

Iraqi cabinet approves US military pact

Suicide car bomb kills 15

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's cabinet defied fiery opposition from Shia hardliners yesterday to approve a wide-ranging military pact that includes a timetable for the withdrawal of all US troops by the end of 2011.

Within hours of the cabinet decision, a suicide car bomb exploded at a police checkpoint in Iraq's volatile Diyala province, killing at least 15 people and underscoring the violence that still plagues the country.

Baghdad and Washington have been scrambling for months to reach an agreement that will govern the status of more than 150,000

US soldiers stationed in some 400 bases across the country after their UN mandate expires on December 31.

The cabinet approved the agreement after a two and a half hour meeting, with 27 ministers voting for it, one minister abstaining, and the remaining 10 skipping the meeting, according to a minister who voted in favour.

Government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh told reporters after the vote that all the most important political blocs had taken a "positive position" on the deal.

"They all expressed a positive position because they consider it the best (agreement) possible,

because it will manage and end the military presence and guarantee the complete withdrawal of the troops."

Iraq's parliament will vote on the pact on November 24, with the first reading set for Monday, deputy speaker Khalid al-Attiya told AFP.

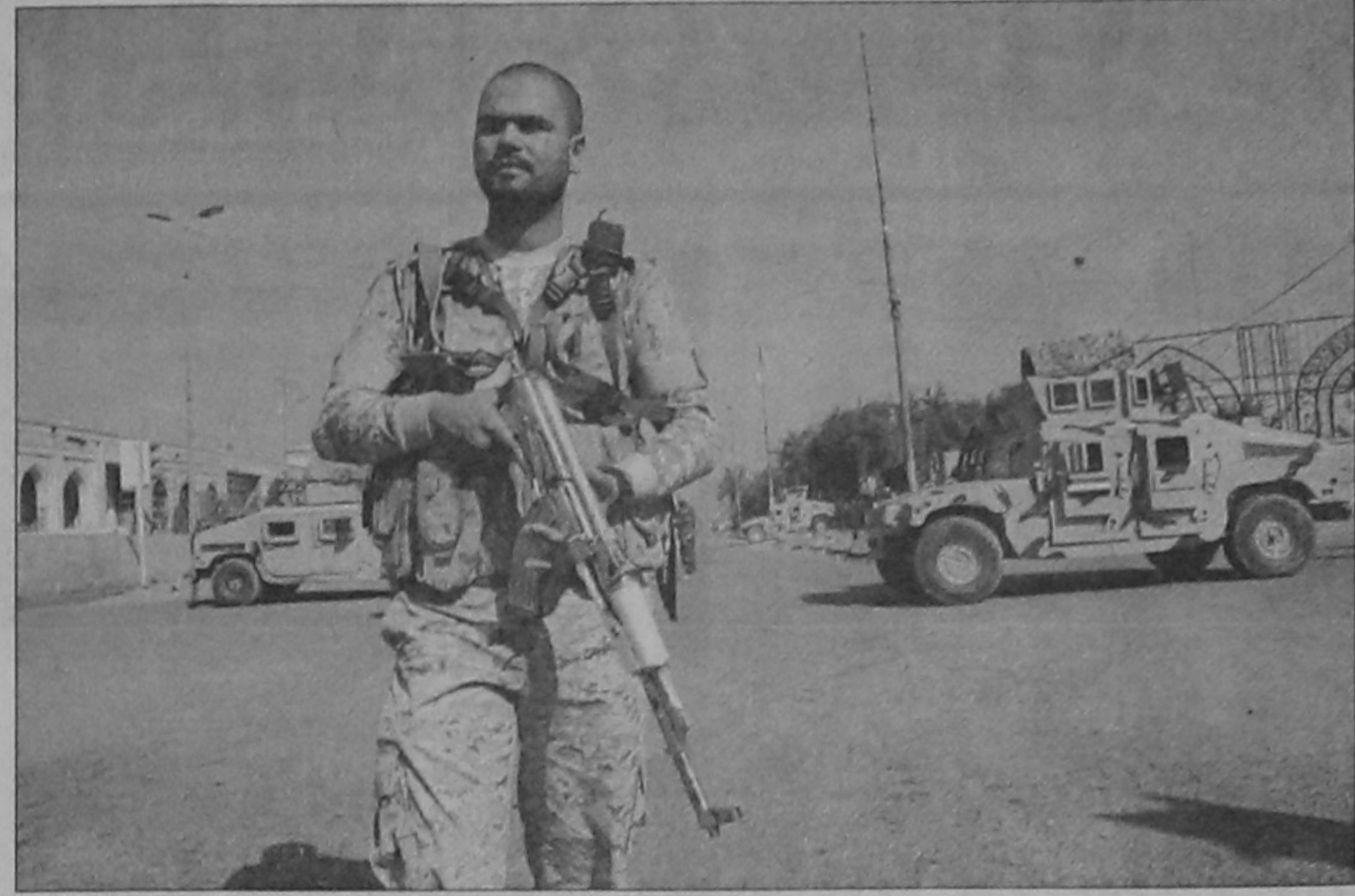
The agreement would then need to be ratified by Iraq's presidential council before Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki would sign the deal with US President George W. Bush.

