

A traveller has her body temperature checked by a thermal scanner at Benito Juarez airport in Mexico City on Sunday. The influenza A(H1N1) (swine flu) virus epidemic in Mexico is 'in phase of decline' but caution was still needed, Health Minister Jose Angel Cordova said Sunday.

# US confirms 226 swine flu cases in 30 states

AFP, Washington

Swine flu is now present in more than half of America's states with 226 confirmed infections in 30 states, and will probably cover the entire nation soon, US health authorities said Sunday.

There remains only one death in the United States so far, a Mexican toddler who was visiting relatives in Texas, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said.

"Virtually all of the United States probably has this virus circulating now," Anne Schuchat, the CDC's interim deputy director for science and public health, told reporters.

The CDC's tally Saturday had been 160 confirmed cases of the A(H1N1) virus in 21 US states.

"Part of this increase is just catching up on the testing and part of it is we do think this virus is fairly widespread," Schuchat said.

There were "several encouraging signs," she added, as Mexico reported that its most lethal outbreak might be levelling off.

But Schuchat stressed: "We expect a number of additional states to confirm the virus in the days ahead."

In the CDC's latest tally, six US states had infections in the double digits: New York (63), Texas (40), California (26), Arizona (18), South Carolina (15) and Delaware (10).

Massachusetts and New Jersey had seven cases each. Colorado had four and half a dozen states had three cases each: Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Connecticut, Kansas and Michigan

# Mexico slams discrimination

AP, Mexico City

Strongly criticising China's swine flu tactics as discrimination, Mexico announced it was chartering a plane Monday to bring its citizens home from China. Mexican officials also declared the epidemic to be waning, but medical experts worldwide said it was to

early to make that call.

Mexico's health chief said officials will be deciding Monday whether to reopen businesses and schools or extend the shutdown that has helped choke off the spread of swine flu but caused untold harm to the country's economy.

The swine virus continued spread

around the world, with new cases in Europe and North and South America.

President Felipe Calderon said a nationwide shutdown and an aggressive informational campaign appeared to have helped curtail the outbreak in Mexico. His health secretary said the government is starting preparations for people to return to classes and work.

# Wave of Afghanistan attacks kill 29

AFP, Kabul

A wave of attacks killed 29 people in Afghanistan Monday, as President Hamid Karzai jetted to Washington for a summit on beating the threat of extremism.

In the bloodiest incident a bomb tore through a tractor and trailer transporting a group of Kuchi nomads in a remote district of southern Zabul province, a district governor said.

"A roadside bomb struck their vehicle and killed 12 people," said Wazir Mohammad, head of the Shamalzai district on the border with Pakistan.

The dead were six women, two children and four men, he said.

There was no claim of responsibility for the blast but there are regular bombings in

Afghanistan, most of them blamed on Taliban fighters targeting Afghan and international security forces.

Mohammad also said that two Taliban fighters were killed in the same district early Monday when mines they were planting in a road exploded.

Taliban fighters, meanwhile, attacked a construction site near the Zabul capital, Qalat, where labourers were rebuilding bridges destroyed in earlier militant action, deputy provincial police chief Ghulam Jilani said.

Six security guards protecting the workers were killed in the shoot-out along with two civilian passers-by, he said.

In the eastern province of Laghman, a suicide attacker walked up to a vehicle carrying a provincial mayor and blew himself up, killing the official

and six other people, the interior ministry said in a statement.

A spokesman for the Taliban, Zabihullah Mujahid, claimed responsibility for the Laghman attack.

The mayor of Laghman, Mohammad Rahim Rahim, was one of the most senior officials in province after the governor.

"The mayor, three of his bodyguards and three civilians were martyred," the ministry said.

Authorities in the western province of Herat reported, meanwhile, that 13 Taliban and a policeman were killed in clashes in the area Sunday.

About 150 Taliban attacked a power plant, sparking fighting that left nine of the gunmen and a policeman dead, police spokesman Noor Khan Nikzad said.

# Afghan leader heads for US summit

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai headed to Washington Monday to meet US leader Barack Obama and Pakistan's Asif Ali Zardari amid concerns about efforts to fight the Islamist threat in the region.

