

Three killed as Israel strikes Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

An Israeli air strike on Saturday killed three Islamic Jihad militants...

The deaths came a day before US Vice President Dick Cheney begins a regional tour.

Three more Islamic Jihad militants were wounded earlier the same day east of Gaza City...

An Israeli army spokeswoman confirmed the reports, adding that Gaza militants had fired four rockets at Israel...

Amid the tit-for-tat shooting, the armed wing of Hamas said it could strike Israeli helicopters with weapons which the Palestinian Authority abandoned...

The statement came after Israeli television said an army helicopter was hit by Palestinian fire on Friday during a Gaza overflight...

Mideast negotiators likely to meet this week

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators are set to meet this week, an Israeli official said yesterday...

They are supposed to resume talks this week, an Israeli official told AFP on condition of anonymity...

The two teams have not met since Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas cut off contacts with Israel...

During a subsequent visit to the region, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the two sides had agreed to resume negotiations...

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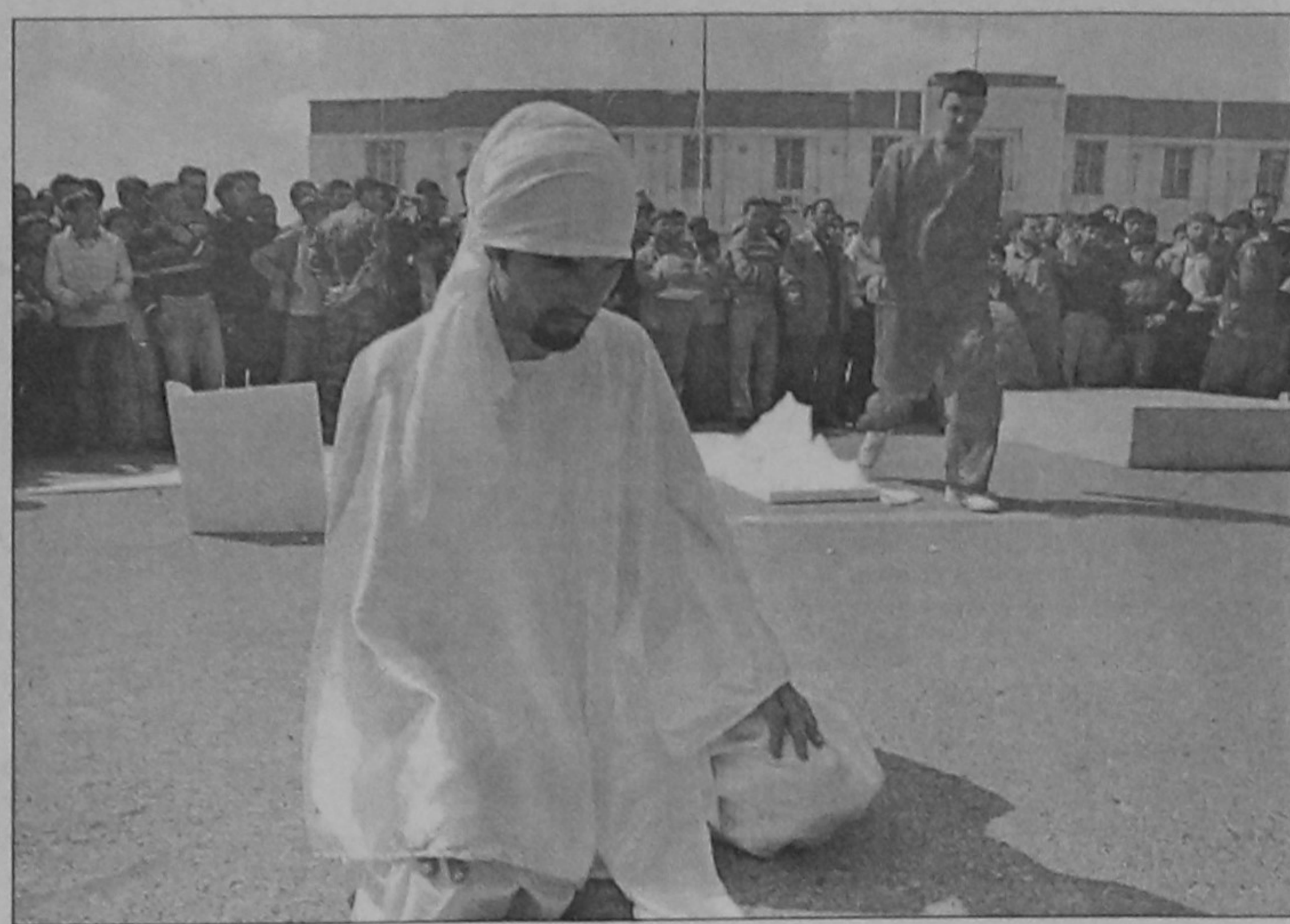


PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi Kurds perform a play in the northern city of Arbil yesterday in remembrance of the victims of Halabja...

Iran polls were not free, or fair: EU

AFP, Tehran, Brussels

Iran's conservatives were yesterday set to win two-thirds of the seats in parliament after dominating legislative elections...

As the votes continue to be counted, the European Union expressed concern yesterday at the conduct of general elections in Iran...

The EU "expresses its deep concern that election procedures in the Islamic Republic of Iran have fallen below the international standards...

In this regard it expresses its deep regret and disappointment that over a third of prospective candidates were prevented from standing in this year's parliamentary elections...

