

Obama leads White House race in 3 key states

AFP, Leesburg, Virginia

US presidential hopeful Barack Obama played up his foreign policy credentials while John McCain highlighted national security, as a poll yesterday showed the Democrat hanging onto his lead in three key states.

Less than two weeks before the November 4 election, Obama made gains in Ohio while his Republican rival chipped away only slightly at the Democrat's edge in Florida and Pennsylvania, the survey by Quinnipiac University found.

As each candidate strove to highlight his opponent's weakness, the survey indicated swing state voters favor Obama on the economy by margins of eight to 19 points, and McCain on foreign policy by margins of two to six points.

Obama, flanked by top veteran military officials in Virginia on Wednesday, portrayed McCain as "out of touch and running out of time," after rejecting new Republican jibes on his plans for taxes and national security.

But McCain warned the

Democratic Illinois senator not to take victory for granted, despite his mammoth financial edge and solid lead in a slew of opinion polls.

Obama is scheduled to take time out from the campaign trail Thursday in order to visit his ailing grandmother in Hawaii.

McCain also returned to his attack on recent comments by Democratic vice presidential pick Joe Biden that, just like former president John F. Kennedy, Obama would be "tested" by a crisis on the international stage within six months of taking office.

The military veteran noted he had some "personal experience" with crises, citing his role in the United States' 1962 showdown with the Soviet Union over its missiles in Cuba—known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. At that time, the Republican nominee was as a fighter pilot assigned Cuban targets.

"I know how close we came to a nuclear war and I will not be a president who needs to be tested. I have been tested," he told an enthusiastic rally on a high school football field in Green, Ohio.

Nato supports talks with Taliban militants

3 US coalition troops killed in Afghanistan

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, AP, Brussels/Kabul

Stressing that military means alone cannot bring peace in war ravaged Afghanistan, Nato has said it was not opposed to talks between the government and Taliban leaders willing to lay down their arms, reports EuAsiaNews.

"If the Afghan government chooses to engage in dialogue with the Taliban, with elements of the Taliban which they consider to be reconcilable that is their decision to take," James Appathurai told reporters in Brussels on Wednesday.

He was commenting on reports that Saudi Arabia has been sponsoring talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

The spokesperson said Afghan President Hamid Karzai had not consulted or sought the permission of Nato to go forward.

"It is his country, a sovereign country. If he chooses to do it then

Nato will support that decision," he said.

"Nato officials don't talk to Taliban and they don't have the mandate to talk to the Taliban," said Appathurai.

"I do believe there is a general sense in Nato that there will have to be a political element to the ultimate solution. We have consistently said that military means alone cannot solve it," he added.

Nato has over 50,000 troops under its mission fighting Taliban guerrillas in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, a roadside bomb killed three US coalition members in western Afghanistan, while 18 Taliban fighters died in clashes elsewhere in the country, officials said Thursday.

In the southern Kandahar province, meanwhile, a bomb placed on a donkey hit a police vehicle patrolling west of the provincial capital, killing an officer and wounding two other people, said police officer

