



PHOTO: AFP

CDF Cpt Kevin Lawson gets out of his truck on the 118 freeway Monday in Simi Valley, California in suburban Simi Valley, 35 miles northwest of Los Angeles. Firefighters were working to keep the flames on the north side of the 118 freeway and away from the homes on the south side of the highway.

## Smoky daytime in California as fires threaten more homes

AP, San Diego

Ash fell on the beach like snow and drivers turned on their headlights in the smoky daytime streets Monday as wildfires that have reduced entire neighborhoods to moonscapes skipped through the hills of Southern California and threatened 30,000 more homes.

California's deadliest outbreak of fires in more than a decade has destroyed at least 1,134 homes, killed at least 15 people and consumed more than half a million acres stretching from the Mexican border to the suburbs northeast of Los Angeles.

"This will be the most expensive fire in California history, both in loss of property and the cost of fighting it," said Dallas Jones, director of the state Office of Emergency Services.

The death toll jumped from 13 to 15 Monday after the bodies of two people were found on a road near San Diego.

Several people suffered burns and smoke inhalation, including eight hospitalized at the University of California, San Diego, Medical Center. Two had burns over more than 55 percent of their bodies, spokeswoman Eileen Callahan said.

Managers of California's power grid estimated that 70,000 to 85,000 Southern California customers were without electricity because fires had damaged transmission lines.

A 90,000-acre wildfire that straddles the Los Angeles-Ventura county line began moving slowly toward million-dollar mansions in a gated community in Los Angeles. California Department of Forestry Battalion Chief Thomas Foley said

that in a "worst-case scenario," the blaze could spread all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., said his home near San Diego was among the hundreds damaged or destroyed. Further east, a small border crossing 70 miles from San Diego was closed as fire cut off roads leading to the US-Mexico border, said Vince Bond of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection.

The dry, hot Santa Ana winds that have fanned the flames began to ease in some areas Monday, raising hopes that overwhelmed firefighters could make progress with the help of reinforcements on their way from other Western states. But the danger was still high.

The San Diego-area fires raced through chaparral and grass, sometimes sparing one home or one cluster of trees while destroying those around it.

"It would be disingenuous to say we have control of these fires. Right now we are throwing everything we can at them," Jones said. "It's such erratic conditions. These are still tremendously dangerous with very little control or containment."

President Bush designated the fire-stricken region a major disaster area, opening the door to grants, loans and other aid to residents and businesses in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura counties.

"This is a devastating fire and it's a dangerous fire. And we're prepared to help in any way we can," Bush said at the White House.

Gov. Gray Davis moved to

activate the National Guard and summon help from neighboring states. He predicted the cost of the fires would be in the billions.

He toured the fire area in San Bernardino and saw "just homes reduced to rubble, charred belongings still sending off smoke."

He was followed later by Gov.-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger, who had a fire briefing in Ventura County and praised work by firefighters.

He thanked Bush for swiftly declaring an emergency and said he would go to Washington on Tuesday to meet with federal officials "to make sure that the federal money will come through."

Across Southern California, the sun glowed red and smoke stung the eyes and lungs. Airport baggage handlers wore masks against the smoke and the ash dropping across the landscape.

"My eyes are burning right now something terrible," said 74-year-old Maury Glantz in San Diego, holding a towel over his mouth and nose. "I have to get out."

Even the primates at the San Diego Zoo went indoors to escape the misery. "Their lungs are built like ours so they can be affected by the smoke," said zoo spokeswoman Yadira Galindo.

Many of those who died in the wildfires ignored evacuation orders and were caught by flames because they waited until the last minute to flee, Sheriff Bill Kolender said.

"When you are asked to leave, do it immediately," he said. "Do not wait."

## Red Cross mulls future in Iraq following attack

### US urges ICRC, other agencies not to pull out

AFP, Geneva

The International Red Cross launched consultations yesterday on the future of its operations in Iraq, saying no decision on whether to pull foreign staff out of Baghdad had been made after a deadly bomb blast at its offices there.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell appealed to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other agencies on Monday not to pull out of Iraq, saying their departure would be a victory for "terrorists."

A series of attacks around Baghdad on Monday killed 43 people -- including two ICRC staff -- and wounded more than 200.

