



## Brown denies hitting staff

AFP, London

Prime Minister Gordon Brown said he has "never, never" hit anybody as his office dismissed media allegations of staff intimidation which have threatened his pre-election fight back.

Brown admitted to a few solid tackles on the rugby pitch in his youth and throwing newspapers on the floor but said any anger was largely directed at himself, as he geared up for a general election expected in May.

"If I get angry I get angry with myself," the prime minister told Channel 4 television. "I throw the newspapers on the floor or something like that."

"Let me just say, absolutely clearly, so that there is no misunderstanding about that: I have never, never hit anybody in my life."

The Observer newspaper published extracts from a book by columnist Andrew Rawnsley, which contained allegations about Brown's conduct in his 10 Downing Street office.

It alleged there had been a string of incidents, such as shouting and swearing at colleagues and thumping car seats, which left staff shaken.

The newspaper said that "during one rage, while in his prime ministerial car, Brown clenched his fist in fury after being told some unwelcome news and then thumped the back of the passenger seat."

## Israel rejects recognition of Palestinian state

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday rejected the idea of foreign countries recognising a Palestinian state with-out a negotiated peace agreement, after France's foreign minister hinted at such a scenario.

"Imposing this kind of semblance of a partial solution from outside goes against the very idea of peace," a senior Israeli official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"Granting recognition when the issues of the conflict have not been settled would add fuel to the fire. This would only push the Palestinians to be even more intransigent and thus make any compromise impossible," he added.

France's Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said over the weekend he could envision the recognition of a Palestinian state even before its borders are drawn up.

"The issue before us at the moment is the building of a reality: France is training Palestinian police, businesses are being created in the West Bank," Kouchner told France's Journal du Dimanche.

"It follows that one can envision the proclamation soon of a Palestinian state, and its immediate recognition by the international community, even before negotiating its borders," he said.

Kouchner's comments came ahead of a visit to Paris by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad, meanwhile, says he is intent on building institutions for a de-facto Palestinian state, which he aims to complete by 2011 regardless of whether peace talks have advanced with Israel.

Later on Sunday, Abbas is due to meet with Kouchner in the French capital and with President Nicolas Sarkozy the following day.

Abbas has agreed in principle to a US proposal that he hold indirect talks with Israel under Washington's mediation, but has requested a number of guarantees.

The Palestinians broke off peace talks after Israel launched a devastating assault on the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip in December 2008, and they insist on a halt to Jewish settlements construction in the West Bank.

## Niger junta promises polls

AFP, Niamey

Niger's new military leaders promised to hold elections, but failed to name a date, as thousands rallied in support of the coup that ousted the strongman of the uranium-rich West African nation.

"Our intention is to stabilise the political situation... We plan to organise elections but first we have to stabilise the situation," Colonel Djibrilla Hamidou Hima, one of the junta leaders told journalists in Mali.

Niger's opposition and the international community have pressed the junta, which overthrew President Mamadou Tandja two days ago, to organise elections and return the country to civilian rule as soon as possible.

## VOA, BBC arms of US, British spy agencies: Iran

AP, Tehran

Iran's police chief on Saturday accused the Voice of America and the BBC of being the arms of US and British intelligence agencies, and warned of severe repercussions for journalists and activists caught having contacts with them, state media reported.

Gen Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam, whose police forces have played a key role in the government crackdown on protesters since Iran's disputed presidential election, was quoted by the official IRNA news agency as saying opposition activists have cooperated with the BBC and the Voice of America "with the aim of weakening and overthrowing the (ruling) system."

"The BBC is the arm of MI-6 (Britain's foreign intelligence agency) and VOA belongs to the CIA," Moghaddam said, according to IRNA. "Those who cooperate with foreign services through transmitting photos, reports, news and anti-revolutionary actions... should know that all their actions are monitored." "We will settle accounts with them when the time comes," Moghaddam warned.

