

Kim Jong-Il's son not to succeed his father

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il's eldest son has denied he is to succeed his father as the head of the secretive communist state, Japanese television reported Wednesday.

"I am free. So I think, if I was the successor, you can't see me in Macau," Kim Jong-Nam told a crew from the TBS network in the southern Chinese city.

"My father is an important person but I am not," he said in English, according to TBS footage, which the network said was recorded on Tuesday.

Asked about North Korea's rocket launch on Sunday, the 37-year-old said: "Sorry I don't have any information, anything to tell you. Just my feeling."

"I am just watching carefully the international community's reaction," he said, adding that he was "quite worried" about "more tension" surrounding his country.

"I hope one day North Korea will be in a good situation politically."

Jan Fischer to be next Czech PM

Czech President Vaclav Klaus, whose country holds the European Union presidency, will appoint Jan Fischer as prime minister on Thursday, Klaus's spokesman said in a statement Wednesday.

Fischer, the non-partisan head of the Czech Statistical Office, will replace outgoing Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, whose cabinet was toppled last month midway through the Czech EU presidency running to June 30.

Klaus's spokesman Radim Ochvat said "President Vaclav Klaus expressed his satisfaction with the solution" proposed by Czech party leaders to end the political crisis.

Detained journo freed in Delhi

Hours after detaining Jarnail Singh, a journalist who flung his shoe at Union home minister, P Chidambaram on Tuesday, the Delhi police set the journalist free.

Jarnail Singh was initially picked up from the AICC headquarters and brought to the Tughlaq Road police station, but no complaint was lodged against the accused and he was allowed to go after he formally "apologised" for his behaviour.

The police had erected barricades on all roads leading to the AICC headquarters at 24, Akbar Road and hundreds of policemen were deployed along the route soon after news of a journalist throwing his shoe at Chidambaram spread on Tuesday afternoon.

Malaysia's new PM to unveil cabinet today

Malaysia's new premier Najib Razak will unveil his cabinet today, officials said, with expectations for a streamlined team aimed at helping him push through promised reforms.

"The announcement of the new cabinet line-up will be made at the PM's office at 3:00 pm (0700 GMT) on Thursday," an official in Najib's office told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The convention is for Najib, who was sworn in last week, to seek the consent of Malaysia's king before announcing the new cabinet.

Local media have said that Najib is likely to reveal a slimmed-down cabinet, which currently embraces 27 ministries with 32 ministers, and that coalition partners of the ruling party UMNO have been told they may get fewer seats.

Insiders say Najib is likely to retain the finance portfolio - seen as critical during the global economic crisis - and that UMNO deputy leader Muhyiddin Yassin is tipped to be deputy prime minister and home minister.



Iraqis gather at the site of a bomb attack in Baghdad. A bomb blast near a Shiite shrine in Baghdad killed seven people and wounded 23, among them women and children, in the third straight day of attacks in the capital, officials said.

12 Palestinians hurt in West Bank clashes

Twelve Palestinians were wounded yesterday when clashes erupted in a West Bank village after Israeli residents of a nearby settlement went on a rampage there, witnesses and medics said.

The injured all suffered gunshot wounds and one of them was in serious condition, medics said.

The clashes first involved Palestinians and settlers from Bat Ayin, where last week an axe-wielding Palestinian killed an Israeli teenager, and then turned into a confrontation between the Palestinians and the army, they added.

The incident began in the early morning hours when settlers from Bat Ayin went to a hilltop between their community and the Palestinian village of Safa to bless the sun in a

prayer said once every 28 years.

According to the Palestinians, the settlers then went on a rampage in the village, firing weapons and vandalising property.

The settlers and the Israeli army said the clashes erupted when the Palestinians threw stones at the praying settlers.

The Israeli army then deployed to the area to restore order, eventually firing on the Palestinian demonstrators.

"IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) were deployed and used dispersal means after all efforts failed to bring calm," an army spokeswoman said.

"When violence escalated the forces opened fire at the lower bodies of a number of main instigators and identified hitting them," she said.