Senior ICRC officials in Geneva as well as in Iraq and neighbouring

countries were discussing what to do after the agency was targeted, with a view to releasing an action plan in the coming days, a spokesman said.

The organisation must balance the security of its 30 to 40 foreign workers and more than 600 national staff in the country against the needs of the Iraqi people, said the ICRC's Florian Westphal.

"We have these two objective obligations to bear in mind which is why we are taking the time we need before making a decision," he told AFP.

Reports in German media Monday -- citing Pierre Gassmann the head of the ICRC's delegation in Baghdad -- that the agency would begin flying its foreign staff out were incorrect, Westphal

continued.

"That was mainly our mistake that the message came across as such but no definite decision has been taken on how to proceed in Iraq," he said.

"There is still a debate, and if and when the decision is taken we will certainly communicate it ... within the next few days."

Various options will be considered on how to proceed with the ICRC's humanitarian work, which includes visiting prisoners of war, working at hospitals and helping with water sanitation.

Different tactics were adopted following previous attacks against the organisation in other conflict zones, including the partial withdrawal of staff, limiting movement outside major

cities or increasing the role played by national workers, said the spokesman.

Antonella Notari, the ICRC's chief spokeswoman in Geneva, said a decision would be made "independently" of other players in the country.

"We will take our own decision based on our own conclusions and on our own criteria," she told a regular news conference here.

"We would like to insist on the fact that we proceed independently of any of the actors in Iraq."

Although discussions about how to move forward centre mainly on the ICRC's work in and around Baghdad, the agency is also assessing its presence across the war-torn country.

## Lebanon, Syria agree on ways to respond to Israeli 'threats'

REUTERS, Beirut

The Lebanese army said on Monday it had agreed with Syria on ways to confront "enemy" threats, hours after Israel and Hizbollah guerrillas traded fire in the latest sign of rising tensions with the Jewish state.

Lebanon's Hizbollah attacked Israeli posts in a disputed border area on Monday, drawing at least five Israeli air raids and heavy shelling on the edges of Lebanese villages.

Regional tensions have flared since Israel struck what it said was a training camp for Palestinian militants in Syria on October 5 in the deepest attack on its neighbor in 30 years.

The Lebanese army said in a statement that it and Syria's armed forces had looked into ways to "confront challenges and enemy threats to which both Syria and Lebanon are exposed."

"A unified formula was reached on this issue," it said, giving no details on exactly how Lebanon and Syria would respond to such "threats."

Syrian Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Hasan Turkmani, who earlier this month put the Syrian armed forces on alert against any new Israeli attack, held meetings on

Monday with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud and top military officials.

Syria, which has broad political and military sway over its smaller neighbor, hinted on Sunday it would retaliate over any Israeli military strike against it by attacking Jewish settlements on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Syrian-backed Hizbollah helped end Israel's 22-year occupation of south Lebanon in 2000, but has since attacked Israeli troops in the Shebaa Farms, near the border between Lebanon, Israel and the Golan Heights.

Monday's attack by Hizbollah on Israeli posts in the Shebaa Farms was the first since August.

In a statement issued in New York, Terje Roed-Larsen, the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, said he "strongly deplores" the attacks on both sides.

He urged all parties to exercise maximum restraint and respect the UN-demarcated border separating northern Israel and southern Lebanon.

"Today's events underscore yet again the acute need for the government of Lebanon to exert full control over the use of force from its territory," Roed-Larsen said.

