



Residents look at firemen extinguishing burning cars in the Nantes Bellevue district, western France Monday. Police said yesterday that 1,173 vehicles were burnt and 330 people arrested overnight as France experienced its 12th straight night of urban violence.

## 'References in Volcker report lack evidence' India to investigate 'tax violations' by 125 firms

PTI, Patna New Delhi

Maintaining that there was no evidence to support the "unsubstantiated references" in the Volcker Committee findings, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Monday made it clear that setting up of the judicial inquiry and the fact-finding mission is a "search" for truth.

"Some unsubstantiated references have been made. There is no evidence. Anybody can write names," he told a press conference here in an apparent reference to the naming of former External Affairs Minister K Natwar Singh and Congress party beneficiaries in the report.

He said the controversy has not hurt the image of the party and the government.

"The attempt will be how to get to the truth of the matter. In the search for this, a judicial commission has been set up and a plenipotentiary has been appointed," he said in reply to questions.

A day after he was relieved of the

external affairs portfolio, Union Minister K Natwar Singh yesterday said he was not a "coward" and would answer all allegations against him in parliament.

A defiant minister, addressing supporters who came from several parts of Rajasthan at his official residence, rubbished all the charges levelled against him in the Volcker report on Iraqi oil-for-food scam and he was happy that a probe had been instituted into it.

The Finance Ministry may independently scrutinise whether there are any tax violations by the 125 Indian companies named by the Volcker Committee report for allegedly paying kickbacks to the Saddam Hussein government to get contracts under the UN Oil-for-Food Programme.

"There is no formal probe but we will look into the tax returns of the 125 companies in the normal course to see whether there is any violation," a top Finance Ministry official said.

## Terror plot foiled, claims Australia

### Muslim cleric among 17 detained, charged

REUTERS, Canberra

An Australian Muslim cleric who said Osama bin Laden was a "great man" has been named by police as the spiritual leader of a group of 16 men charged yesterday with planning a terrorist attack in Australia.

Abdul Nacer Benbrika, also known as Abu Bakr, has long been monitored by Australian authorities and grabbed headlines in August after he praised bin Laden, blamed for the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

He is a self-styled leader of a fundamentalist Islamic group of young followers in the suburbs of Australia's second-biggest city, Melbourne. Some of these followers, local radio reported, attended militant training camps in Asia.

"Osama Bin Laden, he is a great man," Benbrika, 45, told Australian Broadcasting Corp. (ABC) radio in

August.

Following police raids in Sydney and Melbourne on Tuesday, Benbrika was charged with directing the activities of a terrorist organisation and remanded in custody until January.

Benbrika's passport was confiscated in March on advice from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, which then raided his Melbourne home in June, ABC radio has reported.

But Benbrika, a dual Australian/Algerian citizen who has at least six children and has lived in Melbourne since 1989, denied he was a security threat.

"I am not involved in anything here. I am teaching my brothers here the Koran and the Sunna, and I am trying my best to keep myself, my family, my kids and the Muslims close to this religion," he told the ABC,

referring to the holy book and the code of conduct for Muslims.

Benbrika said he opposed anyone trying to harm his religion. He also said it was a "big problem" for Muslims reconciling their religion with life in Australia.

"There are two laws. There is Australian law. There is Islamic law," he said, adding the only law that needed to be spread was Islam.

"Jihad is part of my religion, and what you have to understand that anyone who fights for the sake of Allah ... (with) the first drop of blood that comes from him out, all his sin will be forgiven," he said.

Other Australian Muslim leaders have said Benbrika represented a minority view, and Prime Minister John Howard did not invite Benbrika to a summit of key Muslim leaders in August.

## Lawyer for Saddam co-defendant killed

AFP, Baghdad

A lawyer working for one of the co-defendants of ousted president Saddam Hussein on trial on crimes against humanity was shot dead by armed men in Baghdad yesterday, while a colleague was wounded, interior ministry and legal sources said.

