

## Iraqi leaders meet to end political crisis

### 12 killed in Baghdad mortar attack

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's political leaders held a second day of talks yesterday aimed at patching up the fractured unity government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who is under pressure from Washington to find an end to the political paralysis.

The meeting comes after Iraq's top Shia and Kurdish leaders formed a new political alliance on Thursday, but without rival Sunni leaders.

Talks involving Maliki, Kurdish President Jalal Talabani, Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, Shia Vice President Adel Abdel Mahdi, and Masud Barzani, president of the northern Kurdish region, began on Saturday and were continuing on Sunday, an official from Talabani's

office said.

"Yesterday the three-member presidency, the prime minister and Mr. Masud Barzani held a meeting to look into ways of solving outstanding issues and to decide on the summit," he said, referring to a political summit proposed by Maliki at a date still to be specified.

"Today there are more meetings between the leaders. The summit will be held a couple of days later," the official said, describing the weekend talks as "preparatory."

Maliki's government has been debilitated by a decision on August 1 of the main Sunni political bloc -- the National Concord Front -- to withdraw its ministers from the cabinet over a power sharing dispute with Maliki's Shia supporters.

The walkout means nearly half

Maliki's cabinet has quit or is boycotting meetings, leading to delays in the passage of crucial legislative laws aimed at rebuilding the country.

Maliki is under growing pressure from Washington to end the infighting, concerned that it could torpedo efforts to reconcile the warring factions and undermine the work of 155,000 American troops to end the conflict.

On Thursday, Talabani and Maliki announced the formation of an alliance grouping the Shia Dawia party and Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council and the Kurdish factions of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdish Democratic Party (PDK).

But the National Concord Front, the main Sunni Arab political bloc in

the country's 275-member parliament, slammed the new tie-up as a "futile exercise."

Meanwhile, at least 12 people were killed and 31 wounded in an intensive mortar bombardment of an eastern Baghdad suburb on Sunday, security and medical officials said.

An interior ministry official said the attack came during heavy clashes in the mainly Shia suburb of Obaidi between the US military and militiamen.

"Many mortars were fired. The area has been sealed off," the official said.

A security official said at least five mortar shells landed in the suburb and that all those killed were civilians.

## Scuffles with police as hopes fade for Chinese miners

AFP, Xintai

Scuffles broke out between relatives and security forces at a coalmine in eastern China Sunday as hopes faded for the rescue of 172 miners trapped underground by flash floods.

Floodwaters engulfed the mine in the city of Xintai in Shandong Province on Friday in the latest tragedy to strike China's mining industry, which has one of the poorest safety records in the world.

A crowd of 200 people, angry at the lack of information, toppled an iron fence at the south gate of the mine early Sunday as rumours swirled that the rescue had been called off.

Several relatives broke into the compound of the Zhangzhuang mine where clashes ensued with security personnel.

"I heard they stopped pumping out water from the mine. It is the same as saying they have given up," Zhou Feng, 25, whose father is in the mine, told AFP.



A group of looters walk amidst the rubble in Pisco, 240 km south of Lima, after the strong earthquake, which ravaged the coastal areas of Peru on August 15. The strong quake left parts of the country's coastal towns without electricity, water or communications and killed at least 500 people.

PHOTO: AFP

## Peru quake survivors grow desperate

AP, Pisco

The government sent the army Saturday to stop looting fuelled by rising desperation in earthquake-shattered Peru, where tens of thousands were without fresh water and shivering families huddled in makeshift shelters at the centre of the devastation.

In a soccer stadium in the port city of Pisco, more than 500 people rushed a lone truck that ran out little packets of crackers, candy and toilet paper, screaming that they had not eaten and accusing rescue workers of keeping supplies for themselves.

As many as 80 percent of the people in quake-hit urban areas

may not have access to clean water and many rural communities still have not been reached to assess the damage, said Dominic Nutt, part of an emergency assessment team in Peru for the aid agency Save the Children.

"The situation is probably worse than first imagined," Nutt said.

President Alan Garcia sent 1,000 troops to stop the looting. "We're going to establish order, regardless of what it costs," he said.

