

## PRESIDENTIAL POLLS Comoros ruling party nominee wins

AFP, Moroni

Ruling party candidate Ikililou Dhoinine was yesterday declared winner of presidential polls in the Comoros, which the opposition in the Indian Ocean archipelago claimed were marred by fraud.

The 48-year-old Dhoinine, outgoing President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi's deputy and their designee, took 61 percent of the vote, Elections Minister Abderramane Ben Cheikh Achiraf said, reading the poll commission's final results.

Sunday's ballot, which France also said had been marked by irregularities, saw the pre-poll favourite's two challengers trail by a big margin, with Mohamed Said Fazul garnering 33 percent and Abdou Djibir only six.

Dhoinine's victory, which still has to be approved by the constitutional court, marks the first a politician from the Comoros' smallest island of Moheli has won the presidency since the country's 1975 independence from France.



A young child watches holds an empty bottle as people queue to receive water from tap at the Olympia Leisure Centre in Belfast, Northern Ireland yesterday. Some 40,000 people were struggling to cope without water supplies in Northern Ireland, where frozen pipes have burst, leaving some without fresh water for eight days.

PHOTO: AFP

## N Korea nuclear talks should be revived

Says S Korea president

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak called yesterday for new international talks with North Korea on shutting down its nuclear programme, apparently softening his stance towards the negotiations.

"(We) have no choice but to resolve the problem of dismantling North Korea's nuclear programme diplomatically through the six-party talks," Lee said of the discussions, which began in 2003 and have been stalled for two years.

Lee has taken a tough line with the North since its deadly bombardment last month of a South Korean border island, which caused outrage in Seoul.

His government, along with the United States and Japan, has been cool in response to efforts by Russia and China to resuscitate the six-party forum in an attempt to ease high tensions.

Seoul and its allies say the North must first mend ties with the South and show sincerity about denuclearisation.

The president said the international community is pressed for time because the North has set 2012 -- the centenary of the birth of founder Kim Il-Sung -- as the year to become a

"great, powerful and prosperous" nation.

Because of this goal, we "must certainly achieve the dismantlement of its nuclear programme next year", Lee said.

The South also accuses the North of sinking one of its warships in March near the disputed Yellow Sea border, a charge Pyongyang denies.

Since the island shelling, Seoul has staged a series of military drills and vowed to hit back hard using air power against any new attack.

Lee, however, also called for cross-border dialogue.

"We should make efforts to have peace settled through inter-Korean dialogue" while also strengthening defences, he said, adding that reunification of the two Koreas is not "far off".

Foreign Minister Kim Sung-Hwan said the South is open to dialogue if the North agrees to discuss its nuclear programme in bilateral talks -- something it has always been unwilling to do.

"The window of opportunity for various channels of dialogue is open if North Korea acknowledges that the North and the South -- the direct parties concerned -- should discuss the nuclear issue," he told reporters.

Kim said the five nations negotiating with the North have not yet agreed on conditions for resuming the six-party forum.

## FLOOD IN AUSTRALIA

# Queensland faces massive evacuation

BBC ONLINE

North-eastern Australia's worst flooding in decades is continuing to cause chaos across the region.

Around 1,000 people in Queensland have been evacuated, including the entire population of the town of Theodore.

The government has declared Theodore and two other towns in the region to be disaster zones, and forecasters say the floods have not yet peaked.

The cost of the damage is expected to top \$650m, including massive losses of sunflower and cotton crops.

Army Black Hawk helicopters evacuated the 300 residents of Theodore, where every building in the town apart from the police station has been flooded, local media reported.

Theodore county mayor Maureen Clancy said only a few police officers had stayed behind.

"Certainly the water is still rising. The heights are at such a new record it's not known what this is going to do," she said.

The town's river has risen more than 50cm (20in) above its previous recorded high, Emergency Management Queensland spokesman Bruce O'Grady told Australia's ABC News.

In the southern Queensland city of Bundaberg, residents in some areas were being advised to leave their homes as the Burnett River rose to danger levels.

The river was expected to reach 7.5m (24ft), about 0.3m (1ft) more than the previous high water record of 1954.

In the Central Highlands town of Emerald, flooding forced the closure of the main bridge, cutting the town off, Australian media reported.

