



Thousands of immigrants demonstrate against the current immigration laws in central Rome Saturday. The demonstration was organised by humanitarian associations demanding solutions for the homeless immigrants after Merry Begum, a Bangladeshi woman died with her son when a fire broke out in a building in Rome on January 13.

Iraqi Shias reach deal

REUTERS, Baghdad

The political movement of Iraqi cleric and militia leader Moqtada al-Sadr said it would end a two-month boycott of parliament on Sunday, smoothing over a rift with its Shia allies in the US-backed government.

The political reconciliation with a group viewed with suspicion in Washington came the day after US forces suffered one of their costliest days in Iraq. A total of 19 soldiers were killed, including 12 on a helicopter and five in a clash in a Shia holy city that the US military blamed on militiamen.

Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has been under pressure to crack down on the Mehdi Army, a militia loyal to Sadr that the United States sees as the biggest threat to security in Iraq. But his past dependence on Sadr's political

support has made that difficult.

The Sadrist announced a boycott late last year to press their demand for a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and to protest against a meeting between Maliki and President Bush.

"We are ending our boycott of the ministries and the parliament," Bahaa al-Araji, a senior member of the Sadrist group, told a news conference with the ruling Shia Alliance, adding that there had been a response to their demands.

The US military on Sunday revised the number killed in Saturday's Blackhawk helicopter crash from 13 to 12. It said another five soldiers were killed and three wounded in the clash at a government building in Kerbala.

It was unclear whether the helicopter was shot down.

Residents near Baquba in violent Diyala province northeast of Baghdad said they saw a helicopter in flames in the air.

Two other soldiers were killed elsewhere on Saturday and the deaths of two killed on Friday were also announced.

It was the deadliest day for US forces since Bush announced he was sending about 20,000 more troops to Iraq to try to prevent sectarian civil war between Shia Muslims and the once-dominant SunniArab minority.

His plans have run into resistance from opposition Democrats who now control Congress and scepticism in Washington about how far Maliki can make good on promises to disarm Shia militias.

The US military said on Sunday a brigade of around 3,200 soldiers had arrived in Baghdad, the first of some 17,000 planned reinforcements for the city, and it would be fully operational by the start of February.

The Kerbala clash came as thousands of pilgrims thronged to the city 110km south of Baghdad at the start of the 10-day rite of Ashura, a highpoint of the Shia calendar and a previous target for attacks by al-Qaeda and other Sunnis.

"The Provincial Joint Coordination Centre in Kerbala was attacked with grenades, small arms and indirect fire by an illegally armed militia group," the US military said in a statement, apparently blaming Shia militiamen rather than Sunni insurgents to whom it usually refers as "terrorists."

"Five US soldiers were killed and three wounded while repelling the attack," it said without mentioning attackers killed or detained.

'US uprising plans to foment strife in Iran'

AFP, Dubai

The United States wants to incite a popular uprising in Iran, a senior Iranian official was quoted yesterday as saying, adding that a confrontation between Washington and Tehran is "inevitable."

US President George W. Bush "pursues a strategy hostile to Iran... The coming two months will show the world this strategy," Mohsen Rezai, secretary of Iran's Expediency Council, told the Dubai-based Al-Bayan newspaper.

"America will exploit (sanctions) against Iran to incite people to rise up against the (Islamic) revolution, provide aid to movements hostile to Iran, carry out operations inside Iran and promote a sectarian war," said Rezai, a former Revolutionary Guards commander.

"An Iranian-US confrontation is inevitable," he said, adding that he would not rule out US missile strikes against Iran's nuclear installations.

STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS Bush gets 2nd chance to defend Iraq plan

AP, Washington

President Bush's State of the Union address tomorrow gives him a second chance to defend his new Iraq strategy to a nation soured on the war and a Congress poised to vote against the plan.

It will be the president's last major opportunity to shape America's legislative agenda before the fast-moving 2008 presidential campaign begins to drown out his message.

Bush is expected to strike a conciliatory tone on some domestic issues where he believes he can work with the first Democratic Congress in 12 years. On Iraq, he is expected to stand firm.

The nationally televised speech typically offers great political theatre. This year, however, it comes just 13 days after the president's prime-time announcement of his decision to send 21,500 more US troops to Iraq.

Since then, Capitol Hill the forum for the State of the Union address has grown more hostile.

Democratic support is building around a nonbinding resolution opposing Bush's plan for more troops. Some Republicans already critical of the White House's Iraq policy have embraced the idea and others are looking for ways to sign on.

Despite the political tensions, House Democrats invited Bush to speak at their annual retreat in Williamsburg, Virginia, on Feb. 3 and the president accepted.

"The elephant in the room is Iraq," said Ken Khachigian, a former speechwriter for Presidents Reagan and Nixon who thinks Bush should use forceful, blunt even combative rhetoric to rebut Democrats and others who criticise his war strategy.



President of Finland Tarja Halonen (2-L) and her husband Pentti Arajärvi (L) talk to an artisan from the Indian state of Nagaland during their visit to the Dilli-Haat handicrafts market in New Delhi yesterday. Halonen is in India for a five-day visit.

Teenager shot editor for insulting Turks

REUTERS, Istanbul

An unemployed teenager has told investigators he shot dead editor Hrant Dink because he had insulted Turks, broadcaster CNN Turk reported yesterday.

Police caught Ogun Samast, 17, carrying a gun at a bus station in the Black Sea coastal town of Samsun on Saturday evening, a day after the Turkish-Armenian Dink was shot in broad daylight outside his newspaper office in Istanbul.

