

Obama marks the end of Iraq combat war

AFP, Washington
President Barack Obama yesterday marks the symbolic end of US combat operations in Iraq...

attacks and a five-month-old political impasse that has blocked the formation of a new government...

Just last week, 53 people were killed and hundreds were wounded by a dozen coordinated car bombings in 10 cities and towns across the country...

Iraq's top army officer told AFP earlier this month that he feared worsening security problems after the Americans leave...

But the White House has insisted that the Iraqis are capable of providing for their own security now...

Obama assured Americans in an interview on NBC television Sunday that the timing was right for a drawdown.

"What you've seen is lower and lower levels of violence. The Iraqi security forces are functioning at least as well if not better than any of us had anticipated," Obama said.

Alluding to the Iraqi's failure to form a new government, Obama said the political difficulties were "natural in a fledgling democracy. But we are confident that that will get done."

During his speech, only the second of his presidency to use the solemn setting of the Oval Office, Obama is expected to raise the other major theatre of US military operations: Afghanistan...



A handout picture from the Iraqi prime minister's office shows Iraqi Premier Nuri al-Maliki (R) meeting with US Vice-President Joe Biden in Baghdad yesterday as US combat operations in Iraq come to a symbolic end.

Australian PM rejects new polls

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday rejected a quick return to the polls and welcomed a "new political landscape" after inconclusive national elections prompted the biggest upheaval in decades.

Julia was making her first major speech since the week-end of the August 21 election, which produced the only hung parliament since 1940 and left the major parties scrambling for the support of independents.

"Some say this situation is all too difficult and we should just return to the polls. I disagree," Julia told the National Press Club in Canberra.

"The Australian people have voted for this parliament and our job is to make it work."

As final vote-counting continues, neither Julia's left-leaning Labor party nor the conservative Liberal/National coalition are able to reach the 76 seats needed for a majority, with both relying on the support of cross-benchers.

The lone Greens MP is expected to side with Labor, while one of the independents will announce his decision on Tuesday or Wednesday and the main bloc of another three unaligned members will start formal negotiations later this week.

Somali presidential palace shelled

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Four African Union (AU) peacekeepers have been killed in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, after al-Shabab fighters fired a mortar at the presidential palace.

"A mortar was fired at one of our positions, and it killed four soldiers and injured eight," said Ba-Hoku Barigye, a spokesman for the peacekeeping force. Barigye said the dead soldiers are all Ugandan.

Uganda and Burundi have deployed more than 6,300 troops to support Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

The AU pledged last month to expand the force, with both Guinea and Djibouti promising new troops.

Monday's mortar attack was the latest bloody clash in a week of heavy fighting between al-Shabab and the peacekeepers.

Abbas, Barak meet secretly in Jordan

Palestinian president seeks active US mediation in Mideast talks

AP, AFP, Ramallah Jerusalem

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak have met secretly in Amman ahead of Middle East peace talks that start in Washington this week, Israeli media reported on Tuesday.

The two met on Sunday in a private home in the Jordanian capital, where Barak also held talks with King Abdullah II.

The Israeli defence ministry did not immediately confirm the reports.

Abdullah and Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak will join an inaugural meeting in Washington on Wednesday between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Abbas, who are to launch direct talks the following day.

Thursday's talks will launch the first direct negotiations between the two sides since the Palestinians broke off talks in December 2008, after Israel launched a devastating offensive against the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian president says he will seek active US mediation in negotiations with Israel resuming this week in Washington.

President Barack Obama is hosting Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the first direct talks in nearly two years. Obama has said he hopes to see a peace agreement within a year.

Mexico arrests 'drug lord' Edgar Valdez

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Mexican police have arrested alleged drug trafficker Edgar Valdez, a US citizen also known as Barbie, Mexico's attorney general says.

Officials said he put up little resistance when he was captured in a residential area near Mexico City.

Edgar Valdez is linked to the influential Beltran Leyva drug cartel.

Valdez has been fighting Hector Beltran Leyva for control of the gang, previously led by his brother Arturo until he was shot dead last December.

