

Airstrikes on rebel groups claim 40 in Philippines

AFP, Cotabato
The Philippines said yesterday airstrikes on a suspected meeting of regional al-Qaeda-linked group leaders left 40 dead including possibly two top Indonesian members of the Jemaah Islamiyah extremist group.

Lanka, LTTE move closer to deal on tsunami aid

AFP, Colombo
Tamil Tiger rebels and the Sri Lankan government are close to agreement on cooperation in the distribution of relief aid to tsunami survivors, sources close to the rebels said Thursday.

A decision could be announced before a top Tiger rebel peace negotiator returns to his base in London at the weekend, the sources said adding there was intense international pressure on both parties to work together.

Nepal Maoists abduct hundreds of students for indoctrination

AFP, Kathmandu
Maoist rebels fighting to topple Nepal's monarchy have abducted 325 students and 25 teachers for indoctrination sessions, a local rebel official said Thursday.

CIA's 'ghost prisoners' spark rights concerns

AFP, Washington
The official wall of silence surrounding the Central Intelligence Agency's so-called 'ghost prisoners' who are being held at secret locations has sparked legal concerns here among human rights groups that denounce the practice as abusive.

It is not publically known exactly how many ghost detainees the CIA is holding, who they are or where they are held, but senior Al-Qaeda figures are known to be among their ranks, including Ramzi bin al-Shaibh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

'Political tensions mount in Myanmar'

AFP, Bangkok
Political "tension" has risen in military-ruled Myanmar after the death of an aide to a senior general, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said yesterday.



Iraqi expatriate Kamel Zozo (L) dips his finger in ink as he prepares to vote in a polling station in Berlin, Germany yesterday. Iraqi expatriates cheered and clapped as they cast their ballots across the world in the first election in Iraq since Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003.

Exiles start voting outside Iraq

AFP, London/Amman
Thousands of expatriate Iraqis began casting ballots on Friday in their country's first free election for half a century, with emotions running high despite the relatively low numbers taking part.

will vote for a regime to fill the vacuum left by dictator Saddam Hussein, deposed by US-led troops in April 2003. That was the number of Iraqis who registered to vote in a nine-day process which began on January 17 with optimistic estimates that up to a million expatriates might take part.

"I'm doing this for my children... it's the first step in a thousand-mile journey," he said. The run-up to the vote in Iraq has been marred by continuous violence within the country.

'Pakistan to go ahead with gas pipeline with or without India'

AFP, Davos
Pakistan said yesterday that it would press ahead with a gas pipeline project even if India refused or was unable to join the plan. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said that the pipeline, an energy corridor linking Pakistan and India with Iran, Qatar and the Middle East, would also bring a political dividend by helping create interdependent relations between the two nuclear neighbours.

Speaking at an earlier press conference, Aziz said that as well as talks with Iran and Qatar, he was also talking to officials in Turkmenistan as the shortest route might pass through that central Asian republic, depending on which of three construction projects was chosen.

Palestinians start deploying forces PA slaps arms ban

REUTERS, AP, Gaza
Palestinian security forces widened their control in the Gaza Strip yesterday under orders from President Mahmoud Abbas to prevent attacks on Israelis in another important move toward reviving Middle East peacemaking.

armed with assault rifles, took up positions between Jewish settlements on occupied land, often hit by mortar bombs and rockets launched by militants, and Palestinian towns. Others were headed to Gaza's border with Egypt, where Israel has conducted punishing raids in Palestinian residential areas to root out weapons-smuggling tunnels and militants.



Palestinian security forces deploy in the southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Yunes yesterday. Some 2,000 armed Palestinians were deployed in southern Gaza yesterday with orders to prevent rocket attacks as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said he detected an "historic opportunity" for a breakthrough in the Middle East conflict.

Fear factor weighs heavily on Iraqi voters

AFP, Baghdad
The pressure of risking their lives to vote for their futures is too much for many Iraqis who have been bombarded with threats ahead of tomorrow's historic election. The US military and Iraqi authorities admit that the fear and intimidation instilled by radical insurgents is as much a concern as their car bombs, rockets and bullets.

Hamas sweeps local polls

AFP, Gaza City
The radical Islamist movement Hamas was celebrating yesterday a landslide victory in the first ever local elections in the Gaza Strip, winning 77 out of the 118 seats up for grabs, election commission sources said. The mainstream Fatah faction of Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas won just 26 seats while independents and minor parties won the remaining 15 slots in 10 municipalities across the territory in Thursday's election.

Iraq polls may worsen sectarian tension

REUTERS, Amman
President Bush has hailed Iraq's first postwar election as a "grand moment in Iraqi history" but it runs the risk of deepening communal divisions and pushing the country toward civil strife.

Even US officials do not suggest the election will halt the fierce Sunni-led insurgency that has gripped parts of Iraq, foiled reconstruction efforts and forced Washington to cast about for a credible exit strategy for its bloodied troops.

US, Britain agree on Iraq pullout strategy

AFP, London
The United States and Britain have privately agreed on a way of withdrawing their troops from Iraq, the Guardian newspaper reported yesterday. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his British counterpart Geoff Hoon on Monday agreed on a so-called exit-strategy based on doubling the number of Iraqi police trainees and setting up Iraqi paramilitary units, it said.

How will Iraqi polls work?

REUTERS, Baghdad
Iraqis are due to vote on Jan. 30 in their first election since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. These are key facts about the vote: Who is being elected? Voters will choose 275 members of a national assembly, whose key task will be to debate and approve a new constitution. They will also choose members of 18 provincial assemblies and the autonomous Kurdish parliament in the north.

All Iraqis over 18 years old on Jan. 1 can vote -- perhaps some 15 million of a population of about 27 million. The election register is based on the ration list, a relic of UN sanctions. On Jan. 30, voters must bring two forms of photo identification to their local polling station. After voting, their name is crossed off the register and their thumb marked with indelible ink to prevent them voting again.

BBC fails in its mission of impartiality
AFP, London
The BBC, Britain's internationally renowned television and radio broadcaster, has failed in its mission of impartiality and is guilty of a pro-European bias, according to an independent report it commissioned. The report, commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation's Board of Governors, said there was a "serious problem" with the BBC's coverage of European issues because of its failure to be impartial.



Indian school children shout slogans and hold placards as they stage a demonstration outside the Governor's House in Patna yesterday as they call for action to free seven children abducted in the eastern state of Bihar where kidnapping has become an epidemic.