

## Nobel prize season kicks off today

AFP, Stockholm

The 2004 Nobel Prize season opens today with the announcement of the prize for Medicine, kicking off a series of coveted awards culminating in the prestigious honours for Literature and for Peace.

Scandinavian capitals Stockholm and Oslo are abuzz with speculation, and a feeling emerged that the Literature prize could go to a woman this year, while efforts to limit nuclear build-up and proliferation may be rewarded by the Peace award.

The Peace prize, the only honours to be bestowed in Oslo and not in Stockholm, went to Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi in 2003.

There is no clear favourite ahead of this year's Peace announcement, scheduled for Friday, but if those tipping the nuclear sector are correct, then it may be the turn of the International Atomic Energy Commission and its chief, Mohamed ElBaradei.

## Gaza raid to go on as long as necessary: Sharon

Death toll tops 60

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said yesterday the army would operate to halt Palestinian rocket attacks on Israeli communities ahead of a scheduled withdrawal from the Gaza Strip next year.

Sharon said the army would expand a buffer zone in northern Gaza to ensure Palestinian rockets were out of range of Israel and would stay there as long as necessary to halt rocket attacks such as one that killed two children Wednesday.

But he said Israel would still evacuate the coastal strip it occupied in the 1967 Middle East war next year as scheduled. He added that the withdrawal would not be carried out under fire from Palestinian militants.

"Evacuating the Gaza Strip is a plan that will be carried out and all orders have been given to ensure

that there will no fire at the time of the evacuation, and I believe not after that either," Sharon told Army Radio.

Violence has climbed in the Gaza Strip since Sharon announced his withdrawal plan, as Palestinian militants in Gaza try to portray the planned withdrawal as a victory.

A total of 62 people have been killed in fighting since late Tuesday when the army launched the "Days of Penitence" operation in a bid to prevent rocket attacks by militants. The dead include 59 Palestinians, both civilians and gunmen, and three Israelis, including two soldiers.

The death toll has swept past that of a May operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where more than 40 Palestinians were killed as Israel sought to destroy cross-border weapons-smuggling tunnels.

About 2,000 soldiers have taken control of a 5-mile-deep chunk of northern Gaza to counter militants firing homemade rockets into Israel.

Israeli tanks and bulldozers also opened a new front yesterday, moving from a Jewish settlement in southern Gaza into the Khan Younis refugee camp, residents said.

Two Palestinians were killed early yesterday in an Israeli attack in Jebaliya. Palestinian security officials said a missile apparently was fired from a pilotless Israeli aircraft hovering overhead. The Israeli military said soldiers saw militants planting a bomb and opened fire on them from the ground. The violent Islamic Jihad group identified the dead as members.

Israel Radio said another militant was killed in nearby Beit Hanoun as he was planting a bomb.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian children stand at the entrance of their house in the Gaza Strip refugee camp of Jabalia yesterday. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon vowed to press ahead with a massive military incursion in the Gaza Strip that has killed more than 60 people in five days.

## Kerry pulls ahead of Bush in new poll

REUTERS, Washington

Democrat challenger John Kerry has pulled ahead of President Bush in a poll published by Newsweek magazine showing Thursday's television debate erased the lead Bush had enjoyed for the last month.

In a two-way contest, the Kerry/Edwards ticket in the Nov. 2 presidential election led by 49 percent against 46 percent for Bush/Cheney, according to 1,013 registered voters polled by Princeton Survey Research Associates International.

According to the poll, 61 percent of Americans who watched the first presidential debate on Sept. 30 said Kerry won, 19 percent said Bush won and 16 percent said they tied. The number of debate viewers surveyed was 770.

Bush's job approval rating dropped two points from the Sept. 9-10 Newsweek poll to 46 percent—a 6-point drop since the Republican national convention a month ago. Fifty-seven percent of all poll respondents—a total of 1,144 adults—said they were dissat-

isfied with the way things were going in the United States now.

Sixty percent of registered voters said Bush administration policies and diplomatic efforts had led to more anti-Americanism around the world and 51 percent said the administration had not done enough to involve major allies and international organisations in trying to achieve its foreign policy goals, the poll showed.

However, 46 percent of registered voters said they would still like to see Bush re-elected, against 48 percent who said they would not like to see him re-elected.

When registered voters were asked who would handle issues better overall, Bush led Kerry 52 to 40 percent on terrorism and homeland security.

Kerry scored better on the economy—52 percent against 39 percent—and health care, including Medicare—56 percent to 34 percent. He was also seen to be better at handling American jobs and foreign competition—54 percent against 36 percent.

## 'India can deal with Musharraf'

THE STATESMAN/ANN, New Delhi

According to senior officials, the reason the Indian government has veered round to the view that the Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf is someone it "can do business with" is because the recent attempts on his life have made him "serious about genuinely resolving problems" with India.

With the US Secret Service having largely taken responsibility for his security, he is also "more inclined" to heed "gentle advice" from Washington, which has encouraged General Musharraf to resolve problems with India.

Also, the previous attempt to aid the global anti-terrorist war on its border with Afghanistan while encouraging terror groups in Jammu and Kashmir has not

worked well, senior officials said.

The Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh's assessment of the Pakistani President, increasingly shared even by the so-called "hawks" in the establishment, came after a one-on-one meeting in New York, at which the two men talked of the need to "seize the moment" to "make history".