Meanwhile, Defence Minister Allan Wagner told The Associated Press in Pisco that the death toll from Wednesday's magnitude-8 quake had risen to 540, up from the previous figure of 510 provided by firefighters.

Destruction from the quake, which also injured at least 1,500 people, was centred in the cities of Ica and Pisco in Peru's southern desert, about 125 miles southeast of the capital, Lima.

Aftershocks continued in the area Saturday as a 5.8-magnitude tremor struck off the coast between Ica.

Garcia said at least 80,000 people were affected in some way, mostly through the destruction or damage of homes.

At one end of a soccer field in Pisco, families who had lost everything huddled in a half dozen makeshift shelters made of cardboard and blankets held up by wooden poles.



A relative holds a wounded Iraqi child as he arrives at a Baghdad hospital following an intensive mortar bombardment on an eastern suburb of the capital yesterday. At least 12 people were killed and 31 wounded security and medical officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

## UN official optimistic about Nepali peace

AFP, Kathmandu

A senior United Nations official said yesterday he was optimistic that a peace deal between Nepal's former rebel Maoists and the government will hold ahead of polls planned in November.

"We feel very strongly that the process in Nepal is a very positive one and in talking with various groups I am even more optimistic than I was when I came," B Lynn Pascoe, UN Under Secretary General for Political Affairs, told reporters at the end of a 24-hour visit.

Nepal's former rebel Maoists ended a decade-long guerrilla war late last year by signing a peace deal with the government. Since then, they have been given seats in parliament as well as ministerial portfolios.

During his visit, Pascoe met

elderly Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala as well as Maoist leader Prachanda, a nom de guerre that means "the fierce one."

As part of last November's peace deal the UN has been invited to monitor camps containing former Maoist soldiers and assist in elections planned for November 20.

The polls will elect representatives who will rewrite Nepal's constitution and decide the political future of the country.

"It is critically important to the people of Nepal... that the election be open and fair and totally transparent, and the United Nations wants to do everything we can to help," Pascoe said.

The rebels launched their "people's war" in 1996 with the aim of toppling the monarchy and setting up a one-party communist state in a conflict that killed more than 13,000 people.

## US 'sinking in whirlpool', says Iran leader

AFP, Tehran

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday launched a new attack on the United States, saying Iran's arch enemy was "stuck in a whirlpool" and would sink deeper in the future.

"America is weaker compared to 20 years ago and it does not have its previous power and grandeur," Khamenei said in a speech at a religious conference, state television reported.

"America and its followers are stuck in a whirlpool and they sink deeper as time passes. A dangerous future is predicted for them," he added.

The United States cut diplomatic ties with Iran in 1980 during the siege of its embassy in Tehran by Islamist students in the wake of the Islamic revolution, which deposed the US-backed shah.

Relations have remained frozen

ever since and are marked by continued enmity, with the United States labelled as the "Great Satan" by Tehran.

"In the eternal battle between right and wrong, the Great Satan will lose out," added Khamenei.

Strains have increased in recent months over Iran's controversial nuclear programme and the detention by Tehran of three US-Iranians accused of harming national security.

Although US and Iranian officials have this year met three times in landmark talks in Baghdad aimed at bringing security to Iraq they have failed to make any significant breakthrough.

Khamenei's comments also came just days after it emerged US President George W. Bush was set to issue an executive order blacklisting Iran's Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist group in order to block its assets.

## Top clan elder killed as Somalia strife deepens

AFP, Mogadishu

A top clan elder from embattled Somali Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi's clan was gunned down in Mogadishu overnight Saturday, dealing a blow to a laborious month-old peace initiative.

The killing -- one of the most high-profile assassinations in years in the capital -- came a day after clashes between sub-clans fighting for access to resources in central Somalia left at least 20 dead.

"May Allah bless him, Moalim Harun Moalim Yusuf was one of the prominent Somali clan chiefs and he was killed by two men armed with pistols as he returned from evening

prayers," a spokesman from Gedi's office said.

"He died instantly," Abdullahi Mohieddin Odkha told AFP.

