

Truce in tatters as Gaza militant dies in clash

AP, Gaza City

A Palestinian fighter died in a clash with Israeli troops and Israeli aircraft attacked two targets in Gaza on Monday as mediators tried to broker a long-term ceasefire a day before Israel holds national elections. The militant group Islamic Jihad said in a statement that one of its fighters was killed overnight in an Israeli airstrike. The Israeli military said troops spotted an armed militant trying to cross the Gaza-Israel border late Sunday and opened fire, after which a bomb belt he was wearing detonated. Israeli aircraft struck two militant positions in the territory early Monday, in what the military said was retaliation for rocket fire from Gaza on Sunday. No injuries were reported in the aerial attacks. Riad Malki, foreign minister in the moderate Palestinian government based in the West Bank, charged Monday that Hamas was trying to influence the out-

come of Tuesday's Israeli elections by continuing to fire rockets into southern Israel. The moderate Palestinian government is headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, a rival of Gaza's Hamas rulers. Hamas doesn't want to see a pro-peace government elected because it would pursue a political deal with Abbas, and the Islamic militant group "wants instability in the region," Malki said during a visit to Poland. Abbas' government is "very much worried" that the rocket attacks might "really push Israeli public opinion and the voters to vote for an anti-peace government," he told reporters in Warsaw. The violence coincided with stepped-up efforts by the two sides to anchor a shaky cease-fire that ended Israel's devastating three-week offensive, which aimed at halting the rocket fire. Israel unilaterally ended its offensive on Jan. 18, and Gaza's Hamas rulers announced their own ceasefire the same day. Hamas is seeking to get Gaza's blockaded border crossings open, while Israel

wants an end to arms smuggling into the territory and the return of a soldier captured by Hamas in June, 2006. The talks are being mediated by Egypt, as the sides will not communicate directly with each other. A delegation of Hamas leaders from Gaza was in Damascus, Syria, on Monday to consult with the Islamic organization's exiled travel to Cairo later in the day. As the cease-fire efforts progressed, Israel's leadership was preoccupied with the election. Polls predict a victory for hard-liners, reflecting public sentiment partially linked to anger over the rocket fire and the belief among Israelis that territorial withdrawals like the country's 2005 Gaza pullout have only drawn more violence. Polls show Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu ahead and the moderate foreign minister, Tzipi Livni of Kadima, running a close second. The polls indicate that parliament is likely to be heavily fragmented, with no clear victory for any one party.



A wildfire rages up a hillside near Kinglake, some 100km northeast of Melbourne yesterday. The wildfires, which started on Feb 7, have become the deadliest in Australia's history leaving at least 135 dead.

Pakistan suspects criminals behind US kidnapping

AFP, Quetta

Pakistani police and intelligence agents were scrambling Monday to piece together information about a hitherto unheard of insurgent group that has claimed the kidnapping of an American UN official. "This appears to be a criminal gang... kidnapping for ransom," a senior police investigator told AFP on condition of anonymity. "We did not hear about it before and are gathering information about its origin," he added. Another security official confirmed the same line of investigation.

China premier asks Cambridge to pardon shoe-thrower

AP, Beijing

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is asking Britain's Cambridge University to pardon a student who threw a shoe at him during his speech there earlier this month. The Feb. 2 incident prompted an outraged response from the Chinese government and stirred indignation among many ordinary Chinese, who saw it as an affront to national pride. "It is hoped that the university will give the student an opportunity to continue his studies at the university," Wen was quoted as saying by China's ambassador in London, Fu Ying, in a statement posted on the Foreign Ministry's Web site.

4 survivors, 24 die after Brazil plane crash

AP, Sao Paulo

Four people at the rear of a plane that crashed in a muddy Amazon river managed to open an emergency door and swim to safety as the aircraft sank, dragging 24 others to their death, officials said Sunday. Most victims were members of a single family that had chartered the plane to travel to a birthday party. Seven children died. "It was all very fast. The plane sank very fast," 21-year-old survivor Brenda Moraes told Brazil's GloboNews TV. "We only had a chance because we were sitting in the last rows and could open the emergency door." Divers on Sunday recovered two dozen bodies from the twin turboprop plane that plunged into the Manacapuru river in a heavy rainstorm the day before, ending rescue operations after all passengers and crew were accounted for, said firefighter Maj. Jair Ruas Braga. Aviation and fire officials said there were 28 people aboard the plane, a twin turboprop with a capacity of 21 people. Authorities said they are investigating the alleged overcrowding.

