



A giant fire raging in the Bunyip State Park near Labertouche closes in on farm building, some 125km west of Melbourne yesterday. More than 40 blazes raged across two states as a once-in-a-century heatwave pushed the mercury as high as 46 degrees Celsius.

Raging wildfires kill 14 in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Fourteen people died and more than 100 homes were destroyed in wildfires raging through southeastern Australia yesterday, with arsonists suspected of starting several blazes, police said.

"We have 14 confirmed deceased. We don't know how many more, we are concerned it is possible these numbers could rise up to about 40," said deputy police commissioner Kieran Walshe.

"We base that on the fact we're only just getting into these areas now to search buildings and properties.

High winds fanned more than 50 fires across three states and tens of thousands of hectares (acres) in tinderbox conditions as a once-in-a-century heatwave topped 46 degrees Celsius (115

Fahrenheit).

All those killed were caught up in a raging blaze northwest of Australia's second-biggest city of Melbourne, Walshe said, with six believed to have died in one car trapped in the fire.

Arsonists were believed to be responsible for some of the nine major fires raging through Victoria state.

"We suspect a number of the fires have been deliberately lit," Walshe said.

The most deadly blaze started some 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of Melbourne in East Kilmore and swept 30 kilometres eastwards through several small townships including Wandong, Strathewen and Clonbinane to Kinglake.

"The whole township is pretty much on fire," Kinglake resident Peter Mitchell told ABC Radio.

Nato lashes European allies over Afghanistan

AFP, Munich

The head of Nato and US Vice President Joe Biden joined forces Saturday to urge European allies to step up efforts in Afghanistan, as the United States prepares to send in thousands more troops.

Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer warned the Europeans that they were undermining their leadership credentials and upsetting the balance within the world's biggest military alliance, as it battles a Taliban-led insurgency.

"I am frankly concerned when I hear the United States is planning a major commitment for Afghanistan, but other allies ruling out doing more," he said, at a major

international security conference in Munich, southern Germany.

"That is not good for the political balance of this mission. That is not good for the balance inside the North Atlantic alliance," he said. "Leadership and burdens -- they go together."

Scheffer, who did not single out any nation, warned that the failure to step up "makes calls for Europe's voice to be heard in Washington perhaps a bit more hollow than they should be."

New US President Barack Obama has singled out Afghanistan as his main front in the "war on terrorism" and plans to deploy 30,000 more US troops there over the next

US willing to talk to Iran, but is ready to act

Biden pledges 'new tone' in US foreign relations

AP, Munich

Vice President Joe Biden delivered a clear message to Iran, saying Saturday the US was willing to talk, but will act to isolate and pressure Tehran if it does not abandon its nuclear ambitions and support for terrorism.

In a sweeping speech to international leaders and security experts here, Biden said the US will strive to act preventively to avoid having to choose between the risks of war and the dangers of inaction.

But he held out the option that the US could take pre-emptive action against Iran if necessary to stop crisis before they start. The US, he said, will "continue to develop missile defences to counter a growing Iranian capability, provided the technology is proven and it is cost effective."

At the same time, he said that if Tehran gives up its nuclear program and stops backing terrorists, there will be meaningful incentives.

"We will draw upon all the elements of our power -- military and diplomatic,

intelligence and law enforcement, economic and cultural -- to stop crises from occurring before they are in front of us," Biden told the gathering in his 25 minute address.

During much of the morning Iranian parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani was in the room, but it was unclear if he was there as Biden spoke. There is no indication yet that the two men will meet during the conference.

Biden's speech laid out for the first time to an international audience the Obama administration's foreign policy tenets, and emphasised diplomacy and cooperation. He also warned allies that they will be expected to share the burdens of fighting extremists and bolstering weaker governments and poor nations.

"America will do more, that's the good news," said Biden. "But the bad news is American will ask for more from our partners."

While President Barack Obama has said the US is ready for direct talks with Iran, Biden's comments made it clear the US is not willing to completely discard the

stick, despite early warnings from Tehran.

His comments came a day after Larijani sternly declared that the Obama administration must admit past wrongs before there can be reconciliation.

"The old carrot and stick policy must be discarded," he said, alluding to Western threats and offers of rewards to coax Iran to give up nuclear activities the West views as threatening. "This is a golden opportunity for the United States."

Tehran insists its nuclear aims are peaceful. The former US administration refused one-on-one negotiations with Tehran on the issue unless it made significant nuclear concessions beforehand.

Reaching out to close another rift, Biden said it's time to repair relations between the US and Russia.

He said Nato and Russia should cooperate to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaida. But he warned that the US will continue to have differences with Moscow, including opposition to its efforts to carve out independent states in Georgia.



A Palestinian child inspects a room in his family home, which was damaged following an Israeli strike in the border town of Rafah between Egypt and the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.



A wounded man tries to run from gunshots from the office of the Madagascar president in Antananarivo yesterday. At least 7 people were shot dead after a demonstration of the mayor of Antananarivo, Andry Rajoelina, marched to the office of the president and was dispersed with gunshots.