It was not clear who was behind the assassination and whether or not it was linked to the rising insurgent violence since August 10.

Moalim Harun, 63, was one of the senior participants at the launch last month of an ongoing government-sponsored clan reconciliation conference in Mogadishu.

While the process has been supported by the international community, it has been boycotted by the government's main Islamist foes and a large part of the capital's dominant Hawiye clan.

## Great powers cast bids for strategic C Asia

AFP, Bishkek

In the titanic contest for power over Central Asia between China, Russia and the United States, Akmamat Kasimov's market stall must be the smallest battlefield.

At the heart of the teeming Kaya market in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, he hawks military uniforms from all three protagonists of a 19th century-style Great Game for control of the strategic region.

Just 400 som, or 10.5 dollars, buys a set of Chinese camouflage trousers and smock. An authentic Russian army outfit costs double. Top of the range, the US version carries a price tag of 34 dollars.

"The Chinese one sells best. It's cheap," Kasimov, 38, says.

Today those same three powers are engaged in an infinitely larger power struggle right across Central Asia.

This often sparsely inhabited region of deserts, mountains and steppe boasts huge gas and oil reserves. It also links Europe, Russia, China, and the unstable Muslim world to the south, including Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan.

As demonstrated in joint military exercises and a summit last week of the six-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), China and Russia are working

together to stem US advances into the region.

But for all its vast open spaces, Central Asia may not be big enough for more than one great power and in a three-way struggle, analysts say, China could have the edge.

Unlike Russia and the United States, China has no military presence in the region, instead relying on the lure of the yuan.

"China is quietly expanding through economic means," Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the journal Russia in Global Affairs, said. "They make no drama, but are persistent."

Look around any market in Kyrgyzstan, an impoverished country of just 5.3 million just across the Tien Shan mountains from China, and stands are awash with Chinese goods.

Trade turnover reached 2.8 billion dollars last year -- nearly all of it Chinese imports -- and, according to Chinese President Hu Jintao, leapt another 73.5 percent in the first half of this year.

In the Kaya market, everything from sewing needles to fishing line and paint rollers is labelled in Chinese. At Kasimov's booth, one shopper claimed even the US uniforms with their Nato labels were Chinese counterfeits.

"Well it says American, but it could be Chinese. Who the hell

knows?" Kasimov responded. "We say it's American."

While the Chinese fund and build infrastructure projects through Central Asia, then funnel their goods to new markets, the US is currently focused on maintaining military reach and lobbying for access to energy riches.

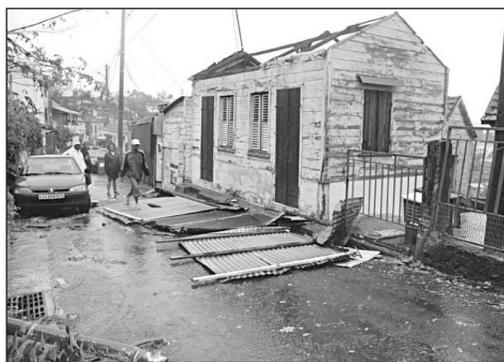
Crucial to the military presence is an airbase in Kyrgyzstan for planes supporting the war against the Taliban in nearby Afghanistan.

Neither Beijing nor Moscow wants the Taliban back and, while unhappy about the US base, they are toning down calls for Kyrgyzstan to follow Uzbekistan's 2005 closure of a similar US air force facility.

"The US will strengthen itself in Kyrgyzstan. This is a forward post of a global strategy," Kyrgyz political analyst Marad Kazakbayev says.

According to Kazakbayev, Washington's strategy is to deal with governments in Central Asia on a bilateral basis, not in blocs, in order to exploit the region's often shifting alliances.

"They tell these small countries: 'Why should you do what China and Russia tell you to do? Be with us!'"



Local residents are walking over fallen steel roofs in Fort-de-France, in the French Caribbean island of Martinique after the hurricane Dean, the first of the 2007 Atlantic hurricane season, barreled toward the Caribbean, delivering rain and gale force winds on Haiti, Martinique Guadeloupe and Antigua.

PHOTO: AFP