

## No confidence vote set on Thai PM's future

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's MPs will vote on the future of embattled Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej this week in a no-confidence debate, a senior official said yesterday.

House Speaker Chai Chidchob set the debate to begin on Tuesday in a bid to defuse the political crisis engulfing the premier's four-month-old rule, with 25,000 protesters besieging government offices since Friday.

"The debate on two no-confidence motions will begin 1:30 pm on Tuesday onwards," Pitoon Pumphiran, secretary-general to the House of Representatives, told AFP.

"I don't know how long the debate will take but a vote of all members will be arranged as soon as the debate ends," he said.

The opposition Democrat Party lodged a motion of no confidence against Samak and seven cabinet

members last Wednesday, but the government had said it could not pursue the matter before the parliamentary session ends on June 28.

It accuses them of acting as a proxy for deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was banned from politics for five years in 2007 by a constitutional tribunal.

The motion also accuses Samak of mishandling soaring global oil prices and rising inflation, which have sparked threats of nationwide protests, and of ignoring the crisis in the insurgency-hit south.

If a simple majority of parliamentarians voted against the government, Samak would be forced to step down.

Samak led the PPP to victory in December elections, which ended more than a year of military rule following Thaksin's overthrow in September 2006.

After intense political haggling,

Samak formed a coalition government in early February with five other parties.

Between them they have 316 of the 480 seats in the lower house -- enough to survive the vote if the coalition sticks together.

The no-confidence motion comes as Samak resisted calls to quit on Saturday from the anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) who led protests at Government House.

Thousands of PAD protesters continue to surround Government House, and its leaders rejected the no-confidence debate as a solution to the crisis, saying it was "too late".

"The government is merely trying to discredit protesters. Debate is no longer the solution as parliamentary process has long failed to solve the problem," Suriyasai Katsaisa, PAD spokesman told reporters.

## Typhoon leaves 19 dead, 30,000 stranded in Philippines

AFP, Iloilo

Flash floods and landslides triggered by Typhoon Fengshen left at least 19 people dead in the Philippines, while an overflowing dam stranded tens of thousands on rooftops, officials said Saturday.

At least 30,000 people living in Iloilo in the central Philippines had scrambled onto rooftops fleeing the rushing water after the man-made dam overflowed, said the city's acting mayor Jed Mabilog.

Rescuers have reported that many could be missing or killed, though this could not be independently confirmed, he said.

"I have received a lot of text messages appealing for helicopters, there are many people trapped on the rooftops," Iloilo congressman Serg Biron told DZBB

radio. "This is the worst flooding that has hit Iloilo in history."

Fengshen, upgraded from a tropical storm on Friday, swept through the country's centre over the weekend, unleashing torrential rains, causing power outages and forcing the evacuations of hundreds of thousands of people.

Officials said earlier that flash floods and landslides triggered by the typhoon had left at least 19 people dead.

In the urban centres of Jaro and Iloilo, residents waded through waist-high waters that made roads impassable to vehicles.

The National Power Corporation was forced to shut down its power plant in the area, triggering a blackout across the province, plant manager Nelson Hemona said.



PHOTO: AFP  
Palestinians enjoy a day at the beach in Gaza city on Friday following a truce between Israel and Hamas. Gaza residents yesterday savoured a first weekend of calm after months of bloodshed in the impoverished Palestinian enclave as a tenuous truce with Israel entered its third day.



PHOTO: AFP  
Members of People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protest in front of the government house in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's embattled Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej vowed not to quit, defying thousands of protesters who have besieged the capital demanding his resignation.

## Syria to cooperate with nuclear team on its own terms

AFP, Damascus

UN atomic inspectors begin a three-day visit to Syria on Sunday to probe allegations that a mysterious site bombed by Israel last year was a nuclear facility.

Syria has said it is ready to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency team led by IAEA deputy Olli Heinonen, but would only allow them to visit the remote desert site of Al-Kibar on the Euphrates River.

