# INTERNATIONAL

US Republican presidential candidate John McCain (L) and Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama (R) take part in the first US Presidential Debate at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi on Friday.

NEWS ANALYSIS

## Obama passes presidential threshold in first debate

AFP, Washington

Neither Barack Obama nor John McCain landed a knockout blow in their first presidential debate late Friday, but the youthful Democrat may have just scored a points victory by standing his own.

Each campaign trumpeted favourable reviews from the instant punditry of television talking heads as Republican McCain played his strong suit of national security and Democrat Obama hammered his theme of the

that on balance, Obama may have nosed ahead by crossing the most icy. important threshold for voters only campaign -- looking presidential.

Indiana University political scientist Marjorie Hershey was reminded of the 1980 election between an enfeebled Democratic president, Jimmy Carter, and his less experienced Republican challenger, Ronald Reagan.

very tired of the Carter administration but did not know Ronald Reagan well enough to feel confident that he could take over as president," she told AFP.

lot of viewers apparently felt persuaded that Reagan was sufficiently presidential that he could function at that level.

"My suspicion is that may have happened tonight with a lot of people who are sick of the (President George W.) Bush administration but were just not sure about Obama's credentials."

Commentators said Obama, 47, held his own on national security against his more experienced rival McCain, 72, and scored with repeated upper-cuts that por-But independent analysts said trayed the Iraq war as the defining failure of Republican foreign pol-

McCain in turn parried with just tuning in to the marathon reminders of his younger Democratic challenger's novelty on the national scene, at one point McCain. attacking Obama's "naivete" and insisting he himself did not need "on-the-job training.

tapped into deep-seated unhappiness with Bush's record to make "A lot of Americans in 1980 were McCain look guilty by association.

The Wall Street crisis was the "final verdict on eight years of failed economic policies" and through the Iraq invasion, Bush and McCain had let al-Qaeda was a draw.

"By his debate performance, a renew its dangerous tentacles in Afghanistan, the Democrat said.

> Circumstances favoured Obama as the financial hurricane overshadowed the debate run-up - and McCain's involvement in the event at the University of Mississippi remained in doubt just hours beforehand.

While the debate was meant to be focussed on foreign policy, the opening exchanges were all related to the economic crisis and roundthe-clock negotiations in Congress on a huge bailout package.

The tale of the tape in an instant telephone poll by CNN and Opinion Research Corp. scored a decisive win for Obama among 524 debate watchers. Asked who did the better job, 51 percent said Obama and 38 percent said

The Democrat had a yawning lead of 58-37 percent on handling the economy, and a narrower edge But Obama, again and again, of 52-47 percent on the Iraq war, the pollsters said.

Another snap poll by CBS News and Knowledge Networks of about 500 uncommitted voters had 39 percent saying Obama was the winner against 24 percent for McCain. A total of 37 percent said it

## targets in Pakistan

AFP, Oxford

Democratic White House contender Barack Obama said Friday he would launch military strikes on extremist targets inside Pakistan if the Islamabad government is unwilling or unable to act.

At their first presidential debate, Obama's Republican opponent John McCain said such threats were unhelpful. "You don't say that outloud," he said.

But Obama insisted: "If the United States has al-Qaeda, (Osama) bin Laden, top-level lieutenants in our sights, and Pakistan is unwilling or unable to act, then we should take them out." McCain countered by calling for

a "new strategy" against al-Qaeda

in Afghanistan. "We're going to have to help the Pakistanis go into these areas and obtain the allegiance of the people. It's going to be tough," said the

# Obama vows to take out' terror Car bomb kills 17 in Syria

AP, Damascus

A car packed with explosives detonated on a crowded residential street yesterday, killing 17 people and wounding more than a dozen others, state-run television

The car was packed with 440 pounds of explosives when it blew up on Mahlak Street, shattering apartment building and car windows and twisting the roof of one car, according to footage aired on Syrian TV.

Syrian Interior Minister Bassam Abdul-Majid called the bombing a "terrorist act" and said all of the victims were civilians. He declined to say who was behind the blast.

"We cannot accuse any party. There are ongoing investigations that will lead us to those who carried it out," Abdul-Majid told state

The 8:45 am explosion occurred in a southern neighbourhood of

Zeinab, a holy shrine for Shia Muslims that is frequently visited by Iranian and Iraqi pilgrims about five miles away.

