

72 killed in Kyrgyzstan quake

Rescuers raced to reach a remote village in Kyrgyzstan on Monday after a strong earthquake killed at least 72 people in a mountainous area near the border with China, officials said.

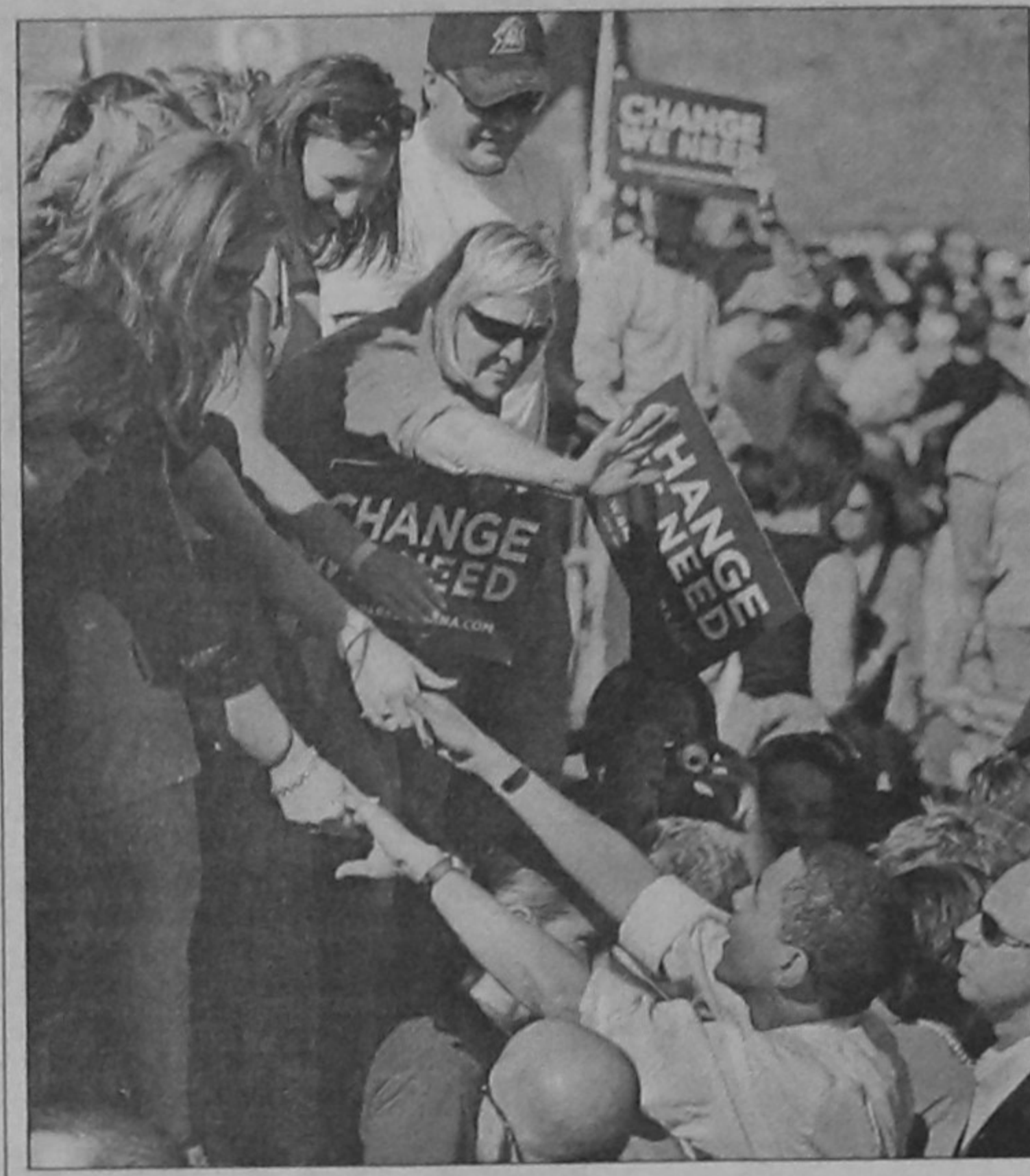
Nura, a village of some 960 residents close to the point where the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China intersect. "The picture we saw was frightening. The village of Nura is fully destroyed, 100 percent," Emergency Situations Minister Kamchybek Tashiyev said.



Dzhunuchaliyev said. But rescue efforts were being hampered by the remoteness of the

village and a lack of telephone links with it, while roads had become impassable in some places due to the quake, officials said. "Efforts to assist the victims are being complicated by the distance of the villages... from hospitals, by a lack of communications and by the destruction of the roads," said health ministry official Dinara Sagynbayeva.

grouping of former Soviet republics. The meeting would go ahead on schedule despite the quake, Bakiyev's office said. Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked and mountainous nation of five million people, is one of the poorest states of the former Soviet Union and lies in a seismically active region.



