

## Nato soldiers kill 15 Taliban insurgents

AFP, Kabul

Nato-led troops killed 15 insurgents in southern Afghanistan after the rebels attacked their convoy with guns and rocket-propelled grenades, the force said yesterday.

The rebels attacked an International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) patrol in the southern province of Zabul on Saturday, an Isaf statement said.

"Isaf forces returned fire killing 15 insurgents. Two Isaf vehicles were damaged and no Isaf personnel were injured," it said.

There are around 31,000 Isaf soldiers in Afghanistan trying to help the government establish stability against a resurgent Taliban to allow reconstruction.

Some of the 37 nations in the force have admitted to facing some of their fiercest fighting in decades in Afghanistan.

## Israeli cabinet votes to change system of govt

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's cabinet voted yesterday to modify government from a parliamentary to a presidential system in what is seen as a move by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to expand his shaky coalition.

The draft bill, which still faces three votes by the full Knesset in order to take effect, gives more power to the executive and raises the threshold parties would need to gain entry to parliament.

The draft, championed by Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the far-right Yisrael Beiteinu party, passed by a vote of 12 for, 11 against and one abstention during the weekly cabinet meeting, a senior government official told reporters.

Supporters of the measure say the modifications would stabilize the political system of Israel, in which the average lifespan of a government in the past decade has been around 18 months.

Critics say the move would weaken parliament and place too much power in the hands of the executive.

Israeli media say Olmert supported the draft bill because he wants Lieberman to join his coalition government.

"Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is keen on the cabinet approve Lieberman's proposal so it can be brought to the Knesset for a preliminary reading," said the liberal Haaretz daily.

# Israel threatens to retake Gaza-Egypt border

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Several Israeli cabinet ministers called yesterday for a military operation to retake control of Gaza's southern border and prevent Palestinian militants smuggling in weapons from neighbouring Egypt.

"Action must be taken without hesitation. Any hesitation is dangerous and we must act immediately," Industry and Trade Minister Eli Yishai of the religious party Shas told reporters.

"When we left the Philadelphi corridor, I said that abandoning it is a doorway to hell," he said, using Israel's term for the 12 km (7.5-mile)-long border zone.

Yishai's call to move back into the corridor, more than a year after Israel pulled troops and settlers out of the Gaza Strip, was echoed by two other cabinet ministers, as well

as a senior commander of military forces in the area.

Palestinian government spokesman Ghazi Hamad denounced the proposal as a potential ruse for an Israeli reoccupation of Gaza — something Israel has said repeatedly is not in the works.

"The call to retake the border is a serious escalation and an incitement for more Israeli aggression," Hamad said.

Israel estimates that since the withdrawal tonnes of munitions, including advanced shoulder-fired missiles, have been spirited across from Egypt in a network of underground tunnels.

That has rung alarm bells in an Israeli military still reeling from its difficulty in beating back well-armed Hezbollah guerrillas during the recent Lebanon war, and which has been hard put to stop cross-border

rocket fire by Gazan militants.

Yom-Tov Samia, a reservist major-general on special assignment as deputy chief of the Southern Command, called for the Gaza border corridor to be retaken and its buffer zone widened — something that may entail razing Palestinian homes.

"The objective would be to prevent Hamas from replicating what happened with Hezbollah in Lebanon," Samia told Israel's Army Radio, referring to the governing Palestinian faction. "This would have to take place in the coming days or weeks."

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was expected to convene top ministers on Tuesday or Wednesday to discuss the option of a major anti-smuggling operation in Gaza, political sources said.

But the sources voiced doubt

that any such mission, with its attendant Palestinian casualties and strains on Israel's strategic ties with Egypt, would go ahead before a planned trip by Olmert to the United States in mid-November.

In the Gaza Strip, masked gunmen killed a senior militant from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah group, which is locked in a power struggle with the governing Hamas movement.