Six of the wounded

Palestinians were injured as a result of fire from settlers and six as a result of army fire, Palestinian medics said.

Last Thursday, an axe-wielding Palestinian killed a 13-year-old Israeli boy and wounded a seven-year-old boy in Bat Ayin before fleeing the area. He remains at large.

Bat Ayin is one of the most radical settlements in the occupied West Bank. Most of its fewer than 1,000 residents are hardline settlers who normally prevent Palestinians from entering the settlement boundaries.

The seven-year-old wounded in last week's attack is the son of Ofer Gamliel, who is serving a 15-year prison sentence for participating in a foiled attack on a Palestinian girls school in Jerusalem in 2002, media said.

ITALIAN QUAKE TOLL AT 260 Aftershocks hamper rescue efforts

Fresh aftershocks have rattled earthquake-hit central Italy, killing at least one more person and hampering the search for survivors.

The latest tremor struck at 0627 local time (0427 GMT) in L'Aquila, epicentre of Monday's 6.2-magnitude quake.

The aftershocks brought down masonry from already damaged buildings and one tremor was felt as far away as Rome.

As the desperate search for survivors continues, officials have raised the death toll from the quake to 260.

Another 100 people are reported to be in a serious condition and some 20,000 people were made homeless.

Premier Silvio Berlusconi

also said the death toll in the earthquake that hit central Italy has reached 260.

Speaking at a news conference yesterday in the devastated mountain town of L'Aquila, Berlusconi said the dead included 16 children, while nine bodies still had to be identified.

Berlusconi said that L'Aquila Bishop Giuseppe Molinari would hold a funeral service for the victims on Friday.

The premier said some 17,700 people left homeless by the quake that struck Monday had found shelter in tent camps set up by authorities. Another 10,000 people were housed in hotels along the coast, bringing the overall number of homeless to almost 28,000. Aftershocks from the earthquake sent new fears

through the tent camps that shelter thousands of survivors, and Pope Benedict XVI said Wednesday that he would visit the shocked and injured people of the area as soon as possible.

As rescue teams pressed ahead with their searches in the crumbled buildings, the homeless emerged from tents after spending a second night in chilly mountain temperatures.

"I slept so badly because I kept feeling the aftershocks," said Daniela Nunut at one of the tent camps set up across the city of L'Aquila. The 46-year Roman-born woman said she and her companion plan to stay in the tent for now. "What can you do? You can't go into the building."

The magnitude-6.3 quake hit L'Aquila and several towns in central Italy early Monday, leveling buildings and reducing entire blocks to piles of rubble and dust.

The Civil Protection agency said 250 people have died, including 11 who have not been identified. Their funeral was scheduled to be held on Good Friday, regional officials said, although at least one victim's funeral was going to be held Wednesday in one of the small villages in the stricken area.

Fifteen people remain missing, officials said.

The ANSA news agency reported that four students trapped in the rubble of a dormitory of the University of L'Aquila had died.

Since the quake early Monday, some 430 aftershocks have rumbled through, including some strong ones, said Marco Olivieri of the National Institute of Geophysics and Vulcanology in Rome.

A strong aftershock at 7:47 pm Tuesday rained debris on screaming residents and rescue crews, who ran from the site.

Many survivors at the camp said they had been cold during the night as heaters in some of the tents were not working. Some read a newspaper as they lined up for hot coffee or tea and a croissant.



A Spanish rescuer and his dog looks for survivors in the remains of a collapsed building yesterday in the Abruzzo capital L'Aquila. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said the death toll in central Italy's earthquake has risen to 260 including 16 children.

Bomb blast claims seven near shrine in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

A bomb blast near a Shiite shrine in Baghdad yesterday killed seven people and wounded 23, among them women and children, in the third straight day of attacks in the capital, officials said.

The mid-morning explosion occurred only 200 metres from the Musa Kadhim mosque, defence and interior ministry officials told AFP.

