

# Obama vows to prevent al-Qaeda, Taliban from operating 'with impunity'

President Barack Obama vowed to prevent al-Qaeda from operating "with impunity" in Afghanistan and urged a combined effort to eradicate safe havens for the Taliban and other militants there.

As Washington launches a review of US policy in Afghanistan, Obama said Afghanistan's national government "seems very detached from what's going on in the surrounding community."

In his first press conference Monday, Obama pointed to Taliban and al-Qaeda militants operating in the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"What we haven't seen is the kind of concerted effort to root out those safe havens that ultimately makes our mission successful," Obama said.

"We are going to need more effective coordination with our military efforts with diplomatic efforts, with development efforts, with more effective coordination with our allies in order for us to be successful," he said.

"I do not have a timetable for how long that's going to take. What I know is I'm not going to allow al-Qaeda and (Osama) bin Laden to operate with impunity attacking the US," he said.

"My bottom line is that we cannot allow al-Qaeda to operate, we cannot have safe havens in that region. And we're going to have to work both smartly and with consistency," Obama

said. In an editorial published Tuesday, Senator John Kerry, who serves as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee echoed the president's line.

"The United States is not in Afghanistan to make it our 51st state -- but to make sure it does not become an al-Qaeda narco-state and terrorist beachhead capable of destabilising neighbouring Pakistan," Kerry wrote in The Washington Post.

Kerry stressed that the mission there was a "race against time" in a region that has never been welcoming to lingering foreign interests.

He stressed that the United States needed more help from allies and a renewed focus on reconstruction.

"Our Nato allies have to shoulder a bigger burden, and we should continue to seek more combat troops with fewer restrictions," he said.

The Obama administration has said it is carrying out a review of strategy in Afghanistan as Taliban militants challenge the Kabul government for control of the south and the east of the country.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates and other officials have signalled a new strategy would likely abandon the ambitious goals of the previous administration -- to forge a democracy in the war-torn and impoverished country.

The chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, Admiral Mike Mullen told soldiers with the 10th Mountain Division that the military's focus had switched to Afghanistan.

## Ex UN-envoy to head probe of Israel's Gaza attacks

AFP, United Nations

Former UN envoy Ian Martin is to head a five-member panel that will probe last month's Israeli attacks on UN facilities in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian UN observer Ryad Mansour said Monday.

Mansour told reporters that UN chief Ban Ki-moon informed the UN Security Council Monday that Martin, a former UN envoy to Nepal who earlier served as secretary general of Amnesty International, would lead the commission.

Ban informed the 15-member UN Security Council during closed-door consultations that the panel "would be composed of four individuals and a member of the (UN) secretariat" and would be "headed by Ian Martin," the Palestinian observer said.

Mansour described Ban's move as a "positive and responsive development, a step in the right direction of investigating crimes committed by Israel."



Firefighters battle to hold the containment lines to prevent a bushfire in the Kiewa Valley from reaching the town of Dederang in the Victoria Alps yesterday. At least 181 people have been killed and entire towns razed as wildfires raged across southeastern Australia during the once-in-a-century heatwave.

## Time of US pressure in Iraq is over: Maliki

### Four US soldiers killed in suicide bombing

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki told reporters yesterday that the time when the United States could put pressure on Iraq had passed.

"The time for putting pressure on Iraq is over," Maliki said, referring to comments by US Vice President Joe Biden who last week urged the Baghdad government to speed the pace of political reform in the war-torn country.

"The Iraqi government knows what are its responsibilities. We are carrying out reform and we are in the last step of the reconciliation," the premier added.

Biden said on Friday that the United States would have to be more aggressive in prodding the Iraq government on forging political reform.

He said that January 31 provincial elections in Iraq had shown that progress was being made, but more needed to be done as the country's leaders had not "gotten their political arrangements together yet."

In fresh violence, four American soldiers and an interpreter were killed in a suicide car bombing in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul on Monday, in the deadliest attack since last May, the US military said.

