

First Korean goes into space

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

The Russian Soyuz spacecraft carrying the first Korean astronaut lifted off from Kazakhstan's Baikonur Space Centre at 8:16pm Tuesday, Seoul time.

Yi So-yeon and cosmonauts Sergei Volkov and Oleg Kononenko are on board the Soyuz TMA-12 which had been attached to a launching vehicle.

The nation became the 36th country to send a person into space.

The spacecraft reached an altitude of about 240km above the Earth's surface less than 10 minutes after launch, and will approach the International Space Station within the next two days.

The Soyuz TMA-12 is scheduled to dock at the ISS at 10pm on Thursday (Seoul time) after circling the Earth 34 times to adjust its orbit.

Live footage broadcast from inside the capsule showed Yi smiling, waving and giving the thumbs-up sign.

Fighting in Baghdad as Iraq marks Saddam's fall

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq yesterday marked the fifth anniversary of the fall of Saddam Hussein's iron-fisted regime with the nation still in turmoil, the capital under curfew and a surge of deadly violence in the Shia bastion of Sadr City.

Iraqi officials said three mortar rounds slammed into Sadr City, the eastern Baghdad stronghold of anti-American Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, killing at least seven people and wounding 24 others.

One mortar round struck the rooftop of a house where a family was having breakfast, killing three members of a family, including two children.

Another mortar struck a nearby tent set up for a condolence service for a person killed earlier in the week, while a third fell on an empty plot.

Clashes in the sprawling Shia district in the early hours killed

another six people and wounded at least 15, a medical official said.

Sadr City has been wracked by fighting since Sunday between Sadr's Mahdi Army militia and US and Iraqi forces in which at least 55 people have died and scores have been wounded.

The US military says it is chasing "criminals" firing rockets into Baghdad and the heavily fortified Green Zone where the Iraqi government and US embassy are sited.

Sadr had last week called for a million-strong anti-American demonstration in Baghdad to mark the anniversary of Saddam's ouster by US invading forces but cancelled it on Tuesday "to save Iraqi blood."

Baghdad's streets were empty of cars and trucks after the authorities declared a 5:00 am to midnight (0200 GMT to 2100 GMT) vehicle curfew to prevent car bomb attacks by Sunni insurgents.

Saddam's hometown of Tikrit

was also under a day-long curfew, an AFP correspondent said.

It took US invading forces just three weeks to defeat Saddam's forces and topple his regime on April 9, 2003.

On that day, US Marines put a rope around the neck of a giant statue of Saddam in Baghdad's Firdos Square, pulling it down in an act that symbolised the fall of the dictator's brutal regime.

A jubilant Iraqi crowd "insulted" the fallen statue by smacking its face with their shoes.

But five years later the American military and Baghdad's new Shia-led regime are still battling to curb the bloodshed that has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced more than four million.

Fears of an upturn in the violence are running deep after hard-line Sadr, angered by attacks on his militiamen, threatened on Tuesday to end the truce his feared Mahdi Army militia has been observing

since August.

US commanders acknowledge that the ceasefire was one of the factors behind a sharp drop in violence across Iraq in the second half of last year.

Although US President George W. Bush insisted in March that toppling Saddam was the "right decision", his commanders are finding it difficult to bring stability to Iraq despite last year's "surge" strategy of deploying an extra 30,000 troops.

The top US general in Iraq, David Petraeus, urged in testimony to the US Congress on Tuesday that further troop withdrawals should be held off for at least 45 days after completing the pullout of the "surge" forces by July.

Petraeus said the surge had helped make "significant but uneven" progress in Iraq, while Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker warned that those achievements were "reversible."



A combo picture shows Baghdad municipal workers cleaning a statue of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in al-Fardous square (L) on March 30, 2003. The second picture shows Baghdad municipal worker cleaning the statue of liberty yesterday which replaced the statue of Saddam Hussein in al-Fardous square.



Residents of Manila's poor community buy packs of government rice while armed soldiers guard the rice distribution operation on Monday.

Buddhist monks push for ending Dalai Lama's exile

AP, Luqu

More than a dozen Buddhist monks staged an emotional protest Wednesday in front of visiting journalists at a monastery in western China to call for the return of exiled Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama, according to a reporter at the event.

The monks, whose numbers grew to about two dozen during the 10-minute incident, began shouting slogans in Tibetan in an outer courtyard as journalists entered a prayer hall at the Labrang monastery in western Gansu province bordering Tibet.

"We want human rights, we want the Dalai Lama back, we want to preserve our religion and culture," said one monk, who switched to Chinese when asked by a reporter from the American Broadcasting Corporation.

