

PHOTO: AFP

Riot police clash with protesters in front of the Polytechnic in Athens on Saturday night. Marchers hurled garbage at riot police who responded with tear gas as the Greek capital saw more protests yesterday, two weeks after the police killing of a teenager that sparked nationwide unrest.

Greek violence rages ahead of budget vote

AFP, Athens

Street violence raged into a third week in Athens as protests sparked by the fatal shooting of a teenager fused with political tension hours from the Greek parliament's budget vote yesterday. Clashes between youths and police extended deep into the night after hundreds of people gathered late Saturday in the capital's Exarchia district, at the site of the December 6 shooting of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos. In Athens, protesters occupying the Athens Polytechnic university hurled fire-bombs and rocks at police who responded with tear gas, while clashes there and around the country saw police cars, a government building and banks targeted with the unrest spreading to the port city of Piraeus and the island of Crete. Unions piled extra pressure on the right-wing government ahead of the parliamentary budget vote. Under-fire Prime Minister Costas

Karamanlis' administration wants to reduce Greece's national debt -- which this year stands at 93.9 percent of GDP, one of the highest in Europe. The conservative leader said last week that Greece expects to pay about 12 billion euros (16 billion dollars) in 2009 to service its debt, amounting to over 19 percent of its revenue and nearly five percent of its gross domestic product. The depth of anti-government sentiment witnessed over the past fortnight has also begun to bite in opinion polls published Sunday. Pollsters Public Issue have the socialist opposition rating a lead on 38.5 percent as against Karamanlis' New Democracy, with 32.5 percent, according to the liberal Kathimerini newspaper. Socialist leader Georges Papandreou's approval rating has also overtaken that of Karamanlis, the poll said. In the centre-left Vima, a similar pattern of voting intentions was recorded by Kapa Research.

BJP-led NDA banking on post-polls allies

But still it suffers from friendless in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh

PTI, New Delhi

Desperate to win new allies ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP-led NDA has resigned to its fate of being 'friendless' in key Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh but is banking on post-poll allies and a new strategy for Uttar Pradesh. The NDA will be having a meeting in the new year after the BJP National Executive meet to draw strategies ahead of the parliamentary polls and feels that the just concluded Assembly elections in five states was a "drawn

match". The opposition alliance feels that it was on a stronger wicket than the ruling UPA whose "blunder" was to part company with the Left parties and instead take the support of Samajwadi Party, which was "not a trusted ally". In an interview to PTI, JD(U) President Sharad Yadav, who has recently been made acting convener of NDA, said the Third Force has no future as BSP supremo Mayawati was not ready to align with the Left and other parties. He said it was difficult to predict how BSP or for that

matter even Ram Vilas Paswan-led LJP would behave in the post-poll scenario. Yadav said in the olden days it was the job of JD(U) to forge unity among Third Front partners. But now Left is making the effort and BSP is there to throw a spanner into it. "So, ultimately the fight in the Lok Sabha polls will boil down to NDA and UPA," he said. He felt that the "geography" of UPA has shrunk and "you don't see the ruling alliance in the Gangetic Plains from Delhi to Bengal. Congress is nowhere".

Saudis deny Qaeda plot against hajj

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has denied it foiled an al-Qaeda attack on this year's hajj, rejecting a US report that it had advanced intelligence of a plot against Mecca pilgrims, a newspaper reported yesterday. The Arab News daily quoted interior ministry spokesman General Mansur al-Turki as rejecting a report in the US-based Internet publication Middle East Times citing American intelligence officials. That report said massive security arrangements for the hajj earlier this month focused on intelligence that al-Qaeda had planned to attack Mecca and the more than 2.4 million participants in the annual Muslim pilgrimage. "We didn't launch any huge counterterrorism operation," Turki said, calling the Middle

East Times report "incorrect," Arab News reported. The Middle East Times, sister publication of Washington's conservative Washington Times, reported on December 16 that the massive security at the hajj was because of intelligence "that al-Qaeda planned to launch a bloody assault on Muslim pilgrims taking part in the annual pilgrimage." Turki called the security operations in Mecca normal for the hajj, Arab News reported. "This is not something new. It's normal, we do it all the time," he said. He also denied the Middle East Times report that the Saudis had launched preemptive raids against suspected al-Qaeda cells three months before the hajj, saying that "no such arrests were made."

