

## Nuke treaty signed, but menacing arms issues lurk

AP, Prague

The nuclear weapons cuts President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed on Thursday would shrink the Cold War superpowers' arsenals to the lowest point since the frightening arms race of the 1960s. But they won't touch the "loose nukes" and suitcase bombs seen as the real menace in today's age of terrorism. "This ceremony is a testament to the truth that old adversaries can forge new partnerships," Obama declared. "It is just one step on a longer journey."

The warheads covered by the treaty are lethal relics of the Cold War, and even with the planned reductions there will be enough firepower on each side to devastate the world many times over. And of more immediate concern are attempts by terrorist groups such as al-Qaida and

nations such as Iran and North Korea to acquire or use nuclear weapons. Obama and Medvedev showed solidarity for a spring showdown with Iran. And, beginning Monday, leaders of 47 countries will gather in Washington in an effort to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, crack down on illicit nuclear trafficking and lock down vulnerable nuclear materials around the world. Introduced Thursday with trumpeting fanfare, the two winning presidents sat at an ornate table in Prague's hilltop presidential castle and put their signatures to a landmark successor to the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. Nearly a year in the making, the "New START" signalled a bold opening in previously soured US-Russia relations. If ratified by both nations' legislatures, it will shrink the limit of nuclear warheads to 1,550 each over

seven years, down about a third from the current ceiling of 2,200. Ratification in the US Senate will hardly be automatic, requiring 67 votes in the 100-member chamber during a congressional election year when cooperation can be hard to come by. Beyond that, urgent international nuclear tasks still face the two leaders. For example, they are trying to forge agreement among themselves and four other nations -- China, France, Britain, and Germany -- on how to tackle Iran's continued defiance of United Nations demands that it cease enriching uranium. The West insists Tehran seeks to develop nuclear weapons; Tehran says it is after peaceful nuclear power. At Obama's side, Medvedev made Russia's support for considering a fourth round of UN sanctions

on Iran clearer than ever. "We cannot turn a blind eye to this," he said of Tehran's intransigence. But that was not the main question heading into the leaders' talks, which ran overtime to about two hours. At issue, as representatives from the six partners prepare for what Obama called "ramped-up" discussions in New York, is how weak any new sanctions regime would need to be to get Moscow on board not to mention China, an even more stubborn holdout. Medvedev said sanctions should be "smart" -- designed to change behavior, not to bring down the hard-line Iranian government or impose hardship on Iran's people. The Russian leader said he had outlined for Obama "our limits for such sanctions," and Obama said those discussions got very specific.



A Buddhist monk wearing a red scarf around his mouth stands beside anti-government guards and riot police at the Police General Hospital near the site of a rally in central Bangkok yesterday. Thai authorities mobilised tens of thousands more security personnel to contain mass rallies which have highlighted Thailand's deep rift pitting Bangkok's ruling elite against the mainly poor and rural Reds.

## Post-Copenhagen climate talks begin amid discord

AP, Bonn, Germany

Differences have emerged at the outset of the first UN climate conference since the disappointing Copenhagen climate summit, as delegates from 175 countries begin afresh on a new global warming agreement. Delegates to the three-day meeting beginning yesterday in Bonn hope to have the main elements of a deal by the end of this year. But they disagree on the document brokered by President Barack Obama at the December summit setting out general goals for controlling greenhouse gases blamed for causing the Earth's average temperatures to rise. Developing countries criticize the fact that the document was negotiated by only a few countries.

## Iraq al-Qaida group says it's behind embassy hits

AP, Baghdad

al-Qaida's umbrella group in Iraq claimed responsibility yesterday for a triple suicide bombing outside foreign embassies in Baghdad, which killed more than 40 people. The group, known as the Islamic State of Iraq, posted a statement on a website that carries al-Qaida and other militant declarations. The statement said the embassy attacks last Sunday were a "new strike into the heart of the security plan" in the Iraqi capital. It also said "all diplomatic corps, embassies and international organizations" dealing with the Iraqi government are "legitimate targets."

The embassy bombings are part of a wave of recent violence in and around the capital that has killed some 120 people in a week. The bloodshed suggests insurgents are seizing on political uncertainty after March elections to try to destabilize Iraq as US troops prepare to leave. The US military plans to reduce troop levels

from some 96,000 to 50,000 by Aug. 31, when it will end combat operations. As part of an agreement with Iraq, the US will withdraw all forces by the end of 2011. On Friday, thousands gathered in the holy city of Najaf, shouting "Iraq is for Iraqis!" and "There is no place for occupiers!" during an annual march organized by anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to mark the anniversary of the fall of Baghdad. "If you stay united, the occupier and get them out of our sacred land," said al-Sadr's aide Sayyid Hazim Al-Araji, reading a speech on the behalf of the cleric, who is living in Iran. "If you divide, the occupier and its supporters will stay in our land," he said. US Brig Gen Ralph Baker told reporters in Baghdad earlier this week that he understands there are "some Iraqis that think the US military will never leave Iraq." But, he emphasized, the draw down plans were on track and have not changed despite the recent violence.

