



## Prince Sihamoni named new king of Cambodia

**AFF, Phnom Penh**

Prince Norodom Sihamoni, 51, has been elected Cambodia's new monarch, replacing his ailing father king Norodom Sihanouk who abdicated last week, the throne council said yesterday.

"Samdech (an honorific) Norodom Sihamoni has been elected as the King of Cambodia," the throne council said in a statement signed by council chairman Chea Sim and released after a brief meeting.

"Norodom Sihamoni, the King of the Kingdom of Cambodia, will be sworn in before taking the throne," it said.

## Afghan vote count begins at last

**BBC ONLINE**

The counting of ballots cast in Afghanistan's presidential election on Saturday has finally begun.

A boycott of the vote has crumbled, with all leading rivals of President Hamid Karzai now endorsing a UN panel looking into alleged irregularities.

Ballot boxes from polling stations implicated in complaints have been isolated for investigation.

Karzai is widely expected to secure victory in the country's first direct elections for president.

The complaints have overshadowed what is widely viewed as being a hugely successful achievement for Afghanistan.

At 0900 local time yesterday, the order went out to eight national counting centres to begin the tallying process.

Some of the results could become known on Thursday.

# 8 Iraqi civilians killed in Baghdad Green Zone

15 guardsmen, 2 army officers, judge & journalist killed in other attacks

**AFF, REUTERS, Baghdad**

Eight civilians were killed and four wounded yesterday in a mortar or rocket attack on Baghdad's fortified Green Zone, home to the US embassy and the Iraqi government, a US army spokesman said.

"Six civilians were killed and three wounded at the Green Zone bazaar, and two civilians were killed and one wounded at the Green Zone cafe," a military spokesman told AFP.

He was referring to two locations popular with US soldiers and civilians inside the fortress-like area of central Baghdad.

There was no word on the nationalities of the casualties, in the attack that came on the eve of the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Iraq's interim prime minister has threatened to attack Falluja unless it turns in foreign militants, but a negotiator for the rebel-held city said yesterday its people were being asked to chase shadows.

Iyad Allawi told Iraq's interim assembly on Wednesday that Falluja must surrender Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, America's top enemy in Iraq, or face military action.

"We want to know what proof there is that Zarqawi is in Falluja," Hatem Maddab, a member of a Falluja negotiating committee, told Arabic Al Jazeera television, adding that the government had now halted peace talks.

US warplanes have repeatedly struck at targets the military says are hideouts used by Zarqawi and

his followers in the Sunni Muslim city 32 miles west of Baghdad.

Earlier two Iraqi army officers, a judge and a woman journalist were gunned down in a string of attacks Thursday and four national guardsmen were wounded in a roadside bombing, police and medics said.

General Nazem Sulayif and Lieutenant Colonel Imad Awad Ahmed were shot dead by unidentified gunmen as they drove down a main road in the restive town of Baquba, northeast of Baghdad, said police Lieutenant Imad Mahmoud.

In Baghdad, Abdulamir Khadem, an investigative judge in Baghdad's Rusafa district, was gunned down as he left his home, said Raisan Ghabdan, a medic at Kindi hospital.

Also in the capital, an Iraqi journalist for Al-Huria television station, Dina Mohammed Hassan, was killed Thursday outside her home in the Adhamiya district, said Colonel Adnan Abdul Rahman, spokesman for the interior ministry.

In Ramadi, fifteen Iraqi national guardsmen were killed in an overnight attack in Qaim near the Syrian border, according to a police officer in the town and a message received at provincial police headquarters yesterday.

"Armed gunmen attacked a national guard post overnight, killing 15 soldiers and stealing their weapons," read the internal message at the Ramadi headquarters for Al-Anbar province.



PHOTO: AFP

A US soldier looks at a burning military vehicle after it was attacked as it drove on a highway to the west of Baghdad on the road leading to the restive Sunni Muslim city of Fallujah yesterday. The US military supply truck was attacked by unknown assailants.