Democratic presidential candidate Illinois Senator Barack Obama shakes hands with supporters at a rally on Sunday at Asheville High School in Asheville, North Carolina.

Curfew in Kashmir thwarts separatist rally

Thousands of Indian security forces implemented a strict curfew in Kashmir yesterday, preventing separatists from holding a pro-independence rally. Organisers behind recent anti-India protests in Kashmir had urged the residents to rally during the day in Lal Chowk, or Red Square, in the heart of summer capital Srinagar.

India paves the way for legal surrogacy

India's Supreme Court has not only confirmed what everyone already knew, that surrogacy is a commercial industry in the country, but it also ruled that renting a womb is legal. The judgment delivered by the apex court last week ends a drawn-out debate on the ethics concerning the practice.



Supporters of Maldives president and Dhivehi Rahyithunge Party's (DRP) presidential candidate Maumoon Abdul Gayoom take part in an electoral rally in Male on Sunday. Around 200,000 Maldivian will vote in the presidential elections scheduled to take place on October 8 to elect their next president.

'Iran does not believe Israel, US will attack'

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, in an interview published Monday, said his country did not believe Israel or the United States would launch a military strike against Iran over its nuclear programme. Asked in an interview with Newsweek magazine and The Washington Post if he believed there would be an Israeli or US attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, Mottaki answered flatly: "No."

conditions to its participation in the talks with Iran. Burns's presence in Geneva, argued Mottaki, "meant that those were no longer in play." Meanwhile, Iran said on Monday that it did not plan to allow a US research and policy think-tank to open in the Islamic republic after Washington gave its blessing for such a move.

2nd US presidential debate today

Republican John McCain is threatening to take off the gloves in his second presidential debate with Democrat Barack Obama yesterday, hoping to pummel his way back into electoral contention. With his poll numbers heading south and the US financial crisis playing to Obama's strengths, McCain needs a game-changing performance during the candidates' prime-time clash in Nashville, Tennessee.

mate Sarah Palin accused Obama of "palling around with terrorists," in an exaggerated reference to the Democrat's ties in Chicago to a former 1960s radical, university professor William Ayers. Obama meanwhile alleged McCain's health care policies would deprive 20 million more Americans of life-saving insurance coverage, as he ramped up his portrayal of the Republican as out of touch with voters' financial hardship.

Time running out on Israel-Palestine deal

Says Livni

Israeli Prime Minister-designate Tzipi Livni warned Sunday that time is running out for a peace agreement with the Palestinians, with extremists gaining strength as negotiations stumble. In her first foreign policy speech since her appointment to form a new government, Livni said Israel must press ahead with peace talks because "doing nothing has its own price."

meeting the target. Livni, who heads the Israeli negotiating team, warned there are dangers in letting the process drag on indefinitely. "An understanding of what is under way in the region shows that time is not working in the favor" of Israel and regional moderates, she said. She was referring to the growing strength of Islamic Hamas militants, who overran the Gaza Strip last year and are challenging moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank.

Livni is trying to put together a majority coalition government. She has until Nov. 3, but she warned that protracted political turmoil could be harmful. "Creating political stability quickly is necessary not for political needs, but so that we can... deal with the challenges from outside, economic and others," she said. If Livni fails to form a government, Israel would have to hold a general election early next year. Hard-line Likud opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu is confident of victory, running roughly even with Livni in current polls. He opposes most concessions to the Palestinians for peace.

Afghanistan, Taliban reject reports of Saudi peace talks

Afghan voter registration starts

The Afghan government said yesterday it was hoping for peace talks with the insurgent Taliban movement but denied a media report that a first round of negotiations took place in Saudi Arabia last month. A spokesman for the Taliban also rejected the US media report that representatives of the militia had met Afghan government officials in Mecca between September 24 and 27.

"It has not happened yet. We would like that to happen but how, when and where, by what mechanism and with whose help - we are working on that," Hamidzadasaid. "Saudi Arabia is the leading country in the Islamic world... The president has said clearly that we look up to the Saudi King and if such a thing would happen, we would welcome it," he said. A spokesman for the Taliban, Zabihullah Mujahed, said: "This is totally untrue. We have not had any talks or negotiations with the government, neither in Saudi nor anywhere else." Meanwhile, Afghanistan began registering voters Monday for next year's presidential polls, an election likely to be the most dangerous and challenging since the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001.



A combo of recent pictures made yesterday shows (from L) French scientists Luc Montagnier and Francoise Barre-Sinoussi, and German Prof Harald zur Hausen. Harald zur Hausen, Barre-Sinoussi and Montagnier won the Nobel Medicine Prize on Monday for separate discoveries of two viruses causing HIV and cervical cancer, the Nobel jury said in Stockholm.