Tehran has repeatedly accused the US and

Britain of fuelling the country's post election unrest in a bid to oust the Iran's clerical rulers. It also frequently accuses its opponents of being in league with the country's enemies, and Moghaddam's comments appear to be part of Tehran's efforts to discredit the opposition by linking them with foreign powers.

The Voice of America and the BBC, which are funded by the US and British governments respectively, have their own Persian radio and TV services, which many Iranians tune in to despite a ban on satellite dishes and government attempts to jam the airwaves.

Last month, a top Iranian Intelligence Ministry official banned Iranians from having any contact with 60 foreign news organizations, Iranian opposition Web sites, human rights groups and nongovernmental organizations. The official accused the media of provoking street riots in Iran.

The intelligence official, who was not identified by name, specifically mentioned VOA and BBC as well as a dozen other Persian-language opposition radios and news Web sites, saying the government will consider cooperation with the news outlets as collaboration with the nation's enemies.



PHOTO: AFP  
Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada (R) and his Australian counterpart Stephen Smith (L) prepare to lay wreaths at the State War Memorial of Western Australia on Sunday. Katsuya said during the visit that Australia's threat of legal action against Japan's whaling programme is "unfortunate", but he did not believe it would hurt ties.

## Obama on health care high wire

AFP, Washington

In a crucial week of high wire politics, Barack Obama is seeking to transform his top priority health care plan, now a liability for his presidency, into a trump card to outwit Republicans.

But ahead of the president's bipartisan health "summit" on Thursday, Republicans also think they may have a winning hand, after building their resurgence on blanket opposition to the plan and Obama's wider agenda.

The live, televised meeting at Blair House, across the street from the White House, may represent Obama's last chance to pass the plan, which has ground to a halt in Congress with painful consequences for his political authority.

The talks may also dictate battle lines for mid-term congressional elections in November, and have deep implications for Obama's slowed presidency.

## 6 Qaeda 'militants killed' in Philippines

AP, Manila

Philippine marines killed a top al-Qaeda-linked militant commander and five other extremists early yesterday in an assault on a rebel encampment on a southern island, a senior military commander said.

A marine special operations platoon raided an Abu Sayyaf camp outside Maibung township on Jolo island following intelligence reports that two wanted militant leaders, Umbra Jumdal and Albader Parad, were there, said Lt Gen Benjamin Dolorfino, head of the military's Western Mindanao Command.

Four civilians have independently identified the body of Parad at a military camp in Jolo town, Dolorfino said, adding that a younger brother of Jumdal, Abdulhaman Jumdal, also was among the slain rebels.

"It's a very significant gain in our campaign against terrorism because we all know that Albader Parad is one of the influential leaders (of the Abu Sayyaf)," he told The Associated Press. "This will have a very big demoralizing effect on the other members and shows that they cannot hide forever from the arms of the law."

Government troops first encountered Parad's group late Saturday and caught up with them at the encampment early Sunday, he said.

One marine was killed and three others were wounded in the clash, Philippine marines spokesman Lt Col Edgard Arevalo said.

The recovery of the slain militants and their weapons indicated the Abu Sayyaf gunmen were caught by surprise and could have suffered more casualties since it was unusual for them to leave the bodies of dead comrades behind, Dolorfino said.

He said the 30-man marine platoon was backed by other troops deployed to block the escape of the militants from their encampment on Jolo, where the militants have operated for years despite a US-backed military campaign against them.

## Singing 'rewires' damaged brain

BBC ONLINE

Teaching stroke patients to sing "rewires" their brains, helping them recover their speech, say scientists.

By singing, patients use a different area of the brain from the area involved in speech.

If a person's "speech centre" is damaged by a stroke, they can learn to use their "singing centre" instead.

Researchers presented these findings at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in San Diego.

An ongoing clinical trial, they said, has shown how the brain responds to this "melodic intonation therapy".

Gottfried Schlaug, a neurology professor at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Centre and Harvard Medical School in Boston, US, led the trial.

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