# Israeli army terms long Gaza raid futile

5 more Palestinian killed

**AFF, Jerusalem**

Senior army officers warned yesterday that Israel's ongoing operation in northern Gaza, which has left more than 120 Palestinians dead since its launch last month, has run on for too long and is now counter-productive.

"The operation has exhausted itself, and continuing it is liable only to lead to complications," one senior officer told the Maariv daily.

"Every additional day that passes makes the humanitarian situation in the northern Gaza Strip worse, and in the meantime, the Palestinians are learning the IDF's (army's) patterns and the location of the troops in Jabaliya, Beit Hanun and Beit Lahiya, making it possible for them to strike at the soldiers."

Five more Palestinians, including a 70-year-old man, were killed overnight as the army pushed on with its so-called Operation Days of Penitence, its deadliest offensive in

Gaza since the Palestinian uprising began more than four years ago.

The operation was designed to put an end to rocket attacks fired at southern Israel from Gaza by militant groups such as Hamas.

Its original focus was the Jabaliya refugee camp and the town of Beit Hanun, but the operation was broadened on Wednesday when troops moved into the town of Beit Lahiya.

However, in a sign that the operation is failing to achieve its aims, two more Qassam rockets -- which take their name from Hamas' armed wing -- were fired from the center of Beit Lahiya shortly after troops had moved in.

"The benefit of continuing the operation is doubtful because even when the IDF is in the northern Gaza Strip, this does not completely prevent Qassam rocket fire at Israel," another officer told Maariv.

"Ultimately, after Israel withdraws, the question whether

Qassam rockets will continue will only be up to the Palestinian security forces, who will have to stop the fire."

Israel is planning to pull all its troops and the 8,000 Jewish settlers in Gaza out of the territory next year.

Meanwhile, the head of the cash-strapped UN agency for Palestinian refugees on Wednesday appealed for international help, highlighting the miserable situation in Gaza and Israeli restrictions on his staff across the occupied territories.

"I would like to see mutual respect and cooperation between Israel and UNRWA," Peter Hansen told representatives of major donor nations and the host countries of the more than four million Palestinian refugees under his agency's care.

He charged that the latest Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip that has killed 118 people in two weeks, and Israel's construction of an Israeli barrier across the West Bank had crippled UNRWA's activities.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (R) and Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry shake hands after the final televised debate on Wednesday at Gammage Auditorium, Arizona State University, in Tempe, Arizona. The 90-minute session focus on domestic issues including healthcare, the economy, taxes, social issues and education.

## FINAL DEBATE

# Bush, Kerry spar over jobs, healthcare

**REUTERS, Tempe**

In their third and final debate, President Bush attacked Democrat John Kerry as a "far left" seNator who would raise taxes while Kerry took aim at job losses under Bush's watch and said the middle class had lost ground because of his policies.

In a debate less than three weeks from the Nov. 2 election that focused on domestic issues, the candidates turned down the volume on the more combative tone of the first two debates.

Bush tried to paint Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat, as a liberal out of step with ordinary Americans who would favor higher taxes, more spending and government intervention in health care.

"There's a mainstream of American politics and you sit right on the far left bank," Bush said.

Kerry hammered Bush on a record of job losses, rising budget deficits and ballooning health care costs.

"I'm going to stand up and fight for the American worker, and I'm

going to do it in a way that is fiscally sound," Kerry said, promising to "restore the fiscal discipline we had in the 1990s."

The two candidates were set to further push their domestic agendas on the campaign trail on Thursday. Bush was to speak at a rally with Republican governors in Las Vegas followed by later events in Reno, Nevada and Central Point, Oregon.

Kerry was to pitch his agenda to the American Association of Retired Persons, an influential group representing senior citizens.

"Tonight you saw most of the differences, not all of them," Kerry told a post-debate rally on Wednesday night. "I'm here to tell you that if you'll help make me president I'm fighting for the middle class in America."

