

## Israel recognises Sharon era over

AFP, Jerusalem

Israelis, while still in shock at the demise of their seemingly indefatigable prime minister, are steadily coming round to the realisation that the tumultuous era of Ariel Sharon is over.

Some medics have already opined that Sharon, prime minister for the last five years and at the centre of Israeli political and military life for half a decade, will probably be unable to sustain the strains of high office after suffering two strokes in less than three weeks.

Many Israelis were at first reluctant to believe that the man known as the "Bulldozer" had himself been knocked down for good.

But with the 77-year-old still in an induced coma four days after being admitted to hospital, reality is sinking in.

"I think that you have to be realistic. For Sharon, it's over. I don't believe he can return to his post even if he pulls through," lamented Emmanuel Mai, a Jerusalem swimming instructor.

"We must get used to the idea that he will not complete what he has begun to do with the Palestinians," he added in reference to last summer's pullout from the Gaza Strip.

The historic withdrawal was widely expected to be followed up by new pull backs from the West Bank had he won March's general election.

It is not the first time that Israelis have had to deal with the shock of losing a leader, with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin a decade ago still etched on the memories of many in the Jewish state.

As was the case during the height of the suicide bombings during the now five-year Palestinian uprising, many Israelis have been glued to the army and public radio stations for the latest updates on the premier's health.

Doctors and aides struck a more upbeat note on Saturday, expressing hope that he would exit his coma but few believe he will emerge unscathed after such heavy bleeding in his brain over the last few days.

"We love him, we love him, we love him," said a fan of the Betar Jerusalem football club, a team noted for its nationalist support base.

"We want him back in his post," the pumped-up fan told journalists as he attended a match against the mainly Arab Bnei Sakhnin team.

A doctor at the Hadassah hospital where Sharon lies in intensive

care, however, made clear that the idea of a return was wishful thinking.

"We are in no doubt that we will be able to revive him... but he will probably not be able to resume his duties," he added.

The doctor said the prime minister, who suffered a massive brain haemorrhage on Wednesday, "risks being paralysed or suffering from other problems that will prevent him from exercising his duties."

Another doctor, who was not part of the team treating Sharon, agreed that "to think that the prime minister can resume his functions is unrealistic."

"At best, he can be a good grandfather to his grandchildren," said Motti Raviv.

## 13 children die in Tajikistan blaze

AFP, Dushanbe

Thirteen children died early yesterday when a blaze swept through a home for mentally handicapped children in the Central Asian state of Tajikistan, police said.

"Thirteen children died and four or five others are missing," a police spokesman told AFP.

Two residents of the home in the centre of the Tajik capital Dushanbe were hospitalised and 77 others were found temporary lodgings elsewhere in the city after being rescued from the burning building in the night, the spokesman said.

Around 100 children between six and 16 years old, most of them with mobility problems, were sleeping in the building when the fire broke out, he added.

"It was terrible. It was dark and we had to run through the rooms looking for children. I managed to get six children aged between six and eight out," said Martin, 27, a security guard who was on duty nearby.



Worshippers hold hands during a memorial mass for Jean Charles de Menezes on his birthday in St Anne's church in London on Saturday. Family, friends and supporters of Jean Charles de Menezes, who was shot dead by police on July 22, 2005 after being mistaken for a suicide bomber attended the mass and celebrated his life.

## Saddam trial may be over by June

AFP, Baghdad

The first trial of Saddam Hussein could be over by June provided interruptions and delays are kept to a minimum, according to a US legal advisor to the Iraqi tribunal trying the former dictator.

Saddam and other former regime members may then face a raft of other charges of crimes against humanity, likely starting with a bloody campaign against the Kurds between 1987 and 1988, said Regime Crimes Liaison Kevin Dooley.

A form of indictment related to the alleged Kurdish massacre will probably be issued in the next two months, but any trial against those accused will only start once the current case is over, he told AFP in an interview.

Dooley, a US prosecutor by trade, heads the so-called Regime Crimes Liaison Office, a Baghdad-based body of legal experts set up by the US government in May 2004 to provide support and advice to the Iraqi High Tribunal.

At present, Saddam and seven co-defendants are being tried for the killing of 148 Shiites from the village of Dujail, north of Baghdad, after a failed assassination attempt in 1982.

Despite only convening for seven days since October 19, the court is to start hearing weeks of testimonies from alleged victims and witnesses as well as documentary evidence into the Shia deaths from January 24.



Under wintry conditions, men queue with empty containers for petrol in central Baghdad yesterday as the oil-rich war torn country suffers from fuel shortages.

## Blair endorses Brown to succeed him

BBC ONLINE

Tony Blair has given his strongest endorsement yet for Chancellor Gordon Brown to succeed him as Labour leader.

Blair said he believed New Labour would "continue long after I've gone".

He told the BBC there would be a new leader at the next election, adding "let's assume it's Gordon", who will take New Labour "on to a new level".

He rejected following the Tories in jumping to a new generation, saying the best thing was to have experience "with the youthful team in support".

He told BBC One's Sunday AM: "When you've been in government and you've got that weight and experience and strength and power there, you know, you can have the best combination, which is the experience with the youthful team in support."