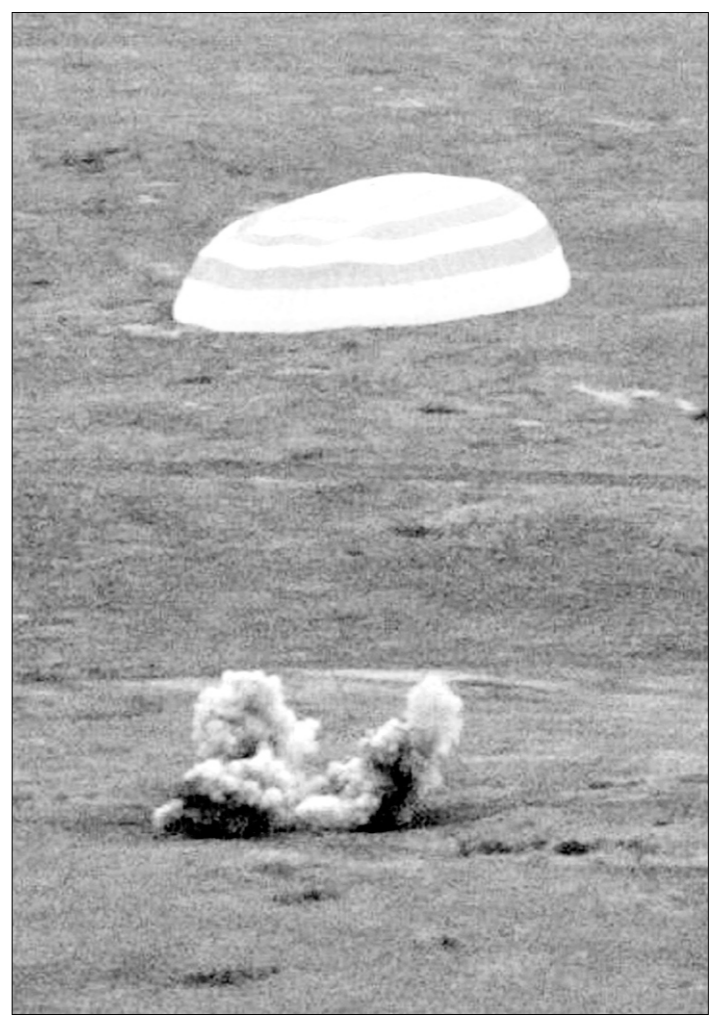


PHOTO: AFP

Soyuz TMA-2 capsule with Yuri Malenchenko of Russia, Pedro Duque of Spain and Edward Lu of the US lands near Arkalyk, about 330 km southwest of Astana yesterday. A crew, which has been manning the International Space Station for six months, touched the Earth safely and on target yesterday after a faulty touchdown earlier this year.

## US Senate ties aid to Malaysia to religious freedom

AFP, Washington

The US Senate voted unanimously Monday to tie religious freedom to 1.2 billion dollars in military aid to Malaysia, after that country's prime minister sparked a row by claiming Jews rule the world.

The measure would require the State Department to determine that Malaysia "supports and promote religious freedoms, including tolerance for people of the Jewish faith" before releasing the money.

The amendment to the overall 18-billion-dollar foreign aid budget does provide exceptions for national security concerns.

It still needs to win support from the House of Representatives, which has passed a resolution condemning Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad over his remarks at the summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in mid-October.

Mahathir said then: "The Europeans killed six million Jews out of 12 million. But today the Jews rule this world by proxy."

## US-Russian space crew returns to earth safely

REUTERS, Near Arkalyk

Three crew disengaged their capsule from the International Space Station and touched down safely on the Kazakh steppe yesterday in what a NASA spokesman called a "dream landing."

Russian Yuri Malenchenko, American Edward Lu and Pedro Duque of Spain landed in their Soyuz TMA-2 capsule at 0240 GMT. Technicians said they took steps to prevent a rough "ballistic" landing like that endured by the last team to return from the ISS.

In May, a US-Russian three-man crew in an identical capsule landed hundreds of kilometers off target. Rescuers spent hours searching for crew members, who managed to crawl out of the descent capsule. The ship's radio antenna had been broken.

But on Tuesday both crew and space officials were happy with the landing on a hazy morning in Arkalyk, 330km southwest of the Kazakh capital Astana.

NASA spokesman Robert Navias told reporters the landing was phenomenal. "It was a dream landing. It's almost as if they (Russians) hit an x-mark on the ground."

"They have landed. Everything is fine, soft landing engines have worked. Everything went according to plan," a spokesman for the Central Space Control in Moscow told Reuters.



PHOTO: AFP

Dusit Zoo members of the board carry a couple of baby white tigers born from white tiger of Nashville zoo during press conference at Dusit Zoo in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand received white tigers from Nashville Zoo in Tennessee last year under the Animal Exchange programme. The white tiger is one of the most endangered species in the world with an estimated numbers of only 200 in existence now.

## Palestinian PM Qorei to stay on

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei has agreed to stay on as leader of an enlarged government after the end of his emergency cabinet's one-month tenure, Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath said yesterday.