Such bombings are rare in Syria, a tightly controlled country where the regime of President Bashar Assad uses heavy-handed tactics to crack down against dissent and

But over the last year, the country has witnessed two major assassinations. Several explosions blamed on Sunni Muslim militants opposed to Syria's secular government have also taken place over the last few years.

Saturday's bombing was by far the largest and tested weaknesses of the government's traditionally tight security grip.

Al-Manar, a satellite TV station allied with Lebanon's Shia militant group Hezbollah, reported that witnesses said more than 14 people were injured including children.

An intelligence building is ment. the capital near the junction to the located in the area, but cars are not city's international airport, at an normally allowed to park nearby of allowing Muslim militants to use suing indirect peace talks with intersection leading to Saydah and it was not clear how close the its territory to cross into Iraq, where Israel.

bombing was to the building.

The last major explosion to strike Damascus was in February when a car bomb killed Imad Mughniyeh, one of the world's most wanted and elusive terrorists. The former Hezbollah security chief was suspected of masterminding attacks that killed hundreds of Americans in Lebanon and brutal kidnappings of Westerners.

Hezbollah and its top ally, Iran, blamed Israel for the assassination, but Israel denied any involvement. Syria has long been on

Washington's list of states supporting terrorism, and the Bush administration has sought to isolate the Assad regime for its support of Hezbollah guerrillas and radical, Palestinian groups. Its attempts intensified after the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri, which many in Lebanon blame on Syria. Damascus has denied involve-

they take part in attacks against US and Iraqi forces.

The country has seen violence by Islamic extremists in recent years, with security forces clashing with al-Qaeda-inspired militant groups on several occasions. In September 2006, Islamic militants tried to storm the US Embassy in Damascus in an unusually brazen attack in which three assailants and a Syrian guard were killed.

Most of those attacks were linked to Jund al-Sham, an al-Qaeda offshoot that was established in Afghanistan. But Syrian experts say al-Qaeda has not made a concerted effort to act in Syria, not because of the strength of its security services, but because of Damascus' traditionally anti-Western stance.

Recently, however, Syria has been trying to change its image and emerge from international isolation, agreeing to establish diplo-Syria also has long been accused matic ties with Lebanon and pur-

### 150 kidnapped Afghan labourers freed

AP, Kabul

Arizona senator.

Taliban militants on Saturday released the last of approximately 150 Afghan labourers they had abducted for almost a week after suspecting the workers of being Afghan soldiers, officials said.

Militants stopped three buses of workers constructing an Afghan army base in the western city of Farah and took the labourers hostage on Sept. 21. Government officials and tribal elders pleaded with the militants to release the men, saying they had abducted simple labourers and not soldiers.

"The Taliban had received a report that these people were going to join with Afghan army, that they are receiving training in this camp that they are building," said Abdul Qadir Daqeq, a provincial council member from Farah.

Tribal elders contacted the Taliban militants to plead the workers' case, Daqeq said. Then the Taliban took several days to question the labourers and determine whether they were soldiers, he said.

The militants released 118 of the workers on Friday, said Khalilullah Rahmani, Farah's provincial police chief. About 30 others were released on Saturday, he said. Three abductees had been released earlier in the week because of illness.

One of the reasons the labourers' release was staggered is because the militants split up the labourers into about six groups held by six different militant factions, Daqeq said.

He said that no ransom was paid and that the Taliban didn't demand the release of militants in Afghan prisons, as they have done in other kidnapping cases.

A Taliban spokesman has denied that Taliban insurgents kidnapped the labourers. He couldn't immediately be reached for comment Saturday.

Kidnappings in Afghanistan are an increasingly common tactic used by militants and common criminals to instil terror, to make political demands and to blackmail families or governments for ran-

The Afghan government has released Taliban prisoners in exchange for a kidnapped Italian journalist, and other countries and families are known to have made large ransom payments to win the release of abductees.

In July 2007, Taliban fighters kidnapped 23 South Koreans, killing two and releasing the rest. The kidnapping of 150 people is the first time militants have attempted to abduct and hold such a large group.



A Syrian man cleans the damages outside a shop following a bomb blast in

Damascus yesterday. A car bomb exploded near a Shia shrine in southern Damascus Saturday killing 17 people and wounding 14 others.

#### Hospital deaths of 40 newborns shocks Turkey

AP, Ankara

Outside the Zekai Tahir Burak maternity hospital stands a bronze statue of a mother nursing a baby with an inscription from the Prophet Mohammed: "Paradise lies at the feet of the mother."

In July, the Ankara facility became the scene of any parent's hell. A total of 27 newborns died there within two weeks, most of them from infection.