Shiite Islam's most important house of prayer in the Iraqi capital has been the scene of repeated attacks since the 2003 US-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein triggered deadly sectarian violence.

Only hours before US President Barack Obama flew into Baghdad on Tuesday on a surprise visit and said that Iraq would soon have to defend itself, a car bomb blast in the same district killed eight people and wounded 20 others.

On Monday, a total of six deadly car explosions in mainly Shiite areas of Baghdad killed at least 34 people and wounded nearly 140, raising new fears of a return to the violence that tore the capital apart in 2007.

The unrest came after deadly clashes in Baghdad between Iraqi troops and former Sunni insurgents now turned anti-Qaeda militants, known as Sahwa, following the arrest of their leader on criminal charges.

The US military has however ruled out involvement of disaffected members of Sahwa and laid the blame on Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has blamed the latest spate of attacks on Al-Qaeda and supporters of Saddam's now banned Baath party.

Obama met the premier on Tuesday during his visit to a US airbase outside the capital, and he promised to pull

American troops out of the country as planned.

"We are strongly committed to an Iraq that is sovereign, stable and self-reliant," the US president said.

In February, Obama announced a new strategy that will see most combat troops withdraw from Iraq by August 2010, although a force of up to 50,000 will remain until the end of the following year.

Under a military accord signed between Baghdad and Washington last November, all American troops will leave by the end of 2011.

Violence has fallen dramatically since the Sahwa, mostly former Sunni insurgents, allied with US forces against Al-Qaeda in late 2006 as more American troops poured into the country under former president George W. Bush's "surge" strategy.

Obama returns home to work after jam-packed trip

AP, Washington

"There is still a lot of work to do here," President Barack Obama declared in Baghdad.

He could have been talking about every stop of his jam-packed, eight-day, six-country overseas trip. Or his to-do list

now that he's back in the United States.

In London, Obama joined other world leaders in trying to tackle the spiraling global economic crisis. In France, he sought help from NATO allies in dealing with the deteriorating war in Afghanistan. In the

Czech Republic, Obama pledged to end the threat of nuclear weapons. In Turkey, he sought to start repairing America's dismal standing in the Muslim world. And in Iraq, he pushed for Iraqis to "take responsibility for their own country."

The pile of problems on Obama's desk was high before he left, and remains so now that he's home.

The president returned to Washington in the early hours of Wednesday morning, bringing his lengthy debut on the world stage - including his first stop in a war zone as commander in chief - to a close.

Aides said he brought home achievements both large and small, evidence, they said, of the benefits of the extended travel that turned attention away from all the pressing matters at home for the first time in his less-than-three-month-old presidency.

"It's tangible and intangible," White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel said of the trip's value.

For a nation gripped with worry about its economic future, among the concrete things Obama achieved was an agreement out of the Group of 20 summit in London. The wealthy and developing nations promised to get a handle on risky financial transactions, to act to further stimulate their economies if growth doesn't improve, and to help poorer nations feeling more effects from the global financial meltdown than they can mitigate on their own.



US President Barack Obama greets troops during a visit to Camp Victory in Iraq on April 7, 2009. US President Barack Obama said on a surprise visit to Iraq on Tuesday that the next 18 months could be "critical" and told the war-torn country that it would soon have to look after itself.

4 shot, 1 dead during rampage in California

AP, Temecula

A gunman opened fire at a remote Korean Christian retreat centre Tuesday night, leaving one person dead and at least three people injured, authorities said.

Authorities were first called to the rural area about 7 p.m. after receiving reports about a man shooting his wife, California Highway Patrol spokesman Mario Lopez said.

But investigators were still trying to learn the circumstances of the shootings, and were hindered by a language barrier in trying to sort out the facts, Riverside County Sheriff's spokesman Dennis Gutierrez said.

"We have some nuns that are very distraught," he said. The name and age of the suspected shooter was not

released and the identity of the dead victim were being withheld until relatives were notified.

At least two of the victims were critically injured. The gunman was also believed to be among the wounded at the Kkottongnae Retreat Camp, located in Temecula about 85 miles southeast of Los Angeles.

