

## Nine die in Japan 'suicide pacts'

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Japanese police have found the bodies of nine people who apparently committed suicide after meeting via special suicide sites on the internet.

A police spokesman said seven young people were found in a van in the Saitama mountains to the west of Tokyo. Minutes later, two women were found dead in a car south of Tokyo, in another apparent suicide pact.

Japan has recently seen a wave of internet-linked suicides, as people seek companions to die with. More than 34,000 Japanese took their own lives in 2003, according to the National Police Agency - an increase of more than 7% from the previous year.

Economic difficulties and an increasing sense of isolation among Japanese youth are believed to be contributing to the rise.

A small but growing number of suicide attempts are being made by people brought together through the internet. Analysts have speculated that group suicide may mitigate the inherent loneliness of taking one's life alone.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis look at the damage to buildings destroyed in the center of the rebel-held city of Fallujah, yesterday following a US military air raid. The US military launched two air strikes on Fallujah, flattening two buildings which the military described as hideouts for Iraq's most wanted insurgent, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

## Israel's Gaza offensive enters third week

AFP, Gaza

Israel's massive military operation in the northern Gaza Strip entered its third week Tuesday, having already left more than 110 people dead and scenes of utter devastation in the territory's largest refugee camp.

The situation in the camp, home to some 104,000 refugees, remained tense, with sporadic gunfire from Israeli tanks sending the Palestinian population ducking for shelter.

Israeli army bulldozers continued to level citrus groves and houses in the northern sector of the camp.

A drive through the squalid streets of the densely populated camp, with Israeli drones circling ominously overhead, reveals a mass of humanity.

Donkey carts compete on the road with dented old Mercedes and

newer Asian imports. Barefoot children play in the sandy pavements and rubbish-strewn gutters.

"Israel moved into Jabaliya and some people have been forced to fight back," said Dr Manar el-Farra, director of the camp's Al-Awdah hospital.

"We are expecting more casualties at any time," said Farra, dodging instinctively behind a pillar after a bullet whizzes past an open hospital window overlooking a working Israeli bulldozer and a tank just 100 yards away.

Farra has signed the death certificates of 26 people since Operation Days of Penitence was launched a fortnight ago in a bid to halt rocket attacks on southern Israel. Six of those fatalities were children.

"Injured casualties come in like burnt pieces of steak," he told AFP.

The United Nations Relief and

Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which is responsible for the camp, has only been able to deliver three convoys of humanitarian aid, with a fourth due on Tuesday.

Those convoys will feed around 9,000 people.

"The situation around the camp is extremely bad," said Lionel Brisson, director of UNRWA operations in Gaza. "We're doing less than expected because we cannot bring in supplies."

Brisson questioned the Israeli tactic of collective punishment.

"The regime of closures is one of strangulation," he said. "Israelis are invoking security reasons but it is affecting the whole population, and making people more desperate ... I'm not convinced it'll work."

"There is a general fatigue in the (Gaza) population. They want peace, to live in peace."

## Maharashtra polls head for a close finish

PTI, Mumbai

In India, Maharashtra Assembly polls taking place today are poised to be a cliffhanger with rebellion plaguing major political parties, BSP and SP raising their stakes in the state politics and pollsters predicting a tight race.

The ruling Congress-NCP, buoyed by their victory in 2004 Lok Sabha polls but attempting to ward off dissension and anti-incumbency factor, have locked horns with Shiv Sena-BJP combine, still reeling under the NDA's defeat and ill-health preventing their star campaigner Bal Thackeray from campaigning with full vigour.

Though the two major political combinations are slugging it out, the presence of BSP, SP and other party nominees and over 1,000 independent candidates have turned the elections to the 288-member lower house, into a multi-cornered contest.

The BSP, which played a spoilsport for the Congress in Vidarbha in the Lok Sabha polls, is contesting maximum number of 272 seats and has

REUTERS, Baghdad

A US air strike targeting foreign militants destroyed a restaurant in rebel-held Fallujah overnight, while peace moves continued aimed at restoring state authority there and elsewhere in Iraq before January elections.

Witnesses said bombs flattened the popular Haj Hussein kebab house on Fallujah's main street, killing two guards and reducing it to a pile of crushed concrete and twisted metal.

The US military said it was a "precision strike" on a meeting place for militants loyal to Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who has a \$25 million US bounty on his head.

"Zarqawi does not come here. Where is Zarqawi? We have not seen Zarqawi," yelled one Fallujah resident after the US raid.

Zarqawi's group has claimed some of Iraq's bloodiest suicide bombings, as well as the

beheadings of foreign hostages, including Briton Kenneth Bigley, who was killed Thursday.

Bigley's body was dumped south of Baghdad the following day, insurgent sources said Tuesday. The British embassy said it had still not recovered the Briton's remains.

US and Iraqi forces have been combing a deadly area south of Baghdad in the past week. It includes Mahmudiya, Latifiya, where the sources said Bigley was killed.

