

### North Korea rejects UN truce talks

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it was ready for direct military talk with South Korea to discuss the sinking of one of Seoul's warships, but only if the armistice commission overseeing the Korean War truce does not get involved.

South Korea has accused the North of sinking the Cheonan, and killing 46 sailors, after a multinational investigation concluded that a North Korean submarine had torpedoed the corvette, an incident that has ratcheted up tensions on the peninsula.

North Korea has denied involvement, saying the investigation was a fabrication. It has also threatened military action if it is punished by the United Nations for the incident.

South Korea said this week it has not given up on trying to persuade the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution against North Korea over the navy ship's sinking.

"If the South Korean authorities respond to our proposal, we will promptly come out for a working contact for the opening of the military talks," the North's official KCNA news agency said.

### Czech Civic Dem leader Necas to be new PM

REUTERS, Prague

Czech President Vaclav Klaus will name Civic Democrat leader Petr Necas as the next prime minister tomorrow, ushering in what should be the strongest government in a decade to tackle economic reforms.

The Civic Democrats are leading coalition talks with two other centre-right parties, TOP09 and Public Affairs, after the three won a combined 118 seats out of 200 in a May 28-29 election with pledges of austerity and fighting corruption.

If the three parties agree on a coalition government they would have a strong majority to kick-start key reforms in pensions and healthcare compared with previous cabinets over the last decade, which lacked a strong enough majority and the will to reform.

Talks between the parties have dragged because of disputes over policy and ministerial posts, including who should run the important finance ministry. Necas has said he wants a deal by early July, in time to prepare the 2011 budget.

"Tomorrow at 10 a.m. I will name Petr Necas as prime minister," Klaus said yesterday in a live television interview.

### US drone attack kills six militants in Pakistan

IANS, Islamabad

At least six militants were killed in a US drone attack in Pakistan's restive northwestern tribal region yesterday, a security official said.

The pilotless aircraft struck in Tabbi Tool Khel area near Miran Shah, the major town in North Waziristan, a known hotbed of Taliban and Al Qaeda militants.

The intelligence official said two missiles were fired at an Islamic seminary, Shoaib ul Aloom, frequently by Taliban fighters conducting cross-border raids on Nato-led international forces in Afghanistan.

"The reports that we have received from our informants, six militants were killed and three wounded," said the intelligence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The death toll may rise as locals believe more bodies are buried under the rubble, added the official. "Efforts are under way to pull them out."

The seminary was headed by a local Taliban leader Amir Hamza, who apparently survived the strike.

The US has increased drone strikes in North Waziristan, regarding the district as a base for militants conducting cross-border attacks on Nato troops in Afghanistan.

Officials say more than 900 militants have been killed in over 100 CIA-operated airstrikes in tribal areas near the Afghan border since mid-2008. Some victims were civilians.



An Ethnic Uzbek woman cries after she voted at a polling station during a referendum in Shark, a village outside Osh yesterday. Kyrgyzstan is to vote in a constitutional referendum that interim authorities insist is vital for easing tensions after deadly ethnic clashes but that some fear could spark new unrest.

## Kyrgyzstan votes for new constitution

Interim leader announces

AFP, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan yesterday voted in favour of a new constitution, its interim leader announced, in a referendum marked by a mass turnout held just two weeks after ethnic clashes killed hundreds.

The constitution establishes a parliamentary democracy in Kyrgyzstan and its adoption was crucial for legitimising the new authorities who took power after the April riots that toppled president Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

The interim government defiantly pressed ahead with the vote despite horrific clashes between minority Uzbeks and majority Kyrgyz earlier this month

that killed hundreds and sparked fears the country faced collapse.

"The new constitution has been adopted, despite the savage attacks of its opponents," Otunbayeva said, adding that the referendum legitimises her as a transitional president.

Her announcement, in which she did not specify the source of her information, came hours after polls closed and well ahead of full results, which are only expected in the next two days.

The first results published on the website of the central election commission based on 17 percent of electoral districts showed 61.6 voting in favour of the constitution and 7.1 against.

"Today is a very important, historic day for the country. The people have put a full stop on the epoch of authoritarian, nepotistic management," said Otunbayeva.

"Today we reached victory on the path to a true government of the people."

She put the turnout at an unexpectedly high 65.1 percent although the website of the central election commission said the figure was over 69.17 percent.