Earlier this month, police found four decapitated bodies hanging from a bridge in the city of Cuernavaca and their heads were discovered nearby with a message warning that anyone supporting Edgar Valdez would risk a similar fate.

Sarkozy govt divided over immigration crackdown

AFP, Paris

President Nicolas Sarkozy's inner circle has stepped up its anti-immigration rhetoric but splits were beginning to appear Tuesday in a government under mounting political pressure.

France's ministers for immigration and European affairs, Eric Besson and Pierre Lellouche, were expected in Brussels Tuesday to defend their moves to deport thousands of members of the Roma minority back to Eastern Europe.

They also face questioning from European Commission officials about Sarkozy's controversial decision to strip French nationality from some foreign-born citizens convicted of a range of crimes.

Back in Paris, where Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner had already said he has considered resigning in protest over the draconian policy, another minister broke ranks on Tuesday, opposing plans to tighten nationality rules.

Fadela Amara, the minister charged with improving conditions in France's run-down immigrant suburbs, said she did not support Roma expulsions and was against broadening the list of crimes that lead to a loss of citizenship.

"There are laws and serious punishments that we must apply," she said, noting that she had supported a law that foresees a loss of nationality for a foreign-born French citizen convicted of terrorism or treason.

"I'm against expanding it to other crimes," said Amara, a former militant for immigrant rights and herself of North African descent, who said she had "always fought against deportations."

Defence Minister Herve Morin, a centrist who is also uneasy in Sarkozy's right-wing cabinet, warned against making a link between crime and immigration.

Sarkozy has said he wants those convicted of endangering the lives of police or public officials added to the list, and Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux suggested polygamy and female circumcision should also be included.

A couple of days after making the nationality threat, Sarkozy announced a crackdown on unauthorised Gypsy settlements, and said that foreign-born Roma would be expelled back to eastern Europe.

On Monday, Besson upped the ante still further, suggesting some foreigners could face deportation for "a threat to public order by repeated acts of theft or aggressive begging."

Edgar Valdez Villareal aka "La Barbie" (C) of the Beltran Leyva drug cartel, is presented to the press at the Federal Police headquarters in Mexico City yesterday. Valdez was detained in a police operation in central Mexico, following intelligence work which began in June 2009. The 37-year-old was a key lieutenant of Arturo Beltran Leyva, who headed the cartel that bears his name and was Mexico's third most-wanted man until his December 2009 death in a military operation.



Iranian paper calls Bruni 'prostitute'

AFP, Tehran

A headline Iranian newspaper stepped up its attack on French first lady Carla Bruni, saying yesterday that the "Italian prostitute" deserved to die for supporting an Iranian woman sentenced to death by stoning.

"This Italian prostitute's indignation at Kayhan's report came while she has had illegitimate relationships with different people before and after marrying (French President Nicolas) Sarkozy," Kayhan said.

"Reviewing Carla Bruni's records clearly shows why this immoral woman has supported an Iranian woman who has committed adultery, has contributed to the murdering of her husband and has been sentenced to death, and in fact she herself (Bruni) deserves death," Kayhan said.



Bruni and Sarkozy

French celebrities for the release of Sakineh Mohammadi-Ashtiani, the 43-year-old mother of two, whose death by stoning sentence has generated an international outcry.

Defending Mohammadi-Ashtiani in an open letter, Bruni vowed that France and her husband would not abandon her.

She criticised the stoning sentence against Mohammadi-Ashtiani saying: "Spill your blood, deprive and after marrying (French President Nicolas) Sarkozy," Kayhan said.

"Reviewing Carla Bruni's records clearly shows why this immoral woman has supported an Iranian woman who has committed adultery, has contributed to the murdering of her husband and has been sentenced to death, and in fact she herself (Bruni) deserves death," Kayhan said.

Bruni, Sarkozy's third wife, angered Kayhan by signing a petition along with several other

200 flights cancelled as typhoon hits Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Japan cancelled more than 200 flights and many ferry services to its southern islands yesterday as a typhoon churned in before likely heading toward the Korean peninsula.

