



PHOTO: AFP
National Security Adviser of Pakistan Mahmud Ali Durrani (R) listens to Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee during a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Pakistan's National Security Adviser is on a five-day official visit to India.

Syria establishes diplomatic ties with Lebanon

AP, Damascus

Syria's president issued a decree yesterday establishing diplomatic relations with Lebanon, and a foreign ministry official said the country will have an embassy in Beirut by the end of the year.

The two countries have not had formal diplomatic relations since they gained independence from France in the 1940s.

Lebanon and Syria agreed earlier this year to establish diplomatic ties and demarcate their contentious border. The West and Lebanon anti-Syrian politicians have long demanded Syria recognize Lebanon's sovereignty by establishing official relations.

The landmark agreement, which came during an official visit by the Lebanese president to Damascus in April, and Tuesday's formal decree reflect Syria's efforts to break with past isolationist policies and resolve tensions with its neighbours.

India announces polls schedule for 5 states

PTI, New Delhi

Skipping a decision on polls in Jammu and Kashmir, the Election Commission today announced one-day poll in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Mizoram while Naxalite-infested Chattisgarh will have two-phased elections between November 14 and December 4.

The two-phased polls in Chattisgarh will be held on November 14 and 20 while elections will be held in Madhya Pradesh on November 25, Mizoram and Delhi on November 29 and Rajasthan on December 4.

Counting of votes in all the states will be taken up on December 8.

The commission is understood to have deferred a decision on polls in Jammu and Kashmir reportedly because of difference of opinion

among the three members of the commission.

No decision has been taken "at the moment" on holding elections in Jammu and Kashmir which is now under Governor's rule, Chief Election Commissioner N Gopalaswami said at a press conference flanked by the other two commissioners Naveen Chawla and SY Quraishi.

He said the commission is still assessing the situation in Jammu and Kashmir.

"We will get back to you as soon as we take a decision in Jammu and Kashmir. Forces are one part of the issues. There are so many other issues. I do not want to say anything more," he said.

Asked whether it meant that elections will not be held before March because of winter, the CEC said "that you leave it to us".

The government had informed

the Commission that it was ready to hold Assembly polls in Jammu and Kashmir next month in three to four phases and as per Home Ministry's assessment of the situation in the state adequate forces are available for conducting the exercise.

The assessment of the situation for holding polls in the sensitive state was made when Union Home Secretary Madhukar Gupta met the full Election Commission here on October 10.

While two Election Commissioners were reportedly in favour of holding elections in the state, the CEC was understood to have some reservations on it.

Gopalaswami said the Commission had visited the state and held discussions with leaders of various political parties on the situation.

"We are still assessing the

situation and will get back to you as soon as we take a decision," he said.

While major political parties in the state -- PDP and NC felt the current atmosphere was not conducive for the elections, BJP and the Left parties wanted immediate polls. The Congress said it was the Commission's call.

The term of the Assembly, which was dissolved following the breakup of the Congress-PDP coalition in the wake of the Amarnath land transfer row, would have ended on November 20.

But since the state was placed under Governor's rule, the elections have to be held before January 15.

The CEC said the polls in the five states would be conducted on the basis of delimited constituencies through Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs).

3 Nato soldiers, 16 Afghan civilians killed in blasts

AP, Kabul

US military successes in Iraq have forced sophisticated and well-trained insurgents to pour into Afghanistan instead, part of the reason violence has spiked in Afghanistan, the Afghan defence minister said yesterday.

In a demonstration of the increasingly deadly attacks, a roadside blast in the east where US soldiers operate killed three Nato troops, while two separate roadside bombings in the south killed 16 Afghan civilians, officials said.

The Afghan defence minister, Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak, said terrorists who would have once fought in Iraq have been "diverted" to Afghanistan.

"The success of coalition forces in Iraq and also some other issues in some of the neighboring countries have made it possible that there is a major increase in the foreign fighters," Wardak told a news conference. "There is no doubt that they are (better) equipped than before. They are well trained, more sophisticated, their coordination is much better."

