

Crisis deepens in Iraq

Arrest warrant for VP as leaders urge urgent talks

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's Sunni Arab vice president said he stood ready to defend himself against terror charges in a defiant news conference yesterday as rival leaders called for urgent talks to resolve a worsening crisis.

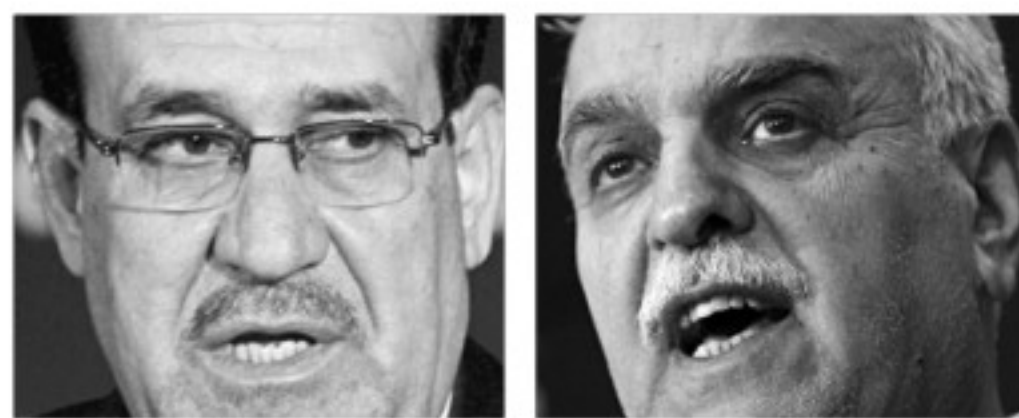
Just days after US forces left the country and on the eve of the national unity government's first anniversary, Iraq's fragile political truce already looked to be unravelling.

Authorities issued a warrant for Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi's arrest on Monday, spurring his Iraqiya bloc to say it would boycott cabinet meetings.

Over the weekend, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki called for the sacking of one of his deputies, a Sunni who branded the Shia-led government a "dictatorship".

The White House voiced concern over the developments as US ambassador James Jeffrey met Iraqi leaders, although Maliki's office ruled out any mediation over the charges against Hashemi.

He called for representatives of the Arab League to take part in the investigation and any



Nuri al-Maliki

Tareq al-Hashemi

questioning, and said apparent confessions aired on state television linking him to attacks were fabricated.

Hashemi also questioned upbeat statements about the state of Iraq from US President Barack Obama, telling reporters: "I am surprised by the statements of the US president, when he said that Iraq had become democratic and had an independent judicial system."

Officials issued the warrant for Hashemi's arrest on Monday, after earlier banning him from travelling overseas.

At least 13 of the vice president's bodyguards have been detained in recent weeks, although it was unclear how many remain in custody.

State television has shown footage of what the

interior ministry said were confessions by Hashemi's bodyguards to planning and carrying out terror attacks, and receiving funding and support from the vice president.

Maliki and other leaders have called for talks to resolve the political crisis, but the premier's spokesman told AFP he would not accept any mediation over the charges against Hashemi.

Maliki has also called for Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlak, like Hashemi a Sunni Arab and a member of the Iraqiya bloc, to be sacked after Mutlak said the premier was "worse than Saddam Hussein".

Lawmakers are due to consider Maliki's request to fire Mutlak on January 3.

The premier's call for urgent talks was echoed by parliament speaker Osama al-Nujaifi and Kurdish regional president Massud Barzani.

Iraqiya said it would boycott cabinet to protest Maliki's "dictatorship" although it has not pulled out of the government.

The bloc, which holds 82 of the 325 seats in parliament and controls nine ministerial posts, had earlier said it was suspending its participation in the legislature.

Indian cabinet clears Lokpal bill draft

Disappointed Hazare to go on fast

PTI, New Delhi

India's cabinet on Tuesday approved a landmark anti-corruption bill which was the focus of nationwide demonstrations in August that rocked the government, officials said.

The proposed law would create a powerful new ombudsman tasked with probing and prosecuting senior politicians and civil servants suspected of graft.

The cabinet meeting headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh approved the "Lokpal" or ombudsman bill after discussions held in the parliament house.

Expressing disappointment with the new draft Lokpal Bill to be tabled in Parliament, Anna Hazare said he would fast for three days from December 27, followed by a three-day 'jail bhara' agitation.

This will be followed by a three-day jail bhara from December 30. After this, I will go to five states (where Assembly polls are due) and campaign against the (Congress-led) govern-

ment," Hazare told reporters here this evening.

Maintaining that the government's intentions on bringing an effective Lokpal Bill were "suspect", Hazare said the government was ignoring the "voice of the people".