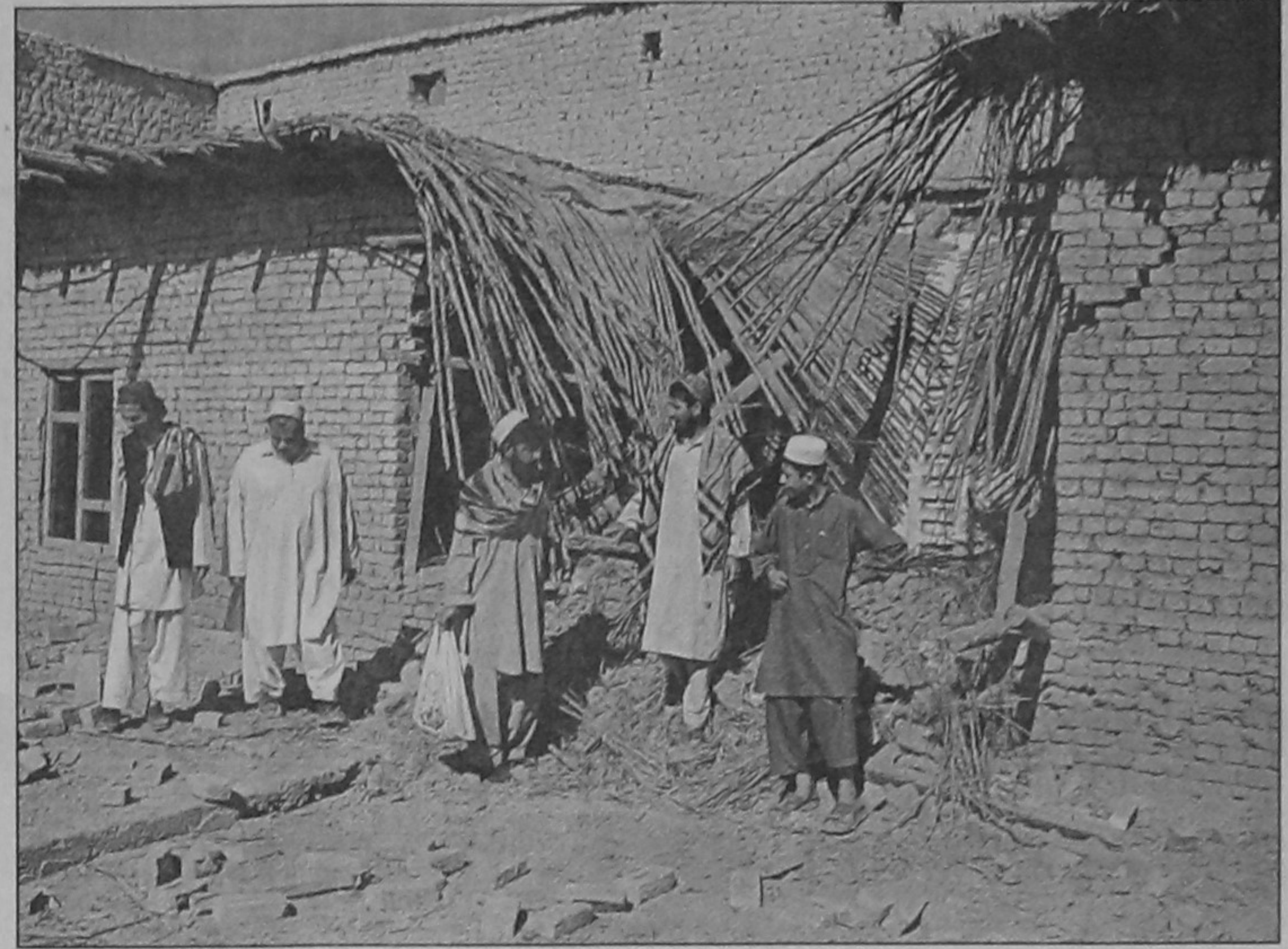
Sadullah Khan.

The bomb that struck the US coalition vehicle Wednesday also wounded another coalition member, the US military said in a statement. It did not provide the exact location of the attack or the nationalities of the victims. Most coalition members are American.

Taliban militants regularly target Afghan, US and other foreign soldiers in their campaign to weaken the government of President Hamid Karzai and its Western backers. The number of insurgent attacks has risen 30 per cent this year compared to 2007.

In the southern Uruzgan province, meanwhile, a US coalition airstrike killed 15 militants Wednesday, including a Taliban commander, another coalition statement said.

The militants were killed near a riverbed in Deh Rawood district, away from the local villages, the statement said.



Pakistani tribesmen gather at the site of a missile attack near Miranshah, the main town in troubled North Waziristan region yesterday. Suspected US spy drones fired missiles into a religious school set up by a top Taliban commander in a tribal area bordering Afghanistan, killing 11 people.



Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain (R), his wife Cindy McCain (2nd R), Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin (C) and her daughters Willow Palin (L) and Piper Palin arrive at a campaign rally at the Green High School Memorial Stadium on Wednesday in Green, Ohio. With less than two weeks left before the November 4 election, McCain is scheduled to campaign in Ohio, Florida and Colorado over the next three days.

