



UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon listens to Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad (R) as he points to the Israeli controversial separation barrier during a tour of the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Ban said the international community "strongly supports" Palestinian efforts to build a viable state at the start of a visit aimed at reviving peace talks.

# Quartet 'strongly supports' Palestinian state: UN chief

AFP, Ramallah

UN chief Ban Ki-moon began a visit to the Palestinian territories and Israel yesterday, saying the Middle East Quartet "strongly supports" Palestinian efforts to create their own state.

He kicked off his two-day visit by meeting Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in the West Bank political capital of Ramallah.

He is also expected to meet senior Israeli officials and to visit the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, still largely in ruins following an Israeli military campaign at the start of last year.

Ban arrived in Ramallah a day after the Quartet called for Israel to halt all settlement construction and for a peace deal with the Palestinians by 2012.

"The Quartet has sent a clear and strong message: We are strongly supporting your efforts to establish an independent and viable Palestinian state," he told Fayyad ahead of formal talks.

Before those talks, Fayyad had taken Ban to a vantage point above Ramallah to show him a large swathe of West Bank territory under exclusive Israeli control and off limits to Palestinian development.

Ban "will see for himself how difficult it is," Fayyad said before the UN secretary general arrived, "but he will also see how determined we are to create positive facts on the ground."

Fayyad claims 60 percent of the West Bank consists of land in so-called Area C, under exclusive Israeli control, and that 70,000 Palestinians live in such zones.

Following the tour, Ban said, "I have seen for myself plainly and clearly how Palestinians are living under such restriction and limitation. Even in your territory you are not able to develop or even maintain a normal economic life."

On Friday, the Quartet (European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States) issued an ambitious statement after a meeting of senior officials in Moscow aimed at getting moribund peace talks back on track.

"The Quartet urges the government of Israel to freeze all settlement activity... to dismantle outposts erected since March 2001 and to refrain from demolitions and evictions in East Jerusalem," he said.

It also urged Israel and the Palestinians to resume talks on final status issues -- security, borders of a future Palestinian state, the fate of Palestinian refugees and

the status of Jerusalem -- to find a settlement within 24 months.

Such a deal would end "the occupation which began in 1967 and result in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel," Ban said.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman was particularly irked by the two-year deadline.

"Peace cannot be imposed artificially and with an unrealistic calendar," he was quoted as saying in an address to the Jewish community in Brussels.

"This type of statement only harms the possibilities of reaching an accord."

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat welcomed the Quartet's call, but asked for a mechanism to "make sure that Israel does effectively halt completely all settlement activity in the West Bank and east Jerusalem."

And speaking before his meeting with Ban, Fayyad said of the Quartet statement: "we regard it as a progressive statement encompassing all the key elements that should govern how the political process proceeds."

# Thai govt and Red Shirts to hold talks: Senator

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai government minister is to meet a representative of the "Red Shirt" protesters holding mass anti-government rallies in Bangkok, a senator said yesterday.

Satit Wongthongtaey, the minister attached to the prime minister's office, and Weng Tojirakarn, considered a second-tier leader of the protest movement, will meet at midday on Monday, Senator Lertrat Ratanavanich told AFP.

The protesters, who back former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, had previously refused the government's offer of talks unless current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva agreed to their demand to call a snap election.

"Satit and Weng Tojirakarn from the Red Shirt protesters agreed to meet on Monday noon," Lertrat said, declining to disclose the venue.

"The first meeting will be to set up a framework of talks," he said.

The Red Shirts, who are mainly from the poor and rural north and northeast of Thailand, have not yet commented on the meeting but it was also confirmed by a government spokesman.

Their so-far peaceful anti-government rally drew more than 100,000 when it began last weekend, and they went on to use attention-grabbing tactics such as splattering Abhisit's home and offices with their own blood.

The rally has since appeared to wane, but on Saturday they packed trucks, cars and motorbikes in a carnival-like convoy aimed at winning over the capital's residents, in what they have dubbed their "class war".

The Reds believe the government is elitist and illegitimate, as it came to power with army support via a parliamentary vote in December 2008 after a controversial court ruling removed Thaksin's allies.

Earlier Saturday, Abhisit said that Thaksin, who was ousted in a coup in 2006 and lives abroad to avoid a jail term for corruption, was an "obstacle to negotiation" between the government and the Red Shirts.

