

## Australia polls impasse expected to end today

REUTERS, Canberra

Australian Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard will know today if she can form a new minority government with the support of three independents, ending more than two weeks of uncertainty after the August 21 elections.

Independent Tony Windsor said the impasse should end on Tuesday morning, but there was a risk the three independent MPs could still split, delivering a deadlock of 75 votes apiece in the 150-seat lower house and the prospect of another election.

"There are still some meetings to go on this, both with the opposition and the government (and) depending on how long they take, and any sticking points, it should be tomorrow," Windsor told reporters in Canberra.

But in a further setback for conservative opposition leader Tony Abbott, the independents said they will not make a final choice until he confirms support from a rebel National Party MP who wants to sit on the cross benches in the new parliament. "Until there is a resolution to that issue we don't really have a decision to make. We cannot form a government even if we wanted to with Abbott," said fellow independent Rob Oakeshott.

Julia and Abbott have been desperately wooing the independents for their support for a minority government since August 21 elections delivered the country's first hung parliament since World War Two. They have demanded political stability from Labor and the conservative as a cornerstone for their support.

Several newspapers on Monday said unnamed conservatives were expecting Julia to win over at least two independents to form a minority government holding 76 seats. Bookmakers are also tipping a Julia Labor government.

Julia currently has 74 seats to Abbott's 73 after a fourth independent last week sided with Labor, but Abbott could still form government if the three uncommitted independents back him.

Julia's Labor has promised a controversial mining profits tax and a \$38 billion broadband project if it wins, as well as a carbon price to curb one of the world's highest per-capita levels of emissions. The conservatives oppose all three policies.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrives at a meeting with Arab and foreign ambassadors in the Qatari capital Doha on Sunday, after declaring in a press conference following a meeting with the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, that any attack on the Islamic republic will result in the destruction of Israel. PHOTO: AFP

## Ahmadinejad voices doubts about 9/11 attacks

AFP, Doha

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has questioned the accepted narrative of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, saying it was still not clear who was behind them.

"Something happened in New York and still nobody knows who the main perpetrators of that act were," Ahmadinejad told diplomats and newspaper editors late on Sunday while on a brief visit to Qatar.

"No independent people were allowed to try and identify the perpetrators," he charged.

"They say terrorists were hidden in Afghanistan and Nato mobilised all its resources and attacked Afghanistan," he said.

"They say that in the Twin Towers, 2,000 people were killed. In Afghanistan, so far more than 110,000 have been killed."

Ahmadinejad has on several occasions questioned the accepted version of the 2001 attacks by al-Qaeda militants, which killed nearly 3,000 people in the United States.

In March, he referred to the attacks as "a big lie," Iranian state media reported.

Iran is locked in a standoff with Western governments over its nuclear programme.

## Blair cancels book-signing over protests

REUTERS, London

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair said yesterday he had cancelled a book-signing in London this week to mark the launch of his memoirs, over fears the event would be hit by protests.

Three people were arrested after eggs and shoes were thrown at Blair, 57, as he arrived to sign copies of "A Journey" at a bookshop in Dublin on Saturday and some of the 200 protesters clashed with police.

No injuries were reported and the missiles did not hit Blair.

Anti-war campaigners and the far-right British National Party had said they would protest on Wednesday at the Waterstone's branch in Piccadilly in central London over Blair's decision to join the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"I have decided not to go ahead with the signing as I don't want the public to be inconvenienced by the inevitable hassle caused by protesters," Blair said in a statement on his website.

"I know the Metropolitan Police would, as ever, have done a superb job in managing any disruption but I do not wish to impose an extra strain on police resources, simply for a book-signing."

He said he would sign books for Waterstone's, which would be available from the store on Thursday.

## Israeli FM pushes for new settlement construction

AP, Jerusalem

Israel's hard-line foreign minister said yesterday that his party will try to block any extension of Israel's settlement slowdown, a move that could derail the recently launched Mideast peace negotiations.

Avigdor Lieberman said the Israeli government must keep its promise to voters that the 10-month slowdown, declared last November under US pressure in order to draw the Palestinians to the negotiating table, will end as scheduled at the end of the month.

The Sept 26 deadline is a challenge for the fragile talks launched in Washington last week. The Palestinians say they will quit the talks if settlement construction accelerates, but not ending the slowdown could potentially bring down the Israeli government. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has yet to say how he will handle the deadline.

"A promise is a promise," Lieberman told Israel Radio. "We will not agree to any extension." "I promise that if there's a proposal that we don't accept it will not pass," he added.

Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party is a key member of Israel's governing coalition, which is led by Netanyahu's Likud party.

It holds 15 seats in parliament, making it the second-largest member of the coalition and giving it the ability to rob the government of its parliamentary majority if it pulls out. Other coalition partners, and members of Netanyahu's own party, also favour resuming construction.

In a sign that compromise was possible, however, Lieberman told the daily Yediot Achronot that he would not quit the coalition even if he does not get his way.

"We will not leave or bring down the government. We will fight from the inside for what we believe," he told the paper.

At the summit marking the relaunch of peace talks in Washington last week, Netanyahu used unusually warm language about the Palestinian leadership and the chances for peace. But the Israeli foreign minister has been vocal in his pessimism.

## Spain rejects Eta's ceasefire proposal

BBC ONLINE

The Spanish government has dismissed as "insufficient" a ceasefire by Eta, saying the Basque separatist group must renounce violence forever.