Palin becomes a burden to Republican ticket

AFP, Washington

The embarrassing price tag of her campaign wardrobe and her blooper about the job description of US vice president confirm what recent polls say: Sarah Palin is a burden to the Republican presidential ticket.

Seven weeks after John McCain picked her as his running mate, getting a sharp boost to his White House effort, Americans are less and less convinced she is worthy to serve as the country's number two leader.

In a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll out Wednesday that puts McCain 10 points behind his Democratic rival Barack Obama, 55 per cent of respondents and potential voters said they believed that Palin is not cut out to be vice president, and 47 per cent viewed her negatively.

Even more troubling, many Republican voters unhappy with the Alaska governor are seeing their

misgivings confirmed, above all with the "troopergate" scandal, in which the governor is being investigated for alleged abuse of power in trying to get her ex-brother-in-law fired from the Alaska state police force.

She faces a second probe this week over whether she violated ethics rules in the affair. A spokesman said 44-year-old Palin requested this subsequent inquiry, branding the first probe a "political witch-hunt."

On Wednesday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declined to talk about Palin during a debate about women in power in Long Beach, California, and became visibly tense when she was asked to comment about her.

The Politico website caused a stir by publishing financial records of the Republican National Committee showing it has spent more than 150,000 dollars on clothes for Palin since she was picked by McCain at the end of August.

Undecided Asians play key role in US election

AFP, Washington

Minority Asians may be the biggest group of undecided voters in the upcoming US presidential and congressional elections and will play a key role in the outcome of the ballot, officials say.

With the current economic troubles their top concern, many of the seven million eligible Asian American voters are likely to choose Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama, and are clamouring to send more of their representatives to Congress and state legislatures, the officials said.

Among those who have made up their mind ahead of the November 4 elections, 41 per cent are likely to vote for Obama and 24 per cent for Republican Senator John McCain, polls showed.

Obama, who spent part of his childhood in Asia, has sent a personal message to the voters, say-

ing he considered himself "an honorary" member of the community.

"I was born in Hawaii, a majority Asian American state, where I spent much of my childhood, and I've lived in Indonesia... I had college roommates who were Indian and Pakistani," he said in a "blueprint for the change we need" for the 13 million strong community.

"My sister is half Indonesian, and she is married to a Chinese Canadian," he added.

McCain also has powerful Asian connections, including having served in the Vietnam War and having an adopted 17-year-old Bangladeshi daughter.

And many Asian-Americans are attracted by his immigration reforms and bipartisanship.

Despite the two candidates' strong lobbying efforts, 34 per cent of all likely Asian American voters remain undecided on who to send to the White House, compared to about eight per cent among the general population, a recent national survey revealed.

"With such a high proportion of undecided voters, Asian Americans are a critical source of potential votes for either candidate in the final weeks of the campaign," said Karthick Ramakrishnan from the University of California, Riverside, among four universities that conducted the poll.

Also, the number of eligible Asian American voters have exceeded the margin of victory in about 50 congressional races, said Naomi Tacuyan, deputy director of the APIAVote, a group campaigning for greater community participation in electoral and public policy processes.

Iraqi bomber rams car into convoy of Shia minister killing 13

Baghdad takes control of Babil from US forces

AP, AFP, Baghdad

A suicide car bomber targeted an Iraqi minister during rush hour Thursday morning in Baghdad, killing at least 13 people and wounding more than 20, officials said.

The blast underscored the continued dangers facing Iraqis despite a sharp decline in violence over the past year as insurgents defy security improvements.

Meanwhile, the US military handed over to the Iraq government security responsibilities for Babil province south of Baghdad, which includes the Sunni belt once known as the triangle of death.

The handover is a key step in America's plan to eventually transfer all 18 of the nation's provinces to Iraqi control so US troops can go home. Babil is the 12th Iraqi province to be handed over, though the process has gone slower than originally planned.

