

## China lashes back at US criticism on HR

AP, Beijing

China yesterday lashed out against US criticism of its human rights record, saying racial discrimination and crime were still rife in the United States and prisoners were being abused at US-run detention centres abroad.

The State Council, China's cabinet, denounced the United States for what it said were rampant violence and widespread discrimination against minorities especially blacks in its annual response to the State Department's report on human rights worldwide.

"For a long time, the life and security of the people of the United States has not been under efficient protec-

tion," the Chinese report said.

Blacks are given heavier criminal penalties, arrested more frequently and are more likely to be targeted for hate crimes, the report said.

It also criticized American troops for brutality at prisons in Iraq and the detention camp for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"As in previous years, the State Department pointed the finger at human rights situations in more than 190 countries and regions, including China, but kept silent on the serious violations of human rights in the United States," it said.

It is "an act that fully exposes its hypocrisy and double standard on human rights issues," said the report which drew mostly from

stories and statistics in the American press.

The response came one day after the State Department said the Chinese government's human rights record "remained poor, and the government continued to commit numerous and serious abuses."

The US report said repression worsened in China in 2005, with a trend toward "increased harassment, detention, and imprisonment" of people seen as threats to the Chinese government. It also mentioned tightened controls over print, broadcast and electronic media and censorship of online content.

## OLMERT SAYS Israel to fix borders in four years

AFP, Jerusalem

Acting premier Ehud Olmert, the frontrunner for the March 28 elections, has fleshed out a key election promise in vowing to set Israel's permanent borders within four years if his Kadima party wins.

Olmert, interim leader of the ruling centrist party and an avid supporter of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip last year, made the comments in an interview with the Jerusalem Post, excerpts of which were published Thursday.

Within four years, he intends to "get to Israel's permanent borders, whereby we will be completely separate from the majority of the Palestinian population and preserve a large and stable Jewish majority in Israel."

## US House panel rejects fund for Iran's democracy

REUTERS, Washington

A House of Representatives committee on Wednesday rejected the Bush administration's new initiative to promote democracy in Iran as it approved \$71 billion in emergency funds mostly to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Republican-led House Appropriations Committee granted the administration almost all of the \$67 billion it wanted for the wars, and ordered that some \$1.3 billion be used to upgrade armour on Army vehicles after the Pentagon was criticised for skimping on those protections for troops in Iraq.

The committee cut most of the \$75 million Bush sought for new pro-democracy efforts in Iran, calling the plan announced with fanfare last month poorly justified. The committee instead funded existing pro-democracy programmes for the country now locked in an international standoff over its nuclear programme.



PHOTO: AFP

Women take part in a rally Wednesday against the US-led war in Iraq, in front of the US embassy in Caracas. Hats with picture depicting US President George W. Bush dressed as an Arab reads "Who's The Terrorist?"

## Shias ask Iraqi morgues to suppress body count

AFP, Washington

The top Shia party in power in Iraq ordered government-run morgues and hospitals to suppress the body count from execution-style shootings in the aftermath of the February 22 bombing of the Askariya mosque, The Washington Post said Thursday.

The differing death tolls that followed the destruction of the Shia holy site -- officially 379 and 1,300 as reported by the Post late last month -- reflect sensitivity to frequent reports of sectarian killings carried out by police and Shia militias allied with the government, the daily said.

An Iraqi health ministry official, who spoke to the daily on condition of anonymity because he feared for his life, said the leading Shia party in Iraq's governing coalition, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), had ordered the health ministry to tell morgues and hospitals to stop tabulating sectarian killings.

That official as well as an interior ministry official and an international official in Baghdad put the number of executions in Iraq six days after February 22 at more than 1,000.

## EU talks clouded by Iran standoff, ME turmoil

AFP, Brussels

The growing Iran crisis, turmoil in the Middle East peace process and global Muslim protests over disputed cartoons risk clouding a meeting of European Union foreign ministers in Austria today.

Closer to home, embattled Balkan efforts to join the European bloc will also be high on the agenda at the twice-yearly informal gathering, hosted this time by the Austrian EU presidency in the picture-postcard city of Salzburg.

The two-day meeting kicks off with a working lunch focused on the Middle East, left in limbo after militant group

Hamas won Palestinian elections, while Israel awaits a successor to stricken Ariel Sharon.

The 25-nation EU has long been the biggest provider of aid to the Palestinians, but refuses contacts with Hamas unless it renounces violence and recognises the Jewish state, throwing its future role into question.

"Obviously ministers are starting to exchange views about 'What if...'" But we have to be very clear that at present... that we don't yet know what sort of Palestinian Authority will be formed," said one EU source.

A British official noted that the EU has released some money, but

ensuring that it went directly to Palestinians and not through the transitional government.

"But clearly the EU does not want to be funding terrorists, and as and when a new government is formed led by Hamas the EU has to consider its position very carefully," she said.

Concerns over the Middle East are compounded by the escalating crisis over Iran, which faces being hauled before the UN Security Council after breaking off negotiations with the EU and resuming sensitive nuclear activities.



PHOTO: AFP

Handout image from Nasa shows an artist's rendition of the Swift spacecraft observing a gamma burst.

## Ancient blast lifts veil on Universe's childhood

AFP, Paris

Astronomers have recorded the death throes of a massive star that exploded nearly 13 billion years ago, an unprecedented sighting that suggests the Universe became a prodigious star-making machine in its early childhood.

On September 4 last year, a sentinel Nasa satellite called Swift detected a huge burst of gamma rays emanating from the constellation of Pisces.

Within seconds, Swift had wheeled around to direct its X-ray telescope at the 80-second burst while, on Earth, teams of astronomers steered optical and infra-red telescopes to get a peek in other parts of the energy spectrum.

The source proved to be the explosion of a huge star whose light had taken around 12.8 billion years to reach us, they report in Thursday's issue of Nature, the weekly British science journal.

## Gunmen abduct 50 Iraqis Bombings kill 9

AP, Baghdad

Gunmen wearing commando uniforms of the Shia-dominated Interior Ministry on Wednesday stormed an Iraqi security company that relied heavily on Sunni ex-military men from the Saddam regime, spitting away 50 hostages. The ministry denied involvement and called the operation a "terrorist act."

On Thursday, a roadside bombing targeting an Iraqi patrol killed at least nine civilians and injured six, police said.

The blast missed an army patrol in Amariyah, a mostly Sunni neighbourhood in west Baghdad, according to

Interior Ministry Maj. Falah al-Mohammedawi.

Another bombing was aimed at a police patrol in Jihad, a mostly Sunni western neighbourhood, and injured three bystanders, said police Lt. Mohammed Kheyoun.

At least three other explosions were heard across the city, but police did not immediately have reports on damage or casualties.

The al-Rawafid Security Co. was attacked after gunmen arrived in a convoy of vehicles, including several white SUVs and a pickup truck mounted with a heavy gun, that they

used to carry away the hostages, said Interior Ministry Maj. Falah al-Mohammedawi.

He said the victims, who included bodyguards, drivers, computer technicians and other employees, did not resist because they believed their abductors were police special forces working for the Interior Ministry.

Meanwhile, police and the US military reported finding the bodies of 24 men garroted or shot in the head, most of them in an abandoned bus in a tough Baghdad Sunni neighbourhood.