

Talks on new Israeli govt begin

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli President Moshe Katsav was to begin hosting talks yesterday on forming a new government amid a slinging match between the winning Kadima party and Labour, its most likely coalition partner.

Katsav was to meet senior members of Kadima, which came out on top in last week's general election with 29 seats in the 120-member parliament, followed by a delegation from the centre-left Labour which came second with 20.

Kadima will recommend that its leader, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, be formally appointed prime minister and charged with forming a cabinet.

Labour -- which could conceivably stitch together a shaky coalition

with right-wing parties and leave Kadima out in the cold -- will recommend that its leader Amir Peretz be given the task.

Other parties, which will meet Katsav on Monday or Tuesday, are reported to be yet undecided on who to back for the top job.

Buoyed by final results that gave him a slim backing for his pledge to fix Israel's final borders by 2010, Olmert has insisted he will be the next prime minister despite deteriorating relations with main coalition hope Labour.

Kadima has already begun informal talks with potential coalition partners but has insisted Labour, which campaigned on a vigorous social economic ticket, not be granted its chief demand of the finance ministry.

Rice, Straw in Iraq to break govt deadlock

REUTERS, Baghdad

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw made a surprise visit to Baghdad on Sunday to press Iraqi leaders to form a new government and avert a civil war.

The visit came a day after members of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari's ruling Shia Alliance bloc broke ranks publicly and joined calls for him to step down to improve chances of ending political paralysis.

"The fact that we're going out to have these discussions with the Iraqi leadership is a sign of the urgency which we attach to a need for a government of national unity," Rice told reporters who travelled with the two ministers from Britain.

US and Iraqi officials say a unity government, more than three months after December's election, is vital to averting all-out war after five weeks of spiralling sectarian

bloodshed.

Rice arrived in Baghdad with Straw, a day after visiting his home region in northwest England.

The two were due to hold talks with Jaafari, who refuses to stand aside, and other leaders including President Jalal Talabani, a British official said. US officials make little secret of doubts about Jaafari's ability to unite and lead Iraq.

Straw said: "We're committed to Iraq, but we need to see progress and that is in everybody's interest."

Their efforts follow a visit last month by leading US senators who urged Iraq's fractious politicians to bury their differences and reach agreement.

"This is in many ways a time of testing for the Iraqi nation and for the Iraqi people. They need a government that can act on their behalf in this time of testing," said Rice.

The move against Jaafari, declared publicly by one leader and echoed, anonymously, by others

came as parties held their latest round of talks on Saturday on a grand coalition with Kurds and Sunnis, who are adamant in their rejection of Jaafari.

Although Iraqi officials said they had reached a deal on forming a national security committee designed to share out more responsibilities among Iraq's feuding sects, there were no tangible signs of progress on the personnel of a new government.

That cannot happen, officials say, until there is accord on a prime minister -- unlikely to happen while Jaafari remains.

US and British officials worry that the paralysis will widen a political vacuum and fuel violence that is becoming more complex as Iraqis wait for their first full-term government since the US and British invasion toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003.

British govt to hold secret talks on Iran strike today

AFP, London

The British government is to hold secret talks with defence chiefs today to discuss the consequences of possible military strikes against Iran, the Sunday Telegraph newspaper reported.

Citing a senior Foreign Office source, the weekly said the meeting would consider the aftermath of an American-led attack on Iranian nuclear sites.

The United States and its allies believe Iran is using its nuclear programme to hide an attempt to develop an atomic bomb.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) denied that such discussions were to take place.

The source told the newspaper: "Monday's meeting will set out to

address the consequences for Britain in the event of an attack against Iran.

"The CDS (chiefs of defence staff) will want to know what the impact will be on British interests in Iraq and Afghanistan which both border Iran."

"The CDS will then brief the prime minister and the cabinet on their conclusions in the next few days."

The United Nations Security Council issued a statement Wednesday calling on Iran to halt uranium enrichment within 30 days.

"If Iran makes another strategic mistake, such as ignoring demands by the UN or future resolutions, then the thinking among the chiefs is that military action could be taken to bring an end to the crisis," the source said.



PHOTO: AFP

A woman holds Mexican and American flags in Ferrel Plaza during a protest against proposed immigration policies Saturday in New York City. Thousands of protesters marched in opposition to tough US immigration bills.

Thousands protest US immigration reform

AFP, Costa Mesa

Thousands of demonstrators rallied in this conservative California town and in New York on Saturday to protest plans for a US legislative crackdown on illegal immigrants.

Organisers of the protest in the town of Costa Mesa, which is planning to become the first US city to allow its police to act as immigration officers by arresting and helping to deport undocumented workers, said 2,500 people took part, but police and reporters estimated the crowd to be around 1,500.

Protest organiser Nativo Lopez, president of the Mexican American Political Association, said the group was outraged by a plan, which would allow police to screen suspected criminals for US citizenship.

"We are here to make a tough statement right in the bedrock of the anti-immigrant movement," said Lopez at the protest that was rowdy but peaceful.



PHOTO: AFP

Senior citizens queue up to get their ballot papers at a polling station in the hometown of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Chiang Mai yesterday. Thailand voted in elections seen as a referendum on Thai Premier Thaksin Shinawatra's leadership after months of street protests, but an opposition boycott has undermined the credibility of the polls.

Victory may not be enough for Thaksin

AFP, Bangkok

Even a resounding victory for Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in yesterday's election may not be enough to quell the street protests against him, analysts say.

But a clear mandate from voters would put him in a stronger position to negotiate an end to two months of political turmoil, amid signs that the public and the security forces are growing weary of street demonstrations in Bangkok.

Thaksin called the elections just 14 months after winning a landslide victory that made him seem an unassailable figure in Thai politics.

That changed in early February, when Bangkok's middle classes erupted in anger at a tax-free stock sale that earned Thaksin's family some 1.9 billion dollars.

The opposition decided to boycott the polls and some 400 candidates were disqualified over fraud in the nomination process, which left Thaksin's party unopposed in most

constituencies in Sunday's vote. It's the kind of victory he would rather not have.

Thailand's complex election laws require all 500 seats in parliament to be filled to confirm a new prime minister. The boycott means that is unlikely to happen.

He has tried to salvage the election by turning it into a referendum on his government, vowing not to take office if wins less than half the vote.

"He wants to prove to the public that he has a new legitimacy to govern. That's his scenario. But I don't think it works that way," said Pornsri Patcharintanakul, deputy chief of the Board of Trade business lobby.

"We will see more demonstrations because opponents of Thaksin will reject the election outcome anyway," he said.

A key protest leader, Chamlong Srimuang, has already vowed to continue demonstrations until the premier resigns.

"For opponents, the issue is not about the election. It's about Thaksin's alleged corruption and abuse of power," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a professor of political science at Chulalongkorn University.

But there are growing signs the protests are losing momentum. Some 70 percent of Bangkok residents surveyed on Thursday said the protests should stop.

The national police chief said Sunday that the protests should end after the election.

"We should return to the rule of law after the election. Everybody should return to normal and not violate any laws or cause suffering to others," General Kowit Watana told reporters.

"Police have been very lenient for a long time," he said.

Thailand's army chief made similar remarks in Thai newspapers Sunday.