

3 Taiwan ministers resign as scandal snowballs

AFP, Taipei

Three Taiwan ministers including the vice premier resigned Tuesday to shoulder responsibility for the island's worst diplomatic scandal involving the alleged embezzlement of 30 million US dollars.

Vice Premier Chiou I-jen was the first to go, followed an hour later by Foreign Minister James Huang. Later in the day the defence ministry announced in a statement Vice Defence Minister Ko Chen-heng had also resigned.

All three had their offices and homes in Taipei raided by prosecutors Tuesday prior to their resignations, and despite standing down each denied embezzling any of the money.

"I am resigning to smooth the judicial investigation of the case and hope it will return me my innocence," Chiou told a press conference.

Chiou has admitted introducing one of two businessmen accused of pocketing the money to Huang.

Separately Huang also tendered his resignation, which was also accepted by Premier Chang Chun-sung.

Diaries show Saddam feared getting AIDS in prison

AP, Cairo

Saddam Hussein feared catching AIDS or other diseases during his US-supervised captivity, a leading Arab newspaper said Monday in publishing excerpts of his prison writings.

The London-based Al-Hayat said the comments came in portions of Saddam's prison diaries that it obtained from US authorities. The US military confirmed some of the late Iraqi leader's writings had been released.

When Saddam found out his US military guards were also using his laundry line to dry clothes, he wrote that he demanded they stop, according to the excerpts.

"I explained to them that they are young and they could have young people's diseases," Saddam wrote. "My main concern was to not catch a venereal disease, an HIV disease, in this place." He said some soldiers ignored his request.

A US military spokesman in Iraq, Maj. Matthew Morgan, declined to describe the writings as a formal diary, but said the former Iraqi president produced thousands of pages of writing while in custody.

Israel braces for political shakeup if Olmert goes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel was bracing yesterday for a possible eruption in the political landscape if Prime Minister Ehud Olmert resigns or is suspended over the latest corruption probe into his affairs.

The atmosphere of uncertainty has been heightened by a whirl of rumours and speculation due largely to a media blackout imposed on details of the case against the 62-year-old premier.

The anti-fraud investigation is the fifth such probe of Olmert's dealings before he became prime minister in 2006, although one case against him has been dismissed. He has denied any wrongdoing.

Israeli media speculated that there has been a "significant development" in the new case and that Israel's justice department may lift the gag order, which several news

organisations have asked the courts to remove.

Olmert's former office manager, Shula Zaken, was questioned for a fourth time Tuesday, public radio said.

"We recognise the public's right to know, but we must also take into consideration the needs of the inquiry," said national police chief Dudy Cohen. "No-one, no matter what his position, is above the law."

Preparations are taking place on the political front in case charges are brought by Attorney General Menachem Mazuz, a move that would force Olmert to step aside while the case makes its way through the courts.

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, a member of Olmert's centrist Kadima party, is the most likely candidate to succeed him, military radio reported.

Olmert has denied any wrongdoing, and on Sunday said he

would cooperate fully with investigators, voicing confidence the inquiry would put an end to "vicious and destructive rumours".

Israel's mass-selling Yediot Aharonot newspaper reported on Friday that Olmert was suspected of having received large sums of money from an American businessman, apparently to help finance some of his election campaigns.

The Jerusalem district court which is looking into the charges against Olmert has revealed that an unidentified foreign national has been questioned as a witness, local media reported.

Olmert, who was questioned by investigators for more than hour on Friday, has insisted that he will continue his duties as premier.

But in a rare step he has cancelled all interviews with local media ahead of the Israel's 60th anniversary celebrations this week.

When a premier resigns it is up to the president, currently Shimon Peres, to pick a successor who can try to form a government. Failing that, early elections must be held.

Behind the scenes, the political manoeuvring has begun.

The ultra-Orthodox Shas party has said it would remain in a government led by Livni if she agrees not to disrupt the status quo between religious and secular factions.

Another high-profile politician, Defence Minister Ehud Barak, also a former Labour Party minister, cannot be considered to succeed Olmert as he is currently not a member of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament.

