N Korea ready

to counter US

North Korea accused the United States of driving tensions on the Korean Peninsula "to the brink of

war," and said it is fully prepared to

anti-US rhetoric came as

Washington increases scrutiny and

pressure on the communist nation

over concern it may test-launch a

long-range missile believed capable

"Today's grave situation in which

the US ... is driving the situation on

the Korean Peninsula to the brink of

war proves once again that peace

has been able to be maintained ...

only because we have a strong war

deterrent," said the North's

Committee for the Peaceful

Reunification of the Fatherland in a

statement issued Friday night

Ex-Japan PM

REUTERS, Tokyo

at the age of 68.

Hashimoto dies

Former Japanese prime minister

Ryutaro Hashimoto, an outspoken

politician who jousted with US

officials over the auto trade and

brought "Big Bang" financial

reforms to Tokyo, died on Saturday

Hashimoto, who retired from

politics last September citing poor

health, had undergone surgery to

remove a large part of his intestine

after being rushed to hospital or

The North's latest burst of its

counter any US aggression.

of hitting the United States.

aggression

# INTERNÂTIONAL

# Pakistan, India spar over prisoner swap

Pakistan and India accused each other yesterday of not releasing enough prisoners under an exchange agreement concluded

Islamabad said New Delhi had not freed the expected number of Pakistanis in an exchange across the common border at Wagah on Friday while India made a similar complaint to its neighbour.

India has released 38 Pakistanis while Pakistan has freed 19 civilian prisoners under the agreement signed by the countries in May as part of a confidence-building process under an ongoing peace dialogue.

Pakistan handed over a batch of 20 Indian fishermen Saturday at Wagah after a day's delay due to the breakdown of a vehicle transporting the prisoners to the border crossing. India's foreign ministry said in a

Indian prisoners released by Pakistan fell far short of what it expected.

'We are disappointed to note that the 240 fishermen whose national status has already been confirmed were not released ... despite the understanding between the Home Secretary of India and the Interior Secretary of Pakistan," it said.

Pakistan's foreign ministry, however, said the Indians had not lived up to their commitments under the prisoner exchange accord.

'The Indians should have released the bulk of some 493 Pakistani prisoners who we think meet the release criteria set out in the May agreement, ministry spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam

The agreement provided for the release of each other's nationals who had completed their jail terms and had their national status verified.

Pakistani prisoners have qualified for release but the Indians claim

otherwise." Aslam said "Both sides have to follow the same principle," she said, adding that neither side could take a selective approach.

The prisoner swap deal has been seen as one of the few successes in the slow-moving peace dialogue launched by the South Asian nuclear-armed rivals in January

The peace process has led to the restoration of full diplomatic ties and increased people-to-people contacts between the neighbours.

But the dialogue is yet to produce a breakthrough on the future of Kashmir, trigger of two of their three wars. The Himalayan region is divided between the nations and claimed in full by both.

### Thai election could be delayed

Says Thaksin

AFP, Bangkok

said yesterday that the country's election, tentatively set for October 15, could be delayed due to the political crisis facing his partyanditsrival.

"The election date was set on

October 15. But something happened in politics, which may cause us to wait longer," Thaksin said in his weekly radio address, which resumed Saturday following its suspension earlier this year.

The premier did not elaborate and avoided discussing the latest challenge to his rule that could see his ruling Thai Rak Thai party and the main opposition Democrat party disbanded over electoral irregulari-

The weekly radio programme was halted in Feburary when Thaksin dissolved the lower house of parliament to call for snap elections, amid street protests demanding his resignation over alleged abuse of power and corruption.



Members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) walk down the main street of rebel-held Kilinochchi town during manoeuvres yesterday. Sri Lankan gunboats sank a suspected Tamil Tiger rebel craft off the island's northern military port of Kankesanthurai, the navy said.

