



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian protesters (R) hold up a placard which reads in Arabic: "Israel destroyed my home," as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, flanked by security guards and unidentified aides, waves to local residents during his tour of the heavily destroyed Ezbet Abed Rabbo area of the northern Gaza Strip's Jabalia refugee camp yesterday.

UN chief in Gaza calls for lifting of Israeli blockade

No Israeli concession on Jerusalem settlement, says Netanyahu

AFP, Khan Yunis/ Jerusalem

UN chief Ban Ki-moon slammed Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip during a tour of the war-battered coastal territory yesterday, saying it was causing "unacceptable suffering."

The visit came as part of a two-day regional tour aimed at reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace talks that last collapsed during Israel's war on the territory's Hamas rulers in December 2008 and January 2009.

"I have repeatedly made it quite clear to Israel's leaders that the Israeli policy of closure is not sustainable and that it's wrong," Ban told reporters in the southern Gaza Strip town of Khan Yunis.

"It causes unacceptable suffering," he said, adding that he was saddened to see that teenagers and children were the most affected.

"This policy is also counterproductive. It prevents legitimate commerce and encourages smuggling. It undercuts moderates and empowers extremists."

It was the UN chief's second visit to Gaza since the war in which some 1,400 Palestinians were killed and thousands of houses were severely damaged or destroyed by Israeli forces. Thirteen Israelis were killed in the fighting.

Ban toured some of the hardest-hit areas of Gaza before announcing projects to build 150 homes, a flour mill and a sewage treatment plant, for which Israel has given rare approval for the import of construction materials.

The housing project on the site of a former Israeli settlement near the southern town of Khan Yunis is seen as a way of proving to Israel that the United Nations can bring building materials into the territory without them being hijacked by Hamas or other militant groups.

Munir Manneh, the head of construction projects for the UN refugee agency UNRWA, said all the materials would be carefully documented.

"We will give an excellent example and prove that we will control the process 100 percent," he said after presenting the

project details to Ban. Ban hailed the projects but said the sight of houses that remain in ruins more than a year after the war ended was "quite distressing" and that more reconstruction was needed, calling the projects a "drop in the bucket."

The Israeli offensive in Gaza largely succeeded in its aim to halt years of nearly-daily rocket attacks from the territory that were rarely lethal but left residents living near the border in a constant state of fear. Israel has said the border closures, which keep out all but vital aid, are necessary to prevent Hamas from rebuilding its military infrastructure and to pressure it to release the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, captured in 2006.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed yesterday ahead of a trip to the United States that there would be no Israeli concessions on settlement building in east Jerusalem.

Netanyahu made the comments as US envoy George Mitchell arrived in Israel on a new mission to try to revive peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

Thai protesters create blood art

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand was mired in political deadlock yesterday as demonstrators used their own blood to create a giant piece of protest art and rejected the government's offer of talks designed to end their rally.

The "Red Shirts" painted poems, pictures and political slogans on white canvas with remains of the blood they had donated and splattered on the prime minister's house and offices in their shock tactics of the past week.

"People of the next generation will know that the older generation would sacrifice everything, including their blood," Red Shirt poet Visa Kantab told the cheering crowd in Bangkok's old quarter as they displayed the artwork.

The Reds, who support ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, are calling for immediate elections on claims that the current government, led by premier Abhisit Vejjajiva, is illegitimate and elite-backed.

"We guarantee that Abhisit will not get bored," Red leader Nattawut Saikur told reporters late on Sunday -- the eighth day of their Bangkok protests -- when asked about their next step.

He said they had "several plans" afoot, without giving further details, as they again rejected Abhisit's offer of dialogue with one of his ministers.

"We will not talk to anybody except Abhisit and we will only talk about one topic -- house dissolution," added another protest leader, Jatuporn Prompan.

Earlier, Abhisit said he would send his education minister and a government official to meet senior Red Shirts on Monday, despite the protesters' repeated insistence on speaking only to the premier.

Indian rail ad places Delhi in Pakistan!

AFP, New Delhi

An advertisement for a new luxury train service embarrassed India's rail ministry yesterday by placing the country's capital, New Delhi, inside the territory of arch-rival Pakistan.

Other gaffes made in announcing the inaugural run of the Maharajas' Express placed Kolkata, the Buddhist pilgrimage centre of Gaya and the Bandhavgarh Tiger reserve in the Bay of Bengal.