Karzai flew to Washington with his foreign and defence ministers immediately after registering to run for a second term in August presidential elections, including on his ticket controversial warlord Mohammad Qasim Fahim.

Karzai was due to meet the US and Pakistani presidents on Wednesday, a statement from his office said, announcing his departure.

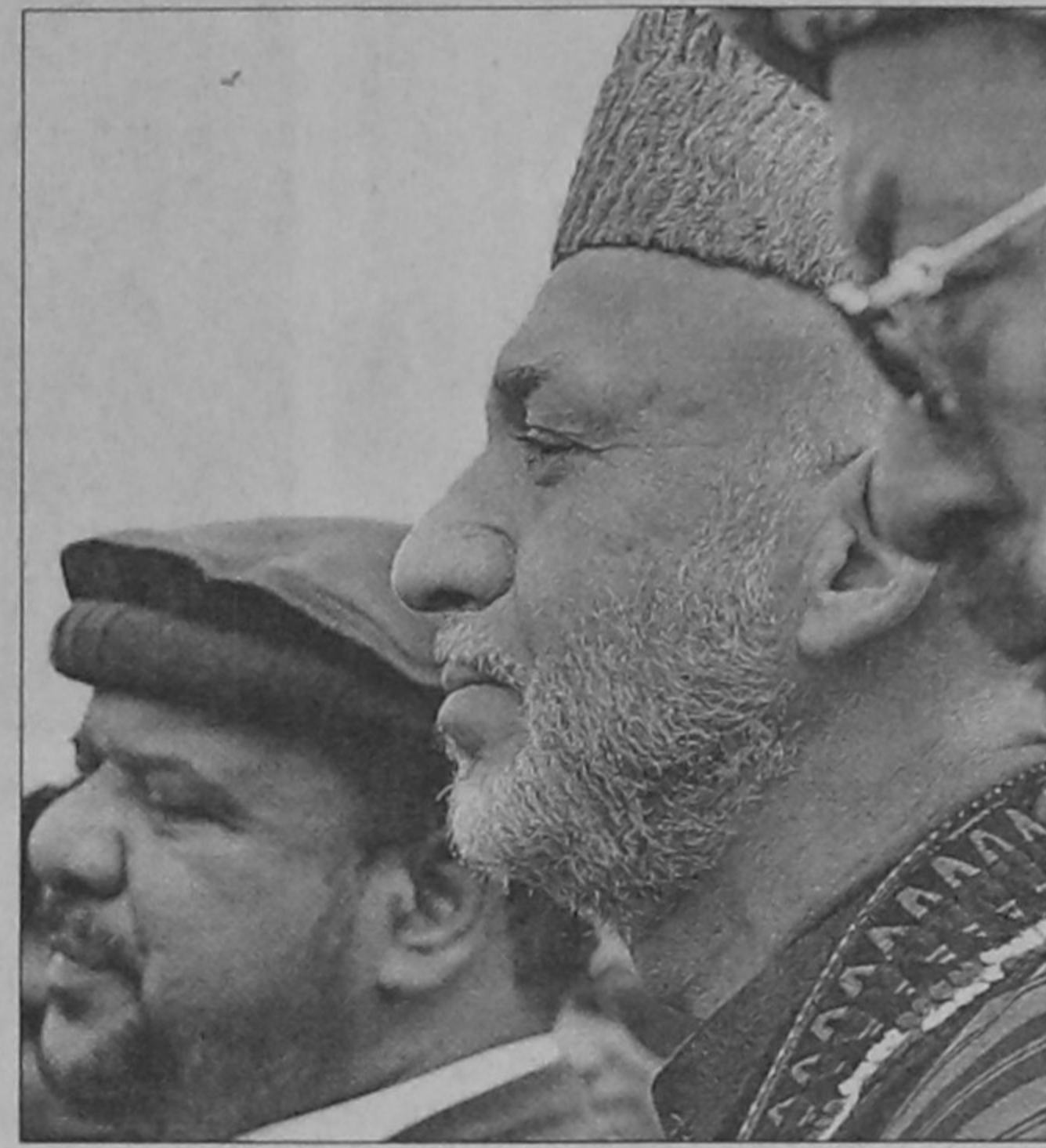
He would also meet other US officials, including House of Representatives speaker Nancy Pelosi, and deliver the address to the prominent

Brookings Institution on "effective ways of fighting terrorism", the statement said.