# Obama drums up support for healthcare votes

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama girded Friday for a crucial weekend vote on his sweeping health care overhaul plan, with Democrats poised to make history after a century of struggling for reform.

Obama will step up his vote-whipping operation on Capitol Hill Saturday, meeting Democrats in the House of Representatives, a day before a scheduled vote on the most far-reaching social programme in decades.

After months of setbacks, bitter partisanship and legislative logjams, Obama appeared triumphant Friday, rekindling the spirit of change that powered his euphoric 2008 election campaign but has been dimmed by the slog of government.

"Right now, we are at the

point where we are going to do something historic this weekend," Obama said at a rally in northern Virginia billed as a rousing climax to his plan to offer health care to 32 million uninsured Americans.

"In just a few days, a century-long struggle will culminate in a historic vote," Obama said, as 8,500 supporters chanted his campaign theme "Yes We Can" in a sports arena.

The White House said Obama has held 64 meetings or telephone calls with wavering lawmakers so far on health care reform.

On Capitol Hill, Democratic leaders kept up the pressure on legislators still on the fence, seeking to piece together the magic majority figure of 216 in the vote on the comprehensive health reform package expected on Sunday.



Nepali Congress party leaders, party cadres and the general public pay their last respect to former prime minister and party president Girija Prasad Koirala in Kathmandu yesterday.

# Koirala: Grand old man of Nepalese politics

BBC ONLINE

GP Koirala is one of Nepal's most long-standing and experienced politicians and has led the country through some of its biggest upheavals.

First coming to prominence as a union leader in the late 1940s, he has been imprisoned, exiled or detained on numerous occasions for championing the cause of democracy against various autocratic regimes.

In 1960, he was jailed for eight years for his pro-democracy views.

His appointment as prime minister is not the first time he has been elevated to the country's leadership after a king's powers have been curbed.

As general secretary of the Nepali Congress Party, he

played a key role in public demonstrations in the early 1990s to end the absolute powers of the current king's brother, Birendra.

In 2001 King Birendra was murdered - along with nine members of his family.

That incident occurred while Koirala was prime minister and it was his role to provide leadership for a stunned nation.

While Birendra was king, he had Koirala placed under house arrest during protests against the king's rule. The same fate befell Koirala in the more recent demonstrations against King Gyanendra.

The eighty-five-year-old describes himself as a centrist and a free marketeer.

He has been prime minister on three previous occasions from the early 1990s.

His longest stint in the top job was three and a half years.

On each occasion his administration fell due to a combination of Congress Party in-fighting and the narrowness of his majorities in parliament.

Koirala is reluctantly taking the top job, complaining that his ill-health and old age makes him an unsuitable candidate.

It will be a tough work schedule for the octogenarian, who commutes by a Dakota passenger aeroplane from his home in the south-east of Nepal to Kathmandu.

While he has in the past been criticised for being too authoritarian, his longevity and stature mean that he remains one of the few politicians in Nepal capable of achieving political consensus.



Bangkok residents (top) react as red-shirted supporters of deposed Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra parade in the Thai capital yesterday. Thousands of red-clad Thai protesters began to snake across Bangkok in a festive travelling rally aimed at winning over the city's residents to their flagging anti-government campaign.

# Obama reaches out to Iranian civilians

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama yesterday subtly shifted US rhetoric on Iran, pledging to ensure Iranians could access the Internet without fear of censorship, and blaming Tehran for isolating itself.

A year after offering a "new beginning" to Iran, Obama used his annual Nowruz, New Year's message to keep the door to dialogue open, but reached out more to the Iranian populace at large rather than their leaders in Tehran.

"Even as we continue to have differences with the Iranian government, we will sustain our commitment to a more hopeful future for the Iranian people," Obama said, in excerpts of his message released by the White House.

The president repeated the now familiar line that Iran had failed to live up to its obligations to come clean on its nuclear programme, so should be held accountable by world powers now seeking a tougher sanctions regime.

The tone of the greeting was coloured by a year which saw Obama's offers of engagement with Iran over its nuclear ambitions largely spurned, and in which Iranian authorities cracked down on protesters following a disputed election.

A US official said privately that Obama was still being careful not to pick sides in the political standoff in Iran, though conceded the message reflected a subtle evolution of US rhetoric towards Washington's long-time foe.

# Iran wasting chance for dialogue: Russia

AFP, Moscow

Russia on Friday warned Iran it was missing out on a chance to start a broad dialogue, as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton again sought to win the Kremlin's assent for tougher stance on Tehran.