The Lokpal, which will be an eight-member body, will have a term of five years, and its chairman or a member can be impeached only after at least 100 MPs make a representation.

The Lokpal and the members will be selected by a Committee consisting of the Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha, Chief Justice of India or a Supreme Court judge nominated by him and a jurist of eminence nominated by the President.

Under the proposals, the PM will be under the purview of the Lokpal with certain safeguards that will keep out aspects like international relations, public order, atomic energy, space, internal and external security from the inquiry.

Gulf states warn Kim death threatens chaos for US policy

AFP, Riyadh

Gulf Arab states yesterday urged Syria's government to immediately halt its "killing machine", and called on arch rival Iran to stop interfering in their internal affairs.

They appealed for Damascus to "put an end to bloodshed, lift all signs of armed conflict and release prisoners, as a first step towards implementing the (Arab) protocol".

Syria signed the accord with the Arab League on Monday after weeks of prevarication in the hope the 22-member bloc will lift sweeping sanctions against the regime.

Despite the accord, at least 100 mutinous troops were killed or wounded yesterday, a day after up to 70 deserters were gunned down while trying to flee their posts, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Moreover Syrian security forces killed 33 civilians, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, adding that 14 security personnel had also been killed.

More than 5,000 people have been killed in the Syrian regime's nine-month crackdown on dissent, says UN.

In its concluding statement, the Gulf Cooperation Council also called on Iran to stop meddling in the internal affairs of the group's members.

The Gulf states also called on their Shia neighbour to "fully cooperate" with the International Atomic Energy Agency, adding GCC members were committed to a Middle East "free of weapons of mass destruction."

AFP, Washington

The death of Kim Jong-Il throws into disarray a US policy of waiting patiently for change in nuclear-armed North Korea, with officials nervously seeking clues on the regime's future direction.

US President Barack Obama pledged to defend regional allies such as South Korea and Japan after the reclusive communist state made the shock announcement Monday of Kim's death at the age of 69.

After years of on-off efforts to end North Korea's nuclear program, the United States recently made a tactical shift to maintain low-level dialogue as a way to discourage future provocations even if no big issues are resolved.

But experts said that Kim Jong-Il's death fundamentally changes US calculations. Instead of a recalcitrant strongman, the United States now must deal with an untested young leader who remains a mystery on the global stage.

Kim Jong-Il, 69, had been groomed for 14 years as successor to his father, the regime's founder Kim Il-Sung. His apparent Kim Jong-Un is in his late 20s and is believed to lack a firm support base within the opaque regime.

"The death of Kim Jong-Il would presumably delay a resumption of (US) negotiations as the new North Korean leadership assesses to what degree it is willing to open up to the outside



This picture shows the body of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il lies in a glass coffin at the Kumsusan Memorial Palace in Pyongyang yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

world," Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank said.

"Although the demise of Kim Jong-Il provides an opportunity for change on the Korean peninsula, it is a transition fraught with uncertainty, nervousness and potential danger," he said.

In a presentation last year, a military strategist warned that the United States needed to study all

possible outcomes as a complete collapse of the nuclear-armed regime could trigger a crisis unseen since World War II.

Colonel David Maxwell of the Army's Special Operations Command said North Koreans should be expected to resist fiercely any foreign forces and could mount an insurgency far more sophisticated than those seen in Iraq or Afghanistan.