"Abu Alaa (Qorei) has agreed to form an enlarged government and he will present it to parliament at the end of the current cabinet's mandate," Shaath told reporters.

He was speaking after a meeting in the West Bank town of Ramallah of the mainstream Fatah organisation's central committee, which was chaired by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Qorei was sworn in by Arafat as the head of a one-month emergency cabinet on October 7.

Shaath said that the current eight-man cabinet would form the nucleus of the enlarged government

to be presented to the Palestinian parliament for approval.

"The central committee examined the formation of an enlarged government and president Arafat gave Abu Alaa the responsibility of creating it," said Shaath.

"Abu Ameer (Arafat) and the central committee were unanimous in their support for Abu Alaa," he added.

Since he took up the post, Qorei has been blowing hot and cold over whether he would agree to stay on as prime minister.

He said on October 13 that he was "more inclined not" to stay in the post in the wake of a row over the post of interior minister, with Arafat blocking moves to install Nasr Youssef into the key post.

But he gave a strong hint on Monday that he would continue, emphasising the need for "stability".

MPs have claimed that while the Palestinian constitution gives Arafat the right to declare a state of emergency, it does not allow him to install an emergency government without their approval.

Qorei, the former speaker of the Palestinian parliament, replaced Mahmud Abbas who resigned as premier in September after a bitter battle with Arafat over control of the multi-branch Palestinian security apparatus.

Israel, which froze all contacts with the Palestinians after a massive suicide bus bombing in Jerusalem on August 19, has said it will not talk with Qorei until he acts against armed factions such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Qorei has identified the securing of a mutual ceasefire with Israel as his government's top priority.

## Air raid kills 22 Taliban, al-Qaeda in Afghanistan

REUTERS, Kabul

At least 22 guerrillas from the ousted Taliban regime and al-Qaeda network were killed in an aerial attack by US-led forces in Afghanistan's southeastern Paktika province, the region's governor said yesterday.

Air support was called in after a group of Taliban and al-Qaeda fugitives fired rockets and heavy machine-guns on a base used by US-led troops and their Afghan allies in Shkin, near the Pakistan border, on Saturday, said Mohammad Ali Jalali.

Jalali told Reuters that he had heard unconfirmed reports that two US soldiers may also have died, but the US military in Afghanistan was not immediately available for comment.

"The 22 bodies for sure were

Taliban and al-Qaeda who got killed in the bombing," Jalali said.

The clash was separate from fighting in the Gomal district of Paktika on Friday in which 20 suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, including Arabs and Chechens, died, according to Paktika police chief Dawlat Khan.

More than 350 people, including civilians, foreign and government soldiers, aid workers and many rebels have been killed since August across Afghanistan.

The south and southeast have been worst affected by a wave of attacks blamed on remnants of the hardline Islamic Taliban regime which has declared a Jihad, or holy war, against foreign troops in Afghanistan and the US-backed government in Kabul.

## US sees credible aviation terror threat in KSA

REUTERS, Riyadh

The United States said yesterday it had credible information of a threat of attacks on aviation and other Western interests in Saudi Arabia. It also said Americans should defer non-essential travel to the Gulf Arab state, the world's largest oil exporter.

The US embassy in the capital Riyadh had earlier warned Americans of possible attacks during the holy Muslim month of Ramadan in the kingdom, birthplace of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, but the new advisory was the first to discourage travel.

Bin Laden, in an audio tape broadcast on an Arabic satellite television on October 18, had vowed more suicide attacks inside and outside the United States.

"The US Government continues to receive indications of terrorist threats aimed at American and Western interests, including the targeting of transportation and civil

aviation," the advisory said.

"There is credible information that terrorists have targeted Western aviation interests in Saudi Arabia," it added.

"The Department of State warns US citizens to defer non-essential travel to Saudi Arabia. Americans are reminded of the potential for further terrorist actions against US citizens abroad, including in the Persian Gulf region."

The embassy urged the 40,000 Americans in Saudi Arabia to remain vigilant, particularly in public places. The fasting month of Ramadan began on Monday in the birthplace of Islam.

Saudi Arabia launched a crackdown on Muslim militants after al-Qaeda suspects hit an expatriate housing compound in Riyadh in May, killing 35 people including nine Americans.

Officials at Saudi Arabian Airlines declined to comment on the US warning.