# Arabs slam world inaction over Israeli offensive

Israel's offensive in the Palestinian territories drew fierce criticism Friday from Arab countries, which also lambasted world leaders' naction amid fears of a regional "This crazy adventure will light

more than one big fire instead of containing a small issue over the abduction of the Israeli soldier," read an editorial in Egypt's state-owned Al-Ahram daily.

Israel carried out dozens of air raids on the Gaza Strip overnight with 5,000 troops waiting to move in of a plan to free an Israeli soldier captured by Palestinian militants on

government of (Israeli Ehud Olmert insists on treading further than (his predecessor) Ariel Sharon, the symbol of Israeli heavy-handedness, because it is ready to fight its war against the Palestinians on other lands, Syria

Israel has also threatened to

target Palestinian militant leaders in Syria and raised its state of alert along the Lebanese-Israeli border amid fears of an attack by Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah.

Egypt's state-owned Al-Gomhuria slammed Israel's detention of Hamas ministers and MPs as "proof that it is a state which (operates) outside the law. The Israeli phenomenon has

truly become a symbol of shame for the international community," it said

The head of the Egyptian parliament's foreign affairs committee warned on Thursday that his country's peace deal with the Jewish state might even be jeopardised by

"Israel should not think that the peace reached with an Arab country can be guaranteed while it continues to perpetrate its crimes and aggressions," Mustafa al-Fekki told REPLY TO NUCLEAR OFFER

# **US** rebuffs Iranian calls for more time

The United States rejected on Friday Iranian calls for more time to study an offer of incentives to curb its nuclear fuel programme, insisting Tehran must respond by a G8 deadline next week

The Group of Eight industrialised nations told Iran on Thursday they wanted a "clear and substantive response" on July 5 to an offer of incentives to stop enriching uranium. But two Iranian officials immediately declared more time was

A Western diplomat familiar with the issue said the Islamic Republic was unlikely to give a firm answer but that if one did not arrive by July 12, when major power foreign ministers next meet, UN Security Council action would loom.

UnderSecretary of State Nicholas Burns insisted the offer was "very straightforward" and Iran's chief negotiator Ali Larijani should respond as requested at a Union foreign policy chief Javier

"There will be a meeting here in

this city next week, where we expect and hope that Larijani will give us an answer ... This is not a complicated offer," Burns said in Brussels. "It is now high time, frankly, that we had a response from the Iranian

government ... We always said this was a process of weeks not months," he told a news briefing. But Russian Defence Minister

Sergei Ivanov signaled that a definitive Iranian reply was not expected "At the meeting they will discuss the (offer) and discuss when Iran is

ready to distinctively and unequivocally formulate its reply ...," Ivanov told reporters in Moscow. "It seems unlikely Larijani is planning to come with an unequivo-

June 4, media said. Hailed as a forceful leader who cal answer on July 5," the Western would tackle reform when he took diplomat said in Vienna, headquarover as premier in 1996, he ultiters of the UN atomic watchdog mately faltered in the face of financial crisis, political scandal and economic stagnation.

By the time Hashimoto made a second run for the premiership in April 2001, losing out to reformist Junichiro Koizumi, he had become an emblem of the ruling party's resistance to change

### Japan passes Italy as most elderly nation

Japan said Friday it had surpassed Italy as the world's most elderly nation, fuelling concerns over the effects of a rapidly aging population on the world's second-largest

People aged 65 or older accounted for 21 percent of Japan's population in 2005, the Ministry of International Affairs and Communication said in a preliminary report. Italy's national statistics office reported that 19.5 percent of Italians were 65 or older last year.

The ratio of people under 15 also hit the world's lowest level at 13.6 percent, dipping below Bulgaria's 13.8 percent, according to Japan's report, based on a nationwide census taken last year.

Palestinian children gather yesterday around a crater created by an Israeli missile attack on a main road in the south-

that without reopening the whole process or changing the path that has been outlined so far," Ereli said.

Under the deal, the United States

will aid the development of civil

nuclear power in India in return for

New Delhi placing some of its

nuclear facilities under International

Atomic Energy Agency inspections.