It took nearly 11 months of tense and detailed negotiations before both Baghdad and Washington were comfortable with the SOFA pact on the future of US forces in

Iraq. The draft agreement includes 31 articles and calls for US troops to pull out of Iraqi cities by June 2009 and from the entire country by the end of 2011.

Under the agreement an executive and a technical committee will be established to investigate "violations" committed by US forces, Dabbagh said, without giving further details.

Iraq had demanded the right to prosecute alleged crimes committed by US troops and foreign contractors, while the United States agreed to lift their immunity only for those who committed crimes off-duty and off their bases.



A member of the Sahwa or Awakening Council, one of several Sunni militias largely made up of former insurgents who have allied with US forces over the past two years to battle al-Qaeda in Iraq, blocks the street after an explosive device detonated close to the Sunni Muslim Gilani mosque and shrine (background) in central Baghdad yesterday.

Somali govt on verge of collapse: President

AP, Mogadishu

The Somali government is close to collapse because disputes within its ranks have allowed armed Islamic insurgents to take control of much of the country, the president said.

President Abdullahi Yusuf's remarks to about 100 Somali lawmakers in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, late Saturday represent the first admission by any official that the government is losing control.

Hours earlier, a radical Islamic group seized another Somali port town, consolidating its control over a southwestern region that borders the Somali capital.

Yusuf said his government only had control of the capital and the southwestern town of Baidoa, which is the seat of Parliament.



The UN's special envoy for the crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo Olusegun Obasanjo (L) and Tutsi General Laurent Nkunda (C) speak to the press after they met in the North Kivu town of Jomba yesterday. Government forces and Nkunda's troops have clashed repeatedly since August in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo in violation of a January ceasefire. An estimated 250,000 people have been displaced.

UN envoy meets Congo rebel chief amid fresh fighting

AFP, Jomba

UN special envoy Olusegun Obasanjo started talks Sunday with rebel leader Laurent Nkunda in the east of Democratic Republic of Congo, as fresh fighting broke out in the region.

Obasanjo's groundbreaking meeting with Nkunda came as UN officials warned that the continued fighting was making the plight of an estimated 250,000 displaced people in Nord-Kivu province increasingly desperate.

The UN envoy met Nkunda at 10:00 am (0800 GMT) in the rebel-held territory of Jomba, which lies near DR Congo's borders with Rwanda and Uganda, 80 kilometres (50 miles) northeast of Goma.

He arrived at Jomba by helicopter from Goma, the capital of

Nord-Kivu province. The two men shook hands warmly when they met.

Nkunda, who was a general in the Congolese army before turning against the government, had changed out of his military uniform into a light grey suit with a white shirt and red tie. Obasanjo was in traditional Nigerian dress.

The former Nigerian president, who was also once a general, briefly inspected Nkunda's soldiers before the two men walked hand-in-hand into a small building to begin their talks.

As the talks got underway however, fresh fighting was raging between Nkunda's National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) and government troops 60 kilometres further north, a UN official reported.

Israel accuses Hamas of 'shattering' Gaza truce

Four Palestinians killed in airstrike

AFP, Jerusalem

Interim Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert accused the Islamist Hamas movement yesterday of "shattering" the Gaza truce, after two rockets hit Israel prompting an airstrike which killed four Palestinian militants.

Olmert told the weekly cabinet meeting that Israel could not stand idly by while it came under repeated rocket fire and said he had ordered security chiefs to draw up action plans against Hamas's 17-month-old rule in Gaza.

