



Iraqis gather at the site of a suicide bombing in the oil rich city of Kirkuk, north of Baghdad yesterday. A suicide car bomber ploughed into a Kurdish party office in Kirkuk yesterday, triggering a blast that killed at least 80 people and wounding 180 others, the city's police chief said.

## Ethiopia slaps life sentences on 35 opposition figures

AFP, KALITI, Ethiopia

Ethiopia's high court yesterday sentenced 35 opposition leaders to life imprisonment for inciting rebellion, after the prosecution had asked for the death penalty. Those sentenced in the wake of violence that rocked the capital during 2005 elections included Hailu Shawl and Bernahu Nega, two senior leaders of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party. Five of the life sentences

handed down by the court sitting in Kaliti, some 25km from the capital Addis Ababa, were given in absentia. Eight of the 38 defendants present received prison terms ranging from 18 months to 18 years from judge Adil Ahmed. Prosecutors last week had requested the death penalty for 38 of the defendants, who were among scores put on trial on charges of inciting the violence following the disputed polls which the ruling party won but the opposition claims were rigged.

## Peres sworn in as Israeli president

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli elder statesman and Nobel peace laureate Shimon Peres was sworn in Sunday as president, pledging to keep up peace efforts in his new post that crowns an unparalleled career lasting more than half a century. Peres took the oath of office in parliament less than three weeks shy of his 84th birthday, replacing disgraced Moshe Katsav in the largely ceremonial post for a seven-year term as Israel's ninth president. His landslide election by the Knesset as head of state was the first vote for a top office that he has won despite having held just about every senior position in the Jewish state.

## Bush admn battles to keep Iraq strategy on track

AFP, Washington

The White House Sunday dismissed calls by two respected Republicans to refashion its unpopular Iraq strategy, but the drumbeat of demands for an early withdrawal of US troops grew louder. In a blizzard of appearances on political talk shows, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley said the administration took the intervention of Senators John Warner and Richard Lugar seriously. But the Republican elders should wait for a mid-September

report by General David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq, before revisiting their proposal for planning to start on a phased withdrawal of US forces. "And the opening shot really ought to be to hear from the commanders on the ground who can make an assessment of where we are in our strategy," he said on ABC television. But Warner, an armed services expert, signalled that patience in Congress with President George W Bush's strategy was wearing thin. Asked if the current Iraq mission

would pass if it were put up for a vote today, Warner said: "I doubt very much that it would." Warner and Lugar, one of the top Republican voices on foreign policy, Friday introduced a bid to force Bush to change course and curtail his "surge" of nearly 30,000 extra troops into Iraq. They proposed that Congress should reauthorise a sharply narrowed US mission in Iraq, to pull troops out of the sectarian cross-fire and retool them to battle extremists, train Iraqi soldiers and secure Iraq's borders.



A picture released by the Israeli Government Press Office yesterday shows Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (R) meeting Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas at Olmert's Jerusalem residence.

## 'Pak al-Qaeda zone poses dilemma for Musharraf'

AFP, Islamabad

With Pakistan at boiling point, President Pervez Musharraf faces a tough dilemma in the rugged and militant-infested frontier zone where al-Qaeda's leaders are allegedly holed up, analysts say. The United States has put the embattled military ruler under pressure to use the momentum from last week's bloody assault on the pro-Taliban Red Mosque in Islamabad to launch a decisive operation along the frontier. Apparent suicide attacks in revenge for the raid killed at least 71 people at the weekend, and followed calls from Osama bin Laden's terror network and its pro-Taliban allies for "jihad" against the Pakistani leader. Meanwhile, Taliban militants in the lawless tribal zone of North