Adel Mohammed Abbas was killed when armed gunmen opened fire on him and lawyer Tamer Hammud Hadi at 1:30 pm (1030 GMT) in the Adl neighborhood of Baghdad, an interior ministry source said.

Abbas was a lawyer for former vice president Taha Yassin Ramadan, a member of the powerful Revolution Command Council who had been one of Saddam's closest aides. Ramadan was known as one of the regime's "enforcers".

## US pushes for extension of UN mandate in Iraq

### 5 US soldiers charged with assaulting Iraqis

AFP, Reuters, Washington

The United States has urged the UN Security Council to extend the mandate of the US-led forces in Iraq for at least a year after the Iraqis elect their first government, The Washington Post said yesterday.

Overcoming resistance from France and Russia for a six-month extension, the US said extending the mandate for a year would spare a new Iraqi government -- to be elected under the new constitution on December 15 -- the burden of having to approve the continued presence of foreign troops on their soil, US diplomats told the daily.

Washington also hopes the extension would encourage US coalition partners to remain in Iraq and avoid a potentially tough battle in the Security

Council on the mandate issue next year after the Iraqi government takes power.

The US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, told The Washington Post by telephone on Monday that the US sought to extend the mandate "far in advance of the Iraqi election" so "it didn't become an issue in the election."

"We thought it was also important to show the continuing international commitment to progress in Iraq," Bolton added.

"We expect this to be voted tomorrow (Tuesday). I don't know anybody who is going to vote against it," he added referring to the resolution, co-sponsored by the US, Britain, Denmark, Romania and Japan.

In a concession to French and Russian objections, the US agreed that the council would review the mandate

on June 15 of next year.

On May 31 the Security Council granted Iraq's request to keep the multinational force in Iraq "until the end of the political process."

Meanwhile, Britain and the United States remain united in their joint struggle to stamp out terrorism and to bring democracy to Iraq, Britain's visiting Defence Secretary John Reid said Monday.

"We should have no illusion as to the severity of the struggle we face against international terror. It will be long, it will be deep," Reid, on his first official trip to the United States as defence secretary, told a panel discussion at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

## Iran says nuclear offer final chance

AFP, Tehran

Iran's top nuclear official warned yesterday an offer to resume stalled atomic talks with Europe was his final attempt to salvage negotiations, insisting Tehran would never renounce its demand to enrich uranium.

Ali Larijani told the BBC his offer in a letter on Sunday to the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany to pick up the talks was "our last word to the Europeans".

European foreign ministers have said they are studying the proposal but have yet to indicate if they will accept the offer, the first since Larijani became hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's pointman on the nuclear dossier.

However, Larijani's letter makes clear that Tehran has no intention of dropping its demand to enrich uranium as part of a full nuclear fuel cycle -- the key sticking point in the tortuous negotiating process with Europe.



A police van (C) carrying arrested terrorist suspects is driven into a Sydney court yesterday. Australian police said they foiled a "large-scale terrorist attack" yesterday after pre-dawn raids in Sydney and Melbourne when officers arrested a radical Islamic cleric, 16 others and shot a suspected extremist.



A Thai employee tries to extinguish fire following a bomb blast in the parking area of a provincial government building in Thailand's violence raged southern Yala province yesterday. Two bombs went off at two different government buildings in Yala after a night of deadly gun battles, as Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra insists security forces are making gains in their fight against Islamic dissidents.

## Thai PM vows offensive as bombs rattle south

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday vowed to pursue its offensive against Islamic militants as two bombs rocked provincial government buildings in the country's south following a night of deadly gun attacks.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who had just returned from the strife-torn region, told reporters he was happy with the government response to the latest unrest and vowed further crackdowns.

"Absolutely, I am satisfied with the incidents last night," Thaksin said. "Many were arrested. We have to continue our work. Next time it's our turn to be more offensive."

Two bombs rocked Yala province early Tuesday, slightly wounding a government official. The explosives, which were placed under cars, hit a Yala provincial education office and a car park behind a provincial hall.