"Syria invited the IAEA and will cooperate with it," President Bashar al-Assad said this month, dismissing allegations made by the United States and Israel that the bombed site was a nuclear facility.

"It is a military facility... it is not nuclear," he said again last week before a landmark visit to nuclear power India.

According to US press reports the UN nuclear watchdog would like to inspect two or three other sites in Syria but Damascus is adamant that its cooperation stops at Al-Kibar.

"It is in our interest that the agency visits the site but to talk about other sites is not in line with the agreement" between Syria and the IAEA, Assad said.

The Israeli attack of September 6 was shrouded in mystery and Israel kept an uncharacteristic cloak of secrecy about the site it bombed in northeastern Syria for days afterwards.

## Mugabe defiant as pressure builds ahead of run-off

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe dismissed opposition claims of violence in state media on Saturday, remaining defiant in the face of Western criticism ahead of next week's tense run-off election.

The 84-year-old leader called the opposition Movement for Democratic Change's (MDC) accusations that its supporters have been targeted in a campaign of violence a ploy aimed at casting the June 27 vote as unfair.

"They have been saying their supporters are being beaten up by our soldiers," the Herald newspaper quoted Mugabe as telling an election rally in the second city Bulawayo on Friday.

"They say this so that they can later say the elections were not free and fair. Which is a damn lie!" he said.

## Besieged Gazans await relief as truce holds for third day

AFP, Rafah

As the truce between Israel and Palestinian militants entered its third day on Saturday, weary Gazans hoped for the easing of a year-long blockade of the impoverished Hamas-ruled territory.

But in the dusty border town of Rafah, black market petrol smuggled through tunnels from Egypt was still selling for the same price it did before the truce -- around seven dollars (4.5 euros) per litre.

"If you think the Jews are going to open the border to let petrol in you are dreaming," said Abu Mohammed, as his sons sucked fuel from a plastic tank to siphon it into used soft drink bottles in the heart of a crowded market.

Gaza's 1.5 million people hope

the ceasefire will lead to a lifting of a near-total blockade that has spawned widespread fuel shortages and left 80 percent of them reliant on international food aid.

But Hamas has said smuggling will continue, and on Saturday the streets of Rafah were lined with tables of cheap Chinese goods brought in through the tunnels, which Israel says are also used for smuggling arms.

Rafah merchants said as long as the blockade continued the network of tunnels between Egypt and Gaza were a lifeline to the territory.

"We are poor and we need the tunnels to live. How can Hamas prevent us from earning a livelihood?" said a 37-year-old merchant, who gave his name only as Nabil.

## Political pressure may delay US-Iraq security deal

AFP, Washington

It may take quite some time for Washington and Baghdad to reach a security deal on the future US military presence in Iraq amid rising political resistance in Iraq to any loss of sovereignty.

Given strains in the Iraqi political scene, exacerbated by US elections in November, President George W. Bush Thursday told Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki the United States was committed to a deal fully respecting Iraqi sovereignty, according to Gordon Johndroe, a White House spokesman.

According to Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, Baghdad and Washington set a deadline of late July to get a deal done. But they remain at odds on the issue of US troops' immunity from prosecution in Iraqi courts, a traditional pillar of a Status of Forces Agreement.

The parties also differ on the number of bases US soldiers would have in Iraq long-term -- Washington wants about 50 -- and on the freedom to conduct operations and to arrest and detain Iraqis.

"The current situation poses a dilemma for the Iraqi government. It wants to restore its full sovereignty as soon as possible, while maintaining a coalition presence until Iraqi forces are able to assume the country's security responsibilities," said Nazar Janabi, a fellow at The Washington Institute and a specialist on Iraqi and Middle Eastern security issues.

"They're not anxious to put us out, what they're anxious to do is to reassert their own sovereignty partly for domestic reasons, so they need to win some of these arguments and show their population that they're not kowtowing to the United States," added Michael O'Hanlon, a defence analyst at the Brookings Institute.

