

## Turkish govt wins vote of confidence

AP, Ankara

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's nine-day old government won a widely expected vote of confidence in parliament Sunday as relations between NATO allies Turkey and the United States remained strained over Iraq.

Legislators voted 350-162 in favor of the government in a procedural vote that finishes off the process of installing a government. Erdogan's Justice and Development party, which has roots in Turkey's Islamic movement, enjoys a large majority in the 550-seat parliament.

Erdogan led his party to an overwhelming victory in elections last year. He had been barred from running for political office himself because of a previous criminal conviction until his party's lawmakers changed the constitution to allow him to run. He won a parliamentary seat earlier this month, allowing him to become prime minister.

## Afghan refugee deal signed with Netherlands, Pakistan

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan has signed two agreements on the repatriation of refugees from neighbouring Pakistan and the Netherlands, a spokeswoman for the United Nations said Sunday.

Maki Shinohara of the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said both agreements were signed this week in Europe, the Pakistan deal at an Afghan reconstruction meeting in Brussels and the Dutch accord in the Hague.

The spokeswoman said the Pakistan agreement, jointly signed by the UNHCR, would cover Islamabad's commitment to returning refugees over the next three years.

"Despite the absence of a formal agreement last year, UNHCR and the Afghan government had assisted the return of 1.5 million Afghans from Pakistan in 2003," Shinohara said, adding an estimated 1.5 million remained in Pakistan.

Under the Dutch agreement, the government of the Netherlands agreed to assist the return of the 40,000 Afghan refugees living in its country, while continuing to host those who wished to stay until April 2004.

## Chinese coal mine blast toll rises to 28

AFP, Beijing

Twenty-eight miners were confirmed killed and 45 were still missing after a gas explosion in northern China, a local official said Sunday.

Rescue teams were still sifting through the Mengnanzhuang coal mine in Shanxi province, almost a day after an explosion caused parts of it to collapse, the official, Gao Liping, told AFP by telephone.

"There's been several cave-ins, so it's hard to get a grasp of the number of casualties," Gao said.

State media reported overnight that 75 people had been working in the mine at the time of the explosion.

China's mines have an appalling safety record, and a total of 4,500 miners died in accidents last year alone, according to Beijing's work safety bureau.

Outside experts, supported by other official figures, put the number of workers killed in accidents even higher at around 10,000 -- the vast majority coal miners.

## Oscar no stranger to war

AFP, Hollywood

The thunder of US bombs pounding Iraq can be heard as far away as Hollywood, where the Oscars, which have survived four wars and never been cancelled, are set to mark their 75th edition in drab style.

Cinema's greatest honours have soldiered on through World War II, the Korean War in the early 1950s, the Vietnam War during the '60s and '70s and through the last Gulf War 12 years ago with the motto "the show must go on."

And this year is no exception, with organisers vowing that the annual ceremony will go ahead as planned Sunday despite the war, barring any stunning developments in Iraq, albeit in a scaled-down version with no red-carpet arrivals and with stars drastically toning down their dress for the evening.

"The Oscars have always reflected what is going on in the world, and during conflicts they have tried to play their own unique part in the war effort as they will this year," said Hollywood awards expert Tom O'Neil.

Instead of taking cover as the winds of war blew through the 20th century, Oscar has always managed to adapt himself to the mood of war.

# Israel stages raids in occupied territories

## Abbas starts forming his cabinet

AFP, Gaza City

The Israeli army carried out several raids into the Gaza Strip overnight, Palestinian security sources said Sunday.

Shortly after midnight, tanks and bulldozers thrust into the central Gaza Strip town of Deir el-Balah, and started demolishing the house of 73-year-old Ibrahim al-Falit, causing the elderly man to suffer a heart attack, the sources said.

Palestinian medical sources said he died on his way to hospital. The army had already razed farmland belonging to his family on Saturday, the security sources added.

Moments later the army carried out an incursion deep into autonomous territory in the southern Gaza Strip between Rafah and Khan Yunis, the sources said.

Soldiers opened fire on two Palestinian policemen, wounding one of them.

In the northern West Bank town of Jenin, Israeli troops arrested two wanted Palestinians, the army said in a statement.

The statement said two other Palestinians were arrested near Ramallah and one in the southern Gaza Strip.

North of the West Bank, a Palestinian gunman opened fire on a kibbutz near the Israeli Arab town of Umm el-Fahm, public radio said.

There were no reports of any injuries and the police launched a manhunt, the radio added.