## Kyrgyz interim chief offers ousted president 'safe passage'

AFP, Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan's interim chief yesterday said ousted president Kurmanbek Bakiyev would get safe passage out of the country, if he resigned. "Bakiyev still has a chance to leave the country," Roza Otunbayeva told reporters in the capital of the Central Asian state. But she warned, "We will only guarantee his personal safety if he resigns." She added the new government has launched a probe against the security forces. "An investigation has been opened against the security forces. It is important now to establish justice," she said.

## Kyrgyz unrest victims mourned daylong

AP, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Thousands of grieving, angry mourners flooded Bishkek's main square yesterday to honour victims of Kyrgyzstan's revolt -- with many blaming the country's absent president for ordering troops to fire on those protesting his government. They gathered on the sprawling Ala-Too Square, where protesters were shot dead at an opposition rally as some stormed the main government building in this Central Asian nation. The health ministry of the ex-Soviet Central Asian nation said yesterday that 76 people had died in the violence and more than 1,400 injured. That figure included 67 people injured overnight Thursday and early yesterday in clashes between looters and security forces backed by vigilantes. Roza Otunbayeva, a former foreign minister who once backed President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and now leads the opposition interim government, visited a Bishkek hospital on

Friday and said she and her comrades would not negotiate with Bakiyev, who has fled to the country's south where he has substantial clan support. In the square, people were sobbing for the lives lost. "We grieve over our heroes. They are real heroes who have sacrificed their lives for the future of Kyrgyzstan," said Khatima Immamaliyeva, a 44-year-old office worker holding a red carnation and crying. "Bakiyev must bear responsibility for the deaths." Another mourner, 26-year-old Azimbek Sariyev, said "my friend Talas perished. I hope he hasn't died for nothing. We have ousted Bakiyev, and won't allow the rulers to mock us." Kyrgyzstan also hosts a Russian military base and is the only nation where both Cold War foes have bases. The deputy head of the interim government, Almazbek Atambayev, was flying to Moscow on Friday to talk with unspecified Russian government officials.

## Obama pushes back on Palin criticism

AP, Washington

President Barack Obama snapped back at Sarah Palin and her criticisms about his nuclear defence policy, calling the former Alaska governor "not much of an expert on nuclear issues." Obama's comments came when asked for a response about a Palin critique that he was like a kid poised for a playground fight who said "Go ahead, punch me in the face and I'm not going to retaliate. Go ahead and do what you want to with me." "I really have no response," Obama told ABC News. "Because last I checked, Sarah Palin's not much of an expert on nuclear issues." The interview occurred Thursday in Prague, where Obama signed a treaty with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that orders both nations to shrink their nuclear arsenals. That deal that must still be ratified by the Russian parliament and the US Senate. Palin was referring to another development on the nuclear front this week, a rewriting of American nuclear strategy.



View of a partly destroyed house on the top of a hill following a landslide in Vicoso Jardim shantytown on Thursday in Niteroi near Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Some 200 people were feared dead in mudslides, officials said Thursday, adding to woes in massive flooding that has already killed more than 150 people.

## Workers race to unearth victims of Brazil mudslide

Toll rises to 182

AFP, Niteroi, Brazil

Rescue workers raced against the clock Friday to unearth as many as 200 people feared buried in a mudslide near Rio de Janeiro, as the death toll from massive floods in the region rose to 182. More than 24 hours after a hillside suddenly collapsed, 16 bodies had been recovered from tonnes of earth that swept away dozens of homes in Morro do Bumba, a slum built on a landfill in this city across the bay from Rio. Firefighters said there was virtually no chance of finding survivors under so much mud. Officials said at least 182 people have been killed in the state of Rio de Janeiro since Monday when the heaviest rains in half a century unleashed floods and mudslides that tore through the metropolitan area's precarious slums, or favelas. Niteroi has been the hardest hit with at least 107 dead, compared to 55 in Rio, according to the civil defense authorities. Civil Defense officials said that at least 161 people had also been injured in the weather chaos of the past four days, and the state of Rio reported that 14,000 people have been forced to move due to the heavy rain. The federal government opened a fund with 113 million dollars to aid municipalities in Rio state affected by the floods and mudslides, the state's governor Sergio Cabral. "Our main concern right now is to save lives," Niteroi mayor Jorge Silveira told cable channel Globo News, adding that the other priority was to "diminish the possibility that these types of events are repeated."