A nursing supervisor at the Inland Valley Regional Medical Centre near the retreat said she had no information on any of the victims.

The retreat is one of four US branches of the Kkottongnae Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, a Roman Catholic organization dedicated to serving the poor and homeless. It was founded in the city of Cheongju, South Korea, by Father Oh Woongjin in 1976.

Iran charges US reporter with spying

AFP, Tehran

US-Iranian journalist Roxana Saberi, who has been detained in a notorious Tehran prison since January, has been charged with spying, deputy prosecutor Hassan Haddad said yesterday.

"Her case has been sent to the revolutionary court. She, without press credentials, was carrying out spying activities under the guise of being a reporter," Haddad was quoted as saying by the ISNA news agency.

"The evidence is mentioned in her case papers and she has accepted all the charges. She has been arrested under the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

The decision to charge the

journalist comes despite calls by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for her release and US President Barack Obama extending diplomatic overtures towards Iran.

Saberi, who holds both US and Iranian nationalities, was initially reportedly detained for buying alcohol which is prohibited in the Islamic republic.

In March, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hassan Ghashghavi said Saberi's press identity card was revoked in 2006 and since then she had been working "illegally" in the country.

Haddad said on Wednesday that Saberi had entered Iran as an "Iranian citizen."

UZ bill goes against AL manifesto

FROM PAGE 1 from lawmakers. The parishes must also let the lawmakers know even if they merely want to contact the government.

It means none of the upazila parishes will be able to do or decide things by themselves, rather they will have to depend on the MPs, who in fact stood on the way of implementing their own electoral pledge of making the parishes self-reliant and autonomous.

The cabinet led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina however had decided to strengthen the upazila parishes by keeping them free from the grips of the MPs.

The cabinet approved bill, which was placed in the parliament too on February 24, did not propose to allow lawmakers to meddle in the functioning of upazila parishes.

The prime minister had opted to keep the lawmakers away from distribution of wheat and rice for local development activities, a minister

who attended that meeting said, adding that all members of the council of ministers had supported the premier's sentiment.

The cabinet approved bill had also decided to repeal the previous provision that had made it mandatory for the parishes to seek suggestions of lawmakers.

The bill approved by the cabinet only proposed that the lawmakers would act as advisers to the upazila parishes.

After scrutinising the bill approved by the cabinet, the parliamentary standing committee on local government made new recommendations, which were included in the bill, to meet the lawmakers' demand that they be given the authority to call the shots in upazila parishes.

Talking to The Daily Star on Tuesday, a day after the passing of the bill, a minister said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was against the proposal for allowing the lawmakers absolute authority to control the devel-

opment activities in upazilas.

She had also assured upazila chairmen, who met her on Monday before the passing of the controversial bill, of considering their demand for not giving the lawmakers the sweeping authority recommended by the parliamentary body, the minister added.

"But when she entered the House, a number of ministers informed her that the party's MPs might not vote for passing the upazila parishad bill, if their proposed authority was not included," the minister said on condition of anonymity.

He said, "I was personally surprised to see that ministers who had supported the prime minister in the cabinet meeting, were changing their positions and suggesting her to meet the lawmakers' demand."

LRD Minister Syed Ashrafur Islam, who placed the upazila parishad bill, accepted all significant recommendations of the standing commit-

tee without uttering a single word against them.

On the day the bill was scheduled for voting, ruling AL lawmaker AKM Mozammel Haque was forced to withdraw his proposals from the Parliament Secretariat, sources concerned said.

In his proposals, he sought repeal of a provision in the bill that made the lawmakers advisers to the parishes and made their suggestions binding for the local government units.

In the face of fierce opposition from other lawmakers, the AL lawmaker also could not even place another proposal, which was scheduled for being placed in the parliament.

In that proposal, he sought repeal of another standing committee recommendation, which made it mandatory for the parishes to seek suggestions of lawmakers before implementation of development plans.