

## 9 Iraqis shot to death in attack on minibus

AFP, Baquba

Nine Iraqis from a Shiite village northeast of Baghdad were shot and killed Wednesday as they boarded a minibus to go to work on nearby farms, police said.

Two more people were wounded in the drive-by shooting in the village of Abu Saida, northeast Baquba, police added.

Police initially said the Iraqis worked on a nearby US military base, but a local village official, Awad Nuri, told AFP they were employed on nearby farms.

## No 'date certain' for Iraq victory, withdrawal: US

AFP, Washington

The White House, in its most detailed public plan yet for success in Iraq, said Wednesday it expected to reduce US forces there in 2006 but warned that victory would not come by a "date certain."

"No war war has ever been won on a timetable and neither will this one," US President George W. Bush's national security council said in a policy paper entitled "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," dated November 2005.

"Although we are confident of victory in Iraq, we will not put a date certain on when each stage of success will be reached, because the timing of success depends upon meeting certain conditions, not arbitrary timetables," it said.

## Bus crash kills 30 in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 30 people died and 15 others were injured when their bus veered off a road in Nepal and plunged 50 metres down a hill, police said Wednesday.

The bus was carrying Hindu pilgrims from Kathmandu and was travelling to Swargadadi, a religious site for Hindus, said the police officer who asked not to be named.

Police were investigating the cause of the accident which occurred on a mountain road 370 kilometres west of the capital.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi boy mourns over the body of his father who was killed with eight others as they boarded a bus, yesterday at the morgue of a local hospital in the city of Baquba, northeast of Baghdad.

## US, UK blamed for Iraq hostages

AP, Baghdad

A peace group blamed the United States and Britain for the abduction of four activists shown in an insurgent video, saying the kidnapping was the direct result of the occupation of Iraq.

After a months-long hiatus in the kidnapping of foreigners, television footage on Tuesday once again showed Westerners held captive: A German archaeologist bound and blindfolded knelt among masked gunmen in one video. Four frightened peace activists were shown in another blurry tape.

The latest attacks are part of a new wave of kidnappings police fear is aimed at disrupting next month's national elections.

Christian Peacemaker Teams, a group that has had activists in Iraq since October 2002, said it was saddened by the video of their workers. The workers, the group said, were working against the occupation of Iraq.

"We are angry because what has happened to our teammates is the result of the actions of the US and UK government due to the illegal attack on Iraq and the continuing occupation and oppression of its

people," the group said.

The group listed the names of those abducted as Tom Fox, 54, of Clearbrook, Va.; Norman Kember, 74, of London; James Loney, 41, of Toronto, Canada; and Harmeet Singh Sooden, 32, of Canada.

"We are some of the few internationals left in Iraq who are telling the truth about what is happening to the Iraqi people," the statement said. "We hope that we can continue to do this work and we pray for the speedy release of our beloved teammates."

On Tuesday, Al-Jazeera broadcast video of the four men held by a previously unknown group calling itself the Swords of Righteousness Brigade. The group claimed they were spies working under the cover of Christian peace activists.

Loney, a community worker, was leading the Christian group's delegation in Iraq.

The brief, blurry tape was shown the same day a television station displayed a photo of the German hostage. The kidnapers threatened to kill Susanne Osthoff and her Iraqi driver unless Germany halts all contacts with the Iraqi government.

## Quake survivors plead for help in Indian Kashmir

REUTERS, Drangyari

Sarwar Jan and her eight shivering children collect a handful of twigs to light a fire in their little tin shed as it snows heavily outside.

"I fear they will catch pneumonia going out in such weather," said 45-year-old Jan, tears streaming down her face as her children huddled around a fire, many of them coughing in their dirty pherens (long coat) or ponchos.

"They will die... God save us." Jan and her children survived the devastating October 8 earthquake in South Asia that killed more than 73,000 people and left millions homeless, and are now fighting a harsh Himalayan winter.

