

Yemen parties agree power transition deal

REUTERS, Sanaa

Yemen's president and opposition agreed yesterday to sign a Gulf-brokered deal for a transition of power with slight modifications after intervention from US and European diplomats, an opposition official said.

The deal, which the opposition said would be signed later yesterday, would ease entrenched President Ali Abdullah Saleh out of power within a month after a nearly 33-year rule in the impoverished Arabian Peninsula state.

"After American, European and Gulf efforts, there was agreement by the president on the Gulf initiative after simple changes, and the signing will be today," opposition official Yahya Abu Usbua said.

Al Arabiya television quoted an adviser to the Yemeni president as confirming the signing would take place.

The United States and oil giant Saudi Arabia, both targets of foiled attacks from al-Qaeda's Yemen wing, are keen to see an end to Yemen's political stalemate, fearing continued chaos could give the militant group more room to operate freely.

Abdullatif al-Zayani, the secretary general

of the Gulf Cooperation Council, has been in capital Sanaa since Saturday trying to revive the GCC-brokered deal that Qatar, one of its six members, backed out of citing stalling and "lack of wisdom."

Saleh, a shrewd political survivor who has outlasted previous opponents' attempts to challenge his power, indicated in April he would sign the Gulf deal, but refused to put his name to it in the final hours.

He said at the time he would only sign in his capacity as ruling party leader, not as president.

The opposition, whose coalition includes Islamists and leftists, said that among the minor modifications in the deal were changes in who would sign and in what capacity for the opposition and for the government.

"The president will sign for the government in his capacity as president of the republic and as head of the ruling party," Abu Usbua said.

Protesters, frustrated that three months of street protests have failed to dislodge Saleh, want the 69-year-old leader out immediately and have said they will step up their campaign by marching on government buildings, a move that brought new bloodshed last week as security forces fired to stop them.

