



A group of men work to try to use a crane to remove a fallen giant iron commercial pole in Taipei yesterday, which crushed two cars on the ground after the pole was snapped by Typhoon Krosa. Typhoon Krosa left five people dead and one missing in Taiwan before weakening into a tropical storm, weathermen and rescuers said.

Key Shia leaders look to dominate with Iraq pact

AFP, Baghdad

A pact forged by Iraq's two most powerful Shia leaders demonstrates their determination to avoid conflict and take advantage of their dominant positions, observers said yesterday.

After jockeying for position since the 2003 US-led invasion, Moqtada al-Sadr and Abdel Aziz al-Hakim have decided to try to end the bloodshed between their movements that was threatening to undermine their pursuit of power.

"They realised the atmosphere of not having armed conflict would be to their political advantage," leading Kurdish politician Mahmud Othman told AFP.

Sadr's movement backed by a

militia known as the Mahdi Army -- rogue elements of which he is trying to rein in -- enjoys the broadest popular support of any grouping in Iraq.

Hakim leads the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), a pillar of the ruling coalition that along with its armed wing the Badr Brigade commands the second biggest following.

The two clerics are direct competitors for control of Iraq's majority Shia community, creating a culture that has led to clashes, assassinations and fears of wider conflict, in particular in the oil-rich south as the British withdraw.

A low-point came in late August when running street battles

erupted between their militias at a major Shia festival in the holy city of Karbala, killing at least 52 people and wounding up to 300.

After the carnage, Sadr ordered his militiamen to observe a six-month ceasefire, including a halt to attacks on US forces.

The deal was a result of clashes between both sides, assassinations, and the fighting in Karbala," said Othman.

"I think with the tensions between the two their positions became weaker. They took this step to repair that to a degree. It is to strengthen Shia unity."

Both Sadr and Hakim hail from families that have been active in Iraq's political and religious life for generations.

British PM on the back foot after ruling out early election

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown defended his decision not to call a general election this year in an interview broadcast yesterday, as reaction indicated his honeymoon had ended with voters.

Brown's announcement Saturday that he would not go to the polls as early as November 1 saw him accused of weakness and indecision as well as fear, after new opinion polls suggested his governing Labour Party's lead had evaporated.

But Brown, who had enjoyed a

buoyant ratings "bounce" after succeeding Tony Blair in June, said he was not running scared simply because one poll suggested the government would lose its parliamentary majority based on the results.

The prime minister also said a general election in either early or late 2008 was unlikely. In theory, he has until May 2010 for the latest to go to the polls.

He said he had considered holding an election this year, and claimed Labour would have won "today, next week or the weeks to come", but decided it was better to give voters time to see his long-term "vision" for the country.

US-sponsored talks have limits, says Israel

AP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told his Cabinet on Sunday that an upcoming US-sponsored Middle East peace conference would not replace direct negotiations with the Palestinians.

He also said his talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas have produced no agreements so far. Olmert and Abbas have met every few weeks in recent months in an effort to formulate a framework for full-fledged peace talks ahead of the international conference, expected to take place in Annapolis, Maryland, in late November.

Israeli and Palestinian teams charged with drafting the document

are to meet for the first time Monday, and next week, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is to return to the region to assess progress.

At the start of Sunday's regularly scheduled Cabinet meeting, Olmert told ministers that his talks with Abbas have been "mostly brainstorming and an attempt to understand the other's viewpoint."

"There have been no agreements or deals," he said.

While the international conference is designed to promote peacemaking, "it will in no way replace direct negotiations with the Palestinians," Olmert said.

The US has not yet set a date for the meeting or announced a list of participants. Palestinian negotiators have said they expect Rice to set a date after she visits the region.

Participation by leading Arab countries is considered key to the conference's success.

So far, regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries without diplomatic ties with Israel have been reluctant to commit, first seeking proof that the meeting will address the core issues: final borders, the status of disputed Jerusalem, Israeli settlements and a solution for Palestinian refugees who lost their homes in the 1948 war that accompanied Israel's creation.

Krosa storms into China's southeast

AP, Beijing

A powerful storm drenched China's southeast coast Sunday after killing five people on Taiwan and prompting the mainland to evacuate more than 1 million people, the government announced.

Krosa, which earlier was a typhoon, hit land at 3:30 p.m. in densely populated Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, the Zhejiang weather bureau reported on its Web site. There was no immediate word on injuries or damage.

At 6 p.m., Krosa, the Cambodian word for crane was a tropical storm. It had sustained winds of 65 mph, with gusts up to 89 mph at that time, according to the Zhejiang weather bureau's deputy director, who would give only his surname, Wang.

More than 1 million people were evacuated from low-lying coastal areas, including more than 500,000 tourists who were at beach resorts for the National Day holiday week, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

Baghdad bombings kill 9 Iraqis

AP, Baghdad

Bombings across Baghdad killed at least nine Iraqi civilians and wounded 12 in three separate attacks early Sunday, including one near Iran's embassy, police officials said.

The violence came a day after two of Iraq's most powerful Shia leaders agreed to end a bitter rivalry and months of armed clashes and assassinations in the oil-rich south that have threatened to spread into a wider conflict.

The incidents began around 7 a.m., when a roadside bomb targeting a police patrol exploded near a minibus carrying workers into central Baghdad.

Three people were killed and four wounded in the Shia-dominated neighbourhood of Baladiyat in the eastern part of the capital, according to a police official who requested anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

The inside of the mangled minibus was soaked in blood, the metal hulk was pummeled by shrapnel and the windows were shattered, according to Associated Press Television News footage.

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