## Israeli PM calls off trip to nuclear conference

AP, Jerusalem

Israel's prime minister abruptly called off a trip to Washington just days before he was slated to attend a conference there on the spread of nuclear weapons, officials in his office said yesterday, fearing Israel would be singled out over its own nuclear program. Benjamin Netanyahu had said he would attend the conference to underline the dangers of terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons, but suddenly called off the trip less than two days after he announced he would take part. Officials in his office said Netanyahu reversed himself because some nations planned to use the conference to target Israel over its barely concealed nuclear weapons program. They spoke on condition of anonymity because no official announcement has been made.

## Asean summit tackles Myanmar polls, regional integration

AFP, Hanoi

Southeast Asian leaders yesterday pressed troublesome member Myanmar to ensure its elections this year are fair and inclusive, at a summit focused on binding together the sprawling region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting in Vietnam's capital Hanoi has been overshadowed by the Myanmar issue, as well as political drama in Thailand, which forced its premier to stay at home. "The main message that's coming out from the summit is the importance of the elections that are coming up in 2010, and not any type of elections," said Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa. "But instead an election that is free, that is fair, that is democratic, that is credible. These are qualities that Myanmar itself has said they want to fulfill. So I think the clarion call... is the importance for Myanmar to live up to the commitments." The United States has led international condemnation of laws Myanmar has enacted for the ballot, the first in the military-run country in two decades, which effectively bar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from participating. ASEAN members are divided on how to handle Myanmar, which has always escaped formal censure from the 10-nation group as it adheres to a principle of non-interference in each other's

internal affairs. But as Myanmar's poor record -- including allegations of massive human rights abuses as well as a failure to shift to democracy -- again threatens to discredit the region, its neighbours reminded it of its obligations. "The elections should be fair, democratic, with the participation of all parties," the summit's host, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, said in an unusually candid terms at a closing news conference. "This will help... stabilise the country and focus resources on development," he said, adding that he had "forwarded ASEAN's message" to the ruling generals during his visit to Myanmar last week.

## 2-million-year-old hominid sheds light on evolution

AFP, Maropeng, South Africa

Two skeletons of a new hominid species dating back two million years and found in South Africa have shed light on a previously unknown stage in human evolution, scientists said Thursday. Baptised Australopithecus sediba, the partially fossilised specimens -- an adult female and a juvenile male -- were found in 2008 in a cavern 40km from Johannesburg. "They, ladies and gentlemen, are potentially a Rosetta stone into the past," Lee Berger, a paleo-anthropologist at the University of Witwatersrand, told a press conference at the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site. "They represent a completely new and unexpected species of human ancestor to science. Something we did not think was there."

## Iran unveils 'faster' centrifuges

BBC ONLINE

Iran's president has unveiled new "third-generation" centrifuges that its nuclear chief says can enrich uranium much faster than current technology. The centrifuges would have separation power six times that of the first generation, Ali Akbar Salehi said in a speech marking National Nuclear Day. Uranium enrichment is the central concern of Western nations negotiating with Iran over its nuclear programme. The new technology could shorten the time it takes to build a nuclear bomb. Tehran insists its nuclear programme is solely for peaceful purposes. Yesterday's announcement comes as members of the UN Security Council discuss a new round of sanctions against Iran over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment. The ambassadors from the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany -- the so-called P5+1 -- described the talks as worthwhile, but said their meetings would continue in the coming weeks. China has been under pressure from the US and others to support new sanctions and took part in the meeting despite its objections. In his speech to hundreds of dignitaries, Salehi announced that "considerable" uranium

reserves had been found in Yazd province. The production of 5 percent-enriched uranium was continuing using first-generation centrifuges and a second generation of machines unveiled last year were in use, he said. He then announced that experts at the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) had managed to design a third generation. "The machines have successfully passed mechanical tests and it is expected that they will have a gas-separation power of nearly 10, which is six times more than the first generation of centrifuges," he said. At the end of Salehi's speech, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stepped onto the stage and pulled back a curtain to reveal one of the new centrifuges. The new models are more advanced than the P1 centrifuge -- designed in the 1970s, reportedly acquired by Iran on the black market in the 1980s, and prone to breakdowns -- in use at the Natanz enrichment facility. BBC Tehran correspondent Jon Leyne, who is in London, says nuclear experts point out that the key question is how many of the third-generation centrifuges Iran can produce. There have already been technical problems with the existing models, so whether it can quickly put the new one into mass production and operation remains to be seen, our correspondent says.