AP adds: A commander who has quarrelled with Yasser Arafat may be tapped to head all of the Palestinian security forces as incoming premier Mohammed Abbas starts to assemble his Cabinet, officials say.

Palestinian sources speaking on condition of anonymity said Abbas met with Mohammed Dahlan, the former Gaza security chief, and is considering naming him Interior Minister.

Abbas, picked as premier after Arafat gave in to intense international and local pressure to reform his regime, met Saturday with leaders of the Fatah movement and began consultations about picking a new Cabinet. Arafat is the leader of Fatah; Abbas is his deputy.

Meanwhile, violence continued early Sunday. Israeli troops moved into the West Bank city of Jenin and the nearby refugee camp, imposing a curfew and searching buildings for wanted militants, Palestinian witnesses said.

Explosions were heard in the area, apparently from soldiers blowing up locked doors, the witnesses said. The army said soldiers were cracking down on a terror infrastructure in the area.

Troops were moved into Jenin and the refugee camp repeatedly over the 29 months of fighting. Five militants were killed in gunbattles during an incursion last week, but soldiers had withdrawn in recent days. The camp is known as a hotbed of anti-Israeli activity.



PHOTO: AFP

A policeman gives directions on Sunday in Central Hong Kong to four tourists wearing masks to protect themselves from a global outbreak of pneumonia which has so far killed 12 people worldwide with eight in the territory. A team of scientists in Hong Kong have identified the pneumonia as a new virus that causes the deadly illness called Severe Acute Respiratory which has infected hundreds of people worldwide.

# Maoists' growing demands delaying talks: Nepal govt

AFP, Kathmandu

Narayan Singh Pun, the government minister negotiator in peace talks with Maoists, said here Sunday the process was being delayed due to ever increasing demands by the rebels.

"The Maoists have demanded the immediate release of all prisoners of conscience as a precondition for talks," said Pun, who is also minister for physical planning and works.

"We are committed to fulfilling their demands but it takes some time to follow up due to the process of law," he said.

Pun also revealed that the Maoists had refused to sit for "a good-will talk" on March 14, demanding the withdrawal of

cases filed against Maoist leaders at the Patan Appellate Court.

The government attorney had filed a case against Maoist leaders Prachanda and Babu Ram Bhattarai on March 5, five weeks after a ceasefire announced by the two sides to pave way for the peace talks.

They also want the withdrawal of anti-terrorism charges that have been labelled against them.

"As per the demand, I had issued a statement assuring safety to the negotiating team during the talks," said Pun, adding, "But they are still reluctant to sit for a good-will talk."

He said the procedural delay in fulfilling the rebels' demands should not be allowed to derail the negotiation process.

"I am still waiting to hold a first round of good-will talks with the Maoists, and it will begin immediately if they agree," he said.

Pun also said the government has no reservations about holding a round-table conference and forming an interim government if an agreement can be reached during the bilateral talks with the Maoists.

He said formation of an interim government under the leadership of the Maoists was possible.

The two sides signed a 22-point Code of Conduct earlier this month as a precursor to talks.

The insurgency, launched in 1996 for a communist republic, has claimed more than 7,800 lives in Nepal.

