

Olmert issues warning to Israeli parties

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said in an interview published yesterday that any Israeli political parties that refuse to accept his plan of withdrawing from parts of the West Bank would not be able to join his coalition government.

Olmert's centrist Kadima Party slid slightly in opinion polls published Thursday, five days ahead of a general election, but still held a commanding lead over other parties.

"I want to emphasise so that no one doubts it: I intend to implement this plan. Anyone who is not inter-

ested in seeing this plan implemented will not be in my coalition. I do not intend to compromise on the details of the plan. This is the plan and there is no other," Olmert said.

Olmert has said that if he is elected he would dismantle most West Bank settlements, fortify remaining settlement blocs and set the nation's borders by 2010. The blueprint is the most detailed proposal for Israel's borders ever presented to voters by an Israeli leader.

Olmert told Channel 10 television on Wednesday that he would wait some time if he is elected before implementing the withdrawal plan to

see if Hamas which swept a January Palestinian parliamentary election will moderate its militant views and negotiate with Israel.

But if Hamas refuses to recognise Israel, accept past Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements and renounce violence, Israel will move to unilaterally draw its borders, Olmert said.

Kadima was founded by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon weeks before he suffered a massive stroke on Jan. 4 that left him comatose. Olmert stepped into Sharon's position, and is being viewed as his successor.

Chile bus crash kills 12 American tourists

AP, Santiago

A bus carrying cruise ship tourists plunged off a highway in northern Chile and tumbled 300 feet down a mountainside Wednesday, killing 12 Americans, US and Chilean officials said.

Two other US tourists and two Chileans the driver and the tour guide were hospitalised in serious condition, said Juan Carlos Poli, a city hall spokesman in the Pacific port city of Arica.

The tourists were returning to Celebrity Cruises' ship Millennium from an excursion to Lauca National Park when the driver swerved to avoid an approaching truck on a rugged highway near Arica, 1,250 miles north of Santiago, he said.

Protesters give Thai PM deadline to quit

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's embattled prime minister yesterday dismissed a threat from his opponents to step up their protest campaign to bring him down unless he resigned by the end of the day.

It was the second deadline the opposition has given Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been battling weeks of mass demonstrations calling for him to resign since his family pocketed almost two billion dollars in a tax-free stock sale.

"There is nothing that worries me about the current situation," Thaksin told reporters as he entered his offices -- which have been surrounded since last week by demonstrators -- for the first time in 10 days.

"Everything is fine," he said, adding that he did not expect protests to turn violent after the announced deadline expired.

"The dateline expires at 10:00 pm (1500 GMT) and we will announce our next step on that stage. I cannot disclose what it will be now," said Suriyasai Katsasila, spokesman for the main anti-Thaksin alliance.

He said the movement would take a "decisive measure."

Media reports said the People's Alliance for Democracy was mulling a march on Thaksin's Bangkok residence.

Another option would be to ask a "third power" -- thought by many to be King Bhumibol Adulyadej -- to intervene and end the political crisis, the Nation newspaper said.

Tens of thousands of protesters have been gathering every night for weeks in downtown Bangkok to oppose Thaksin, who called early elections for next month in hopes of drawing a line under the political crisis.

Thaksin remains widely popular in the country's rural areas and analysts expect he would win the April 2 vote by a comfortable margin.

But in the capital, nightly protests have given voice to anger over his family's sale of the Thai telecom giant Shin Corp to investors from Singapore.

The deal earned Thaksin's family 1.9 billion dollars and used legal loopholes to avoid paying taxes.



PHOTO: AFP

Anti-Thaksin protesters celebrate a court decision against privatisation outside the Supreme Administrative Court in central Bangkok yesterday. A Thai court ruled against the government's plan to privatise the kingdom's largest utility, Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), saying the energy giant's planned initial public offering (IPO) would be politically influenced.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian youth climbs onto an Israeli armoured vehicle to place Palestinian colours during an Israeli military incursion into the West Bank village of Baita, just outside of Nablus Wednesday. This is the third day running that Israeli forces have entered this village in a search operation. Israel is on a high alert one week before the national elections.

Heavy smokers 40pc likelier to be impotent

AFP, Paris

Men who smoke more than a pack of cigarettes a day are nearly 40 percent likelier to suffer from impotence than non-smokers, says a study published yesterday.

The finding comes from questionnaires answered by 8,367 Australian men, a cross-section of the male population aged between 16 and 59.

The study found that erectile dysfunction affected almost 10 percent of respondents -- but smokers were the worst hit.

Men who smoked up to 20 cigarettes a day were 24 percent likelier to suffer a bout of impotence than non-smokers. The risk rose to 39 percent among those who smoked more than 20 a day.

