



PHOTO: AFP  
A man looks at his flood-devastated neighbourhood in Jakarta yesterday. Torrential rains raised water levels further, bringing more misery to Jakarta and the surrounding area where the floods have already killed 40 people.

## Republicans block debate on Iraq troops surge

AP, Washington

Republicans blocked a full-fledged Senate debate over Iraq on Monday, but Democrats vowed they still would find a way to force President Bush to change course in a war that has claimed the lives of more than 3,000 US troops.

"We must heed the results of the November elections and the wishes of the American people," said Majority Leader Harry Reid.

Reid, D-Nevada, spoke moments before the vote that side-tracked a nonbinding measure expressing disagreement with Bush's plan to deploy an additional 21,500 troops to Iraq.

The vote was 49-47, or 11 short of the 60 needed to go ahead with debate, and left the fate of the measure uncertain.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch

McConnell of Kentucky described the test vote as merely a "bump in the road" and added that GOP lawmakers "welcome the debate and are happy to have it."

The political jockeying unfolded as Democrats sought passage of a measure, supported by Sen John Warner, R-Virginia, that is critical of the administration's new Iraq policy. It was the first time Democrats had scheduled a sustained debate on the war since they won control over Congress in last fall's midterm elections.

McConnell called for equal treatment for an alternative measure, backed by Sen Judd Gregg, R-New Hampshire, saying Congress should neither cut nor eliminate funding for troops in the field. That measure takes no position on the war or the president's decision to deploy additional forces.

## Astronaut arrested over Nasa love triangle attack

AFP, Miami

US police have arrested a woman astronaut who allegedly attacked and tried to kidnap a woman she considered a rival for the heart of a space shuttle pilot.

Police said Nasa astronaut Lisa Nowak, 43, donned a trench coat and a wig to accost her love rival, Colleen Shipman, at Orlando International Airport in the pre-dawn hours of Monday.

Nowak, a US Navy captain and a married mother of three, flew to the International Space Station in July. Nowak and Shipman were rivals for the affections of astronaut William Oefelein, 41, who flew a mission to the orbiting space station in December.

# Hamas, Fatah trade fire at Gaza border

### Palestinian leaders in Makkah for summit

AP, Gaza City

Hamas and Fatah security officials traded fire at Gaza's border with Egypt on Tuesday as Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh passed through on his way to reconciliation talks between his Hamas movement and the rival Fatah group in Saudi Arabia, witnesses said.

Haniyeh, who was in a VIP hall and not in the immediate area of the firefight, crossed to Egypt unharmed, they said. He had arrived at the border crossing under heavy guard after travelling along a route lined with hundreds of Hamas gunmen on foot and in jeeps.

Although Haniyeh expressed confidence that the reconciliation talks would end months of Palestinian infighting, Tuesday's

gunbattle was an ominous sign for the meeting in Makkah, which analysts have said could be the two sides' last chance to avert civil war.

The 10-minute gunbattle at the border terminal caused no injuries, said the witnesses, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of safety concerns.

Fatah and Hamas security officials offered a different version of events. They said shots were fired in the air to disperse a crowd of thousands of people who had tried to push through the border crossing after Haniyeh.

The passage Gaza's gateway to the outside world has been closed to outgoing traffic since Jan. 8 because of Israeli security alerts.

The two groups have been clashing ever since Islamic Hamas

militants unseated President Mahmoud Abbas' long-ruling Fatah in parliamentary elections last year. Although the separately elected Abbas remained in power, with considerable authorities, Hamas' violently anti-Israel ideology has drawn punishing sanctions by the West and Israel.

Abbas hopes a Hamas-Fatah coalition government would end the factional violence and the sanctions.

Earlier rounds of talks, some brokered by Egypt, Syria and Qatar, foundered over Hamas' refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist. Israel and Western donor countries have said their sanctions won't be lifted until Hamas softens its position.

The negotiations follow an

especially bloody round of factional violence. More than 30 people were killed and more than 200 were wounded in four days of fighting before the factions ceased fire on Sunday.

Before setting off on the trip from his house to the border, Haniyeh sounded upbeat about reaching a power-sharing agreement with Fatah.

"We will do all within our power to reach a Palestinian agreement on national unity government," said Haniyeh, whose delegation is to be led by Hamas' exiled leader, Khaled Mashaal. "We are optimistic and hopeful that we will succeed, and return to our people with an agreement that can heal our wounds and end the tension."

## UK paper reveals video of US 'friendly fire'

REUTERS, London

A British newspaper published transcripts yesterday of what it said was a cockpit video recording from a US warplane at the centre of an inquest into "friendly fire" in Iraq in which a British soldier was killed.

The Sun, Britain's biggest-selling tabloid newspaper, said the video tape revealed the pilots, realising they had hit a convoy of British armoured vehicles, said "God dammit" and "We're in jail, dude."

Lance Corporal Matty Hull was killed near the southern Iraqi city of Basra in March 2003 when two US A-10 tankbusters twice fired on the British convoy.

The recording, extracts of which were played on BBC radio and Sky Television, showed how before firing the pilots discuss whether they can see orange panels -- designed to show allied planes a convoy is friendly -- on top of the armoured vehicles. They conclude the orange objects must be rocket launchers and attack the convoy.