It said three soldiers were killed on the spot while a fourth and the interpreter died later of their wounds when the suicide bomber's car exploded near their vehicle.

The US military considers Mosul, 370 kilometres (225 miles) from Baghdad, to be al-Qaeda's last urban stronghold in Iraq. A total of 26 US soldiers have now been killed in the Mosul region over the past year.

## Australian wildfires claim more lives

### Special task force to hunt arsonists

AFP, Healesville

Australian firefighters fought yesterday to save communities from wildfires that have claimed 181 lives and left a trail of charred bodies in blackened homes and twisted car wrecks.

As investigators launched the country's largest ever arson investigation, police warned that the death toll -- already the worst in Australia's history -- would rise further during the week.

"Road by road, house by house, we are working our way through," Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon said.

"We believe the toll will rise. It's a very sad thing for all of us in our community... we hope towards the end of the weekend that the toll will start to settle in terms of numbers."

In devastated Kinglake, Ross Buchanan risked his life to save his home -- only to find his 15-year-old son McKenzie and daughter Neeve, nine, had been killed as fire raged through the rest of the town.

"I've lost two kids, nothing can bring them back," he told Sky News.

The mounting number of bodies has forced authorities to set up a temporary morgue in Melbourne which has so far admitted 101 victims, the Victoria state coroner said.

Nixon said a special task force involving 100

officers, dubbed Operation Phoenix, would investigate all aspects of the fires, including tracking down arsonists responsible for some of the blazes.

She said authorities were confident of arresting one blamed for starting and repeatedly reigniting fires in Gippsland, in Victoria's east, where almost 20 people have died.

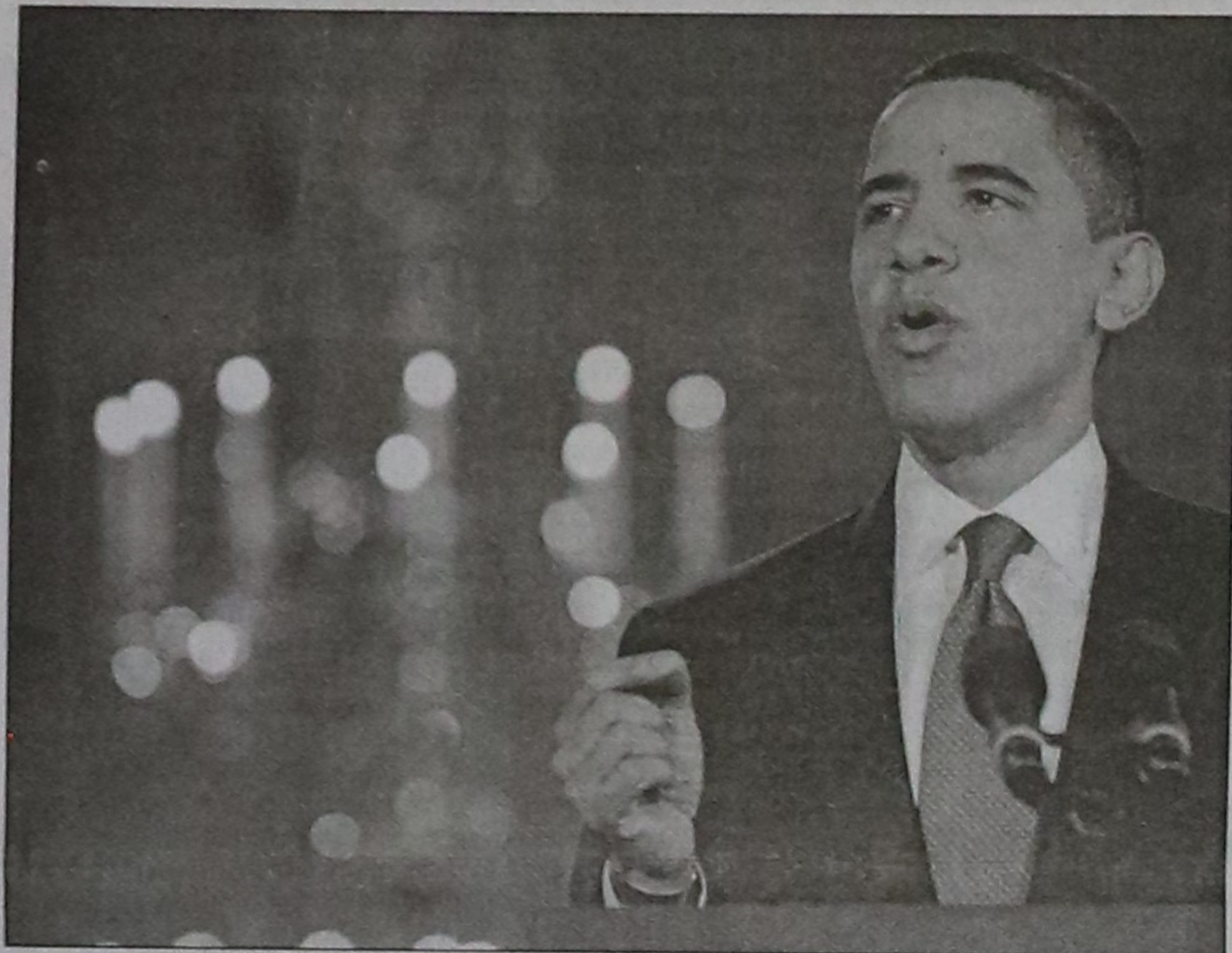
Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has described the arsonists as "mass murderers," and Victoria Police Minister Bob Cameron said authorities were determined to catch them.