Thaksin seeks asylum in UK

Ousted Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra has applied for political asylum in Britain, where he has spent most of his time since being forced out of office two years ago, officials said on Monday. The Home Office said Thaksin applied for asylum when he flew into Britain in early August, breaking his bail conditions in a corruption case in Thailand. "He applied for asylum pretty much when he landed... and so did his wife," a spokesman told AFP.

But the Home Office said it could give no further information on the progress of the applications because it does not comment on individual cases. Thailand's Supreme Court issued a fourth arrest warrant for Thaksin on September 26 when he failed to appear in court in Thailand to face corruption charges in a property scandal. His wife, Pojaman, has been convicted on tax evasion charges, adding to the legal cases piling up against the couple since Thaksin was ousted in a September 2006

coup. One of his lawyers, Watchara Seangprathum, said in August that Thaksin planned to ask for asylum in Britain saying the "request will note their malicious treatment in Thailand, where they lack security and freedom". The Supreme Court is trying Thaksin and his wife in absentia on charges accusing him of using his political influence as premier to help his wife buy a plot of prime Bangkok real estate from the central bank at a knockdown price.



This IUCN undated handout picture taken in India shows a Fishing Cat (Prionailurus viverrinus). Half the world's mammals are declining in population and more than a third are probably threatened with extinction, according to an update released on Monday of the "Red List," the world's most respected inventory of biodiversity.

Half of mammals 'in decline'

Half the world's mammals are declining in population and more than a third probably face extinction, said an update yesterday of the "Red List," the most respected inventory of biodiversity. A comprehensive survey of mammals included in the annual report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which covers more than 44,000 animal and plant species, shows that a quarter of the planet's 5,487 known mammals are clearly at risk of disappearing forever. But the actual situation may be even grimmer because researchers have been unable to classify the threat level for another 836 mammals due to lack of data. "In reality, the number of threatened mammals could be as high as 36 percent," said IUCN scientist Jan Schipper, lead author of the mammal survey, in remarks published separately in the US-based journal Science.

The most vulnerable groups are primates, our nearest relatives on the evolutionary ladder, and marine mammals, including several species of whales, dolphins and porpoises. "Our results paint a bleak picture of the global status of mammals worldwide," said Schipper. The revised Red List, unveiled at the IUCN's World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, is further evidence that Earth is undergoing the first wave of mass extinction since dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago, many experts say. Over the last half-billion years, there have only been five other periods of mass extinction. The Red List classifies plants and animals in one of half-a-dozen categories depending on their survival status. Nearly 40 percent of 44,838 species catalogued are listed as "threatened" with extinction, with 3,000 of them classified as "critically endangered," meaning they face a very high probability of dying

out. There were a few slivers of good news showing that conservation efforts can prevent a species from slipping into the category of "extinct." The black-footed Ferret, native to the United States, was moved from "Extinct in the Wild" to "Endangered" after it was successfully introduced into seven U.S. states and Mexico. The European bison and the wild horse of Mongolia made similar comebacks from the brink starting in the early 1990s. But these remain exceptions that highlight the need to act before other species populations dwindle beyond the threshold of viability, experts say. "The longer we wait, the more expensive it will be to prevent future extinctions," said Jane Smart, the head of the IUCN's Species Programme. "We now know what species are threatened, what the threats are and where."

N Korea gave ultimatum on nuclear deal

North Korea has given the United States an ultimatum to accept its proposed solution to the latest nuclear row between the two sides, a pro-Pyongyang newspaper said yesterday. The North Korean side appears to have suggested ways to peacefully resolve the nuclear dispute, through the top US negotiator (Christopher Hill) to six-party talks and issued an ultimatum related to this," said Chosun Sinbo, newspaper of a pro-Pyongyang Korean group in Japan. It gave no details but predicted a breakthrough if Washington responds positively to the proposals. Hill visited Pyongyang last week to try to rescue a six-nation deal, which is crumbling because of a dispute over verification of the North's declared nuclear programme. The US negotiator said on his return he had had "very substan-

tive" talks but gave no immediate details. "A bold and epochal solution might have been forwarded (from the North) as time is running short ahead of the US presidential election," said Chosun Sinbo, which normally reflects the hardline communist state's thinking. "The six-party talks, reactivated after North Korea's underground nuclear test in October 2006, may break down if the two sides fail to reach an agreement," it said. In such a case North Korea may try to reverse its nuclear disablement to strengthen its hand in negotiations with the next US government, the daily said. But Hill's trip shows it does not want to waste the diplomatic efforts made so far, the paper said. The US negotiator had been invited by Pyongyang. Pyongyang accepted the six-nation aid-for-disarmament deal in February 2007, just four months after staging its nuclear test.