

## 8 die in Russian airplane crash

AFP, Moscow

Eight people were killed when a small airplane crashed in the Moscow region, officials at Moscow's Domodedovo airport said early yesterday.

Air traffic controllers lost contact late Saturday night with the Cessna 208 plane, which had six passengers and two pilots on board, the airport's press service said in a statement.

The plane, belonging to Ivolga-Avia airlines, was flying from the southern city of Voronezh and was due to land at Domodedovo.

Lawmaker Nikolai Olshansky's son Igor was among the dead, the Interfax news agency reported, quoting emergency ministry officials.

"According to preliminary findings, the reason for the plane's crash was the violation of flight rules by the crew," RIA Novosti quoted Nikolai Savchenko, a deputy prosecutor general, as saying.

# Iraq reconciliation efforts clouded by divisions

AFP, Cairo

Iraqi leaders resumed efforts yesterday to prepare a reconciliation conference for the war-torn country, facing deep sectarian differences heightened by a wave of violence at home.

The first of the three days of Arab League-sponsored talks on Saturday was marked by bitter recriminations between the war-torn country's factions and a brief walkout from one session by Shia and Kurdish delegations.

Sunni Arab politician Adnan al-Dulaimi, who was sacked earlier this year as head of Iraq's Waqf or Islamic endowment body, told reporters that a February 25-March 1 date was being

considered for the reconciliation conference itself.

"We don't have too high expectations. The purpose of this meeting is to develop an agenda. If we reach an agreed agenda, this will already be a big step," Iraqi government spokesman Leith Kubba said Saturday.

Three committees tasked with preparing a wider reconciliation conference in Baghdad, with "building confidence" and drafting the Cairo gathering's final statement began meeting Sunday.

Jawad al-Khalsi, an influential Shia imam who has been central to recent dialogue efforts, did not hide his disappointment when the first day of talks came to an end.

"We are divided between parties who are opposed and others who are favourable to the occupation. But we're still at square one since we were not given the opportunity to discuss in depth the crucial issue of a withdrawal timetable," he told AFP.

Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari set the tone of the meeting at the opening on Saturday, when he firmly vetoed the participation of members of Saddam Hussein's ousted regime.

Egypt and Arab League chief Amr Mussa had pressured the Iraqi government to allow former members of the now banned Baath party "with no blood on their hands" to be included in the talks.

"I appreciate Amr Mussa's efforts that led to this meeting, but here's what I tell him: it may be difficult to gather all the protagonists but it is even more difficult to deal with the reality on the ground, when the other is carrying arms and spilling blood," Jaafari said.

His comments prompted an angry reaction from the Committee of Muslim Scholars, the leading Sunni religious authority in Iraq.

The rest of the day was marked by deep confessional divisions and news of yet another deadly suicide bombing by the Sunni-dominated insurgency in Iraq targeting the majority Shia community.



Iraqis demonstrate in Baghdad yesterday to protest continued violence in their war-torn country and the abuse of Iraqi prisoners in interior ministry jails.

PHOTO: AFP

## Gamma kills 12 in Central America

REUTERS, El Progreso, Honduras

Tropical Storm Gamma lashed Central America on Saturday and killed at least 12 people, three of them in a plane crash on their way to a luxury jungle lodge owned by film director Francis Ford Coppola.

In Honduras, Gamma's torrential rains, which followed several days of downpours from a cold front, cut off Caribbean coast villages, killed at least nine people and left 14 others missing. Several disappeared when a rescue boat overturned in raging river waters.

Slow-moving Gamma is the 24th named storm of a record-breaking Atlantic hurricane season and is cutting an erratic course off the Caribbean coast of Central America and toward Cuba, where it is expected to land on Monday. The storm was not expected to gain strength.

Experts said it would bypass Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, which is recovering from a battering by Hurricane Wilma three weeks ago, and revised earlier predictions to say it probably would not directly hit southern Florida, where Wilma also wreaked havoc.

## Probe fails to land on asteroid

REUTERS, Tokyo

A Japanese space probe on a mission to bring back the world's first rock samples from an asteroid failed to touch down yesterday on its target nearly 300 million km (186 million miles) from earth.

But scientists from the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) were trying to pinpoint the location of the probe and considering a second attempt at landing.

The unmanned Hayabusa (Japanese for "falcon," had been scheduled to touch down on the surface of the 548-metre-long 25143 Itokawa for just one second after a voyage of two and a half years.

## Iran sees no case for referral to UN

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran said yesterday any decision to refer its nuclear case to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions would be purely political and not based on evidence Tehran was trying to build a nuclear weapon.

"There is no legal or logical reason for Iran's case to be referred. But if something does happen in the next few days based on political motives that is a different matter," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told a news briefing.

The UN nuclear watchdog meets in Vienna on Thursday to discuss International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director Mohamed ElBaradei's latest report on Iran and consider again whether to send Iran's case to the Security Council.

