Participants put the number at about 75.

No arrests were reported.

-- Mary Beth Sheridan

D.C. police responding to a reported shooting discovered the body of a 49-year-old man in a stairwell in Southeast Washington yesterday morning, officials said.

Officers arrived at the apartment building, in the 400 block of 37th Street, about 2:35 a.m. They found James Randolph on the stairs with a gunshot wound, Officer Junis Fletcher said.

Randolph was pronounced dead at the city medical examiner's office, Fletcher said. He lived in the unit block of 35th Street SE.

No arrests have been made in the case, which is under investigation.

-- Mary Beth Sheridan

A fierce fire caused heavy damage last night to three adjacent wood-frame houses in Southeast Washington, authorities said.

No injuries were reported in the blaze that brought about 140 firefighters with 50 pieces of equipment to the scene in the 3300 block of Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue in the Congress Heights area.

The cause of the fire was not immediately known.

A woman who was moving from one of the houses said many of her belongings were inside when the blaze started.

"I lost everything except for my clothes and my bed," said the woman, Carlen Blunt.

The fire started about 7:30 p.m. and continued to smolder about two hours later. It was the third major fire in the city in seven days.

-- Elissa Silverman

and Martin Weil

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Five apartment buildings in Suitland were evacuated yesterday afternoon after fire officials detected high levels of carbon monoxide, according to the Prince George's County fire department.

About 11:30 a.m., residents of an apartment complex in the 3800 block of Regency Parkway reported a strange odor and thick black residue coming from heating vents. Three residents were sick with headaches, nausea and vomiting, common symptoms of carbon monoxide exposure.

Nearly 100 residents were temporarily forced from their apartments, a fire department spokesman said. Dozens of people were evaluated and treated at the scene, and four were transported to hospitals for exposure to carbon monoxide. They were in fair condition, fire officials said.

A boiler that services the apartment buildings appeared to be the source of the carbon monoxide, officials said.

Levels of the gas began to decrease when the boiler was shut down.

Although they will be without heat until the boiler is repaired, most residents were allowed back into their units by about 1:30 p.m.

-- Kristen Mack

An off-duty Prince George's County police sergeant apparently shot her male housemate in Waldorf yesterday and then committed suicide, the Charles County Sheriff's Office said.

Investigators said Tora Lynn Coates, 38, shot the man, 45, multiple times and then shot herself at their home in the 5800 block of Opaleye Court about 12:30 p.m., said Kristin Timko, a spokeswoman for the sheriff's office.

The man was taken by helicopter to Prince George's Hospital Center, where he was in critical condition yesterday evening, Timko said.

His name was not released yesterday, and the nature of the relationship was unclear.

Coates, who was assigned to internal affairs in Prince George's, was the sister of former Calvert County sheriff Vonzell R. Ward, who left office in 2001.

-- Kristen Mack

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