Maliki is under rising pressure from Shia forces to limit the US reach. Iran in turn has thrown itself into the debate, opposing any security agreement between Washington and Baghdad.

According to Steve Simon of the Council on Foreign Relations, "because of their experience with the British, who at one time occupied Iraq... there's a tremendous sensitivity among Iraqis about being

under foreign domination."

In an effort to get a deal, the United States has made concessions.

According to Zebari, they have dropped their demand for immunity for US subcontractors in Iraq, a highly sensitive issue after the killings of 17 civilians in September 2007 in a shootout in Baghdad by agents of US private security contractor Blackwater.

Iraq in turn has ceased demanding that the United States commit to protect Iraq from domestic and foreign threats.

Experts have their doubts about whether a deal can be struck by July.

"Iraqi politicians are engaged in a rhetorical campaign against such an agreement, making it nearly impossible to finalize a deal by this summer," said Nazar Janabi.

If that happens, once the UN mandate expires, either it could be extended, or a temporary deal could be reached, noted O'Hanlon.

Iraqi Oil Minister Hussein Chahristani, in an interview with The Guardian, suggested that might be the course, and that Iraq would like a short-term deal: "only short, for one or two years."

## No talks on uranium suspension: Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran on Saturday stressed it will not negotiate with world powers over its nuclear programme if it is required to suspend its controversial uranium enrichment activities.

"Suspending uranium enrichment has no logic behind it and it is not acceptable and the continuation of negotiation will not be based on suspension," Iranian government spokesman Gholam Hossein Elham told reporters.

His comments come a day after Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki indicated Tehran is willing to hold talks over its nuclear programme.

"We have informed the group of 5+1 countries of our readiness to negotiate over our own peaceful nuclear activities," he said.

"The package put forward by the 5+1 countries is under consideration in Tehran and we will give the response at an appropriate time," he added.

## 6 soldiers slain in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Six foreign troops including a Polish national were slain in bombings in Afghanistan on Saturday, the forces said, making it the deadliest day for international soldiers in the war-torn nation this year.

Meanwhile, the US-led force said that 35 militants died in operations across the country in the last 24 hours.

Four of the foreign troops serving in the US-led coalition were killed when insurgents attacked

them with an improvised bomb and small arms fire just outside the southern city of Kandahar on Saturday, the force said.

"Four coalition service members were killed and two more were seriously wounded today in an IED (improvised explosive device) strike while conducting operations in Kandahar province," a statement from the force said.

A coalition spokesman later said the "complex attack" included a roadside bomb explosion followed by small arms fire just west of the volatile city. The soldiers' national-

ities were not revealed.

Another soldier serving under the same deployment died in a similar bomb explosion overnight in the southwestern province of Farah, the force said.

In another bomb attack like the ones that killed the troops serving in the US-led coalition, a Polish soldier in the separate Nato-led International Security Assistance Force was killed in the eastern province of Paktika. Isaf and the Polish defence ministry said.

Four other soldiers were injured, they said.