Now Turkey is reeling from a similar tragedy at another hospital, this time in the western city of Izmir, where 13 premature babies died last weekend within 24 hours, apparently from tainted IV treatment.

The deaths at two of the nation's most modern maternity hospitals go to the heart of Turkey's uncertain status as a country energetically seeking to modernise in its bid to join the European Union but held back by problems associated with the developing world.

The scandals have exposed a shortfall in the number of specialized neonatal units dealing with premature and high-risk babies aswell as a shortage of qualified staff in a country of 70 million. Most hospitals lack specialized

premature birth units, and high-risk or premature babies are often transferred to larger hospitals in cities like Istanbul, Ankara or Izmir. Transfers and a high concentration of newborns in the same place increases the risk of infections, experts say.

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(L-R) EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, EU external relations commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and ME Quartet representative former British prime minister Tony Blair chat before a meeting of the Quartet members at UN headquarters in New York on Friday. The Quartet met to discuss the Middle East peace process.

### ME Quartet is pro-Israel Says Hamas

AFP, Gaza City

The Islamist Hamas movement on Saturday denounced statements made in New York by the Middle East Quartet, claiming the diplomatic group is biased towards "The position of the Quartet

reflects a pro-Israeli bias," the Palestinian movement that rules the Gaza Strip said in a state-Hamas also criticised the diplo- ity."

matic group, made up of the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States, for calling on Palestinians to put an end to "acts of terrorism" against Israel.

"It is perfectly unjust to qualify as terrorism the Palestinian resistance, which is perfectly legitimate," the movement said. A ministerial session of Quartet deal.

members ended on Friday with a call for Palestinians and Israelis to make every effort to conclude a peace agreement before the end of the year.

Quartet members also "expressed deep concern about increasing (Israeli) settlement activity, which has a damaging impact on the negotiating environment and is an impediment to economic recovery and called on Israel to freeze all settlement activ-

Hamas said that didn't go far

"It is not enough for the Quartet to express its concern over settlements, action is needed" the statementsaid.

Continued construction of homes for Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank is seen as a major obstacle to reaching a peace

#### Six powers agree to confirm Koirala slams Prachanda for undermining Nepali democracy PTI, Kathmandu

AFP, United Nations

differences on Iran Friday and circulated a new Security Council draft resolution that reaffirms Russia and China. existing UN sanctions over Tehran's nuclear programme.

also called on Iran "to fully comply, without delay, with its obligations (under relevant UN resolutions) diplomacy." and to meet the requirement of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) board of governors."

The draft was circulated after week. foreign ministers of the five permanent members of the Security will be unanimity" on the text, said Russia and the United States -- plus Maurice Ripert. Germany agreed on its wording

earlier in the day. The UN Security Council has ply, slapped three rounds of sanctions

fissile material for a nuclear bomb. The United States and its new sanctions against Tehran but have run into resistance from

existing UN Iran sanctions

Churkin Friday again dismissed The terse, three-paragraph text talk of new sanctions, saying "more discussions are necessary" with Tehran and "there's still room for

> Diplomats said after their meeting on Iran that the new draft would not be voted upon until next We are very hopeful that there

Council -- Britain, China, France, his French counterpart Jean-

The six powers have been trying on Iran for refusing to suspend to convince Iran to abandon urauranium enrichment, a process, nium enrichment amid Western which can be used to make the fears that Tehran is seeking to build

an atomic bomb.

Friday's meeting gained new Six major powers papered over European allies have pushed for urgency after the UN nuclear watchdog reported last week that Tehran continued to defy international pressure to cooperate with Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly its investigation. Iran insists its nuclear programme is strictly aimed at producing civilian energy.German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier welcomed the six countries' agreement on the text as "an important sign of unity on Iran" and noted the draft did not rule out future sanc-

tions. "The position of the international community remains that we want to say firstly, that we are ready to cooperate with Iran but sec-He warned that Tehran faces ondly, only if Iran fulfils its commit-"more isolation" if it fails to com- ments to the international community," he told reporters.

The ministers had initially planned to gather here Thursday to weigh new sanctions against

Nepal's former Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala today accused the Maoist leadership of hatching a conspiracy to end parliamentary democracy in the country.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Mohan Vaidya have started hatching a conspiracy to end parliamentary democracy saying they have no faith in it," Koirala told a gathering in the capital. "Prachanda has challenged the

fundamentals of parliamentary democracy by saying that he does not believe in the traditional type of Parliamentary democracy," Koirala said, adding, "If that is the case, I Nepal Students Union, the student Koirala said.

wing of Nepali Congress.

