

Australian wildfire suspect named

AP, Melbourne

The only person so far accused of lighting one of Australia's deadly wildfires was named publicly yesterday as officials urged a nation outraged by the alleged arson to let justice take its course.

Brendan Sokaluk, a 39-year-old who reportedly once served as a volunteer firefighter, has been kept at a secret location by police since his arrest last week in connection to blazes that swept Victoria state because of fears for his safety.

The confirmed death toll from the Feb. 7 disaster crept to 189, and would rise further, police said.

Brendan Sokaluk's case went before a court packed with media and onlookers Monday, but he chose to stay in police protective custody rather than attend.



US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke (L) shakes hands with Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee (R) during a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. The newly-appointed US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan said that militancy presented the same security risks to both the United States and South Asia.

US, India, Pakistan face 'common militant threat'

Says Holbrooke

AFP, New Delhi

The newly-appointed US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan said yesterday that Islamist militancy presented the same security risks to both the United States and South Asia.

"India, the United States and Pakistan all have a common threat now," Richard Holbrooke told reporters in New Delhi.

"For the first time in 60 years since independence, your country (India) and Pakistan and the United States all face an enemy that poses a direct threat to our leadership, our capitals and our people."

His comments came after the Pakistan government signed an agreement with Islamic hardliners to enforce sharia law in part of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province.

Holbrooke, appointed to implement a new US strategy in South Asia under President Barack Obama, was in New Delhi at the end of a regional tour that included visits to Islamabad and Kabul.

Holbrooke met Indian leaders on Monday for talks that focused on the global threat from Pakistan-based militants in the wake of the Mumbai attacks.

Holbrooke, the new US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, arrived in New Delhi late on Sunday as part of a regional tour after visits to Islamabad and Kabul.

He was appointed to implement a new US strategy in South Asia under President Barack Obama, who plans to boost troop numbers in Afghanistan and to force Islamabad to eradicate al-Qaeda safe havens inside Pakistan.

Indian foreign policy advisers and was later scheduled for talks with Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

"We will share our perceptions, and terrorism emanating from Pakistan will be part of that," an Indian official told AFP ahead of the meetings. "We think the Pakistan establishment is key when talking about terrorism."

India has labelled Pakistan the "epicentre of terrorism" in the region and has accused it of sheltering Islamic groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is widely blamed for November's attacks on Mumbai.

New Delhi has noted with strong approval that Holbrooke's tour coincided with Islamabad's admission that part of the Mumbai attacks, in which 165 people were killed, was indeed planned in Pakistan.

EU pact with Syria to be signed by June

Says commissioner

AFP, Damascus

EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said on Sunday she expects a long-delayed partnership agreement with Syria to be signed in mid-year.

There is a "good chance" the EU's council of foreign ministers will approve a revised accord "either under the Czech presidency, that means before the end of June, or early in the Swedish presidency," the commissioner told AFP.

The EU and Syria drew up a draft pact in 2004 but it was

never signed by EU member states for political reasons.

"We have updated the agreement with Syria and we are in the process of translating this agreement to the different languages of our member states," Ferrero-Waldner said on her arrival in Damascus for a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad.

The proposed pact envisages the granting of financial aid to Syria in return for economic reforms.

Ferrero-Waldner's visit is the first to Damascus by an EU external relations commissioner.

Venezuelan leader wins right to seek re-election

AP, Caracas

President Hugo Chavez says a referendum victory that removed limits on his re-election is a mandate to intensify his socialist agenda for decades to come. Opponents warn of an impending dictatorship.

Both sides had called the outcome of Sunday's vote key to the future of this South American country, split down the middle between those who worship the president for redistributing Venezuela's oil riches and those who see him as a power-hungry autocrat.

"Those who voted 'yes' today voted for socialism, for revolution," Chavez thundered to thousands of ecstatic supporters jamming the streets around the presidential palace. Fireworks lit up the Caracas skyline, and one man walked through the crowd carrying a painting of Chavez that read: "Forever."

Josefa Dugarte stared at the crowd from the

stoop of her apartment building with look of dismay.

"These people don't realise what they have done," she muttered.

With 94 percent of the vote counted, official results showed the amendment passing 54 percent to 46 percent, an irreversible trend, and opposition leaders accepted the results. Tibisay Lucena, president of National Electoral Council, said turnout was 67 percent.

The constitutional overhaul allows all public officials to run for re-election as many times as they want, removing barriers to a Chavez candidacy in the next presidential elections in 2012 and beyond.

"In 2012 there will be presidential elections, and unless God decides otherwise, unless the people decide otherwise, this soldier is already a candidate," Chavez said to applause. First elected in 1998, he has said he might stay in power until 2049, when he'll be 95.



Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez (C) celebrates his victory with his daughters from the balcony of the Presidential palace on Sunday in a referendum on constitutional changes. The referendum win allows Chavez to seek re-election without limits.