Waziristan tore up a shaky peace deal signed with the government last September, increasing the sense of insecurity. But analysts say Musharraf will also know that the region's conservative and fiercely independent tribes have bloodied the noses of all who have tried to subdue them since the subcontinent's British colonial rulers. "Musharraf is in a very difficult position with very limited choices," Rasool Bakhsh Raees, professor of political science at the Lahore University of Management and Sciences, told AFP. Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, has been "considerably weakened" by a political crisis over his suspension of Pakistan's chief justice, which sparked nationwide protests and violence, Raees said. Even with what appears to be

broad public support for the Red Mosque raid, Musharraf should not go too far, he added. "The use of force has to be very prudent, you cannot crack everybody's head and (then) hope to relax. That is equally dangerous," Raees said. NEWS ANALYSIS Force has rarely been a successful policy in the tribal areas, which cover about a third of the porous 2,500-kilometre (1,500-mile) border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The region provided thousands of the "Jihadis" who battled the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s -- and welcomed back Taliban and al-Qaeda militants who fled the US-led invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11.

## US to pour \$750m into Pakistan's tribal areas

AFP, Washington

The administration of President George W. Bush plans to pour 750 million dollars worth of aid into Pakistan's tribal areas in a bid to wrest it away from al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, The New York Times reported on its website late Sunday. But citing unnamed officials involved in the planning, the newspaper said some people were warning of the dangers of distributing so much money in an area where oversight is impossible. Who will be given the aid has quickly become one of the most contentious questions between local officials and American planners concerned that millions might fall into the wrong hands, the report said.

## Pakistan in talks to save peace deal with militants

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan held crisis talks with tribal elders yesterday to save a peace deal with pro-Taliban militants, amid fears of fresh violence after three weekend suicide attacks left more than 70 dead. Thousands of people fled the tense tribal region of North Waziristan, a day after rebels there tore up the controversial peace accord they had struck last year with the government of President Pervez Musharraf. Security forces remained on high alert in the wake of the bombings, which targeted two troop convoys and a police centre near the Afghan border in apparent retaliation for last week's assault on the Red Mosque in Islamabad.

al-Qaeda and local Islamic hardliners have called for holy war against Musharraf following the two-day raid on the pro-Taliban mosque, in which at least 11 troops and 75 people, mostly militants, were killed. A government representative met elders in Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, "to find out the status of the pact after the reported statement by Taliban commanders that they are scrapping it," a government official told AFP. "We are trying to engage them in a bid to keep the accord intact," the governor of North West Frontier Province and the architect of the deal, Ali Mohammad Jan Aurakzai, was quoted as telling The News daily.

The talks also dealt with complaints by tribesmen that troops have taken up positions at checkpoints, which were abandoned under the deal, and about unpaid compensation for previous military operations, local sources said. Under the September deal -- heavily criticised by Washington and Kabul -- the militants had vowed to stop cross-border attacks in war-torn Afghanistan and hunt down foreign insurgents hiding in the lawless mountain areas. Hundreds of al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents took shelter in the region after US-led forces overthrew the hardline Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. But the Taliban Shura (Taliban

Council) scrapped the deal Sunday, protesting the troop build-up and new checkpoints and calling on local tribal militias to stop all cooperation with the central government in Islamabad. Bazaars were deserted as hundreds of families fled Miranshah for safer areas, and state-run Radio Pakistan went off the air when broadcasters joined other government officials in leaving the area, local residents said. Troops also stepped up security around the town's fort. Meanwhile the chief minister of North West Frontier Province, Akram Durrani, on Monday summoned a meeting of key clerics, tribal elders and lawmakers to discuss the security situation, his spokesman told AFP.

## Lanka seeks foreign aid for captured province

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government said yesterday it would seek foreign aid to rebuild a key province recently wrested from the Tamil Tiger rebels after months of fighting. Donors would be asked to fund an ambitious reconstruction bid in the newly seized Eastern province, an area of some 9,635 square kilometres, said Public Administration Minister Karu Jayasuriya. "We appeal to donors and I have reason to believe that help will be forthcoming," Jayasuriya told reporters in the tropical island's capital, Colombo. Troops said last week they had control of the Eastern province after

winning a battle for Thoppigala jungle and driving away rebels, who are fighting for an independent homeland for minority Tamils. "We are hoping to have an accelerated programme of development that will be completed in six months," Jayasuriya said, without specifying how much money the government would seek or its source. Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, which dates back 35 years, had led to the neglect of roads, communications and electricity supply in the province, he said. The government also said it planned nationwide ceremonies for Thursday to mark the province's capture, including a military parade of 700 personnel.

