

DUBAI PASSPORT ROW

Britain to expel Israeli diplomat

AFP, London

Britain is to expel an Israeli diplomat in response to the use of fake British passports in the killing of a Hamas commander in Dubai, the BBC and Sky News television reported yesterday.

A Foreign Office spokeswoman refused to comment on the reports but said Foreign Secretary David Miliband would make a statement to lawmakers in parliament at 3.30pm (1530 GMT).

Israel's ambassador to London Ron Prosor went for talks at the Foreign Office on Monday, an embassy spokesman said, while not confirming the expulsion reports.

Prosor was briefed on the results of an investigation into the passport cloning which Prime Minister Gordon Brown had ordered in February, led by the Serious Organised Crime Agency, the Daily Telegraph reported.

It was not clear how senior an Israeli diplomat is to be expelled, but the BBC reported that it would not be the ambassador.

Miliband last month urged Israel to give its "full cooperation" to an international probe into the use of fake passports by the killers of Mahmud al-Mabhuh, a founder of Hamas' armed wing, on January 20.

The Jewish state has said there is no proof in widespread allegations that its spy agency, Mossad, was behind the murder, and media reports suggest Britain will not contest this.

But the Telegraph reported Miliband would blame the Israeli security services for the forged passports.

Britain had previously called in the Israeli ambassador to discuss the issue after Dubai police in February released photos and names of European passport holders alleged to have been members of the hit squad.

They say the suspects used the identities of 12 people from Britain, as well as people from Ireland, France, Australia and Germany.



PHOTO: AFP

People demonstrate on Tuesday in Lyon, as part of a nationwide day of protest against job cuts, wages, the high cost of living and plans for pension reform. Most of France's unions joined forces to organise strikes in dozens of cities stepping up pressure on President Nicolas Sarkozy after his government reshuffle in response to a stinging regional election.

Sarkozy faces strikes after polls drubbing

AFP, Paris

French public sector workers went on strike yesterday, disrupting train services and schools in another challenge to President Nicolas Sarkozy after his party's stinging election defeat.

France's major unions called the national day of action to protest job cuts and plans for pension reform, a centrepiece of Sarkozy's agenda for the second half of his mandate.

The protests came a day after Sarkozy dismissed his labour minister and reshuffled his cabinet in response to a humiliating defeat by the left in regional elections.

Paris area commuters faced some disruption with half of trains running on some suburban lines, while the state-owned SNCF rail authority said nearly two-thirds of high-speed TGV trains were up and running.

One in five primary and high school teachers went on strike, the education ministry said around midday, as unions called for a strong turnout to protest the government's plan to replace only half of retiring staff.

France's biggest union, the CGT, said 180 protest marches were planned in cities and towns across the country.

CGT leader Bernard Thibault called on Sarkozy to chart a new course for his economic policy to urgently tackle unemployment now at 10 percent and falling living standards.

"The issue is getting new direction in economic and social policies," said Thibault.

Union leaders said they were not expecting a massive show of force but stressed the strikes would put labour issues back at the top of the political agenda.

"We must send a strong message to the government," said Francois Chereque, head of the CFDT union.

French workers are increasingly feeling "abandoned" by Sarkozy's government, he said. "The government must change its methods."

Obama to sign health bill, celebrate with allies

AP, Washington

President Barack Obama's yearlong health care overhaul drama featured dozens of speeches, contentious debate and a televised summit with lawmakers before a divided Congress passed the bill. An elaborate White House signing ceremony kicks off the next act: selling the sweeping changes to a sceptical public.

House and Senate Democrats who backed the bill as well as lesser-known people whose health care struggles have touched Obama were expected to join him Tuesday for the ceremony in the East Room. Afterward, Obama and much of that audience were heading to the Interior Department for an even larger celebration.

Act II begins Thursday when Obama visits Iowa City, Iowa, where as a presidential candi-

date he announced his health care plan in May 2007, to talk about how it will help lower health care costs for small businesses and families.

The House late Sunday voted 219-212 no Republicans voted in favour to send the 10-year, \$938 billion bill to Obama. The measure, which the Senate passed in December, eventually will extend coverage to 32 million uninsured Americans, reduce federal budget deficits and ban such insurance company practices as denying coverage to people with existing medical problems.

A companion measure sought by House Democrats to make a series of changes to the main bill was approved 220-211. It goes to the Senate, where debate could begin as early as Tuesday. Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev, says he has the votes to pass it though only under special budget rules requiring just a simple majority vote.

China-US talks in May

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday that the next round of high-level strategic and economic talks with the United States would be held in Beijing in late May, amid strains between the countries on a number of issues.