The incident followed a similar interruption during a closely scripted government media tour of Tibet's capital of Lhasa two weeks ago to view damage from anti-

government riots that erupted there last month.

Authorities have tightly restricted access to Tibet and Tibetan areas of western China where protests also broke out. The sometimes violent anti-government demonstrations were the largest and most sustained among Tibetans in almost two decades.

ABC reporter Chito Romana said the monks also displayed the snow lion pennant of independent Tibet, labelled a "reactionary flag" by China's communist regime.

Romana said Chinese Foreign Ministry handlers observed the protest but did not attempt to block the monks. The group walked away after senior monks appeared and calmed them down, he said.

Shortly afterward, a senior monk told reporters the protesters represented only a few of those at Labrang. He said they would not be punished by monastery authorities, but could face sanctions if authorities find that they broke the law, Romana said.

Move to unearth secrets of Britain's Stonehenge

AFP, London

Academics hope they are about to crack the puzzle of why Stonehenge, the circle of giant stones in southwest England which has inspired mystery and wonder for nearly 5,000 years, was first built.

One theory is that it was designed as a place where pilgrims went in search of healing for the sick -- a kind of prehistoric Lourdes, the Christian pilgrimage site in southern France.

Scientists are hoping that a new technology will help them to make a breakthrough during a major excavation at the UNESCO World Heritage Site, which looms over Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire.

"This excavation is the first opportunity to bring the power of modern scientific archaeology to bear on a problem that has taxed the minds of travellers and archaeologists since medieval times," said Timothy Darvill, head of Bournemouth University's archaeology department, one of the dig's leaders.

In around 2,600 BC, hundreds of men arranged 80 giant standing stones on Salisbury Plain, where there was already a 400-year-old stone circle.

Around two centuries later, even bigger stones were brought to the plain.

Today, only 40 percent of the originals remain. But around 850,000 visitors per year come to marvel at the 17 stones which are still intact.

The biggest stones came from a quarry some 30 kilometres (18 miles) away, while some of the others come from a range of hills

in southwest Wales, a 250 kilometre journey away.

-- Stonehenge remains 'a puzzle, a riddle' --

Nobody knows how they were transported -- although studies suggest that it could have taken up to 600 men to move them -- or how the massive stone lintels were put on top of the stones, which are up to seven metres (22 feet) tall.

The sheer magnitude of the feat has prompted scores of outlandish claims about how Stonehenge might have been built.

In the Middle Ages some believed that Merlin, a wizard in the legend of King Arthur, was behind Stonehenge. More recently, extra-terrestrial involvement has been suggested.

But the experts are more interested in finding out why, rather than how, the stones were put in place.

Some think it may be a prehistoric observatory, because it faces where the sun rises for the summer solstice; others moot a druidic sacrificial temple, but druids did not even exist when it was built.

"It's a puzzle, a riddle," Darvill admitted. His own theory is that "Stonehenge was a healing temple, a kind of prehistoric Lourdes," although he does not yet have direct evidence to back this up.

There are some details which support his theory: a string of bodies are buried around the circle, most of which were diseased.

Furthermore, in the centre of the circle were more than 80 bluestones from a Welsh quarry, of which a handful remain.



A file picture taken on October 17, 2006 shows Druids performing a pagan Samhain blessing ceremony at Stonehenge, in Avebury, Wiltshire, in southern England. Archaeologists have started excavating on Stonehenge on Monday March 31, 2008 hoping to explain the mystery of the alignment of the five thousand years old stones.

Obama calls for talks with Iran

AFP, Washington

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama on Tuesday called for a "diplomatic surge" including talks with US foe Iran, to help stabilise the situation in Iraq.

The Illinois senator battling Hillary Clinton for his party's nomination called for more pressure on the Iraqi government to embrace political reconciliation and a regional "diplomatic surge" that

includes Iran.

"We should be talking to them as well," Obama told David Petraeus, the top US general in Iraq, and Ryan Crocker, the US ambassador to Iraq.

"I do not believe we are going to be able to stabilise the situation without that," said Obama, adding that a plan for US troop withdrawals was needed to force Iraqi factions to work together.

"I think that increased pressure in a measured way... includes a timeta-

ble for withdrawal. Nobody is asking for a precipitous withdrawal."

Obama has taken fire from Clinton and Republican presumptive nominee John McCain for his offer to talk, if elected president, with the leaders of several US foes including Iran.

He used his question period during the crucial Senate hearing to restate his initial opposition to the war in Iraq, which Clinton voted to authorise.

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