The Iranian people deserve a genuine democratic choice about the future of their country, the EU statements said.

In Iran, it remains to be seen how supportive the new parliament will be of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad...

must seek re-election next year against a background of popular discontent over Iran's high inflation.

Interior Minister Mostafa Pour Mohammadi said that based on seats decided so far from Friday's vote, conservatives were set to win 71 percent of the seats in parliament...

Initial indications from the race for Tehran -- which sends 30 MPs to parliament -- showed that conservative candidates took the first 14 seats without recourse to a second round.

But reformists hailed their performance as "remarkable" under circumstances that saw hundreds of their best candidates, including sitting MPs, disqualified by headline bodies for insufficient loyalty to the Islamic revolution.

Reformist coalition spokesman Abdollah Nasserai said reformists were set to win around 50 seats outside of Tehran and would also pick up seats in run-off votes next month in the capital.

"Despite all the restrictions... we managed to disturb the game of our opponents," he told reporters.

If confirmed, this would mean reformists have actually increased their numbers in the 290 seat parliament, where they currently have around 40 MPs.

British PM struggles to change Iraq policy

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown wants to turn a page on Iraq by pulling out troops controversially sent in by his predecessor Tony Blair...

Brown has increasingly put the focus on Afghanistan since succeeding Blair last year, reportedly warning that fighting the Taliban is now the frontline in the US-led "war on terror" triggered by the September 11, 2001 attacks.

In the run-up to Brown taking over from Blair in June last year, anti-war campaigners including those within the governing Labour Party were buoyed by his admission that "mistakes" were made in post-war planning in Iraq.

They were encouraged further when he appointed a number of Iraq war critics to his cabinet inner circle and detected a cooler, more businesslike approach to relations with the United States when he first met President George W. Bush.

But there is disappointment that despite a change at the top, a radical change of direction has not materialised yet.

Brown, who as Blair's finance minister was reportedly unhappy about supporting invasion, was given an early taste of the conflict a soldier from his own parliamentary constituency was killed in Iraq a day after he took over.

He has since faced similar pressures to his predecessor over mounting British casualties and fatalities, plus concern over supply of equipment, medical care for injured troops and the spiralling cost of operations.

But analysts say any attempt by Brown to change perceptions, including by cutting troop numbers from the current 4,100 to 2,500 in the coming months and switching the focus to Afghanistan, has had little effect on military strategy.

Rosemary Hollis, director of research at the Chatham House foreign affairs think-tank in London, believes Brown has his hands tied.

McCain brushes up own image as Democrats campaign on

AFP, Washington

US Republican presidential hopeful John McCain surfaced in Iraq yesterday as he moved to burnish his foreign policy credentials while Democrat Barack Obama gained more convention delegate votes.

The Illinois senator also earned 25 new delegates in Iowa county conventions Saturday while Hillary Clinton earned 14, according to the Obama campaign.

McCain plans to visit Europe and other countries in the Middle East this week to burnish his statesman credentials as Democrats fight it out back home.

While McCain begins his diplomatic trips, Democrat Barack Obama was under fire on two fronts, over controversial remarks his pastor made about the September 11 attacks and his ties to a businessman facing corruption charges.

All this as McCain, who touts his foreign affairs experience over Obama and Democratic rival Hillary Clinton, leads a congressional delegation from Tuesday to meet the leaders of Jordan, Israel, Britain and France, his office said.

But off the official schedule is this weekend trip to Iraq, where he will see firsthand the effects of the troop "surge" which he has fervently advocated even as US public support for the war slumped, the Washington Post reported.

The delegation will meet with US military officials and Iraq's leaders to assess the success of the surge strategy that deployed more soldiers to Iraq, the Post said.

Observers said the trip will give several heads of state a closer look at one of the three candidates battling for the White House.

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While McCain travels, Democrats are struggling to choose between Obama and Clinton, with party leaders concerned that their mud-slinging could detract from the party's goal of ousting the Republicans from the White House.

Obama repudiated remarks by his Chicago pastor as he sought to quell an uproar over Reverend Jeremiah Wright. The Illinois senator has also been dogged by his ties to Chicago businessman Tony Rezko, who is accused of using his political clout to carry out a kick-back scheme aimed at extorting millions from firms trying to do business with the state.

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Kosovo faces possible Serb secession

AFP, Pristina

A month after it declared independence, Kosovo has come under a threat of possible secession of its Serb minority amid fears of fresh violence that could compromise the international community's efforts to push the new state on a promising path.

Ethnic Albanians, who make up 90 percent of Kosovo's population of almost two million, proclaimed independence on February 17, fulfilling a long dream to separate from Serbia proper.

But Serbia, backed by its long-time ally Russia, has rejected the move, insisting that "Kosovo is and will always be Serbian." But the refusal could not harm a widespread joy throughout Kosovo.

While calm prevailed in Pristina and most of the landlocked territory bordering Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania, in the northern part, populated mostly by the Serb minority -- some 40,000 of 120,000 still living in Kosovo who also rejected the independence -- tensions have remained high.

In the ethnically-divided Mitrovica, the main town in the area, hundreds of young Serbs gathered for daily protests on the bridge over the Ibar river, a natural border between the northern Serb-populated part and the southern, Albanian district.

The Serbs here refuse to accept Kosovo institutions and have vowed to set up their own parliament soon.

So far, the newly proclaimed state of Kosovo has been recognized by 27 countries, among them the United States and major European powers.

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