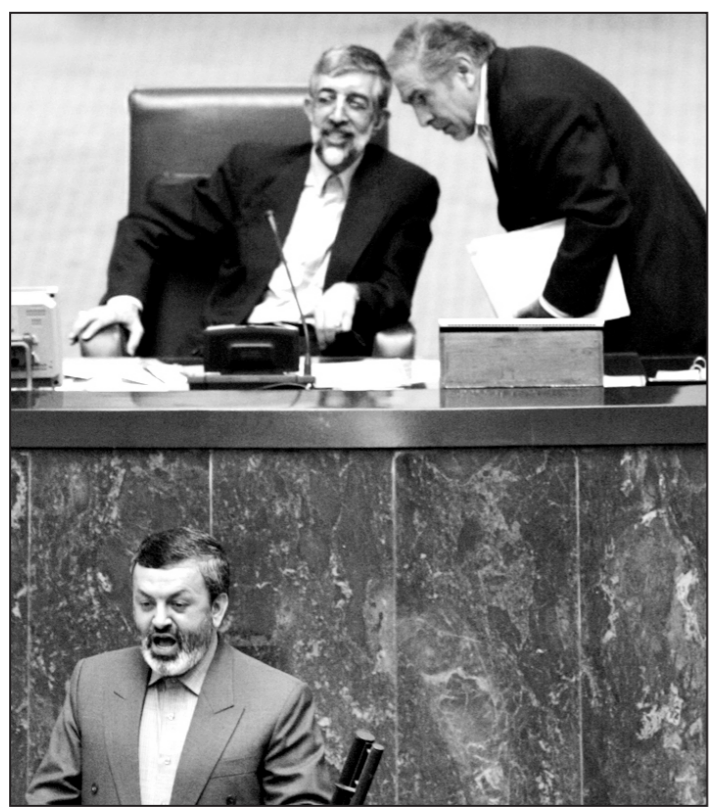
At least 19 Palestinians have been killed in inter-factional fighting this month.

Fatah officials blamed Hamas for the death of Mohammed Shahadeh, a commander of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Hamas denied the allegation and denounced the killing as a "cowardly assassination."



Palestinian gunmen attend the funeral of member of the Palestinian security service Mohammed Shahada, 27, in the Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza City yesterday. Shahada was killed in an exchange of gunfire between Hamas and Fatah factions in the centre of the Gaza Strip.

PHOTO: AFP



Iranian Minister of Agriculture Mohammad Reza Eskandari (bottom) speaks as Iran's parliament speaker Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel (L) chats with MP, Ahmad Nateq Nuri (R) during an impeachment hearing at the parliament in Tehran yesterday. Eskandari escaped an impeachment demanded by less than 15 percent of the MPs after the vote in parliament.

PHOTO: AFP

## US official admits 'arrogance' and 'stupidity' in Iraq

REUTERS, London

The Arabic news channel Al Jazeera quoted a senior US official yesterday as saying that the United States had shown "arrogance" and "stupidity" in Iraq.

Asked about the report, a US State Department spokesman said department official Alberto Fernandez had been misquoted.

"We tried to do our best (in Iraq) but I think there is much room for criticism because, undoubtedly, there was arrogance and there was stupidity in the United States in Iraq," Al Jazeera quoted Fernandez, director of public diplomacy in the State Department's bureau of Near Eastern affairs, as saying.

His comments were published on Al Jazeera's English-language Web site, which said he had made them in Arabic in an interview with the station aired late on Saturday.

Asked about the report, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said: "What he (Fernandez) says is that it is not an accurate quote." Asked whether he

thought the United States would be judged as being arrogant, McCormack said "No."

Fernandez was also quoted as saying Washington was ready to talk to any Iraqi group except al-Qaeda in Iraq to end violence.

Al Jazeera said a spokesman for ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's Baath Party had earlier said the United States was seeking a face-saving exodus from Iraq and insurgents were ready to negotiate but would not lay down their arms.