"China and the US have preliminarily agreed to hold the second round of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing in late May -- the specific dates are still under discussion," foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang said.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner will represent the US side, while Vice Premier Wang Qishan and State Councillor Dai Bingguo will lead the Chinese delegation, Qin told reporters.

Russia wants US missile defence in N-treaty

AFP, Moscow

Russia and the United States have still to agree over links to missile defence issues in the nuclear disarmament treaty, the chief of Russia's general staff said in an interview published yesterday.

"The treaty is some 95 percent complete," General Nikolai Makarov told the Rossiyskaya Gazeta daily.

"We still have to resolve some issues, including getting the US agreement to include the missile defence issues into the treaty," he added. "Whether the new treaty is signed, and how soon it will be, will depend on the sides' readiness to consider each other's interests," Makarov said.

Earlier this month, Boris Gryzlov, speaker of Russia's lower parliamentary chamber, the Duma, said it would not ratify a future nuclear disarmament treaty with the United States

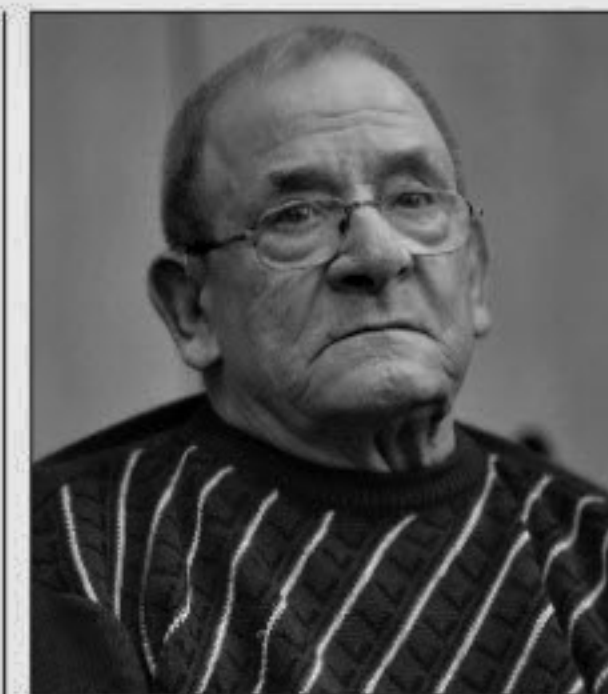
unless it dealt with the issue of missile defence.

Some observers have said that a Russian insistence on a link with missile defence is the main problem holding up agreement on a successor to the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) between the two countries.

Russia has already expressed concern after Romania said this month it would hold talks with Washington on hosting US missile interceptors, and Bulgaria showed an interest in taking part in a US missile shield.

This plan would be part of a replacement for a scrapped US initiative to place missile defence facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic, long a source of tension between Moscow and Washington.

US President Barack Obama and Russia's Dmitry Medvedev had targeted a new agreement by the end of 2009 to drastically reduce nuclear stockpiles, but negotiations dragged on into 2010.



Ex-Nazi hit man convicted over WWII murders

AFP, AACHEN, Germany

Justice finally caught up with an 88-year-old SS assassin yesterday as a German court jailed him for life for shooting dead three civilians in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands in 1944.

Heinrich Boere, who has admitted to the cold-blooded killings on several occasions, spent six decades one step ahead of the law after escaping from a prisoner of war camp in 1947 and returning to his birthplace in Germany.

The bespectacled Boere, sitting in a wheelchair and wearing a striped red and white jumper, grey trousers, socks and sandals, showed no emotion as the verdict was read out in a packed courtroom.

Saudi woman blasts clerics

AP, Dubai

It was a startling voice of protest at a startling venue. Covered head-to-toe in black, a Saudi woman lashed out at hard-line Muslim clerics' harsh religious edicts in verse on live TV at a popular Arabic version of "American Idol."

Well, not quite "American Idol": Contestants compete not in singing but in traditional Arabic poetry. Over the past episodes, poets sitting on an elaborate stage before a live audience have recited odes to the beauty of Bedouin life and the glories of their rulers or mourning the gap between rich and poor.

Doctor kills 8 students in China

AP, Beijing

A former doctor armed with a large knife killed eight children and injured five others yesterday at an elementary school in eastern China, a local official said.

The assailant was arrested after the 7:20 am attack. Xinhua News Agency said. He is a former community clinic doctor with a history of mental health problems, said a man surnamed Wu in the Nanping city government office, who would not give his full name as is common among Chinese officials.

Eight children from Nanping City Experimental Elementary School were killed, and five were being treated at a hospital, Wu said. Six died at the scene.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (C) walks with members of security forces after a cabinet meeting at the Public Health Ministry in Bangkok on Tuesday. Thailand extended a tough security law enacted ahead of mass anti-government protests, which have stretched into second week.