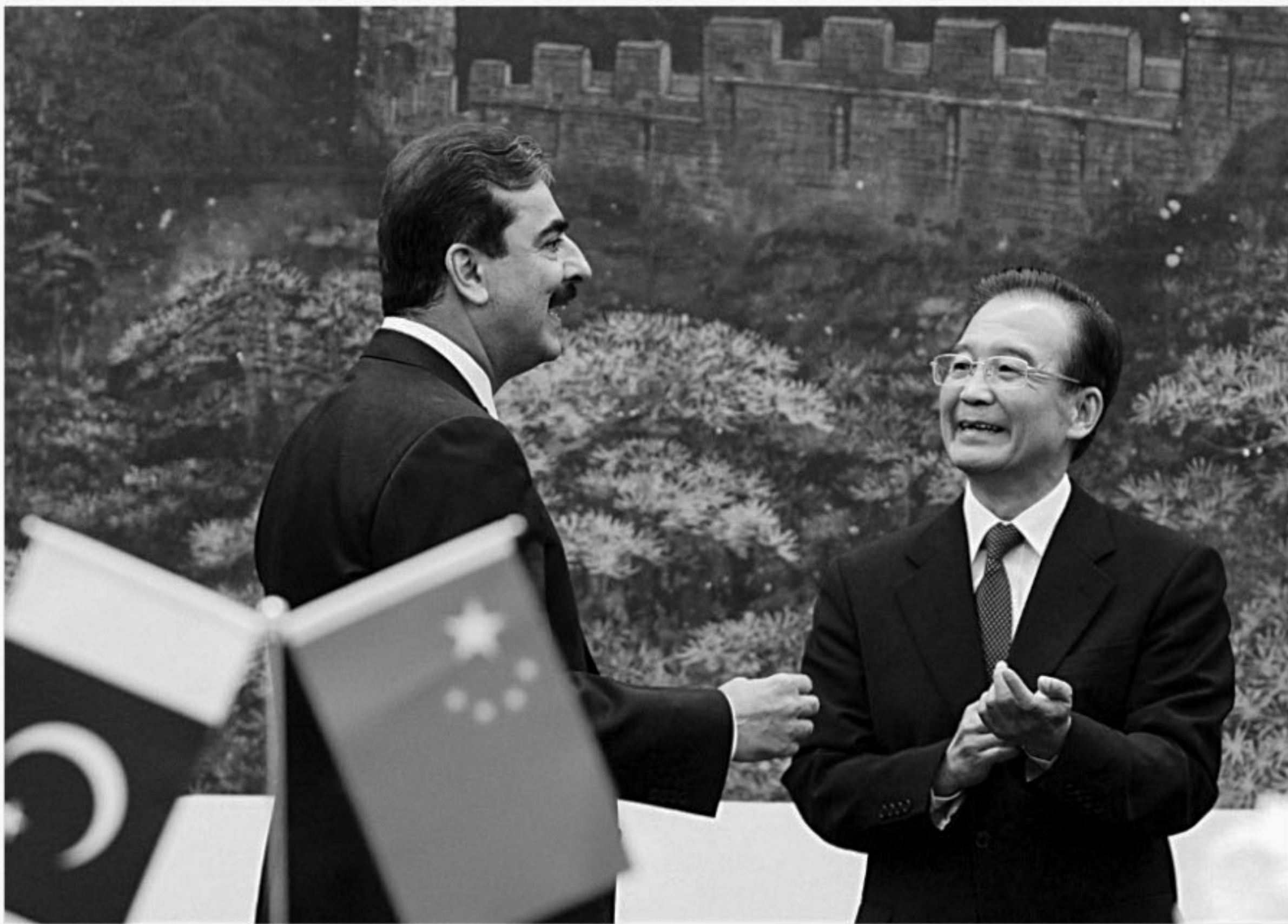


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan's Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani (L) talks to China's Premier Wen Jiabao (R) during a singing ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. China's vowed to remain friends "forever" with Pakistan despite the harsh international response to the country after the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 02.

Singapore PM reshuffles cabinet

AFP, Singapore

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday announced a sweeping cabinet revamp after the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) was rocked by its worst ever election showing.

The party old guard led by his father Lee Kuan Yew, 87, and Goh Chok Tong, 70 -- former prime ministers who served as advisers to the government -- are out of the new cabinet at their own request, the premier said.

Also out are the widely criticised ministers in charge of internal security, housing and transport -- three of the hottest issues in the May 7 polls, which the prime minister has called a "watershed" event for the island republic.

Analysts said it was one of the most dramatic cabinet overhauls ever seen in Singapore, with 11 of the 14 ministries having a new boss.

Militant attack on Pak police checkpoint kills 17

REUTERS, Peshawar

More than 70 militants armed with rockets and mortars attacked a security post on the outskirts of Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar yesterday, the latest in an upsurge of violence since Osama bin Laden was killed in the country this month.

Two members of the security forces and at least 15 insurgents were killed in a four-hour gunbattle that erupted following two successive attacks on the security post set up to defend Peshawar, the gateway to the troubled northwest region.

"They were well-armed. They had heavy weapons, rockets, mortars everything. The fighting lasted for about four and a half hours," Ejaz Khan, a city police officer, said.

The attack took place near Khyber, part of Pakistan's lawless tribal belt on the Afghan border, which is regarded as a global hub of militants, including al-Qaeda and the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban movements.

Two members of the security forces were killed and five wounded, Khan said. At least 15 insurgents were killed.

Security forces repulsed the first attack by the militants which was carried out just before midnight, officials said.

"Then they carried out a big attack early

in the morning. We also called in reinforcements to counter the attack and we did it," a Peshawar security official said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but militants linked to al-Qaeda and the Taliban have stepped up attacks in Pakistan after the killing of bin Laden in a military town by US special forces on May 2.

The Pakistani Taliban, who are close to al-Qaeda, have vowed to avenge bin Laden's death and said their suicide bombers killed 80 people last week at a paramilitary academy in the northwestern town of Charsadda.

In a suspected sectarian attack yesterday, two men on a motorbike fired on a vehicle and killed four Shia Muslims and wounded four others on the outskirts of the southwestern city of Quetta.

Pro-Taliban Sunni militants groups, many of whom are linked to al-Qaeda, are trying to foment conflict among Pakistan's religious sects in an attempt to destabilise the government just as it faces pressure from the United States and the West to crack down on militant groups, analysts say.

Pakistan has come under renewed pressure to prove it is serious about tackling militancy since bin Laden was discovered in Abbottabad.

OPEC MEETING

Rebels want to represent Libya

AFP, Dubai

Libya's rebel National Transitional Council wants to represent the oil-rich country at June's OPEC meeting, spokesman Mahmud Shammam told AFP yesterday, amid reports the oil minister has defected.

"We want to attend, and will study the legal procedure," said Shammam, media spokesman for the NTC.

"We still do not know if OPEC will invite us," he said.

Libya, a key crude-exporting nation that was producing some 1.7 million barrels a day before the rebellion broke out in mid-February, has seen its output slashed since the revolt began.

According to the International Energy Agency, Libya's exports averaged 1.49 million bpd before the uprising, with 85 pc of that going to Europe.

Medvedev warns of Cold War over missile defence

AFP, Skolkovo

President Dmitry Medvedev yesterday warned the West it would face a new Cold War if it failed to address Russia's concerns over a proposed missile defence shield for Europe.