Typhoon Kompasu, packing gusts of up to 216 kilometres (134 miles) per hour near its centre, slammed Okinawa in the country's far south Tuesday afternoon, the Japan meteorological agency said.

The agency issued a warning of heavy rains and strong gales and told residents to be on alert against possible landslides and floods.

A blackout hit 1,320 houses in Okinawa, "but we have not received any reports of casualties following the typhoon," said an official of Okinawa prefecture's crisis management office.

Ozawa confirms challenging Japan PM

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japanese powerbroker Ichiro Ozawa confirmed yesterday he would challenge Prime Minister Naoto Kan in a party vote, setting up a clash that risks creating a policy vacuum as Japan struggles with a strong yen and fragile growth.

The strife in the Democratic Party of Japan, which could split the party just a year after it took power for the first time promising change, coincides with policymakers' efforts to curb a rise in the yen that threatens economic recovery.

A Bank of Japan decision to boost a cheap loan scheme at an emergency meeting on Monday did little to weaken the yen, still hovering near a 15-year high against the dollar hit last week.

"This could be the beginning of a party split. It may not be immediate, but the confrontation is real and serious," said Koichi Nakano, a Sophia University professor.

Ozawa, 68 and known for shaking things up, announced his decision after efforts failed to avoid a showdown in the September 14 DPJ leadership vote.

"As I have said before, I have decided that although I am unworthy I would like to take part (in the race) with everyone's support," Ozawa told a news conference at party headquarters.

The winner of the race will likely become premier by virtue of the Democrats' majority in parliament's powerful lower house. Kan is already Japan's fifth leader in three years.

Hurricane Earl threatens US Coast after hitting Caribbean

AP, San Juan

Hurricane Earl, now a powerful Category 4 storm, barrelled toward the US coast early yesterday after battering tiny islands across the northeastern Caribbean with heavy rain and winds that damaged homes and toppled power lines.

Earl is forecast to potentially brush the US East Coast late Thursday, before curving back out to sea, potentially swiping New England or far-eastern Canada. The US National Hurricane Center warned coastal residents from North Carolina to Maine to watch the storm closely.

"Any small shift in the track could dramatically alter whether it makes landfall or whether it remains over the open ocean," said Wallace Hogsett, a meteorologist at the centre.

DIFFERENT bites 'Spiderman' arrested after scaling skyscraper

AFP, Sydney

A French climber known as "Spiderman" was arrested on the roof of a 57-storey Sydney skyscraper on Monday after scaling the building without ropes or a harness to raise climate change awareness.

Alain Robert scaled the 150-metre (492-foot), twin-tower Lumiere apartment building in central Sydney in about 25 minutes, as dozens of curious onlookers packed the pavement to cheer, clap and take photographs.

"I think people were impressed with him, he is the world's best climber," publicist Max Markson told AFP.

Robert was arrested by police when he reached the skyscraper's roof and taken to a nearby police station, where he was charged with trespass and endangering the safety of another.

MySpace gets in tune with Facebook

AFP, San Francisco

MySpace on Monday began letting users synchronize updates with Facebook, the social networking superstar that supplanted the firm that once ruled in that arena.

"This new sync functionality is part of an ongoing effort to make it simple for people to share their updates beyond MySpace and allow fans and friends to interact with that content across the Web," MySpace said in a release.

News Corporation-owned MySpace had already let users share updates in the form of real-time musings, comments, or observations at hot microblogging service Twitter.

Fruits, vegetables cut cancer risk for smokers

AFP, Washington

Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables may decrease the risk of some kinds of lung cancer for smokers, according to a study released Monday.

"Although quitting smoking is the most important preventive action in reducing lung cancer risk, consuming a mix of different types of fruit and vegetables may also reduce risk, independent of the amount, especially among smokers," said H Bas Bueno-de-Mesquita of the Netherlands-based National Institute for Public Health and the Environment.