

Iraq's main Sunni bloc resigns in blow to govt

AFP, Baghdad

All six ministers from Iraq's largest Sunni bloc tendered their resignation from Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's coalition government yesterday following a month-long spat.

The decision by the National Concord Front effectively ends any claim by the Shiite-dominated coalition to be a government of national unity, and strikes another blow at Iraq's already faltering programme of national reconciliation.

"The Front announces its withdrawal from the government of Nuri al-Maliki and the deputy prime minister and the ministers will submit their resignation today," said Rafie al-Issawi, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs.

Issawi made the announcement at a press conference held inside Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone as Iraq's Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi and other senior members of the bloc stood behind him.

Hashemi will remain vice president and the bloc's 44 parliamentarians will return to the National Assembly in September after its summer recess, where they will swell the already growing ranks of the opposition.

Maliki still has the support of his own Dawa Party and the Kurdish bloc, but his hopes of maintaining a parliamentary majority will rest on independent Shiite deputies and the powerful Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC).

When parliament returns all eyes will be on the Shiite SIIC to see if the party will

continue to prop up Maliki's faltering government or attempt to win the premiership for one its own champions.

"The Front will remain active in the political process hoping that it will be reformed and that sectarian and ethnic divides will disappear," Issawi said.

But he warned that "if the other political parties are not serious, we will rethink the feasibility of our participation in the whole political process."

Sami al-Askari, an MP from the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance and an advisor to Maliki, said he regretted the Front's decision.

"This is not positive development. Our brothers in the Concord Front should have postponed this decision, especially because some of their demands have nothing to do with the government," he

complained.

The announcement caps a month-long struggle between the Sunni bloc and Maliki's Shiite-led government, one that became particularly bitter last week when the Front threatened withdrawal if its demands were not met.

The Front has accused the government of failing to rein in Shiite militias and of the arbitrary arrest and detention of Sunni citizens, but on Wednesday leaders seemed to leave the door open for future discussions.

"Our central and historic goal is reform. We will reconsider the withdrawal tomorrow if they review our demands," Hashemi said.

Indian doctor may face new terror charges in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Terror charges could still be laid against an Indian doctor even though the original case against him collapsed through lack of evidence, Australia's police chief said yesterday.

The investigation into Mohamed Haneef, who was detained for three weeks in connection with the failed British car bombings and then released, was far from over, said Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty.

Defending the police handling of the case, he denied that the investigation had been bungled.

"At the moment it is quite annoying that people are saying this is a bungled investigation," Keelty told reporters. "It is not bungled at all. It is continuing.

"It's still potentially possible that a brief of evidence will be submitted against Dr Haneef."

Haneef's lawyer, Peter Russo, who travelled to India with the doctor after he was freed at the weekend, was outraged by the Keelty's remarks.

"For crying out loud, it was his information that the director (of public prosecutions) relied on to proceed with the matter," Russo told Nine Network television.

The 27-year-old Haneef, who had been working at a state hospital in Australia, was charged with providing "reckless" support to a terror group in connection with June's failed car bombings in London and Glasgow.

The case against Haneef centred on a mobile phone SIM card found in the possession of a second cousin of his who has been implicated in the attacks.

Haneef said he had merely given the card away before moving to Australia to take up a hospital job.

The case became a political issue after Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews revoked Haneef's visa even though he was granted bail by a court and refused to restore it after the charges were finally dropped.

Critics accused the government of trampling on Haneef's rights in an attempt to appear tough on terrorism.



PHOTO: AFP

Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal (L), US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (R) and Defence Secretary Robert Gates (C) prior a joint press conference yesterday in the Red Sea port city in Jeddah. Saudi Arabia said yesterday it will send a mission to Iraq to explore the possibility of reopening its embassy there years after the 2003 US-led invasion.

FIRST CASUALTY OF ELECTION DEBACLE

Farm minister quits Abe's scandal-plagued cabinet

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's farm minister resigned yesterday, the first casualty in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's scandal-plagued cabinet after a major election defeat that has raised calls for a change in government.

Abe has defied opinion polls that say many voters want him to quit as well, arguing that Sunday's election blow showed anger over the scandals surrounding his administration but not his conservative agenda.

Farm minister Norihiko Akagi, 48, becomes one of the shortest-serving members of a Japanese cabinet in memory. He took office just two months ago after his predecessor killed himself amid a funding scandal.