1954 currently prevents the United

States from trading nuclear technol-

ogy with nations that have not

signed up to the Non Proliferation

Treaty. The law has to be amended

India tested nuclear weapons in

1974 and 1998 and, as a result, is

currently banned by the United

States and other major powers from

buying fuel for atomic reactors and

other related equipment

for the India deal to be effective.

The US Atomic Energy Act of

ern Gaza Strip town of Rafah. Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya's life will be at risk if the wounded Israeli soldier detained by militants in the Gaza Strip is not freed, a senior Palestinian official warned yesterday.

**US** hints changes in

nuke deal with India

"We will continue to work with

Congress as we have in the past to

address remaining issues in the

legislation in the bill," said State

Department deputy spokesman

to go through some more work.'

But Ereli said: "Obviously, it has

Ereli refused to specify what

types of changes the bill could go

through, with opponents to the law

arguing it did not include enough

safeguards to prevent India from

applying the nuclear technology and

few remaining issues to be worked

out," Ereli said, stressing the

changes were unlikely to be signifi-

cant enough for them to have to go

"We think that we'll be able to do

"The way I'd put it is there are a

material to military use.

back for committee votes

State Dept happy with quick nod of

Congressional committees

The US State Department said

Friday it was pleased with two

congressional committees' quick

approval of a controversial nuclear

deal with India, but hinted changes

in the law may be made before it

develop civilian nuclear facilities

was easily approved by the Senate

Foreign Relations Committee on

Thursday, two days after sailing

through the House of

Representatives' International

approved by the full House and

Senate, with the State Department

saying Friday it would work closely

with both chambers to make sure

the landmark legislation takes

The package must still be

Relations Committee

A deal giving India help to

### Saboteurs narrowly miss blowing up Pak train

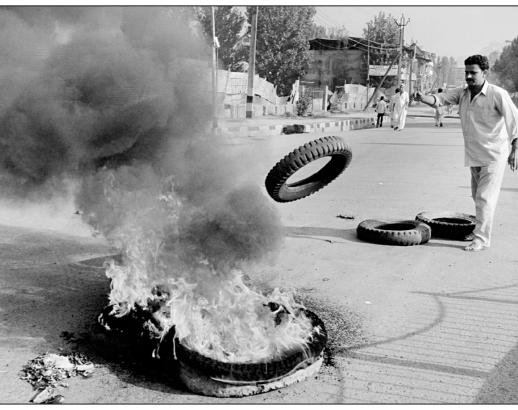
Saboteurs blew up yesterday part of a railway track in troubled southwestern Pakistan just 20 minutes before the arrival of a train heading for neighbouring Iran, officials said.

Rail authorities said three explosions ripped off a 36-foot (11.5-metre portion of track outside Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan province, a region where tribal rebels have been waging an insurgency for years

The train, heading for the Iranian border town of Zahdan, had already left Quetta but was stopped soon after its departure as railway workers detected a bomb 35km down the track, official Shoaib Khan told AFP.

As bomb experts defused the first device three other explosions occurred a short distance away destroying the track, Khan said. Officials said the bombs were

intended to target the train, which only had around 30 people including staff members aboard.



A Kashmiri protester burns tyres during a protest in Srinagar yesterday after federal police allegedly shot dead a 31year-old ailing music composer, Inayatullah Bhat Friday evening.

### China opens 1st train service to Tibet

The first train service to Tibet opened Saturday on the world's highest railway, an engineering feat protesters say could threaten the restive Himalayan region's environment and Buddhist culture

Chinese President Hu Jintao cut a giant red ribbon at a nationally televised ceremony in the western city of Golmud as the first train left for the Tibetan capital of Lhasa carrying 600 passengers. Musicians in Chinese and Tibetan costumes banged on drums and cymbals.

Minutes later, state television showed a second train pulling out of Lhasa travelling toward Golmud. A third train was due to leave Beijing for the Tibetan capital later in the day.