Medvedev told reporters that the US decision to push ahead with construction of the missile defence system despite Russia's objections will force Moscow "to take retaliatory measures -- something that we would very much rather not do."

"We would then be talking about developing the offensive potential of our nuclear capabilities."

The Russian leader also reaffirmed any earlier threat to pull out of the new START disarmament agreement that entered into force this year if the missile shield is deployed and operated without the Kremlin's input.

"This would be a very bad scenario. It would be a scenario that throws us back into the Cold War era."

Moscow has been fighting Nato plans to deploy a system the West sees as a means of



protection from nations such as Iran but Russia believes could potentially be deployed against its own defences.

The Kremlin's biggest fear is that the shield could one day be turned around and instead of shooting down incoming missiles be used to attack Russian soil.

Medvedev yesterday demanded a legally-binding assurance from the United States that this will never happen -- a safeguard that Moscow says Washington is refusing to give.

Nato has thus far invited Russia to voice its concerns in formal meetings but refused to provide Moscow with a formal role in the shield's operation that it seeks.

Medvedev said he understood the United States' argument that the shield was not aimed at Russia but rather nations such as Iran.

But he argued that such nations do not yet have the capacity to launch nuclear weapons at the West.

"That means it is aimed against us," said Medvedev.

SEX SCANDALS

Are the top bureaucrats immune of charge?

REUTERS, United Nations

Whether IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn is innocent or guilty of sexual assault is yet to be proven, but his arrest has certainly raised questions about international organisations attitude towards their top officials in such matters.

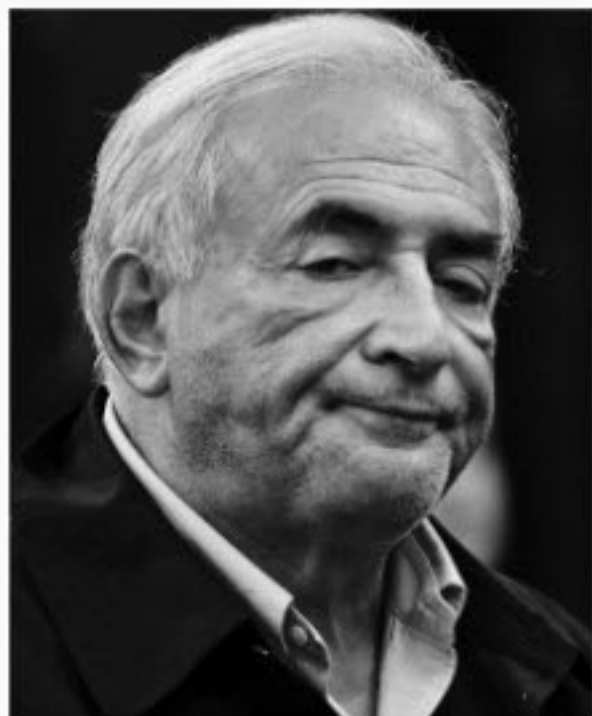
Strauss-Kahn, managing director of the Washington-based International Monetary Fund, was arrested on Saturday while about to fly to Paris after a chambermaid at a New York hotel said he had tried to rape her earlier in the day.

The scandal has broken at a time when private companies are becoming less and less tolerant of any sexual misconduct by their senior executives. A string of high-profile companies have shed their bosses in recent years over such issues.

This has raised the question about big government backed organisations like UN, IMF, World Bank, Nato's practices in the relative fields and their internal procurement processes.

Whatever the verdict the Juries give, critics say international bureaucracies may not be rigorous enough in their hiring standards, especially when who gets to be boss is decided at least in part by horse trading among governments.

Experts note that it is rare for a politician or a high profile bureaucrat to go to jail for sex crimes whether because most stop short of criminal behaviour or because their victims don't press charges.



Dominique Strauss-Kahn

And experts say that men in high and powerful places are particularly vulnerable to sex-related additions.

Strauss-Kahn, who was backed by the EU for his post, faced earlier controversy in 2008 over an affair with a female IMF economist who was his subordinate.

That time, he apologised for an "error of judgment" and was eventually exempted from charges.

Paul Wolfowitz, nominated for the World Bank job by then US President Bush in 2005, resigned over his involvement in a high-paying promotion for his companion.

Such episodes are evidence for some of inherent weaknesses in selection systems.

The IMF and World Bank are classified as UN specialized agencies but in practice the United Nations does not control them or appoint their leaders.

But the United Nations, whose leaders often say has a "zero tolerance" policy on sexual harassment, has had issues of its own.

The best known involved Ruud Lubbers, a former Dutch prime minister who became head of the UN refugee agency and was accused in 2004 by a US employee of

unwelcome touching.

