

Zimbabwe PM hurt, wife killed in car crash

Party wants independent probe

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's new Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai was hospitalised Friday after a car crash that killed his wife, just three weeks after taking office in a unity government, his party said.

The couple was headed to their home town in Buhera district where he was to hold a rally on Saturday, but their car was hit by a freight truck and Susan Tsvangirai died at the scene, party officials said.

"He is stable," Finance Minister Tendai Biti, Tsvangirai's top political aide, told reporters after visiting the premier at a private hospital.

Douglas Gwatalzo, a physician who visited Tsvangirai, declined to give details on his injuries but said "he is okay."

Police spokesman Wayne Bvudzijena was quoted by state television as saying that the truck had crossed into the

oncoming lane and side-swiped Tsvangirai's vehicle.

"The 4x4 Toyota Landcruiser is understood to have overturned and rolled thrice," the report said.

The truck in the crash that killed Zimbabwe Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's wife and injured him belonged to a US aid agency "partner" for AIDS drug delivery, a US embassy official said Saturday.

"The truck that was involved in the crash belonged to a partner of USAID. It's not a US government vehicle," the official said on condition of anonymity.

Tsvangirai's party wants an independent probe of the car crash that killed his wife and injured him, a lawmaker said Saturday after a report faulted a US contractor.

Tsvangirai, a longtime rival of President Robert Mugabe who recently became prime minister in a unity govern-

ment aimed at ending months of political turmoil, remained in hospital following the crash on Friday.

"We will not get involved in any speculations until a full investigation has been conducted. Right now can't draw any conclusions," said Eddie Cross, an MP from Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party.

"The party will insist on an independent investigation."

Tsvangirai's spokesman James Maridadi told reporters at the hospital in Harare that the accident happened at 4:00 pm (1400 GMT), and that two other people were in the car.

"The driver of the truck appeared to be sleeping," an MDC minister told AFP.

Another source who had visited him at the hospital said Tsvangirai's head appeared swollen, but doctors had not yet commented on his condition.



PHOTO: AFP

Police stand yesterday next to the vehicle Zimbabwean Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai was riding in during his March 6 accident in Featherstone, 80 km from Harare. The truck involved in the car crash that killed the wife of Tsvangirai, Susan, belonged to a contractor working for the US and British governments.



PHOTO: AFP

A burqa-clad Pakistani woman walks with members of her family towards a shanty inhabited by people from the country's North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) on the outskirts of Islamabad yesterday. Terrified, locked up at home and courting death if they go out alone, women oppressed by Taliban extremists in Pakistan's Swat valley have nothing to celebrate on International Women's Day.

Top US envoys in Syria for 'engagement' talks

AFP, Damascus

Two senior US envoys were meeting Syrian leaders on Saturday as Washington pursues its new policy of engaging with all countries in the Middle East, even its long-time foes.

Shortly after their arrival, Jeffrey Feltman and Daniel Shapiro went straight into talks with Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, an AFP journalist said.

Washington's overtures to Damascus are in line with the policy of new US President Barack Obama to engage states in the region, Feltman said in Beirut ahead of the trip.

"The president has said he wants to sustain in principle engagement with all states in the region and that includes Syria," he said.

Feltman is a former ambassador to Lebanon and acting assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, while Shapiro is senior Middle East and North Africa director at the National Security Council.

The pair expect to discuss a "long list" of concerns Washington has with Syria -- the key ally of US arch-foe Iran -- on the first high-level US trip in four years.

"Our trip to Syria... is an opportunity for us to start addressing these concerns and using engagement as a tool to promote our objectives in the region," Feltman said.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Israel this week on her maiden tour of the

Middle East that the envoys would hold "preliminary conversations" with Syrian officials.

Washington recalled its ambassador to Syria four years ago following the assassination in Beirut of Lebanon's ex-premier Rafiq Hariri, whose murder in a massive bomb attack was blamed on Syria.

Damascus denied any involvement in the February 2005 killing, but two months later withdrew its troops from Lebanon, ending almost three decades of political and military domination over its neighbour.

"We'll talk to the Syrians about many many issues but about Lebanon, the message is clear: the US and the international community... all agree Lebanon is for the Lebanese," Feltman said in Beirut.

Clinton said on Tuesday "There are a number of issues we have between Syria and the United States as well as the larger regional concerns that Syria obviously poses."

Feltman and Shapiro will "explore with Syria some of these bilateral issues," she said.

Feltman met the Syrian ambassador in Washington Imad Mustafa in late February in what a State Department spokesman called a "very frank discussion."

US-Syria ties were especially tense under president George W. Bush's administration, which accused Damascus of supporting terrorism and of turning a blind eye to the flow of arms and supplies to insurgents in Iraq.

