

## Fires race across Texas, Oklahoma

REUTERS, Oklahoma City

Firefighters in Texas and Oklahoma battled wind-fueled wildfires on Tuesday that burned homes and cars and forced one small town to evacuate residents.

The fires, at least several of which officials blamed on children playing with fireworks, raced across a countryside parched by months of abnormally dry weather.

Winds near 64 kph whipped through the region, while temperatures rose to an unseasonably high 27 Celsius on Tuesday.

"It's dry as a bone, and brittle," said Oklahoma City Fire Department spokesman Brian Stanaland. "The fire is traveling extremely rapidly. It's hopping across the country."

Television reports showed the fires moving across the prairies and into housing developments where homes were ablaze and cars burning in their driveways. Residents watered their yards to prevent flying sparks from igniting the grass.

At least six houses were destroyed and many others damaged in fires around Oklahoma City, the local sheriff's office said.

## Lanka seeks India's role to tame Tigers

AGENCIES, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse discussed on Wednesday bilateral and other issues amid escalating violence in the island nation.

The details of the talks in New Delhi were not available. However, the focus is to secure New Delhi's increased involvement in the island's troubled peace process.

Rajapakse arrived in India on Tuesday for a four-day visit, his first foreign trip since taking office after winning the November 17 presidential election.

Indian officials said that during a series of meetings in New Delhi with Indian leaders, including PM Manmohan Singh, the neighbours will explore ways to consolidate bilateral ties, particularly in the economic field.

Sri Lankan President after his arrival at New Delhi airport (Reuters photo)

Rajapakse was slated to meet the leader of the Congress party,

Sonia Gandhi, as well as the ministers of commerce and industry, home, shipping, road transport, and highways and planning.

Ahead of his visit, Rajapakse said last week in Colombo that he would use the trip to seek New Delhi's increased participation in the island nation's faltering peace effort with the Tamil Tigers.

"They are our closest neighbour and it is very important for me to have them involved in the process," Rajapakse told reporters.

The president said he expects India to play a similar role to that of the four so-called "co-chairs" — the United States, the European Union, Japan and Norway.

The diplomatic quartet are Sri Lanka's key backers and they preside over international efforts to raise money in support of the island's efforts to end three decades of ethnic bloodshed that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

Rajapakse said he was also keen to study India's system of devolution as it could be a model for Sri Lanka to grant extensive power

to minority Tamils. "I am for a unitary state with maximum possible devolution," he said. "I want to study the Indian model and I am sure we can learn from that."

Rajapakse has gone back on a promise by his party to accept a federal system of government in exchange for ethnic peace as initially agreed with the Tamil Tigers during a round of talks in December 2002.

A recent escalation of violence has heightened fears that Sri Lanka could be slipping back to war despite a February 2002 truce with the rebels.

In the latest bloodletting, suspected Tiger rebels staged two bomb attacks in the island's embattled regions on Tuesday, killing 10 soldiers and a constable.

The soldiers were ambushed with a Claymore mine at Pululy in the Jaffna peninsula, where 18 soldiers were killed in two similar attacks earlier this month, an official said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) shakes hands with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (L) prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Rajapakse arrived in India for a four-day visit which he has said will aim to secure a greater role for India in the island's fragile peace process. The trip is the first foreign visit by Rajapakse since he took office after winning the November 17 presidential election.

## Beslan massacre 'could have been prevented'

AFP, Moscow

The 2004 Beslan school hostage massacre "could have been prevented" if law enforcement personnel had followed orders to tighten security, the head of the Russian parliamentary commission investigating the tragedy said here Wednesday.

"If orders had been followed, the terrorist act could have been prevented," Alexander Torshin, deputy speaker of the Federation Council, told lawmakers as he outlined preliminary conclusions from a parliamentary inquiry set up in September 2004.

Speaking a day after a panel of experts said officials in charge of coordinating the response to the hostage crisis had made no mistakes, Torshin said that there had been many security deficiencies before and during the three-day standoff that exacerbated it.

"The list of failures and shortcomings is long," Torshin said.

The crisis erupted on September 1, 2004 when Chechen rebels seized a primary school in the southern Russian city of Beslan, taking more than 1,000 people including hundreds of students and their parents arriving for the first day of school hostage.

## Israeli planes hit Lebanon

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli warplanes attacked a Palestinian guerrilla group's training base in Lebanon on Wednesday, the army said, after a rocket strike on an Israeli town raised border tension to its highest level in years.

"The message is to the government of Lebanon which is responsible for preventing terror attacks from its territory,"

Israel's northern commander Major-General Udi Adam told Reuters.

"The State of Israel holds the Lebanese government responsible for these attacks, in that it has done

nothing to dismantle the terror organizations operating from within Lebanon, in violation of U.N. decisions 425 and 1559," the army said in a statement.

The attack targeted a base belonging to the pro-Syrian Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) in Na'meh south of Beirut and slightly wounded two of its fighters, the group's spokesman Anwar Raja told Reuters.

He denied the group's involvement in the rocket attack against northern Israel.