"The sooner that they're taken out of the community the better for everybody's sake," he told Sky News. "We now know the devastation that they've caused."

Exhausted firefighters, most of them volunteers who have had little rest since the firestorms flared on Saturday, had more immediate concerns as they tried to save communities in the path of the flames.

Healesville, about 50 kilometres (31 miles) northeast of Melbourne, was the latest community threatened by the fires, which razed entire towns over the weekend.

Victoria's Country Fire Authority warned the town was in danger from "heavy ember attack," a phenomenon that survivors who have faced it liken to a fiery hailstorm of burning embers.



US President Barack Obama answers a question during his first prime time press conference in the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC, on Monday.

## Gaza truce depends on Israeli election: Hamas

AFP, Cairo

Hamas is awaiting the outcome of Tuesday's Israeli election to know whether a long-term truce deal in Gaza can be reached, senior Hamas member Osama Hamdan told AFP.

Egypt has been mediating between Israel and the Gaza Strip's rulers since mutual ceasefires ended the 22-day war on the territory on January 18, but progress has been slow despite repeated announcements of imminent success.

State news agency MENA reported that a Gaza-based Hamas delegation returned to Egypt for more talks on Tuesday, but Lebanon-based Hamdan told AFP by telephone that the Islamists were awaiting the Israeli election result.

"We're following the Israeli election. The election taking place today will determine what will happen," he said.

"If (right-wing Likud leader Benjamin) Netanyahu wins, I don't think that the current government will conclude an agreement. If the current government wins, they could reach an agreement."

While a Hamas official said on Saturday that a truce accord could be clinched within "a few days," Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said on Monday that a lasting Gaza truce could come into effect "next week."

MENA said the Hamas delegation in Cairo on Tuesday, which includes senior members Ayman Taha and Gamel Abu Hashem, would

"resume efforts to reach a cooling off."

They will "present the movement's final stand regarding cooling off with Israel and receive the response of the other factions regarding proposals for activating the cooling off and discuss them with Egyptian officials."

Hamdan said that pending the Israeli election result, Hamas was continuing its contacts to resolve sticking points, particularly on how to reopen Gaza's crossing points.

Israel, which controls all but one of the border crossings, has kept the densely populated strip closed to all but essential supplies since June 2007, when Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian faction Fatah.

Hamas has said that Israel wants the crossings to be open initially to 80 percent of goods, with complete opening to follow when a prisoner exchange deal is sealed for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who was captured in 2006.

The Islamists have said they want clarifications on what goods would be allowed into the Gaza Strip initially.