Later Tuesday a 40-year-old Muslim, Maromee Salae, was shot dead by suspected militants in Patae village of Yala province, police added.

Those attacks came after 14 coordi-

nated attacks overnight in Yala left five people dead, including two militants, in Yala and Pattani provinces.

One of the slain militants, Asumi Jarong, was wanted in connection with the unrest, and had a one million baht (243,000 dollar) bounty on his head, southern army commander Lieutenant General Kwanchart Klaharn told reporters.

Seventeen people had been arrested in connection with the overnight raids, he added.

Also during the night, the managing director of the local Thongtun Thai newspaper was shot dead in Narathiwat province, police said.

Abdullah Mama, 37, was shot five times in the town of Sungai Kolok by gunmen who had followed him in a pick-up truck. He was pronounced dead in hospital a short time later.

"Police have established two possible motives for the killing. Either it was a personal conflict or part of the unrest," police Colonel Somsak Rommayanon said.

The attacks came just hours after Thaksin left the region.

## Israel political crisis may force early elections

### Knesset rejects Sharon's cabinet picks

AFP, Tel Aviv

A festering crisis between Likud party rebels and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was well placed yesterday to force early Israeli elections depending on a leadership ballot in main coalition partner Labour.

An embarrassing defeat in parliament on Monday over two cabinet appointments has left the Sharon camp sandwiched between the prospect of early elections or finding a way to reassert control over the party.

"This measure will have consequences," Sharon told parliament Monday, even as MPs ratified his appointment of chief ally Ehud Olmert

as finance minister at a separate vote.

Leading the rebel camp is the charismatic darling of Israel's right and Sharon nemesis, Benjamin Netanyahu, who makes no secret of his desire to drive the premier out of the Likud leadership and replace him as prime minister.

With the Labour party on the cusp of a crunch leadership election on Wednesday, the crisis may come to a head over the state 2006 budget, which the Sharon government has until March 31 to force through parliament.

Should the government fail to stitch together the majority it still lacks in time, the government will fall automati-

cally and early elections -- which are normally scheduled for November 2006 -- will become a matter of course.

Eight votes rejecting Sharon's cabinet appointments and three Likud MPs who absented themselves were enough to put his promotions on the back burner.

"The current situation cannot last," Olmert declared Tuesday.

Various Likud party rebels have threatened to torpedo the budget unless the government makes substantial provisions for settlements in the occupied West Bank and earmarks money for the 8,000 settlers evacuated from the Gaza Strip.

## Lankan candidates promise peace

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's presidential frontrunners both promise lasting peace with the Tamil Tigers if elected at this month's poll, but while their pledges strike a chord with ordinary voters, they may have misjudged the rebels.

Sporadic grenade attacks and shootings in and around Tiger-held areas ahead of the Nov. 17 poll serve as an eerie reminder of a silent conflict that has killed dozens since a 2002 ceasefire halted two decades of civil war.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) -- blamed for the August assassination of the island's foreign minister -- are refusing to resume peace talks they pulled out of in 2003 because they are not ready for a long-term deal, analysts say.

"The LTTE simply are not in a position to give up their demand for a separate state yet," said Kethesh Loganathan of the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Colombo.

"It is one of the factors which is holding them back from entering into negotiations on a permanent settlement," he said.

"They are not committed to a permanent peace within a united Sri

Lanka."

The Tigers, who have an estimated 18,000 to 20,000 cadres, want interim self-rule in the 15 percent of Sri Lanka they control with their own courts, tax system and even speedgun-toting traffic police.

But they insist on dictating the terms in their quest for a homeland for minority Tamils, who they say are discriminated against by Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese, which stalled the peace process under outgoing President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Peace envoys and truce monitors say a return to a full-blown war that killed over 64,000 people is unlikely, but analysts expect little change whoever wins the election.

"You get the inevitable feeling that they have an agenda and that they have been keeping to it," said Iqbal Athas, a defence analyst for Jane's Defence Weekly, referring to a spate of killings of intelligence and military officials.