Respectable numbers were seen showing up throughout the day to cast their ballots in the southern city of Osh -- the epicentre of the violence -- with the situation calm and no reports of unrest, an AFP correspondent reported.

### Afghan ops not slowed despite command change

Says Nato

AP, Kabul, Afghanistan

A Nato spokesman stressed yesterday that military operations to secure vast areas of Afghanistan would not be delayed by the ouster of the top commander in the war and mounting casualties.

Nato and US forces are continuing their work as they await the arrival of new commander Gen. David Petraeus. He is taking over from Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who was ousted by President Barack Obama after he and his aides were quoted in Rolling Stone magazine making disparaging remarks about top Obama administration officials.

There has been concern that the leadership shake-up will further slow a push into the volatile south that has already been delayed by weeks in some areas and months in others. But Nato spokesman Brig. Josef Blotz told reporters in Kabul that the worries are unwarranted and the military is not pausing because of the changes.

## Guinea takes road to democracy, holds first free election

AP, Conakry, Guinea

Guinea yesterday held its first free election since independence more than half a century ago, a vote many hope will finally end decades of harsh military rule and launch a new democratic era.

On the eve of the ballot, the country's powerful junta leader vowed to ensure fairness and transparency, and warned a roomful of presidential hopefuls they must help avert violence or risk casting the West African nation back to its volatile past.

"We can no longer continue to live like we are in a jungle, as if we are in a state without authority," Gen. Sekouba Konate told 24 candidates gathered on couches in the presidential palace late Saturday. "Too many Guineans have perished and suffered."

"Starting from now, it's up to you to make it happen," he said. The choice, he added, is between "peace, freedom and democracy, or chaos and instability."

Konate, along with all members of his junta and a transitional governing council comprised of civilians are barred from running in the vote, which many hope will go down in history as the nation's first truly democratic poll since independence from France in 1958.

The ballot marks a spectacular turnaround for a country that just months ago was full of despair, terrorized by an army that rampaged through the capital with impunity -- courtesy of Moussa "Dadis" Camara, an erratic army captain who seized power in a December 2008 coup hours after the nation's previous despot, Lansana Conte, died.

When opposition leaders rallied at a Conakry stadium last September to insist Camara step down, the military opened fire into the crowd, massacring more than 150 people, wounding more than 1,000 and raping countless women.

A UN investigation into the tragedy fuelled tensions within the junta over who would take the blame, and Camara was shot in the head by his presidential guard chief and ultimately removed from the political stage.

## Georgian authorities pull down Stalin monument

AP, Tbilisi, Georgia

Authorities in Georgia yesterday tore down another monument to Soviet dictator and native son Josef Stalin.

The monument in the town of Tkibuli in western Georgia was taken down two days after authorities tore down a bigger and more famous monument to Stalin in his hometown of Gori.

Both statues were brought down in the middle of the night in an apparent bid to avoid protests and media attention.

Stalin was born to a modest family of cobblers in 1878. Both monuments in his honour were erected before his death in 1953.

The Georgian government says a younger generation who have embraced Western ideals of freedom favor the dismantling of Stalin's monuments.

"A memorial to Stalin has no place in the Georgia of the 21st Century," President Mikhail Saakashvili said Friday. Saakashvili's government said a memorial to the fallen in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 will replace Stalin's statue in Gori.

Georgia's Culture Minister Nikolos Rurua said the government will also soon rename Georgian streets still carrying Stalin's name.

But Rurua said that the body of Stalin's mother that rests alongside the nation's most prominent figures shouldn't be buried as some in Georgia have suggested.

"The mother of Stalin carries no responsibility for what her dictator and tyrant son did to people," Rurua said on Imedi television yesterday. "Reburying her body isn't a good idea."

Stalin's mother Keke Dzhugashvili, born in 1858 to a peasant family in Gori, died in 1937. She was buried at the Mtatsminda Pantheon, a cemetery in Tbilisi where Georgia's writers and other cultural and public figures were buried.



Israeli soldiers arrest a woman protester during a demonstration by Palestinian, Israeli and foreign activists against Israel's controversial separation barrier which crosses the Palestinian territories in the West Bank town of Beit Jala, near the biblical town of Bethlehem, yesterday.

### Palestinian refugees seek basic rights in Lebanon

AFP, Beirut

Palestinian refugees gathered yesterday outside UN headquarters in Beirut to demand basic civil rights in Lebanon, such as a choice of jobs and ownership of property.

The protest organised by Palestinian and Lebanese non-government organisations was initially due to be held outside the parliament building in downtown Beirut.