Although an internal report supported the allegation -- which Lubbers denied -- then UN secretary-general Kofi Annan ruled it could not be substantiated.

At International Criminal Court prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo was also accused by an employee in 2006 of sexual misconduct.

A panel of ICC judges found the allegation "manifestly unfounded."

But international organisations elsewhere defended their practices.

UN human resources chief Catherine Pollard claimed recruitment was "guided by a thorough and competitive selection and appointment procedure" and senior and other staff had to complete training sessions on sexual harassment and abuse of authority, Pollard told Reuters in an email.

The instinct of international bodies to protect their own, at least in public, contrasts with the abrupt exits in recent years of a number of private company bosses -- from Hewlett-Packard Co to BP Plc -- over sexual issues.

"Corporate boards are increasingly less tolerant of anything that's smacks, smells, looks like some degree of impropriety," said Linda Finkle of business coaching firm Incedo Group, based near Washington.

"As (corporate) boards in the past did not take action for infractions, however large or small, it has come back to bite them, and so they're extra cautious now," Finkle said.

But she said that in some government organisations she had worked with, "I'm often surprised at the total lack of accountability."

Philip Roth wins Man Booker Prize

AFP, Sydney

Philip Roth, America's most decorated living novelist, won the fourth Man Booker International Prize yesterday, beating off competition from 12 other authors for the \$97,500 award.

The prize was first presented in 2005, and is given every two years for a body of work that was written either originally in English or is widely available in English translation.

The 78-year-old Roth, who could not travel to Sydney to receive the accolade because of back problems, said it was a great honour to be recognised.

"I hope the prize will bring me to the attention of readers around the world who are not familiar with my work. This is a great honour," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (R) and Ireland's President Mary McAleese stand together during a wreath laying ceremony yesterday at the Irish War Memorial Garden in Dublin, Ireland where 49400 Irish soldiers were killed for Britain in World War II.

US image sour in Muslim nations

Obama's key MidEast speech today

AFP, Washington

The image of the United States has soured in Muslim nations in the past year, says a poll released two days before President Barack Obama is due to deliver a speech on the pro-democracy revolts sweeping the Arab world.

Meanwhile, President Obama will today seek to sketch a plausible policy response to the sudden, complex and often contradictory demands thrown up by an "Arab Spring" of popular revolt.

In a major speech, Obama will seek to quell domestic criticism and uncertainty in the Middle East and North Africa about the exact nature of US policy.

Carney said that the speech would make "news" and promised some "specific new ideas" about new US policy towards the region.

What Obama will not do, it appears, is use the speech to relaunch his stalled drive for Israeli-Palestinian peace -- even though Jordan's King Abdullah II on Tuesday called the struggle the "core" regional issue.

The Pew survey found that the US president remains unpopular in most Muslim nations, and most disapprove of the way he has handled calls for political change roiling the Arab world.

Only in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation where Obama spent part of his childhood, does a majority have a favourable view of the US, says the poll by the Pew Research Centre.

NEWS IN brief

Mahathir Mohamad in hospital



AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad was admitted to hospital early yesterday for a chest infection, his aide said.

His condition is stable, said Sufi Yusoff, press secretary to Mahathir, adding that he may have to stay there for a week.

Mahathir retired in 2003 after 22 years in power. He remains an influential figure in Malaysian politics, and often speaks up on current issues.

Al-Jazeera journalist who went missing in Syria freed

AFP, Doha

Al-Jazeera journalist Dorothy Parvaz who went missing on her arrival in Syria last month is free and back in Doha, the news channel said on its website yesterday.

It said that Parvaz, 39, returned yesterday to Doha from Iran, after she disappeared on arrival in Damascus on April 29.

Al-Jazeera said Parvaz, who holds American, Canadian and Iranian passports, was "detained in Syria upon her arrival in Damascus 19 days ago, while on assignment." Syrian authorities had said she was expelled to Iran for travelling on an expired Iranian passport.

Mexico rescues 513 migrants

AFP, Tuxtla Gutierrez

Police on Tuesday detained 513 undocumented migrants from Latin America and Asia who were crammed into two trucks bound for the United States, prosecutors in southeast Mexico said.

The migrants "were traveling inhuman conditions" in southeastern Chiapas state, which borders Guatemala, the local attorney general's office said in a statement.

Four killed in Tunisia gunfight with al-Qaeda suspects

AFP, Tunis

A shootout erupted yesterday between suspected Libyan al-Qaeda militants and troops in Tunisia, leaving the two alleged militants and two soldiers dead, security officials said.

The suspected militants were wearing belts of explosives and were "terrorists, strongly suspected of belonging to the al-Qaeda network," said a Tunisian security official.