

## Saddam urges Iraqis to 'shake hands'

REUTERS, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein, back in court two days after being sentenced to hang for crimes against humanity, urged Iraqis yesterday to seek reconciliation.

Invoking Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM) and Jesus, Saddam told a court trying him for genocide against Kurds: "I call on all Iraqis, Arabs and Kurds, to forgive, reconcile and shake hands."

Saddam met his death sentence in the first trial on Sunday with cries of "Allah is Greatest!" and "Down with the invaders!"

On Tuesday he was unusually subdued during a session in which he quietly listened to witnesses recount how they were detained, shot or gassed by Iraqi soldiers in the late 1980s.

Saddam and six former commanders face charges of genocide for their roles in the 1988 Anfal (Spoils of War) military campaign against ethnic Kurds. Prosecutors say up to 180,000 Kurds were killed, many of them by gas attacks.

The ousted president's fate after the earlier trial is now in the hands of an appellate chamber. No execution is likely before next year.

# Palestinians bury dead as Israel quits Gaza town

## Destruction all around as 6 more killed

REUTERS, Beit Hanoun

Israeli forces pulled out of a battered northern Gaza town yesterday after their biggest operation in the Palestinian territory in a year, leaving residents to bury their dead.

"This is the worst raid we have ever witnessed," said Khail Yazji, a 45-year-old resident and police officer. "The Israeli army has brought destruction into every single street and nearly into every single house. This is the tsunami of Beit Hanoun."

Israeli forces killed five gunmen and a civilian and wounded 13 people on Tuesday in raids on three other areas in the northern Gaza Strip, staging grounds for rocket attacks on southern Israel, militant groups and hospital officials said.

"The Israelis leave one area and enter another," Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said. "We have spoken to the American

administration and to the Europeans that such a situation cannot help restoring security and stability."

Israeli troops and settlers quit the Gaza Strip 14 months ago, but the army in June launched a continuing offensive against militants after gunmen from the territory crossed into Israel and seized a soldier, who is still being held.

Officials said they expected the Fatah faction's Abbas and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas to hold talks on Tuesday on a unity government of professional experts.

But amid differences over who should replace Haniyeh as prime minister, no time was set for a meeting that Palestinians hope can lead to a new administration and resumption of direct international aid to the Palestinian Authority.

After watching Israeli armour leave, Palestinians poured into the streets of Beit Hanoun, a town of 30,000, and then buried more of their dead.

Thousands of Palestinians, including gunmen firing in the air, marched in funeral processions for 23 people killed in the past week of fighting. Some were militants, their bodies shrouded in factional flags.

In all, Israeli troops killed 52 people, more than half of them militants, during the raids that centered on Beit Hanoun, Palestinian medical officials said. One soldier has been killed.

Stepping around puddles of sewage, some residents looked shocked at the extent of damage to buildings and infrastructure.

Beit Hanoun's mayor, a member of the governing Islamic group Hamas, said some 40 homes were destroyed and 400 damaged during the fighting.

Announcing an end to "Operation Autumn Clouds," the army said it found large amounts of weaponry, including rocket launchers and anti-tank missile launchers, in Beit Hanoun.

Despite the assault, which some Israeli political commentators said was partly aimed at restoring deterrence power Israel lost in an inconclusive Lebanon war in July and August, militants have continued to launch rockets across the frontier.

The end of the operation had been widely expected in Israel ahead of talks Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will hold at the White House with President Bush on November 13.

Both have spoken often of easing humanitarian conditions for Palestinians in the impoverished Gaza Strip while pledging to boycott the Hamas-led government until it recognized Israel, renounced violence and accepted existing interim peace accords.

Western sanctions have deepened economic hardship in the occupied West Bank and in Gaza since the Islamist movement took office in March after winning a January election.



Palestinians gather around the destroyed al-Nasser Mosque after the Israeli army pulled out of Beit Hanoun, northern of Gaza Strip yesterday. Six Palestinians were killed in Gaza Tuesday as Israel withdrew from the flashpoint town of Beit Hanoun after a week-long assault on militants that has left 62 Palestinians and one soldier dead.