His comments came as defence officials said that Israel's border crossings would remain closed to humanitarian deliveries to the aid-dependent territory despite mounting international pressure for a

resumption of desperately needed food and fuel.

"The responsibility for the shattering of the calm and the creation of a situation of prolonged and repeated violence in the south of the country is entirely on Hamas and the other terror groups in Gaza," Olmert told ministers.

"We cannot tolerate this price tag that the terror organisations are trying to set against our right to prevent the continuing terror attacks and threats," he said.

Olmert said that he had asked security chiefs to draw up options for action against Hamas rule.

"I instructed them to... present different action plans against the Hamas terror rule without its hampering our ability to use all necessary force in our response to viola-

tions of the calm."

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who is one of the two frontrunners to replace Olmert after snap elections to be held in February, echoed the prime minister's remarks, a senior official said.

"The calm is being violated, that's a fact. Israel can't accept violations without taking the action it determined ahead of time," she was quoted as saying. "The army must present the options."

Earlier on Sunday, two rockets hit Israel without causing any casualties or damage prompting a retaliatory air raid against Gaza City, which killed four militants.

In a telephone call to AFP, a small armed group not linked to Hamas, the Popular Resistance Committee, said that the dead men were its fighters.

NEWS ANALYSIS

US pact holds pitfalls for Iraq's feuding factions

AFP, Baghdad

Most of Iraq's political factions believe that a military pact approved by the Iraqi cabinet Sunday offers the best hope for eventually expelling foreign troops, but convincing the public could prove divisive, analysts said.

The wide-ranging accord establishes a firm timetable for the withdrawal of nearly all US-led troops by 2011, but it also legitimises their presence until then, providing political ammunition for hardline nationalists.

"There is the agreement and there is the psychology of the agreement," Hosham Dawod, an Iraq expert at France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, said in a phone interview from Paris.

The latter is a key consideration in a country where a welter of factions jockey for support on the streets and in the voting booths.

"If you ask most political leaders if it's possible to have an Iraqi state without this agreement they will say no," Dawod says. "The differences are over how to present it to the public."

Followers of the firebrand Shia

cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose power has withered in recent months as Iraqi troops have cracked down on his feared Mahdi Army militia, have vowed to oppose the agreement with massive street protests.

"They have said that rejecting the agreement is a national demand and that for them it is a policy that will strengthen them on the Iraqi street," said Dawod, who recently met with several senior Sadrists in Paris.

The Sadrists' protests may help them mobilise support ahead of provincial elections slated for January 31, but they ignore the benefits of the agreement, says Tariq al-Mamori, the editor of Iraq's Al-Bilad Al-Yaum newspaper.

"There is a part of the Iraq population that is not cultured, that is very simple, and that is easily led by religious leaders," he says.

"But I don't understand (the Sadrist position) because the alternative to the agreement is worse than the agreement," he adds, pointing out that rejecting the agreement also means refusing a set US timetable for withdrawal.

Those who have signed the pact

will likely say they had no other option.

"Whatever they may be saying today, for nationalist purposes, especially ahead of the elections, the current parties in power want the US forces to stay," said Joost Hiltermann, of the International Crisis Group.

"The US presence is keeping them in power and they know that they remain weak and unpopular, with an army that has been only partially rebuilt and remains woefully inefficient."

That may not prevent some of the more powerful parties -- like the Shia Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council -- from trying to shift the burden of accepting the agreement to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and his smaller Dawa party.

Perhaps anticipating this, Muwafaq al-Rubaie, the head Iraqi negotiator for the pact, told AFP ahead of the vote that he thought the agreement would be considered an achievement for all Iraq's political factions.

"I hope it will help the ruling parties in the provincial elections," he said, emphasising the "s" in "parties."

Obama reaches out to former rivals

AP, Washington

Presidents typically say they want to be surrounded by strong-willed people who have the courage to disagree with them. President-elect Barack Obama, reaching out to Hillary Rodham Clinton and Republicans, actually might mean it.

Abraham Lincoln meant it. He appointed his bitter adversaries to crucial posts, choosing as war secretary a man who had called him a "long-armed ape" who "does not know anything and can do you no good."

You could say his Cabinet meetings were frank and open.

Richard Nixon didn't mean it. "I don't want a government of yes-men," he declared. But among all the president's men, those who said no did so at their peril. He went down a path of destruction in the company of sycophants.