Thailand extends harsh security law

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand extended a tough security law yesterday as it faced more anti-government rallies, in a decision made by the cabinet shortly before two small grenade blasts hit its meeting place.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva confirmed the week-long extension of the measures, which were due to expire on Tuesday, as part of a massive security response to rolling demonstrations launched on March 14.

"Protesters could seize or blockade any building in Bangkok and nearby areas, which could affect the well-being of the public," said a statement from the army-run Internal Security Operation Command.

The law, which allows authorities to set up checkpoints, impose curfews and limit movement, was originally enforced across eight provinces but was extended in Bangkok and parts of two neighbouring provinces.

After Abhisit left the cabinet meeting, held at a ministry complex on the outskirts of the capital guarded by thousands of military personnel, two small blasts caused minor damage to three cars but no injuries.

"It shows that our politics is getting more violent," said Public Health Minister Jurin Laksanawisit, describing the explosions, which come after four similar grenade attacks this month as "shocking."

The red-shirted protesters, loyal to fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, are pushing for snap elections to replace a government they say is undemocratic and represents only the country's elites.

Their campaign, including dramatic stunts like splashing donated blood on Abhisit home and offices, has passed off relatively peacefully despite fears of a repeat of riots a year ago that left two dead.

AHEAD OF TALKS WITH OBAMA

Netanyahu stands firm on Jerusalem 'building'

AFP, Washington/Ramallah

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reaffirmed Israel's right to build settlements in occupied east Jerusalem ahead of potentially difficult talks with US President Barack Obama yesterday.

Showing no sign of compromise in a dispute which has harmed relations with the United States, Netanyahu told a pro-Israel lobby group: "The Jewish people are building Jerusalem 3,000 years ago and the Jewish people are building Jerusalem today. Jerusalem is not a settlement. It is our capital."

Meanwhile, the Palestinians on Tuesday warned that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's refusal to freeze settlements in east Jerusalem threatened US efforts to revive peace talks.

"What Netanyahu said does not help American efforts and will not serve the efforts of the American administration to return the two sides to indirect negotiations," Palestinian Authority spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina said.

"Netanyahu's policies and the actions of his government will in the end lead to the destruction of all opportunities available for a serious peace process and successful negotiations."

Palestinians want mostly Arab east Jerusalem, occupied and annexed by Israel after the 1967 war, to be the capital of their hoped for future state.

Netanyahu was given a standing ovation by the 7,500 delegates at the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) annual conference, which earlier heard a warning from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over the settlement building.

Dinosaurs' dominance 'helped by mass volcanism'

BBC ONLINE

Immense volcanic activity helped the dinosaurs rise to prominence some 200 million years ago, a study suggests.

Dinosaurs were the dominant vertebrates on land for some 135 million years.

While it is widely accepted that an asteroid or comet wiped them out, there has been less agreement on the factors, which led to their ascendancy.

Research in PNAS journal suggests volcanic eruptions changed the climate, causing a mass extinction that wiped out the dinosaurs' main competitors.

The scientific paper, by researchers from the US and Taiwan, looked at several lines of evidence such as plant lipids and wood from sediments interbedded with lava flows.

Freak storm hits Australia's Perth

AFP, Perth

Some 100,000 people were left without power on Tuesday after a freak storm battered the Australian city of Perth, hurling golf ball-sized hailstones and causing floods and landslides.

Western Australia premier Colin Barnett estimated a damage bill of hundreds of millions of dollars after the wild weather smashed into the city late on Monday, paralyzing flights and commuter traffic.

Thousands of residents jammed emergency phone lines as falling trees downed power cables and crashed into homes in the worst storm seen in years. Hospitals were flooded and some damaged schools remained closed on Tuesday.

"I think from my memory this would be the most severe weather conditions we've had since the famous May storm in 1994, where we had very, very strong winds and a massive loss of power supply," Barnett told public broadcaster ABC.

"Hopefully the damage to the power supply won't be as severe but I suspect this time we've got a lot more damage to buildings and housing."

Nearly 160,000 homes lost power at the height of the storm, which brought wind gusts over 120 kilometres (75 miles) per hour and dumped nearly 40 millimetres (1.6 inches) of rain.

About 20 people were evacuated from one hospital's emergency room after the roof collapsed, while a landslide near the city centre crushed two parked cars and filled one apartment with mud.

Stained-glass windows and glasshouses were shattered at The University of Western Australia, where vice-chancellor Allan Robson said there had been "considerable" damage.

New Saddam-era mass grave found

AP, Baghdad

Iraq's Human Rights Ministry says a Saddam Hussein-era mass grave dating to his 1991 suppression of a Shiite revolt has been unearthed in the south.