Lt Gen Lloyd Austin, the No. 2 US commander in Iraq, said security gains have been remarkable but cautioned that "while the enemies of Iraq are down, they are not necessarily defeated."

In Baghdad, the attacker rammed the car into the Labour and Social Affairs Ministry convoy as it passed through the central Bab al-Sharji area, a ministry spokesman said.

The Shia minister, Mahmoud Mohammed al-Radhi, escaped unharmed but three of his guards were killed, spokesman Abdullah al-Lami told the al-Arabiya TV station.

"It is the latest in a series of criminal acts that are targeting development process in Iraq," al-Lami said.

At least 10 civilians were killed in addition to the guards, and 21 people were wounded, according to police and hospital officials, who

spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorised to release the information.

Smoke and the smell of gunpowder filled the air. Drivers at a nearby intersection sought shelter behind their cars until Iraqi security forces ordered them to evacuate the area.

AP Television News video showed a burned SUV and the charred hulk of the apparent car bomb surrounded by Iraqi security forces. The windows of a nearby camera store were shattered, with torn pictures left among the glass.

Youssef Qassim, the 40-year-old owner of a nearby clothing store, said he peered through a hole in the concrete wall surrounding the market and saw at least two cars on fire with burning bodies inside.

"The guards of the government convoy opened fire into the air but stopped when US forces arrived at the scene," he said.

Millions could starve in North Korea: UN

AP, Seoul

The UN food agency has warned that millions of North Koreans could face starvation, but a South Korean official said Thursday that Seoul has not decided whether to respond to a request for food aid to the communist country.

Around 2.7 million people on North Korea's west coast will run out of food in October, the World Food Programme said in a report released on Tuesday.

North Korea has relied on aid to help feed its 23 million people since natural disasters and mismanagement devastated its centrally controlled economy in the mid-1990s. Famine is believed to have killed 2 million people. The country's food shortage has worsened this year following devastating floods in 2007.

The WFP also said the food shortages have especially affected urban households in areas with low industrial activity due to higher food prices, reductions in public food rations and lower employment.

The food shortage warning comes as the North has ratcheted up its hostile rhetoric against South Korea and its president amid fraying ties.

In August, the WFP asked South

Korea to provide emergency aid to North Korea to help it avert a food crisis, but Seoul has not yet responded.

The South Korean government said it would not tie food aid to North Korea's nuclear disarmament, but it also said public opinion was a consideration in deciding whether to send aid.

On Thursday, Unification Ministry spokesman Kim Honyeon said no decision had yet been made.

South Korea has been a main aid donor to its impoverished northern neighbour, but public sentiment has worsened following the July shooting death of a South Korean tourist at a North Korean mountain resort.

North Korea had previously rejected South Korean offers of direct food aid in apparent anger over the new South Korean government's harder-line policy toward the North.

The North warned Seoul last week that it might cut any remaining ties between the neighbours if South Korea continues its policy of "reckless confrontation."

On Wednesday, South Korea denied it had taken a hard-line stance toward the North, calling that view "preconceived or biased."



This file photo taken on January 9, 2007 shows Chinese human rights activists Hu Jia (R) and his wife Zeng Jinyan (L) in their apartment on the outskirts of Beijing. Chinese dissident Hu Jia won the European Parliament's prestigious Sakharov Prize yesterday.

EU awards rights prize to Chinese dissident Hu

AP, Strasbourg

The European Union honoured jailed Chinese dissident Hu Jia with its top human rights prize on Thursday in defiance of Beijing's warning that selecting him would seriously harm its relations with the 27-nation bloc.

"Hu Jia is one of the real defenders of human rights in the People's Republic of China," said European Parliament President Hans-Gert Poettering. "The European Parliament is sending

out a signal of clear support to all those who support human rights in China."

Members of the European Parliament selected Hu for the Sakharov Prize from a shortlist of three that also included candidates from Belarus and Congo. Lawmakers said Chinese pressure had been counterproductive.

Before the announcement, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said awarding Hu the prize would constitute interference in China's internal affairs.