General Pervez Musharraf was "India's best bet" at the moment, a senior official said, adding that the J&K problem was "very solvable".

"It will take time, but it is doable," a senior official said, adding that General Musharraf "appeared serious now, and J&K was no longer the only core issue."

This was despite India's continued concerns on cross-border terrorism and the continued existence of terrorist training camps on the other side of the line of control.

## US spy drone crashes in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

An unmanned US surveillance plane crashed yesterday near the southern Pakistani air base of Jacobabad that is used by US forces operating in neighbouring Afghanistan, police said.

"It was a small unmanned plane which crashed early this morning," local police officer Masroor Jatoti told AFP by telephone.

He said the wreckage was found in bushes near Jacobabad's Shahbaz airbase.

"It fell in an unpopulated area and there were no casualties or property losses," Jatoti added.

The airbase is used by the US-led coalition for operations in Afghanistan to crush al-Qaeda and Taliban extremists. Pakistan is a key ally in the US led war on terror.

## US warplanes keep on pounding Fallujah

8 customs officers found dead, 2 Westerners slain

AFP, REUTERS, Fallujah

Two people were killed and 10 wounded after US warplanes bombed a building on the outskirts of the rebel-held Iraqi town of Fallujah yesterday, medics said.

The US military said the raids had probably killed a "large number" of insurgents who had been shifting weapons.

"We have received two dead and 10 wounded," said Dr Dhiya Ahmed at the general hospital in Fallujah, west of Baghdad.

The strike, the third in just over 24 hours, severely damaged the targeted building, triggering a wave

of secondary explosions that indicated ammunition had been stored inside, the army said in a statement.

According to the military, 10 to 15 rebels suspected of links with Iraq's most wanted man Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi had been present when it struck at about 1:00 am (2200 GMT Saturday), but it gave no exact casualty figure.

Earlier eight Iraqi customs officers have been found dead and the valuable cargo of antiquities they were transporting from southern Iraq is missing, police said Saturday in Nasiriyah.

"Seven customs officers and their commander, reported missing on

September 27, have been found dead in the region of Latifiyah," a Sunni Arab insurgent bastion immediately south of Baghdad, the chief of police in the nearby Shiite majority provincial capital of Hilla, told AFP.

Reuters adds: Iraqi police have found the bodies of a man and a woman, both believed to be Westerners, south of Baghdad, the director of the hospital that received the corpses said yesterday.

He said the man had been beheaded and the woman had been shot, but no other details about the circumstances of death were available. The bodies were found late on Saturday.

## Iran refuses to surrender nuclear fuel technology

AFP, Tehran

Iran asserted yesterday that it has already acquired the sensitive technology to produce its own nuclear fuel and said it would be "irrational" to agree to surrender such a capability in exchange for supplies from overseas.

"One should not put one's fate in the hands of others. It would be irrational," said foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi.

"We have the technology and there is no need for us to beg from others. This suggestion is good for countries that do not have this technology, but we do not need their generosity and help," he added.

Asefi was reacting to US Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, who has suggested providing Iran with nuclear fuel to generate electricity if the country agreed to give up its controversial work on the nuclear fuel cycle.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan presidential candidate Masooda Jalal (R) is first ever welcomed by schoolgirls while arriving in Lolang, some 100km north-west of Kabul. Afghanistan is set to hold its first ever democratic presidential election on October 9, choosing amongst 18 candidates, with Masooda being the only woman.

## 14 people killed in Thai fireworks factory blast

AFP, Bangkok

At least 14 people have been killed and two injured in an explosion at a fireworks factory at Thailand's ancient capital Ayuthaya, officials said yesterday.

A district official said authorities were still unsure how the blast occurred at the Boon-Leur fireworks factory about 3:00 pm (0800 GMT) in Ayuthaya, just north of the Thai capital Bangkok.

"What we do know is this factory's license ran out 10 years ago and it was illegally producing fireworks," Kamnueng Isaro told state radio.

## Lanka's latest peace bid suffers stillbirth

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's latest bid to revive the peace process with Tiger rebels has suffered a stillbirth with the country's main opposition calling for a boycott of the new initiative, political sources said yesterday.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga is due to launch a "National Advisory Council for Peace and Reconciliation" on Monday. But parties holding the balance of power in parliament, who can make or break a deal with rebels, will not attend.

"The council shall be the forum for consultation and advice on issues pertaining to the peace process and for advancing reconciliation and understanding among persons of communities through dialogue," the president's office said.

The main opposition United

National Party (UNP) dismissed Kumaratunga's initiative and said the way to end the deadlock in the Norwegian-backed peace process was to start direct negotiations with the Tigers.

Compounding the problems for Kumaratunga is a decision by Tiger proxies in parliament, the Tamil National Alliance, to keep away and instead insist on resuming peace talks based on the controversial Tiger self-rule proposals.

Political sources said the council would be of little use without the key players.

Kumaratunga's Marxist-backed party came to power in April after dismissing the right-wing administration of UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on a charge of making too many concessions to Tigers.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi man collects his grand daughter on the second day of the start of the academic year in Baghdad yesterday. Parents are worried about sending their children to school as the country falls further into turmoil, with car bombing and kidnapping taking place in many cities of the country. Over 30 children were killed on September 30 following a series of simultaneous car bombings that day.