

## 9 dead as helicopter crashes in Philippines

AFP, Manila

A military helicopter carrying a group of government scientists and a Red Cross official crashed in a mountainous area of the northern Philippines yesterday, killing all nine people on board, officials said.

Three rescue helicopters reached the crash site on the slopes of Mount Namal near the town of Gabaldon, 100km north of here and retrieved the bodies within hours, they added.

Among those killed were four scientists from the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) as well as their former boss, Raymundo Punongb-ayan, the country's most famous seismologist, according to Phivolcs chief Renato Solidum.

Punongbayan became a governor of the Filipino chapter of the Red Cross after retirement.

The helicopter's four-man crew were also killed, Solidum said.

The cause of the crash was not known, said the air force, who added that it happened under clear skies.

Senator Richard Gordon said the flight was organised by the Philippine National Red Cross to conduct an aerial inspection of a planned resettlement site for victims of last November's deadly landslides around the town of Dingalan, near Gabaldon.

"I received a message from the Office of Civil Defence that unfortunately, all the passengers died," said Phivolcs chief Renato Solidum.

"The aircraft exploded but we don't know if it was upon impact or while in mid-air," said Senior Inspector Pablo Cruz, police chief of Gabaldon, who was among the first at the crash scene.

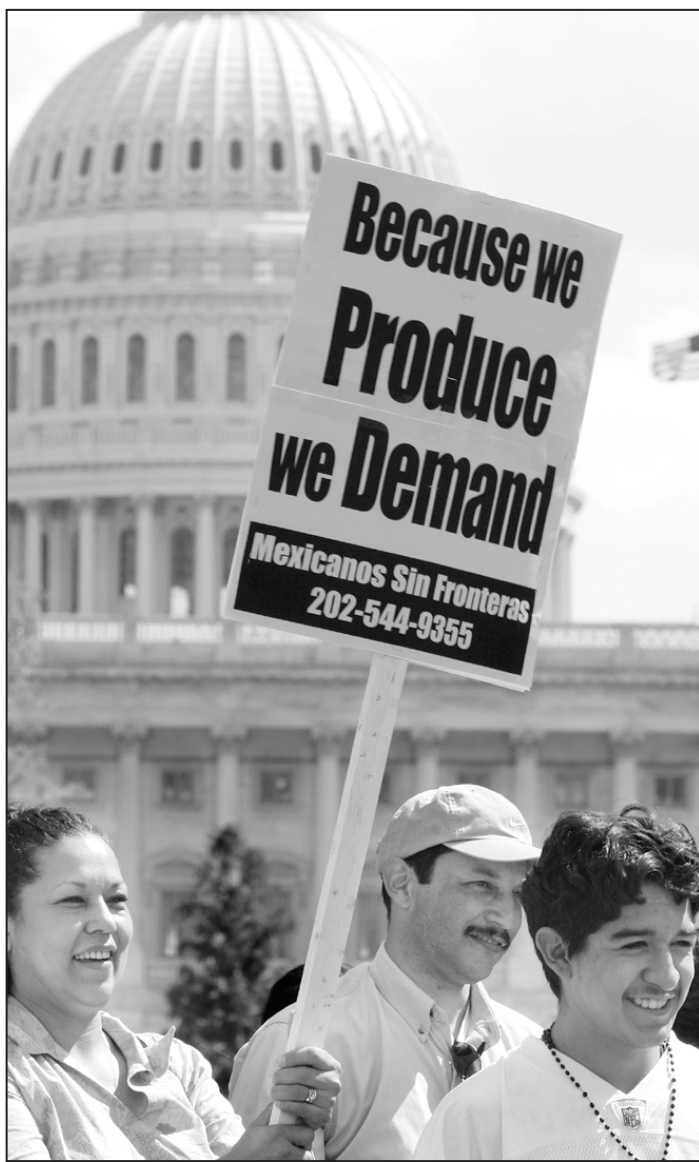


PHOTO: AFP

Immigrant organisations including the National Coalition for Dignity and Residence for Immigrants participate in a rally Wednesday on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, calling for permanent residency to immigrants working in the United States.

## Iraqi parliament okays partial cabinet

Car bomb kills 2, militants gun down general

AP, AFP, Baghdad

The interim National Assembly approved a partial Cabinet yesterday, breaking months of deadlock and political wrangling. But disputes remained over key ministry positions and two deputy prime minister slots.