But in his short time in office Akagi was embroiled in his own set of money troubles, raising further questions about Abe's choice of ministers.

"There were various reports about me during the upper house election campaign. It is an undisputed fact that

these were partly responsible for the defeat of the ruling coalition," Akagi said after resigning.

Akagi also attracted unwanted attention 10 days before the election when he showed up at a cabinet meeting with large bandages covering his face.

He said he had a skin irritation, but media ridiculed him, saying that -- like Abe's cabinet -- he looked beaten up.

"I was chastised by many people for not appropriately explaining my illness. This also affected the election results and I apologise," said Akagi, who showed reporters a stack of receipts in a bid to explain past controversies.

Akagi is the third cabinet minister to resign since Abe took office in September.

"The way he explained things was bad," Abe told reporters after receiving Akagi's resignation. "As the result, people's distrust grew, and I took it seriously."

But senior lawmakers within the

ruling party were openly critical of both Akagi and Abe, who had earlier said he was planning a cabinet reshuffle.

Upper-house legislator Yoichi Masuzoe said the resignation would have "nothing but a negative impact" on the administration.

"This makes people wonder why he's resigning before a planned cabinet reshuffle. They may speculate this is a strategy to put off the reshuffle and extend the life" of the current cabinet, he said.

"The prime minister's office has lost commonsense. I'm taken aback."

Toshimitsu Motegi, deputy secretary-general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, said "some people who contested the election feel he should have done this a bit earlier."

Party secretary general Hidenao Nakagawa also offered to resign after the election drubbing, although he is still in his position pending a replacement.

Sudan welcomes UN Darfur force decision

AFP, Khartoum

After months of stonewalling, Sudan yesterday welcomed a UN resolution approving a joint African Union-UN peacekeeping force for strife-torn Darfur, a belated international response to a four-year-long humanitarian disaster that has left 200,000 people dead.

Tuesday's resolution finally authorised the world's largest peace-keeping force -- 26,000 troops and police -- to take charge of what the United Nations has called the world's greatest humanitarian catastrophe.

In addition to the huge death toll, more than one third of Darfur's six million population have been displaced as a result of what the United States has branded a genocidal campaign by Khartoum against rebels.

The new force, which could begin deploying as early as October, will take over from the current under-equipped AU mission of 7,000 to patrol a vast and mostly arid area in western Sudan roughly the size of France.

Khartoum welcomed the resolution after finally agreeing to the hybrid force on July 12 on condition it be made up

essentially of African troops.

Sudan's ambassador to London Omer Siddig described the decision as "a step in the right direction," saying Khartoum had itself asked the United Nations to help the struggling African Union force.

"The African Union doesn't have resources and doesn't have trained people, so we requested assistance from the United Nations and from the international community to come for the help of the African Union on the ground," he told BBC Radio.

As to Khartoum's eventual cooperation on the ground, Sudan's ambassador to the United Nations, Abdalmahmood Abdalhaleem Mohamad, said his government would examine the text and respond in a few days.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon hailed the resolution as "historic and unprecedented" while the United States warned Khartoum of sanctions if it did not comply.

Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir has repeatedly accused Washington of leading efforts to recolonise Sudan, as a result of which Western troops numbers in the hybrid force are likely to be minimal.

Japan 'cautious' about any N-deal with India

AFP, Manila

Japan said yesterday it was very cautious about any nuclear cooperation with India and urged New Delhi to make a full accounting of its landmark atomic deal with the United States.

Japan said it could help India with its vast and growing energy needs but said the country, one of the world's top polluters and a nuclear-armed state, should take part in future efforts to fight climate change.

"As main emitters of greenhouse gases, we want India to join in a new framework" after the Kyoto Protocol expires at the end of 2012, Japanese foreign ministry spokesman Mitsuo Sakabasa said.

India has signed and ratified Kyoto, currently the main international agreement aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but is not one of the countries that has to make targeted emission cuts.

New Delhi has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

But even with cooperation on the environment, Japan -- the only country ever attacked by nuclear weapons -- was hesitant about any new nuclear

developments in India, even for peaceful purposes.

"Inevitably from the Japanese viewpoint, we should take a very careful position," Sakaba said in Manila on the sidelines of an Asian security summit.

"The nuclear issue is a very sensitive issue for Japan because of, needless to say, the Japanese experience at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So we are very much concerned with any new nuclear power."