Iran's defiance over its nuclear programme means the country is wasting a chance for talks to find a solution, stressed that sanctions would be counterproductive, his spokesman Yuri Ushakov said.

"A resolution (on sanctions) is possible," Putin said at the meeting. "But sanctions will not contribute in resolving the problem, they could be counterproductive," Ushakov quoted him as saying.

"It is letting an opportunity

to establish dialogue with the international community slip away," Lavrov said.

Later in talks with Clinton, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, believed to have a final say on all issues related to Iran, stressed that sanctions would be counterproductive, his spokesman Yuri Ushakov said.

"A resolution (on sanctions) is possible," Putin said at the meeting. "But sanctions will not contribute in resolving the problem, they could be counterproductive," Ushakov quoted him as saying.

Clinton said Washington

# 'Tehran allows Laden daughter to leave'

AFP, Dubai

A teenaged daughter of Osama bin Laden has been allowed to fly out of Tehran where she had taken refuge in Saudi Arabia's embassy, a Saudi-financed newspaper reported on Friday.

Asharq Al-Awsat said Iman bin Laden arrived in Damascus on a commercial flight on Thursday together with her mother Najwa al-Ghanem, the fugitive al-Qaeda chief's first wife.

The mother of Syrian origin had travelled to Iran from Damascus to collect the teenager, it said.

Asharq Al-Awsat said that Saudi diplomatic efforts had led to her being authorised to leave the Islamic republic, unlike other members of the bin Laden family.

Iman bin Laden, 17, who holds Saudi nationality, escaped her Iranian minders and took refuge in the Saudi embassy in January.

Asharq Al-Awsat reported in late December that 18 members of the bin Laden family missing since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States had been living under house arrest in Iran.



Myanmar-born US activist Kway Zaw Lwin and his fiancée Wa Wa Kyaw smile yesterday as he arrives at Dulles International Airport after being released by Myanmar's military regime on Thursday.

# Sarkozy's party braces for electoral wipe-out

AP, Paris

President Nicolas Sarkozy's party braced for a potential electoral wipe-out in Sunday's final round of regional elections, which an alliance of the rival left hopes will give it a national sweep and a staging ground for 2012 presidential voting.

Even damage control was difficult for the conservatives.

Sarkozy's UMP party, or Union for a Popular Majority, has ended up pleading with voters to go to the polls, hoping supporters simply failed to cast ballots in the first round the case for more than one in two French.

The participation rate was at a historic low in last Sunday's voting some 46 percent. The Socialist-led left won 53.5 percent of the votes while the UMP-led conservatives had 39.9 percent.

Even with Sarkozy's party, some said voters were being alienated by the president and his high-speed reforms.

Former Prime Minister Alain Juppe said this week that Sarkozy must start "facing reality."

Pope Benedict XVI has apologised to victims of child sex abuse by Catholic priests in Ireland.

In a pastoral letter to Irish Catholics, he acknowledged the sense of betrayal in the Church felt by victims and their families.

The Pope said there had been "serious mistakes" among bishops in responding to allegations of paedophilia.

The pastoral letter is the first statement of its kind by the Vatican on the sexual abuse of children.

It follows revelations of paedophilia within the Irish Catholic Church, which have rocked the institution.

Scandals involving Catholic priests have been reported in other countries, including the Pope's native Germany.

Addressing the victims of abuse, the Pope wrote: "You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry."

He continued: "Your trust has been betrayed and your dignity has been violated... I openly express the shame and remorse that we all feel."

He said those guilty of abuse must "answer before God and properly constituted tribunals for the sinful and criminal actions they have committed".

# Queen recycles her clothes!

ANI, London

Queen Elizabeth II has been revealed to like recycling her outfits and not wear them only once, making sure she gets full use of them.

Her senior dresser Angela Kelly, who lives in Buckingham Palace and designs and creates Her Majesty's clothes, says she would never insist on having a new outfit for each occasion.

"Oh no, she doesn't believe in all that. She wears her dresses to death," the Daily Express quoted Kelly, who has a team of 10 staff working with her, as telling students at Broomhill Infants in Sheffield.



Anubhai Bharwad (C), father of Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) head constable Haribhai Anubhai Bharwad, carries the Indian national flag, which was draped over Bharwad's coffin, to give it to his grandson Bharat during the cremation in Bamangam, Matar Taluka, some 70km from Ahmedabad yesterday.