Brad Carter, the mayor of Rockhampton, warned that his city and more remote surrounding communities could be cut off by the weekend.

The floods are also hitting businesses in Queensland, which is Australia's key coal-producing state.

Two of Australia's biggest coal export terminals - Dalrymple Bay and Gladstone Ports - together with Australia's top coal transporter QR National said they were cutting back on operations while the floods persisted.

## West has 3 years to rein in Iran

Says Israeli minister

REUTERS, Jerusalem

The United States and its allies have up to three years to curb Iran's nuclear programme, which has been set back by technical difficulties and sanctions, a senior Israeli official said yesterday.

Saying Iran remained his government's biggest worry, Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Yaalon did not mention possible unilateral military strikes by Israel, saying he hoped US-led action against Tehran would be successful.

"I believe that this effort will grow, and will include areas beyond sanctions, to convince the Iranian regime that, effectively, it must choose between continuing to seek nuclear capability and surviving," Yaalon told Israel Radio.

"I don't know if it will happen in 2011 or in 2012, but we are talking in terms of the next three years."

Yaalon, a former armed forces chief, noted Iran's uranium enrichment plan had suffered setbacks. Some analysts have seen signs of foreign sabotage in incidents such as the corruption of Iranian computer networks by a virus.

"These difficulties postpone the timeline, of course. Thus we cannot talk about a 'point of no return'. Iran does not currently have the ability to make a nuclear bomb on its own," Yaalon said.

"I hope it won't succeed at all and that the Western world's effort will ultimately deny Iran a nuclear capability."

Yaalon had previously been hawkish on Iran, saying Israel, believed to have region's only nuclear arsenal, should attack Iran rather than see it get the bomb.

## 'Plant List' gives boost to conservation effort

AFP, Paris

Capping the UN's International Year of Biodiversity, botanists in Britain and the United States yesterday unveiled a library of plant names aimed at helping conservationists, drug designers and agriculture researchers.

The database, accessible at [www.theplantlist.org](http://www.theplantlist.org), identifies 1.25 million names for plants, ranging from essential food crops such as wheat, rice and corn to garden roses and exotic jungle ferns, and provides links to published research.

The aim is to clear up a century-old taxonomic jumble in which non-standard names sowed ignorance, rivalry and sometimes damaging confusion about the world's plant wealth.

"Without accurate names, understanding and communication about global plant life would descend into inefficient chaos, costing vast sums of money and threatening lives in the case of plants used for food or medicine," Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG) said.

The project brought together scores of experts at RBG's famous Kew Gardens in

London with the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis.

It traces its origins to a 1999 botanical congress which called for a clear picture of plant biodiversity to help preserve species under threat.

The Plant List is described as a working list that will require finetuning.

"(It) is really a major step forward," said Peter Wyse Jackson, president of the Missouri Botanical Garden.

"It provides for the first time a basic checklist of what plants there are on the planet, and it can be used for so many purposes, planning conservation, action looking at the economic importance of plants and so on."

Of the 1.25 million names, 1.04 million are of species rank while the remainder are "infraspecific," meaning they are families or sub-groups of species.

The longest name is *Ornithogalum adseptentrionesvergentulum*, for a group of species that includes the 'Star of Bethlehem' plant. The shortest names include *Poa fax*, or scaly poa, a purplish flower native to Western Australia.



Members of a Thai bomb squad unit inspect the site of a car bomb attack by suspected Muslim militants in front of a highway department office in Narathiwat province yesterday. An early morning car bomb in the restive south wounded seven people despite intelligence warning.

PHOTO: AFP

## Chavez dares US to cut diplomatic ties

AP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez dared the United States to expel his ambassador or cut off diplomatic ties in retaliation for his rejection of Washington's choice for ambassador to Caracas.

Tensions have been growing over Chavez's refusal to accept American diplomat Larry Palmer and also over US criticisms of a legislative offensive by the president's congressional allies. Lawmakers have granted Chavez expanded powers to enact laws by decree for the next year and a half, a change that opponents condemn as antidemocratic.

Chavez has said he will not accept Palmer to be ambassador due to comments he made earlier this year suggesting that morale is low in Venezuela's military and that he is concerned Colombian rebels are finding refuge in Venezuela.