N Korea in 13-day long mourning

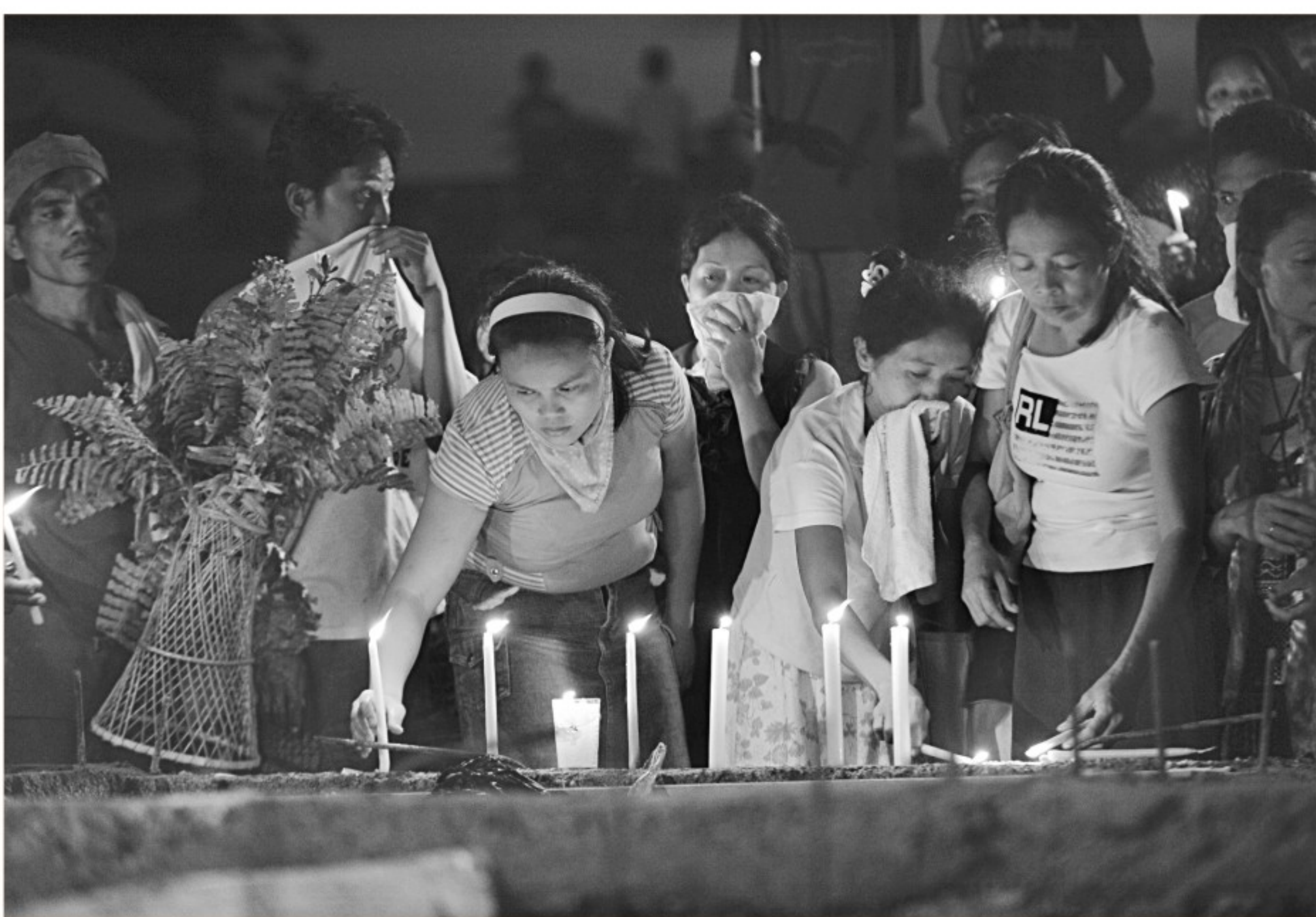
AFP, Seoul

The North has decreed 13 days of nationwide mourning for its leader Kim Jong-Il.

In Pyongyang, state television showed a sombre dark-clad Kim Jong-Un, youngest son and successor to his father, viewing the corpse along with other high officials.

State media have reported scenes of mass grief following Kim's death from a heart attack on Saturday, which the regime kept secret for two days.

Despite the nation's hardships, state TV aired footage of near-hysterical mourners, young and old alike, pounding the ground. Flags of mourning were flying from military bases, factories, commercial facilities and farms, and endless queues of mourners were forming.



Relatives of the victims of the devastating flash floods light candles during a burial in a mass graveyard at a public cemetery in Iligan City on the southern island of Mindanao yesterday. Officials said the death toll from the flood crossed 1,000 yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Big quakes no more likely than in past: Study

AFP, Washington

Massive earthquakes are no more likely today than they were a century ago, despite an apparent rise of the devastating temblors in recent years, US researchers said on Monday.

The deadly 9.0 earthquake this year in Japan, an 8.8 quake in Chile last year and the 2004 Sumatra-Andaman earthquake that registered 9.0 on the moment magnitude scale have raised alarm in some science and media circles that such events may be linked.

But researchers at the University of California went back over the world's earthquake records dating back to 1900 and found over time there was no statistically significant rise in the number of big quakes 7.0 and higher.

Even though there is "a disproportionate number of very large 8.5 earthquakes between 1950 and 1965," there were uncommonly fewer of these during a much longer period afterward from 1965 to 2004.

The researchers also looked for any clues from the Earth's crust that could explain why or how big quakes might be linked.

"And the conclusion was no, there isn't a likely physical cause that would link for example a large earthquake in South America to one in Japan," Shearer told AFP.

"The events are just too far away for it to be very likely that there is a physical link between them."

Taken together, the two approaches "suggest that the global risk of large earthquakes is no higher today than it has been in the past," concluded the study.

The findings are in line with a study in Nature Geoscience earlier this year that found the regional hazard of larger earthquakes is increased after a main shock, but the global hazard is not.