## Afghanistan rejects Pak proposal to fence border

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan said Tuesday it would "never accept" the fencing of its border with Pakistan after Islamabad renewed the proposal amid pressure to stop the crossborder movement of militants.

The border, called the Durand Line, was drawn by the colonial British more than a century ago and is not accepted by Afghanistan, which is suspicious of attempts to have it internationally recognised.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri on Sunday repeated his country's proposal to fence the 2,500-kilometre (1,500-mile) border, which in some areas cuts through steep mountainous terrain.

A spokesman for President Hamid Karzai reiterated Afghanistan's strong rejection of the idea, saying the militancy must be stopped at its roots.

"Terrorism or terror activities cannot be rooted out by fencing the Durand Line," Karim Rahimi told reporters.



Two schoolgirls (C) walk past policemen standing guard near the venue of the peace talks between Nepal's rebel Maoist and multi-party government in Kathmandu yesterday.

# Parties upbeat as Nepali peace talks go on

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's governing parties and Maoist rebels edged closer yesterday to sort out sticky differences on the role of the monarchy and arms management in peace talks to end a decade of war, officials said.

The two sides, who have observed a ceasefire for the past six months, met informally Monday for six hours, but postponed the formal launch of their negotiations until Tuesday.

Tuesday's talks were progressing positively, delegates contacted inside the prime minister's residence said.

"The leaders, in principle, have reached consensus on almost all political issues including the Maoists' arms management," said Amik Serchan, deputy prime minister

and head of People's Front Nepal, one of the seven parties in the alliance government.

"This shows that the talks are close to reaching a deal for permanent settlement," he said.

A leader from Nepal's biggest party was also upbeat.

"There has been significant progress in the ongoing peace talks between the seven-party alliance and the Maoist rebels. The leaders are very close to consensus on political issues and the Maoist arms management deal," said Arjun Narsingh KC, a senior Nepali Congress leader.

Talks were set to continue into Tuesday evening, a delegate said.

"A task force from the eight parties (seven-party government and Maoists) is drawing up a draft paper on all the political issues

including arms management," said Arjun Narsingh KC, a leader from the Nepali Congress party.

Labour Minister Ramesh Lekhak said Monday that "technical problems" had cropped up during informal discussions between leaders of Nepal's seven-party coalition government.

Negotiators had expected a breakthrough this week in Nepal's protracted peace process after the Maoists agreed at the weekend to lock up their weapons and place them under United Nations supervision.

The disarming of the rebels had been a sticking point in the peace process aimed at ending a bloody conflict that has claimed at least 12,500 lives in Nepal since 1996.

# Pakistan asks India to tackle Kashmir dispute head-on

AFP, Washington

The Pakistan-India peace dialogue will end up a "futile exercise" if New Delhi refuses to tackle the thorny Kashmir dispute, Pakistan's minister for Kashmir affairs Tahir Iqbal told AFP Monday.

Speaking ahead of the resumption of high-level peace talks next week that were put on ice for months, he said the dialogue should move from merely devising confidence building measures to ending the Kashmir conflict itself.

Since its launching two years ago, the peace process has moved slowly, with the only major result being a bus link across the Line of Control, the military

ceasefire line dividing the Indian and Pakistani sectors of Kashmir.

Iqbal said the time had come for the nuclear-armed rivals to reinvigorate the wobbly peace process by tackling the Kashmir dispute head-on.

"Unless we try to find a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir problem, I think this exercise is futile, and we need to concentrate on the Kashmir problem itself," Iqbal said in an interview in Washington.

"I think the CBMs (confidence building measures) only will not solve the Kashmir problem. It is the Kashmir problem itself which has to be talked about, has to be discussed and finally find a solution to," he said.

# Iraq plans to reinstate ex-Baathist officials

## Baath party threatens retaliation if Saddam executed

AFP, Baghdad/Dubai

Iraqi leaders have agreed a draft law to allow former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party back into government jobs, a top official said Monday, one day after the ousted dictator was sentenced to hang.