Bush appeared with Arizona Sen. John McCain at the downtown Phoenix baseball park, telling more than 30,000 supporters he enjoyed the debate. "It gave me the chance to tell the American people where I want to lead for the next four years," he said.

# Lanka offers new proposals to end peace deadlock

**AFF, Colombo**

Sri Lanka's government yesterday said it was ready with new proposals to resume peace talks with Tamil Tiger guerrillas and hammer out a political solution to the island's bloody ethnic conflict.

Government spokesman Mangala Samaraweera said a set of fresh proposals had already been finalised to restart negotiations, which remain on hold since the Tigers walked out of talks in April 2003.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have said they will resume discussions only on the basis of an "Interim Self Governing Authority," a proposal for self-rule in embattled northern and eastern regions.

"Counter proposals are ready and have been finalised," Samaraweera told reporters. "The proposals will be given to the Tigers when they are ready to look at them."

He said the cabinet was "baffled" at the Tiger's reluctance to re-open talks with the new government which came to power in April after the president sacked the previous administration for allegedly conceding too much to the rebels.

Samaraweera said the new government had maintained the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire that has been in place since February, but accused the Tigers of systematically eliminating political opponents.

"We have also conceded to a lot of LTTE ideas in the past six months," he said. "But the assassination of political opponents by the LTTE or anyone else is not helpful for the process."

He declined to unveil the government's new proposals, but President Chandrika Kumaratunga earlier this month invited the rebels to discuss setting up a federal state in exchange for ethnic peace.

Her government's main coalition partner, the Marxist JVP, opposes any territorial concessions to the Tigers and opposition parties have

demanding a united front to push ahead with the peace process.

There has been no formal response to Kumaratunga's offer, but the Tigers described as a "waste of time" a recent government move to broaden political consultations on the peace process through a "peace advisory council."

The Swiss Foreign Minister warned here Tuesday that Sri Lanka's fragile ceasefire was in danger of breaking down and asked the two sides to return to peace negotiations at the earliest.

Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey said a "lack of confidence" was holding up a resumption of talks. She said it was made clear to the Tigers that all political killings must stop and that they must resume peace negotiations at the earliest.

The Sri Lankan government has accused the Tigers of murdering more than 250 rivals since the ceasefire.

# Chinese hostage, 5 abductors killed in Pak rescue raid

**AFF, Tank**

One of two Chinese hostages and their five kidnappers were killed yesterday in a rescue operation by army commandos in Pakistan's remote tribal area, while the second hostage was safe, security officials said.

"One is dead. Unfortunately he has succumbed to injuries. One is absolutely safe," Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

The rescue operation was launched by the army's crack Special Services Group early Thursday as gunshots were heard from the mud-hut where the hostages were being held, sparking fears they were being killed.

Several attempts this week to negotiate the release of the Chinese engineers, who had been held since Saturday, had failed.

The two men were freed just after midday (0700 GMT) and all five

kidnappers were killed, but one of the Chinese was seriously wounded by gunshots, Sultan said, blaming "gunfire from the miscreants."

An intelligence official in northwest city Peshawar told AFP that the deceased Chinese "was killed during the shootout."

The pair were abducted by al-Qaeda-linked militant tribesmen as they drove to a hydroelectric dam project near Jandolia, 75km from the Afghan border in the wild tribal district of South Waziristan.

The five abductors who were killed included three foreigners and two Pakistanis, an intelligence official said.

They took orders from a militant leader of the hardcore Mahsud tribe Abdullah Mahsud, who had been imprisoned until March at Guantanamo Bay for 25 months after he was captured fighting for the Taliban in northern Afghanistan in late 2001.

# Iraq war stimulated world terrorism: Blix

**REUTERS, Stockholm**

Former chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said Wednesday the US-led invasion of Iraq had failed tragically in its aim of making the world a safer place and succeeded only in stimulating terrorism.