That study countered an earlier 2009 paper in Nature that suggested seismic waves might have an effect on distant fault lines, potentially increasing the risk of earthquakes far away.

Karzai wants immediate halt to Nato night raids

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai on Tuesday demanded an immediate halt to Nato-led night raids after the military insisted the operations will continue despite the recent death of a pregnant woman.

Karzai has led public criticism of the controversial raids, saying they endanger lives and harass local communities, and repeatedly called on US-led international forces to stop entering Afghan homes.

The latest spat comes after the pregnant wife of an anti-drugs official was killed during a raid in the eastern Paktia province in the early hours of Saturday when Nato-led forces returned gunfire coming from a compound.

Nato has defended the operations as the safest way of targeting insurgent leaders, insisting they will continue but with the increasing involvement of Afghan special forces.

"The president of Afghanistan wants an

Cairo violence enters fifth day

Outcry grows as death toll rises to 12

AFP, Cairo

Clashes between Egyptian security forces and protesters demanding an end to military rule entered a fifth day yesterday, as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denounced the beating of women as a "disgrace."

Riot police used rocks, batons and live bullets to disperse protesters through the night and into the morning, witnesses said, in violence that has left 12 people dead since Friday.

The clashes have heaped pressure on the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Scaf), with both liberals and Islamists facing off in the country's first post-revolt elections condemning its handling of the transition.

The Scaf -- which took power when a popular uprising ousted Hosni Mubarak in February -- denies it gave orders to use force against protesters but admitted troops had beaten a veiled woman after having ripped her clothes.

In unusually strong language, the US secretary of state accused Egypt's new leaders of mistreatment of women both on the street and in politics since the revolt nearly a year ago that overthrew Mubarak.

"This systematic degradation of Egyptian women dishonours the revolution, disgraces the state and its uniform, and is not worthy of a great people," said Clinton.

And rights watchdog Amnesty International urged arms suppliers to halt transfers to Egyptian forces.



Hamid Karzai

immediate halt to the night raids and house searches of Afghans," presidential spokesman Aimal Faizi said.

"He doesn't want any foreigner to go to the homes of Afghans and search their homes."

"We don't want the war on terrorism to be fought inside people's houses," he added.

The spokesman for Nato's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Brigadier General Carsten Jacobson, said in 85 percent of night raids no shot is fired and they cause less than one percent of civilian casualties.

The raid on Saturday targeted a leader of the Taliban-linked Haqqani militant network, Nato said, but the Paktia provincial governor described it as an "arbitrary operation".

According to the United Nations, the number of civilians killed in violence in Afghanistan rose by 15 percent in the first six months of this year to 1,462, with insurgents blamed for 80 percent of the killings.

NEWS IN brief

Hamas, Fatah begin unity talks

AFP, Cairo

Representatives of all the Palestinian factions began meeting in Cairo yesterday to discuss ways of implementing a stalled reconciliation deal, delegates said.

But officials played down expectations of a breakthrough, with Fatah delegation head Azzam al-Ahmed telling AFP he did not expect any agreement on the key issues of security and an interim government "before the end of January."

On the agenda were questions relating to a range of key issues, including the formation of a caretaker cabinet, security, parliamentary and presidential elections, which are to take place in May, and reformation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), he said.

106 journalists killed in 2011

AFP, Geneva

At least 106 journalists were killed in 2011, among them 20 who reported on the Arab spring uprisings, a campaign group said on Monday.

More than 100 others were attacked, intimidated, arrested and wounded in countries including Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, the Geneva-based Press Emblem Campaign said.

Mexico and Pakistan were the most dangerous countries to work in however.

"The casualties could be higher if figures were known for journalists who were victims of enforced disappearances," the group said in a statement.

Iran invites UN nuclear inspectors

AFP, Vienna

Iran has invited the UN atomic watchdog for a visit, but it is unclear whether inspectors would have access to sites where covert nuclear weapons activity is suspected, Western diplomats said yesterday.

"Our understanding from our conversations with the IAEA is that... Iran has made a sort of general invitation, but there is nothing specific in there," one diplomat to the Vienna-based agency told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Homeless kids in US number 1.6m

AFP, Washington

Fully 1.6 million children in the United States -- one in 45 kids -- were homeless last year, living in shelters, cars, abandoned buildings and parks, a study released Monday found.

With youth homelessness surging 28 percent since 2007 amid tough economic times, the National Center on Family Homelessness called its study a "call to action for all of us to address child homelessness before we lose another generation."

Half of all US homeless kids live in six US states, and among the worst hit of all were Georgia, Alabama and California, the most populous US state.