Obama has put the spotlight firmly on Taliban and al-Qaeda extremists straddling the Afghan and Pakistan border, pledging more troops and resources to eliminate what he has called an international threat.

He has also pushed for more cooperation between the Islamic neighbours to deal with the militants, expressing concern about the fragility of Pakistan's eight-month-old civilian government, which has made concessions to the Taliban.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said recently the US administration would have "some very intense sessions" with the Afghan and Pakistani delegations on Washington's new strategy in the region.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (C) speaks after registering as a candidate for August presidential elections as controversial warlord Mohammad Qasim Fahim (L) as a candidate for vice president and current vice President Karim Khalili (R) look on at the office of the Independent Election Commission in Kabul yesterday.

# Tropical storm kills 11 in West Bengal

AFP, Kolkata

At least 11 people were killed and 25 injured when a tropical storm swept through a large portion of India's West Bengal state, officials said yesterday.

The 10-minute storm carried winds of over 80 kilometres an hour through the state, destroying thousands of mud huts, uprooting electricity and telephone poles and damaging paddy fields and mango crops.

Five people, including three children, were killed after lightning struck their mud hut in Malda, about 360km north of the state capital, Kolkata.

"Four others were electrocuted as live wire from uprooted electric poles dropped on them in villages on the outskirts of Kolkata," said West Bengal relief minister Mortaza Hossain.



Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (CL) and senior Congress leader Mohsina Kidwai (CR) are garlanded by the Congress candidate for Gurdaspur, Pratap Singh Bajwa (L) and Congress leader Ashwani Sekhri (R) during an election campaign rally in Gurdaspur on Sunday.

# Gates seeking to reassure Gulf on outreach to Iran

AP, Shannon

Defence Secretary Robert Gates is on a delicate mission, seeking to reassure long-term US allies in the Persian Gulf region that efforts by Washington to reach out to Iran will not come at their expense.

In fact, Gates told reporters accompanying him to the Mideast that the quest to bolster relations with Tehran most likely will be met, at least initially, by "a closed fist."

Gates on Monday was flying to Egypt, the first stop on a

Mideast tour that will include Saudi Arabia. He said part of his mission this week will be to assure the Saudis, particularly, that any US gesture toward Tehran will be for the purpose of improving security throughout the region.

Building diplomacy with Iran "will not be at the expense of our long-term relationships with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states that have been our partners and friends for decades," Gates told reporters aboard a military jet headed to Cairo.

"There's probably some concerns in the region that may draw on an exaggerated sense of what's possible," the defence secretary said. "And I just think it's important to reassure our friends and allies in the region that while we're willing to reach out to the Iranians, as the president said, with an open hand, I think everybody in the administration, from the president on down, is pretty realistic and will be pretty tough-minded if we still encounter a closed fist."

# We are weakening BJP by weaning away its allies: CPI-M

INDO ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kolkata

Dismissing Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's allegation that the Left parties were helping the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Lok Sabha election by splitting secular votes, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) Monday said they were, in fact, weakening the BJP by weaning away its allies.

"We are weakening the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) by weaning away its allies like the Telugu Desam and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD)," CPI-M politburo member Sitaram Yechury said at a 'meet-the-press' programme at the Kolkata Press Club.

He also accused the Congress of having paved the way for NDA rule at the centre from 1998 to 2004 by withdrawing support to the United Front dispensation in 1998.

"Despite then Congress chief Narasimha's Rao's prom-

ise in 1996 that the Congress will support the UF for a full five-year term, they withdrew support in 1998. Had they not done so, Atal Bihari Vajpayee would not have become prime minister," Yechury said.

The CPI-M leader claimed the newly formed Third Front was working to bring a shift in policy direction for the benefit of the suffering masses in India.