The spokesman, Abu Mohammed, outlined a series of conditions he said would have to be met before talks with the Americans could begin, the Web site said.

The demands included the return to service of Saddam's armed forces, the scrapping of every law adopted since his removal from power, the recognition of insurgent groups as the sole representatives of the Iraqi people and a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops.

Al Jazeera said Fernandez had dismissed the Baath Party's conditions.

## US, China at odds over how to handle N Korea

AFP, Beijing

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to China illustrated a fundamental gap in how Washington and Beijing think the North Korean nuclear crisis can be resolved, observers say.

While the United States sees China, Pyongyang's oldest ally, as the key to unlocking the standoff sparked by North Korea's October 9 nuclear test, Beijing thinks Washington needs to soften its stance towards the regime of Kim Jong-Il.

Rice, who on Sunday wrapped up a four-nation tour of Asia and Russia aimed at securing international support for UN sanctions against North Korea, hailed China's pledge to better monitor its border with the Stalinist state.

"Nobody wants to be on the wrong side of this resolution," she told reporters here on Friday after meetings with China's top leaders, underscoring the importance of Chinese backing for the raft of measures against Pyongyang.

A range of Chinese banks said last week they had suspended or

restricted financial transactions with North Korea — a sign of good intentions from Beijing, which approved the UN sanctions despite some reservations.

But special Chinese envoy Tang Jiaxuan, who met with Kim in Pyongyang last week, called on Washington to be "flexible" in its approach to North Korea so that six-party disarmament talks boycotted by Kim for a year could resume.

"This is in the interests of all sides and I hope the United States will take a more active and flexible attitude," Tang said.

North Korea walked out of the talks involving the two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia and the United States in November when Washington imposed sanctions to try to block the North's access to international banks.

Highlighting the difference of opinion on how to handle the crisis, one Chinese diplomat said the onus now fell solely on the United States to lure Pyongyang away from the nuclear brink and back to the negotiating table.

"Above all, it's a problem between the United States and

North Korea," the diplomat, who asked not to be named told AFP.

"We were able to see that during the six-party talks," he added, explaining Washington and Pyongyang still harboured "Cold War" attitudes toward each other.

Marcus Noland, a North Korea expert at the Institute for International Economics in Washington, warned it would be difficult for the United States to backtrack on its financial sanctions.

"First, there is no public sympathy in the US for North Korea's counterfeiting. No public official can appear to be weak on this," he said.

"Second, now that there is a formal legal case in the US involving law enforcement and not just diplomatic agencies, the US government cannot simply drop the issue."

Given the current impasse, critics of the administration of US President George W. Bush say he should change tack and renew direct dialogue with Pyongyang, instead of leaving it to China to host the six-way negotiations.

## Iraq eyes grim holiday as US mulls strategy change

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqis prepared yesterday to mark a grim Eid-ul-Fitr holiday after the bloodiest month of Ramadan in four years forced the United States to weigh a change in tactics.

Islam's holy month will end on this week's Eid — the precise date being one of many things that divides Iraq's Sunnis and majority Shias — after a month of slaughter that was ferocious even by Iraq's bloody standards.

Hundreds of Iraqis have been

murdered in both sectarian violence and clashes between armed militia factions, while US military casualties for October have already hit the highest monthly death toll of 2006.

In renewed violence on Sunday, several bombs exploded in Baghdad, killing two people and injuring nine, including a child, medics said.

One bomb exploded inside a collective taxi as it passed through the crowded Shorjah market, the latest in a series of attacks targeting families preparing for the upcoming

feast.

"A passenger dropped a bomb in the back of the cab and got out. The car had gone just 20 metres (yards) when it exploded, killing the driver and another passenger and injuring five bystanders," said police Major Mohammed Ali.

Shortly after he spoke, another blast hit a nearby police vehicle. It was not immediately clear if there had been more casualties, while terrified shoppers scattered for safety.