The top US commander in eastern Afghanistan, Maj Gen Jeffrey Schloesser, told The

Associated Press last month that he is seeing a spike in the number of foreign militants including Arabs and Chechens flowing into Afghanistan. He said militant Web sites have been encouraging fighters to go to Afghanistan instead of Iraq.

"I can't prove they are coming from Iraq to Afghanistan, but I've seen it on Web sites that's what they're being told to do," Schloesser said.

The Iraqi insurgency at its height drew Arab extremists and other jihadi leaders who were once focused on Afghanistan, including the Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Masri, believed to be the current leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Iran also stepped up aid to Shiite militias as sectarian strife grew after 2006. But the precise number of foreign fighters in Iraq was never clear and many US commanders believe local Iraqis comprise the bulk of the al-Qaeda and other jihadi forces.

In Afghanistan, militant attacks have turned deadlier and more sophisticated this year, part of the reason more US and Nato troops have died there in 2008 than in any year since the 2001 US-led invasion.

Nato said a roadside bomb blast killed three of its soldiers in eastern Afghanistan Tuesday. The alliance

did not provide their nationalities or the exact location of the blast, but the majority of troops in the east are American.

In the south, a bomb attack apparently intended for Nato troops exploded against an Afghan minivan in Uruzgan province, killing nine civilians, said Juma Gul Himat, the provincial police chief.

Himat blamed "the enemies of Afghanistan" a term commonly used for the Taliban. He said the road where the bomb exploded is often used by Nato troops. The taxi had been travelling toward the provincial capital.

A second bomb blast also intended for Nato troops killed seven civilians travelling in a bus in Ghazni province on Monday, the Defence Ministry said Tuesday.

Most bomb attacks in Afghanistan are intended for Afghan or Nato soldiers, but the blasts are far more likely to kill civilians.

Violence has risen steadily in Afghanistan since late 2005. More than 4,700 people mostly militants have been killed in insurgency related-violence this year, according to an Associated Press count of figures provided by Afghan and Western officials.

Obama extends lead in key states: Poll

AFP, Washington

Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama has solidified his lead over rival John McCain with 51-54 percent support in four key battleground states, a poll released yesterday showed.

Obama also leads or ties McCain among white voters for the first time in Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, according to polling by Quinnipiac University conducted with the Wall Street Journal and washingtonpost.com.

"Senator Obama's leads in these four battleground states are as large as they have been the entire campaign," said Peter Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute.

"Those margins may be insurmountable barring a reversal that has never been seen before in the modern era in which polling monitors public opinion throughout the campaign."

The high marks for Obama are due to his economic plan and his performance in last week's town

hall debate, the second of three ahead of the November 4 election, pollsters said.

The results showed the Illinois senator with 54 percent of the likely vote in Wisconsin compared to 37 percent for McCain, and 54 percent in Michigan compared to 38 for McCain.

Obama held a slimmer but still significant lead in Colorado (52 to 43) and Minnesota (51-40).

The results also showed Obama with an edge among white voters in all four states, with 48 percent of the likely white vote in Colorado compared to 47 percent for McCain, and 48 percent of whites in Michigan compared to 43 percent for McCain.

Obama, who is seeking to become America's first black president, had an even larger margin of support among whites in Wisconsin (52 percent to 39 percent) and Minnesota (49 percent to 43 percent).

The survey included more than 4,000 adults between October 3 and 7, and had a margin of error of plus or minus three percent.



PHOTO: AFP
Democratic presidential nominee US Sen Barack Obama (D-IL) greets people during a campaign event at SeaGate Convention Centre on Monday in Toledo, Ohio.

Thai court accepts ruling party dissolution case

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai court yesterday agreed to hear a case which could see three political parties including the ruling People Power Party disbanded, in a further blow to the protest-hit government.

The People Power Party (PPP) and two of its coalition partners are facing dissolution because some of their party executives were convicted of vote fraud after the December 2007 elections, which swept them to power.

