

New arson attacks suspected as Australian fires rage

Residents begin returning to destroyed homes

AGENCIES, Yea, Kinglake

Australian police investigated fresh arson attacks and looting yesterday as angry survivors pressed for access to towns devastated by wildfires that continue to burn across vast areas.

Victoria state Premier John Brumby said there was "little doubt" that fires had been deliberately lit overnight in the state where at least 181 people -- and possibly more than 200 -- died in blazes at the weekend.

"I think words escape us all when it comes to describing that deliberate arson," he said.

State police commissioner Christine Nixon said investigators were closing in on an arsonist blamed for lighting a fire in the Gippsland region, in the state's east, which killed about 20 people.

As police continue the largest arson investigation in Australia's history, firefighters raised concerns about looters picking through the remains of abandoned properties in a disaster zone about the size of Luxembourg.

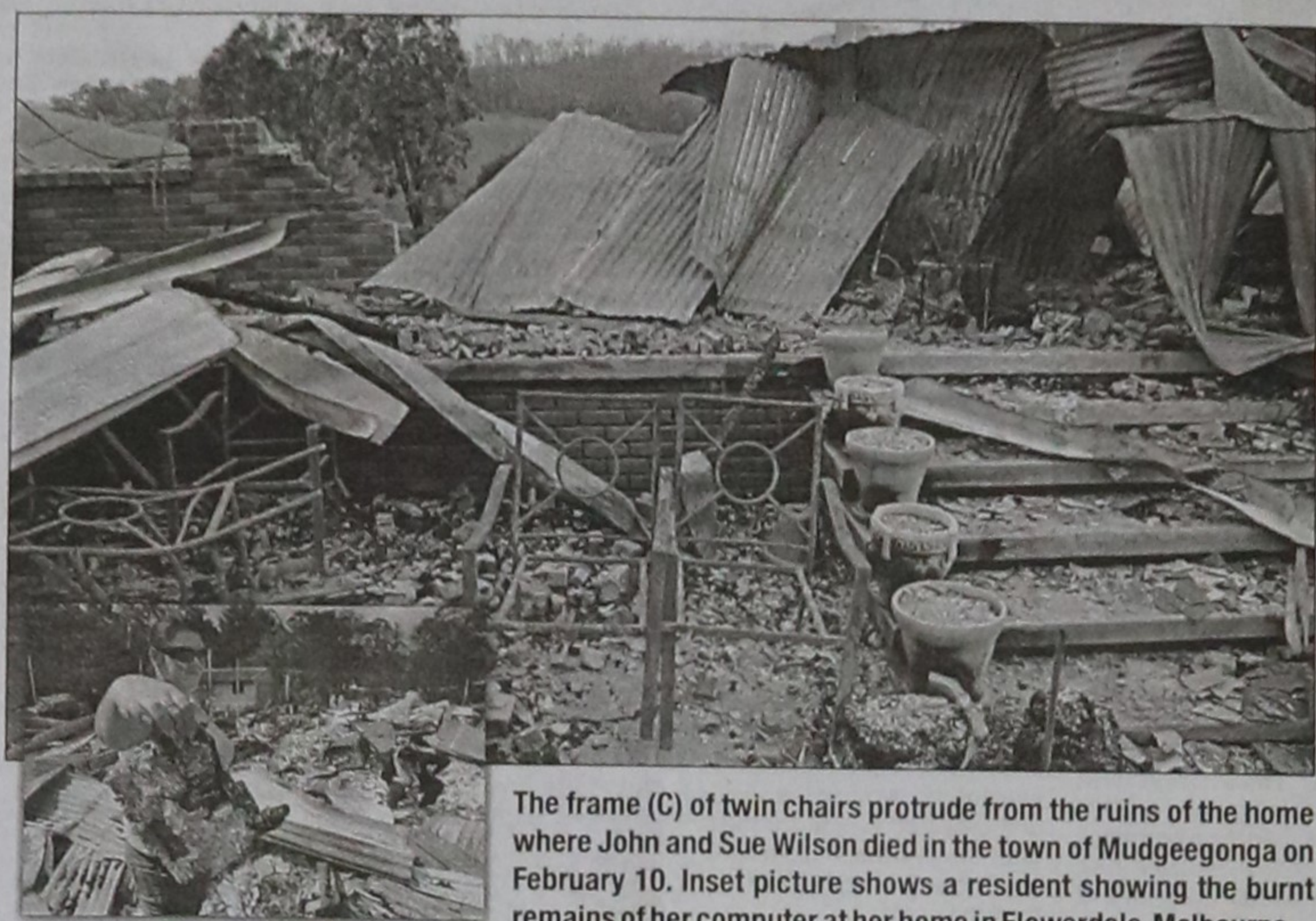
"We have had some reports of looting and certainly some (firefighting) volunteers and citizens who have told us that they have seen strange people in their neighbourhoods," Nixon said.