The legislators approved a list of 27 ministers and five acting ministers, ushering in Iraq's first elected government since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Cabinet was approved by 180 lawmakers out of the 185 present in the 275-member parliament, Speaker Hajim al-Hassani announced to applause.

Prime Minister-designate Ibrahim al-Jaafari submitted a Cabinet that includes members of Iraq's main Shia, Sunni and Kurdish factions.

But Al-Jaafari himself, a Shia, will be acting defence minister, a position that was supposed to go to a Sunni Arab, and disputes remained over two deputy prime minister slots and the defence, oil, electricity, industry and human rights ministries.

Ahmad Chalabi, a former Pentagon favourite from al-Jaafari's Shia-dominated alliance, will be one of four deputy prime ministers and acting oil minister. Kurdish official and former Vice President Rowsh Nouri Shaways will be another deputy and acting electricity minister.

Al-Jaafari has struggled to reconcile the competing demands of Iraq's myriad factions since Jan. 30 elections.

Shia leaders rejected his initial choices for a Sunni deputy prime minister and defence minister because of suspicions they had ties to Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, which brutally repressed Iraq's majority Shias and Kurds.

Al-Jaafari also faced infighting within his United Iraqi Alliance, the largest bloc in parliament, over the oil and electricity portfolios.

Lawmakers earlier said the Cabinet would include 17 Shia Arab ministers, eight Kurds, six Sunnis and a Christian. Among them are six women, responsible for seven portfolios, according to Thursday's announcement.

President Jalal Talabani and his two vice presidents signed off on the list before Thursday's historic vote. A handover between outgoing Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and al-Jaafari will take place within days, the incoming premier told reporters Wednesday.

"The Iraqis will find that this government has religious, ethnic, political and geographic variety, in addition to the participation of women," he said from the steps of his office. "Now that the process has started, we will spare no effort to bring back a smile to children's faces."

Allawi's Iraqi List party, which has 40 seats in the National Assembly, was not included in the new Cabinet. Alliance lawmakers said they had given up trying to balance Allawi's demands with those of Sunni factions that could offer help in beginning talks with Sunni militants, who are believed to be the

backbone of the insurgency.

Many Shias have long resented the secular Allawi, accusing his outgoing administration of including former Baathists in the government and security forces.

Shias make up 60 percent of Iraq's 26 million people. The Kurds make up 20 percent, and the Sunni Arabs, who largely stayed away from the elections either in boycott or for fear of attacks, are roughly 15 percent to 20 percent.

Al-Jaafari had been under mounting US pressure to form a transitional government so it can step up and coordinate efforts to suppress the insurgency. Many here believe the political impasse had emboldened insurgents, who have staged a series of dramatic and well-coordinated attacks in recent weeks.

AFP adds: An Iraqi major-general was shot dead early yesterday while on his way to work in Baghdad, an interior ministry official said.

The officer, Mohsen Abdel Sada, who worked as an intelligence aide to an interior deputy minister, was gunned down in his car by three men who drove by in another vehicle in the southern Dura district of the capital.

Earlier, at least two Iraqi soldiers were killed and some 15 people were wounded, including three US soldiers, when a car bomb exploded Thursday morning in Tikrit, northern Iraq, Iraqi police and the US military said.

## Abu Ghraib abuses 'tip of iceberg': HR Watch

Amnesty blasts US for failing independent probe

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

A rights watchdog said on Wednesday the abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison were just the "tip of the iceberg" of US mistreatment of Muslim prisoners.

The abuses at Abu Ghraib are part of a larger pattern of US rights violations of detainees in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere, New York-based Human Rights Watch said.

Its summary of accusations of abuses came on the eve of the first anniversary of publication of photos showing humiliation and mistreatment of prisoners at the Iraqi jail.

"Abu Ghraib was only the tip of the iceberg," Reed Brody, special counsel for Human Rights Watch, said in a statement.

"It's now clear that abuse of detainees has happened all over - from Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay to a lot of third-country dungeons where the United States has sent prisoners. And probably quite a few other places we don't even know about."

The group said it was concerned the United States had not stopped the use of what it called illegal coercive interrogation.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International blasted the United States yesterday for failing to launch an independent probe into Iraq's Abu

Ghraib prison scandal, a year after images of abused detainees first shocked the world.