"Constitutional Court judges have agreed to accept cases against Matchimathipataya, Chart Thai and People Power Party," a court statement said.

"We inform the attorney general and leaders of those parties to submit written defence within 15 days."

After the submissions, the court will begin deliberations, but no date was set for a verdict.

The news comes a week after two people died and nearly 500 were injured in bloody street clashes between police and anti-government protesters, who were trying to stop a session of parliament from going ahead.

The crackdown was the culmination of a months-long campaign by protesters to bring down the government.



PHOTO: AFP
Cambodian soldiers stand guard near the Preah Vihear temple in Preah Vihear province, some 543km north of Phnom Penh yesterday. Thailand's foreign minister on Tuesday denied that about 80 of the country's troops had withdrawn from a disputed area on the border with Cambodia, and insisted they had the right to stay there.

Russia gives territory to China, ending border dispute

AFP, Moscow

Russia ended a decades-old border dispute with China yesterday by giving it a stretch of river island territory in a ceremony symbolising the Cold War rivals' warming ties.

Chinese and Russian flags were raised and new border markers erected as part of the handover at China's far northeastern tip near the Russian city of Khabarovsk, Interfax news agency reported.

A Russian border guard unit withdrew from what is now Chinese territory, leaving behind an empty headquarters and barracks buildings, Interfax said.

Under an agreement signed by the two countries' foreign ministers in July, Russia agreed to give up Tarabarov Island, known as Yinlong in Chinese, and half of Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island, called Heixiazhi in Chinese.

"This event completes the delineation and the legal establish-

ment of all parts of the Russian-Chinese border, which is over 4,300 kilometres (2,700 miles) long," Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement.

"The border issue, a historical legacy that had been left to Russia and China, has received its complete and final resolution."

Interfax said about 170 square kilometres (66 square miles) of land were handed over in the islands along the Amur River border between Russia and China, which saw skirmishes during the Cold War.

After a bitter rift between the one-time communist allies in the 1960s, both nations deployed enormous tank armies along the border, raising the spectre of a vast land battle in the event of full-scale war.

Recently, however, Russia and China have drawn closer together, motivated by factors including a joint desire to promote economic growth and form a regional counterweight to the power of the United States.

North Korea to resume nuclear dismantlement

AP, Seoul

North Korea planned to resume dismantling its nuclear programme Tuesday for the first time in two months, days after the United States removed the communist regime from a terrorism blacklist as a reward under a disarmament pact.

Pyongyang has told the International Atomic Energy Agency that it would restart work to disable the Yongbyon nuclear reactor and allow international inspectors to resume their activity. The plans were outlined in a restricted document to the agency's 35 board members that was obtained by The Associated Press.

Separately, IAEA spokeswoman Melissa Fleming said agency inspectors "will also now be permitted to reapply the containment and surveillance measures at the reprocessing facility." That meant agency seals taken off the plant and monitoring cameras recently removed at the North's orders

would be restored.

The country's official Korean Central News Agency had given no word by Tuesday afternoon if the work had gotten under way. South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman Moon Tae-young said he had no information whether the work had begun.

North Korea also said Sunday it would restart work to disable Yongbyon, though it did not specify a date.

Two months ago, North Korea stopped disabling Yongbyon in anger over US demands that Pyongyang accept a plan to verify its accounting of nuclear programmes as a condition for removal from a blacklist of countries accused of sponsoring terrorism.

Until late last week, the North had threatened to reactivate the plutonium reprocessing plant at Yongbyon.

But the North and the US reached a compromise on the verification row following a trip to

Pyongyang by chief US nuclear envoy Christopher Hill. Washington announced its removal of the North from the terror list Saturday, saying Pyongyang had agreed to all its nuclear inspection demands.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the resolution of the dispute. His spokeswoman, Michelle Montas, said Ban considered it "another step towards a verifiable non-nuclear Korean Peninsula."

China also hailed the progress and pledged to move the denuclearisation process forward as host of the nuclear disarmament talks that involve Japan, the two Koreas, the United States and Russia.