He said Japan wanted details about India's new nuclear cooperation deal with the United States, and that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe would raise the issue when he visited India later this month.

The accord with the United States allows US exports of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India for the first time in 30 years -- a move intended to reverse sanctions imposed on the Asian giant for its nuclear tests.

The deal is the centrepiece of India's new relationship with Washington after decades of Cold War tensions and is part of New Delhi's efforts to expand energy sources to sustain its booming economy.

Castro still has say on govt decisions

AFP, Havana

Ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro said yesterday he was still consulted on "every important" government move but did not reveal when he might return to the helm a year after handing over to his brother.

In a statement published a year after he officially ceded power to his brother Raul, the defense minister, Fidel Castro portrayed himself as still very much involved in the affairs of state.

"Raul himself has been entrusted with making sure that every important decision, during the period that I have been recovering, was decided after consulting with me," he said in a statement appearing in the newspapers Granma and Juventud Rebelde.

"What am I going to do? I will fight ceaselessly as I have done all my life," he said.

Castro handed over to his brother four days after undergoing a gastrointestinal operation last year, and he has only appeared in photographs and videos since.

Murdoch wins control of Dow Jones, Wall Street Journal

AFP, New York

Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch has won control of Dow Jones Co. and The Wall Street Journal newspaper in a five billion dollar takeover, the US company confirmed yesterday.

The coup for Murdoch's News Corp. after three months of intense negotiations is expected to lead to a dramatic shakeup of the US media landscape.

The acquisition comes after tough talks between News Corp., Dow Jones and the divided Bancroft family who have controlled Dow Jones and its flagship business daily for over a century.

The deal was approved by both boards of directors and members of the Bancroft family and trustees representing 37 percent of the company's shareholder vote, the companies said in a statement posted on the Dow Jones website.

In a concession by Murdoch, a five-member committee will be charged with "assuring the continued journalistic and editorial integrity and independence of Dow Jones' publications and services," the companies said.

Some Bancroft family members, echoing the worries of journalists at the paper, had voiced concerns the takeover would undermine the newspaper's editorial independence.

The final decision in which some family members backed the deal came only "after much soul-searching, hard work and analysis," the Bancrofts said in a statement.

"It is our most fervent hope that in the years to come, The Wall Street Journal will continue to enjoy, and deserve, the universal admiration and respect in which it is held all over the world," the family said.

And it added that it hoped the Journal and Dow Jones would remain committed "to the long tradition of journalistic excellence, independence and editorial integrity of which we are all so proud."

Murdoch expressed gratitude to the Bancroft family members who supported his offer and recognized "how difficult this decision was for some family members."

He added: "I want to offer the Bancrofts my thanks, and an assurance that our company and my family will be

equally strong custodians."

Murdoch, 76, has built a vast media empire over the decades and is planning to expand his interests further on October 15 with the launch of a News Corp. business news cable television channel, Fox Business Network, in the United States.

The Journal said Murdoch had stated Monday that he may add four pages of extra news coverage to the Journal.

News Corp. will still need to get US regulatory approval for the deal, but Murdoch has said he does not anticipate any problem. The Journal said the deal could be closed by the end of the year.

Murdoch's triumph came after several months of tough negotiations. The Bancroft family initially had rejected News Corp.'s offer and several Journal journalists had strongly opposed the deal.

Some Bancroft family members were fearful that Murdoch would destroy the Journal's editorial independence, but he conceded to establishing the editorial oversight board in a bid to appease such opposition.

69 trapped coal miners rescued in China after 3-day ordeal

AFP, Beijing

Sixty-nine men trapped in a flooded Chinese coal mine for more than three days were pulled out alive yesterday, authorities said, ending a terrifying ordeal in which they survived on milk and pumped-in oxygen.

Dramatic footage broadcast on state-run television showed the filthy miners stumbling as they emerged from the mine in central China's Henan province wearing blindfolds to give their eyes time to adjust to daylight again.

A crowd waiting at the entrance of the Zhijian mine cheered while eager officials rushed to shake the hands of the dazed men, some of whom were so weakened by their experience that they had to be carried away on stretchers.

"Through our hard efforts over the last 70-odd hours we have saved 69 lives and I'm really very moved," said the head of the nation's work safety bureau, Li Yizhong, who had travelled to the mine to oversee rescue efforts.