'Sonia, Shahrukh among 50 most powerful people'

PTI, New York

Congress president Sonia Gandhi and Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan have been ranked among the 50 most powerful people in the world by the US-based magazine 'Newsweek' in a list topped by President-elect Barack Obama. Pakistan army chief Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, who controls the country's nuclear weapons, is placed 20th on the list of the global "power elite" at the beginning of 2009 in the magazine's January issue. Obama, who scripted history by becoming the first black-American to be voted to the White House, is followed by Chinese President Hu Jintao, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and powerful Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

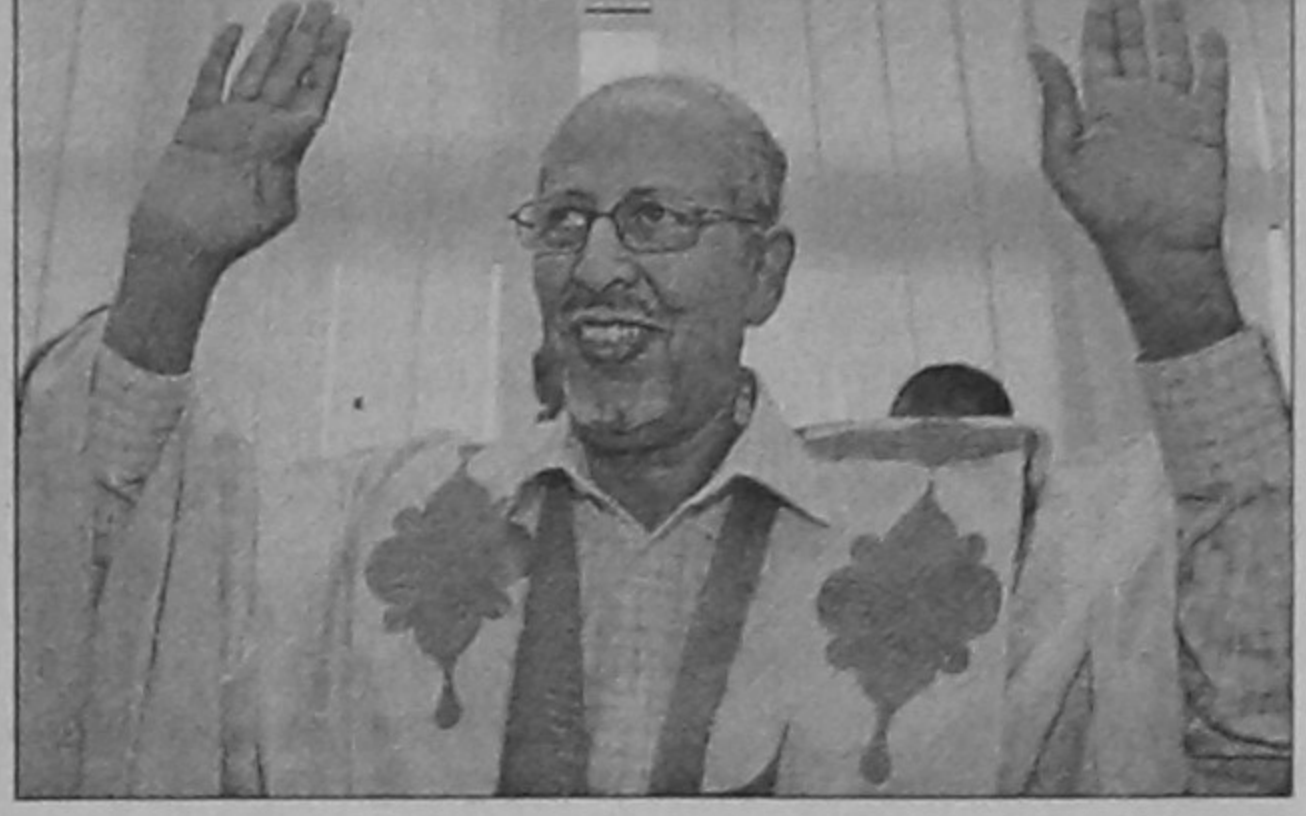


PHOTO: AFP

File photo shows Sidi Ould Sheikh Abdallahi celebrating after Mauritania's historic presidential election victory on March 26, 2007 in Nouakchott. Mauritania's military junta freed ousted president Sidi Ould from house arrest yesterday after weeks of international pressure.