The agency which designed the ad -- promising to show passengers "an India like never before!" -- amended a version approved by Eastern Railways on March 19, the rail company's spokesman Samir Goswami told AFP.

"The agency decided to mark the train route more prominently in the final copy of the advertisement, given to newspapers, without informing us," Goswami said by phone from Kolkata.

Iraqi PM in tight election battle, demands recount

AFP, Baghdad

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, locked in a tight battle with his main rival to form Iraq's next government, yesterday called for a manual recount of votes cast in the country's March 7 polls.

His demand was immediately slammed as a "clear threat" against the election commission by the Iraqi bloc that is neck-and-neck with the incumbent's State of Law Alliance in the race to be the biggest grouping in parliament.

Results from the election, the second since Saddam Hussein was ousted in the US-led invasion of 2003, come less than six months before the United States is due to withdraw all of its combat troops from Iraq.

Latest figures from Iraq's election commission and based on 92 percent of ballots cast show State of Law trailing Iraqiya, led by secular ex-premier Iyad Allawi, by less than 8,000 votes nationwide.

In a statement on Sunday, Maliki called on Iraq's election commission to "immediately answer the demands of political parties to proceed with a manual recount" which he said would "protect political stability ... and prevent a return to violence."

The statement, which pointedly noted that Maliki remained head of the country's armed forces, did not specify whether he wanted a nationwide recount, or only in particular provinces.

The statement differs markedly from Maliki's own comments just a week ago, when he said election complaints "cannot affect the results."

Maliki advisor Ali al-Mussawi said the count had been proceeding properly until two-thirds of votes were tabulated, at which point "numbers were jumping illogically."

"We cannot give up and this (a manual recount) is the simplest measure that can be taken."