## Pyongyang confirms closure of N-reactor

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

North Korea confirmed Sunday that it had shut down its Yongbyon atomic reactor under UN supervision, the first step in a process designed to rid the communist state of nuclear weapons. The closure of the facility, which produces plutonium for nuclear weapons, is the first step taken by Pyongyang toward ending its atomic programme since 2002 and the first phase of a six-nation disarmament deal reached in February. "We shut down the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and allowed the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) personnel to monitor it on the

14th, when the first shipment out of 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil arrived," a foreign ministry spokesman told the official Korean Central News Agency. "We have fulfilled our promises in advance ... which show our commitment to the implementation of the agreement," the spokesman told KCNA. The US State Department said earlier Sunday it had been informed of the shutdown. "We welcome this development and look forward to the verification and monitoring of this shutdown by the International Atomic Energy Agency team that has arrived in North Korea," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

## Britain believes 30 Islamist militant cells plotting attacks

AFP, London

Britain's security services believe up to 30 Islamist militant cells are plotting attacks and they are monitoring 2,000 suspects and another 2,000 sympathisers, the new security minister said yesterday. Alan West told BBC radio that the scale of the security operation was "quite dramatic" as he backed extending the 28-day limit on the time suspects can be held without charge. He issued the warning following three botched car bombings in London and Glasgow at the end of last month -- attempts that came just days after Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as prime minister. "I have come back to this after

about 16 months away from it and I have to say I was quite concerned when I saw what the level of threat is," said Lord West, the former chief of defence intelligence and now the security and counter-terrorism minister. "If one looks at what our security service and police are looking at on a day-to-day basis, they are now monitoring over 200 groupings or networks which to varying degrees are threatening our security," he told the BBC. "There are 30 that are actually being looked at very closely indeed because they have got to the stage where they are gathering materials and doing things which could lead in fairly short term to doing something if they wanted to.



People walk past damaged houses in Kashiwazaki yesterday. A powerful 6.8-magnitude earthquake rocked Japan, killing seven people and injuring hundreds as it toppled houses and sparked a fire at one of the world's biggest nuclear plants.

## Abbas holds talks with Olmert Israel to free prisoners this week

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel plans to release 250 Palestinian prisoners by the end of the week, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas as the two leaders met in Jerusalem on Monday. The pair held discussions for an hour in the presence of aides and then for nearly an hour one-on-one, in their second meeting since fighters loyal to Abbas were overrun in Gaza by Islamist Hamas a month ago. The prisoners, the vast majority of them from Abbas's Fatah party, are slated to be released on Friday

following Israel's pledge to free them as a goodwill gesture to Abbas, a senior Israeli official quoted Olmert as saying. "The ministerial committee will convene tomorrow to go over the list of 250 prisoners which has been drawn up by the Israeli security services, and once it is approved, the prisoners will be released on Friday unless there are legal steps taken against the release," the official said. But while welcoming the release, the Palestinians said the freeing of 250 prisoners out of the more than 11,000 currently held in Israeli jails was not enough.

"The president demanded that political leaders be included among them," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told reporters in Ramallah after the encounter, the sixth official meeting since Olmert took office in May 2006. The prisoners include 11 minors, with the rest adults who have at least a year left to serve in their sentence, and all will have to sign a "commitment not to be involved in terror," the official said. The prisoner release was one of a series of moves undertaken by Israel to boost Abbas since the Gaza takeover by Hamas, a group pledged to the destruction of the Jewish state.