Deposed Mauritanian president freed

AP, NOUAKCHOTT, Mauritania

The deposed president of the desert-encircled African nation of Mauritania was set free Sunday after 4 1/2 months under house arrest. But those in his inner circle said Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi is still under surveillance. They pointed to the security forces posted inside his home in the country's capital and the soldiers still patrolling his native village. Kaber Ould Hamoudi, the president's chief of staff, said soldiers woke Abdallahi's family shortly after 3 a.m., banging violently on the door of his home in Lenden, a village 150 miles (240 kilometers) from the capital where the military had placed him under 24-hour surveillance. The security forces demanded his staff wake the 70-year-old president, who was not told where he was going and was not allowed to be accompanied by his family.



PHOTO: AFP

A Christian Palestinian boy dressed as Santa Claus attends the last Sunday Mass before Christmas at the Latin Catholic Church in Gaza City yesterday. Some 2,000 Palestinian Christians live in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip.

Belgium scrambles to avoid political collapse

AFP, Brussels

Belgium's monarch on Saturday held new meetings with political party leaders in a bid to find a transitional government willing to try to lead the country away from a new political crisis. The meetings will hold the key to whether King Albert II accepts the resignation of prime minister Yves Leterm

over a scandal linked to troubled Fortis bank. Deadlocked elections in June 2007 left the country unable to form a new government to overcome deep divisions between Dutch and French-speaking regions. Leterm finally pulled together a cabinet in March, which has now collapsed under allegations that his aides pressured judges not to interfere in the break-up of Belgian-Dutch bank Fortis, which nearly collapsed in the global financial crisis. The scandal, dubbed by the Belgian press "Fortisgate", centres on a legal battle with Fortis's minority shareholders over the government sale of the bank's Belgian assets to French bank BNP Paribas. The court has frozen the sale.

Advertisement for a book or publication. It features a circular logo with Bengali text: 'আমার ভেট আমি দেবো দেখে শুনে জেনে দেবো'. Below the logo, there is more Bengali text: 'আমার ভেট আমি দেবো দেখে শুনে জেনে দেবো'. At the bottom, there is a small circular logo with a portrait of a man and the text 'লেখক: ড. সত্যজিৎ ও রবীন্দ্রনাথ অধিকার'.

Pakistan mall fire kills 10

AFP, Islamabad

The death toll from a massive fire that gutted a major shopping mall in the Pakistani garrison city of Rawalpindi has risen to 10, with six others still missing, officials said yesterday. Rescuers were combing through the debris in search of survivors at Ghakhar Plaza, which partially collapsed 12 hours after the blaze erupted in the early hours of Saturday, deputy city commissioner Haseeb Athar told reporters.

Head of Swedish Academy resigns

AFP, Stockholm

The head of the Swedish Academy, which each year awards the prestigious Nobel Literature Prize will step down in June after 10 years in the post, he announced at the body's annual year-end gathering. Horace Engdahl, 59, an author and literature critic, will be replaced by Peter Englund, a writer and historian who was elected to the Academy in 2002. "In line with a decision taken back in May by the Academy, which with admirable restraint has kept it secret until today, I will be leaving my position of my own will on June 1, 2009, exactly 10 years after I took over from Mr. (Sture) Allen," Engdahl announced late Saturday.

New Thai cabinet sets to work amid complaints

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Premier Abhisit Vejjajiva's newly unveiled cabinet set to work yesterday on building reconciliation and reviving the economy, despite the threat of protests over some appointments. Key ministers from the Democrat Party met to discuss policy matters, a day before an official swearing in ceremony on Monday in front of the revered king. "After the royal audience tomorrow, the prime minister may call for another discussion of government policy before the cabinet meet for the first time on Tuesday to approve the policies," said deputy interior minister Thaworn Senneam.

The cabinet list was announced Saturday after King Bhumibol Adulyadej signed a royal command approving the ministers, appointed after Abhisit won a parliamentary vote to bring a Democrat-led coalition to power. Of the 36 cabinet posts, 24 ministers are serving in government for the first time. Heading the economic team is finance minister Korn Chatikavanij, an Oxford contemporary of 44-year-old Abhisit. The minister formerly worked for investment bank JPMorgan Chase. But amid a global financial downturn exacerbated by political turmoil in the kingdom, business leaders have criticised the choice of other economic ministers tasked with reviving the country's fortunes.

Vacancy Announcement from JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency). The text describes the agency's role in providing technical assistance and lists a vacancy for a 'Technical Officer for Midwifery (1 post, Narsingdi)'. It details the responsibilities, qualifications (Bachelor's degree in midwifery, 5 years experience), and application process (submit CV and cover letter to the DGFP office in Dhaka by 31st December 2008).