"I read on the Internet that he (Dink) said 'I am from Turkey but Turkish blood is dirty' and I decided to kill him ... I do not regret this," CNN Turk quoted Samast as saying.

Dink was a respected but controversial figure who promoted reconciliation between Turks and Armenians but also called on Turkey to recognize its role in massacres of Armenians during World War One. Turkish nationalists saw such comments as an insult to national honour.

Samsun's chief prosecutor Ahmet Gokcinar confirmed to state-run Anatolian news agency that Samast had confessed.

Abbas holds more crisis talks in Syria

AFP, Damascus

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas holds more talks in Syria yesterday aimed at ending a deadly power struggle with the ruling Hamas but it remained unclear whether he would meet the Islamist movement's powerful exiled supremo Khaled Meshaal.

"Questions remain unresolved. We are trying to resolve them," Ramadan Abdullah Shalah, secretary general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement said after two hours of talks with Abbas Saturday.

An Abbas-Meshaal meeting could be the key to resolving the violent standoff between the Palestinian leader and his rivals in Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, which swept to power in the Palestinian territories in March.

Abbas's Fatah party and Hamas have tried for months to agree on a national unity government in the hope of ending a crippling boycott and aid freeze by the United States and the European Union.

Washington and the EU consider Hamas to be a terrorist group and suspended direct financial aid to the Palestinians because the Islamists refuse to renounce violence or recognise Israel's right to exist.

Tensions between the two factions boiled over in the Gaza Strip in December, killing more than 30 people.

The clashes erupted after Abbas called for early elections as a way of resolving the standoff with Hamas, which has vehemently rejected the move as an attempted coup and warned it could set off civil war.

On Saturday, Syria affirmed its commitment to Palestinian unity when President Bashar al-Assad met Abbas, whose Fatah party was dramatically ousted by Hamas in January 2006 elections.

Abbas's spokesman Nabil Amir said the two leaders had an "amicable and very frank" discussion that focused on "Palestinian issues in detail and the regional situation."

He reported that Assad had told Abbas that he was "attached to

Palestinian national unity and ready to support anything that could help reinforce it, as well as efforts to find an adequate solution to the Palestinian problem."

On the prospects for meeting between Abbas and Meshaal, the spokesman said only that he hoped there could be "positive encounters" between them.

It was the first meeting between Abbas and Assad since 2005, while Abbas has not seen Meshaal -- one of Israel's most wanted men -- since Hamas's shock election win.

On Friday, Abbas received a boost when Israel released 100 million dollars in tax revenue collected on behalf of the Palestinians that had been withheld since Hamas took power.

The move, which involves only part of the estimated 600 million dollars in Palestinian customs duties withheld by Israel, followed a December summit between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Following his trip to Syria, Abbas is expected to head on to Beirut.

Major quake rocks Indonesia No tsunami risk

AFP, Jakarta

A major 6.5 magnitude undersea earthquake rocked Indonesia's northern Sulawesi province yesterday, the country's meteorology agency said, but it added there was no risk of a tsunami despite earlier fears.

"After one hour we called the port authority in Manado and there was no rise in sea level. Therefore we cancel the possibility of tsunami taking place," said Arif from the meteorology agency in Jakarta.

The office had earlier said there was a possibility of a tsunami.

The earthquake struck at 07:27 pm (1127 GMT) and was centred some 51km under the sea 160km southeast of the North Sulawesi capital of Manado, Ari said.

The private Metro television station said that the earthquake sparked panic in Manado and that some buildings had cracks in their walls.

The Detikcom online news service said that many people were fleeing to higher ground fearing a tsunami. They headed mostly to the Winangun area on the hills south of city, carrying anything they could, including pets, it said.

The ElShinta radio station reported that power in Manado was cut off but Detikcom said power remained in some parts although the telephone network was not functioning.



Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas (L) shaking hands with Syrian Vice President Faruq al-Shara (R) during a meeting attended by Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erakat (C) in Damascus yesterday.

US envoy in China to mull date for N Korea talks

REUTERS, Beijing

Washington's envoy to North Korean nuclear talks arrived in China and his Pyongyang counterpart conferred with Russia on Sunday, as hopes revived for progress in the long-running six-country negotiations.

US envoy Christopher Hill, aiming to fix a date for resuming the talks, said he would brief China's chief negotiator, Wu Dawei, about discussions he held last week in Berlin with the North Korean representative, Kim Kye-gwan.

"I will ask (Wu) about his thoughts on when they could schedule the next round of six-party talks," Hill told reporters on arrival at Beijing airport.

China hosts the talks, which also group the two Koreas, the United States, Japan and Russia, and which began in 2003 with the aim of persuading impoverished Pyongyang to scrap its nuclear arms development.

'Britain seeks radical security, anti-terror policy overhaul'

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government will create a new national security department to fight terrorism as part of a radical overhaul of its troubled interior ministry, newspapers reported yesterday.

John Reid, the no-nonsense Blair ally tasked with reforming the hapless Home Office, will split the department into two bodies: one for national security and the other for the justice system, the Sunday Telegraph reported.

Each will be run by its own cabinet minister.

In a column in the same newspaper, Reid said there would be "no sacred cows" in overhauling an unwieldy department he dubbed "not fit for purpose" when he was named home secretary last year.

"I can fix the problems, but I need three years," read the title of Reid's piece.

The opposition Conservative party has long campaigned for a cabinet-level minister to deal with anti-terrorism issues.