Ministry's spokesman Kamil Ameen says government teams working on an irrigation project found the grave in an agricultural area in Maysan province.

Ameen told The Associated Press Tuesday that about 20 bodies were unearthed. The irrigation project has been put on hold until the excavation is complete.

Since the 2003 US-led invasion toppling Saddam's regime, mass graves have been found across Iraq.

Following Saddam's defeat in the first Gulf War, Iraq's Shiites revolted in the south, but were brutally suppressed. Hundreds of thousands are believed to have been killed.

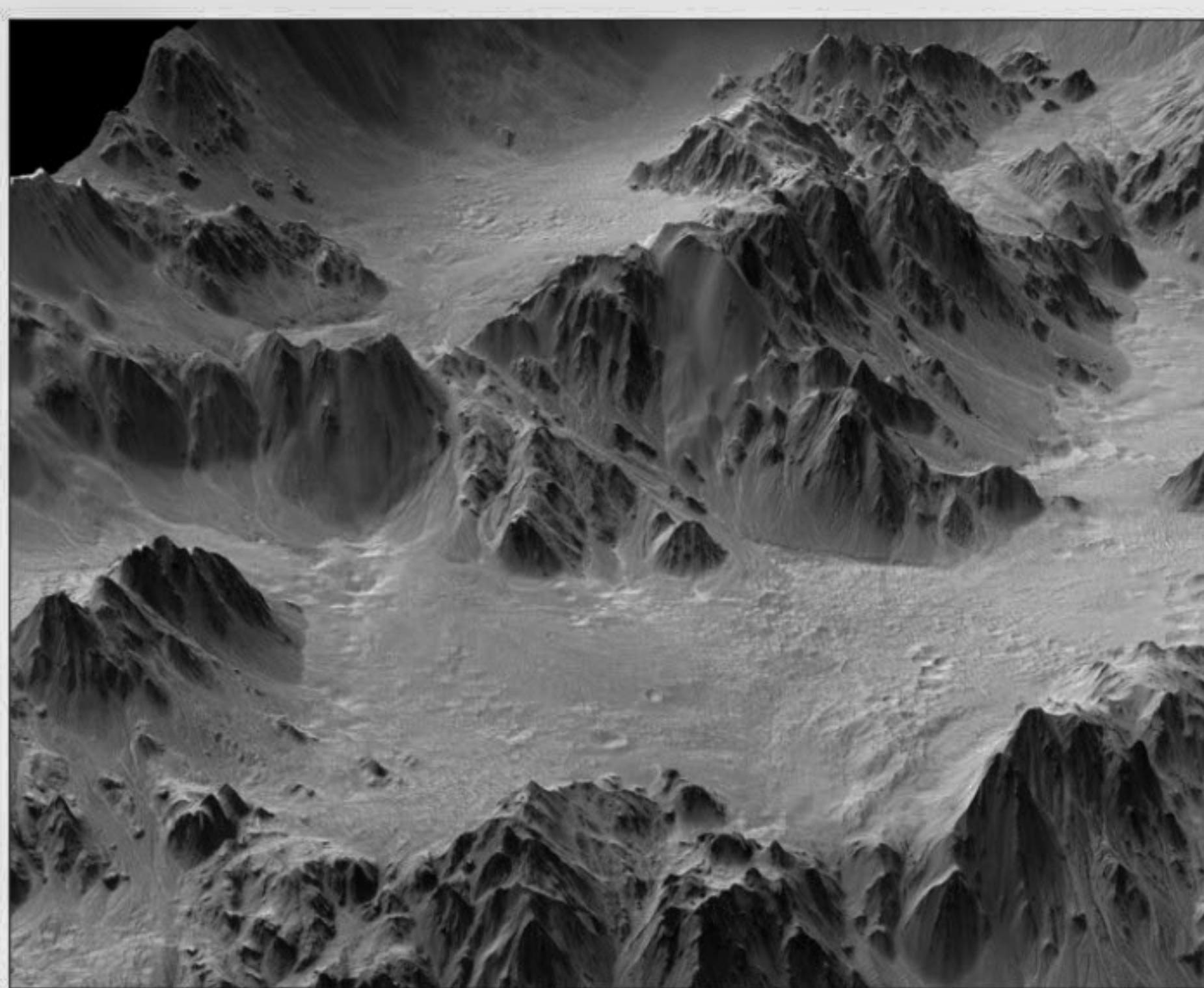


PHOTO: AFP

The handout photo released by Nasa on February 17, 2010 shows a portion of the wall terraces of Mojave Crater on Mars. Hundreds of impact craters on Mars have ponded features with pitted surfaces. These "pitted ponds" are thought to result when material melted by the crater-causing impacts is captured behind the wall terraces.