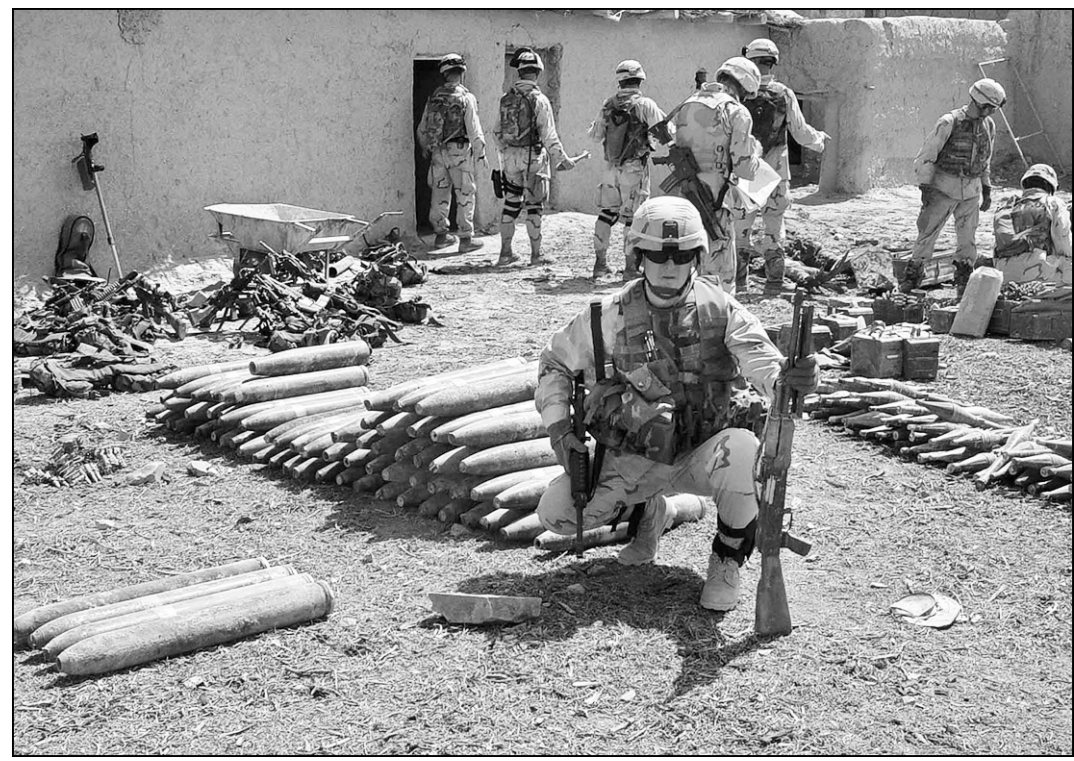


PHOTO: AFP

This handout photo provided by the US Army on Saturday shows a US Army personnel shows part of cache of weapons and ammunition recovered during "Operation Valiant Strike" in Sami Ghar Mountain Range, southeast of Kandahar, Afghanistan. The operation by coalition forces, the latest US offensive in the war on terror in Afghanistan, continues in the villages and caves in southern Kandahar province.

## Gunmen kill Kashmiri rebel leader

AFP, Srinagar

Unidentified gunmen Sunday shot dead at point blank range a senior Kashmiri rebel leader of Indian-administered Kashmir's dominant militant group, police said.

Abdul Majid Dar, 48, was gunned down while getting out of a car near his brother's house in Sopore, 50 km north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

He said the gunmen came up to the car and opened fire with an automatic weapon, killing Dar instantly.

His mother Shah Begum and sister Rehana Akhter were critically injured in the attack and rushed to Srinagar's main hospital.

Dar was one of the few rebel leaders open to talks to resolve the Kashmir issue. Last May, moderate separatist Abdul Gani Lone was gunned down in a crowded public place by gunmen who disappeared immediately afterwards into the throng.

No one has been arrested for either killing and no group has claimed responsibility.

Dar, as chief commander of operations of the Hizbul group, called a unilateral ceasefire with the Indian government forces in July 2000. India reciprocated, ordering troops not to target Hizbul fighters.

But the movement's leadership in Pakistan withdrew the ceasefire within a fortnight after New Delhi refused any role for Islamabad in potential talks over Kashmir.

## Pneumonia claims 8 in Hong Kong

AFP, Hong Kong

An eighth person has died in Hong Kong of a mysterious respiratory disease, health officials said Sunday, taking the worldwide toll for the illness to 13.

Another 25 people had been diagnosed with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), bringing the number of confirmed cases in the territory to 242, Hospital Authority director Ko Wing-man told reporters.

The latest death was of an 80-year-old man, who had also suffered from heart disease, Ko said.

At least 386 suspected SARS cases have been reported in 13 different countries, according to World Health Organisation figures.

## Al-Qaeda may already have bio-arms

AFP, Washington

Al-Qaeda is on the verge of producing -- or may already have produced -- biological and chemical weapons, the Washington Post reported Sunday, citing documentary evidence and interrogations recently conducted by the US government.

Quoting "three people with access to written reports," the Post reported that al-Qaeda's biochemical weapons program is considerably more advanced than US analysts suspected.

The picture continues to sharpen daily, one official said, because translation and analysis of the documents continues, and because the operative captured with them began divulging meaningful information about production plans only over the past several days.

Authorised government spokesmen declined to discuss the subject, saying it is classified.

Evidence shows that al-Qaeda leaders completed plans and obtained the materials required to manufacture two biological toxins -- botulinum and salmonella -- and the chemical poison cyanide, according to the newspaper.

They are also close to a feasible production plan for anthrax, a far more lethal weapon, which kills 90 percent of untreated victims if spread by inhalation and as many as 75 percent of those treated when the first symptoms become evident, the daily wrote.

Most of the new information comes from handwritten documents and computer hard drives seized during the March 1 capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, regarded by some government analysts as al-Qaeda's most important operational planner.