## Evidence on ISI role in Mumbai bombing 'not clinching': India

REUTERS, New Delhi

India has good but not clinching evidence against Pakistan's spy agency for its role in the July serial bombings in Mumbai, which killed 186 people, a top security official said yesterday.

Police last month blamed Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, for the seven bombs, which ripped through commuter trains and platforms in Mumbai.

Both Pakistan and Lashkar have denied any involvement.

National Security Adviser MK Narayanan said while the evidence was as good "as we can possibly get in terrorist cases", it could not be called clinching.

"We have connectivity, linkages, confessions. We have a number of arrests which are pretty good," the official told the CNN-IBN television news channel in an interview which was to be broadcast later in the day.

"But there are pieces of the puzzle which are not available. I would hesitate to say we have clinching evidence, but we have pretty good evidence," he said, according to excerpts of the interview released by the channel.

Narayanan said the evidence would most likely be presented to Pakistan during the mid-November talks between the foreign secretaries of the nuclear-armed rivals.

The foreign secretaries are meeting in a bid to revive a peace process, which was put on hold by New Delhi after the blasts.



Young demonstrators march with banners and flags in support of immigrants who have been killed attempting to cross the Mexican border into the US during a protest Saturday in New York City. Participants marched to protest federal lawmaker's inaction to produce a humane legalisation bill.

PHOTO: AFP

## Sudan expels UN envoy over Darfur row

AFP, Khartoum

Khartoum gave the top UN representative in Sudan three days to leave the country Sunday, marking a new low in relations soured by the row over the world body's proposed role in war-torn Darfur.

Outspoken UN envoy Jan Pronk has prompted the ire of Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir's regime by criticising its handling of the crisis in Darfur and pushing for the deployment of UN peacekeepers there.

"The Sudanese foreign ministry has given Mr. Pronk 72 hours to leave the country," the state news agency SUNA reported, quoting the foreign ministry.

## al-Qaeda is winning war of ideas

Warns British minister

AFP, London

Britain's interior minister has warned that the government risks losing the "battle of ideas" with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, the Sunday Telegraph newspaper said.

Home Secretary John Reid spoke at an emergency meeting of ministers and security officials and pressed for an urgent escalation in the propaganda war against such groups, the weekly said.

Reid said al-Qaeda's "single extremist narrative" was becoming increasingly attractive to young Muslims in Britain, the broadsheet reported.

The Sunday Telegraph said it had been told by ministers that 30 terror plots were being probed and 1,500 young Muslims were suspects.

After the meeting on October 12, a minister said the foiled alleged terror plot to blow up trans-Atlantic aircraft had led Prime Minister Tony Blair to order a tougher stance.

"The approach is to bolster moderate voices and isolate and attack the extremists," the unnamed minister was quoted as saying.

Blair was reported to have told ministers to work with "the leaders, not the panderers" in the Muslim community.

## 5.47-carat canary diamond found in US park

AP, Murfreesboro

A Wisconsin man visiting a state park took home the ultimate souvenir: a 5.47-carat canary diamond.

Bob Wehle of Ripon, Wis., found the diamond at the Crater of Diamonds State Park in Murfreesboro Oct. 14. The park is the world's only publicly operated diamond site where visitors are allowed to search and keep any gems they find.

Wehle's 5.47-carat diamond is bright yellow and has no visible flaws, said Tom Stolzar, park superintendent. It is the second-largest gem unearthed this year at the park.



This Oct. 20, 2006, photo released by Arkansas State Parks shows a 5.47-carat canary diamond found on Oct. 14 by Bob Wehle of Ripon, Wisconsin, at Crater of Diamonds State Park in Murfreesboro, Arkansas. The park is the world's only publicly operated diamond site where visitors are allowed to search and keep any gems they find.

PHOTO: AP

## Attacks on govt will not stop: Mahathir

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's former premier Mahathir Mohamad refused Sunday to end his attacks on the government, despite talks with his successor, which had raised hopes for a resolution to the damaging feud.