"This is a magnificent feat by the Chinese people, and also a miracle in world railway history," Hu said. He said it showed China's people were "ambitious, self-confident and capable of standing among the world's advanced nations

The \$4.2 billion train project is part of develop poor, restive areas in China's west and bind them more closely to the country's booming east.



A Tibetan passenger waves as she boards yesterday the first train to depart Lhasa railway station on the new China-Tibet rail line in Lhasa, capital of Tibet. China opened the world's highest railway linking the remote Himalayan region of Tibet with the rest of the country in a symbol of power that President Hu Jintao hailed a "miracle".

## Guantanamo ruling heralds political showdown

REUTERS, Washington

Democrats see the Supreme Court's Guantanamo ruling as White House. Republicans say it shows how tough President George W. Bush is on terrorists and voters will eat it up.

political debate over the decision declaring military tribunals illegal as they look to capitalize on a national security issue ahead of crucial congressional elections in

"How do you go back to Chicago, Illinois, or Las Vegas, Nevada, and say 'You know what? The president is just being too mean to these people," said Don Stewart, spokesman for Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas. "That's a very difficult argument to make."

In Thursday's ruling, the nation's highest court found the tribunals, which Bush created right after the September 11 attacks for prisoners at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, vio ated the Geneva Conventions and

The White House has been accused of using the war against terrorism to grab executive power at the expense of the US Congress. Vice President Dick Cheney has spoken publicly about restoring the powers of the presidency after what he saw as "an erosion" in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal.

The Bush administration has turned that tide in many ways, ranging from the fight to keep secret the deliberations of its energy task force, to its assertion of authority after September 11, including secret domestic surveillance and financial tracking programmes.

"The Guantanamo ruling is a repudiation of their entire governing philosophy," said Simon Rosenberg, founder of the centrist New Democrat Network. "This philosophy has failed. It's not only failed, it hasn't passed the test of the Supreme Court.'

### US offers \$5m reward for info on al-Qaeda leader

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has authorized a reward of up to five million dollars for information leading to wanted al-Qaeda leader

Abu Ayyub al-Masri, in Iraq.
Deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said in a statement Friday that the reward was offered in the hope it would encourage persons to come forward with information on al-Masri.

The State Department said Abu Ayyub al-Masri is an Egyptian national and a senior al-Qaeda leader in Iraq.

He is a direct associate of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who was recently killed by US forces, according to the US government.

"Trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Masri is an explosives expert specialising in the construction of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices," the same bombs responsible for large numbers of US troop casualties, the

# **US** brushes off new Laden tape warning

AFP, Washington

The CIA authenticated a new audiotaped message Friday in which al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden vows to wage holy war in Iraq and Africa, while the White House brushed off the message as old

In the fourth tape this year, bin Laden hails Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the slain al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, as a "lion of Islam" and says Americans got the wrong man by convicting Zacarias Moussaoui of involvement

in the September 11 attacks. "I am responsible for assigning the roles of the 19 brothers who took part in the attacks of September 11,

2001," bin Laden said. The recording appeared on the As-Sahab Internet site that is fre-

quently used by al-Qaeda. "We will keep up our fight to bleed your money dry, kill your men so that (your forces) go home defeated, as we defeated you in Somalia," bin Laden told US

President George W. Bush. "The banner (of jihad) has not fallen. It will be picked up by another lion of Islam. We will continue our fight against you everywhere, in

Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Somalia and in Sudan A Central Intelligence Agency

official said the tape had been studied and authenticated, but other US officials played down its signifi-"Following a technical analysis of an audiotape (posted) on the

Internet, the CIA assesses it is the voice of Osama bin Laden," a CIA A State Department spokesman said the tape showed that, even

though al-Qaeda was getting weaker, "we still have our work cut out for us. "Their capabilities have been essened, but they still remain a threat

The fight against al-Qaeda and others

who practice terrorism is going to be a long one," deputy spokesman Adam Erelitold reporters But White House press secretary Tony Snow said that Bush had little

reaction to the latest bin Laden

"No, it's another bin Lader audiotape. It is what it is," he told reporters when asked if Bush had