"Since 2002 they have built a much stronger military machine... That is one of the reasons the peace talks remain stalled at the moment," he added. "(The election outcome) is not going to make a substantive difference to the peace process."

## Maoist rebels release son of ex-Nepali PM

AFP, Kathmandu

The son of a former Nepalese prime minister was released yesterday after being held for almost two weeks by Maoist rebels who had abducted him to press for payments to sugarcane farmers, a report said.

Arun Chand, son of Lokendra Bahadur Chand, was handed over to human rights activists and journalists, private television channel Nepal One reported.

"Nepal's Maoists released Arun Chand Tuesday morning," Nepal One reported.

Chand was abducted in northwest Nepal on October 27 and held for 12 days by the rebels who pressed him to make payments due to local sugarcane farmers from a mill he runs.

On Monday the rebels had demanded a ransom of 30 million rupees (410,958 dollars) for the release of Chand, who is the managing director of Basulinga Sugar Mills.

The rebels released Chand after negotiations with human rights activists and journalists produced a pledge from him to pay the farmers within the next three months, Nepal One reported.

## Divided Kashmiri families wait in vain

AP, Gulpur

Clutching a box of sweets for his Pakistani uncle, 21-year-old law student Suheb Mir waited at an Indian military post on the disputed frontier dividing Kashmir.

He had heard authorities were going to open the border Monday to allow people to seek aid and check on long-lost relatives in wake of the Oct. 8 earthquake.

But his hopes and those of countless others like him were dashed by Kashmir's political reality. The highly anticipated event was postponed to next week, in large part due to Indian concerns that Muslim militants might head into Indian territory.

The delays angered several hundred Pakistanis waiting to cross, who began chanting for a free Kashmir. Pakistani police fired tear gas to break up the crowd.

The tensions came amid new warnings that the world has not donated enough aid to see quake survivors through the harsh Himalayan winter. About 3 million people are homeless across the region, most in Pakistan, where the estimated death toll rose from 73,000

to 86,000 on Tuesday. India has reported 1,350 deaths in its portion of Kashmir.

Kashmir was split between Hindu-dominated India and Muslim-dominated Pakistan after the bloody partition of the subcontinent following independence from Britain in 1947. Both countries claim the mainly Muslim territory in its entirety, a dispute that has caused two wars between the nuclear-armed neighbours and kept families separated for more than half a century.

Mir's mother, Khadija, hails from Pakistan but moved to India 22 years ago when she married Mir's father and made her home in the border town of Gulpur. She has not been back since, and her children have never met their uncles or cousins.

"All these years, my sisters and I, we've grown up listening to our mother tell stories of her life across the border in Pakistan," Mir said.

A few days ago Khadija, whose childhood home was destroyed by the quake, received a phone call from a brother back in Pakistan, Mohammed Rizwan, who said he would like to spend a few days with her family.

## Dreaded Indian bandit Nirbhay Gujjar shot dead

REUTERS, Lucknow

One of India's most wanted bandits, linked to more than two dozen murders and 100 kidnappings, has been shot dead after a fierce encounter, police said yesterday.

Nirbhay Gujjar, armed with automatic weapons and boasting a flamboyant handlebar moustache, had wreaked havoc in the rough ravines of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh for more than a decade.

He kidnapped small traders and affluent farmers, killing them if ransoms were not paid, police say. Gujjar, who was about 50, was shot dead by a police special taskforce (STF) in Uttar Pradesh on Monday.

"We were keeping a close watch on his movements and as soon as we had confirmed knowledge about him, we rushed an STF team and they finally got him," state police chief Yashpal Singh told Reuters.

The country's most notorious bandit in living memory was Phoolan Devi, dubbed the "Bandit Queen", a low caste woman who took to the gun after being gangraped by upper caste men.

She surrendered after years of terror and went on to become a member of parliament before being gunned down outside her official Delhi residence in 2001.

Another famous villain, or dacoit, Koose Muniswamy Veeerappan, who smuggled ivory and sandalwood, was shot dead last year after a hunt lasting decades in the thick jungles of southern India.