"Promoting the six-party talks process serves the common interests of the involved parties," Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said in a statement issued late Monday. "China appreciates the constructive efforts made by the concerned parties."

Tensions over Georgia threaten peace talks

AFP, Geneva

Georgian and Russian officials are to sit down face-to-face Wednesday for the first time since a five-day war in August, but tensions over the regions at the heart of the conflict threaten to derail the talks in Geneva.

Although Russia has withdrawn from most of Georgia in line with an EU-brokered ceasefire, Tbilisi is furious at the continuing presence of 7,600 Russian troops in the Georgian rebel regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Georgia insists its sovereignty cannot be questioned and accuses Russia of annexing the territories in the August 8-12 conflict.

After the war Russia formally recognised both rebel Georgian provinces as independent countries, a move fiercely opposed by Georgia and its allies in the West and so far followed by no other country except Nicaragua.

It has since opened diplomatic

ties with the regions and set about establishing permanent military bases there.

The major sticking point ahead of the Geneva meeting has been the presence, or not, of South Ossetian and Abkhazian officials at the talks.

Russia has indicated it could pull out if delegations from the Georgian territories are not awarded equal status.

For Tbilisi this is out of the question.

Georgia's Reintegration Minister Temur Iakobashvili told AFP there would be "no separate delegations from the separatist authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Geneva."

However, "if Russians wish so, they may include Abkhaz and Ossetian separatists in its delegation," he said.

As UN chief Ban Ki-moon arrived in Geneva on Tuesday to try to kick-start the talks, this fundamental problem was still to be resolved.

Ban was to hold a dinner with French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and the EU's foreign policy chief Javier Solana later Tuesday to thrash out such issues before talks begin in earnest on Wednesday.

According to a diplomat in Brussels close to the issue, the representatives from South Ossetia and Abkhazia would participate in talks at the level of two working groups, but not at the plenary sessions.

The Geneva talks will be held under the auspices of UN, EU and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Experts were not exactly hopeful they would be able to thrash out the terms of the peace with both Russia and Georgia refusing to budge from their entrenched positions.

"There is risk of a deadlock," said Daniel Warner, a political specialist on the Caucasus at the Geneva-based Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

Mbeki opens talks to save Zimbabwe deal

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe and his main political rival arrived for talks Tuesday with former South African leader Thabo Mbeki aimed at saving a flagging power-sharing deal.

Mbeki brokered the agreement reached four weeks ago that called for the creation of a unity government to end months of deadly political turmoil and to rescue the nation from economic ruin.

But opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai has threatened to pull out of the deal, after Mugabe last weekend announced that he would give his own party the most important posts in cabinet.

Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has called on Mbeki to find a way to break the impasse, saying that Mugabe violated the spirit of the deal by giving himself control of the army, police and other security agencies.

Justice minister Patrick Chinamasa, the lead negotiator for Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, said in the state-run Herald newspaper

that they remained committed to the talks, but insisted that the only post up for discussion was the finance ministry.

"As far as we are concerned, the only contention is the ministry of finance. We hope the facilitator will come up with fresh ideas," he said.

"The country has been drifting for the past six months. We cannot continue drifting," he added.

The talks began as Zimbabwe's parliament was to resume sitting Tuesday afternoon, with Mugabe's ZANU-PF in the minority for the first time since independence in 1980.

Parliament will have to consider a constitutional amendment to implement the power-sharing agreement, which allows 84-year-old Mugabe to remain as president while opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai takes the new post of prime minister.

But the entire deal has hit the rocks after Mugabe's announcement on the cabinet, which drew sharp condemnation as the European Union threatened to impose new sanctions on the regime.



PHOTO: AFP
A home stands in ruin after the first Santa Ana wind fire of the season passed through the area North of the 118 Freeway along Topanga Canyon Road on Monday in Chatsworth, California. Santa Ana winds, which in some areas have blown up to about 65-miles an hour, continue to aggravate wildfires around Los Angeles.