Scientists dig for the guts of quakes

AP, Chicago

Scientists are pursuing earthquakes deep into their subterranean lairs, studying them on land and below the sea. Yet, confronted with the question of when and where the "next big one" will occur, an uncomfortable silence sets in.

Based on history there will be quakes in Japan, also in Tibet, said Leigh Royden of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"Will we ever be able to predict them? I don't know," she said Sunday at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is welcomed upon her arrival at Tokyo's Haneda Airport yesterday. Hillary arrived in Japan to kick off her Asia tour, which is expected to focus on the global economic crisis and hot-button security issues including North Korea.

Hillary Clinton praises US-Asia ties

AFP, Tokyo

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton -- the first American top diplomat in half a century to start her job with an Asia trip -- praised US ties with the region after arriving in Japan yesterday.

"I have chosen Asia on my first trip as secretary of state to convey that America's relationships across the Pacific are indispensable to addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities of the 21st century," she said.

Hillary Clinton was set to meet Japanese leaders on Tuesday and the following day travel on to Indonesia, followed by South Korea and China.

"By strengthening our historic Asia alliances, starting right here in Japan, and forging new partnerships with emerging nations, we can

begin together to build networks around the world to help us solve problems that none of us can solve alone," she said shortly after arriving at Tokyo's Haneda airport.

In her talks with Japan's leaders and citizens, she said, "we will be looking for ways to collaborate on issues that go beyond just our mutual concerns to really addressing the global concerns."

These would include "climate change and clean energy, Afghanistan, Pakistan, nuclear proliferation and other common concerns."

She added that "the bilateral relationship between the United States and Japan is a cornerstone in our efforts around the world," adding that Washington and Tokyo needed to work together to address the global financial crisis.

Israel takes control of more West Bank land

Israeli aircraft strike Gaza

AP, AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has taken control of a large chunk of land near a prominent West Bank settlement, paving the way for the possible construction of 2,500 settlement homes, officials said yesterday, in a new challenge to Mideast peacemaking.

Successful Israeli governments have broken promises to the United States to halt settlement expansion, defined by Washington as an obstacle to peace. Ongoing expansion is likely to create friction not only with the Palestinians, but with President Barack Obama, whose Mideast envoy, George Mitchell, has long pushed for a settlement freeze. Obama has said he'd get involved quickly in Mideast peace efforts.

The composition of Israel's next government is not clear yet following inconclusive elections last week. However, right-wing parties are given a better chance to form a ruling coalition, with hardline leader Benjamin Netanyahu at the helm.

Netanyahu supports settlement expansion and has derided peace talks with the Palestinians as a waste of time, saying he would focus instead of trying to improve the Palestinian economy. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has dismissed Netanyahu's approach as a non-starter, and his aides said recently that peace talks can only resume after a settlement freeze.

At the centre of the latest expansion plans is Efrat, a settlement of about 1,600 families south of Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Israeli aircraft struck smuggling tunnels on Gaza's border with Egypt on Monday, after two rockets were fired from the Palestinian territory, witnesses said.

Israel says armed groups use the tunnels around the border town of Rafah to smuggle weapons into the Hamas-run Palestinian enclave.

Just hours before the air strike, two rockets were fired into southern Israel from Gaza but exploded without causing any casualties, an Israeli army spokesman said.

CG, its many actions extra-constitutional

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After the committee's report is placed in the parliament, it will be well within the jurisdiction of the House to decide whether to look into the charges, and take steps to resolve the constitutional quagmire, committee members observed.

A question regarding whether the caretaker government's overstay in power requires a legal coverage was also already raised.

The special committee already started figuring out a way for giving the almost two-year caretaker regime a legal cover, if required. The committee is scheduled to meet again today to discuss the matter.

Initially the committee members were in favour of providing the cover, but after consulting legal experts and deliberations among themselves, they now seem to be

changing their previous position on the issue.

The constitution allowed the caretaker government to stay in power for only 90 days, but the latter ended up prolonging its regime almost for two years.

On special invitation of Law Minister Shaifque Ahmed, two former attorney generals Mahmudul Islam and Rafiq-ul-Haque, eminent jurists Dr M Zahir, Azmalul Hossain QC, Tawfiq Newaz, and Barrister Fazle-Noor-Taposh MP attended the committee's meetings and gave their opinions on constitutional jurisdiction of the immediate past caretaker government.

They also helped the committee to select 54 ordinances for recommendation for ratification by the parliament, which were finalised on Sunday.

On the president's authority to promulgate ordinances under article 93 of the constitution, the committee in its draft report observes that the president may promulgate ordinances in absence of a parliament or if it is not in session, but the authority is limited.

But enacting new laws through promulgation of ordinances repealing laws enacted by a parliament is out of bounds for the president, the report adds.

Referring to the experts' opinions and article 58 (D) of the constitution, the report also says a non-partisan caretaker government is an interim government, and the foundation of its functions is that article.