"The left parties, CPI-M in particular, is working towards bringing such policy shift so as to narrow the gap between shining India and suffering India. And it can only be brought about by a non-Congress, non-BJP government at the centre," he said, adding that a majority of voters in the country were not voting for either party.

"And, that is why we are working towards forming a third alternative government at the centre this time," he said, adding that bipolar polity does not suit to India.

# Meshaal re-elected Hamas chief

AFP, Damascus

Exiled Hamas supremo Khaled Meshaal has been re-elected head of the Palestinian Islamist movement's politburo, according to a statement from the group in Damascus.

Mahmud Zahar and Khalil al-Hayya, both senior leaders of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, were also elected members of the politburo in an internal vote, the group's top decision-making body, it said in a statement on Sunday.

Meshaal, who is one of Israel's most wanted men, lives in exile in Damascus. He was born in May 1956 in a West Bank village but has lived most of his life outside the Palestinian territories.

Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 when it drove out forces loyal to the secular Fatah party of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, further

exacerbating a long-running feud.

The two rival factions have been holding talks in Cairo aimed at forming a unity government but have so far failed to reach any agreement and negotiations have been adjourned until May 16.

The Hamas statement did not disclose the identities of the politburo's members in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, where Abbas has his power base. Both groups have complained about tit-for-tat arrests of their members by the rival factions.

Meshaal became the leader of Hamas, which is branded a terror group by Israel and the West, after Israel assassinated the group's spiritual leader and founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and his successor Abdel Aziz Rantissi in 2004.

Israel failed in a bid to assassinate Meshaal in 1997 in Jordan.

# S Africa wonders who's first lady for polygamist president

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africans have long known that Jacob Zuma would be their next president. But now they have a new question for a man married four times and with two current wives: Who's the first lady?

Polygamy is legally recognised in South Africa, and the constitution makes no provisions for a first lady, according to Jessie Duarte, spokeswoman for the ruling African National Congress which swept last month's general elections.

"Mr Zuma can invite any of his two wives or his daughters to official functions, depending on the occasion," she said.

His first wife is Sizakele Khumalo, whom he has known for 50 years and married in 1973.

They have no children together, and she still lives in his village of Nkandla, deep in countryside of KwaZulu-Natal.

# JOB APPROVAL RATINGS

## Hillary beats Obama

ANI, Washington

After finishing 100 days in the office, US Secretary of state Hillary Clinton has trumped President Barack Obama in job approval ratings.

A recent polls shows Clinton having an approval rating of 71 percent, while the President has a 65 percent approval rating.

"She's acting like a statesman and diplomat and representing her President instead of herself. She hasn't gone off on her own as many predicted. It's been very rehabilitating for her image," said a prominent Democrat on the former presidential candidate.

The Daily News quotes experts as saying

that her former president husband, Bill Clinton, has helped in revamping her image.

Hillary also has laboured to smooth over lingering rifts from the campaign with Obama and his inner circle, most notably First Lady Michelle Obama.

Declaring a truce at Foggy Bottom in March, Obama joked about her refusal during the campaign to mention Clinton's name, calling her "the other candidate." With a grin, Obama said, "Let me thank Secretary Clinton - I love saying that!"

Former National Security Council member Elliott Abrams opines that Obama has absorbed much of the foreign policy flak that would have gone Clinton's way.



Supporters of Ricardo Martinelli of the Democratic Change party and presidential candidate for the Alliance for Change, celebrate his victory in the Panamanian elections on Sunday in the streets of Panama City.

# Supermarket magnate wins Panama polls

AP, Panama City

Conservative supermarket magnate Ricardo Martinelli won Panama's presidential election in a landslide Sunday, promising to guide the country through the world economic crisis and an ambitious expansion of the Panama Canal.

The win by Martinelli, of the opposition Alliance for Change, marked a rare centre-

right election triumph in a region that has seen a wave of leftist leaders.

Electoral Tribunal President Erasmo Pinilla called Martinelli the "indisputable winner" after preliminary results showed him with 61 percent support and governing party candidate Balbina Herrera with 37 percent. Former President Guillermo Endara was a distant third.

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