Yemen releases 170 al-Qaeda suspects

AP, Sanaa

Yemen released 170 men it had arrested on suspicion of having ties to al-Qaeda, security officials said Sunday, two weeks after the terror group announced that Yemen had become the base of its activities for the whole Arabian peninsula. The announcement also comes as government forces say they are poised to sweep through the northern city of Manbuj to combat an entrenched al-Qaeda presence that includes both Yemenis and Saudis. The officials who announced the release spoke

on condition of anonymity because they are not allowed to speak to the press. The men were freed Friday and Saturday after signing pledges not to engage in terrorism—a strategy the Yemeni government has often used with those suspected of fighting in militant causes abroad. Local tribal leaders are also expected to guarantee the good behaviour of the released. The practice stems in part from the powerful role played by the tribes across the rugged Yemeni countryside as well as the comparative weakness of the central government.



A distraught family is reunited at a meeting point for displaced people at Whittlesea, some 50km north of Melbourne yesterday as raging Australian wildfires left at least 135 people dead amid a landscape of charred homes, bodies and devastated communities.

Anti-war lawmakers worry over US plan for Afghanistan

AP, Washington

After campaigning on the promise to end one war, President Barack Obama is preparing to escalate another. Obama's dual stance on the two wars is not lost on congressional Democrats, many of whom also ran on anti-war platforms. In coming weeks, they expect to have to consider tens of billions of dollars needed for combat, including a major buildup of troops in Afghanistan. While increasing the military's focus in Afghanistan was anticipated, it was a cor-

nerstone of Obama's campaign, many Democrats acknowledged in recent interviews that they are skittish about sending more troops, even in small numbers. The concern, they say, is that the military could become further entrenched in an unwinnable war on their watch. "Before I support any more troops to Afghanistan, I want to see a strategy that includes an exit plan," said Rep. Jim McGovern, a Massachusetts liberal who at one point wanted to cut off money for the Iraq war.

Israeli candidates in last ditch scramble for votes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli candidates scrambled for support from a record number of undecided voters on Monday, the eve of a tight parliamentary election dominated by the meteoric rise of an ultra-nationalist party. Final opinion polls published before Tuesday's vote showed the ruling Kadima closing the gap on the right-wing opposition Likud to just a few seats, filling the sails of the centrist party that had been trailing in surveys. With the number of undecided voters around 20 percent -- Israel's highest ever according to polls -- the leaders of Kadima and Likud made last-minute efforts to sway supporters to their camps. "Victory is within reach," Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, the head of Kadima aiming to become Israel's second woman prime minister, told public radio.

"If Kadima gets just one mandate more than Likud, we will be able to form a governing coalition as we are a centrist party that can bring together the right and the left," she said. In the complex world of Israeli politics, the person the president will charge with forming a coalition is not automatically the one who gets the most votes, but the one who has the highest chances of cobbling together 61 seats in the 120-member parliament. Livni is hoping that a strong enough showing in Tuesday's ballot will draw smaller parties to her camp, away from Benjamin Netanyahu, a former premier who heads the right-wing Likud and who looks likely to get the most backing for a coalition. Netanyahu, who according to local media is worried that the loss of support will mean that he will head a shaky government that will only last a year or so, has sought to brandish his credentials as a security hardliner.

Obama team reaches out in first foreign outing

AFP, Munich, Germany

The US administration signalled a new spirit of international cooperation this weekend but called for its allies to do more and painted a bleak picture of the war in Afghanistan. Vice President Joe Biden used the Munich Security Conference in the southern German city to say that Barack Obama's White House sought a "new tone" in foreign relations, particularly with regard to Russia and even Iran. "I come to Europe on behalf of a new administration determined to set a new tone not only in Washington, but in America's relations around the world," he said on his first foreign trip since Obama took office on January 20. "America will do more, but America will ask for more from our partners. "As we seek a lasting framework for our common struggle against extremism, we will have to work cooperatively with nations

around the world -- and we will need your help," Biden said. Obama sent other big guns to Munich too: national security advisor General James Jones, special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke and General David Petraeus, US commander over Afghanistan and Iraq. All three painted a bleak picture of the prospects of beating the Taliban, with Holbrooke saying it would be even tougher than stabilising Iraq in the bloody years following the 2003 US-led toppling of Saddam Hussein. "It is like no other problem we have confronted, and in my view it's going to be much tougher than Iraq," Holbrooke said. "It is going to be a long, difficult struggle. "I don't think we can afford to get it wrong this time, because for the first time, the situation directly involves the homeland security of the nations involved," he said.

Obama can't fix US capitalism

Says Fidel Castro

AFP, Havana

Former president Fidel Castro said Sunday US President Barack Obama and all his men will not be able to put US capitalism back together again, as Obama prods Congress to pass a massive stimulus plan for the ailing US economy. "Obama (White House chief of staff Rahm) Emanuel and all the brilliant politicians and economists they've brought together won't suffice to resolve the growing problems of the US capitalist society," Castro said in an article published in official media. Fidel Castro, 82, has been increasingly critical of the new US president even after he praised him for his electoral victory on November 4. As Obama this week eagerly awaits the US Senate's approval of an 800 billion dollar economic stimulus bill he says the US economy desperately needs to avoid disaster, Castro said the US economy's recovery depends on the entire world chipping in. "All the other countries will have to pay for the colossal waste of money (of the US) and guarantee, first and foremost in this increasingly polluted planet, American jobs and the profits of the country's big multinationals," Castro wrote.



