



An Iraqi soldier stands guard as a man inspects the wreckage of a bus at the site of an explosion in the central shrine city of Najaf yesterday. A powerful car bomb near a Shia shrine in Najaf killed two Iranian pilgrims and an Iraqi and injured at least 54 people.

Car bomb rocks Iraq shrine city ahead of today's vote

Qaeda threatens to kill Iraqis who will vote

AFP, Najaf

A car bomb targeting Iranian pilgrims killed three people in Iraq's holiest city Saturday on the eve of the war-shattered nation's general election, which al-Qaeda has threatened to wreck.

The blast near a Shia shrine in Najaf, which local officials said killed two Iranian pilgrims and an Iraqi and wounded at least 54 people, came despite a massive nationwide security operation in the run-up to Sunday's vote.

It gutted four pilgrim buses, mangled cars and left the area spattered with blood, smashed glass and torn clothes, and blew out the windows of nearby hotels that host the thousands of Iraqis who flock there every month.

"We had gathered all the pilgrims in the car park, and they were getting into the buses when the explosion took place,

and killed and injured many visitors," said Hussein Banahi, an Iranian tour guide.

"The attack carries the prints of al-Qaeda and Saddamists," said Faed al-Shimmary of the provincial council in Najaf, which hosts the shrine of Imam Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law and a revered figure in Shia Islam.

Thirty-seven of the wounded were Iraqis, local officials said, adding that the blast was just 500 metres from the shrine in the city that lies south of Baghdad.

The attack on Iranian pilgrims drew fire from Tehran, with Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast condemning it as an "inhuman and criminal act."

The final days of campaigning for Sunday's polls, the second parliamentary election since US-led troops ousted

dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, have been overshadowed by a series of suicide bombings in Baghdad and the city of Baquba.

The Islamic state of Iraq, the Qaeda front here, said in a statement Friday it was imposing a "curfew" on Sunday and anyone who dared defy it would "expose himself to the anger of Allah and... all kinds of weapons of the Mujahideen."

Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Qaeda front, had threatened last month to disrupt by "military means" the poll which looks set to see minority Sunnis vote en masse, in stark contrast to their 2005 election boycott.

Friday's statement from Qaeda, an extremist Sunni group that views Shias as heretics, came as voting was already under way for an estimated 1.4 million Iraqis living abroad in 16 different countries.

Mubarak hands power to PM ahead of operation

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has handed over power to his prime minister ahead of a gall bladder operation in Germany yesterday morning, state television has announced.

Mubarak had issued a decree giving Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif executive power until he returns to Cairo, as the constitution requires him to do, said the report.

State television announced on Thursday that Mubarak, 81, would undergo medical tests in Heidelberg on Friday "following complaints of gall bladder pain" while in Germany for talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Obama vows to reduce number, role of nukes

AFP, Washington/United Nations

US President Barack Obama pledged on Friday to reduce both the number and the role of nuclear weapons as he recommitted himself to the abolition of the ultra-destructive arms.

Obama was marking the 40th anniversary of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which he said remained the cornerstone of international efforts to stop the spread of the weapons.

"Our forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review will move beyond outdated Cold War thinking and reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, even as we maintain a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent," Obama said in a statement.

A senior US official earlier this week said that

the Obama administration planned "dramatic reductions" in the country's nuclear arsenal as part of the review, due to be completed by late March.

Obama laid out a vision for a nuclear-free world in a major speech last year in Prague, while acknowledging he may never see the goal achieved.

"The United States reaffirms our resolve to strengthen the nonproliferation regime to meet the challenges of the 21st century as we pursue our ultimate vision of a world without nuclear weapons," he said in the statement.

Obama has called a major summit in Washington in April on nuclear security. His administration is also involved in talks with Russia on a new treaty, which Obama said Friday would "significantly reduce our nuclear arsenals."

Obama urges action on healthcare without delay

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Saturday renewed his appeal to Congress to vote on his healthcare reform, arguing that any delay would allow insurance companies to continue their old practices.

"We are very close. And so I ask Congress to finish its work," Obama said in his weekly radio address.

"I ask them to give the American people an up or down vote. And let's show our citizens that it's still possible for Washington to look out for their interests and their future."

No school for almost half of Afghan children: Karzai

AFP, Kabul

Almost half of school-age children in Afghanistan do not have access to education, President Hamid Karzai said yesterday as he inaugurated the new school year.

Despite a seven-fold increase in the number of children going to school in the eight years since the repressive Taliban regime was overthrown, 42 percent still do not attend or have access to schools, Karzai said.

"Five million school-age children in our country do not go to school, some because of war or because their schools have been closed by the Taliban or others, some because they do not have the ability to go to schools," he said.

In early 2002, fewer than one million children -- only boys -- attended 3,400 schools across the country, taught by 20,000 male teachers, said education minister Mohammad

Farooq Wardak.

By contrast, seven million students -- 37 percent of them girls -- attend 12,500 schools, where 30 percent of the teachers, or 175,000, are women.

"We are still facing a series of serious challenges," Wardak told a ceremony at a secondary school adjacent to the Presidential Palace.

"Forty-two percent of school-age children do not have access to schools and another 11 million of our compatriots are illiterate," he said.

Afghanistan has been suffering some sort of armed conflict for the past 30 years, starting with the Soviet invasion of 1979, through civil war, and, from 1996-2001, rule by the Islamist Taliban who banned girls from education.

