



European tourists light candles during a memorial ceremony for the victims of this week's attacks at the scene of the bombings in the Red Sea resort of Dahab Wednesday. Twin suicide attacks targeting security personnel rocked northern Sinai near the Gaza Strip yesterday, two days after triple bombings killed at least 18 people in Dahab.

Kadima, Labour clinch Israeli coalition deal

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli prime minister designate Ehud Olmert's Kadima party on Thursday reached a coalition deal with the Labour party on forming a government, which will aim at fixing Israel's final borders.

The accord follows marathon negotiations between the two parties which had agreed in principle to establish a coalition government back on April 4 after the March 28 general election won by Kadima.

"We have reached an agreement, the details of which will be published this afternoon at a joint news conference," a spokesman for Labour leader Amir Peretz told AFP.

A press conference which was planned following the signing of the coalition deal by the parties negotiation teams was planned for Thursday for 3:00 pm (1200 GMT) but was later postponed, although officials insisted it was only for technical reasons and did not mean the deal was in jeopardy.

UNSC not in charge on Iran: Putin

AFP, Tomsk

Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday the UN atomic agency and not the more politicised Security Council should take charge of efforts to resolve the standoff over Iran's nuclear programme.

"We believe it is the IAEA that must play a key role and not unload this weight onto the back of the Security Council," Putin said, referring to the International Atomic Energy Agency whose chief was to report Friday to the Security Council on Iran's nuclear program.

"We will work cooperatively with all of our partners" to resolve the standoff over Iran's nuclear programme, which the United States says is being used as cover to develop nuclear weapons -- a

charge Tehran rejects.

"It is too early to run ahead and say what decisions we might take together. The main thing is that any decisions that are made must be made in agreement" among all involved, Putin said at a joint news conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the Siberian city of Tomsk.

His comments came on the eve of the crucial UN meeting where the IAEA is expected to report that Iran has ignored a UN deadline expiring Friday to stop uranium enrichment.

Iran's refusal to back down on the uranium enrichment could lead to Security Council sanctions, although Iranian allies Russia and China oppose such a move.

Tehran says it needs the enriched fuel for its civilian reactor

project. However, the enrichment process could in theory be extended to making weapons-grade material and building the Islamic republic's first atomic bomb.

Russia, which is building Iran's first and still unfinished nuclear power station, has consistently sought to slow down the US-led drive to isolate Iran and pressure the Islamic republic into giving up all nuclear ambitions.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov underlined Putin's caution by downplaying the urgency of Friday's UN Security Council meeting.

"The procedure of presenting and examining the report is not an ultimatum. It is of a working nature and does not have a time limit," Lavrov said in Tomsk.



Angelina Jolie tops most beautiful list

AP, New York

She's got that pregnant glow, but it is Angelina Jolie's humanitarian efforts that make her most radiant, according to People magazine.

The pillow-lipped actress graces the cover of People's "100 Most Beautiful People" issue, on newsstands Friday. It's her fourth time on the list, but first as cover girl.

"She looks the most beautiful when she's in the field natural, no makeup, nothing," the magazine quotes musician Wyclef Jean, who worked with Jolie on a relief effort in Haiti. "Because you see Angelina, the angel. It doesn't get any better than that."

Musharraf offers to pull troops back from Afghan border

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has told tribal chiefs that he would pull troops out of a restive region on the Afghan border if they expelled foreign militants and ended their militancy.

Musharraf, speaking to a Jirga or council of tribal elders in the north-western city of Peshawar, also promised development projects provided peace was maintained, the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan said.

"I am ready to sanction any mega project (in the region) if the people

cooperate with the government in its endeavour to purge their areas from the elements of terror and extremism," he said on Wednesday.

He called upon the council to help frustrate terrorism and extremism in their areas and maintain peace for development, integrity and solidarity of the country.

Musharraf urged the tribal elders "to curb terrorism and extremism through the traditional Jirga system to pave the way for the federal government to minimise the deployment of the security forces and consequently withdraw them from

the tribal areas," the news agency said.

He said foreign terrorists were using "our soil for the fulfilment of their nefarious designs and putting them (tribesmen) in trouble and danger."

"I assure you that these foreigners are not your friends and they are here to fulfil their own agenda which has no concern with Islam," he said.

President Musharraf, a key ally in the US-led "war on terror", last month warned foreign insurgents to leave the tribal belt or be killed.

Myanmar offensive uproots 11,000

AP, Bangkok

Myanmar troops waging their biggest military offensive in almost a decade have uprooted more than 11,000 ethnic minority civilians in a campaign punctuated by torture, killings and the burning of villages, according to reports from inside the country and Thailand.

The campaign by government troops in eastern Myanmar to suppress a decades-old insurgency among the Karen people began in November. But it has intensified in the past month, according to reports from the Free Burma Rangers.

Blair under fire amid scandals

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faced fresh calls to resign after three senior cabinet ministers floundered in political and personal crises in one of the government's darkest weeks.

Newspapers gave a damning verdict on the governing Labour Party's woes, which climaxed in a sex scandal starring the deputy prime minister, a crime blunder by the interior minister and a snub by nurses for the health minister.

"A government in meltdown," said the right-wing Daily Mail in an editorial.

"Labour Clowns," echoed The Sun tabloid, while The Daily Telegraph went a step further say-

ing: "Blair must pay the price for his misgovernment."

A week before local elections in England, Blair's Labour Party -- once the image of hope and change following years of sleaze under the Conservatives -- appears to have lost its sparkle as reflected in recent

opinion polls.

The latest blow came on Wednesday when Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, 67, admitted to tabloid revelations that he had cheated on his wife by having a two-year affair with a civil servant 24 years his junior.

SC meets to try to resolve Thai crisis

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's Supreme Court met yesterday to consider invalidating snap elections held earlier this month, in a bid to resolve a months-long political drama that has forced out the prime minister.

The unusual gathering of all the court's 87 justices was prompted by a rare political intervention from Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who Tuesday demanded they find a solution to the crisis.

"I believe that our solution will be fair and just to all parties," Chief Justice Charnchai Likhitjitha told reporters after the meeting.

He and the chiefs of two other powerful Thai courts will meet Friday to reach a final decision, but

Charnchai refused to give details of their deliberations.

Another of the justices, Virat Chinvinijkul, said they considered not only the fairness of the elections, but what role the courts should play in the political crisis.

"The most contentious issue to be deliberated was the legality and constitutionality of the election on April 2 and ... whether the elections were organised in a free and fair manner," he said.

The ruling party as well as the opposition parties that boycotted the snap polls and protest leaders that helped drive prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra from office have all said they would agree to new elections.