Barak and other centre-left moderates are not eager for new elections for fear of returning to power the head of the right-wing opposition and former Likud premier, Benjamin Netanyahu, a favourite in recent opinion polls.



Pakistani soldiers and policemen stand at the site of a suicide attack near a police checkpoint on the outskirts of Bannu in northwestern Pakistan yesterday. A suicide bomber in a rickshaw blew himself up near a police checkpoint killing a policeman and two civilians and wounding several others.

Thousands rally against Hu on landmark Japan visit

AFP, Tokyo

Thousands of people rallied in Tokyo on Tuesday as Chinese President Hu Jintao paid a rare visit, denouncing Beijing's crackdown in Tibet and demanding Japan exert pressure on him.

Police were deployed in force to protect Hu, who is paying his first foreign visit since major demonstrations against Chinese rule broke out in Tibet in March, casting a shadow over the Beijing Olympics.

Riot police formed a human chain to seal off central Tokyo's sprawling Hibiya Park, where at least 300 demonstrators chanted, "Arrest the murderer Hu!" and "Hu, get out!"

Police shoved back some 10 demonstrators who tried to push through a barricade and threw paper Tibetan flags at an official-looking car entering the park, where Hu and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda were to have dinner.

Adding to the chaos, throngs of young people were also in the park to listen to a loud hard-rock concert being held on a sunny public holiday.

Elsewhere in Tokyo, some 4,200

people, including Tibetans and members of China's Uighur minority, took to the streets, according to organisers.

They held signs that read, "Hu Jintao, respect the Olympic spirit" and "Don't kill our friends."

"I hope that the Japanese, who have a tradition of justice and share with us both physical similarities and Buddhist culture, would say to the Chinese: 'Don't do what's wrong.'" Tibetan refugee Kalden Obara told the rally.

China, under fire over its clampdown in Tibet, this week reopened talks with envoys of the Dalai Lama, the Himalayan region's exiled spiritual leader.

"But I don't want the Chinese government to pretend to hold talks only for the sake of the Beijing Olympics' success," Obara said to a storm of applause.

Hu's visit, long in the planning, is the first by a Chinese president to Japan in 10 years as Asia's two largest economies try to improve ties marred by wartime memories.

Opposition lawmaker Yukio Edano called on Fukuda, known for his conciliatory views towards China, to raise the Tibet issue forcefully with Hu.

DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY Polls open in Indiana

AFP, Indianapolis, Indiana

Polls opened in Indiana Tuesday, as voters in the midwestern state and North Carolina take their turn choosing between Democratic presidential rivals Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

The day's voting began in parts

of Indiana at 6:00 am (1000 GMT) and was to close in North Carolina at 8:30 pm (0030 GMT).

Opinion polls pointed to another messy draw on the biggest single day of voting left in the epic battle for the Democratic nomination, with Obama tipped to win in North Carolina and Clinton ahead

in Indiana.

Combined, the two states are electing 187 pledged delegates on Tuesday -- 115 in North Carolina and 72 in Indiana.

According to a tally by independent website RealClearPolitics, Obama has 1,491 pledged delegates from all the races so far to Clinton's 1,337.

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US to withdraw 3,500 troops amid spike in Iraq violence

AFP, Baghdad

A pullout of 3,500 US troops from Iraq was underway yesterday, the military said as Baghdad and Tehran kept up diplomatic moves to halt the escalating deadly street battles with Shia militias.

The American forces in Baghdad announced that the soldiers who came as part of a controversial "surge" in February 2007 would complete a return to their base at Fort Benning in Georgia over the next several weeks.

One third of the 3,500 troops have already left while the others

are on their way, US military spokesman Major Winfield Danielson told AFP.

The pullout is in line with US President George W. Bush's "surge" plan announced in September to complete the withdrawal of the 30,000 extra troops he deployed last year to curb an increase in sectarian violence in Iraq.

The latest announcement came as Iraq moved to mend fences with its former enemy Iran, even as Washington accused Tehran-linked groups of providing support for Shia militiamen fighting American forces in Baghdad.

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