Hamas and Israel, which refuse to negotiate directly with each other, announced unilateral ceasefires on January 18 after a short but fierce conflict left around 1,330 Palestinians and 13 Israelis dead.

Palestinian militants have fired around 40 rockets and mortar rounds into Israel since the theoretical end of hostilities, and Israel has launched sporadic air and artillery strikes on Gaza in retaliation.

## Sarkozy urges Europe to rebuild ties with Iraq

AP, Baghdad

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, on his first trip to Iraq, urged other European leaders yesterday to follow his lead and rebuild ties with the country that were frayed by the US-led war.

Sarkozy the first French head of state to visit Iraq since the 2003 US invasion that his predecessor opposed was received by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani in a televised welcome ceremony held outdoors despite gusty winds in Baghdad.

The French leader praised Iraq for successful provincial elections held last month without major violence, and he promised economic and political support for the country.

"The elections were very, very successful," he said. "France believes in the unity of Iraq and the world needs a strong Iraq," he said at a joint news conference after meeting with Talabani.

Sarkozy, nicknamed "Sarko l'Americain" for his admiration and support of the United

States, has been seeking to re-establish ties with Iraq and shore up relations with Washington that were deeply strained by his predecessor's opposition to the war.

Then-President Jacques Chirac's refusal to back the US-led military effort in Iraq led to a new low in France-US ties. France was vilified in US public opinion. Some Americans boycotted French wines, and french fries took on the name "freedom fries" in the House of Representatives cafeteria.

Sarkozy urged other European leaders to help Iraq.

"We want to encourage all European countries to come," he said. "It is in Europe's interest to extend a hand here and to support the peace."

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who accompanied Sarkozy on Tuesday, made the first trip by a senior French official to the country on Aug. 20, 2007. Kouchner said at the time that Paris wanted to "turn the page" and look to the future. He also travelled to Iraq in June.



A replica of the Omid (Hope) satellite and the Safir-2 rocket that carried it into space are displayed as Iranians take part in a rally to mark the 30th anniversary of the Islamic revolution at Azadi (Freedom) square in Tehran yesterday.