Interior Minister Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba said the group was weaker than ever and his government would continue to pursue its members.

At the weekend Eta said it would no longer carry out "armed actions".

Its campaign for a separate Basque state has led to more than 820 deaths over the past 40 years.

Eta has called two ceasefires in the past but abandoned them both. It is unclear whether the latest is meant as a permanent or temporary move.

Rubalcaba said Eta had broken too many ceasefires to be trusted and the days of declaring a truce and starting a dialogue had passed.

"I think the word insufficient reflects quite well the position not (just) of the government but of all the democratic parties," he told Spain's state-run TVE television station on Monday.

Rubalcaba demanded "a definitive and unconditional abandonment" of Eta's violent campaign.

The BBC's Sarah Rainsford in Madrid says this is a hard-line response that effectively rules out peace talks.

In a video handed to the BBC and broadcast on Sunday, three hooded Eta fighters are shown sitting behind a desk with the Eta flag pinned up behind them.

## Cameron's media chief under pressure over hacking row

AFP, London

Pressure mounted on British Prime Minister David Cameron's media chief yesterday over allegations he knew about illegal phone hacking by reporters when he was editor of a tabloid newspaper.

The use of hacking on the News of the World, which Andy Coulson edited from 2003 to 2007, was under renewed scrutiny after a story in the New York Times about the scandal, which in 2007 led to one of the tabloid's senior journalists being jailed.

The New York Times quoted a former News of the World reporter as saying Coulson knew about the hacking, amid claims from senior opposition politicians that police had failed to fully investigate the case first time around.

In response, London's Metropolitan Police has now said it would be prepared to investigate the allegation made in the New York Times by former reporter Sean Hoare.

A spokesman for Coulson -- who resigned from the newspaper after one of his editors was jailed three years ago, saying he took "ultimate responsibility" -- said he was ready to meet police voluntarily to discuss the claims.

"Coulson emphatically denies these allegations. He has, however, offered to talk to officers if the need arises and would welcome the opportunity to give his view on Hoare's claims," the spokesman said.

Meanwhile, Cameron's official spokesman told reporters that the premier accepts Coulson's position -- but did not respond directly to a question about whether Cameron believed his denials of involvement.

"He has full confidence in Andy Coulson and he continues to do his job," the spokesman said. "He has denied those allegations and the prime minister accepts that."

Coulson, Cameron's director of communications and a special adviser, is paid 140,000 pounds (167,000 euros, 215,000 dollars) a year of public money, only slightly less than Cameron himself.

Cameron's coalition government of his Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats faces awkward questions about the affair in the House of Commons Monday as it gets back to work following its summer recess.

A Labour lawmaker is to ask an urgent question demanding that Home Secretary Theresa May explains what action she intends to take following the most recent claims.

Labour's former deputy prime minister John Prescott, who believes he may have been targeted by News of the World phone hacking, has called for police to reopen their probe, saying he was "far from satisfied" with their handling of his case.

## Chinese pilots lied about flying records

BBC ONLINE

China is checking the qualifications of all its commercial pilots, after it emerged that more than 200 of them lied about their experience.

The revelation follows an investigation last year by the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC).

Half the pilots worked for the parent company of an airline involved in a recent fatal plane crash.

Shenzhen Airlines is the parent company of Henan Airlines, whose aircraft crashed last month killing 42 people.

Fifty-four passengers and crew survived the crash, in which the plane missed the runway.

Between 2008 and 2009, the employment histories of more than 200 Chinese commercial pilots were found to have been falsified, with some of them embellishing their flying histories.

The report said that some of those involved were former military pilots who became civil pilots.

After being discovered, pilots were grounded and had to go through re-examinations and re-assessment.

A further investigation into qualifications has now been launched by the CAAC, the country's aviation regulator which says it cannot guarantee it has got rid of all the under-qualified pilots.

## China, US meet amid tensions over trade, military

AP, Beijing

Senior US and Chinese officials met yesterday to steady relations upset by disputes over currency, trade and military affairs despite calls for a tougher line on Chinese economic policies that some say are contributing to American unemployment.

With congressional elections in two months, President Barack Obama is under pressure to kick-start the economy and many lawmakers say he should start by addressing China's lopsided trade surplus and currency policies.

Meanwhile, China's nationalistic state media have criticized US-South Korea military exercises in the Yellow Sea and US government statements on South China Sea territorial disputes, saying they represent threats to China's security.

Chinese officials tried to set a positive tone, emphasizing the need for cooperative relations, at the start of their meetings with National Economic Council Director Lawrence Summers and Deputy National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon.

"Continuing to develop a positive and comprehensive China-US relationship contributes to our two countries' major interests in peace, security and development," Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said.

Summers later told Vice Premier Wang Qishan that Obama "has emphasized for us the importance he attaches to a very strong relationship between the United States and China."

Among the issues on the agenda, Summers said, is setting up a visit to Washington by Chinese President Hu Jintao.

The brighter talk is meant to signal a willingness to cooperate after several months of public discord, analysts said. Shi Yinhong, an expert on the US at Renmin University in Beijing, said relations are troubled but the worst is over and both sides are headed toward reconciliation.

"The key point of the talks is not to make significant agreements, but to improve understanding of each other's stance. If tensions can be reduced to some degree and confidence increased, that is an achievement," he said.



Passengers travel by underground train at Liverpool Street station in London yesterday. Unions are set to strike for 24 hours, bringing parts of London's Underground network to a halt. PHOTO: AFP

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