## Lankan jets pound Tiger positions

### US lawmakers ask Bush to appoint peace envoy

AFP, Colombo/ Washington

Sri Lankan air force jets pounded suspected Tamil Tiger rebel positions in north-eastern Sri Lanka on Tuesday as troops consolidated in an area captured from the guerrillas, the military said.

Israeli-built Kfir jets hit a jungle area near Morawewa where members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were gathering, a military official said.

"We had information about an LTTE formation and the air force took those targets," he said adding that the guerrillas were believed to have fled their former eastern bastion town of Vakarai.

President Mahinda Rajapakse made an unannounced visit on Saturday to Vakarai where the Tigers maintained their own police, courts and civil administration before being driven out on January 19.

The battle for Vakarai, which

lasted several weeks, cost the lives of 41 troops and an estimated 331 rebels, according to the military.

More than 4,000 people have been killed in violence since December 2005 despite a truce arranged by peace broker Norway in 2002.

In Washington a group of 38 US lawmakers have asked President George W Bush to appoint a special envoy to help bring about peace in conflict-ridden Sri Lanka.

The legislators from the House of Representatives said in a letter to Bush that they were troubled by renewed violence and a rising number of deaths as well as a big increase in unsolved kidnappings across Sri Lanka.

"It is time for the United States to provide global leadership to help advance peace for the people of Sri Lanka," they said, according to a copy of the letter obtained by AFP from the office of New Jersey Democratic Representative Rush Holt, who initiated the move.

## New outbreaks of bird flu in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has reported its first cases of deadly bird flu in almost a year after finding the virus in small flocks of chickens and peacocks, officials said yesterday.

All the chickens in a flock of about 40 birds at a house in Rawalpindi, near Islamabad, had died or been killed after the H5N1 virus was detected, said Food, Agriculture and Livestock Ministry spokesman Mohammad Afzal.

"The virus was found in domestic poultry in Rawalpindi. Eighteen birds died and tests confirmed they were infected with H5N1 virus, the rest of the birds were then slaughtered," he told AFP.

"We believe it is an isolated case" in Rawalpindi, he added. Several major chicken farms are located in the area.

Afzal said the virus had also been detected in a flock of peacocks in Mansehra in North West Frontier Province. "Again 18 birds died and the rest had been quarantined and will be slaughtered today," he said.

He added: "There is no case of human infection."

The virus has not yet been found

in commercial poultry following the latest outbreak and the government had provided farmers with enough vaccine to protect their birds, Afzal said.

Pakistan produces 4.5 million chickens annually, while peacocks are often kept for decorative purposes and as a good luck charm to bring their owners wealth.

Pakistan's first H5N1 cases were in March 2006 at two chicken farms in North West Frontier Province. Its last case was in April when it slaughtered about 40,000 chickens at eight poultry farms on the outskirts of the capital.

No human bird flu cases have been recorded in Pakistan.

Concern over bird flu was already growing on Tuesday after a teenage girl died in Egypt, becoming the 166th victim worldwide, and as the EU debated how to contain a British outbreak of the virus.

The vast majority of H5N1 avian flu cases to date have been recorded in Asia, but early in 2006 the viral disease began showing up in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

## 58 states adopt plan to end child soldiers

AFP, Paris

Fifty-eight countries agreed yesterday to take action to protect children from being recruited as soldiers in wars, joining for the first time an effort that had been largely confined to NGOs.

The 58 countries that signed up to the so-called Paris commitments at the end of a two-day conference included 10 of the 12 nations where an estimated 250,000 children bear arms.

"We commit ourselves to spare no effort to end the unlawful recruitment and use of children by armed forces or groups in all regions of the world," French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said at the end of the gathering held in Paris.

The document put the onus on governments to prosecute recruiters or commanders of child soldiers and to seek the unconditional release of all children enrolled in armies or armed groups.

Ten years after children's rights campaigner Graca Machel unveiled the Cape Town principles that would guide non-governmental organisations, the Paris commitments were

hailed as a key step that would inject new momentum to international efforts to end the use of children in combat.

"For the first time countries are solemnly committing to apply and respect these principles to combat the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts," a foreign ministry official said.

Among the signatories were Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nepal, Somalia, Sudan, Sri Lanka and Uganda, which are on a UN black list of countries that recruit child soldiers.

Two others on the UN list -- Myanmar and the Philippines -- did not take part in the conference, which was organised by the UN children's agency Unicef and the French foreign ministry.

Unicef and French officials stressed that the list of countries adhering to the Paris commitments was not final, hoping to build on the effort launched during the conference.

## India, Pakistan to launch anti-terror panel in Mar

AFP, New Delhi

An India-Pakistan anti-terror panel set up last year will hold its first meeting in March in Islamabad, the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministries said yesterday.

A three-member Indian delegation would be led by KC Singh, a senior bureaucrat in India's foreign ministry who deals with international organisa-

tions, a statement said.

The mandate of the anti-terror panel was to "identify and implement counter-terrorism initiatives and investigations," it added.

Pakistan foreign ministry spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam later told a weekly briefing in Islamabad the meeting would be held on March 6-7.

The idea to set up the panel was

first proposed during a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf in the Cuban capital of Havana, on the sidelines of an international summit in September.

The initiative followed the July train bombings in India's financial capital Mumbai that killed 186 people.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian female supporters of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) display a poster during a demonstration in Srinagar yesterday. Businesses remained closed and transport came to a standstill in the restive state of Jammu and Kashmir in response to a call by separatists to protest against alleged disappearances and custodial killings of civilians