Thousands of firefighters are battling to save communities still threatened by 23 wildfires raging across farms and tinder-dry bushland in the southeast of the country.

Country Fire Authority (CFA) Deputy Chief Fire Officer Steve Warrington said fires near Bunyip and Kinglake could merge and threaten more towns in the Yarra Valley northeast of Melbourne if fanned by forecast northerly winds.

"There is a huge effort going on minimising the impact of that fire as we speak," Warrington told the Australian Associated Press.

Premier Brumby said he understood residents' desire to return to their towns but warned that the horrific scenes in places such as Marysville were simply too gruesome



The frame (C) of twin chairs protrude from the ruins of the home where John and Sue Wilson died in the town of Mudgee on February 10. Inset picture shows a resident showing the burnt remains of her computer at her home in Flowerdale, Melbourne.



Valerie Greig is reunited with her cat Bonny, found in the remains of their burnt-out home in the township of Flowerdale which lies in ruins after the bushfires decimated the small community some 100 kilometres north of Melbourne yesterday.

for survivors to see. "You can imagine if people return to those areas and they return to a house... and there are still deceased persons there, the trauma of this and the impact would be quite devastating," he told Sky News.

Meanwhile, some residents of towns scorched off the map by the worst ever wildfires returned to their homes for the first time yesterday and found scenes of utter devastation.

"Where do you start? Where do you start?" said Peter Denson, standing blank-faced amid the ruins of his home in Kinglake, where at least 39 people were killed and the town all but destroyed in Saturday's inferno.

Denson, a carpenter, has lived in Kinglake since 1977. He said he wants to rebuild, but his house, now a blackened pile of timber, bricks and

twisted metal, was not insured because he could not afford it. "It's like a big atom bomb has gone off," said Denson.

Authorities had sealed off some towns because the grim task of collecting bodies from collapsed buildings was proceeding slowly and because they wanted to prevent residents from disturbing potential crime scenes. Embers were still posing a threat of flare-ups.

While there is free access to many areas in the fire zone, tensions have been rising in recent days as demands rose for police to let residents back to the worst-hit places to check on their homes and check on pets and other animals left behind. Police urged people to be patient.

The official death toll stood at 181 yesterday, but bodies were still being collected and Brumby said it would

exceed 200 deaths. Of the other five fire sources, four were not suspicious and one was still being investigated. An estimated 60,000 fires burn each year in Australia, most of which are lit accidentally or by lightning strikes or power lines.

Australia's top law officer, federal Attorney General Robert McLennan, said yesterday anyone found guilty of lighting a fire that caused multiple deaths would face life in prison if convicted.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd told the Seven Network late Tuesday "they should be allowed to rot in jail."

Victoria's Chief Commissioner of police, Christine Nixon, said there had been reports of suspicious behavior amid the destruction.

Residents were allowed to return to Kinglake, about 130 kilometres

north of Melbourne, but their progress was slow because emergency workers were still removing burned debris and cutting down trees that appeared ready to fall. Power lines the electricity supply long cut were strewn across some streets.

More information emerged Wednesday indicating just how extreme Saturday's conditions were. The Bureau of Meteorology said Saturday's high temperature of 115 degrees Fahrenheit (46.4 Celsius) in Melbourne shattered the city's record of 114 F set on Jan. 13, 1939 a day known as Black Friday for wildfires that killed 71 people.

Fire authorities said the official tally of houses destroyed was more than 1,000. Some 5,000 people are homeless, and 2,850 square kilometers of land has been scorched.

Rejoinder, our reply RPCL in limbo

FROM PAGE 1
On August 24, 2008 the BTRC issued a letter to other operators stating that in the light of judgment, leasing out of the line is illegal and asked them to terminate any such contract with the Bangla Phone.

After this Bangla Phone filed a writ petition on August 28 challenging the letter. But a day before, on August 27, Bangla Phone sought BTRC's permission for such contracts.