Nearly 600 people in Indian Kashmir, whose world was destroyed by the quake, live in

temporary tin sheds and tents under a thick layer of snow and freezing temperatures in Drangyari, a small valley ringed by lofty snow-covered mountains and pine forests.

"Life has become extremely difficult particularly for children. Allah is angry with us. Allah only can save us," said Mohammad Showkat Khan, the chief priest of the village, looking toward the sky as the snow falls.

Nearby men, women and children shovelled snow from the roof of their tin sheds and tents, many of them with bare hands.

"I can't sleep for the whole night because of the coughing and the pain in my foot," said 10-year-old Parveena, pointing toward the frostbite on her right foot.

Khan said many children had fallen ill in the village and at least three had been sent to an army

hospital.

"We provide them medical facilities when they come to us but our doctors have also visited the village twice in recent days," said Lieutenant-Colonel S. Solanki, an army officer, in a nearby army camp.

Winters are always harsh in this part of the Himalayan region. Snowstorms and avalanches killed 300 in Indian Kashmir last season and meteorologists predict another tough winter this year.

Many areas are cut off from the rest of the world, sometimes for months.

Relief officials say they have constructed nearly 2,000 prefabricated shelters and over 12,000 tin sheds for the quake survivors.

Khan said many children had

## 8 reported dead in Pakistani quake zone

AP, Muzaffarabad

More than 700 people many suffering from pneumonia and hypothermia were treated at hospitals Wednesday as winter descends on Pakistani

Kashmir and the millions who lost their homes in last month's earthquake.

Media reports said eight people have died in northwestern Pakistan and Kashmir due to the bad weather, and doctors said the situation could worsen in the coming weeks if arrangements are not quickly made to provide winterized shelters to quake survivors.

Rain and snow began lashing Pakistan's part of Kashmir late Saturday, blocking several roads and grounding helicopters used to ferry aid to remote areas. The quake struck on Oct. 8, killing more than 87,000 people.

## Saudi women score twice in first polls

AFP, Jeddah

Two Saudi businesswomen swept to an unprecedented victory in elections to the board of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the first polls in which women stood as candidates in the conservative Muslim kingdom.

"I'm happy, but I'm still under shock," Lama al-Suleiman, one of the two winners, told AFP, summing up the feelings of many election activists and watchers who had expected one woman at best to be voted into office.

"It's a big leap for Saudi women, an answer to what people want," said Suleiman, a 39-year-old mother of four.

Suleiman and fellow female winner Nashwa Taher ran on a list of heavyweight business people and industrialists which clinched the 12 board seats up for grabs, according to results released early Wednesday.

With only 100 women among the

some 3,880 chamber members who cast ballots, the pair's victory was effectively handed by men.

"We should give them (women) a chance because they have little representation in society," one male voter said Tuesday, adding he had voted for four women.

The two businesswomen's win came several months after landmark municipal elections across oil-rich Saudi Arabia from which women were barred but which were credited by many for heightening public interest in the chamber polls in the Red Sea city and turning them into a hotly-contested race.

The fact that women, who previously were entitled only to vote for the Jeddah chamber's board of directors, stood as candidates "was also an unusual event which contributed to making this election unusual," said Othman Basagr, a member of a task force which assisted the elections committee.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian woman argues with an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint which blocks off the road leading to a Palestinian school yesterday. The road has been blocked for over a week preventing the children from reaching their classes.

## Hurricane season finally ending

AP, Miami

The victims of the busiest and costliest Atlantic hurricane season on record may be comforted now that it's finally ending Wednesday: No hurricane has been known to hit the United States between December and May.

But despite the end of the June 1-to-Nov. 30 season, tens of thousands of Americans are still dealing with the devastation from Hurricanes Wilma, Rita and Katrina, the nation's worst natural disaster in modern times.

And hurricanes still could form over the next few months. In fact, a tropical storm took shape in the Atlantic on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, thousands remain homeless along the Gulf Coast, where Katrina hit three months ago. The storm plunged New Orleans into the kind of chaos usually seen in developing countries, exposing the gap between rich and poor, and raising serious doubts about the country's readiness for another catastrophe, caused by man or nature.