This has left a huge knowledge gap that the international community has been trying to fill, with billions of dollars of aid pouring in since the Taliban were pushed out in a US-led invasion.

Israeli action at Al-Aqsa sacrilege: OIC

UNSC urges restraint in tense Jerusalem

AFP, Jeddah/United Nations

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference yesterday accused Israeli police of sacrilege by occupying Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque and called for international intervention to "end Israeli aggression."

EKmeleddin Ihsanoglu, secretary-general of the Jeddah-based pan-Islamic body, said in a statement that Friday's fighting between Muslims and Israeli police, which injured dozens, was "a sacrilegious act of profanation of the holy Islamic site."

The police action was "a violation of international law and a flagrant attack on the freedom of religion of the nature that could take the region into a war between religions," he said in the statement.

Ihsanoglu called on the international community and the Quartet on Middle East peace -- the European Union, the United States, Russia and the United Nations -- to "pay heed to the gravity of the Israeli violations and the threat they pose to the region now and in the future."

He called for "an international intervention effective at every level to end Israeli aggressions and make Israel respect international law."

Earlier the UN Security Council called for restraint following clashes between Israeli police and Muslim protesters in Jerusalem Friday and said it looked forward to an early resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Fears spread as Chile rattled by aftershocks

AFP, Constitution

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon visits the earthquake-struck Chilean city of Concepcion Saturday to assess its needs as new fears spread among Chileans following three strong aftershocks.

The Navy meanwhile sacked the head of the Oceanography Service, saying he had failed to provide a clear warning of the deadly tsunami that followed Saturday's 8.8-quake, as criticism grew of the official disaster response.

A first 6.2-magnitude aftershock jolted people awake at 6:20 am (0920 GMT), Friday just six days after the 8.8-magnitude quake which, along with the tsunami, left more than 800 people dead and some two million homeless.



This recent undated photo received Saturday shows Indian boy Gurshan Singh (R) with his mother Harpreet Kaur Channa in Melbourne.

Parents visit Indian toddler's body in Australia

AFP, Melbourne

The distraught parents of an Indian toddler whose body was dumped by a Melbourne roadside made an emotional visit to their son's body yesterday, as police continued to investigate his suspicious death.

The couple spent an hour viewing the body of three-year-old Gurshan Singh at the Melbourne coroner's centre, before returning to a relative's house with the mother in tears.

The boy's body was found Thursday several hours after he disappeared from a suburban house.

As stuffed toys, flowers and messages of support collected outside their home, family friend Ajay Pathania said the couple, who had been studying in Australia, had cancelled their plane tickets back to Punjab, northern India.

British PM faces Iraq inquiry backlash

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown faced a backlash yesterday over his testimony to a public inquiry into the Iraq war as ex-military chiefs questioned his claims that the army was adequately funded.

Brown told the inquiry on Friday that it had been "the right decision" for Britain to invade Iraq alongside the United States in 2003 and claimed that as finance minister he had provided sufficient funds for the military fight.

But the head of the Armed Forces at the time of the 2003 invasion accused Brown of being "disingenuous" in saying that he provided mili-

tary chiefs with everything they had asked for.

"He's dissembling, he's being disingenuous," Admiral Lord Boyce, the chief of the defence staff up to the start of the invasion, told The Times newspaper.

"It's just not the case that the Ministry of Defence was given everything it needed. There may have been a 1.5 percent increase in the defence budget but the MoD was starved of funds."

Lord Charles Guthrie, the head of Britain's armed forces from 1997 to 2001, meanwhile said Brown had been "economical with the truth" in his testimony to the inquiry, headed by former senior civil servant John Chilcot.

Study sheds light on memory and learning

ANI, Washington

In a new study, researchers have delved into the question: Are we overestimating remembering and underestimating learning?

Led by Nate Kornell, an assistant professor of psychology at Williams College, and Robert A Bjork of the University of California, Los Angeles, the researchers have reported their findings in the paper titled 'A Stability Bias in Human Memory: Overestimating Remembering and Underestimating Learning'.

"To manage one's own conditions of learning effectively requires gaining an understanding of the activities and processes that do and do not support learning," wrote the authors.

In psychology, experts use the term metacognition to talk about how people think about their own cognitive processes - in essence, thinking about thinking.

To investigate how people think about their capacity for remembering, the authors asked people to look at a list of words and predict how well they would be able to remember the words after subsequent periods of study and testing.



British Prime Minister Gordon Brown (R) talks with Afghan village elders at the Shawqat Forward Operating Base, Lashkar Gah, Helmand Province in Afghanistan yesterday. Early wins in a major anti-Taliban push in southern Afghanistan offered a "beacon of hope," British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said during a surprise visit to troops.

Brown hails anti-Taliban push

AFP, Camp Bastion

Early wins in a major anti-Taliban push in southern Afghanistan offered a "beacon of hope," British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said Saturday during a surprise visit to troops.

During a lightning eight-hour visit to Helmand province, Brown cautioned that it was vital to "win the peace as well as the war" and vowed that British troops would stay in Afghanistan until their job was done.

"That's why it's so crucial that in just 20 days since the start of the operation, the combined international and Afghan forces, military and civilian, have begun turning a stronghold of brutal Taliban insurgency into a beacon of hope for local people," he told reporters.

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School of Business
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Tel: 9862386 - 90, 9881917, 9881681, 9884498
Ext: 254
Fax: 880-2-8823959, 8850226
E-mail: info@iub.edu.bd

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