Koirala's remarks come at a time when Prime Minister Prachanda is trying to convince the world leaders that Maoists are committed to multi-party democracy and will respect human rights and democratic principles in the ongoing "Maoist leaders Prime Minister 63rd General Assembly of the

United Nations. Referring to Prachanda's remarks about a new socialist political system that comes through the fusion of communism and democracy, NC President said his party would never accept such a communist model of socialism that spares democratic rights.

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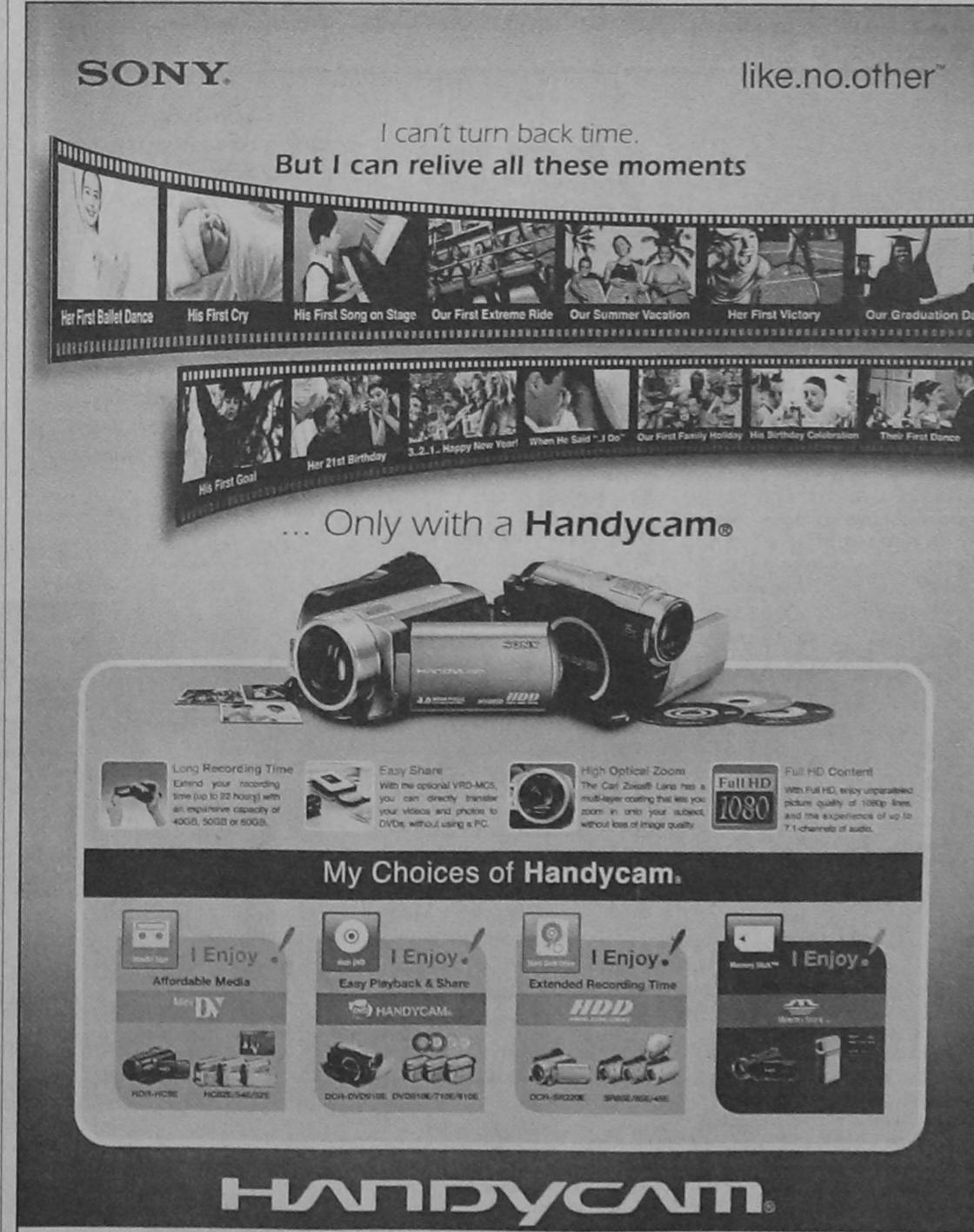
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