Ali al-Lamy, head of the Supreme National Council for De-Baathification, said the proposed reform could reverse the sacking of more than a million former Baath Party activists, mainly members of Iraq's Sunni minority.

"A draft law has been prepared that goes in line with the project of national reconciliation released by the prime minister," he told AFP.

"This draft will help those who were Baathists to return to their posts or get pensions," he said, unveiling a reform that could allow many thousands of former ruling party members to return to work.

While most rank-and-file Baathists would be allowed back into the jobs once considered theirs by right under Saddam's one-party state, the top 1,500 party cadres considered complicit in his crimes will remain excluded.

"The law will allow Baathists to return to their offices but not allow them the ideology of the banned Baath party," he warned. "We consider those who insist on remaining in the Baath Party to be terrorist

elements."

Meanwhile, Iraq's disbanded Baath party threatened to attack the heavily-protected "Green Zone" in Baghdad if the death sentence is carried out against its leader Saddam Hussein, in an Internet statement posted yesterday.

"If president Saddam Hussein is executed... the party will reinforce its siege against the Green Zone," which houses Iraqi government offices and the US embassy, said the party's command on its official site.

It vowed to "use all possible means to destroy embassies, as well as the headquarters of intelligence and treacherous organisations".

# US watchdogs warn of polling problems

AP, Washington

With a third of Americans voting on new equipment and voters navigating new registration databases and rules governing acceptable IDs, election watchdogs worry about polling problems Tuesday.

Although turnout generally is lower in midterm elections, this year was the deadline for many of the election changes enacted in the wake of the Florida balloting chaos in 2000.

"There has not been an election in decades that has had this much change," said Wendy Weiser, an attorney with the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's law school. "Part of it is because of the federal Help America Vote Act."

Control of Congress is at stake as all 435 House seats and 33 of 100 Senate seats are up for grabs, along with offices of 36 governors. Democrats have to gain 15 seats to take control of the House and six to win the Senate.

Because individual congressional races are generally decided by fewer votes than presidential

contests, any problems are more likely to affect the outcome, said Doug Chapin, director of Electionline.org, a nonpartisan group that monitors voting changes.

According to Election Data Services, a Washington, D.C., consulting firm, 32 percent of registered voters will see new equipment since the 2004 elections, a jump from 19 percent using new machines two years ago.

Nearly half of all voters will be using optical-scan systems that ask voters to fill in the blanks, with ballots then fed by poll workers into a computerized system. Another 38 percent will cast votes on ATM-like touchscreen machines, the ones criticized by many computer scientists as prone to hacking and other problems.

Election experts say both types are bound to cause trouble.

Touchscreens may display incorrect ballots or fail to boot properly. Voters might circle a name instead of filling in a box and not have their decision scanned correctly.

# India launches major counter-insurgency offensive in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

India yesterday announced a major counter-insurgency offensive in its restive northeastern state of Assam, two days after twin blasts killed 14 and wounded 40 others.

Federal home secretary VK Duggal, who chaired several security meetings in Guwahati, the main city of insurgency-wracked Assam state, said the fresh offensive against separatist rebels would ensure "no civilian lives are lost".

"You will see the visible changes yourself. Just wait and watch the results," Duggal told reporters here.

Sunday's blasts occurred at an upscale shopping centre and near an oil facility in Guwahati.

Police in Assam have blamed the blasts on the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), which has been fighting for an independent homeland since 1979. The group has not claimed responsibility for the attacks.

The Ulfa pulled out of peace talks with the federal government in

late September, after India called off a six week truce on September 24.

Duggal said New Delhi was ready to pursue the peace process, although official sources told AFP that security officials had decided on a "cohesive counter-insurgency" strategy to "either capture or neutralise key Ulfa commanders."

Duggal said he had met senior army, paramilitary, police and intelligence officials in Assam and evolved a security plan to "ensure the safety and security of people and economic installations."

"Anybody who picks up weapons and explosives will be dealt with firmly and effectively," he said.

"New Delhi will address all the constraints" faced by security personnel and the local government in tackling insurgency in the state, he added.

Police sources said Duggal promised to consider the Assam government's demand to send additional personnel.