Iran faces possible sanctions after failing to convince the world that its nuclear program is designed to meet its energy needs and not to build an atomic weapon.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice suggested on Sunday the referral could be at a later unspecified date.

## Labour set to quit govt as Sharon mulls Likud split

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's Labour party was set yesterday to approve the withdrawal of its eight ministers from the ruling coalition as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon pondered whether to quit his right-wing Likud party and go it alone in a general election early next year.

With parliament due to be dissolved later this week, members of Labour's central committee were to

meet in Tel Aviv to rubber stamp the party's decision to pull out of Sharon's governing coalition.

The decision to withdraw was made following this month's surprise election of Amir Peretz as Labour's new dovish leader -- a move which has propelled the country towards early general elections.

Labour's eight ministers and three deputy ministers have already signed their resignation letters which are due to be submitted

Monday, and will come into effect 48 hours later.

As the country began gearing up for general elections, expected in February or March, Sunday's headlines were dominated by the speculation over Sharon's political future.

The hawk-turned-pragmatist Israeli leader is widely expected to make an historic break from the right-wing faction he helped found, but which has increasingly become an albatross around his neck.

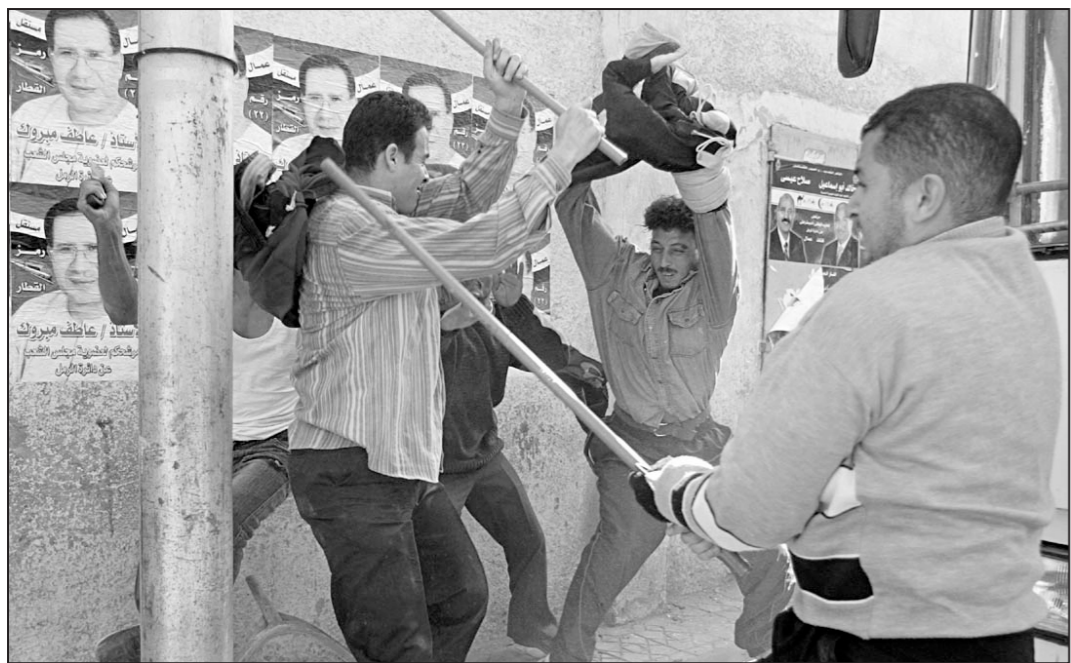


PHOTO: AFP

National Democratic Party and sympathisers of the Muslim Brotherhood fight at the Raml district in the port city of Alexandria yesterday during the second round of the Egyptian parliamentary elections.

## Tension runs high in 2nd round of Egypt election

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian forces arrested 200 supporters of the Muslim Brothers before the second round of Egypt's parliamentary election kicked off yesterday, amid fears of government attempts to curb the Islamist movement's political surge.

The focal point of the second phase of the month-long election was the Islamist bastion of Alexandria, where tensions were running high between supporters of the Muslim Brothers and the ruling National Democratic Party of President Hosni Mubarak.

While the NDP's dominance is not in doubt after securing 112 out of 164 seats up for grabs in the first phase, the officially banned but tolerated Brotherhood won a surprise 34 constituencies, twice its tally in 2000.

With the second phase including

many of their traditional strongholds, the Muslim Brothers could be on course to have 100 MPs in the 454-seat People's Assembly.

But observers predicted the NDP would not allow the Islamist movement to make such inroads and voiced fears the second phase could see widespread fraud and even violent clashes.

"This phase will be more tense than the first round. The government will try to interfere with the polling process in a bid to prevent the surge of the Muslim Brotherhood," prominent judge Yehya al-Rifai told AFP.

"There is a more fraud that the judges can cope with," he warned, stressing that the number of judges assigned to polling stations and the contingent of independent monitors would not be sufficient to prevent irregularities.