## 22 die in Indian bus accident

AFP, New Delhi

At least 22 people, among them three children, were killed when their bus collided with a truck in India's western Gujarat state early Wednesday, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

The bus caught fire on impact, burning the passengers beyond recognition, police deputy superintendent Bharuch Malik told the news agency.

"The bus had only one entry and exit point. As soon as the bus hit the truck, the panicked passengers ran to the back of the vehicle and were trapped when fire erupted from the rear portion," he said.

The fire intensified, fuelled by the foam seats and other flammable materials in the bus, PTI said.

"Only after post-mortems we will be able to ascertain how many (victims) were males and how many females," Malik said.

## Demonstrators protest alleged electoral fraud in Iraq

AFP, Samarra

Hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets of Samarra on Wednesday to denounce alleged electoral fraud in Iraq's general elections which gave Shiite-based religious parties a commanding lead in the preliminary results. Demonstrators in the town 125 km north of the capital, held banners calling for the dismissal of the electoral commission and the formation of a government of national unity.

"Jaafari. Hands off. This country doesn't want you," read one banner referring to the outgoing Shiite prime minister, Ibrahim Jaafari, who says he is prepared to form a new government after the December 15 polls.

On Tuesday, thousands of

demonstrators, from Sunni Arab and secular parties, took to the streets of Baghdad and Tikrit to demand new elections.

But Abdel Aziz Hakim, leader of a formerly Iran-based religious party that is one of the main planks of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance, has ruled out any possibility of election re-runs.

"The election results cannot be invalidated," said Hakim, head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. "Elections cannot be held anew."

Hakim and Kurdish leaders were meeting in northern Iraq on Wednesday to discuss the formation of a new government even though final election results have yet to be announced.

## EU Launches 1st Galileo Program Satellite

AP, Paris

The first satellite in the European Union's Galileo navigation program was launched from Kazakhstan on Wednesday, a major step forward for Europe's answer to the US Global Positioning System.

The Galileo satellite, named "Giove A," took off from the Baikonur Cosmodrome aboard a Soyuz rocket. Journalists monitored the liftoff through a linkup at the European Space Agency headquarters in Paris.

The \$4 billion Galileo project will eventually use about 30 satellites and end Europe's reliance on the GPS system, which is controlled by the US military.

Galileo will more than double GPS coverage, providing satellite navigation for people from motorists to sailors to mapmakers. In particular, Galileo is expected to improve coverage in high-latitude areas such as northern Europe.

## Pakistan starts work on second Chinese-made nuclear power station

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan Wednesday began construction of a second nuclear power station with China's help at Chashma in Punjab province.

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz launched work on the 325-megawatt power plant, a twin to an adjacent station of the same capacity already in service since 2000.

"Today's concrete-pouring ceremony of Chashma-2 marks yet another landmark in Pakistan-China relations and a milestone in the history of nuclear technology in Pakistan," Aziz told a gathering of senior Chinese and Pakistani officials.

The 850-million-dollar project is expected to start production in 2011, a Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission spokesman told AFP.

The reactor design is based on China's Qinshan 1 nuclear reactor in its eastern province of Zhejiang.

## Iraq war in numbers

### From WMD to the victims



## Mass grave found in Gujarat

AFP, Ahmedabad

Villagers claimed a mass grave had been uncovered for victims of religious riots in western India in 2002, an official said Tuesday.

"Eight human skulls were unearthed. The villagers believe that these are mortal remains of the 26 people who had been killed in a mob attack here in 2002," said social worker Sohail Topiwala, part of the team that discovered the site in Panchmahals district in Gujarat. He said he expected his team would find more bodies.

More than 2,000 people — mostly Muslims — were killed in the riots sparked after a Muslim mob reportedly torched a train carriage in Godhra town, killing 59 Hindu pilgrims in 2002. Officials later found the fire was an accident.

Human rights groups accuse the state government, controlled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, of turning a blind eye to the riots.

Villagers from Panderwara, where the grave was found, claimed police did not hand over the bodies of their relatives after the riots, instead swiftly burying them.

## Sonia must step down as NAC chairperson: Advani

PTI, Mumbai

India's main opposition party BJP President LK Advani on Wednesday demanded that Congress President Sonia Gandhi step down as head of National Advisory Council in the wake of the Iraqi oil payoffs controversy and accused it of being desperate to "hang" Natwar Singh to portray Gandhi as "squeaky clean".

"There was prima facie case that the Congress party was a non-contractual beneficiary of Saddam Hussein's largesse, while former minister for External Affairs, Natwar Singh was a mere messenger-cum-commission agent," BJP President LK Advani said in his inaugural address at the party convention that began in Mumbai on Wednesday.

Advani said that the Congress president cannot continue to pretend (that) she did not know her party was a beneficiary of Saddam's oil kickbacks. The Volcker Report has only reinforced the Congress party's utter disregard for probity in public life, he said.

"The Congress party, which has fathered the culture of corruption in India, does not appear remotely ashamed. On the contrary, it is brazenly using official investigating agencies to try and shift the focus away from those who were the real beneficiaries," Advani said.