Blix, in implicit criticism of the main protagonists President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, said the action had also failed to deter any ambitions on the part of Iran or North Korea to develop nuclear weapons.

"The acknowledged gain of the war was that a treacherous and murderous dictator (Saddam Hussein) was removed, but the rest has been tragedy and failure," he told Reuters in an interview. "It has stimulated terrorism."

Many critics of the invasion argue it opened Iraq to Islamist militants involved in an insurrection against coalition forces, while distracting attention from a campaign against the al-Qaeda group blamed for September, 2001 attacks on the United States.

"Is the world safer? No. It's not safer in Iraq," he said in his native Stockholm. "If North Korea and Iran are contemplating going for weapons of mass destruction, then it hasn't stopped them. It has not solved the Middle East conflict."

Blix suggested Washington and London had lost perspective in focusing on Saddam who, it has since emerged, was not involved in developing nuclear arms.

"Of course they were concerned with North Korea and Iran. But...they focused a great deal of their efforts on Iraq while other things were left simmering."

Iran denies US accusations it is developing nuclear arms. Experts say North Korea has an arsenal of between two and nine nuclear bombs.

Blix, who retired from the UN last year and now chairs a Swedish-sponsored Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, also cast doubt on the Iraqi government's comments Tuesday that UN weapons inspectors were welcome to return.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians scavenge vegetables from a demolished storage building in the town of Beit Lahia, in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday. Israeli tanks and bulldozers uprooted some 100 citrus trees on farmland and several houses as the Israeli army extended their incursion into the town.

## 'Maldives reform bid off to a rocky start'

**AFF, Colombo**

The Indian Ocean atoll nation of the Maldives launched moves towards democratic reform, officials said Wednesday, but dissidents complained the process had got off to a difficult start.

Two days after President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom lifted a state of emergency he brought in to crack down on political activists, a parliamentary session known as the Special Majlis opened in the capital island Male Tuesday.

"With the lifting of the state of emergency and the resumption of the Special Majlis, there can be no doubt that the reform process is fully back on track," government spokesman Ahmed Shaheed said in a statement sent here.

He said Gayoom, president since 1978 and Asia's longest serving leader, was committed "to deliver this programme of historical democratic change" in the archipelago of 320,000 Sunni Muslims.

# Democrats, Republicans charge vote improprieties

**REUTERS, Los Angeles**

Democrats on Wednesday charged that the national Republican party was linked to a group accused of trying to stop Democrats from registering to vote in at least two Western battleground states, Nevada and Oregon.

The accusations came as voters rush to meet registration deadlines and election officials around the country report surging registrations, with just three weeks to go in the cliffhanger US presidential campaign.

"We have learned from news reports that a Republican organisation, Voters Outreach for America, has been registering voters and then ripping up the forms when registers identify themselves as Democrats," Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe said in a telephone briefing.

"According to the news reports, the groups have been largely, if not entirely, funded by the Republican National Committee," McAuliffe said.

The Republican National Committee said in a statement it had

a "zero tolerance policy for anything that smacks of impropriety in registering voters."

It accused the Democrats of applying "selective outrage" and said Democrat-aligned groups had also faced allegations of "systemic voter registration fraud." The Republican statement cited the progressive group ACORN, which says on its Web site it has registered 200,000 new voters this election cycle and made "non-partisan" get-out-the-vote appeals.

ACORN officials have said they have tightened procedures to reduce errors.

The reports from Nevada and Oregon, and similar concerns expressed in Arizona, Pennsylvania, Maine and Missouri, were the latest in a series of alleged campaign dirty tricks involving groups aligned to both major parties.

Election officials in several states have turned over thousands of suspicious voter registration forms for investigation, many of them with bogus addresses, fictitious names or forged signatures.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan election workers empty ballot boxes at a counting center in Kabul yesterday. After delays over fraud charges and boycott threats, the vote count in Afghanistan's presidential election finally began yesterday, five days after millions of men and women defied the Taliban to have their first say in their country's destiny.