The US State Department has said it stands behind its nomination of Palmer, who is awaiting Senate confirmation. State Department spokesman P J Crowley said last week that Venezuela's decision to reject Palmer after initially giving consent will have consequences on relations with Caracas, and that the US government will evaluate what to do.

"If the government is going to expel our

ambassador there, let them do it!" Chavez said in a televised speech Tuesday night. "If they're going to cut diplomatic relations, let them do it!"

"Now the US government is threatening us that they're going to take reprisals. Well, let them do whatever they want, but that man will not come," Chavez said.

There was no immediate reaction from the US Embassy in Caracas, which has been without an ambassador since Patrick Duddy finished his assignment and left in July.

Chavez, whose economy relies heavily on oil sales to the United States, has accused Palmer of dishonoring the Venezuelan government by expressing concerns on several sensitive subjects including 2008 accusations by the US Treasury Department that three members of Chavez's inner circle helped Colombian rebels by supplying arms and aiding drug-trafficking operations.

"For an ambassador to come, he has to respect this homeland," Chavez said.

Chavez's latest actions in pushing through controversial laws are contributing to the diplomatic tensions. The measures have been hurriedly passed before a new legislature takes office Jan. 5 with enough opposition lawmakers to prevent passage of some types of major laws.

## IVORY COAST CRISIS Gbagbo defiant at African ultimatum

BBC ONLINE

West African leaders have ended their mission to Ivory Coast, having failed to persuade incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo to stand down.

They had hoped Gbagbo would agree to cede power to Allasane Ouattara, widely considered to be the true winner of November's elections.

But Gbagbo has refused, despite the leaders' threat of military action.

The dispute has led to widespread unrest in Ivory Coast, with thousands fleeing and scores of people killed.

State-controlled TV has indicated that several million African nationals from other countries living in Ivory Coast might be at risk if threats from African countries of military intervention against Gbagbo continue.

Gbagbo has said that his government will cut diplomatic ties with any countries recognising Ouattara.

The presidents of Benin, Sierra Leone and Cape Verde had travelled to the main city, Abidjan, as representatives of the Ecowas West African regional grouping.

The visit was being seen as a final chance to urge Gbagbo to peacefully cede to Ouattara - who is currently holed up in a hotel in the city protected by around 800 UN peacekeepers.

Few details of the separate talks with the two rivals have emerged, but President Boni Yayi of Benin told reporters: "Everything went well."

## SATELLITE LAUNCH FAILURE Medvedev fires space chiefs

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev yesterday fired two top space officials and reprimanded the space agency chief after a launch failure caused Russia to delay the deployment of its own navigation system.

This month's failed launch of three Glonass-M orbiters marked a humiliating setback to the country's efforts to introduce a global rival to the US Global Positioning System (GPS).

A presidential statement said Energia Vice President Vyacheslav Filin and Roskosmos deputy head Viktor Remishevsky had been fired for "the mistakes made in the fuel calculations".

The Russian Proton-M rocket failed to reach its initial orbit during the December 5 launch, causing it to dump the three high-tech Glonass-M satellites near the Hawaii Islands.

The brief statement also said Medvedev had reprimanded Roskosmos chief Anatoly Perminov and ordered the agency to be more careful in its future work.

"On the Russian president's instructions, Roskosmos will undertake additional measures to strengthen its performance discipline," the Kremlin statement said.

The satellites would have completed a system whose research had been begun by the Soviet Union in 1976 before being interrupted and then picked up again by the country's president-turned premier Vladimir Putin.

Russia's de-facto number one has vowed to place Glonass readers on every car made in Russia by 2012 and hailed the system as an example of how the country can claw back its Soviet-era technological might.



Officials have found animals are regularly abused and mistreated at some of China's zoos.

PHOTO: AFP

## China cracks down on abuse at zoos

BBC ONLINE

Officials in China have cancelled the licences of seven animal parks and ordered improvements at 53 other zoos, parks and circuses.

Officials found that animals used in performances were often abused and laws for their care often violated.

Six government teams had been inspecting about 500 animal parks after calling for a ban on animal performances.

The country's first animal protection law is under consideration.

The government's latest report found "frequent abuse and exploitation" of animals in parks and zoos.

"Both the security of endangered species and the safety of the public are threatened by improper management," the State Forestry Administration deputy head Yin Hong told the official Xinhua news agency.