On November 10, the High Court in its verdict said that after the July 13 verdict, Bangla Phone continued with leasing out facilities of its optical fibre network to others illegally without obtaining any permit and again continued it after obtaining an interim order in this writ petition. The court further said that the petitioner did not give any chance to BTRC for replying to its August 27 letter. The High Court Division also imposed costs of Tk 5,000 on the petitioner.

The Rejoinder added while the two High Court benches held that the Bangla Phone had acted illegally in leasing out the line, The Daily Star report held that the leasing out was lawful.

The report also mentions Bangla Phone's DDCSP license, but omitted the state of Bangla Phone's 2008 writ petition challenging the cancellation of its DDCSP license.

OUR REPLY
The rejoinder elaborated the legal feud between the BTRC and Bangla Phone, but did not reveal any new information as far as The Daily Star news is concerned. We stand corrected about the date of the High Court division verdict which was delivered on November 10, not in October, as was mentioned in the report.

Nowhere in the report it was held that Bangla Phone's leasing out of the line was legal. The report categorically stated that the High Court order in November upheld BTRC's authority in issuing the letter (asking other operators to stop using Bangla Phone line), and asked the BTRC company to seek BTRC's permission for the same.

The rejoinder stated nothing about BTRC's non-issuance of No Objection Certificate (NOC) for release from the Customs Department of imported machinery needed for the phone service by the company. This action alone has virtually shut down Bangla Phone's operation.

We stand by our report.

After all, the BTRC's main issue with Bangla Phone was that the company was not providing phone service to the people, which is the company's primary mandate.

Records show that Bangla Phone sought BTRC's NOC for at least 33 instances between January 2007 and December 2008, but the BTRC did not give any NOC. The NOCs were related to remote switch called IAD and RSU 0432, transmission equipment MUX and optical fibre cable. Of these, Bangla Phone obtained BTRC's NOC for the MUX equipment by winning a writ petition with the High Court.

Bangla Phone wrote to BTRC repeatedly pleading for the NOCs saying that the company's business was being severely affected for this reason. But this did not change BTRC's mind.

Again, from the beginning of 2007 the BTRC took a hard stance that laying of the optical fibre was illegal which the court in July last year declared legal. It shows that BTRC's interpretation of what's legal or illegal itself is questionable.

Once again, when the BTRC believed leasing of the line was illegal, why did it not ask other operators to stop using Bangla Phone's line in the first place in May 2007 (when BTRC served the first notice on Bangla Phone on the matter)? Why did it take this step in August 24, 2008? It also indicates that the BTRC was not sure about the issue.

The BTRC also did not hesitate to cancel Bangla Phone's DDCSP license. This prompted Bangla Phone to file a writ petition.

The BTRC's stance appears hostile specially when the regulatory authority resorted to impose financial penalty on mobile phone companies for illegal VoIP operation that drained out thousands of crores of taka but did not restrict their legal operations. The BTRC did not refuse issuance of any NOC to the mobile phone companies.

These reinforce Bangla Phone's argument that the BTRC had been highly inflexible about any deviation by Bangla Phone and was determined to shut the company down. As per the court verdict, Bangla Phone has violated some parts of its agreement by leasing out the line, but the court did not rule that for such violations the company that invested Tk 134 crore should be shut down.

The problem with the LTSA deal is that we have signed it and we have some obligations to respect it," said an official. He mentioned that Mymensingh plant needed LTSA since it no longer had any O&M operator, and the RPCL did not have adequate high quality staff to run the show.

"We are recruiting people and once the staff become a bit experienced, they take jobs

abroad and leave us," said an official describing RPCL's dilemma with the LTSA.

The contract with TTS gives the RPCL a scope to 'negotiate' the second phase. This prompted the RPCL board to seek price offers from a handful of LTSA companies. "Its not an open tender," the official added.

Letters were sent to Alstom Switzerland, Bhel GE India, Siemens AG Germany, Wood Group Thailand and MJB UAE in November last year. Only Wood Group and MJB responded.

The Wood Group sought euro 15.7 million and MJB euro 9.83 million, clearly showing that TTS was heavily overcharging for its services.

"Personally, I am in favour of an open tender for such a costly job. But it will be up to the board to decide the next course of action," he said, adding that the decision process might take two to three months.

The root of such a service contract appears to be linked with the chief of LIPPS, Captain AZ Rezaul Haq, source said.

Reza has been found responsible for a series of costly unsolicited contracts, and is accused of heading a nexus of corruption in the RPCL till 2005.