US marines foiled an attempted suicide car bombing near Yusufiya Monday, the military said. The marines shot at a vehicle speeding toward them and it exploded.

In a videotape aired Monday, Iraqi militants beheaded a Turkish contractor they said co-operated with US forces.

Fallujah representatives were due to meet interim government officials Tuesday in the latest of a series of talks to put Iraqi security

forces back in control of the rebellious city.

Chief Fallujah negotiator Sheikh Khaled al-Jumali reported progress in talks with Defense Minister Hazim al-Shaalan and Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih Monday.

"We have a final round of talks today and expect to make an announcement on a truce," he said.

Previous truce deals have failed to calm Fallujah.

In Baghdad, Shia fighters handed in more weapons to police in the sprawling slums of Sadr City under a deal that could end weeks of clashes with US forces there, police said.

The US-backed government led by interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi is determined to pacify trouble-spots across Iraq ahead of nationwide elections scheduled for January.

## 10 freed Turkish hostages arrive in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Ten former Turkish hostages, whose liberation was announced on Sunday, have arrived in Baghdad, where they were introduced to the press.

The 10 men appeared in good health, and the company's manager vowed the Vinsan construction firm would stay in Iraq, defying the Islamic militant group that kidnapped its workers.

"We will not leave Iraq," Ali Haydar Veziroglu told reporters at Vinsan's offices in Baghdad.

The Turkish construction company announced on September 21 that it was freezing its activities in Iraq after 10 of its workers had been taken hostage.

On Sunday, Arab satellite channel Al-Jazeera reported an Islamist group, calling itself the Salafist Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Group, released the 10 Turkish hostages based on the condition that their company pulled out of the country.

## Afghan vote count still on hold

AFP, Kabul

Vote counting in Afghanistan's troubled election was still on hold Tuesday as opposition candidates backing down from boycott threats awaited an international inquiry into charges of fraud and irregularities.

A breakthrough agreement on Saturday's disputed ballot was reached Monday when Yunus Qanooni, who has the support of the powerful Northern Alliance and is the main rival to US-backed interim President Hamid Karzai, said he would accept the election result after the inquiry.

Several other candidates among a group of 14 who declared in the middle of voting that they would boycott the results have adopted a similar stance.

The dispute tainted an otherwise jubilant day as millions of Afghan men and women flocked to polling stations for their first-ever say in

choosing their country's leader, defying threats of violence by the Taliban militia who were ousted three years ago.

The joint UN-Afghan electoral commission announced Monday the UN would set up an independent panel to investigate the charges of irregularities.

The panel will include a former Canadian diplomat and a Swedish electoral expert, and a third member yet to be identified, election commission vice-chairman Ray Kennedy said.

Vote counting meanwhile had been put on hold in case there was any need to deal with a specific ballot box, Kennedy said.

Qanooni is also pushing for some polling stations to be reopened. He has charged that in areas where he has wide support the stations opened late and closed early.

## Bush, Kerry trade charges before final debate

AP, Denver

In a last-minute flurry of accusations before their final debate, John Kerry tried to tie President Bush to record oil prices while the president charged that his Democratic opponent has totally misunderstood the war on terror.

On the way to the debate that will range over domestic issues from the economy to health care, Bush is reaching out to military supporters in Colorado Springs, where the war in Iraq is the chief concern.

Bush's campaigning Tuesday in the conservative heart of Colorado is an effort to counter Kerry's surprising bid to win a state that has voted Republican in nine of the past 11 presidential elections. One poll shows Bush ahead in Colorado; another shows the two men in a close race.

## Indian Maoist leaders emerge from jungle for talks

AFP, Hyderabad

Leaders of India's oldest and most violent Maoist group have emerged from their jungle hideouts for groundbreaking peace talks with the state government here later this week, officials said Tuesday.

The People's War Group (PWG) rebels have been hiding for almost two decades. In a symbolic gesture the Maoist leaders changed out of their battle fatigues and handed over their assault rifles to colleagues who then went back into the jungles.

The Maoist leaders, headed by PWG state secretary Akkiraju Haragopal, alias Ramakrishna, arrived in Hyderabad early Tuesday, said R.P. Singh, police commissioner of Hyderabad.

"They are being treated as state guests and we are making all security arrangements to ensure their full safety," Singh told AFP.

The rebel leaders addressed a large gathering of followers in Guttiwada Bilam, 300 kilometres (186 miles) southeast of Hyderabad late on Monday night.

Haragopal told the rally the PWG had decided to participate in peace talks to find solutions to some of the basic problems of the people, reports said Tuesday.



A demonstrator dressed as an evil figure leads a protest against the IMF-World Bank represented by the effigies in the background outside the Department of Finance in Manila yesterday. Protestors blamed the international lending institution for the economic woes of the Philippines and called for a debt cap in the payment country's ballooning foreign debt which stands at 56.3 billion US dollars.