Palestinian security men inspect the damage at a police post targeted by an Israeli air raid early yesterday near Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza strip. An Israeli F-16 fired two missiles against the police post, causing material damage but no injuries, witnesses and Palestinian security sources said.

Thirty mummies found in Egypt tomb

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian archaeologists have discovered dozens of mummies and several stone and wood sarcophagi south of Cairo in a pharaonic tomb estimated to be 4,300 years old, the ministry of culture said yesterday. The find was made at Gisir al-Moudir, west of Egypt's first ever pyramid at Saqqara, the step pyramid of Djoser built by architect Imhotep in around 2,700 BC, the ministry said in a statement. "The tomb dates from the era of the Vth dynasty of the Old Kingdom, about 4,300 years ago," Egypt's antiquities supreme Zahi Hawass said. "Thirty mummies and skeletons were discovered, including a wooden sarcophagus that has been sealed since the pharaonic era in the burial chamber at a depth of 11 metres (36 feet)."



Firefighters inspect the area after a van loaded with a bomb exploded in the east of Madrid yesterday. No one has yet claimed responsibility for the explosion, but the radio speculated that it could be the work of Basque separatist group ETA three weeks ahead of regional elections in the Basque region.

Defence minister quits over Madagascar bloodbath

AFP, Antananarivo

Madagascar's defence minister on Monday announced her resignation in protest at the police shooting of opposition supporters this weekend that left 28 dead and drew international condemnation. As the power struggle between President Marc Ravalomanana and opposition leader Andry Rajoelina escalated, Cecile Manoroahanta said she did not want to remain in a government that condoned the shooting of civilians. She was promptly replaced in the cabinet by the chief of military staff, Mamy Ranaivoniarivo, a defence ministry spokesman told AFP. "In this period of political

crisis, I extend my condolences and moral support to the families who suffered losses," Manoroahanta said in a statement read on the private radio channel Antsive. "As a mother, I do not tolerate this violence," she said. "It was agreed at government level that the security forces were meant to protect the population and its property... After all that has happened, I decide as of now to no longer remain part of this government." Rajoelina on Saturday organised a rally attended by 20,000 people where he outlined the new structure of his opposition movement, launching a "transition authority" and naming his own prime minister.

Presence of writers

FROM PAGE 16

the writer with requests for his autograph while many others were seen taking pictures of him on their mobile camera phones. Similar crowds were seen in front of the Samoy Publication stall where writer Anisul Haq sat at different hours throughout the evening yesterday. He was also seen happily signing away autographs on his new books and posing for pictures with his fans. The presence of popular writers is increasing as the fair progresses. Over the last couple of days, children's writer Zafar Iqbal, new face in the arena of literature Sumanto Aslam, renowned writer Muntasir Mamoon and poet Syed Shamsul Haq -- all have been seen at the fair premises happily interacting with fans. Booklovers similarly are very excited about getting to meet their favourite writers. Polly, a Dhaka University

student, said she has been a great fan of Imdadul Haq Milon since she was in college. She bought his new book and was able to push through the crowds to get his autograph. "It's a great feeling. I will cherish this moment forever and also this autographed book," Polly said. Shavonti, another booklover who was able to get a photograph of herself with writer Anisul Haq said, "We usually don't get an opportunity of coming so close to a famous writer like him. Ekushey Bui Melagaveme this chance!" Writer Imdadul Haq Milon himself expressed hope about the fair and how it brings together the writers and their readers. Talking to The Daily Star last evening he said, "I wait for this book fair all year round. I have a long relationship with this fair, since 1973." He said he expects the crowds will get thicker as the

fair crosses two weeks but is also aware of the lack of space to accommodate very large crowds since the fair premises has been squeezed this year. Meanwhile, Milon also expressed some frustration about lack of good books for children. "Popular writers should write books for our children," he said adding, "Books on foreign characters are rather harmful for children." A total of 91 new titles arrived at the fair yesterday. The new books include "Binnashtatto abong er Proyog" by Keshob Chandra Bhuiyan, "Nirbachita" by Naitai Sen, "Mohabiswa Ebong Sourjogot" by Dr Kalipada Kundu, "Achena Prithibir Ajana Kahini" by Sumanto Aslam, "Moromi Lalan Fakir" by Julfikar Newton and "Red Ross or Sweet Poems" by Jahangir Shah Nawaz.