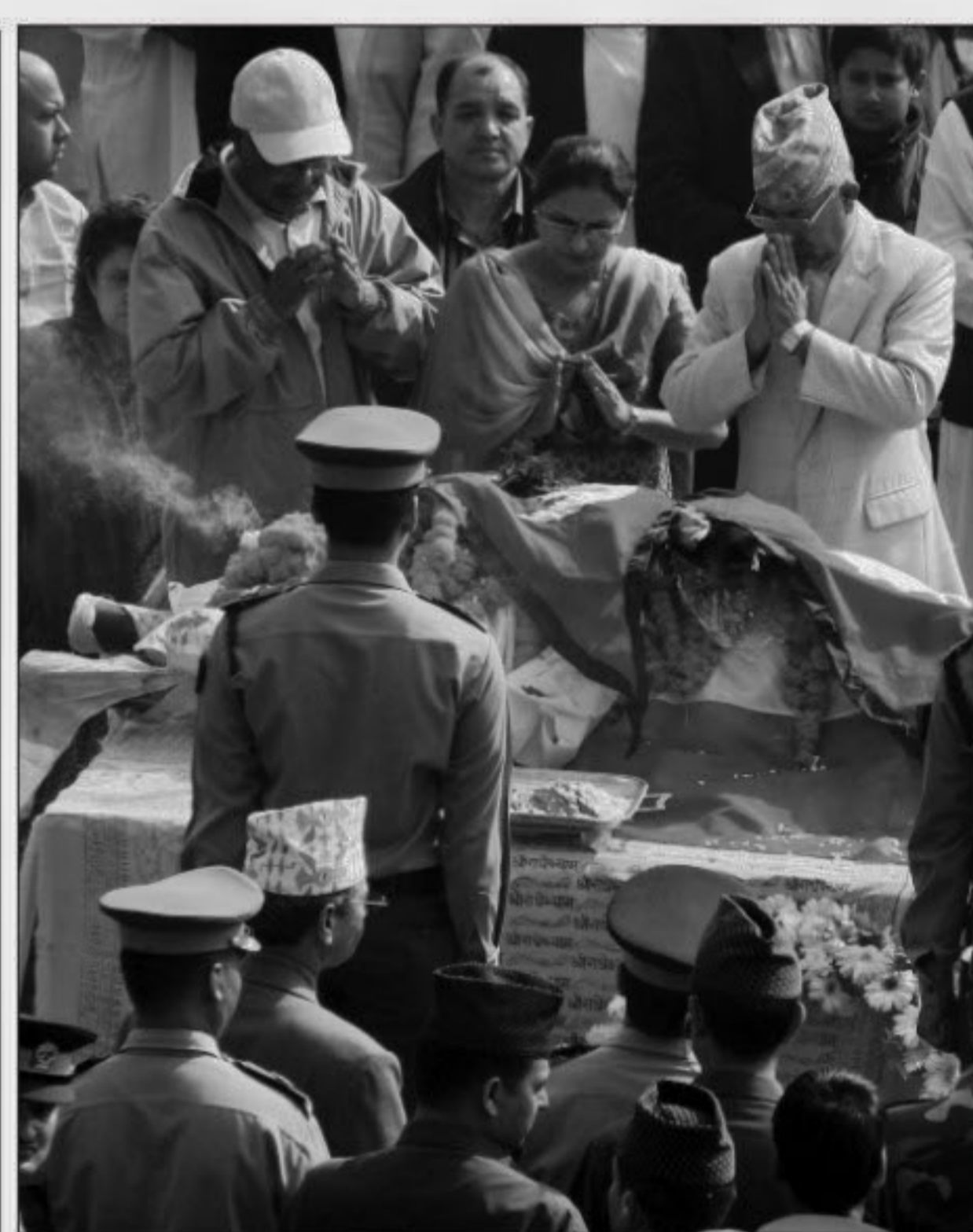


PHOTO: AFP
Nepal's Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal and his wife (C) pay their last respect to Nepal Congress president and former prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala in Kathmandu yesterday. Koirala, who brokered the peace deal that ended a bloody 10-year civil war, died on Saturday after a long illness.

Thousands pay their final respects to Koirala

AFP, Kathmandu

Thousands of people gathered in Kathmandu yesterday to pay their final respects to Girija Prasad Koirala, the former Nepalese leader who helped bring a decade-long civil war to an end.

Mourners carrying floral garlands and traditional silk scarves formed huge queues around the national stadium, where Koirala's body is lying in state, and waited for hours in the hot sun to pay their tributes.

"He was a true statesman who led Nepal through its most difficult period," said banker Sadiqsha Poudel as he waited outside the stadium.

"He was like a father figure and I don't know what will happen now he is gone."

Koirala, who died on Saturday aged 85 after a long illness, led the Himalayan nation through some of its biggest upheavals, including the massacre of 10 members of the royal family.



PHOTO: AFP
French President Nicolas Sarkozy (C) and first lady Carla Bruni-Sarkozy speak with a girl while leaving a Paris polling station after voting for the second round of the regional election yesterday. Sarkozy faces pressure to rethink policies and reshuffle ministers as his right-wing party UMP heads for a thrashing in this final round of regional elections.

Sarkozy's party braces for setback in polls

AP, Paris

President Nicolas Sarkozy's conservative party was bracing for a massive setback yesterday as frustrated French voters cast ballots in regional run-off elections likely to favour the opposition left and to set the stage for the 2012 presidential race.

Discouraged by Sarkozy's handling of the stumbling economy, voters preferred the Socialists and like-minded parties in the first round of voting a week ago. Apathy played a central role in that round, with turnout at a record low in the first round, at 46 percent. By noon in Sunday's runoff, turnout was about 19 percent, the Interior Ministry said.

Sarkozy's UMP party, or Union for a Popular Majority, has ended up pleading with voters to go to the polls. In last week's vote, the Socialist-led left won 53.5 percent of the votes while the UMP-led conservatives had 39.9 percent.

Even in a politically active, and generally left-leaning, neighbourhood in southeast Paris, one voting station stood empty for the first hour after polls opened Sunday. Eventually Jeanne-Marie Debras appeared and cast her ballot for a far-left list, including Communist Party candidates.

"I hope this election will breathe new life into (the left)," the 62-year-old retired teacher said. "We have the impression that we have forgotten about our rights," she said.

Voters like Debras are angry at Sarkozy's reform efforts aimed at loosening up labour rules to make the economy more globally competitive. Hardcore facts of life like jobs, salaries, pensions and defeating the economic crisis are prime concerns to the French.

Global warming can lead to increased violence in human beings

ANI, Washington

A new research has shown that as the earth's average temperature rises, so does human "heat" in the form of violent tendencies, which links global warming with increased violence in human beings.