Madagascar police kill 7 opposition protestors

AFP, Antananarivo

Madagascar police shot dead at least seven supporters of opposition leader Andry Rajoelina Saturday as they tried to march on a palace of President Marc Ravalomanana during a protest.

The new escalation in the weeks-old power struggle between the ousted mayor of Antananarivo and Ravalomanana came after the opposition announced a rival "transition authority" with Rajoelina in charge.

According to AFP reporters on the scene, a group of demonstrators attending a rally in the capital started marching towards Ambohitsorohitra Palace after facing off with security forces for an hour.

A first cordon of anti-riot

police retreated when the protestors advanced but a second one closer to the presidential compound then opened fire with live bullets, killing at least seven people and wounding many more.

An AFP reporter saw seven bodies in the city hospital's morgue.

"Considering the institutional vacuum created by the dismissal procedure launched against the president... Andry Rajoelina is appointed as chairman of the transition high authority," an aide of the opposition leader had told the rally.

Rajoelina himself said all of the vast island's regions would be represented in the transitional body and announced that Roindro Monja, a politician from the southwestern city of Tuléar, was "his" new prime minister.

Sadrists complain of vote fraud

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi politicians backed by the radical anti-US cleric Moqtada al-Sadr yesterday said they would lodge an official complaint about votes being excluded during last weekend's provincial elections.

Allies of Sadr said that preliminary results declared by election authorities were markedly different from estimates compiled by the party's observers during the hotly-contested vote.

"There is a big difference in the figures we have, through our agents and observers, and those that were declared," said Amir al-Kinani, secretary general of the Free

Independent Movement, backed by Sadr.

"We will submit the appeal in the results of a number of Baghdad areas and other provinces, including Najaf, Maysan, and Diwaniyah," he said.

The Free Independent Movement finished second in the capital Baghdad with nine percent of the vote, which left them 29 percent behind candidates backed by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

The Sadrists movement also finished second in the Shiadominated provinces of Maysan, Najaf and Dhi Qar, south of Baghdad.

Kinani, however, alleged that many ballot boxes had been excluded from the official vote count.

BBC presenter won't apologise for calling British PM 'idiot'

AFP, London

BBC television presenter Jeremy Clarkson said yesterday that while he was sorry for having made fun of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's appearance, he would not apologise for calling him an "idiot".

Clarkson, known to viewers around the world as the face of the BBC's top-rated "Top Gear" car show, had described Brown, who lost his sight in one eye in an accident suffered while playing rugby as a teenager, as a "one-eyed Scottish idiot" during a press conference in Sydney.

Clarkson was sharply criticised for the remarks by British politicians and the Royal National Institute of Blind People, and though he issued an apology on Friday, he told The Sun tabloid that he hadn't "apologised for calling him an idiot."

"I very specifically apologised for making fun of his personal appearance -- very specifically," he told the newspaper from his Sydney hotel.

"I have nothing against the Scottish and of course I regret making any remark that might have upset the disabled.

Obama considering 2 Iraq withdrawal plans

AP, Washington

The White House is considering at least two troop withdrawal options as it weighs a new Iraq strategy one that would preserve President Barack Obama's campaign pledge to get all combat brigades out within 16 months and a second that would stretch it to 23 months, two officials said Friday.

A third, in-between option of 19 months is also being weighed, according to the officials, neither of whom would discuss the sensitive topic without being granted anonymity. One of the officials said the main focus appears to be on the 16-month and 23-month options; 23 months would run to the end of 2010.

Under either timeline, the US would hope to leave behind a number of brigades that would be redesigned and reconfigured as multipurpose units to provide training and advising for Iraqi security forces, one official said. These brigades would be considered noncombat outfits and their presence would have to be agreed in advance by the Iraqi

government, which under a deal signed late last year insisted that all US forces not just combat brigades be out of Iraq by the end of 2011.

Obama has said his Iraq policy will include leaving a residual US military force of unspecified composition and size in Iraq and in the region to conduct counter-terrorism missions against al-Qaeda in Iraq and to protect American diplomatic and civilian personnel. He has said they will not build permanent bases in Iraq but will continue training and supporting Iraqi security forces "as long as Iraqi leaders move toward political reconciliation and away from sectarianism."

The concept of the stay-behind training and advising brigades has been well developed, the official said, although the details such as their size and makeup are in an early stage of being sorted out.

At the White House's request, top military officials recently offered an assessment of the risks associated with the 16-, 19- and 23-month withdrawal timetables,

without saying which is preferred. Obama's top two defence advisers, Defence Secretary Robert Gates and Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen, have not yet provided a formal recommendation to the president on a timetable, an official said.

It is possible that Obama will ask for similar assessments of other withdrawal timetables before deciding on a way ahead.

A senior administration official said Friday, without commenting on the timetables under consideration, that the White House and senior military commanders "are coming to a meeting of the minds" on troop withdrawals and on the need for a diplomatic and political strategy to end US involvement in the war and to ease the strain on troops and their families.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to discuss the matter publicly, said it likely would be a matter of "weeks, not months" before Obama is ready to announce his decisions on an Iraq strategy.



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