US, Russia signal fresh start on defence issues

AFP, Geneva

Russia and the United States on Friday signalled a fresh start on missile defence and disarmament issues after a first meeting of their foreign ministers since US President Barack Obama was elected.

Both US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov said the meeting marked the beginning of a thaw in relations between the two superpowers.

"This is a fresh start, not only to improve our bilateral relationship but to lead the world in important areas, particularly with respect to nuclear weapons and nuclear security," said Hillary Clinton after the meeting in Geneva.

Russia's Foreign Minister said that both parties could find shared ground.

"I think we can arrive at a common view, both in the context of strategic offensive weapon and missile defence," Lavrov told a joint news conference.

Hillary Clinton also said that Washington and Moscow have agreed to a work plan towards renewing their START disarmament treaty, which is due to expire by December 5.

"We intend to have an agreement by the end of the year, this is of the highest priority to our governments," she said.

The treaty, which was signed in 1991, committed both parties to cut their stock of arsenal, including reducing missiles to a maximum of 1,600 and warheads to no more than 6,000.

A senior US official later said that they would be discussing reductions in their nuclear arsenal, but he said it was too early to specify the levels.

The meeting in Geneva marked a move between the two countries to "reset" their relationship, after growing tensions crystallised around Russia's August show of force in its brief war against US-ally Georgia.

Fear of death stalks Pak women in Swat

AFP, Peshawar

Terrified, locked up at home and courting death if they go out alone, women oppressed by Taliban extremists in Pakistan's Swat valley have nothing to celebrate on International Women's Day.

Nearly 100 years after the annual day was created to mark the struggle for equal rights for half the world's population, most women in Swat look blank and go silent when asked about gender rights and discrimination.

They're too frightened to speak in public. They can only leave the confines of their homes accompanied by a male relative, their bodies hidden in veils.

"How can I tell you my name, are you crazy? I was told not to give my name to anyone because the Taliban could hurt me," one girl in the ninth grade told AFP by telephone from the former ski resort.

For nearly two years, thousands of Taliban fighters have waged a terrifying campaign to enforce their repressive interpretation of Islam in Swat, transforming the region of majestic mountains and lush valleys into a war zone.

Last month, the government signed a widely

criticised agreement with a pro-Taliban cleric to enforce Sharia law in exchange for a ceasefire in a region where most locals say the Taliban have become the masters.

The girl's dreams of becoming a doctor are over. She worries the Taliban will stop her finishing school, regardless of her parents' support.

"My mother told me I can do anything, but my inner soul is shattered."

"Tell me if you stop women getting an education where will a sick woman go? Do you want her to go to a male doctor? I was told that education is compulsory for every man and woman in Islam but the Taliban destroyed our schools."

Militants have destroyed 191 schools in the valley, 122 of them for girls, leaving 62,000 pupils with nowhere to study, local officials say.

Huma Batool -- not her real name -- is a 42-year-old mother of two who dices with death to teach girls at a private school in the region's main town Mingora.

"We have to veil ourselves and wear shuttlecock burqas. We are not safe even at home. We fear the Taliban all the time. Life is becoming worse and worse for women in Swat," she told AFP by telephone.

Pakistan gives \$1.5m to UN for probe into Benazir's killing

PTI, United Nations

Pakistan has given \$1.5 million to the United Nations as seed money to partially cover the cost of a three-member fact-finding commission which will look into the assassination of former Premier Benazir Bhutto.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's spokesperson Michele Montas said the world body chief also spoke to Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari on Thursday and among the subjects discussed were matters related to the Commission.

During the phone conversation, Ban and Zardari also discussed John Solecki, the kidnapped UNHCR official, as also the recent terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team, the spokesperson said.

Nasa planet hunter rockets into space

AP, Cape Canaveral

Nasa's planet-hunting telescope, Kepler, rocketed into space Friday night on a historic voyage to track down other Earths in a faraway patch of the Milky Way galaxy.