"The police outside parliament usually ban any protest there," said Maher Shehadeh, one of the Palestinian organisers. So the protesters gathered instead several hundred metres (yards) away outside the UN headquarters.

Maher said 6,000 people were taking part in the peaceful protest.

The Palestinians travelled in buses from Lebanon's 12 refugee camps for the Beirut gathering organised by Palestinian and Lebanese non-governmental organisations.

"Working is a right, " "We want to live in dignity," read placards carried by the protesters.

"I have the right to own property," said another, summing up the frustration of the tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees who live in dire conditions in Lebanon.

## The two faces of Lebanon

ALJAZEERA NEWS ANALYSIS

Thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian activists were marching in Beirut yesterday in support of social and economic rights for the more than 400,000 Palestinians living in the country's 12 refugee camps.

A debate in the Lebanese parliament over granting civil rights - apart from the right to vote and naturalisation - to Palestinian refugees has threatened to polarise the country along roughly-but not exclusively - religious lines.

Maronite Christian parties have temporarily come together to oppose the move, citing their fear that the "integration of Palestinian refugees" into Lebanese society would tip the demographic balance in favour of Muslims, as well as straining Lebanon's resources and the country's job market.

Predominantly, but not exclusively, Muslim, liberal, nationalist and pan-Arab parties have joined hands with Hezbollah in pushing to allow Palestinians the right to own property and work in the country that has hosted them since the 1948 establishment of Israel.

Some opponents of the draft law fear that the process could lead to the naturalisation of Palestinians and their permanent settlement in Lebanon - thus undermining the Palestinian refugees' right of return to their homeland, while proponents argue that social and economic rights are a fulfillment of basic human rights and do not forfeit the Palestinian refugees' right of return.

While Palestinian refugees in Lebanon carry Lebanese travel documents and have access to education, they are prohibited from working in more than 70 professions.

Thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian activists are marching in Beirut today in support of social and economic rights for the more than 400,000 Palestinians living in the country's 12 refugee camps.

A debate in the Lebanese parliament over granting civil rights - apart from the right to vote

## US has driven back al-Qaeda

Says CIA chief Panetta

AP, Washington

The US has driven al-Qaeda into hiding and undermined its leadership, but is struggling to oust its primary sympathizer, the Taliban, from Afghanistan, the nation's spy master said yesterday.

CIA Director Leon Panetta's assessment comes as President Barack Obama advances a risky new war plan that relies on 98,000 US troops to prop up the Afghan government and prevent al-Qaeda from returning. No longer overseeing the commander in chief's mission is Gen Stanley McChrystal, sacked this past week in a stunning shake-up in US military leadership after his critical comments about the White House.

"We're seeing elements of progress, but this is going to be tough," Panetta told ABC's "This Week." He said al-Qaeda's evolving attack strategy increasingly relies on operatives without any record of terrorism involvement or those already in the US As for Osama bin Laden, Panetta said it's been years since the US had good intelligence about his whereabouts. Panetta estimated there are fewer than 100 al-

## Nothing to gain from damaging BP

UK and US agree

REUTERS, Toronto

US President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron agreed on Saturday there was nothing to be gained from damaging BP, a British official said after a meeting between the two leaders.

Cameron on Friday had called for greater clarity on the costs BP was facing from the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. The energy giant's stock has fallen to a 14-year low and \$100 billion (66.4 billion pounds) has been wiped off its market value since the disaster struck on April 20.

British business and shareholder groups have been clamouring for the new prime minister to stand up for BP because of a perception that Obama has been too critical of the company to deflect his own falling poll ratings. The British official said that Cameron raised the BP issue with Obama when the two leaders had their first face-to-face meeting since the prime minister took office last month. "Both agreed that there was nothing to be gained from damaging BP as a going concern," the official said. "Both agreed that BP must meet its obligations to cap the leak, clean up the damage and meet legitimate compensation costs."



US President Barack Obama speaks alongside British Prime Minister David Cameron during a meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on Saturday.

"The company says it has paid out \$2.35 billion so far in clean-up and compensation costs for the ecological disaster caused by the biggest oil spill in US history. That does not include the \$20 billion oil spill fund it has agreed to set up, nor the billions of dollars it will have to pay in fines. BP was once a predominantly British company but now has global operations and has a major presence in the United States. Around 40 percent of its shareholder base is in Britain and a similar proportion is drawn from the United States."