The London-based human rights organisation also condemned signs of fresh torture and sexual abuse in the country by the Iraqi prison authorities.

"People around the world will be recalling the horrific images they saw a year ago and wondering what happened to those prisoners," said Amnesty secretary general Irene Khan, noting that only a handful of low-ranking US soldiers had been prosecuted or disciplined over the outrage.

"But what was the role of those higher up, including, for example, the US secretary of defence?" she demanded, referring to Donald Rumsfeld.

It said nine detainees were known to have died in US custody in Afghanistan. At least 11 al-Qaeda suspects have also "disappeared" in US custody, with no evidence of where they are being held.

It said there was growing evidence that prisoners being held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, on suspicion of links to radical Islamic groups "have suffered torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment."

## Terrorist acts, deaths tripled in 2004: US

AFP, Washington

The United States said Wednesday that terrorist activity in the world increased sharply last year with the number of attacks and dead more than tripling but that it was winning the global "war on terror."

The US National Counterterrorism Centre, an arm of the Central Intelligence Agency, said in a report there were 651 terrorist attacks across the globe last year with 1,907 people killed.

This compares with 208 attacks involving 625 fatalities in 2003, according to State Department figures released last year.

A total of 6,704 people were wounded in terrorist strikes last year, according to the centre, compared to the 3,646 reported for 2003. Another 710 people were taken hostage in 2004, the new report said.

But State Department Counsellor Philip Zelkoff said: "I think we are winning the war on terror but it is a very long struggle."

"And I want to triple underscore: No complacency."

The centre released the figures for the first time and separately from an annual State Department country report on terrorism, which said the global threat remained "significant" and Iraq was still the central battleground.

Earlier this month, the depart-

ment said it had decided not to publish statistics after widely publicised errors were found in figures for 2003 that had to be revised.

NCTC acting director John Brennan said the centre used new methodology, statutory criteria and counting rules to capture the fresh statistics and that it was unfair to compare 2004 figures with previous years.

"An increased level of effort allowed a much deeper review of far more information and along with Iraq were the primary reasons for the significant growth in terrorist incidents being reported," he said.

In Iraq, the number of terrorist incidents ballooned from 22 in 2003 to 201 last year.

The terrorist data has become a political hot potato, with Democrats suggesting that the administration of President George W. Bush was politicising the issue.

Congressional Democrats, led by House minority leader Nancy Pelosi, charged that last year's erroneous report was used to bolster administration claims to be making progress in the war on terror, and urged the State Department to include data on terrorist attacks in its annual report.



PHOTO: AFP

Leader of Taiwan's opposition Nationalist Party Lien Chan (C-L) along with his wife Fang Yu (C-R) wave to the media amid heavy security during his visit to the forbidden city in Beijing Thursday. Lien, chairman of Taiwan's nationalist party or Kuomintang (KMT), said he felt an "historic responsibility" to bring peace between China and Taiwan as he arrived in Beijing for talks with Chinese President Hu Jintao

## Iraq legal advice leak hits Blair hard ahead of polls

REUTERS, London

Iraq exploded onto the British election campaign yesterday as leaked advice from the government's top lawyer, questioning the war's legality, hit Tony Blair just a week before polling day.

Trailing the prime minister badly in opinion surveys, opposition parties seized on the secret pre-war report from Attorney General Lord Peter Goldsmith as showing Blair was deceitful.

"The whole things reeks. (There has been) gross deception," said Dominic Grieve, legal affairs

spokesman for the main opposition Conservative Party.

The deeply unpopular Iraq war remains Blair's Achilles Heel, with many Britons believing he misled them over the extent of Saddam Hussein's banned weapons programme -- London's main justification for joining the US-led 2003 invasion.

The latest legal row taps directly into the hot election issue of Blair's trustworthiness and echoes allegations that the government also pressed the country's intelligence services to produce a clear-cut case for war.

The Goldsmith leak has ruined Blair's attempts to focus the last days of the campaign on local

issues like the economy, health and education. But analysts said it was unlikely to derail his bid for a third term.

The March 7, 2003 document shows Goldsmith cast doubt on the legal grounds of war just days before Blair ordered troops in.

Goldsmith said then "a court might well conclude" UN Security Council resolutions at the time did not authorise war.

"I remain of the opinion that the safest legal course would be to secure the adoption of a further resolution to authorise the use of force," Goldsmith wrote.