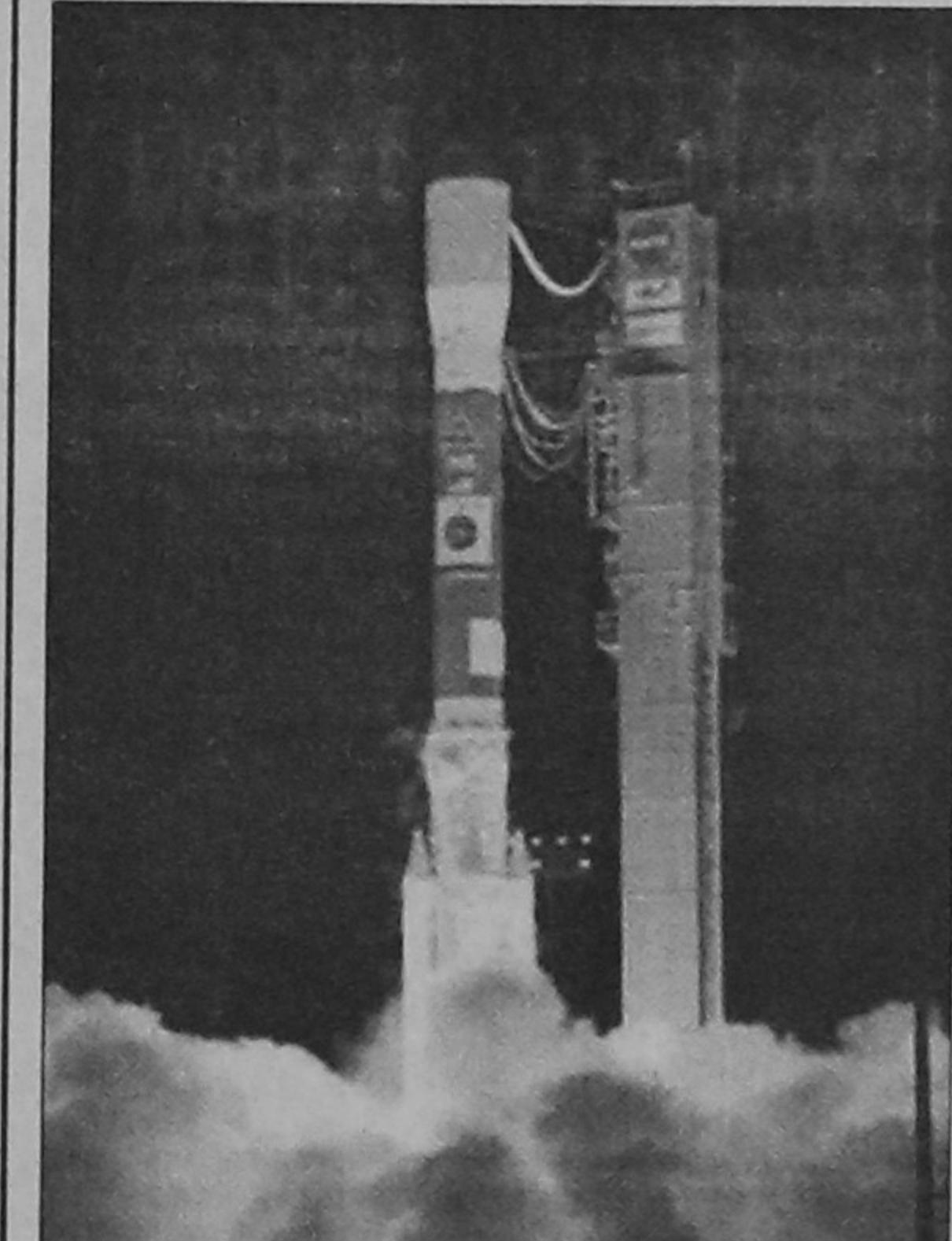
It's the first mission capable of answering the age-old question: Are other worlds like ours out there?

Kepler, named after the German 17th century astrophysicist, set off on its unprecedented mission at 10:49 p.m., thundering into a clear sky embellished by a waxing moon.

"It was just magnificent. It looked like a star was being formed in the sky," said Bill Borucki, Kepler's principal scientist. "Everybody was delighted, everybody was screaming, 'Go Kepler!'"

Kepler's mission will last at least 3 1/2 years and cost \$600 million.

The goal is to find, if they exist, Earth-like planets circling stars in the so-called habitable zone orbits where liquid water could be present on the surface of the planets. That would mean there are lots of places out there for life to evolve, Borucki said.



A Delta II rocket successfully launches from Vandenberg's Space Launch Complex-2 in United States. Nasa launched the Kepler space telescope on the space agency's first mission to detect Earth-like planets that may harbour life in our galaxy.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem (R) meets with US envoy Jeffrey Feltman (L) under a portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus yesterday. Two senior US envoys, Feltman and Daniel Shapiro, were meeting Syrian leaders as Washington pursues its new policy of engaging with all countries in the Middle East, even its long-time foes.

Obama to reverse limits on stem-cell research

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama will Monday wipe out another contentious aspect of his predecessor George W Bush's legacy by removing curbs on federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research.

The president will sign an executive order reversing a policy that critics say has hampered the fight into finding treatments for grave diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and diabetes, a senior administration official said.

The official would not divulge the exact wording of the order, but confirmed, on condition of anonymity, that it would be in line with Obama's campaign vow to restore funding to embryonic stem-cell research.

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