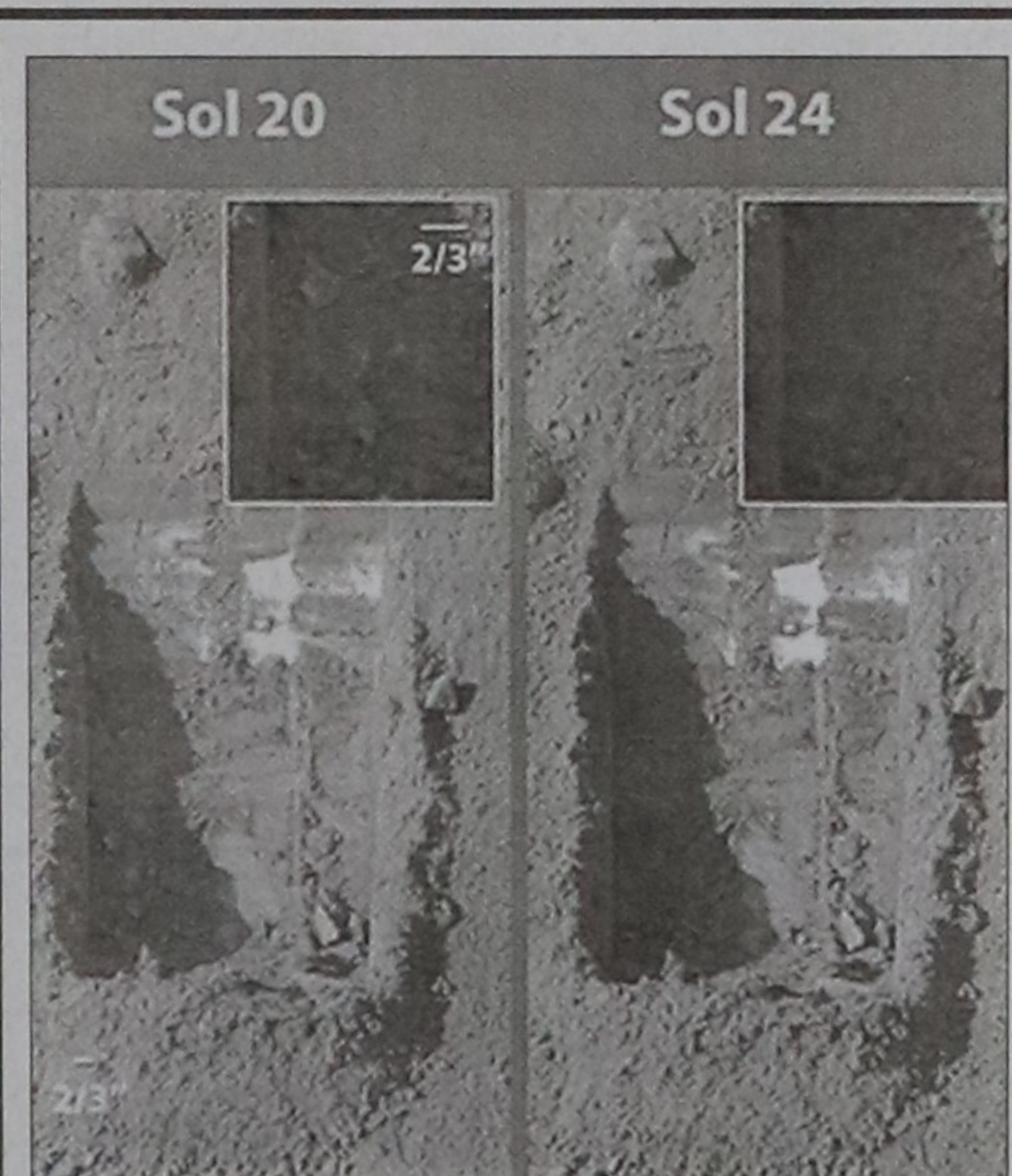


PHOTO: AP  
This combination of images provided by NASA's Phoenix Mars Lander's Surface Stereo Imager on June 15, left, and Wednesday, June 18, 2008, right, or Sols 20 and 24, shows sublimation of ice in the trench informally called "Dodo-Goldilocks" over the course of four days. In the lower left corner of the left image, a group of lumps is visible. In the right image, the lumps have disappeared.

## Phoenix lander confirms presence of ice on Mars

AFP, Washington

Scientists rejoiced Friday after the Phoenix Mars lander confirmed their long-held belief that ice is hiding under the surface in the Red Planet's northern region.

The lander's robotic arm started digging trenches into Martian soil after touching down near the planet's north pole on May 25, revealing a white substance that scientists had said could be either salt or ice.

Phoenix flexed its arm again to enlarge a trench on June 15. It then took pictures of eight bright bits of material the size of dice inside the hole, which scientists dubbed "Dodo-Goldilocks."

When the lander took new photographs of the trench four days later on Thursday, the material had vanished, settling the debate about whether it was salt or ice.

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