The LIPPS was formed in 1999 with 35 percent share belonging to the RPCL and the remaining to Lahmayer International of Germany, which was locally represented by Reza. But he had acquired all the German shares without board approval or government's knowledge and acquired the RPCL shares in 2005 using his influence on the RPCL chief.

This led to a conflict, and ultimately Reza fled Bangladesh, sued the RPCL at a Singapore arbitration court and won the case unilaterally. But the verdict could not take effect as the RPCL has challenged it in a Dhaka court.

Still absconding, Reza is facing multiple cases filed by the RPCL for sabotaging its Mymensingh power plant back in August 2005.

Reza controlled RPCL's power project consultant Lahmayer International as its local agent from the nineties. He also represented Siemens and Alstom power companies that installed Mymensingh power units. Again, Lahmayer was appointed RPCL's consultant on the basis of unsolicited negotiation.

Corruption
FROM PAGE 16
during the BNP-led alliance government was so pervasive that it broke all past records.

Asked whether the education ministry will reinstate the officials and teachers removed unlawfully by the past BNP-led government, the minister said the government would take necessary steps after investigation.

Raising a volley of supplementary questions, the treasury bench lawmakers said the then BNP-Jamaat-led government sacked many teachers and put their party men in their stead.

The lawmakers demanded removal of those BNP and Jamaat men from the educational institutes of their constituencies.

On salary hike of community schoolteachers, Nahid said the teachers are low-paid. "We are working to enhance their salaries," he assured the House.

In response to queries by legislators, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury also in charge of the cabinet division on parliamentary affairs, said legal actions will be taken against those who misuse the national flag.

When AL legislator Mujibul Haque asked her if lawmakers are entitled to use the national flag inscribed with the Jatiba Sangsad monogram she said the House would decide on the matter later.

"But you should neither feel proud of using the flag nor feel hurt without it," Matia added.

Parliamentarians of the treasury bench perching on the back rows, however, welcomed Mujibul's proposal by thumping desks.

100 hurt
FROM PAGE 1
and ransacked vehicles. They also put barricades on the highway bringing vehicular movement to a halt for over two hours.

On information, police rushed to the spot and charged baton on the agitating workers to disperse them.

The workers alleged that the factory authorities never pay their monthly salaries on time.

The injured include Ashulia Police Station officer-in-charge (OC) Rafiqul Islam, garment workers Sumi Akhter, Nipa, Beauty Taslima, Nazma Sumi, Sumon, Abul, Swapan, Rasel, Dolly, Azam, Hasnat and Dalia.

Rafiqul Islam told The Daily Star, "We fired over 100 blank shots and lobbed more than 50 teargas canisters to disperse the garment workers."

"At least 31 policemen and over 20 passengers were wounded. But no garment worker was injured," the OC said.

No case was filed and none was arrested in connection with the incident, he added.

Inconclusive election puts Israel, peace in limbo

AP, Jerusalem

Inconclusive election results sent Israel into political limbo yesterday with both Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and hard-line leader Benjamin Netanyahu claiming victory and leaving the kingmaker role to a rising political hawk with an anti-Arab platform.

Livni's Kadima Party won 28 seats, just one more than Netanyahu's Likud, in Tuesday's election for the 120-member parliament, according to nearly complete results. Both held victory rallies, but without a clear majority neither can govern alone. Hard-line parties won a majority of the votes, meaning that Netanyahu has more natural allies and a better chance of forming a coalition.

The results set the stage for what could be weeks of coalition negotiations. The first meetings began yesterday, with Netanyahu meeting the head of the ultra-Orthodox Shas faction and Livni meeting Avigdor Lieberman, whose ultranationalist party received 15 seats and

emerged as the third-largest force in parliament.

Two of the more likely options would see a hard-line government led by Netanyahu, leaving Livni in the opposition, or some form of accommodation between the two in the form of a centrist coalition in which they would share power.

Whatever government is forged, it is unlikely to move quickly toward peace talks with the Palestinians and instead could find itself on a collision course with President Barack Obama, who has said he's making a Mideast peace deal a priority.

Paralysis could dampen prospects for Egyptian-led attempts to broker a truce between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers after Israel's devastating offensive in Gaza last month. Hamas might be reluctant to sign a deal at the risk of having it overturned by the incoming coalition.

It's up to Israeli President Shimon Peres to decide whether Livni or Netanyahu should have the first shot at forming a government.

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