"And I think that's a very strong case for Gordon... Alan Greenspan (US Federal Reserve Board Chairman) a short time ago described him as the 'finance minister without peer in the western world'."

"I mean, it's a pretty good endorsement. And therefore I think what is clear is that if we're sensible as a political party and carry on learning the lessons of why we spent eighteen years in

opposition and now we've got three terms of government.

"If we're sensible about it, we can move to the next level, the next stage and be extremely successful. And that's what I want to see."

"There is no doubt in my mind that New Labour will continue and will continue well after I have gone," he said.

"It is sometimes said that Gordon is, you know, not New Labour, he is old Labour, he is a roadblock to reform. It is complete nonsense. He is completely and totally on the same lines as me."

Blair also said he would not rethink his plan to stand down as prime minister before the next election.

Earlier, in an interview with the Observer newspaper, Mr Blair said he hadn't "the faintest idea" whether new Conservative leader David Cameron would make a good prime minister.

Blair said people should accept that the media would give Mr Cameron "a more than fair wind".

"Now, what do you do about that? Relax, because the changes he is trying to make in the Conservative Party are changes to the basic settlement New Labour represents."

Asked about Cameron, Blair told Sunday AM the repositioning of the Conservatives was "not the same as having a policy agenda for the future".

## US tries to exploit rift among Iraqi rebels

AFP, Washington

The United States has stepped up contacts with some Iraqi insurgent groups in a bid to exploit tensions between home-grown rebels and foreign militants groups such as al-Qaeda, the New York Times reported on Saturday.

While talks had taken place previously, the discussions have acquired a greater significance since October as a rift has opened up between Iraqi insurgents and al-Qaeda, the papers said.

Violence has erupted between Iraqi insurgents and al-Qaeda in several predominantly Sunni cities, including Taji, Ysefya, Qaim and Ramadi, the daily reported, citing a

Western diplomat, an Iraqi political leader and insurgent leader as unnamed sources.

"In interviews, Iraqi insurgents say there is widespread hatred for al-Qaeda among ordinary Iraqis" because of bombings that have killed thousands of civilians, the paper wrote.

The talks were at an early stage but had the objective of engaging Iraqi rebels who want an end to the US military presence but who strongly reject the methods and goals of Abu Masab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

"If we could reach an understanding with each other, meaning the resistance, as they call it, and the coalition, then they will in turn take

care of Zarqawi and the terrorists," the unnamed diplomat told the paper.

Tarik al-Hasimi, the leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party who was in regular contact with Iraqi insurgents, was quoted as saying he did not think the talks had made much progress. One of the sticking points was a demand by insurgents for a timetable for the withdrawal of US forces in Iraq, he told the newspaper.

The US government has acknowledged previously that it has pursued talks with some insurgents. Last June, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld confirmed that Washington had arranged contacts for the Iraqi government with elements of the insurgency.

## Iran to remove UN seals at atomic research sites

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran said yesterday it was preparing to remove UN seals at some nuclear research and development sites, despite strong Western opposition to its decision to resume atomic research halted over two years ago.

It would be the second time in five months that Iran, which insists its nuclear programme is peaceful, removed some seals put in place by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

European Union and US officials have said the move, which

follows Iran's resumption of uranium processing at its Isfahan plant in August, will jeopardize efforts to find a diplomatic solution to Iran's atomic ambitions and could accelerate calls for its case to be sent to the UN Security Council.

"We will remove the seals and we have announced that we are ready to start research from tomorrow," Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told a weekly news conference.

"It depends on the IAEA to announce its readiness as this will take place under the agency's

supervision," he added.

A resumption of atomic research and development would mean that all of Iran's nuclear programme, much of which was put on hold as part of negotiations with the EU that started in late 2003, was active once again apart from the actual enrichment of uranium at its unfinished Natanz facility.

Uranium enrichment is the most sensitive part of the nuclear fuel cycle since it can be used to produce bomb-grade material as well as nuclear reactor fuel.

## New China toxic spills threaten millions

AFP, Beijing

Two major new toxic spills in China have threatened water supplies for millions of residents, officials and state media said yesterday, as local governments took emergency measures.

In the eastern province of Shandong a 60 kilometer-long (37 mile) diesel oil slick flowing down the Yellow River, China's second longest river, forced the province to stop pumping water from it, the Xinhua news agency said.

So far 63 pumping stations along the river in several cities and counties, including the capital Jinan, have been shut down, said Xinhua.

An official at the Jinan city Yellow River River Affairs Bureau told AFP the city of about six million people was now relying on

water from reservoirs.

"We still have water to provide. We are doing all right. We're using reservoir water, which can last us several months," said the official.

It was not immediately clear if other cities had similar backup supply.

Provincial officials could not be reached for comment even though the cabinet issued a nationwide emergency response plan Sunday that promises to inform the public of public health threats in a timely and accurate way.

The oil spill occurred Thursday at Gongyi city in neighbouring Henan province when a frozen pipe broke, causing six tons of oil to spill into a tributary of the Yellow River.

However, Xinhua did not report it until Sunday.