## N Korea steps up verbal attack on South

AFP, Seoul

North Korea stepped up its verbal attack on South Korea Sunday after suspending inter-Korean economic talks scheduled for this week.

The North also warned that South Korea's alleged military alert posture during the Iraqi war and its joint military exercises with the United States could destroy inter-Korean relations.

"South Korean authorities should put an immediate stop to the anti-DPRK confrontation," the North's government newspaper Minju Joon said, despite Seoul's claim that South Korean troops had never been put on high alert.

The alert is part of South Korea's "confrontation racket" against North Korea which has nothing to do with the Iraqi war, Miju Joon said.

On Saturday, the North suspended planned economic cooperation and marine talks with the South, scheduled for the coming week.



PHOTO: AFP

A Chechen woman casts her ballot in a tent of the refugee camp in Karbulak, Ingushetia, at the border with Chechnya on Sunday during voting on a constitutional referendum on the war-torn breakaway Russian republic.

# Chechen refugees vote despite scepticism

AFP, Grozny

Chechen refugees living in this tent camp said they voted in a constitutional poll on Sunday because they were willing to do anything to bring peace closer in their war-torn republic, despite deep scepticism that the Moscow-backed poll would yield results.

"I have lost 10 years of my life -- I voted to put an end to that," said Stupian, 45, who had just cast his vote in the polling tent set up at the Karabulak refugee camp in the Russian republic of Ingushetia.

Supian said he was voting with a mixture of "bitterness and joy" as he was willing to take part in any process that could end the bloody conflict that has been raging in Chechnya on and off since 1994.

In the weeks leading up to the referendum many refugees expressed doubt that the new constitution -- which cements Chechnya's status as part of the Russian Federation -- would fulfill the Kremlin's promises to bring peace.

Loudspeakers at the polling booth here blasted out traditional Caucasian music in an attempt to

create a festive atmosphere, but the visibly boosted police presence reminded voters of the danger that continues to plague the fragile political process in breakaway Chechnya.

Thirty armed men were guarding the polling booth, vehicles were banned from entering the camp and three extra polling tents had been set up in case the first one was destroyed.

Police were swarming in the roads around Nazran, the capital of Ingushetia, and markets and public places were closed for the whole weekend to avoid violent incidents or attacks.

More than 10,000 refugees living in camps in Ingushetia were expected to take part in Sunday's poll, according to Sergei Yastrezhembzky, the Kremlin's top spokesman on Chechnya.

That number is only a fraction of the 103,000 Chechens who the United Nations estimates are living in Ingushetia, with around 19,000 housed in tent camps.

The Kremlin strongly urged -- some observers say forced -- thousands of refugees to return to

Chechnya in a bid to show that the security situation there was stable, but most refused to return out of fear for their lives and safety.

"I often go into the forest to gather herbs and I hear explosions from far away," said Aset, a Chechen refugee who said she thought the vote would do little to end the war that has killed tens of thousands of people.

"This won't end the war -- our lives have changed too much. The first word that newborns make here sounds like a gunshot," she said.

"They gave us copies of the draft constitution, but we used them mostly to wrap sunflower seeds that we sell at the market," she said.

A sign inside the polling booth at Karabulak urged refugees to approve the constitution: "Choose for yourself: peace or war, law or chaos, work or unemployment, well-being or poverty. This referendum is peace."

Yet refugees who voted said they were skeptical that the referendum would bring the peace promised by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

# US planes accused of spying on Russia

AFP, Moscow

Russia on Sunday accused US spy planes of flying regular surveillance missions near its southwestern territory.

A Russian defense ministry commission said that analysis of three flights by U2 spy planes detected in the past 30 days showed a regular pattern, the news agency said.

The commission accused Georgia of allowing the US planes to carry out spy missions from its

territory.

It said the flights all followed the same pattern as a US plane which was intercepted Saturday when it came within 20 kilometers (13 miles) of the Russian border with Georgia, flying at an altitude of 18,000 meters (60,000 feet).

The Russian foreign ministry said in a statement Saturday that the flights resembled "a return to Cold War-era practices."

It said they were "all the more inappropriate" considering the international tension created by the

US-led war on Iraq, which Moscow fiercely opposes.

The US flights are officially carried out in agreement with Georgia, as part of the post-September 11 "war on terrorism."

Georgia signed a deal with the United States in late 2001 allowing regular overflights, mainly to Cyprus and Afghanistan.

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze said last week he was ready to offer the United States use of his country's air bases for the war on Iraq.