Explosion at Indian fireworks factory kills 27

AP, Jaipur

A huge explosion at an illegal fireworks factory in western India on Thursday killed 27 people, including 12 children, police said.

The blast, which occurred before dawn, blew apart the workshop set up in a home in a slum in the town of Deeg, said area police chief Rohit Mahajan. Another 17 people were injured in the explosion.

Mahajan said the force of the blast also brought down two neighbouring homes, where the 12 children were killed.

Deeg is some 192km northwest of Jaipur, the capital of India's Rajasthan state.



The handout picture taken on June 15, 2008 and released yesterday, shows two yellow-crested Abbott's cockatoos in a tree in Masakambing.

'Extinct' cockatoo rediscovered in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

A species of cockatoo feared to have become extinct has been "rediscovered" with the sighting of a handful of breeding pairs on a remote Indonesian island, researchers said yesterday.

Ten Yellow-crested Abbott's cockatoos were found on the Masalembu archipelago off Java island, the Indonesian Cockatoo Conservation group told AFP.

"We were excited when we found them in residential areas on Masakambing island," researcher Dudi Nandika said.

The group included four breeding pairs and two juveniles. Despite the discovery the Yellow-crested Abbott's cockatoo (Cacatua sulphurea abboti) remains the rarest species of the bird on earth, he said.



An Iraqi policeman secures the area as Iraqi workers remove debris yesterday from the site where a suicide bomber slammed his explosive-filled car into the convoy of Iraq's labour minister, killing at least eleven people in Baghdad's Tahreer Square.

Next US leader should get to work on ME

Say Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat

AFP, Tokyo

The next US president, be it Barack Obama or John McCain, should get to work immediately to jump-start Middle East peace talks, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said here yesterday.

Erakat was visiting Tokyo for talks with Israel's Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit, in the latest meeting arranged by leading donor Japan aimed at building confidence between the two sides.

"Whoever will be the next president of the United States, whether Mr. McCain or Mr. Obama, they must immediately engage and continue their engagement and no time should be wasted," Erakat told reporters.

Erakat conceded that the next US leader will have an overwhelming number of pressing issues,

including the global financial crisis, US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a nuclear standoff with Iran.

"But we need them to focus and to remain engaged for their own interest in achieving peace between Palestinians and Israelis, and Israelis and Syrians, and Israelis and Lebanese," Erakat said.

US President George W. Bush brought Israeli and Palestinian leaders to a summit in Annapolis, near the US capital, in November last year, which set a goal of reaching a peace accord by the time he leaves office in January.

However the Palestinian side say the target is impossible to reach because of political developments in Israel, where outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is waiting for his successor Tzipi Livni to form a government.

Tensions boil up around Georgia rebel regions

AFP, Tbilisi

Tensions boiled up around Georgia's breakaway regions Thursday, as Tbilisi said Russia was massing troops in South Ossetia and rebels in Abkhazia accused Georgia of killing a senior army officer.

Russia denied the troop buildup, accusing Georgia of having violated a ceasefire agreement by deploying special forces near the rebel regions.

The incidents underscored how high tensions remain after Russia and pro-Western Georgia fought a brief war over South Ossetia in August, sowing instability in the strategic Caucasus region.

Georgian Interior Ministry Spokesman Shota Utiazhvili told AFP that Russia had deployed an additional 2,000 troops in South Ossetia and that Tbilisi was "deeply concerned" by the move.

"During the last two weeks,

2,000 additional Russian troops have been deployed in South Ossetia," he said. "The total number of Russian troops in South Ossetia is now up to 7,000."

Utiazhvili also said that 40 armoured vehicles had been deployed in the disputed Akhalkgori region of South Ossetia, which Tbilisi says Russian forces must withdraw from under a European Union-brokered ceasefire agreement.

Akhalkgori, a predominantly ethnic Georgian district, was under Tbilisi's control before the war.

"We are deeply concerned over such provocative actions committed by the Russian Federation," Utiazhvili said.

Speaking to journalists in Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted that Russia was maintaining its plans to deploy no more than about 3,700 troops in each of the two rebel regions.