It so happens that Obama and New York Sen. Clinton share a reverence for "Team of Rivals," Doris Kearns Goodwin's book about how Lincoln brought foes into his fold. Clinton listed it during the campaign as the last book she had read. Obama, clearly a student of Lincoln, spoke of it several times.

Now past could be prologue. Obama is considering Clinton for secretary of state or another

senior position, meeting John McCain on Monday to see how his Republican presidential rival might help him in the Senate, and sizing up one-time opponents in both parties for potential recruitment. He made one Democratic presidential opponent, Delaware Sen. Joe Biden, his running mate.

"I think it reflects a great inner strength on Obama's part that he is seriously considering creating a team of rivals as Lincoln did," Goodwin told The Associated Press on Friday.

"By surrounding himself with people who bring different perspectives, he will increase his options, absorb dissenting views and heighten his ability to speak empathetically to people on different sides of each issue. The challenge, of course, is to ensure that the discussions do not become paralysing, and that once a decision is made the inner circle accepts that the time for debate is over," she said.

During the bitter primary campaign, Clinton dismissed Obama as a neophyte who could not be trusted to handle crises and who had not done much more in politics than make fancy speeches. Obama sniffed that "you're likable enough, Hillary."



An Israeli tank takes position along the Israeli-Gaza border close to the Karni crossing point yesterday. Interim Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert accused the Islamist Hamas movement Sunday of "shattering" the Gaza truce, after two rockets hit Israel prompting an airstrike that killed four Palestinians.

Skin cancer vaccine may be within reach Says scientist

AFP, Sydney

An Australian scientist who developed a vaccine for cervical cancer said Sunday a vaccine which could prevent some skin cancers may be possible within a decade.

Professor Ian Frazer said that tests of the vaccine on animals had proven successful and that human trials could begin as soon as next year.

"We can teach the immune system the trick it needs to fight the viruses that cause these skin cancers relatively easily with a vaccine, but getting them to go to the right place and do the right thing is the challenge," he told reporters in Brisbane.

"And what we've learned is a trick where we can overcome that particular block."

Frazer, who will deliver his findings to the Australian Health and Medical Research Congress on Monday, said the vaccine would protect against squamous cell carcinoma but not the more deadly melanomas.

He said a vaccine developed from the research, which began in 1985, was still a decade away.

"It's taken us that long to understand how the immune system works in the skin so that we can make the necessary steps to get the breakthrough," the Queensland University researcher said.

Advertisement for a skin cancer vaccine in Bengali. Text includes: 'আমার ভোট আমি দেবো', 'দেখে শুনে জেনে দেবো', 'প্রকাশনা: চলচ্চিত্র ও প্রকাশনা অধিদপ্তর', 'ডিবিসন-১০০-১৬/১১/০৮'.



Francis Benner sprays his house with water to protect it while his neighbour's house burns on Saturday in Yorba Linda, California. Strong Santa Ana winds are fanning flames throughout Southern California, destroying hundreds of homes and causing thousands to evacuate.

Wildfires in Los Angeles reduce hundreds of homes to ash

AP, Los Angeles

Southern Californians endured a third day of destruction Saturday as wind-blasted wildfires torched hundreds of mobile homes and mansions, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee and shut down major freeways.

No deaths were reported, but the Los Angeles police chief said he feared authorities might find bodies among the 500 burned dwellings in a devastated mobile home park that housed many senior citizens.

"We have almost total devastation here in the mobile park," Fire Capt. Steve Ruda said. "I can't even read the street names because the street signs are melting."

The series of fires has injured at least 20 people and destroyed hundreds of homes from coastal Santa Barbara to inland Riverside County, on the other side of the Los Angeles area. Smoke blanketed the nation's second-largest city Saturday, reduc-

ing the afternoon sun to a pale orange disk.

As night fell, a fire fed by a sleet of blowing embers hopped through the winding lanes of modern subdivisions in Orange and Riverside counties, destroying more than 50 homes, some of them apparently mansions.

A blaze in the Sylmar community in the hillsides above Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley destroyed the mobile homes, nine single-family homes and several other buildings before growing to more than 8,000 acres more than 12 square miles. It was only 20 percent contained Saturday.

It sent residents fleeing in the dark Saturday morning as notorious Santa Ana winds topping 75 mph torched cars, bone-dry brush and much of Oakridge Mobile Home Park. The blaze, whose cause was under investigation, threatened at least 1,000 structures, city Fire Department spokeswoman Melissa Kelley said.