Forecasters say 2006 could be another brutal year because the Atlantic is in a period of frenzied hurricane activity that began in 1995 and could last at least another decade.

Government hurricane experts say the increase is due to a natural cycle of higher sea temperatures, lower wind shear and other factors, though some scientists blame global warming.

The 2005 season obliterated many long-standing records:

In 154 years of record-keeping, this year had the most named storms (26, including Tropical Storm Epsilon, which formed Tuesday), the most hurricanes (13), the highest number of major hurricanes hitting the US (4), and the most top-scale Category 5 hurricanes (3).

Katrina was the deadliest US hurricane since 1928 (more than 1,300 dead) and replaced 1992's Andrew as the most expensive one on record (\$34.4 billion in insured losses).

Total insured losses from hurricanes this year were put at \$47.2 billion, above the previous record of \$22.9 billion set last year when four hurricanes also hit the US, according to risk-analysis firm ISO.

Wilma was briefly the most intense Atlantic hurricane on record in terms of minimum central pressure (882 millibars). It also was the fastest-strengthening storm on record its top sustained winds increased 105 mph in 24 hours in the Caribbean.

## Clinton pledges continued help for tsunami-hit Aceh

AFP, Banda Aceh

The UN special envoy for tsunami recovery, former US president Bill Clinton, pledged Wednesday that the international community would not abandon Aceh even after it fades from world attention.

Clinton was on a lightning half-day visit to Aceh, where more than 165,000 people were killed or remain missing after last December's devastating tsunami, one day after he toured damaged areas in Sri Lanka.

"The assistance of the international community -- the United Nations, the Indonesian government, NGOs large and small -- will stay with you until Pak (Mr. Kuntoro's) job is done," the casually-dressed envoy said, referring to Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, the head of the agency in charge of rebuilding Aceh.

Clinton laid a wreath at a mass grave where tsunami victims were buried, 12 kilometres south of the provincial capital Banda Aceh, before visiting displaced people housed in temporary homes. Its residents clustered around him, trying to shake his hand.

## Uma Bharti suspended for anti-party activities

PTI, New Delhi

Barely four days after she was appointed BJP National General Secretary, the stormy petrel of saffron politics Uma Bharti was on Wednesday suspended from the primary membership of the party for "anti-party activity", virtually paving the way for her expulsion within three days.

Bharti, one of the handful of mass leaders in the party credited with its landslide victory in Madhya Pradesh and recently in Bihar, was suspended by the BJP Central Parliamentary Board for "her conduct and statements" in the wake of the recent leadership change in Madhya Pradesh.

Chaired by party President LK Advani, the Board meeting was attended among others by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

"The attention of the Board was drawn to her conduct and statements over the last few days and it was of the opinion that these constituted anti-party activity. It was decided to suspend her from the primary membership of the party. A show cause notice would be served to her with three days time to respond as to why she should not be expelled from the party," BJP General Secretary Arun Jaitley said in a brief statement after a short 20

minute meeting of the Board.

Refusing to accept the Board's nomination of Shivraj Singh Chauhan as the next Chief Minister, Bharti had on Monday stormed out of the state BJP legislature party meeting in Bhopal with 13 loyalist MLAs even as her supporters indulged in violence outside. Addressing reporters yesterday, she went ballistic charging all senior leaders including Advani with violating party discipline and began a Padyatra to Ayodhya.

Bharti was suspended from the party last November also after she dared Advani to take action against her at a meeting of party's Central Office bearers.

Bharti's suspension was revoked a month later after she apologised for "hurting" Advani.

A protégé of late Vijayaraje Scindia, the firebrand leader has been closely associated with the BJP since the Ram Janambhoomi movement and is an accused in the Babri Mosque demolition case along with Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi.

A favourite of the Sangh Parivar, the RSS had exerted pressure on BJP for revoking her suspension last year but this time around it has distanced itself from her after she targeted its Joint General Secretary Suresh Soni.