Mahathir met with Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for two hours Sunday to address the very public verbal brawling that has sent shockwaves through the ruling party and raised fears of government instability.

The feisty 82-year-old political veteran, who now publicly regrets handing the top job to Abdullah in 2003, described the atmosphere as "cordial" but indicated he was not pleased with the results.

"I can't say I am happy, I am satisfied I am able to say these things directly to him," Mahathir told reporters.

"I will continue to criticise if I feel something is done which is not beneficial to the country," he added. Mahathir said he "stated all that was in my heart" during the meeting, and that Abdullah responded on most issues including allegations that his influential son-in-law is the power behind the throne.

He said Abdullah also addressed Mahathir's charges that his son had

gained improperly from government contracts, and "my allegation that we have become a police state".

Mahathir said Abdullah told him that only opposition figures — including ousted deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim who was sacked and jailed in 1998 and who is now making a political comeback — benefited from the stream of criticisms.

"He said each time I do these things, I become more unpopular, and he also lost his popularity because of my criticism."

"But he recorded in his little book... all that I said, and it was quite thick. I hope that after this, there will be action that will be taken."

Abdullah and Mahathir last week agreed to the meeting at the urging of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) which has ruled Malaysia for the past four decades.

Mahathir, infuriated by the axing of projects conceived during his two decades in power, including an abandoned proposal to build a new bridge to Singapore, has accused Abdullah of incompetence, nepotism and corruption.

## 'Tigers aiming to bully govt ahead of talks'

REUTERS, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels were trying to intimidate the Sri Lankan government ahead of crunch peace talks next week by launching high-profile attacks in the island nation, the head of the state's peace agency said.

There has been a surge of violence in the past month with scores of people being killed in rebel attacks.

Both sides meet in Geneva on Oct. 28-29 to try to end the fighting that has killed around 1,000 people since July and made a 2002 ceasefire almost redundant.

"They seem to be following a strategy designed to intimidate the government," Palitha Kohona, secretary general of the state's peace secretariat, which coordinates and handles peace dialogue for Colombo, told Reuters in an interview.

"My own view is that they are not going to get any leverage as the result of the violence and terrorism."

Rebel leaders were not immediately available for comment but residents in the northern Tamil-dominated Jaffna region said on Sunday that the LTTE was warning Colombo of a wider conflict.

"Now prevails a war environment ... it is inevitable that the consequences of the aggressive war moves launched by the government would spread throughout Sri Lanka," one Jaffna resident quoted LTTE political wing leader SP Thamilselvan as saying on a rebel local TV station.

Kohona said the ongoing violence must not derail the talks.

"I think we must separate the talks from the violence. The talks are designed to create an environment to achieve a sustainable, lasting peace," he said late on Saturday.

Sporadic violence, including mortar and grenade attacks, continued over the weekend in the troubled north and east in the run-up to the first face-to-face talks since February between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who are fighting for an independent homeland for the Tamil minority.

On Wednesday, the rebels launched a sea-borne suicide raid on a naval base in the southern city of Galle, losing 15 of their cadres while killing one government sailor.

The attack was the first such strike by the LTTE so far down in the

Sinhalese-dominated south, underlying its threat of bringing the war into new areas.

Two days earlier, the rebels rammed an explosives-laden truck into a convoy carrying naval personnel in north-central Sri Lanka, killing about 100 people, mostly sailors.

"To approach negotiations through piles of dead bodies and broken limbs appears to me a contradiction in terms," said the soft-spoken Kohona, sitting in his office on the 10th floor of a heavily guarded building in the heart of Colombo.

But the LTTE's official Web site said Sri Lankan artillery and air strikes were hitting civilians, citing a strike by air force jets last week, which it said had killed three children in the north. The military could not confirm the incident.

More than 65,000 people have been killed in the two-decade conflict fuelled by complaints from Tamils about discrimination by the government and sections of the Sinhalese majority.