Using US government data on average yearly temperatures and the number of violent crimes between 1950 and 2008, the researchers estimate that if the annual average temperature in the US increases by 4.4 degree Celsius, the yearly murder and assault rate will increase by 34 per 100,000 people - or 100,000 more per year in a population of 305 million.

While the global warming science has recently come under fire, the main premise behind the Iowa State researchers' research paper is irrefutable.

"It is very well researched and what I call the 'heat hypothesis'," Anderson said.

"When people get hot, they behave more aggressively. There's nothing new there and we're all finding the same thing. But of the three ways that global warming is going to increase aggression and violence, that's probably the one that's going to have the most direct impact - even on developed, wealthy countries, because they have warm regions too," he added.

The ISU researchers analysed existing research - including an update on a study Anderson authored in 1997 - on the effects of rising temperature on aggression and risk factors for delinquency and criminal behaviour.

Britain pledges crackdown on lobbying by ex-ministers

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Labour party promised a crackdown on lobbying by ex-ministers Sunday after some of its lawmakers were caught in a newspaper sting, just weeks before an election.

Senior Labour members of parliament (MPs) were filmed by an undercover reporter apparently offering to use their connections with government in return for money - although they all subsequently denied wrongdoing.

The party responded by promising tighter regulation on lobbying activities if Brown's government is re-elected in polls expected on May 6.

"There can never be any suggestion that companies and businesses can only speak to government by buying access through MPs or anybody else," a spokesman said.

Battery-power desalination device offers hope to parched areas

AFP, Paris

Scientists said yesterday they had made a nanotech device to strip salt from seawater, paving the way to small-scale or even battery-powered desalination for drought-hit regions and disaster zones.

The tiny prototype is reported on the eve of the UN's World Water Day, which aims to highlight the worsening problems of access to clean water.

Conventional desalination works by forcing water through a membrane to remove molecules of salt.

But this process is an energy-gobbler and the membrane is prone to clogging, which means that de-sal plants are inevitably big, expensive, fixed pieces of kit.

The new gadget has been given a proof-of-principle test by Jongyoon Han and colleagues of the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

It works through so-called ion concentration polarisation, which occurs when a current of charged ions is passed through an ion-selective membrane.

The idea is to create a force that moves charged ions and particles in the water away from the membrane.

When the water passes through the system, salt ions -- as well as cells, viruses and micro-organisms -- get pushed to the side. This saltier water is then drawn off, leaving only de-salted water to pass through the main microchannel.

The tiny device had a recovery rate of 50 percent, meaning that half of the water used at the start was desalinated. Ninety-nine percent of the salt in this water was removed.

Laden's son Omar slams Qaeda

AFP, Riyadh

Osama bin Laden's son Omar said on Saturday that al-Qaeda's North Africa branch should keep out of his family's affairs, after it accused his brother of mistreating his siblings stranded in Tehran.

The al-Qaeda chief's fourth son also confirmed that his sister Iman bin Laden together with their mother Najwa al-Ghanem had been allowed to leave Iran on Thursday after months of trying, and they were now in Damascus.

"We confirm that Iman left Iran with her mother three days ago," Omar told AFP by telephone from Britain.

On Friday, the Saudi-financed daily Asharq Al-Awsat said Iman, who took refuge in the Saudi embassy in Tehran in November after evading her Iranian minders, and Ghanem who is of Syrian origin had been allowed to leave Iran.



PHOTO: AFP
Protesters demonstrate on Hollywood Blvd in Los Angeles during an anti-war protest marking the seventh anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq on Saturday.

Anti-war protesters take to US streets

AFP, Washington

Thousands of anti-war protesters took to the streets of the US capital Saturday, on the seventh anniversary of the US-led war in Iraq in a show of frustration widely ignored by the media and public.

As the National Marathon wound down in the city, protesters after midday gathered outside the White House bearing signs alluding to the high cost of the war both in money and human lives and decrying the use of unmanned aircraft, or drones, to bomb US enemies.

Under sunny skies and the watchful but discreet gaze of uniformed police, some demonstrators carried coffins draped in the Iraqi and Afghan flags in homage to civilian deaths the fighting in both countries has caused.

"Obama policies in Iraq and Afghanistan are as criminal as Bush's," said Iraqi Veterans Against the War member Mathis Chiroux, 26, referring to President Barack Obama's continuation of the two-front war his predecessor George W. Bush began.