Article 58 (D) says a non-partisan caretaker government will function as an interim government and will carry out only routine governmental

duties with the aid and assistance of persons in services of the republic, and except in cases of necessity for being able to carry out such duties, it will not make any policy decision.

The article also says a non-partisan caretaker government will provide the Election Commission with all possible aid and assistance required for holding a peaceful, fair, and impartial general election to the parliament.

But the immediate past caretaker government promulgated 119 ordinances, many of which are not related to elections, law and order, and routine governmental work.

A total of 122 ordinances were promulgated since the concluding meeting of the last parliament, with three of those being promulgated just before the caretaker government took over power.



A mother Polar Bear rests on the frozen tundra with her cubs waiting for the Hudson Bay to freeze over in 2007 in Mantioba, Canada. Travel agents report that clients are increasingly requesting trips to see the melting glaciers of the Antarctic, the threatened coral of Australia's Great Barrier Reef or Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro before it loses its ice cap.

'Astonishing richness' in polar sea species

AP, Bangkok

The polar oceans are not biological deserts after all.

A marine census released Monday documented 7,500 species in the Antarctic and 5,500 in the Arctic, including several hundred that researchers believe could be new to science.

"The textbooks have said there is less diversity at the poles than the tropics, but we found astonishing richness of marine life in the Antarctic and Arctic oceans," said Victoria Wadley, a researcher from the Australian Antarctic Division who took part in the Antarctic survey. "We are rewriting the textbooks."

In one of the biggest surprises, researchers said they discovered dozens of species common to both polar seas separated by nearly 7,000 miles (11,000 kilometres). Now they have to figure out how they separated.

"We probably know more about deep space than we do about the deep polar oceans in our own backyard," said Gilly Llewellyn, leader of the oceans programme for the environmental group WWF-Australia. She did not take part in the survey. "This critical research is helping reveal the amazing biodiversity of the polar regions."

Salma Hayek marries French tycoon Pinault

AFP, Paris

Mexican actress Salma Hayek and French businessman Francois-Henri Pinault married at the weekend in Paris, a local official said yesterday.

They were wed in the town hall in the St Germain area on the Left Bank on Saturday, mayor Jean-Pierre Lecoq told AFP, confirming a report on the Le Point news magazine website, which belongs to Pinault's conglomerate.

The couple, who have an infant daughter, had been due to marry last year but in July said they had cancelled their engagement.

Coal city planned to rehabilitate

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"Land and surface water are directly affected in case of both underground and open pit mining," Chowdhury noted. "It's immoral to keep people in the dark about such consequence. People have the first right to know if the project would affect their livelihood."

This city may have a mining university and school and home to new industries. The emphasis of this city would be ensuring the livelihood of the first generation settlers.

Chowdhury, Environment Minister Mustafizur Rahman Fizar and State Minister for Energy Shamsul Haq Tuku visited the Barapukuria mining area last month and held open meetings with the affected villagers.

Many houses developed cracks and some pieces of land have subsided by one metre, while the sub-soil water table has gone down beyond reach of normal tube-wells. During the meetings, the villagers were asked if they would like to voluntarily move to a safer place nearby.

It was decided with the villagers that a committee will be formed with two representatives from each village adjacent to the mine. The committee would talk rehabilitation and compensation issues.

"Some people in Barapukuria are living amid life risk. We are trying to find out what could be done to avert this situation. They may be temporarily rehabilitated to a safe area. We can offer them choices, but we would

leave it up to the people themselves how they would like us to solve the problem," Chowdhury pointed out.

The idea of the city is also prompted by further mining prospects in the northern region. While controversies surrounding the Asia Energy coal pit mining proposal in Phulbari have stalled new decisions on tapping mines resources now, the country's ever increasing energy crisis would compel the government to take hard decisions.

Other than Asia Energy, the government has given Petrobangla a licence to explore Dighipara coal zone and the Hosaf group [which is responsible for corruption in the Barapukuria coalmine and power projects] to explore Khalashpir zone.

Obama goes to Canada for maiden trip abroad

AFP, Ottawa

US President Barack Obama will visit Canada Thursday, on his first trip overseas since being inaugurated last month, with economic concerns expected to top his agenda.

The visit is scheduled to last only about six hours, just enough time for meetings, a working lunch and a press conference with Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Obama will also meet with Michael Ignatieff, the new head of Canada's main political opposition group, the Liberal Party.

Baghdad bus bombs kill 8

AFP, Karbala

Hundreds of thousands of Shia pilgrims mourned a revered imam under tight security in the Iraqi shrine city of Karbala on Monday as eight people were killed in Baghdad bus bombings.

Under the gaze of rooftop snipers, crowds of mourners chanting "Ya, Hussein" passed through the mausoleums of Imam Hussein and his half-brother Abbas for the Arbaeen (40 days) ceremony.

They punched the air and their chests with their fists, while others brandished green and black flags.