INTERNATIONAL

Obama marks the end of Iraq combat war

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama yesterday marks the symbolic end of US combat operations in Iraq, seven years after an invasion he opposed, and at a time when the country still seems far from being stabilized.

Speaking from the Oval Office, Obama will address Americans in a nationally televised speech at 8 pm (midnight GMT). Before that, he will travel to a military base in Texas to meet with soldiers who have recently returned from

The size of the US force in Iraq has dropped below a symbolic threshold of 50,000 troops. Starting Wednesday, their mission will be to "advise and support" the Iraqi army.

Speaking on ABC television early Tuesday, Obama's chief spokesman Robert Gibbs said that winding up US military operations in Iraq provides Americans the opportunity to put behind them one of the most divisive periods in recent history.

"We can thank the men and women who made tremendous sacrifices. We can heal the wounds that were opened... about whether we should go to Iraq," he

"I think what you will hear tonight (are) the steps we have to take here at home to strengthen our security domestically," Gibbs said.

Under a timetable set by Obama when he took office, all US troops are supposed to be out by the end of 2011, although officials have said a small residual military presence is likely to remain indefi-

Iraqi officials, worried about a surge in mandate.

attacks and a five-month-old political impasse that has blocked the formation of a new government, have expressed concern that the US military may be moving to the exits too quickly.

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, the latest in a rash of attacks during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Iraq's top army officer told AFP earlier this month that he feared worsening security problems after the Americans leave, and said they should stay until the Iraqi military is fully ready -- in 2020.

But the White House has insisted that the Iraqis are capable of providing for their own security now, and the top US general said only a "complete failure" of the local security forces could lead to a resumption of US combat operations.

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 politi-cal 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, where the president chose to escalate, tripling the number of US troops since the start of his



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.

a "new political landscape" after inconclusive national elec-

Australian

PM rejects

new polls

AFP, Sydney

tions prompted the biggest upheaval in decades. Julia was making her first major speech since the weekend of the August 21 election, which produced the only hung parliament since 1940 and left

Australian Prime Minister Julia

Gillard yesterday rejected a quick return to the polls and welcomed

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 unallied members will start formal negotiationslaterthisweek.

'Spiderman'

arrested after

A French climber known

as "Spiderman" was

arrested on the roof of a

57-storey Sydney sky-

scraper on Monday after

scaling the building

without ropes or a har-

ness to raise climate

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

Alain Robert scaled

change awareness.

skyscraper

bites

scaling

AFP, Sydney

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.

Edgar Valdez Villareal

aka "La Barbie" (C) of

sented to the press at

Mexico City yesterday.

Valdez was detained

in a police operation

following intelligence

work which began in

June 2009. The 37-

year-old was a key

lieutenant of Arturo

Beltran Leyva, who

bears his name and

was Mexico's third

his December 2009

death in a military

operation.

headed the cartel that

most-wanted man until

Hurricane

US Coast

after hitting

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

tially 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

could dramatically alter

whether it makes landfall or

"Any small shift in the track

watch the storm closely.

meteorologist at the centre.

Earl is forecast to poten-

and toppled power lines.

Caribbean

AP, San Juan

in central Mexico,

the Beltran Leyva

drug cartel, is pre-

the Federal Police

headquarters in

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 Mahmoud 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.

EdgarValdez 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 Valdezwould 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,"

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

said Amara, a former militant for immigrant

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.'



US broadens N Korea sanctions

AFP, Washington

The US government on Monday slapped sanctions on four people and eight organizations accused of aiding North Korea's government through illicit trade, the Treasury Department said.

President Barack Obama issued an order freezing assets and imposing travel bans, as Washington stepped up pressure after the sinking of a South Korean navy ship in March which was blamed on Pyongyang.

Obama also expanded the scope of US sanctions to cover those involved in the trade in drugs and luxury goods to and from the dirt-poor nation.

The US placed sanctions on a secretive branch of the Korean Worker' Party, known as Office 39, which is suspected of selling methamphetamine in China and South Korea and acquiring luxury items for North Korea's leaders.

The group is thought to be involved in a failed attempt to buy two Italian-made luxury yachts worth more than 15 million dollars for North Korea's reclusive leader, Kim Jong-II.

Among those also targeted were the head of North Korea's intelligence agency Kim Yong-Chol, who has been linked to the March torpedo attack that killed 46 people on the South Korean ship. Pyongyang denies any role in the attacks.

Green Pine Associated Corporation, a group said to be controlled by Kim Yong-Chol's intelligence agency, was also sanctioned.

The organization was accused of "exporting arms or related materiel from North Korea," and is said to specialize in the production of maritime military craft and armaments.

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

"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

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 Corporationowned 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 Buenode-Mesquita of the Netherlands-based National Institute for Public Health and the Environment.

Hurricane Earl threatens Irani paper calls Bruni 'prostitute' AFP, Tehran

A hardline 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.

whether it remains over the open ocean," said Wallace Hogsett, a Bruni, Sarkozy's third wife, angered Kayhan by signing a petition along with several other

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 husbandwould not aband on her. She criticised the stoning sentence against

Mohammadi-Ashtiani say-**Bruni and Sarkozy** ing: "Spill your blood, deprive your children of their mother? Why? Because you have lived, because you have loved, because you are a woman, an Iranian? Every

> Human rights officials in the Iranian judiciary say Mohammadi-Ashtiani was sentenced to death by stoning for adultery in a case that also got her a 10-year jail term for participating in her husband's murder.

part of me refuses to accept this."

her stoning sentence.

Iran says it has yet to take a final decision on

typhoon hits Japan AFP, Tokyo

cancelled as

200 flights

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 warn-

ing 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

decision after efforts failed to avoid a showdown in the September 14 DPJ leadership vote. support," Ozawa told a news conference at party headquarters. received any reports of casual-

ties following the typhoon", said The winner of the race will likely become premier by virtue of the Democrats' majority in parliament's powerful lower house. an official of Okinawa prefec-Kan is already Japan's fifth leader in three years. ture's crisis management office.