## Storms batter Britain and France

AFP, Paris

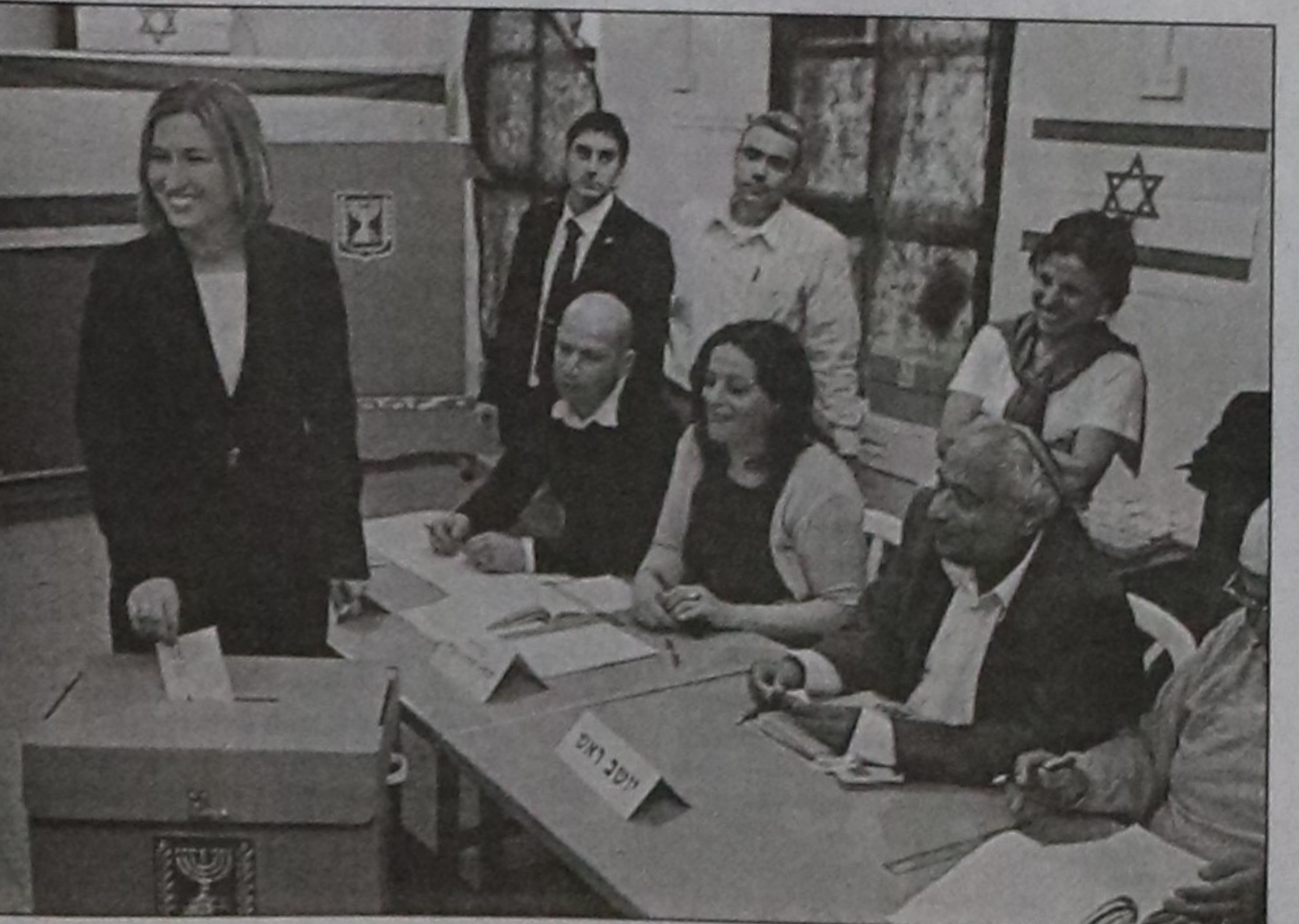
Severe winds and rain lashed France and Britain on Tuesday, knocking out power to half a million homes and forcing the closure of Paris' two international airports for the first time in 34 years.

Hurricane-force gusts of up to 140 kilometres (87 miles) per hour were recorded on France's west coast, as the second major storm in two weeks barreled in from the Atlantic.

Driving snow, torrential rain and heavy winds also caused flooding and power cuts in Britain.

French emergency services were called out hundreds of times to clear fallen trees and debris from roads, but there were no initial reports of injuries.

Bracing for winds of up to 100 kilometres per hour in the capital, the authorities shut down Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports, cancelling more than 200 flights.



Israeli Foreign Minister and Kadima party candidate Tzipi Livni speaks to reporters at a polling station yesterday in Tel Aviv. Israelis voted in a tight election race between hawkish former premier Benjamin Netanyahu and centrist Livni, with the far-right set to make major gains.

## Israelis vote with Livni, Netanyahu in close race

AP, Jerusalem

The two front-runners in the race to rule Israel made last-minute appeals to voters as polls opened Tuesday in a close general election whose outcome could determine the course of Mideast peace negotiations.

Opinion polls for months have predicted a decisive victory for the hard-line Likud Party, headed by former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But new polls released over the weekend showed the Kadima Party, led by moderate Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, closing the gap.

After casting her vote at a Tel Aviv polling station, Livni called on Israelis to do the same, despite rainy weather that could keep turnout low.

"I have just done what I want every citizen in Israel to do. First of all to get out of the house, rain or no rain, cold or hot, go out, go to the polling station, go into the booth, close your eyes, and vote," Livni said.

Livni was one of the architects of Israel's offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip last month and has been striving to present an image of herself as tough but sensible.

Despite the narrow gap between Livni and Netanyahu, polls have predicted that voters will take a sharp turn to the right and elect a parliament dominated by hard-line parties opposed to territorial concessions. That would make it difficult for Livni to form a government even if she wins.

### SILVA METHOD

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